Some Heroes

April 2008

There are some topics I save up because they'll be so much fun to write about. This is one of them: a list of my heroes.

I'm not claiming this is a list of the *n* most admirable people. Who could make such a list, even if they wanted to?

Einstein isn't on the list, for example, even though he probably deserves to be on any shortlist of admirable people. I once asked a physicist friend if Einstein was really as smart as his fame implies, and she said that yes, he was. So why isn't he on the list? Because I had to ask. This is a list of people who've influenced me, not people who would have if I understood their work.

My test was to think of someone and ask "is this person my hero?" It often returned surprising answers. For example, it returned false for Montaigne, who was arguably the inventor of the essay. Why? When I thought about what it meant to call someone a hero, it meant I'd decide what to do by asking what they'd do in the same situation. That's a stricter standard than admiration.

After I made the list, I looked to see if there was a pattern, and there was, a very clear one. Everyone on the list had two qualities: they cared almost excessively about their work, and they were absolutely honest. By honest I don't mean trustworthy so much as that they never pander: they never say or do something because that's what the audience wants. They are all fundamentally subversive for this reason, though they conceal it to varying degrees.

Jack Lambert

I grew up in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. Unless you were there it's hard to imagine how that town felt about the Steelers. Locally, all the news was bad. The steel industry was dying. But the Steelers were the best team in football — and moreover, in a way that seemed to reflect the personality of the city. They didn't do anything fancy. They just got the job done.

Other players were more famous: Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Lynn Swann. But they played offense, and you always get more attention for that. It seemed to me as a twelve year old football expert that the best of them all was Jack Lambert. And what made him so good was that he was utterly relentless. He didn't just care about playing well; he cared almost too much. He seemed to regard it as a personal insult when someone from the other team had possession of the ball on his side of the line of

scrimmage.

The suburbs of Pittsburgh in the 1970s were a pretty dull place. School was boring. All the adults around were bored with their jobs working for big companies. Everything that came to us through the mass media was (a) blandly uniform and (b) produced elsewhere. Jack Lambert was the exception. He was like nothing else I'd seen.

Kenneth Clark

Kenneth Clark is the best nonfiction writer I know of, on any subject. Most people who write about art history don't really like art; you can tell from a thousand little signs. But Clark did, and not just intellectually, but the way one anticipates a delicious dinner.

What really makes him stand out, though, is the quality of his ideas. His style is deceptively casual, but there is more in his books than in a library of art monographs. Reading *The Nude* is like a ride in a Ferrari. Just as you're getting settled, you're slammed back in your seat by the acceleration. Before you can adjust, you're thrown sideways as the car screeches into the first turn. His brain throws off ideas almost too fast to grasp them. Finally at the end of the chapter you come to a halt, with your eyes wide and a big smile on your face.

Kenneth Clark was a star in his day, thanks to the documentary series *Civilisation*. And if you read only one book about art history, *Civilisation* is the one I'd recommend. It's much better than the drab Sears Catalogs of art that undergraduates are forced to buy for Art History 101.

Larry Mihalko

A lot of people have a great teacher at some point in their childhood. Larry Mihalko was mine. When I look back it's like there's a line drawn between third and fourth grade. After Mr. Mihalko, everything was different.

Why? First of all, he was intellectually curious. I had a few other teachers who were smart, but I wouldn't describe them as intellectually curious. In retrospect, he was out of place as an elementary school teacher, and I think he knew it. That must have been hard for him, but it was wonderful for us, his students. His class was a constant adventure. I used to like going to school every day.

The other thing that made him different was that he liked us. Kids are good at telling that. The other teachers were at best benevolently indifferent. But Mr. Mihalko seemed like he actually wanted to be our friend. On the last day of fourth grade, he got out one of the heavy school record players and played James Taylor's "You've Got a Friend" to us. Just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running. He died at 59 of lung cancer. I've never cried like I cried at his funeral.

Leonardo

One of the things I've learned about making things that I didn't realize when I was a kid is that much of the best stuff isn't made for audiences, but for oneself. You see paintings and drawings in museums and imagine they were made for you to look at. Actually a lot of the best ones were made as a way of exploring the world, not as a way to please other people. The best of these explorations are sometimes more pleasing than stuff made explicitly to please.

Leonardo did a lot of things. One of his most admirable qualities was that he did so many different things that were admirable. What people know of him now is his paintings and his more flamboyant inventions, like flying machines. That makes him seem like some kind of dreamer who sketched artists' conceptions of rocket ships on the side. In fact he made a large number of far more practical technical discoveries. He was as good an engineer as a painter.

His most impressive work, to me, is his drawings. They're clearly made more as a way of studying the world than producing something beautiful. And yet they can hold their own with any work of art ever made. No one else, before or since, was that good when no one was looking.

Robert Morris

Robert Morris has a very unusual quality: he's never wrong. It might seem this would require you to be omniscient, but actually it's surprisingly easy. Don't say anything unless you're fairly sure of it. If you're not omniscient, you just don't end up saying much.

More precisely, the trick is to pay careful attention to how you qualify what you say. By using this trick, Robert has, as far as I know, managed to be mistaken only once, and that was when he was an undergrad. When the Mac came out, he said that little desktop computers would never be suitable for real hacking.

It's wrong to call it a trick in his case, though. If it were a conscious trick, he would have slipped in a moment of excitement. With Robert this quality is wired-in. He has an almost superhuman integrity. He's not just generally correct, but also correct about how correct he is.

You'd think it would be such a great thing never to be wrong that everyone would do this. It doesn't seem like that much extra work to pay as much attention to the error on an idea as to the idea itself. And yet practically no one does. I know how hard it is, because since meeting Robert I've tried to do in software what he seems to do in hardware.

P. G. Wodehouse

People are finally starting to admit that Wodehouse was a great writer. If you want to be thought a great novelist in your own time, you have to sound intellectual. If what you write is popular,

or entertaining, or funny, you're ipso facto suspect. That makes Wodehouse doubly impressive, because it meant that to write as he wanted to, he had to commit to being despised in his own lifetime.

Evelyn Waugh called him a great writer, but to most people at the time that would have read as a chivalrous or deliberately perverse gesture. At the time any random autobiographical novel by a recent college grad could count on more respectful treatment from the literary establishment.

Wodehouse may have begun with simple atoms, but the way he composed them into molecules was near faultless. His rhythm in particular. It makes me self-conscious to write about it. I can think of only two other writers who came near him for style: Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford. Those three used the English language like they owned it.

But Wodehouse has something neither of them did. He's at ease. Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford cared what other people thought of them: he wanted to seem aristocratic; she was afraid she wasn't smart enough. But Wodehouse didn't give a damn what anyone thought of him. He wrote exactly what he wanted.

Alexander Calder

Calder's on this list because he makes me happy. Can his work stand up to Leonardo's? Probably not. There might not be anything from the 20th Century that can. But what was good about Modernism, Calder had, and had in a way that he made seem effortless.

What was good about Modernism was its freshness. Art became stuffy in the nineteenth century. The paintings that were popular at the time were mostly the art equivalent of McMansions—big, pretentious, and fake. Modernism meant starting over, making things with the same earnest motives that children might. The artists who benefited most from this were the ones who had preserved a child's confidence, like Klee and Calder.

Klee was impressive because he could work in so many different styles. But between the two I like Calder better, because his work seemed happier. Ultimately the point of art is to engage the viewer. It's hard to predict what will; often something that seems interesting at first will bore you after a month. Calder's sculptures never get boring. They just sit there quietly radiating optimism, like a battery that never runs out. As far as I can tell from books and photographs, the happiness of Calder's work is his own happiness showing through.

Jane Austen

Everyone admires Jane Austen. Add my name to the list. To me she seems the best novelist of all time.

I'm interested in how things work. When I read most novels, I pay as much attention to the author's choices as to the story. But

in her novels I can't see the gears at work. Though I'd really like to know how she does what she does, I can't figure it out, because she's so good that her stories don't seem made up. I feel like I'm reading a description of something that actually happened.

I used to read a lot of novels when I was younger. I can't read most anymore, because they don't have enough information in them. Novels seem so impoverished compared to history and biography. But reading Austen is like reading nonfiction. She writes so well you don't even notice her.

John McCarthy

John McCarthy invented Lisp, the field of (or at least the term) artificial intelligence, and was an early member of both of the top two computer science departments, MIT and Stanford. No one would dispute that he's one of the greats, but he's an especial hero to me because of Lisp.

It's hard for us now to understand what a conceptual leap that was at the time. Paradoxically, one of the reasons his achievement is hard to appreciate is that it was so successful. Practically every programming language invented in the last 20 years includes ideas from Lisp, and each year the median language gets more Lisplike.

In 1958 these ideas were anything but obvious. In 1958 there seem to have been two ways of thinking about programming. Some people thought of it as math, and proved things about Turing Machines. Others thought of it as a way to get things done, and designed languages all too influenced by the technology of the day. McCarthy alone bridged the gap. He designed a language that was math. But designed is not really the word; discovered is more like it.

The Spitfire

As I was making this list I found myself thinking of people like Douglas Bader and R.J. Mitchell and Jeffrey Quill and I realized that though all of them had done many things in their lives, there was one factor above all that connected them: the Spitfire.

This is supposed to be a list of heroes. How can a machine be on it? Because that machine was not just a machine. It was a lens of heroes. Extraordinary devotion went into it, and extraordinary courage came out.

It's a cliche to call World War II a contest between good and evil, but between fighter designs, it really was. The Spitfire's original nemesis, the ME 109, was a brutally practical plane. It was a killing machine. The Spitfire was optimism embodied. And not just in its beautiful lines: it was at the edge of what could be manufactured. But taking the high road worked. In the air, beauty had the edge, just.

Steve Jobs

People alive when Kennedy was killed usually remember exactly where they were when they heard about it. I remember exactly where I was when a friend asked if I'd heard Steve Jobs had cancer. It was like the floor dropped out. A few seconds later she told me that it was a rare operable type, and that he'd be ok. But those seconds seemed long.

I wasn't sure whether to include Jobs on this list. A lot of people at Apple seem to be afraid of him, which is a bad sign. But he compels admiration.

There's no name for what Steve Jobs is, because there hasn't been anyone quite like him before. He doesn't design Apple's products himself. Historically the closest analogy to what he does are the great Renaissance patrons of the arts. As the CEO of a company, that makes him unique.

Most CEOs delegate taste to a subordinate. The design paradox means they're choosing more or less at random. But Steve Jobs actually has taste himself — such good taste that he's shown the world how much more important taste is than they realized.

Isaac Newton

Newton has a strange role in my pantheon of heroes: he's the one I reproach myself with. He worked on big things, at least for part of his life. It's so easy to get distracted working on small stuff. The questions you're answering are pleasantly familiar. You get immediate rewards — in fact, you get bigger rewards in your time if you work on matters of passing importance. But I'm uncomfortably aware that this is the route to well-deserved obscurity.

To do really great things, you have to seek out questions people didn't even realize were questions. There have probably been other people who did this as well as Newton, for their time, but Newton is my model of this kind of thought. I can just begin to understand what it must have felt like for him.

You only get one life. Why not do something huge? The phrase "paradigm shift" is overused now, but Kuhn was onto something. And you know more are out there, separated from us by what will later seem a surprisingly thin wall of laziness and stupidity. If we work like Newton.

Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Jackie McDonough for reading drafts of this.

- Japanese Translation
