

The Heroic ~ Ernesto Pujol

Until this pandemic, it was very easy to be a hero in a society where no one lifted a finger. For most Americans, the heroic had been split into two equally perverse categories. On the one hand, there was the trivialized heroic co-opted by shopping, achieved by surprising each other with unexpected gifts that lifted our spirits. But frankly, things don't have to be fun all the time. Perhaps it's time to put the sentimental dictatorship of fun aside and embrace seriousness, to teach seriousness to a generation that was hitherto under pressure to prove their fun-making skills as fake heroism.

On the other hand, the heroic was synonymous with grandiosity, promoting our individual and collective passivity. We delegated the collective responsibility of "doing something about it" to a single individual. We placed the burden of sacrifice on the passionate hero, while the rest of us remained cool and comfortable. Some soldier, visionary, messiah, prophet, or preacher died for us on the cross, in the gallows, in prison, on the road, on the frontlines. We were concerned but didn't care enough to risk the grittiness of collective action, to put our lifestyle on the line.

For decades, I have tried to shed this psychic passivity when facing social injustice and climate crisis, realizing that no one is going to save me, that I need to save myself and those I love. In other words, using the language of the heroic: I need to be my own hero. But that language is not meant to feed the self-driven and self-sufficient, perverse American individualism that has divided us, resulting in a society that lacks a sense of community. I am simply trying to take on my share of the heroic burden of making things better for all.

Somewhere along the way, I have also realized that shedding the sentimentality and the grandiosity of the heroic requires a redefinition of the heroic. The heroic is too deep to be contained in a Hallmark card and too communal to be delegated to a single individual.

The fact is that during this pandemic, the heroic has returned to the collective. The doctors, nurses, technicians and scientists assuring our health; the teachers assuring the continuity of education; the food producers, suppliers, distributors and vendors assuring our continued nutrition; the garbage collectors assuring our public hygiene; the utility (electricity, water, gas) providers assuring basic life services; the connectivity providers (TV, Cable, Internet) and journalists assuring the flow of truthful information exchange; and the security personnel assuring property and safety, all those are the admirably brave people on whose backs our quarantine runs.

Are they heroes? Please be my guest and call them heroes. Providers have died like martyrs for us; they deserve all manner of praise. But I personally prefer to say that they are inspiring people doing their jobs on our behalf while facing challenging, deplorable, and even life threatening conditions, and that we need to a much better job supporting them, assuring them higher salaries, safer working conditions, and more visibility going forward.

Perhaps it is finally time for universal health care and universal education in America. But I would not say that we have become a society of heroes because that would feed back into the toxic heroic, if not the society of empire. I would say that we are finally maturing as a society, joining the rest of the world as a society, getting reacquainted with the sacrifices that construct a truly democratic society.

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