

ANOTHER HERO

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
February 23, 2020

READING

“Credo”
Alfred Kreymborg (1883 – 1966)

I sing the will to love:
the will that carves the will to live,
the will that saps the will to hurt,
the will that kills the will to die;
the will that made and keeps you warm,
the will that points your eyes ahead,
the will that makes you give, not get,
a give and get that tell us what you are:
how much a god, how much a human.
I call on you to live the will to love.

SERMON

Over the past few days, a non-partisan consensus seems to have developed that Elizabeth Warren’s takedown of Mike Bloomberg on Wednesday night was a sight to behold. In Peggy Noonan’s Wall Street Journal column on the morning after, she said, speaking of Bloomberg, “It was the worst performance in recent debate history – but if he can turn it around it will be the biggest comeback in modern primary history.”

Noonan describes Warren as a disciplined political performer whose candidacy lost steam in the past six months. “But Wednesday night,” Noonan says, Warren “was full of fight, tricky and full of mind games... She was playing everybody. It was kind of fabulous.” Noonan adds: “Someone on Twitter caught her essence: ‘She shot a man in Reno just to watch him die.’”

Time will tell whether or not Bloomberg’s political wounds turn out to be fatal. In politics as in medicine, money can buy extraordinary levels of treatment and rehabilitation.

In the quest either to hold onto the White House or take it back, Americans are looking for a hero. Some are looking for a hero to make America great again, others for a hero to make America respectable and respected again. Still others are looking for a hero on other fields of endeavor – to vanquish pernicious diseases, for example, or to stand down climate change, mitigate inequality, or eradicate bigotry.

Even at their best, however, heroes often turn out to be a mixed blessing. The category was invented by the ancient Greeks, whose oral tradition of storytelling created the hero Odysseus. His exploits were eventually written down by the poet or collection of poets we know as Homer. Odysseus' skill on the battlefield enabled the Greeks to vanquish the Trojans after a decade of war, a story told in Homer's Iliad. Then Odysseus began his decade-long journey back home to Ithaca, where his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus faithfully awaited his homecoming, a tale recounted in Homer's Odyssey.

For his part, Odysseus always intended to return home, but his faithfulness went astray from time to time. Along the way, he engaged in the occasional plunder here and the occasional dalliance there. To the ancient Greeks, this didn't diminish his heroism, but exemplified it. A hero was a warrior, known for his valor on the battlefield, rather than his virtue off the battlefield.

The first line of the Odyssey describes Odysseus as *andra polutropos* - a phrase that literally means "a man of many turns." In her splendid new translation of the Odyssey, Emily Wilson renders the term as "a complicated man." An earlier translator describes Odysseus as "a man skilled in all ways of contending." On these terms, Odysseus will use any means necessary to outwit any opponent and win any fight. You should be in awe of such a man, Homer suggests, but you should also watch your back. He's "full of fight, tricky and full of mind games," as Noonan puts it.

When heroes get cast in this light, I agree with Tina Turner: "We don't need another hero." The hero she had in mind shows up after the apocalypse, emerging victorious from a deathmatch in a steel cage known as the ThunderDome. In the title song of the movie *Mad Max: Beyond ThunderDome*, Turner sings:

Out of the ruins
Out from the wreckage
Can't make the same mistake this time
We are the children
The last generation
We are the ones they left behind
And I wonder when we are ever gonna change it
Living under the fear 'til nothing else remains
We don't need another hero
We don't need to know the way home
All we want is life beyond the Thunderdome

Into far too many places on planet Earth, life has come to resemble a ThunderDome — a battle of each against all in which the main goal is individual success. If the work of a hero is to out-wit everyone else, or over-power everyone else, or out-earn everyone else, and so to emerge as the trickster-in-chief, or the hooligan-in-chief, or the titan-in-chief, then I agree: we don't need another hero.

Charles Portis, who has been described as America's least known great novelist, died this past week in Little Rock, Arkansas at the age of 86. In his 30's, Portis was a rising star journalist for the New York Herald Tribune. He covered the civil rights movement in the South, writing stories about the Birmingham riots, the jailing of Dr. King, Gov. George Wallace's efforts to stop desegregation, and the rise of Malcolm X, among many other groundbreaking stories. Shortly after Portis was promoted to head the Tribune's London bureau, he decided instead to move to a fishing shack in Arkansas and write novels.

One of those novels is titled *True Grit*, which became a bestseller. It was made into a movie in 1969 by Henry Hathaway and again in 2010 by the Coen brothers. The story centers on a young girl named Mattie Ross. Her pigtails belie a brassy disposition and a mean streak. She says, "I was just fourteen years of age when a coward by the name of Tom Chaney shot my father down in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and robbed him of his life and horse and two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band."

Mattie explains that her father had hired Chaney, who was down on his luck, to go with him to Fort Smith and help lead back a string of mustang ponies. "If Papa had a failing," she says, "it was his kindly disposition; I did not get my mean streak from him."

Once in Fort Smith, before the drive back home even began, Cheney got drunk in the saloon and lost all his money at cards. Insisting that he had been cheated, Cheney went back to the boarding house for his rifle. On Cheney's way back to the saloon, Mattie's father tried to intervene and save Cheney from further trouble. Enraged, Cheney shot Mattie's father in the breast.

Mattie's voice continues: "You might say, what business was it of my father's to meddle? My answer is this: he was trying to do that short devil a good turn. He was his brother's keeper. Does that answer your question?"

Since this is a western, we know that justice eventually will be done. Mattie will avenge her father's death and, in so doing, defend the principle that honorable people ought to be the keeper of their brothers and sisters. But since this is a struggle between good and evil, we also know that there will be suffering. Meanness will abound, both within and among the pursuing and the pursued.

When the local sheriff tells Mattie about several bounty hunters whom she might employ to track Cheney down, the sheriff says that William Waters is the best tracker and L.T. Quinn brings his prisoners in alive. "The meanest one is Rooster Cogburn," the sheriff says. "He is a pitiless man, double tough and fear don't enter into his thinking."

Mattie responds, "Where can I find this Rooster?"

Near the end of the story, Mattie avenges her father's death, but in so doing endures a series of unfortunate events that results in her being bitten by a rattlesnake. Rooster Cogburn, whose loyalty to Mattie and her cause has ebbed and flowed throughout the film, scoops her up, heaves her onto the back of a horse, and then swings up behind her. "I must get you to a doctor, sis, or you are not going to make it."

Rooster rides like the wind throughout the day and into the bitterly cold night. As snow begins to fall on the wind-whipped landscape, their horse founders. Rooster pulls Mattie clear as the horse sinks to the ground, and then he reaches down to pick her up. "Put your arms around my neck," he says. "I will carry you."

He does, mile after tortuous mile. In the end, a hero in the usual sense turned out to be a hero in a different sense.

In her song "We Don't Need Another Hero," Tina Turner wrestles with what life might look like beyond the ThunderDome. She asks:

So what do we do with our lives?
We leave only a mark
Will our story shine like a life
Or end in the dark?

She ends up answering her own question, as she sings:

Looking for something
We can rely on
There's got to be something better out there
Love and compassion
Their day is coming
All else are castles built in the air.

We are not going to be saved by Superman, or Superwoman, or a Super-PAC. We will be saved individually as we find something we can rely on – others who will carry us when we are sinking down. We will be saved collectively as we do the same for others. There is something better out there: love and compassion. Their day is coming.

That's not to say that the quality of our leaders, including our political leaders, isn't important. It's my view that the vitality of any political system will not rise above, at least not for long, the moral integrity of its leaders. In that sense, this upcoming election matters hugely. Our civic engagement as people of faith is essential.

But I'm not running for President, and neither are you. Our civic duty, and indeed our spiritual responsibility, is to exemplify the moral integrity we expect to see in our elected leaders. We need to be someone whom others can rely on to carry them in times of turmoil and even tragedy. We need to demonstrate that there is something better out there. We need to be another kind of hero.

As Alfred Kreymborg puts it:

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the will that points your eyes ahead,
the will that makes you give, not get,
a give and get that tell us what you are:
how much a god, how much a human.
I call on you to live the will to love.