

# HEROES OVERVIEW

Youth in all societies need role models and heroes. Heroes are the subject of tribal stories, myths, epic poems, and modern media. With heroes and role models, American society has created a need for "stars" or celebrities. Role models are usually considered adult examples for those seeking their own growth and direction. The skilled hunter, farmer, artisan, or warrior were such in past societies. Apprenticeships offered an institutional means of learning by example.

Heroes conquer, on a grand scale, challenges to justice, truth, and freedom. Celebrities and stars are objects of admiration, infatuation, and curiosity. They tend to live out our fantasies of wealth, status, and pleasure. Celebrities have a much shorter, popular life-span than do heroes and are noted more for the style than for the substance of their lives and contributions.

*Webster's Dictionary* offers the following definitions for the word, "hero":

- Any *man* noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose; especially one who has risked *his* life.
- A person prominent in some event, field, period or cause by reason of *his* special achievements or contributions.
- Any *male* regarded as a potential lover or protector.
- In mythology and legend, a *man*, often born of one mortal and one divine parent, who is endowed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his bold exploits and favored by the gods.

Dictionaries define "hero" in male terms, of course, to distinguish it from "heroine." The latter is infrequently used, so we need to raise questions about the implications left in young minds.

The movie industry, and, to some degree, the rock music business, attempt to turn celebrities into heroes. Stallone as "Rocky" and "Rambo," Arnold Schwarzenegger as "Conan," "Terminator," or "Commando," or Chuck Norris, in one of his many roles, are meant to be persons we can believe in and emulate. They all have bodies majestic, and (in movies other than "Rocky" or "Conan") carry automatic weapons, are extremely violent, invincible, and immortal. They fight battles that have us frustrated, and bring justice where evil seems to have the upper hand.

It was said that youth in the 1970s had no heroes. The 1980s (and now the 1990s) seem to be more open to heroes, if not hero-worship. Is there a place for real heroes in the political, business, academic, artistic, scientific, social and

religious areas of our society? Young people today want health, wealth, and success. Along with loving relationships, they also long for a touch of the heroic.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. Young people especially need heroism—vicariously or actually—in their lives. As parents, teachers, and youth leaders, we sometimes squelch that aspect of life in a desire to see them socialized, conforming, and "mature." We need to allow for and encourage appropriate heroism.
2. If adults have no place for "heroes," young people will have to find their own. And the media may provide them with heroes short on values and long on sensationalism. Adults need to help youth process the media's heroes and heroic messages.

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