



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on April 4, 2016

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## Where Have You Gone, George Washington?

When Simon & Garfunkel sang “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?” in 1968, they were lamenting the absence of true heroes. Of course, what perhaps said even more about society was that they weren’t singing “Where have you gone, George Washington?” (one too few syllables for the tune, I know).



From before the creation of the stories of Odysseus, Hector, and Jason, civilizations have had their heroes. They need them. This isn’t just because we like exciting entertainment or campfire tales, titillating diversions though they may be, but for an all-important reason that, it seems, has been largely forgotten.

“As the twig is bent, so grows the tree,” “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it,” “Give me a child until he is seven, and I will show you the man.” These and many other sayings speak of a simple truth: As Danish psychologist Dr. Nicolai Sennels said when analyzing the “psychology of Muslims,” what is ingrained into someone during formative years can be almost impossible to overcome. A person is as clay, starting out malleable and easily moldable, but hardening with age until his form is set.

Yet what type of process is building the babe during these tender years? The child doesn’t gain the ability to think in an abstract manner until about age 11, when, as famed child psychologist Jean Piaget defined it, he enters the final stage of *intellectual* development, known as “formal operations.” Thus, the substantial early-years formation that has already occurred by that point cannot be an intellectual phenomenon. It is a matter of shaping the emotions, the passions. Boston College professor William Kilpatrick wrote about this in his book *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*, citing both ancient philosopher Plato and modern one Allan Bloom:

Plato also addresses himself to stories, poetry, painting, and craft [as well as music], and has much the same thing to say about them. Children ought to be brought up in an atmosphere that provides them examples of nobility and grace. This imaginative education is not a substitute for a reasoned morality, but it paves the way for it, making it more likely that the grown child will happily accept the dictates of reason. In this way, the child develops an erotic attachment to virtue, by which Plato meant not so much sexual as passionate. Just as the senses can be enlisted on the side of vice, so (with a little more difficulty) can they be enlisted on the side of virtue. Through the senses the child can come to love justice and wisdom long before he can grasp these notions in their abstract form. As an example, Allan Bloom mentions the statues that graced the cities of Greece, and attracted young men and women to the idea of nobility by the beauty of the hero’s body.



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## Role Models and Virtue

As is often said, virtues are caught more than they're taught. A parent can talk till he's blue in the face, but no amount of eloquence can do as much to mold his five-year-old as the example he sets; during those tender years, he ideally should be the embodiment of virtue. And if the proper emotional attachments aren't developed, the consequences can be far-reaching. As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Abolition of Man*, "Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers." The ill-raised philosopher has morality only in his head; the well-raised philistine has it in his heart.

Yet since parents are real people and not demigods and can't perfectly model virtue, even the best of them can use a little help. Enter the hero. By making the hero a seductive, larger-than-life embodiment of virtue — someone children will aspire to be — the young are drawn in emotionally to the moral life.

Consider, for instance (and this is just an example), Lucas McCain of the old series *The Rifleman*. He was strong, tough, courageous, skilled with his fists and firearm, and was respected by others as a hero — that was the "hook," that he was everything any red-blooded young boy would want to be. But he also exhibited faith (to an extent), hope, honesty, charity, fortitude, justice, temperance, prudence, chastity (implied), diligence, patience, kindness, forgiveness, humility, and love. It's quintessential marketing directed toward a noble end. By combining a seductively manly image that any boy would want to "buy into" with the aforementioned virtues, it serves to create that "erotic attachment to virtue." It's greatness by association: Children will admire the man and in the process start to admire what he embodies, the morals.

This brings us to the old counter-culture (now its spirit is mainstream) criticism that the traditional hero is "unrealistic." This is first dishonest, as the authenticity argument is only used to attack the virtuous. The very same people making it have no problem portraying a character repeatedly surviving hails of bullets unscathed, wholly non-representative criminals, such as middle-aged, white, male muggers in New York City; or gorgeous 120-pound girl-power characters tossing 220-pound male criminals around like rag dolls. So they well understand the concept of "artistic license" — they just place it in liberalism's and licentiousness' service. But the argument also completely misses the point. Defenders of the cultural effluent that is rap will sometimes say, "It's just telling you what's going on out there." But something serving that purpose isn't called art; it's called news. And while the only good news may be no news, there should be only good art. If it doesn't enrich society but only degrades, it has no reason to exist.

So the storybook hero isn't called to be realistic, only righteous. And this is what civilizations have so often done (when their better angels have prevailed): create heroes, or role models, who eschew vice and reflect virtue, as best as the society understands those qualities. That is, until recently.

Now, a budding Thomas Aquinas might have noticed that the list of qualities credited to the Lucas McCain character was mostly a combination of the theological, cardinal, and heavenly virtues. An ideal hero embodies all virtues and in this way provides every necessary moral element for a child to emulate and aspire to during his emotional-formation stage. Thus, the fewer the virtues exhibited by the hero, the more incomplete the moral influence. And what we've done in modern times is kill moral compasses



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by killing the hero, little by little, as he has gradually been robbed of his virtues.

To do this complete justice, I must mention that even many of our older American heroes were at least somewhat lacking in one important virtue: faith. Pope Benedict XVI said, and I agree, that Western Civilization's high-water mark was around the 13th century. This claim will raise eyebrows, but that was an age when people exhibited true faith and when, as G.K. Chesterton noted, everyone (in the West) agreed on "what really mattered." Yet faith would remain prominent in the West for quite some time. The last words of Thomas More, declared a "Reformation martyr" by the Church of England, before being beheaded in 1535 were, "The king's good servant, but God's first." George Washington made many faith-based statements, among them being, "It is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favors." And Samuel Adams, "Father of the American Revolution," once said that we should pray for the "holy and happy period when the kingdoms of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be everywhere established, and the people willingly bow to the scepter of Him who is the Prince of Peace." Related to this, also note that man does have a tendency to heroicize even the vice-ridden when they happen to satisfy some deep yearning (e.g., for vengeance) or spark the imagination; thus did criminals such as Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, Jesse James, and John Dillinger become folk heroes to many. But this is just all the more reason why art must not merely imitate life, but exalt moral living.

## Where We Went Wrong

Yet art does imitate as well as influence, and in this is a cultural barometer. And if there was a "tipping point" in the transition from Christian to post-Christian America, it was the 1960s. Consider the series *Lost in Space*, which ran between 1965 and 1968. While rightly known now for its campiness, a straight-adventure first-season episode (still in black and white) portrayed the characters — mainly the Robinson family — stopping to pray. This would never be seen in the series again. There was little room for God in a rapidly secularizing United States.

This is evident in that 20th-century phenomenon, the superhero. Superheroes are not like medieval Crusaders, who often cited God as their inspiration for defending the West from Muslim expansionism; Washington, who spoke of God as indispensable; or More, who accepted martyrdom in obedience to God. They're powerful, but their power is either inherent to them as an accident of nature or evolution, or is born of man's technology. Of course, they long exhibited many of the virtues, yet they also reflected the spirit of the age.

At the CiRCE Institute, a "provider of inspiration, information, and insight to classical educators," Christian writer Joshua Sturgill examines this in his article "Superman or Abraham?: On Modern Conceptions of Heroism." He writes that since "heroes are the personification of culture and help define its prevailing morality, we should be able to tell quite a lot about modern America by examining a few of our perennial heroes." Beginning with Superman, Sturgill points out that the character "is perhaps our closest connection to the heroes of the ancient world," who "were god-bred men" (e.g., Achilles), as he's "from a superior race of beings." Superman is also "virtuous, handsome, powerful and benevolent.... Superman is raised in the heartland of America and exemplifies innocence [meaning, absence of sin], industry and courage," Sturgill tells us. This good-without-God theme continues with Batman, who, as the writer puts it, "is the union of the martial art of the Far East and the economic art of the Far West. He represents the hope of a new man emerging from pluralism, and therefore justifies pluralism —



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uniting in himself the materialisms of the Orient and of Western Europe. He is the technological monk, the peaceful assassin, the ascetic playboy. He makes the disparate appear compatible.”

Transitioning from the ignoring of God to a more aggressively secular message, there were the X-Men, created in 1963. As Sturgill informs:

The X-Men are a collection of heroes made so by Evolution (even Darwinian Evolution).... The X-Men stories assume a God-less universe driven by blind natural laws that produce involuntarily the “next step” of biological progress.... The X-Men assure us that we need not worry about having no religion. Biology is progress.... Added to this (especially in the films) is the related and underlying premise that moral judgment is baseless and universally destructive.

Now, this last notion is itself an attack upon virtue, as “judgment” is necessary to define it as such. After all, virtue refers to a set of “good moral habits” and has a corollary: that there is also a set of bad moral habits — vice. And how could we distinguish between good and bad habits without rendering (proper) judgment? Of course, the non-judgmentalism approach is also contradictory, as implicit in it is a negative judgment of judgmentalism (not to mention that a common X-Men theme is the “wrongness” of prejudice and “racism”). Yet whether the hero is Batman, Beast, or James Bond, the larger point is this: Once sufficiently disconnected from virtue’s author — God — it was only a matter of time before virtue itself was under assault.

This became quite obvious in the 1960s, when almost-ideal fictional heroes such as Lucas McCain and idealized historical ones such as Washington (“I cannot tell a lie”) were replaced by the next degeneration. We saw, for instance, *Star Trek*’s Captain James T. Kirk. He was certainly courageous, just, generally honest, and exhibited varying degrees of most of the other virtues, but faith was completely absent. And chastity? Kirk was the embodiment of “Hugh Hefner Blasts Off.”

The ’60s also saw the rise of the antihero, an individual whose supposed appeal is that he lacks some of the heroic virtues. A prime example was Clint Eastwood’s spaghetti-western character; known as the “Man With No Name,” he was also the man with little virtue. He certainly displayed courage, fortitude, and diligence, but the other virtues were either sorely lacking or absent. Of course, being a crack shot and quintessentially “cool,” he certainly could influence the young emotionally.

And the problem today is twofold: We not only don’t understand virtue very well, but we also mock it. As *American Thinker*’s Barry Rubin put it while commenting on contemporary entertainment in his 2008 piece “Detecting Real Heroes,” “Someone who appears moral is, of course, instantly identifiable as corrupt. In a television show, film, or whatever, if a sincere religious believer (except for a Muslim) or a clergyman appears, you know he is stealing from the poor box. That stereotype holds and you can tell from the start who the villains are.” In keeping with this, virtue is cast as vice. If someone appears chaste, he just must have a sexual problem. Honesty is devalued, with our “heroes” being masters of Machiavellian deceit. Kindness has given way to coolness, selflessness to selfishness, and forgiveness to a fearsome vindictiveness. Understand, though, that this occurs not because of any intellectual understanding that what was once called virtue actually isn’t so, but because vice feels right. As ancient Chinese sage Confucius put it (I’m paraphrasing), “I never knew anyone who loved virtue as much as sex.”

This brings us to the crux of the problem: A majority of moderns cannot even believe in virtue, properly understood. Virtues are expressions of Truth, by definition absolute and transcendent. But awash in



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moral relativism, most Westerners today — and virtually everyone in the arts — believe that what we call “right and wrong” is merely an expression of the collective preference of the moment. And among people divorced from Truth, “the most common basis for moral decision-making [is] doing whatever feels right,” as the Barna Group research company put it in 2002. In this relativistic universe, there are no virtues, and hence no “good guys” and “bad guys” in any real sense, only competing feelings and fancies.

And in this evolving and devolving universe, the hero’s virtues were gradually whittled away as he went from hero to anti-hero to moral zero. What are we left with? As Rubin put it, “A pirate fighting demons; a nicer gangster battling a less charming one, that’s enough to give you something to cheer for in this type of [relativistic] drama. After all, in our times we are told by the professional tellers that there are no heroes, [sic] everyone is dirty, corrupt and vile. After all, isn’t society that way?” Of course, we may see a character pay homage to the feelings-fired fashions of the day and take up the cudgels for an obligatory ism or one of its standard bearers. Thus did the FX anthology *American Horror Story* — a series wholly devoid of goodness — engender sympathy for a sociopathic witch (third season, *Coven*, 2013-2014) by contrasting her with a vile slave-owner and having her proclaim at one point that she voted for Barack Obama “twice.” Message: She may be a reprobate, “But, kids, she’s *our* reprobate. Hope and change, yay!”

Or just compare the original film *Cape Fear* (1962) with its remake (1991). Both involve a lawyer named Sam Bowden being targeted by a criminal, Max Cady, whom he helped send to prison. In the original, whether or not Bowden (Gregory Peck) is a “hero,” he certainly is a virtuous man who ultimately acts heroically; in contrast, while Cady is well played by Robert Mitchum, he is still no one to look up to. The lines between good and evil are clearly drawn. Fast-forward three decades, however, and we have Bowden (Nick Nolte) in the remake remade as a thoroughly sleazy character. Not only is he guilty of legal misconduct, he’s cheating on his wife, has a tumultuous, unappealing family life, and is generally a weak man, the father every boy neither respects nor wants. Of course, Cady (Robert De Niro) is more than shady, but he is also larger than life: He’s clever, smart, self-educated to the point of erudition, and exhibits superhuman mental strength, not even blinking at excruciating pain. So the movie portrays no hero. And presented with a pathetic weak man and a *powerful*, cool super-villain, whom would youth be more likely to emulate? Hey, remember, you can’t really be “good,” anyway, because “good” is a social construct, just a “point of view.” But “power”? That’s certainly real — and alluring.

## Cultural Influence

So we’re managing a neat trick: undoing millennia of moral striving as we dial civilization back to something approximating pre-Christian, pagan morality. Our zero faux heroes possess all the things the animal organism desires, such as strength, cleverness, courage, and power. In this they’re little different from Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, or Attila the Hun, all of whom were admired merely for winning one for “the team.” But where are the theological, cardinal, and heavenly virtues?

A couple of years ago, I had a discussion about cultural influences with a man given to philosophical musing. He mentioned that he was watching the mid-’80s-born series *MacGyver* with his young nephew, and the boy remarked, apparently with some cynicism and incredulity, that the main character, secret agent Angus MacGyver, “always does the right thing.” It speaks volumes: Where youth once took for





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granted that heroes would be white knights, such exhibited virtue can now be shocking to them.

And this should alarm us. For as Founding Father John Adams warned, “The only foundation of a free Constitution is pure virtue, and if this cannot be inspired into our People in a greater Measure than they have it now, they may change their rulers and the forms of government, but they will not obtain a lasting liberty.” A nation that allows virtue to become extinct will soon follow it into the abyss.



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