



# Three Heroes

**R**obin Hood has always been a hero of mine. He had the characteristics that I most admire: audacity wit, and a flagrant disregard for authority. The rich might have forgiven him if he had been motivated by pure self-interest— yes, robbery was understandable— but to return the treasure that had been so diligently wrung from the laboring peasants— that was simply unforgivable.

In doing that, the hooded outlaw took away more than purses. He took away the moral authority of the people who made the rules: the rules that always favor the people with moral authority.

But in truth my admiration of Robin Hood is more aesthetic than ethical. I envy the lifestyle. In the morning: relieve the rich of their excessive pride and lucre. In the afternoon: toss bags of coins to grateful peasants. In the evening: return to the greenwood to drink ale with a merry band of ne'er-do-wells. Who in their right mind would not trade a lifetime in a cubicle for a week in Sherwood.

Of course, it gives me pause to reflect that back in the day Robin Hood was simply an outlaw with a price on his head. He was a terror to the good sheriff and all the people of means who saw it as their absolute right to build their estates on the backs of the laboring classes. And what if he were he alive today? He would still be a terrorist with a price on his head: an enemy of freedom— that is, if freedom is defined as the right of the rich and the educated to freely exploit the poor and the ignorant.

Another beloved hero of mine is the ill-starred gentleman from La Mancha, Señor Don Quixote, who determined that the only life worth living was one of uncompromising service to the highest ideals. And so, the story goes, forsaking his home and family at the age of 50 he set off in the company of his faithful man servant, Sancho Panza, to live the life of a knight errant. This life consisted, for the most part, of aimlessly wandering in search of great



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wrongs that needed righting and subsequently being rewarded handsomely with blows and curses for his efforts.

One need not be a psychologist to diagnose Don Quixote as a delusional schizophrenic. Obsessed with a code of chivalry that no longer existed anywhere except in his own imagination, he had lost all sense of reality. He mistook windmills for giants, innkeepers for barons, and harlots for damsels in distress. He was a madman.

He was also an idealist—a man who stubbornly refused to accept the world as it appeared to be. Ignoring the sound advice of family and friends, he was certain that his eyes saw a truth that was hidden from a world blinded by the busyness of practical concerns. What was more, and most inspiring to me, at an age when everyone has traded in the heroic dreams of youth for a comfortable cynicism, Don Quixote grew more certain that with his “good right arm” he alone could slash through the veil of appearances and rescue the truth that lay captive beneath it.

It is a very noble dream—and, who knows, maybe harlots really are damsels in

distress.

My heroes are not all fictional characters. Mahatma Gandhi, Mr. Churchill’s “little brown man,” holds a place of honor in my pantheon of heroes. He was one part Robin Hood, who stared down the British lion and compelled it to step aside for Indian home rule, and one part Don Quixote, who stubbornly clung to an idealistic vision that non-violence was a more potent force than all the guns of the greatest army in the world.

Mr. Gandhi, a pacifist, was anything but passive. He was a warrior pure and simple—and a fighter for truth and justice. He merely eschewed the weapons of violence as flawed instruments that caused as much spiritual harm to their users as they caused physical harm to their victims.

He believed that a practitioner of non-violent resistance should actively refuse to participate in any form of injustice, legal or otherwise. When threatened with violence, the practitioner willfully absorbs that violence it into his or her being, where it is then transformed by the power of Truth into loving kindness and is returned, jujitsu-like, to the aggressor, who is

overwhelmed by its power.

He believed that Truth was not an abstract ideal but an absolute power and he dedicated his life to the discovery of how this power might be applied by the masses of ordinary men and women to right the great wrongs of the world.

Gandhi titled his autobiography “My Experiments with Truth,” and that is how he lived his life. He never doubted the power of *Satyagraha*, Truth Force, but he spent his life experimenting with how this power could be employed at the level of politics.

Gandhi’s commitment to non-violent Truth Force was not based on philosophical idealism; it was an article of religious faith. His uncompromising adherence to many anti-modern disciplines puts him in the category of “religious fundamentalist” : although married he practiced strict celibacy; he renounced the “pleasures of the palate” and ate only the simplest of foods—when he ate at all; he forsook private property as a form of theft and greeted heads of state wearing the loin cloth of an untouchable.

As one of the first critics of global economics, he insisted that his countryman follow his example and spin Indian cotton by hand rather than buy machine-made cloth of British manufacture. He thoroughly disapproved of materialistic Western culture and agreed with his Islamic friends that it was essentially a “Satanic” culture, and a great plague upon the earth. By any measure Gandhi should be labeled a religious fanatic if he were not so safely dead.

And so it is that I, a man entering the last third of his life, continue to steer my life, for better or worse, according to the patterns set by this odd pantheon of heroes: a terrorist, a madman, and a religious fanatic. Who is to say if this stubbornly practical world will tremble or snicker as it parries the thrusts of a gray-beard idealist?

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