

Tyler Prozes - "Heroism"

In the real world, people aren't born on foreign worlds or stung by magic spiders, becoming heroes through birth, chance, luck, or magic powers, like the heroes of our movies. It's often not a choice. But in the real world ordinary people *do* become heroes, through service to their country and fellow citizens, because of the element of sacrifice that is both inherent to service and that service allows us to achieve.

Harold Christ Agerholm was just an ordinary American. Born in rural Wisconsin, he went to a local school and began working for a manufacturing company. When World War Two broke out, he served his country and joined the marines. By 1944, the war was at its height, and the Americans were engaging in a fierce island-hopping campaign across the Pacific on the march to mainland Japan. The battles were brutal. The Japanese fought to the bitter end. Harold took part in the landings on Saipan. When a Japanese counterattack overran an American position and threatened a number of wounded soldiers, Harold came to the rescue. Acting on his own volition, he found a Jeep, and working under heavy mortar and cannon fire, single handedly evacuated over forty five wounded men. (Congressional Medal of Honor Society) He was shot by a sniper on one of his trips, and ultimately died, but *he saved forty-five lives* in the process. He sacrificed himself in the line of service to both his country and his comrades, and forever immortalized his name as an American hero, from a factory boy from rural Wisconsin to a Medal-of-Honor recipient. That is the first way sacrifice allows ordinary people to achieve heroism through service: it gives them the *opportunity* to display that heroism, to go above and beyond the call of duty and become something truly exceptional. Every person has that opportunity, but it's examples like Agerholm that can push us, that show us what each and every one of us can achieve. If he had lived out his life in that factory in rural Wisconsin, he would've lived and died an ordinary figure, ultimately lost to the dustbin of time, not the hero we know him as now.

Even if somebody doesn't achieve recognition for their heroism in the conventional sense, a medal or a memorial dedicated in their name, they are no less heroic. Over the course of the second world war, 464 American Soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor. (US Army) 464 out of 16 Million Americans who fought. Around 400,000 died (National World War 2 Museum). Who are we to say they don't deserve recognition for the heroism they displayed? It's not a zero sum game. War may extract a high price, but even for those who survive, it's *years* taken out of their life. For those who remain in the military, it can be their *entire life*. They can be left with psychological scars from serving. (Kurtzman) That is a sacrifice. As former Vice President Pence once said, "Our veterans really don't consider themselves heroes... [But] on this day it is our day to set the record straight; every veteran of the armed forces of the United States is a hero to the American people," (Cronk) They served to keep us safe and free. Our *way of life* is owed to the years they spent. Whether it be five years, or ten, or a lifetime, the second way ordinary people can achieve heroism through service is the inherent sacrifices they make *by serving*, and that is a sacrifice made by *every veteran*. Through their service, every ordinary man or woman can become a hero.

But service can mean many things, and thinking it a thing that can only be manifested as military service ignores the tireless work put in by so many others. Doctors, teachers, police officers, firefighters, civil servants, any number of public sector employees who devote and sacrifice just as much of their time and of their lives for the sake of their country, for improving the lives of their fellow citizens, are heroes too. Public services, provided by people in the *public service*, are "at the foundation of free and fair societies." (Oxfam) Many comforts of modern life we take for granted are owed to them. Teachers better lives by harnessing the power of knowledge. Firefighters save thousands of lives every year. Doctors save millions. That is heroism, for the same reason that military service is an inherent act of heroism. These are ordinary people. One could even call them plain. Saying without heroes we are all plain people is a disingenuous statement because heroes *are plain people*. Time is the most precious resource

we have, and their decision to spend their time in service to their country and to bettering the lives of their fellow citizens is a valuable sacrifice that makes each and every one a hero.

Although people who dedicate their life in service to their country should rightly be revered, we must also not fall for its deadly, blinding allure. Benito Mussolini once wrote that “Fascism believes now and always in sanctity and heroism.” (Mussolini) Heroism, especially heroism achieved through sacrifice of the self in service of the state, was a critical part of Fascist ideology, not just Italy or the Nazis but any number of totalitarian states throughout history. They used this aspect of heroism to inspire their soldiers to fight and die for evil causes. If Hitler didn't have this form of patriotic inspiration to motivate his armies and his people, he would've never made it past Warsaw. Umberto Eco, a prominent Italian historian, wrote that “In Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death.” (Eco) It's part of the strange romantic aura that surrounds war, and one of the many reasons why our ideas of national service can't be pigeonholed into an ultimately deadly fantasy concept of the military. People can become heroes, but a hero is not inherently a good thing. A hero is simply “a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” (Oxford Dictionary) Being idealized by fascists for doing evil deeds is clearly not a moral achievement. Hitler awarded thousands of Iron Crosses, a medal for bravery analogous to our own Medal of Honor. (Britannica) So even though it is important to recognize the heroism that sacrifice in the line of service brings with it, we must also learn to separate the good from the bad, to judge every deed in a moral and just manner, and to not blindly fall into the cult of heroes that fascists and despots have wielded so effectively throughout history.

Ultimately, service is the surest way to become a hero, because real service requires sacrifice, a deeply heroic act. You, too, could become a hero, by taking a stand for your country or your fellow citizens, doing something significant to better their lives. All of us can. One only needs to look at the billions who have done so before us and draw inspiration from them. But that element of sacrifice can be used for good or for ill, and must be treated with caution.

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