

Examining the definition of hero



I have been thinking about the word "hero" lately.

One reason is the congressional investigation regarding the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi, Libya: Ambassador Chris Stevens, information office Sean Smith, and former Navy SEALs Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty. There are important questions to be answered, the most serious and basic: Did U.S. officials, from top to bottom, mislead the American public?

But amid the growing skepticism, the men, Stevens, Smith, Woods and Doherty, are mentioned less and less, their heroism lost in the flotsam and jetsam of a tumultuous, yet necessary, investigation. Unlike some other government employees involved in the Benghazi tragedy who appear "to go along to get along," Woods may have disobeyed orders to "stand down" and lost not some bureaucratic position and pension but his life to do what he believed to be right.

Woods' actions, along with those of Stevens, Smith and Doherty, are often followed by the word "hero." As a writer I take the use of words seriously, and in reference to these four men "hero" is appropriate. But I also listen for how certain words are used, overused and abused to the point they are watered-down to point of irrelevance. Take "warrior," for example. It is

a word so worn-out in sports that it is a mockery of itself. A professional basketball player, paid millions of dollars, sprains his ankle and is hauled to the locker room, arms draped over two teammate's shoulders. Minutes later, ankle taped, he limps back onto the court. The fans explode with applause. Inevitably, the play-by-play announcer clears his throat and speaks with the reverence of a TV preacher at prayer as the color commentator nods like an enraptured worshipper: "What a warrior."

No, I do not think so.
A competitor? Okay.
A tough guy?

When discussing basketball players, who in comparison to football players are wimps, "tough guy" is questionable, but I can live with it.

But a "warrior"?

Lay that on the combat veteran Marine living down the street.

Similarly, "hero" gets tossed around in sports for all the wrong reasons. I cite the downfall of every formerly revered steroid juiced jock, Lance Armstrong et al, and leave it to fans as to whether the term "hero" has been abused as much as drugs.

Mark Twain said we admire heroes "for great qualities which we ourselves lack." Yet I wonder if "non" heroes lack such qualities or just have not been called to exercise them. Or maybe they have and nobody noticed.

Woods and Doherty, like many in the military, were athletic. Woods a high school wrestler, Doherty a train-

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er at SEALFIT, a fitness company run by former Navy SEALs. They were classic heroes. Men of action, distinguished courage and ability, admired for brave deeds and noble qualities. After all, how many of us, if given an order that takes us out of harm's way and abrogates us from responsibility, would disobey and risk our life?

Well, here's the twist: Maybe more than we think.

Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo was recently quoted in The Wall Street Journal on what makes a hero. "The decision to act heroically," he said, "is a choice that many of us will be called upon to make at some point in our lives. It means not being afraid of what others might think. It means not being afraid of the fallout for ourselves. It means not being afraid of putting our necks on the line." Woods and Doherty serve as dramatic exam-

ples of such heroism.

But there is a phrase within Zimbardo's quote that we may glide past as we focus on "not being afraid" and "putting our necks on the line." He says "the decision to act heroically is a choice that many of us will be called to make."

Many of us.

In my mind, unlike "warrior" in sports, "hero" is a word which perhaps we do not apply often enough because we associate it with magnificent acts of courage like those in Benghazi. But what about the guy who tells his son that he will work overtime at his dead-end factory job until they drag him out so the boy can go to college? I have a friend whose dad told him exactly that.

Not being afraid of the fallout for ourselves.

Or the stocky, 40-year-old Mexican immigrant, who lugs around children's early reader books, faithfully attends his tutoring classes for English after putting in a long day at his blue-collar job, covering his face in embarrassment as he erases and corrects homework, all because he wants "to make a better life for my family."

Not being afraid of what others might think.

Or the woman who takes a stand on lightning rod political and social issues, knowing it will provoke condemnation from those who oppose her. Knowing some of those people are family and friends, the very folks whose opinions and approval she val-

ues most. Yet, she takes her stand.

Not being afraid of putting our necks on the line.

Twain, a supreme observer of the human condition, noted that "one can be a hero to other folk, and in a vague sort of way understand it, or at least believe it, but that a person can really be a hero to a near and familiar friend is a thing which no hero has ever been yet to realize, I am sure."

For most heroes there are no cheering crowds or pontificating announcers to proclaim their deeds. But it is that deafening silence and lack of recognition that make two honest-to-God warriors like Woods and Doherty, along with admirable men of service like Stevens and Smith, all the more heroic. In a different way heroism also applies to the factory worker, the Mexican immigrant and the principled woman. Disregarding orders to "stand down," they have done what they believe to be right, unafraid of the fallout or what others may think, and put themselves on the line.

But that is what heroes do, and they are not so rare. Prove Mark Twain wrong and look past the game or chest-puffing politician on TV. There's probably a hero closer than you think.

Mike Pemberton's short stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Aethlon*, *Touchstone* and *Euphemism*. His first novel, "Transcendental Basketball Blues," was published in 2011. He lives in Hoopston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.