
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Witness

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I was wondering, who are your heroes?

I lost two of mine recently. Their deaths were not tragic. Both lived long lives. Yet, I miss them.

Dean Smith was a basketball coach at the University of North Carolina. I only knew the man the public knew, and yet I feel like I knew him. He won a lot of games, and innovated in ways that changed the game itself. He touched a lot of lives, some personally and others through the campaigns he led for social justice.

John Miner was a parishioner at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, Georgia. He was a friend, and in so many ways he showed me what a lived faith looks like. He loved the liturgy. He loved his family. He loved his country. And, he loved his Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets!

These men were heroes in the sense that each lived his life in service to something bigger than himself.

I used to think that Odysseus was the archetypal hero. I admired the virtues of the warrior, and his willingness to risk his life for the sake of the greater good. Just imagine the courage and creativity it took to explain to his family why it took him ten years to return home after the war!

I have noticed, though, that the people I admire most are not really like Odysseus. They are more like saints. They have the courage, strength, and wisdom of warriors, but you can't tell their stories without talking about things like humility, love, joy, peace, gentleness, and faithfulness.

The story of the warrior is always about the warrior. And increasingly, what passes for heroic often looks a lot like mere celebrity. When it's all about you, it's, well... all about you! The story of the saint, though, is not really about the saint; it's a story about God.

Another name for these heroes might be witnesses.

The stories of Dean Smith and John Miner are stories of witness. They took responsibility for making God believable. They did the things that allowed the rest of us to connect with God through them, simple things like showing up, laughing, and celebrating the contributions of others.

So, I'm wondering, who are your heroes?

I'll bet you already know what it took me years to learn. The real heroes are rarely the ones drawing attention to themselves

as they walk down the red carpet. The real heroes are the ones who point to God as they teach us, by their example, how to bridge the gap between who we are and who we want to be.

The real heroes are the ones you miss.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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