

On Heroes

Colonel Rick Husband, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Anderson, Commander Laurel Clark, Captain David Brown; Commander William McCool, Dr. Kalpana Chawla and Ilan Ramon are no more.

Our Declaration of Independence asserts that all men are created equal. We come into this world in nakedness and die alone, as equals sharing a common lucky bond of existence for a short time. At some level, of course, all humans are born and die and are the same. But to die as a hero.....well, that is something quite different.

The distinction between the notorious and heroic has been lost in our culture. Joseph Campbell talked about heroes. When asked why there are so many stories about the hero in mythology, he answered, "Because that's what's worth writing about."

That's why the firemen collectively became heroes in the tragedy of September 11. That is why the astronauts who have died from accidents beyond the magic of engineering are such important people. We, in America, cry for heroes, because they are so hard to find and because when they appear, they embody a kind of vision of what could be.

JFK, not a likely hero outside of his good looks, became one in his tragic and very public death and the various draconian speculations afterwards. President Lyndon Johnson became a very unlikely and generally unacknowledged hero by managing to get Civil Rights legislation through Congress. Martin Luther King, Jr. is heroic in his fight and death. Our founding fathers seem to have become heroes jointly. Can scientists like Archimedes and Albert Einstein be heroes? Can a woman? Joan of Arc comes to mind and the three women, Cynthia Cooper, Coleen Rowley and Sherron Watkins who took huge professional and personal risks to blow the whistle on what went wrong at WorldCom, Enron and the FBI. Philosophers? Adventurers? Explorers? Francis of Assisi?

We desperately need people that we can look to for inspiration. We have lost the traditional hero. Politicians have failed us in many ways. There seem to be no statesmen in the image of Everett Dirksen or Barbara Jordan any more. Athletes are spoiled children, making so much money and inevitably disappointing us outside their athletic prowess. Soldiers are candidates, but generals are the ones that normally get the attention.

So, while our current president is preparing for a war that has unforeseen consequences, we mourn these space heroes of the Columbia, heroic because of the spectacular way they died and because in our minds they embody many attributes we all see as heroic in the depths of our convictions. God fearing. Smart. Accomplished. Motivated. Adventurous in space as Ulysses was among the gods. Noble in a dreadfully dangerous profession that doesn't get any public attention anymore.

We mourn their loss as if we knew them. Not the same way we knew the original, swaggering space jockeys of "The Right Stuff," but because of the exhaustive media attention which has brought much more than ever intended about the Columbia crew. They are called "Pilots with Ph.D.s and soldiers who were scientists" by the press. By now we know intimate things about their lives, their loves, their parents, their religious beliefs, their countries. In our minds, they are, in their catastrophic, publicly viewed death, so much more than when they were alive.

God bless heroes. We desperately need more. There are so few of them, after all.