The Arc of Heroism: Is Heroism Universal?

The work of Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst is mystical and mythological. Jung studied heroism, theorizing the hero represents an archetype that it is an element of the collective unconscious. As an archetype, the hero emerges in our dreams, myths, legends, fables and is symbolically present in all cultures. Jung called archetypes primordial images and they symbolized our motivations, values and religious elements which are all universal. It is composed of images that all human beings possess because of shared human experiences. Archetypes are universal and innate to human beings and include personality traits. Jung concluded that the desire or striving to become a hero resides in all human beings and is expressed symbolically in dreams and daily behavior.

Jung described the collective unconscious as part of the psyche that every human being inherited and it was universal, shared by all human beings. The archetypes he described emerged from the collective unconscious and were innate, unlearned and inherited. Archetypes reflect one’s motivations, values and personality traits. For Jung, an archetype’s expression is influenced by several factors such as culture and other unique experiences relative to the person. The hero’s primary objective is to defeat enemies and overcome obstacles; slay the wicked dragon and monster. In mythological stories, the hero enters darkness alone and courageously returns unharmed and victorious.

Heroes are present in almost every culture of the world. In early civilizations, the hero may have

been a warrior who went to battle and returned victorious—recounting the number of enemy dead and sharing near death accounts in battle. Philosophers and psychologists suggest that human beings have an innate need to identify with heroes. The deep, powerful psychological need to identify with heroes serves us nicely inspiring us to overcome what seem like insurmountable difficulties in life. By internalizing—taking in the admired qualities of our heroes, we transform ourselves into our own heroes and imagine ourselves overcoming challenges.

Regardless of what culture in the world we examine we see heroism being lauded. Expressions of heroism are broad ranging from having superhuman strength to superior intelligence; to heightened intuition, magnificent talent to moral acumen and clarity. Courage in the face of daunting forces reflects true heroism in the raw—fearless and uncompromising. The hero welcomes the challenge and defeats it. This hero leaves an imprint on society—one whose valiant story is documented in history and whose legacy will retain staying power, a sort of death-defying immortality symbol. We don’t forget heroes whose life and work made a significant difference in the lives of many. The arenas of heroic significance which impacts millions of lives may be political, social, religious, economic or cultural. An individual’s heroic act may be single and event making or it may be a sustained, life long dedication to a cause or ideal—such as in the life and work of Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa won world wide acclaim and was elevated to heroic stature for her unswerving dedication to serving the destitute, dying and poorest of the poor.