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[Introduction to] Heroism and Wellbeing in the 21st Century: Applied and Emerging Perspectives

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Heroism and Wellbeing in the 21st Century

Applied and Emerging Perspectives

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Preface

Letters from the Ground

Preface 1 Becoming an Everyday Hero

Michelle Werning

We live in an amazing time in history. We have the vast knowledge of the universe and humanity's collective history at our fingertips. We can travel and explore and learn. We can spend our time helping others or improving our own lives. The wonders and opportunities many enjoy, however, are not available to everyone—there is a dramatic divide between the rich and the poor. We face drastic environmental challenges because the way we live is threatening to destroy the very environment we need to survive.

I am reminded of something Stephen Hawking (quoted in Potter 2011), the famous scientist and mathematician, said:

Our population and our use of the finite resources of planet Earth are growing exponentially, along with our technical ability to change the environment for good or ill. But our genetic code still carries the selfish and aggressive instincts that were of survival advantage in the past. It will be difficult enough to avoid disaster in the next hundred years, let alone the next thousand or million.

Essentially, Hawking is saying that our pre-frontal cortex (the logical and rational part of the brain) is continually at odds with the primitive “survival of the fittest” part of our brain. He is not particularly optimistic that we will be able to overcome our primitive programming. Does that mean that all hope is lost? Wouldn't it be great if there were superheroes out there ready to swoop in and save the day?

If there was ever a time when the human race needed heroes, this is it. But what if we could become heroes ourselves—what if we could learn to override our primitive programming and become more determined, compassionate, and courageous? What if we could give the next generation of children the tools they need to become heroic?

That is what this book is all about—heroism education. Heroism education is an opportunity to create a kinder world by giving current and future

generations the tools they need to be determined, compassionate, and courageous. Although there have always been determined, compassionate, and courageous people in the world, heroism education is a concerted effort to nurture these attributes and make them the rule rather than the exception.

My interest in heroism education is very personal because I grew up in the shadow of some very real heroes. Their story provides a foundation for the premise that heroes can be created and that we have an opportunity to nurture a more heroic society.

Tragedy

I am alive today because when I was a young child my mother put herself between me and a man with a gun. My mother became pregnant with me right after she finished high school at the age of 19. The young man who got her pregnant was not ready to get married or be a father, and, for my mother, being pregnant without a husband in America in 1966 was not a good thing. My grandparents were in the process of moving from California to Arizona, and they all decided it would be best if she moved with them. I was born in Florence, Arizona, on February 14, 1967. I never met my real father.

In August of that same year, my mother fell in love with a charming man named Tom, and they got married. He had a good job and a nice car and seemed like the perfect husband and father. The first few months were good, but he turned out to be a monster. Once my mother was away from her family, he quickly became controlling and abusive—the violence ended with him locking us in a cellar while we were in New York visiting his mother when I was 16 months old. His mother found us and set us free and told my mother she should get as far away from him as possible. My uncle wired money so that we could return to Arizona. Once we were safely back with my grandparents, my mother thought that we had escaped from a very dangerous man. Sadly, this was far from the truth.

On May 23, 1968, a warm summer evening a few weeks later, we were dressed up and in the car driving to a graduation party for one of my cousins. I sat in the front seat, between my mother and grandmother, and my mother's 11-year-old sister (my aunt) sat in the back. A car passed us on the highway, and there was Tom—he had followed us from New York. He was angry, driving aggressively, and trying to force my grandmother off the road. Afraid he would cause an accident, she pulled the car to the side of the road. My mother reassured her, "Don't worry, he probably just wants to talk." He parked in front of us and came to my mother's side and pulled her out of the car. They stood there, my mother still standing between the car door and the seat, and they argued. He wanted her to come back with him, but she said no. Then she shouted, "No! Don't . . ." No one saw the gun under his jacket. He pulled it out and shot her once—and then he pointed

the gun at me. My mother turned, and he shot her again in the side, and she fell across me on the seat.

As the shots rang out, my grandmother yelled, “Tom! No!” and ran around the back of the car to stop him. He turned and shot her four times. After she fell to the ground, he opened the back door of the car and pointed the gun at my aunt. She held up a blanket for protection—*click. Click*—there were no more bullets in the gun. He had emptied it when he shot my grandmother. As my aunt sat frozen on the seat, holding up her blanket, he started to reload the gun. That’s when the headlights of an oncoming car lit up the road—Tom panicked, ran back to his car, and drove away.

My grandmother called out to my aunt, “Are you there? You have to signal the car.” My aunt got out and used her blanket to signal for help. She realized I was crying and got back into the car and pulled me from under my mother and into the back seat. The car stopped, and the driver drove into town to get an ambulance and notify the police. My mother was dead—the second bullet had hit her heart. My grandmother had been shot four times: twice in the abdomen, once in the neck, and one bullet grazed the pointer finger on her right hand. She would later say that she could only remember trying to put her finger in the gun to stop Tom from shooting. She was seriously wounded but alive, and my aunt and I were unharmed. The killer was caught two days later, and he died in prison when I was in my mid-twenties.

Heroic Journey

I grew up hearing this story—I always knew that my mother had died trying to protect me, that my grandmother risked her life to save us all, that my 11-year-old aunt tried to stop bullets with a blanket, that she was strong enough to get out of the car and signal a stranger who stopped to help and then pull a crying child from under her dying sister.

You might think that, growing up in the shadows of such strong women, I would also be that kind of hero; that being a hero is in my blood. How could it not be? But that would be a lie. I was bullied terribly in school. I was never brave enough to defend myself or anyone else. Growing up with a brave hero (and hearing stories of other brave heroes) only made my lack of bravery more apparent. I thought that heroism must have skipped a generation in my family. Why wasn’t I brave or courageous? I spent many years asking myself this question.

I finished school, worked, went to university—I was supported in so many ways by my grandparents and my brave aunt. I met and married an amazing man, moved to Germany, and became a mother to two wonderful boys. Becoming a mother changed me. I knew from personal experience that horrible things can happen. Would I be heroic if my family was ever in mortal danger?