



CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

Who Should Be Our Heroes?

We live in an age of gotcha, the more outrageous the better, bad behavior sells television. No matter when you turn on the television, whether you flip to Jersey Shore where a group of white kids have become famous for partying and bad behavior, to former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin shooting elk, to politicians squabbling as people starve, or to NBA, NFL, or ABL players acting out on the court and off, heroes and heroines are not making the headlines these days. In fact, it appears as if media is now producing heroes and heroines with even less merit to having the title than the ones they produced in the 30s and 40s, most of whom were white men with money and power.

So, who should be our heroes and heroines modernly? Where do we find them? Who will help us in the quest? Well, as already suggested, it will not be television, for even when heroes can be found there, their run is short-lived. Will it be radio? Probably not, because radio too has become filled with one loud mouth after another attempting to out blab another loud-mouth who is

getting the most air play for being negative. Not to mention that one has to really click around the dial to find hosts who are well informed and not self-absorbed. How about the web, will it help us find modern heroes and heroines? Definitely not if they are black. While the web has revolutionized our ability to spread information around the world and to do it at warped speed, it has not been able to figure out how to publish and produce blogs, online newspapers, podcasts, or the many other avenues of web media that consistently feature black men and women in a positive light.

So, who or what does that leave? Well, perhaps the Church? Likely not. The Catholic Church continues to dig itself out from sexual abuse scandals as the handlers of the Pope pray that he does not make another comment that it will take them a week to explain. Then, there's the megachurch pastors such as Eddie Long, who was dogged by five sexual misconduct lawsuits in 2010 and finally settled out of court and the records in the case were sealed. Does anyone imagine parents holding him up for their children as a hero? Then there is a long list of clergy and Church leaders who due to thievery, sexual indiscretions, living double lives, greed, and more have made the work of committed clergy quite difficult. Maybe we can use teachers as modern-day heroes and heroines. Teachers still perform one of the hardest jobs known to humanity. However, one is almost afraid to lift up teachers for this role without scrupulously scrutinizing their lives first for fear that no sooner are they applauded than an old lewd video will show up, or information surfaces that they slept with students or committed some other illegal act. I still believe in teachers and they play a pivotal role in any society. However, given the dismal graduation rates and the high number of students who are unable to read and write at grade level (in all fifty states), although parents also have a major responsibility for the education of their children, one has to wonder about what is going wrong with the teaching that is occurring in our public schools.

So, what's left? Well, I say this year, let's look to those men and women who just do good work because good work has its own rewards. Let's look to volunteers, for real heroes and heroines look to the those men, women, boys, and girls who, year in and year out for little or no pay and no limelight, serve the poor, tend to the elderly, assist the illiterate, assist children, build homes for those without decent places to live, provide free legal services, and provide so many other essential services.

Yes, that's where you can find modern heroes and heroines of all ages—they are volunteers. Some of them begin as volunteers and end up as crusaders and leaders of movements. But wherever they end up, these heroes and heroines are always there doing the hard work of serving the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. These ordinary men and women, educated and uneducated, just believe in service. They are represented by groups such as Doctors Without Borders, Habitat for Humanity and countless small, local groups around the country that serve as a safety net for those who are barely surviving. If you want to find a hero, without a doubt, just look for long-term, committed volunteers.

II. Roll Call of Everyday Heroes



Evans Wadongo

Twenty-three –year-old Evans Wadongo of Kenya was named a CNN Hero in 2010. On the CNN website an article about Evans Wadongo reads:

The villagers’ faces light up as Evans Wadongo arrives. Men, women and children sing and gather around as he shows how his invention -- a solar-powered LED lantern -- will soon light up their homes. “These families, they are so poor. They don’t have electricity,” said Wadongo, a native of rural Kenya. “It’s only kerosene and firewood that they use for lighting, cooking. The amount of money that every household uses to buy kerosene every day -- if they can just save that money, they can be able to buy food.”

Wadongo is giving his country’s rural families a way to replace the smoky kerosene and firelight with solar power. He says he also hopes his invention will ultimately improve education and reduce poverty and hunger. And he’s providing it for free. The youngest of four children, Wadongo grew up in a home that stressed the importance of education -- his father was a high school teacher. But years of exposure to smoke while studying by kerosene and firelight left Wadongo with eyesight problems.

With a lack of good light to study by -- Wadongo often had to share one lantern with his siblings and other family members -- he remembers the frustration of unfinished homework and poor exam performance.

“I couldn’t compete effectively with other kids who had access to lighting,” he said. “In every home in the village it was the same. Many children drop out of school for these reasons ... so they remain poor for the rest of their life. All along I was asking myself if there is anything that can be done to improve this situation.”

In 2004, while attending a Kenyan university for agriculture and technology, Wadongo found his answer. He was fiddling with a dorm experiment involving the timing of LED (light-emitting diodes) Christmas lights when it struck him: The environmentally friendly light source could be used to light rural homes.

“I knew it would have to be sourced by the sun to be useful to people in rural areas,” he said, “but [I] had never seen a solar panel small enough for individual homes.” Then, while walking home from visiting a friend, Wadongo stumbled upon a broken-off piece

of a discarded solar panel. With it, he was able to light a small number of LEDs. His project -- Use Solar, Save Lives -- was born.

“I immediately knew the impact that it would have on the rural communities,” he said. An artisan helped him design the solar lantern, which Wadongo calls MwangaBora -- Swahili for “good light.”

To help get the project started, Wadongo’s family and friends subsidized his student loans for two years. Production of the lanterns was slow until Wadongo attended a leadership training program sponsored by the nonprofit Sustainable Development for All-Kenya. When the group heard about his MwangaBora, it immediately committed to help, eventually bringing Wadongo on as a partner and chairman of the board.

The group has helped reduce production costs to \$20 per lantern. Costs are covered by donations. Volunteers help build the lanterns and work with local government and women’s groups to determine the communities most in need. The group sets a small percentage of the cost of each lamp to go toward the volunteers.

“We’re helping them to earn a living. They’re able now to sustain their families,” he said. Wadongo works on the lantern project full time without pay and eats only one meal a day to help save money and build more lanterns. He said he expects costs to decrease further as the program grows.

The group buys excess pieces of solar paneling, cut from commercially sold panels, in bulk from an overseas company. In an outdoor metal shop, Wadongo and volunteers hammer scrap metal for the frame of the lantern.

Wadongo estimates he's distributed 10,000 lanterns -- and he has no plans for slowing down. “I want to reach out to as many rural communities as possible,” he said. “The impact is saving lives.”

Children can now study. Households can buy food with the money they save on kerosene, reducing hunger in communities. The solar lanterns help reduce carbon emissions, too. Wadongo said that when the time and need arises, he intends to service, replace, and recycle his lanterns.

For Wadongo, the satisfaction comes in knowing that he's helping to lift people out of poverty. “I just feel like it's right,” he said.¹



Susan Burton

Susan Burton was also named as a 2010 CNN Hero.

Susan Burton, a former addict and prison inmate, knows how many women recently released from prison succumb to drugs and criminality again; nearly 60 percent return to prison within three years, according to California's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

It's a cycle that Susan Burton is striving to break through her reentry program. Having served six prison terms for drug offenses in the 1980s and '90s, Burton knows from experience how hard it can be to not return to prison and make something positive of your life.

Now age 57, she believes that without resources and support, most women coming out of prison will also be recidivist. "Every time I was released, I swore I wasn't going back. ... But I know now that without the resources and support, it's next to impossible. ... If you don't have a new door to walk through, the only thing is the old door."

A new door is what Burton's program -- A New Way of Life Reentry Project -- gives to just-released female offenders. By providing a sober place to live and other support services, she's helped more than 400 women get back on their feet.

Things fell apart for Burton when her five year old son was accidentally killed by a car in 1981. Grief stricken, she turned to drugs and ended up in prison for years. "I couldn't get off the turnstile," Burton said. "I knew I had a problem but didn't understand the complexity." Burton has been clean since 1997. She saved up enough money to buy a house in Watts. She put bunk beds in the bedrooms and at the end of 1998, she opened her doors. Right away, her program took off.

"Today, Burton -- now a certified dependency counselor -- has five houses and supports up to 22 women at a time, largely with funding from a variety of private foundations. She receives 20 to 30 letters a week from inmates and answers each one, promising them a place to stay. Burton personally picks up most new arrivals at the bus station or at the prison gates, greeting them with a simple "welcome home."

She and her group provide food, clothing and transportation, along with helping women register for benefits and get ID cards so they can find work and begin regaining custody of their children. For being allowed to participate in the program women are asked to attend 12-step meetings, and

enroll in school, get drug treatment or find work. She also asks them to contribute \$500 a month when they can, but says she won't turn anyone out as long as they're making progress. When the women are ready to live independently, Burton finds them housing and helps furnish their homes.

According to Burton, 75 percent of women who enter the program stay clean and don't return to prison for at least 18 months. She also runs a clinic with UCLA's law school that helps expunge women's records so they can find work more easily and encourages all of her residents to become politically active. "I want the women to realize that ... they have something to contribute," she said.

For Burton, her hard work "is giving life, hope, and courage to people to give back to the world," she said. "I just wanted my life to count towards something good, and this was the way I could do it."²



Mother Wright

Having spent most of the last twenty years in Oakland, CA, I heard about Mother Wright. She always made the news for daily giving out groceries to some needy individual or family. She was a legend. Mary Ann Wright (known as Mother Wright) did most of her work in Oakland, California. She was born in Darlington, Louisiana. In 1950 she divorced and moved to California with her nine children. She later remarried and had three more children.

In 1980 she decided to help feed poor people after, she said, she received a vision in a dream. She started out by serving one meal a week, paid for from her Social Security income. With help from others, among them grocers, produce merchants, the leaders of local churches and community groups, and city officials, this effort grew to become the Mother Mary Ann Wright Foundation. Before her death in 2009 she served the poor in Oakland for 27 years.

This was an ordinary grandmother who decided that she should try to make a difference. She saw a need and she filled it. Once she made up her mind that the Lord had spoken to her about serving the poor, she was tenacious. She would enlist anyone she could to help her feed the poor. Mother Wright may not be one of those people who make the history books for great achievements. However, all long-time residents of the Bay Area who watched her work, know that without a doubt, she was a bone fide hero. She let's all of us who believe that societal problems are too big to tackle, know that we can start where we are and see what happens.

Mother Wright's daughter, Joel Wright, her grandson Illya, and a small, but dedicated staff are continuing the food giveaways.

III. How to Be a Hero

Be **H**onest - Heroes live in integrity. No, they are not perfect; but, at the core of their character is honesty. This means, at minimum, they engage in and practice truth telling; and, by their honest walk in life, they encourage truthful actions by others. Heroes are individuals who have a love for truthfulness and a disdain for dishonesty. The critical element of honesty in their character leads them to be just, upright, scrupulous, candid, equitable, fair-minded, and honorable. By implication, the hero's spirit of honesty causes him/her to abhor deceit, fraud, theft, lies, duplicity, and other forms of common dishonesty. They are trustworthy, dependable, and aboveboard with their actions, intentions, and habits.

Be **E**ducated - Heroes are educated individuals. Some are educated in classrooms and the academic corridors of educational institutions. Others are educated in the school of life, being filled with mother wit, common sense, and life experience. Each is knowledgeable about his/her own culture, history, and fellow man (woman). Thus, by educated, we mean the hero is informed generally about the world in which he/she lives; and, he/she has a specific understanding of the area in which his/her historic efforts are most manifest. Their education energizes them to do what others know should be done but do not do. Heroes are empowered to achieve the unlikely and the seeming impossible, because they know what they do not know and they know how to compensate for this by surrounding themselves and relying upon others who do know.

Be **R**esilient - Heroes are resilient. When others fail and give up, heroes get up and keep going. When others give in, throw in the towel, and declare it can't be done, heroes create, find, and make new ways. Heroes, with selfless fortitude and unquenchable drive, motivate others to achieve, because their resilience suggests heart, strength, and achievement. Here, the hero's resilient spirit telegraphs a need to be adaptable, flexible, adjustable, and accommodating. The hero's resilient spirit is the direct opposite of one with a rigid, stiff, and inflexible spirit. The latter spirit breaks under pressure, fails to recover when faced with extreme conditions, and succumbs when faced with great difficulty. The hero, on the other hand, expects difficulty, rebounds from extreme conditions, and uses pressurized situations to create new openings, spring to new frontiers, or go to a place where he or she can regain his or her footing, to achieve even greater heights.

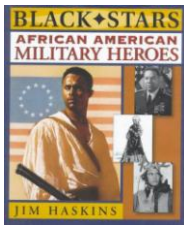
Be for **O**thers - Heroes are heroes because they are able to look beyond themselves and their own aspirations and needs. They are heroes because they use their honesty, education, and resilience for their communities, churches, and others. Their

service may be for a brief period or a lifetime, and it profoundly marks their unique approach to a condition, situation, movement, or project. Heroes embrace opportunities that have been rejected by others, because those opportunities provide fertile ground for human achievement that will be beneficial to some other human being, institution, community, animal, or thing.

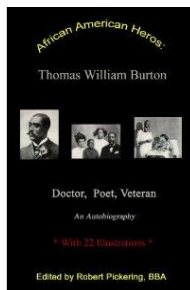
From the beginning of time to the present, the pages of human history, cultures of every nation, and the annals of political institutions are replete with examples of great heroes who have risen from obscurity to places of lasting honor, because they have served others in some unforgettable and noble manner. These heroes, old and new—young and old—are remembered because they have lived useful and heroic lives. In each instance they have asked themselves, even in unspoken tones, one of the following questions: (1) How can I resolve this problem?; (2) What can I do to remediate this situation?; (3) What can I do to encourage humanity?; (4) How can I help someone else?; (5) Is this my time to make a difference in the world?; (6) Who will do this, if I don't?; (7) Why not me?; (8) Is it really impossible or just difficult?; (9) Am I willing to risk failure, punishment, or even death?; and (10) Why am I waiting for someone else to act, is this not my opportunity to make a difference?

It is not enough to celebrate heroes. We must become heroes.

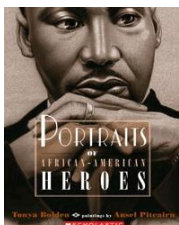
IV. Books on Heroism



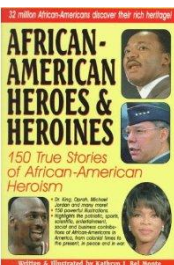
Jim Haskins. African American Military Heroes. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1998. This is a book for ages 9–12.



Thomas William Burton. Robert Pickering, ed. African American Hero: Thomas William Burton, Doctor, Poet, Veteran. Titusville, FL: Classics Publishing, 2008.



Tonya Bolden. Ansel Pitcairn (Illustrator). Portraits of African-American Heroes. New York, NY: Puffin Publishers, 2005.



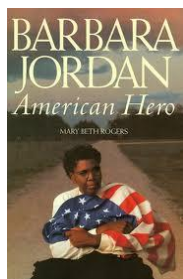
Kathryn Bel Monte. African-American Heroes and Heroines: 150 True Stories of African-American Heroism. Hollywood, FL: Frederick Fell Publishers, 1998.



Jennifer Smith Turner. Lost and Found: Rhyming Verse Honoring African American Heroes. Newington, CT: Connecticut River Press, 2006. This is another great book for kids.

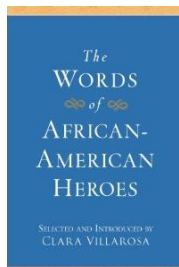
NY: Bantam-

Barbara
moral force of
senator since
before dying



Mary Beth Rogers. Barbara Jordan: American Hero. New York, Dell, 2000.

Jordan spoke in the cadences of a black preacher, backed by the the United States Constitution, and became Texas's first black the Reconstruction era. She served in Congress for two decades of multiple sclerosis at the age of 59 in 1996.



Clara Villarosa. The Words of African-American Heroes. (Newmarket "Words Of" Series). New York, NY: Newmarket Press, February 2011.

VII. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Optimistic

The Sounds of Blackness are known for positive music. One of their classic songs, “Optimistic,” could well be the anthem for today’s ordinary heroes and heroines. See the video from the 1990s featuring the Sounds of Blackness with Ann Nesbit.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEu-5444SGw&feature=related>

The song "Hero," by Kirk Franklin, speaks of God who is the ultimate hero. Those of us who have been rescued by this Hero, have an obligation to pay it forward.

Hero

The heavens were silent
The earth weeped in pain
Nations were trembling and hope never came
A Terror filled the air
And it wouldn't go away
We needed a hero to come and save

Famine and hunger,
Disease in the land
The hatred the killing taking lives from your hand
Creation waits through the darkness we pray
Tell me where is the hero to come and save

Through the nails
Through the thorns
From the hill to the grave
Was a voice in the distance the lamb that was slain
My soul had no song and my debt I couldn't pay
When I needed a hero you came and you saved

To the homeless
The widow
The fatherless son
To the sick and the broken alone with no one
Lift up your head your hope is on the way
When we needed a hero you came and you saved the day

[Bridge:]

When the curtain had closed
And it felt like the end
When your blood caught the fall and took away every sin
Even though men deny
You're the only sacrifice
That loved us enough you loved us so much Lord
That you gave your life see you saved my life

Now I can see you I'm no longer ashamed

Your power I feel see our lives have exchanged
Every wrong is erased, Jesus
You are my hero you came and you saved the day

[Bridge:]

When the curtain had closed
And it felt like the end
When your blood caught the fall and took away every sin
Even though men deny
You're the only sacrifice
That loved us enough you love us so much Lord
That you gave your life see you saved my life

Now I can see you I'm no longer ashamed
Your power I feel see our lives have exchanged
Every wrong is erased, Jesus
You are my hero you came and you saved [x2]
You are my hero you came and saved The day

[Vamp:]

You saved you saved the day [repeat]

you are my hero you came and you saved the day.³

“If I Can Help Somebody” by Alma Androzzo sums up the sentiment of those who are true heroes.

If I Can Help Somebody

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,
If I can show somebody he is trav'ling wrong,
Then my living shall not be in vain.

Then my living shall not be in vain,
Then my living shall not be in vain;
If I can help somebody as I pass along,
Then my living shall not be in vain.
If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,
If I can bring back beauty to a world up-wrought,
If I can spread love's message that the Master taught,
Then my living shall not be in vain.
Then my living shall not be in vain,
Then my living shall not be in vain;

If I can help somebody as I pass along,
Then my living shall not be in vain.⁴

Perry Como also gained notoriety for his singing of “If I Can Help Somebody.” This version was written by Murray Wizel and Irving Melcher, arranged by Jack Andrews

If I Can Help Somebody

I'll give my hand to those who cannot see,
The sunshine or the fallin' rain.

I'll sing my song to cheer the weary along,
For I may never pass this way again!

I'll share my faith with every troubled heart,
So I shall not have lived in vain.

I'll give my hand, I'll sing my song,
I'll share my faith, because I know,
That the time is now to fulfill each vow,
For I may never pass this way again!⁵

Notes

1. “Evans Wadongo.” CNN 2010 Heroes. Online location www.cnn.com accessed 20 December 2010
2. “Susan Burton.” CNN 2010 Heroes. Online location www.cnn.com accessed 20 December 2010
3. Franklin, Kirk. “Hero.” Hero. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 2005.
4. “If I Can Help Somebody.” By Alma Androzzo
5. “If I Can Help Somebody.” Lyrics, Murray Wizel. Music, Irving Melcher. Arr. by Jack Andrews