

Healers & Heroes



ORDINARY PEOPLE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

CLIF CLEVELAND, MD, MACP
AUTHOR OF SACRED SPACE

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
PHILADELPHIA

ACP

AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
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Manager, Books Program: Diane McCabe
Production Supervisor: Allan S. Kleinberg
Developmental Editor: Karen C. Nolan
Interior and Cover Design: Elizabeth Swartz
Composition: Wendy Smith

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For

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and

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who gave invaluable help to my study of Janusz Korczak

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And I remain indebted to my heroes.

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE BACKS OF HEROES



I had a crush on Allene Hutchinson. She was my first grade teacher at Harwell Avenue School in LaGrange, Georgia. The photograph from my first day of school in September 1942 shows her, a prim brunette, standing next to me, her right hand resting on my right shoulder. She seems shorter in this picture than I remember. Tall for my age, as I would be for most of my years in grammar and junior high school, I stand to her right side, dapper in a necktie and a striped Palm Beach jacket. We did not have the word “blazer” in our 1942 vocabulary. Exposed wrists show that I am already outgrowing this coat. My legs appear scrawny below the hems of my short pants. My smile seems tentative. When I finished my assignments early, Mrs. Hutchinson gave me more columns to add and stories to read. She presided with gentle expertise over the launch of a twenty-two-year engagement with formal education.

After lunch each day, Mrs. Hutchinson read to us, usually one chapter per day, from books that usually required two or more weeks to complete. We were encouraged to rest our heads upon arms folded across the tops of our desks during the reading. Some of my classmates quickly fell asleep. I had difficulty containing my anticipation of the next installment in the current novel. *Lassie* left the most indelible

imprint. This was the first long story that I had encountered that dealt with hardship and courage, the fortitude in this instance being demonstrated by a dog. I read and reread *Lassie* after receiving my own copy as a Christmas gift. I found comfort and inspiration in those first books.

Outside the classroom, I lived in fear. Gawky, nearsighted — a flaw that I concealed for years — and clumsy, I lived in fear of humiliation. When teams were picked or sides chosen for a playground game, I was the last person picked and sometimes was simply overlooked. I do not recall ever getting a hit when we played baseball. A beating at the hands of the older boys who presided over the hours outside the classroom constituted my biggest fear. During my elementary and junior high years, there were no social promotions. A student languished in a grade until he or she either met the requirements for promotion or attained age sixteen or married and left school. The first elopement of a classmate occurred in elementary school, she a mature, sweet-natured girl who wore faded sack-dresses.

I suspect that some of the older males at the Harwell Avenue School would be classified today as dyslectic or mentally impaired. They behaved in class under threat of being sent to the principal, a large and intimidating lady with the demeanor of a drill-sergeant. Legend had it that she wielded the paddle while the janitor held miscreants over a table. Recess was another matter. A number of retired, elderly teachers joined the faculty as replacements for younger teachers who relocated to be closer to their recently drafted husbands. A single teacher assumed playground duty each day. I doubt that some of the elderly monitors could see or hear very much of what transpired.

Like most of my peers, I sought anonymity within a group. Gangs of older boys terrorized any younger male whom they might isolate. A visit to the bathroom at recess was out of the question. We heard tales of frightening acts forced upon any younger boy who dared go to the toilet. Bladder control was essential.

Although threatened and chased from time to time, I was seriously accosted only once during my years in grade school, and that on a Halloween night. While trick-or-treating, two of us suddenly were surrounded by four of the dreaded older boys. They threatened to strip us, beat us, and lock us in the basement of a nearby church. One of

our captors brandished a knife. My friend and I bolted to safety when a nearby porch light was turned on. A few days later I recognized one of the quartet when he came to our duplex to collect for our newspaper delivery. He told me that he would kill me if I ever revealed to my parents what had earlier transpired. I never saw him again. I assume he resigned his paper route.

Junior high school raised the level of risk. The older boys, now fully matured, became more blatantly threatening. We shared classrooms, locker rooms, hallways, and playgrounds with young men who routinely bragged of their sexual exploits and derided us mercilessly. Teachers avoided the backs of classrooms where sullen, older males slouched at their desks. Once, in a stairwell between classes, a classmate suffered a severe beating at the hands of a male several years his senior. His assailant attended class for two more days before the school board acted upon his expulsion.

I successfully maintained a low profile during school. I was not so fortunate during a weekend jamboree sponsored by the Boy Scouts. At the annual events troops competed against each other in a variety of outdoor contests such as map reading, first aid, and construction of rope bridges. I packed my camping gear — mess kit, sleeping bag, poncho, and other items purchased from an Army surplus store — and walked to the pickup point in the parking lot of my church. During the following day's competition in orienteering, my group came upon a fully operational liquor still. The nervous owner of the illicit distillery begged us not to report him. Of course, we did when we returned to our camp. Later, we were told that the proprietor and the most valuable parts of his equipment had disappeared by the time the sheriff acted upon our tip and raided the site.

After the day of competitions and a campfire, I walked toward the tent area. Suddenly, two older Scouts grabbed me, forced me to the ground, and shone a flashlight in my face. They blamed me for our troop's failure in one of the earlier contests of the day. I had no idea what they were talking about. I recall the beer on their breath. One of the pair held a knife against my throat while cursing me. An unknown voice firmly said, "Leave him alone," and my two assailants quickly withdrew. I never knew who intervened. I found excuses thereafter

for not attending another scouting event. I kept my distance and avoided eye contact with my attackers. I had to maintain a higher level of vigilance. Fear left me a legacy of migraine.

My peers and I maintained a code of silence as far as telling our parents much of anything that occurred outside the classroom. Possibly, we thought that childhood and adolescence followed certain unchangeable patterns, and soon we would have completed our time of testing. In any event, we would with time acquire additional bulk and become more savvy in avoiding danger.

My protectors during those years were the real and fictional heroes whom I encountered in movies, books, and newspapers. World War II dominated the media during the first three years of school. I savored the exploits of aviators, tank crews, and submariners. An aunt gave me a history of a downed aircrew in the Pacific and their harrowing float to safety in a life raft. This was the first book of nonfiction that I read several times. I followed the course of the war in daily newspapers and broadcasts. I interpreted what I heard into piles of pencil drawings that invariably featured a hero engaged in battle with dastardly enemies. Intimidated at school, I could create a personal zone of safety in my imagination.

Heavily censored letters — V-mail — arrived from my mother's brothers who served overseas in the Army. Their reports and those passed through the family from cousins in North Africa, Italy, and France personalized the battles and presented me with heroes whom I knew. I searched an atlas to pinpoint their presumed duty stations.

Near the end of the war, my father received a letter from a friend of his who wrote from Iwo Jima. An infantryman, he wrote of his anticipation of returning to his civilian job. His letter arrived soon after my father learned that his friend had been killed in action. I assumed that this man whom I had met before his entry into military service had died heroically. This was the first fatality of war whom I had known.

My real and imagined heroes afforded me shelter in a childhood world that I found threatening and unpredictable. Each hero showed me an alternative to the fear in whose shadow I lived. I sensed that I might be able to borrow traits from my heroes so, if not heroic in my own right, I could at least conceal my doubts about my own worth.

INTRODUCTION

Following junior high school, my family moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where danger seemed less prevalent. In this calmer venue, I continued to add to my personal hall of heroes. The Korean War supplied several. The televised Army-McCarthy hearings provided a civilian example of heroism in the person of Joseph Welch, who demonstrated to me the power of words in rebuffing an adversary, the Red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy. I learned that courage might take many forms beyond coping with physical dangers. I learned that heroic actions often occurred in quiet venues, with little or no acknowledgment and no thought of reward.

My heroes, in a way, delivered me safely through childhood and adolescence. They continue to guide and to inspire me. Subsequent years have revealed to me many instances in which people address and ultimately overcome obstacles of injustice, belligerence, ignorance, and illness.

I continue to build a complex mosaic of heroes. Several of their stories follow.