Tumarkin, M. (25 August 2007). Heroism or just a croc? The Age.

# Heroism or just a croc?

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WHETHER WE LIKE IT or not, contemporary ideas of courage are not really forged in philosophical explorations and debates. The media, politics, and of course popular culture take the lead in defining what courage is and what it is not. Dominated by discussions of heroes and heroism, the public sphere is not particularly interested in complex, contradictory and non-telegenic forms of courage. Ideas of courage are subsumed in the heroic. This unproblematic conflation of heroism and courage would not be such an issue (after all, the line between the two is far from self-evident), if only popular ideas about heroism were not so lazy and confused.

When Steve Irwin died in September 2006, speared in the heart by a stingray, he was instantly heralded as a hero by the Australian and international media. "Simple hero for a complicated age"; so ran the headline from The Daily Telegraph. "Amid extraordinary scenes of mourning", wrote Kathy Mark for London's Independent, "Australians struggled to come to terms with the death of Steve Irwin." Exactly the same language was used to describe the aftermath of two of Australia's worst recent tragedies - the 1996 Port Arthur massacre and the Bali bombings of 2002. The same sentiments and expressions, word for word. This easy slippage between descriptions of two major national tragedies and the accidental death of a celebrity betrayed not only the absolute debasement of the modern language of heroism, but a broader collective impasse about the meaning of both heroism and courage.

In the US, where the Crocodile Hunter was extremely popular, the media spoke of Irwin's life and death in strictly heroic terms. "I've interviewed presidents, kings and Oscar-winning movie stars," talk-show host Larry King said. "My boys just shrugged. But once I talked to the real-life, world-famous Croc Hunter, well, that made me a hero." If we ever needed proof of the extent to which heroes and celebrities tend to form a continuum in the modern world - one big crossbred, indistinguishable mass - that was it, loud and clear. Reportedly, the Australian women's basketball team used their emotional response to the news of Irwin's death as inspiration to win, with the devastation the players felt becoming their secret psychic weapon in a world championship final against Russia. After their victory, they were also branded heroes. Modern culture, particularly in Australia, has a soft spot for victorious athletes (especially of the underdog variety), routinely branding them heroes for winning or simply trying hard enough.

When Bindi Irwin spoke at the memorial service for her father, her speech was not only endlessly quoted and tearfully admired, but also adopted as a transnational refrain. "My daddy was my hero," said Bindi, and if you had any reservations before she opened her mouth, by the end of her speech you would have been more than likely ashamed of your unwarranted cynicism. According to media reports, young Australians were grieving for the Crocodile

Hunter en masse "as if they had lost a member of their own family". "Steve Irwin had such a profound impact on children," wrote The Gold Coast Bulletin, "that many parents believe his tragic death will be a landmark for kids in the way the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Princess Diana were for adults." So much so that the Queensland Education Department gave state schools approval to put lessons on hold, and instead screen Irwin's memorial service to their students. How does this mind-boggling substitution occur? What needs to happen for a loud guy on TV to become part of your identity?

Needless to say, what sounds powerful and moving coming from the lips of an articulate and composed eight-year-old girl who has just lost her much-loved father can become glib, even obscene, when claimed by the amorphous public sphere. Irwin's untimely death was, without question, his family's tragedy. But how on earth did the rest of us manage to appropriate it? When Germaine Greer described Irwin's death as the revenge of the animal kingdom, she was accused not just of being an unscrupulous headline-seeker but also of totally misjudging the depth of public sentiment. "The animal world has finally taken its revenge on Irwin," she wrote in The Guardian, "but probably not before a whole generation of kids in shorts seven sizes too small has learned to shout in the ears of animals with hearing 10 times more acute than theirs, determined to become millionaire animal-loving zoo-owners in their turn." Whatever truth there was in what Greer had to say, and there was certainly a great deal of hard truth in her words, her comments were widely perceived as hero-bashing at its most mean-spirited and self-serving. If her intention was to provoke, Greer provoked in the main the most personal and ugly kind of backlash. The question of what exactly our national heroes are made of remained not only unanswered, but largely unasked.

So what was it about the Croc Hunter that allowed both the public and the media to slip so easily into the language of the heroic? He was famous through his televised experiences, wore a khaki uniform and displayed an impressive degree of physical fearlessness, at least in the presence of crocodiles and venomous snakes. Steve Irwin was passionate about the environment and, despite his fame and wealth, he continued campaigning for conservationism, i.e. he didn't "sell out". In countless blogs and discussion boards that sprang up in the aftermath of his death, people spoke about Irwin dying while doing what he loved. In their eyes, this fact too made him a hero. I have to say that I find this a rather loose definition, since the same might be said, for instance, about an ageing businessman dying of a heart attack while fornicating in a hotel room.

It was critical, of course, that Irwin carried himself with neither conceit nor a sense of self-importance. In Australia we like our heroes to be down-to-earth and self-effacing. During Cyclone Larry, for instance, which devastated the Queensland town of Innisfail in March 2006, father-of-four Harry Kirkman rescued a number of his neighbours from almost certain death. And of course Harry would hear nothing of being called a hero. "I don't classify myself as a hero," he told the media. "I am just a neighbour going out to help. They're Aussies like us and they were in trouble . . . someone had to go out there." Perfectly put, Harry. Thank you from all of us. Imagine if unassuming, more-

ordinary-than-a-speed-bump Harry were to say something quite different. "Yeah, what I did was pretty bloody unbelievable. You know, I thought I was going to die, yet I went and did it anyway. Most people would not have done it in my place, that's for sure. What can I say - some people have it and some people don't." That would be the death of a hero and, quite possibly, the birth of a medium-sized pariah, yet if you think about it, every single word of Harry's imagined oration would have been true. Most people would not have done what he did in his place. Some people have it and some people don't.

However easily Harry Kirkman fits into a hero template, he really did act heroically, saving people's lives and risking his own. The same simply cannot be said about Irwin, who, as far as I can ascertain, did nothing heroic or truly courageous either, for that matter. If we are prepared to classify his interaction with animals as heroic, we are, I am convinced, in a great deal of trouble. And this is not to make slight of his life, the considerable legacy he left behind or his family's grief, but to sound an alarm at just how slippery and treacherous our ideas of heroism have become, how infected with laziness and insincerity. Perhaps what is at stake here is that if Irwin was not a hero, we are not sure what to do with his death.

After all, his quick ascendance into the ranks of heroes is precisely what allowed so many people to grieve for him publicly and to make sense of his death, which was not only stupid and random, but also, to use John Howard's unusually colourful adjective, downright freakish. To me, the big question is whether there is a way of reclaiming our discourse on heroism and courage from this bogus language and ready-made rhetoric. Perhaps we are better off abandoning it altogether.

This is an extract from Courage, MUP, $32.95, in shops on Monday.