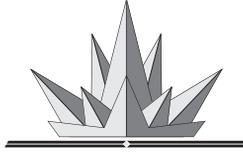




HEROIC

**THE
SURPRISING PATH TO
TRUE MANHOOD**

BILL DELVAUX



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PUBLISHING GROUP
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-3944-7

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

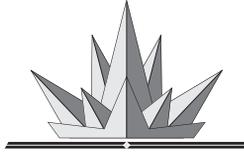
Dewey Decimal Classification: 248.842
Subject Heading: HEROES AND HEROINES / MEN /
JESUS CHRIST

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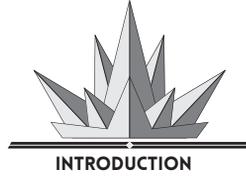
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I AM NO HERO

Men are incurably fascinated with the heroic.

They are mesmerized by heroic men they see in movies. They are pulled toward heroic tales they read in books. They are drawn to heroic deeds in the news. Some strange resonance is at work here, calling something out to a man—unbidden and unknown.

But the resonance doesn't last.

Back in the world of bosses and bills, tests and emails, it fades into the background—or into non-existence. Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps it was a silly notion. Perhaps it was nothing at all. Back in the world of the familiar, men feel something very different.

They feel uninitiated. Entering the work world, they have the bodies of men but inside they still feel like boys. Left without markers or guides to navigate the treacherous masculine terrain, they quickly become disoriented. To manage, they hunker down and latch onto anything for some sense of comfort or success.

They feel anonymous. Trying on different jobs and positions, they hope to land not just a steady income, but a clear-cut sense of identity. Yet it eludes them. They don't know who they are. And they don't know how to find it. They feel like shadows in the background.

They feel stuck. Stuck in work they tolerate or hate. Stuck in patterns that corrupt or imprison. If there was ever any sense of something burning inside of them to do, it has long been drowned out. The goal of life now is to survive. Some don't even do that.

If a man were to put words to all of this, it would come as a simple statement: "I am no hero." If you feel that way, join the rest of us.

Yet the resonance continues to call something out to us. Some mysterious voice bids us, *Come and follow. There is so much more to you. There is so much more to your life. You are meant for greater things. Come and follow, even if it costs you blood and spit, grime and grief—even if it costs you everything. In the end, you will lay your body down with no regrets. In the end, you will die a happy man.*

What is offered in this book is what it would look like to get up and follow that call. But I must issue a warning at the beginning. This path will be a surprise. The path we typically choose as men—well, that's what got us into trouble in the first place. True heroes are not necessarily the men who talk the loudest or seem the most successful. They are certainly not the ones who bully others into submission. Neither does the path lead to a stereotyped lumberjack or linebacker sort of manhood. Artists and athletes, musicians and hunters—whatever a man's gifts or proclivities, he is invited to take the same path. It is one that transcends typecast roles and cultural bounds.

That's why this way is different. That's why you must be ready for the unexpected. You must be prepared

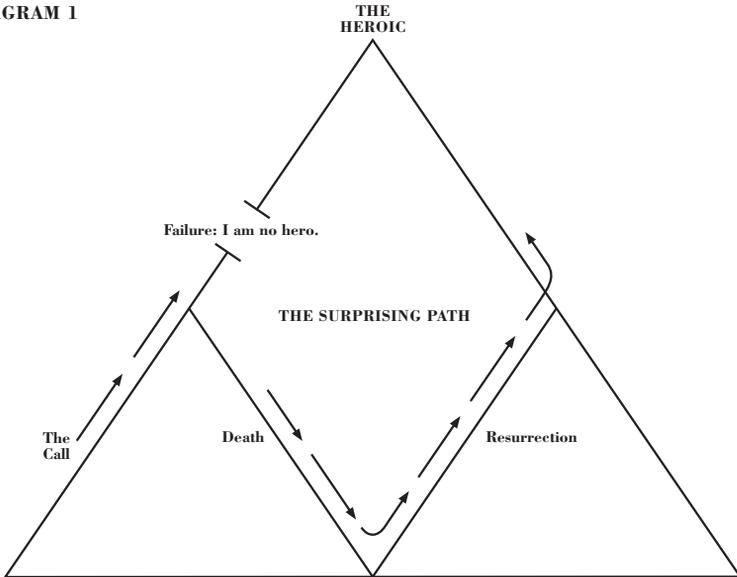
to enter the unknown. This is the surprising path into manhood.

Another warning. To get up and follow will change everything. It will turn everything upside down. The incalculable may happen. The impossible may be asked. Nothing will be the same as it was before.

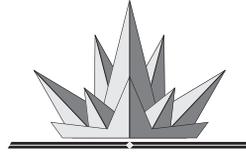
One last thing to set the record straight: I am no hero either. Trust me on that one.

But I know Someone who is.

DIAGRAM 1



The ascent to the heroic requires a surprise turn into death and resurrection. What that means will be described in the pages ahead.



CHAPTER 1

SEARCHING FOR HEROES

*“We are like sculptors, constantly carving
out of others the image we long for, need,
love or desire, often against reality, against
their benefit, and always, in the end, a
disappointment, because it does not fit them.”*

—Anais Nin

*“The denigration of those we love always detaches
us from them in some degree. Never touch your
idols: the gilding will stick to your fingers.”*

—Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

*All men are like grass, and all their
glory like the flowers of the field. The
grass withers and the flowers fall.*

—1 Peter 1:24, author paraphrase

It’s an ordinary family photo, yet if you look closer, it contains the contradiction of the ages.

It’s a picture of me with my brother Tom. He is around four years old, making me about two. He had instigated the scene. I was just following suit, wanting to copy him. But it is our mother who had made the scene possible. She had taken two towels and wrapped one around each of our necks. Then she fastened them so

that most of the towel became a cape, draping down our backs. My brother has a triumphant smile on his face, looking off in the distance with eyes that glow. My own eyes are transfixed on Tom. There we both are, ready to be Superman, ready to be “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” Those words from the 1950s Superman TV show are still etched in my memory.

Tom had probably watched the show, becoming captivated by this visitor from another planet. Superman appeared to be a normal man in disguise, but he was more than a man. And he was more like the man Tom wanted to be. Of course at four years of age, he wasn’t processing any of this consciously. But something about Superman had tugged at him enough that he wanted to dress up and fight “for truth, justice, and the American way.” So did I.

On one level, this family photo is the standard fare of childhood behavior. From infancy, we learn by watching and copying, whether it’s walking or talking, tying our shoes, or swinging a bat. Yet there is an additional element. Tom and I were not just learning a skill. We were copying a man we wanted to be like. But even here, there is nothing noteworthy. All boys look for a man to imitate, whether it’s founded in reality with a grandpa or in the imaginary with those super-action figures.

But underneath these familiar terrains lies something else, as odd as it is common. It’s a twist that should make us pause. On a purely rational level, the story of Superman is ridiculous. No man can bend steel or fly through the air. It’s all right for young boys to imitate

a mythologized character approaching the status of an ancient Greek god. But if a grown man attempts to be Superman, he is deemed psychotic. He has lost touch with reality. Yet no one wanted to spoil our boyhood imaginations that day, especially my mother, assuming that we would grow up and get in touch with reality.

So there we both were, standing triumphantly in our backyard with capes unfurled, dressed like thousands of other boys at that time, wanting to be what we could *never, ever become*. It is this contradiction that interests me. It is this twist that intrigues me. What was it about being more than a man, about being Superman, that captivated all of us boys? What was it about having superhuman strength and X-ray vision? About battling evil and rescuing the helpless? What was it about all this that so deeply resonated with those who had as yet no cognitive categories for such things? What is it about Superman that continues to captivate older audiences in all of the movie remakes? It is what we see in him, what we search for in others, and what we long to find in ourselves.

It is the heroic.

There is more to the Superman story. It's found in the life of the man who played Superman in the 1950s TV show, the actor George Reeves. Here is his story. After deciding to become an actor in high school, he got his first major break as one of Scarlett O'Hara's suitors in *Gone with the Wind*. But his real claim to fame came in landing the role of Superman in the TV series that ran from 1951–57. The series was scheduled to restart again in 1959, but it never happened. Instead, the police

were called to his home and found George lying naked on his bed, bleeding where a bullet had shattered his temple and ripped through his brain. The newspapers reported that he had killed himself.

Rumors of George's struggle with alcoholism and depression certainly corroborated this story, but his mother was convinced that someone had murdered him. She attempted her own investigation using a private detective, but died before it was ever finished. George's girlfriend at the time disappeared right after his death, never to return, even for his funeral. She had been informed that he had left everything in his will to another lover, a married woman with whom he had had an affair for years, whose husband had connections to the criminal underworld.

Whether George committed suicide or was murdered by the mob, although an intriguing question, is not my point in retelling his story. It's the story itself. What did the life of George Reeves have to do with the life of Superman? Absolutely nothing. The contradiction is jarring. When I first heard his story, I was shocked and then saddened over his tragic life, cut short at forty-five years of age. I was also disappointed. Even though I knew that George was only acting as Superman, I had assumed something better than this sordid tale. In the end though, he was just another man struggling with his own set of sins and addictions—struggling and losing.

He was no Superman.

He was no hero.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

But we have jumped ahead of ourselves a bit. I want to return for a minute to the days of our boyhood heroes, to the time before disappointment and heartbreak. There is something here worth exploring and understanding. Think about it for a minute. Whom did you look up to as a boy? Whom did you admire as a young man? Who seemed to have the strength and skill to win the day? Who seemed to always know what to do and how to do it? Who fired your imagination with hopes of beating overwhelming odds? Who was your hero?

I began asking that question to a number of men. I heard so many different stories, but all with the same underlying passion as they spoke. Some of their heroes were celebrity figures. One of my faculty colleagues responded with Mickey Mantle, the Yankee baseball star who seemed to have it all. He could run, throw, hit, and field the ball—all with amazing skill. Following in the steps of icons Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio, he was treated like a hero, appearing on cereal boxes, baseball cards, and covers of national publications. My colleague loved baseball, so Mickey Mantle became his hero to admire. Another friend of mine, Jay, told the story of being drawn to a well-known SEC collegiate quarterback when he was a boy. Overcoming major injuries that should have ended his career, this quarterback refused to give up and fought his way back onto the playing field. It was his courage and tenacity that inspired Jay to keep playing football through his own setbacks and

injuries—Jay eventually becoming an SEC quarterback himself.

Other heroes chosen were ordinary men whose impact was extraordinary. A former student of mine responded by naming his grandfather. When I asked him why, he looked straight at me without blinking and immediately replied: “He seemed invincible.” Another friend, Tim, answered with the story of an older brother. Raised by parents who were distant and cold, this brother became the sole family connection for his heart. Tim played all the sports growing up, but his brother loved the outdoors instead. So they would spend hours bushwhacking through the expanse of woods bordering his house, camping out at night and talking about life. It is no surprise that Tim loves backpacking in the wilderness to this very day.

There are countless other hero stories I have heard: the rugby coach who instilled the value of hard work, the Scoutmaster who inspired so many to be Eagle Scouts, the older brother who sacrificed so much to join the army, the high school administrator who led by serving, and the teacher who inspired a student to become a novelist. I had a religion professor in college whose reputation was stellar. When I took his class, I saw why. He wasn’t an exceptional lecturer or brilliant thinker. But on most afternoons you could find him in his office rocking chair, counseling students and encouraging them. I was one of those he listened to in that rocker. In fact, I was so taken with the man that I began to imitate him in my mannerisms and speech.

We love hearing stories like these because they stir up in us our highest aspirations, as well as the memories of our own heroes. Starting as young boys, we search for heroes, hoping to find and imitate them, so as to become heroic ourselves. But what exactly are we looking for in our heroes? What is it that gives them such magnetic power?

The most obvious trait of our early heroes is their physical strength and prowess. We are looking for the strong man. Often we choose athletes, for these men seem to possess the strength to beat the enemy and win the day. Who isn't inspired at times by the competitors we see in collegiate sports, the Tour de France, or the Olympic Games? And which of these great athletes didn't have someone inspiring them as a boy? Scott, another one of my friends, grew up with an older brother who possessed uncanny athletic ability. In whatever sport he took up—be it football, basketball, or lacrosse—he excelled. Along with the skill went a fighting spirit. He hated practices and just wanted to compete. When Scott entered the sixth grade, a time when school sports start to become important, he began to look up to his brother as a hero to imitate. I have heard similar stories endlessly repeated by men who found their first hero in a strong man.

But there is more than just raw strength that pulls us to our heroes. During early manhood, we begin looking for someone who understands life and can point out the true path amid the jungle of lies. We are looking for the wise man. One of my students loved Captain Kirk of *Star Trek*, precisely because he used his wits and

intellect rather than a display of power. It was the captain's wisdom that won the day. For me, I was mesmerized by the character of Yoda when *The Empire Strikes Back* appeared in theaters. I was intently searching then for someone who knew the truth and would train me in it. Yoda did just that when he helped Luke Skywalker understand the Force, training him in the ways of the Jedi.

But at some point, we are drawn to another type of hero, one who uses his strength and wisdom not for his own benefit but for others. We are looking for the noble man. Here is the quintessential hero, the one who lives for a transcendent purpose, not for his reputation. And he remains true to that purpose even when it costs him dearly. We are drawn to this warrior who fights for the good, precisely because he does it for everyone else. So many of the heroic men in story and film exhibit this prized quality. You only have to think of William Wallace, Maximus, Jean Valjean, or Aragorn to see the noble man in action. We feel a masculine energy pulsating from him, a fire in his soul that strikes something deep in ours. We want to burn as he does.

It's important to note several things here. First, I have used words like *pull*, *admire*, and *inspire* to delineate the power our heroes have over us. But these words don't quite have enough bite. Let me go at it this way. I recently read a newspaper article about a successful collegiate football coach on his first public appearance before the season. From young boys to elderly men, they all crammed into a hotel lobby for hours, waiting to get a brief glimpse or an autograph. Perhaps they might even

get a chance to touch him. When he appeared, bedlam erupted as the crowd surged forward. Security guards tried to keep order as press cameras flashed incessantly. Shouts of, “We love you, coach,” were heard over the commotion. It was all over quickly, but the hours of waiting seemed worth it for those who had gathered. The reporter suggested that these football fans saw their coach almost as a god-like figure. Then he gave a name to what he had seen. Hero worship. There it is—*worship*. That’s the word I’m looking for. That’s the power our heroes have on us. We put them up on a pedestal and worship them in wonder and adoration. Whether this is legitimate or questionable is another issue. My point is that we all do it, without premeditation or understanding why. It’s inside all of us, the longing to idolize our chosen heroes.

The second thing to note is that no one sits us down as boys and teaches us about the heroic. No one explains to us the strength, wisdom, and noble character we should be looking for in our heroes. Even further, no one exhorts us to start searching for such men and follow their steps. We receive no instruction on this matter whatsoever. It is entirely innate, planted in some deep recess of our hearts. Long before we could even spell the word *hero*, we were already looking for one and looking up to one.

Finally, what is at the bottom of our search for the heroic? It is this: We are looking for the ideal man. We are looking for true masculinity. We know that we don’t have it, and we know that we must find a hero to get it. But even further, we long to connect to that hero, hoping

to warm ourselves in that masculine fire so as to ignite one in ourselves. It is this hope that sets us off on the trail—ever hunting, ever searching.

TROUBLES ON THE TRAIL

But somewhere along the way, the trail grows cold. The search becomes confusing. We awaken to troubling realities that disturb our grasp of the heroic. We awaken to death and evil, to sin and shame. We find that our heroes aren't the men we thought they were, the men we needed them to be.

All my life, I have longed for men to be more than what they could be, setting me up for the inevitable let-down. Often it came drip by drip, slowly dissolving my ideal image of them, as acid does to metal. One of my early heroes was a pastor known for his leadership ability and intellectual acumen. I loved standing in line to greet him after the service. The firm handshake would be followed by some banter between us. He would then throw his head back in laughter. In the joy he radiated, I sensed he had the fire I needed. But as I grew older, I learned of his inability to connect with others beyond the surface level. As far as I knew, he had few, if any, deep friends. What was he hiding that he didn't want others to see? My image of him eroded, and I became conflicted over how I should feel about him.

Other early heroes of mine included popular musicians. As a budding one myself, I was taken by their skill and creativity, as well as the aura they radiated on stage. One artist I was particularly drawn to was Dan

Fogelberg. There was something about his haunting melodies and poetic lyrics that captivated me. I learned most of the songs he ever wrote, performing them and copying his style in my own songs. But sometime later, I happened to meet someone who knew Dan personally. I was told troubling stories of relational wreckage and alcohol abuse. I left the conversation feeling confused. What was I to do with my tarnished image? I had no answer.

But at other times, the image didn't slowly erode. It shattered. By my sophomore year in college, I was drowning in a morass of doubt and despair about the big questions of life. As a result, I developed a keen interest in philosophy, expectant that it could give me the answers I desperately needed. Along with that interest, I was searching for a wise man. And I set my hope on a philosophy professor to fill that void. But my hopes were unraveled as the class proceeded. Instead of taking up the universal questions of God and reason, goodness and truth, I only remember petty discussions involving psychological conundrums (How do you describe green to a blind person?) and linguistic puzzles (Does a tree make a sound if it falls in the forest but no one hears it?).

But the real shattering happened as I came out after class one day and happened to see him conversing with another professor. They were strolling through the shade-filled lawn that separated the academic buildings. As I innocently walked behind them, I realized I could overhear their conversation. My professor was enthusiastically sharing his anticipation of an upcoming philosophy convention where he could party and drink. I was

stunned. I had already seen my share of drunken bodies and reckless behavior. I had already walked through enough dorms the morning after, reeking of stale beer and vomit. Wherever goodness and truth were to be found, I knew it was not there. My wise man had shattered. The one I had looked to for rescue from drowning—hoping for a rope, a life preserver, anything—had just thrown me an anchor. I walked away staggering, drowning again.

My experiences are only repeated in some form with the other hero stories I have mentioned. Remember Scott's admiration for his athletic older brother? It turned to confusion and dismay as he got older. His brother became addicted to alcohol in college and then moved on to drugs, souring relationships in the family as he became more narcissistic. Scott realized that his brother was no longer someone to follow. He was someone from whom he had to distance himself. He did not want his life to turn out that way. What happened to Tim's older brother, to all of those moments they shared camping in the woods together? All that abruptly ended with his older brother's death in an accident, thrown from a car because he was not wearing a seat belt. At fourteen, Tim was devastated, left alone in a family unwilling and unable to grieve. What about the story of Mickey Mantle? It, too, crashed as a heroic tale. To numb the pain of his father's death from Hodgkin's disease (and figuring he would die from it as well), Mickey turned to alcohol, eventually destroying his marriage and estranging his family. My friend Jay who played collegiate football later find out that his own football

hero had left a trail of relational devastation behind him through anger and manipulation. And what about that student of mine who believed that his grandfather was invincible? I asked him when he learned otherwise. He replied with three words: “My grandpa died.”

The stories of our failed heroes come in all shapes and sizes, of uncles discovered with pornography, of cousins who sexually abused, of coaches caught lying, of athletes cheating with drugs, of teachers living secret lives, of musicians using the stage to hide—all once admired, all now defrocked. You have heard these stories yourself. You have known these men yourself.

The trail grows cold because the radiance we felt in our heroes fades. The fire flickers. Whether through their foolish choices or the specter of death, they cease to be the men we thought they were. We can no longer reach up to them. They have dropped down to us. What we do with our fallen heroes now becomes part of the continuing confusion. For some of us, we keep looking for a new hero to follow. For others, we try to shut down the longing, embracing worn-out platitudes: “People will let you down.” “Don’t trust others; you can only trust yourself.” “Everyone makes mistakes.” But I suspect for most of us, it’s an odd combination of both routes. This is the energy behind the heightened expectations we feel for the new minister, the new CEO, or the newly elected politician. We need these men to be heroic leaders who can fight and come through for us. Yet when the inevitable disappointment comes, we scurry back into our self-protective corners, musing over our dreams broken once again. Worse still, we develop a cynicism that

anticipates the dark side, congratulating ourselves when it appears: *We were right after all. Everyone has dirty laundry. Everyone has skeletons in the closet. There are no heroes. That's just a fairy tale.* But with such a settled conviction, the fire goes out. Suddenly we're in darkness.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

What are we to make of such contradiction and confusion? What are we to do with such dashed dreams and ideals? What do we do with our failed heroes? The Bible sheds some unique light in this darkness. A good place to begin is Paul's summary statement on the condition of humanity: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Sin is described here as falling short—as lacking something or being destitute of something. But the most intriguing part of this statement is what we are lacking: the glory of God.

Glory is one of the more significant words in the Bible's vocabulary. When used of God, it denotes the luminous radiance with which He is surrounded whenever He reveals Himself. It's a radiance that leaves an unforgettable impression. The sense of impression probably comes from the Hebrew root behind *glory*; a verb that means to be heavy or weighty. God's glory is that. It's too heavy and weighty to be ignored. It etches a mark on all who experience it so that they are forever changed.

But there is more to glory than its definition. God's glory becomes thematic for the story of the Bible. Genesis 1 starts that story with God going to work as a

skilled artisan. All of creation is endowed with a radiance that reflects the glory of the Creator. We see it in the purplish-hued sunsets, in the sweeping mountaintop vistas, and in the dome of the night sky that is jeweled with countless points of twinkling light. But more important, mankind was created in the likeness of that glory. We were to be godlike, sharing in that glory. We were to reflect it and bathe in it, enjoying Him and each other. This was to be our heritage and our life. But alas, we have lost the glory. The story of the fall in Genesis 3 is the story of all of us. Like our first parents, we believe the lie that true life is found outside of walking with God. We believe that He is, in fact, holding out on us and can't be trusted. So we choose to go and find life on our own. In so doing, we fall—we all fall short of the glory of God. We become destitute, stripped of that glory, not because He turns away from us but because we have turned away from Him and can no longer reflect that glory. Yet we do not cease to exist, but live in a kind of shadow world, where we only half exist. We are not men, but phantoms of our true selves. We have lost *our* glory, and the penalty is the very lack of glory itself. We are left hungering for it.

Perhaps you already see the connection with our search for heroes. Left in this shadow world, we are incurable hero-makers. We long for men to be more than what they are because they were *supposed* to be that way. The faint glimmers and isolated flashes of that original glory we sometimes see in men compel us to place them on a hero pedestal and worship them. We think, *Here is the answer to our search. Here is the true man.* Yet our

worship becomes bitter idolatry. Disillusionment and heartbreak inevitably follow.

This is nowhere truer than in the masculine figure closest to us. To that one man we now turn.