

Essay

Reflections on *A Hero Dreams*

Based in part on actual events, *A Hero Dreams* is a deeply personal narrative that explores, through the eyes of a child, the age-old problem of violence. In some ways, it's a disturbing, even harrowing, tale—one that delves into the very darkest realms of the human psyche. Yet there's a spark of hope, a ray of sunlight—albeit razor thin—shining from deep within the troubled soul of our protagonist, ten-year-old Ricky Williamson. Ultimately, *A Hero Dreams* joins forces with the second two books in the Hero's Path series to paint a far-reaching arc that tells a story of possibility and the power of forgiveness to heal society's most ancient wounds.

The origins for *A Hero Dreams* have been with me for almost as long as I can remember. One of my earliest memories is of nearly drowning in a swimming pool at the age of four. But somewhere along the way, I buried the memory. Then one day I remembered. I remembered the incident. And I remembered who I was—a storyteller. I had a story to tell . . .

While working as in-house counsel for a manufacturing company in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, I liberated myself each day at noon from the confines of my ten-by-ten office for a run. My hour-long reprieve would lead me along winding trails, past ponds and lakes, and through the natural wooded beauty surrounding our suburban corporate campus.

One summer afternoon, as the temperature approached 100 degrees, I was sprinting past a small lake when I began to feel woozy. Then, in a flash, an image appeared. It was the body of a small boy floating along the lake's grassy shore. I stopped short. Magically, the scene came to life, and I surrendered to my imagination. Lost in a reverie now, I found myself crouching in the grass and holding this phantom boy in my arms. I gazed into his face. I knew this boy. It was *me* at the age of ten!

Questions began to percolate.

How did he get here? Was he from the past? Had he traveled through time on some urgent mission? If so, who had sent him? Perhaps he carried a message that would somehow change the course of my life . . . and the lives of others as well . . .

Thus, a storyteller was reborn. A tale was emerging—one that would begin circa 1970 with a near-drowning in a swimming pool and lead to an encounter years later between a thirty-five-year-old man and himself at the age of ten . . . and beyond . . . The “beyond” part was unclear, but I had faith it would come in good time.

I returned to my desk, my head buzzing with ideas. Without knowing just how the pieces would fit together, I felt certain this story was one worth sharing. This could be my chance to make a contribution—one with potential to change the world in some small but not insignificant way.

I started by scribbling a thought on a Post-it note, then setting it aside before returning to work. Another thought arose. And another. By the end of the afternoon, there were dozens of Post-its scattered about the office. That night at home—and many nights after—I sat at my computer, determined to synthesize my notes into some kind of logical order. More often than not, I fell asleep in front of the screen, exhausted from the demands my day job and from the effort of my new-found passion.

Finally, in December 2011, I left the corporate world for a new one—the world of a writer and budding first-time author. The next five years were dedicated to crafting a 700-page manuscript, originally entitled *Even the Banyan Tree Knows Peace*. When I wasn’t writing, I spent much of my time contemplating two of the novel’s largest themes—the root causes of violence and the possibility of peace.

The possibility of peace.

Had there ever been a time in the history of modern civilization of widespread, sustained peace? I didn’t think so. War and all other forms of violence seemed to be interwoven in the very fabric of human cultures throughout the world. I did a little research and made a discovery. According to the anthropological and archeological evidence, the first wars were fought just before the rise of the world’s earliest civilizations in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Fertile Crescent (circa 3500 BC).

So, I was forced to ask myself:

Is war inevitable? Is it a fundamental part of the human condition? Is the propensity for war and violence embedded in our DNA? Is it somehow tied to the rise of civilization? Perhaps it’s a matter of evolution—that we have yet to grow out of the infantile need to slaughter each

other, not for survival (as Darwin might argue), but over petty geographical and ideological disputes?

Being an optimist by nature, I refused to accept such notions. There had to be a solution to the problem of violence, I reasoned. Surely, peace was possible, or so I dared to hope.

I went to work studying the writings of my heroes—all great advocates for the radical idea of nonviolent resistance: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, and Henry David Thoreau. Each believed in the power of nonviolent resistance to right injustice and create lasting social change.

In support of the Civil Rights Movement he led until his assassination in 1968, Dr. King urged his followers to: “meet the forces of hate with the power of love . . .” Martin Luther King, Jr. *Struggle for Equality: Quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2011) According to King, violence was a self-fulfilling prophecy, or rather a continuing cycle with a simple, but not necessarily easy, solution:

“Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967)

Sound familiar? The last line of this quote is a simple corollary to Jesus’s pronouncement to “love your enemies.” *Matt. 5:44*

Could it be that simple? Was it possible to break the cycle of violence, not through brute force, but through love? Could we achieve peace by committing ourselves, as Dr. King did (and Gandhi before him), by responding to violence with love rather than hate?

Convinced Dr. King was correct, I sprinkled the seeds for this idea throughout the text and subtext of *A Hero Dreams*. Often, it’s the voice of Ricky’s deceased father that suggests peace is indeed possible. For example:

If we could see and know that only love is real, there would be no thoughts of separation. If there were no thoughts of separation, young boys would not tease each other and older boys would not learn to fight. If boys never learned to fight, men would not go to war defending abstract concepts such as right and honor. The world would only know peace.

To conclude that peace is possible because only love is real requires not the mind of a scholar, but the open heart of a child—a child like Ricky Williamson, a child like the one who lives in us all.

Ricky’s angel makes her case for peace more indirectly:

Something’s wrong here, my love . . . and together, we’re going to make it right.

The “something” that’s wrong is not Ricky, of course, but the violent world he’s been born into. Thus, his quest for peace begins in the very first few pages of *A Hero Dreams* (see the Prologue describing Ricky’s near-death experience and first encounter with his angel). As the story unfolds and throughout most of his journey, however, he feels his angel has abandoned him. Events occur. Obstacles arise. Yet he perseveres. Then, in the novel’s final pages, he learns she has always been with him.

The idea that, through love and forgiveness, we can break the cycle of violence that has cast a shadow across almost all of human history is further developed in the second and third books of the Hero’s Path series. Along the way, we are exposed to unpleasant, but invaluable, insights into the nature of violence. In the end, we are rewarded with an uplifting message of hope—hope for the possibility of peace in our time. Stay tuned.

Mark Ristau
February 15, 2017
St. Paul, Minnesota