**Heroes, Sheroes, and the Inspiring Messages**

**They Pass On to Us**

A whole-class essay written by the following students in the *ESL7* class at SDCE:

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The world today is filled with messages more than it has ever been before. From the moment the ring of the alarm clock tells us it is time to wake up in the morning and the dog barking outside informs us that a stranger is passing by, we are inundated with messages. The label on a box of breakfast cereal tells us what our daily nutrition needs are and how many calories we are just about to consume. On our way to work or school, with a push of a button we hear what just happened in Paris and whom the President is going to meet today. Our parents, children, teachers, colleagues, and classmates have tons of things to say and technology makes sure that they can do it at any point during the day or night. And if this were not enough, scientists are rapidly unscrambling the information coded in our own DNA, and deciphering the languages in which other species: birds, dolphins, and trees, communicate their messages. How, in this deluge of information directed at us, or just darting by us, do we decide which messages to listen to, and which ones to ignore? How do we know which ones are good and will makes us stronger, wiser, and better, and which ones will only slow us down, or maybe even hamper our growth?

We spent many days talking about it in class. We brainstormed and crossed ideas until we finally decided to focus on the messages we receive from those whom we consider heroes. Heroes, after all, are walking vouchers of support and success. They do good things for others. They are trustworthy. They know how to succeed. After two weeks of debating, we breathed a sigh of relief. We had our topic and we were sure we had hit a gold mine. Now we just had to identify some heroes around us, listen carefully to the messages they say, and write them down. But … who are the heroes?

Two more weeks of heated discussions and perplexing arguments. This time Maya Angelou came to our rescue and spoke to us through the Internet. What makes one a hero, she explained, is “the decision to be conscious of the other – the homeless and the helpless, the downtrodden and oppressed.”  Heroism, she continued, “is a state of mind and willingness to act for what is right and just,” even if it means a major discomfort in one’s life.

Okay. We were slowly getting somewhere. We split into groups and began to look more closely at various life situations. We read a book about the hidden messages that mothers knowingly and unknowingly send to their children. Sure, mothers can be easily overwhelmed with their multiple responsibilities. They can get easily frustrated and take it out on their children. They may be overprotective or possessive for fear that they may lose their child. They may treat their children as their belongings; after all, they are their children. Or they may make a decision to be conscious of these traps and their consequences for the child and do what is right. These mothers are heroes. Or, since we are quoting Maya Angelou, they are “sheroes”

By the end of the month, we have shared many inspiring stories and come up with interesting insights. Tomoko thought of her own experience as a mother. We define mothers with words like*loving*, *caring*, *strong* or *thoughtful*. She wanted to always be all of these, but as soon as she became a mother, she recognized how tough it is to be like that every day. Mothers are required to work without pay or vacation. Therefore, sometimes they feel like escaping from this unending job. Sometimes they are tempted to say, “Don’t bother me. Leave me alone.” When her daughter asks her to read her books, sometimes she will say, “Yes,” but sometimes she will say, “I have a lot of things to do. Why don’t you read them yourself?”  From these words, her daughter is not only getting the direct message, but also the indirect one: “Mommy’s priority is her job, not her daughter.” Should Tomoko pay careful attention to each word she says? Is it even possible? She cannot really do it, but what she can do is hug her daughter when she drops her off at the school, smile to her when she wakes up each morning, cook her favorite food for dinner, and cry with her when they read a sad story. Even though her daughter sometimes sees her when she is not at her best, she learns the big message that even though Tomoko is not a perfect mom, she loves her very much.

Seonjoo thought about her own mother. She realized that her mother has been a real hero in her life and continues to influence her even though Seonjoo is now an adult woman herself. Her mother raised five children having a professional career as a pharmacist at the same time. As children, Seonjoo’s brother and sisters were very different from each other and caused a lot of trouble, but their mother never gave up. She always trusted them and encouraged them. She documented every achievement of each one of her children and now all of them have beautiful baby books that tell them what happened when they were babies. The most surprising thing is that she never stopped working even after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer two years ago. She has endured a major surgery and nineteen chemotherapies, and has not given up on life and not even on her work.  Without using words, she has sent unmistakable messages to her children and taught them how to be strong and live an awesome life.

Ruth wrote about another great woman. One morning, as she was listening to the radio trying to improve her language skills, a report of an associate Justice of the U.S Supreme Court who dissociated herself from the position taken by the Court caught her attention. Her interest was sparked even more by the fact that she and the Justice, Ruth Joan Bader Ginsburg, shared not only the legal profession, but also their first name. When later she found that her favorite fashion magazine devoted a long article to Ginsberg, the friendship was sealed. The Hobby Lobby case, as it was known, was about the Court’s decision to allow a privately held company to exclude contraception coverage from employees’ health plans based on the owner’s religious objections. The Court ruled under the Religious Freedom Restauration Act, a 1993 United States federal law aimed at preventing laws that burden a person’s free exercise of religion. Justice Ginsburg, however, disagreed and wrote a soon-to-be-famous dissent. “The freedom of religion,” she said, “stops at the other fellow’s nose” while contraceptives are “an essential part of women’s health care that should be covered by any employer” without exception. Ginsburg has written many remarkable dissents. Even though dissents don’t carry precedential weight, attorneys and judges may use them in their everyday practice for a change in the law. The first message that Ginsburg sent Ruth was that women can be appointed at the highest judicial body in the United States. The second was never to give up fighting for your ideas. Encouraged, Ruth dived further into Ginsburg’s life and discovered a true modern “shero” who had not only fought for the advancement of women’s rights before she became a judge, but when diagnosed with cancer in 1999, also fiercely fought the disease.

Tamila also pondered the special strength women possess. Her husband once told her, “You are a delicate flower, but that flower will survive in the driest desert. And even if that flower becomes covered with ice, it will still survive. ” She was struck by the message he sent her with these words and how they made her realize her own strength. Indeed, women are strong and many of them are real sheroes:  mothers preparing sandwiches for their children early each morning and wives waiting until late at night until their hero husbands come back from work, but her hero is her husband. Every day she receives from him new messages that make her grow: his happy smile in return for her good-morning; fresh flowers on the table; his patience when she interrupts his work because she suddenly needs to know how to correctly pronounce a new English word she has just learned. And he never ignores her or shows irritation. The message is clear: she is important. And that in return only makes him more important for her.

Natalia thought about her relationship with her husband. In every marriage there comes a time when one spouse will have to compromise in order to help the other grow. Sometimes it is the husband; more often it is the wife. Natalia’s husband has been assigned to positions that took him to various parts of the world, and every time she followed him to another country, she had to put her dreams aside. At the beginning, it was easy. She simply thought she was delaying her plan to have a professional career, but after a while, it became obvious that she was giving up a part of herself and she began to feel resentful towards him. They fought a lot, to the point where she would threaten to leave and take their daughter with her, and each time he would always say that if she was unhappy, he would quit his job and they would start over again back in their native in Brazil. It was during those difficult moments that she realized the power she had over him, including the power to destroy everything he had worked for so hard. Her family never understood why she had not asked him to quit, but in her heart of hearts she knew she could not do it. It would be utterly selfish. And if she became doubtful, the glow in his eyes and the smile on his face when he brought another achievement home would send her a reassuring message that his happiness was her happiness and it was worth every tear she had shed and every lonely night she had faced.

Melee, a doctor in her native Korea herself, considered how doctors can become more conscious of “the other”. She expressed the concern that it is very difficult to be a hero as a doctor because, however hard they try, doctors are unable to cure every patient and help with every predicament. On the other hand, doctors can easily become monsters because of the power they have in the unequal relationship with the patient. Most doctors of course want to be heroes. To be a hero, a doctor should study hard to be up-to-date on the latest medical advancements and always work hard to find the best treatment options available for the patient. Good communication with the patient is also critical. Every patient wants to be listened to without being rushed to the door. Sometimes they have to give up their sleep to go to see the patient who needs them.  Last but not least, doctors should treat their patients with empathy and love. In general, medical students learn not to be emotional about their patients’ predicaments, but sometimes this lesson goes too far. As a result, doctors sometimes appear cruel when they deliver bad news. If doctors make the effort to think about the patient’s situation and talk to them in a considerate way, their words can heal the suffering of the patients’ souls.

Victor and Yoshi discussed the constructive messages we need to receive in order to thrive professionally at the workplace. The relationship between the boss and the employee is complicated. Both parties need to be conscious of their positions and will have to give up some of their own goals giving priority to what is best for the company. Bosses can also be heroes or monsters, and employees do not always understand it is hard to exert power and show compassion at the same time. Bosses face certain pitfalls. They may be afraid to teach the employees all they know for fear that the latter might take their place. A boss may also be selfish or busy and tempted to pass all the work to the employee. If this relationship becomes sour, however, no one grows and no one gains. Those bosses who are our heroes and allow us to grow have the courage to provide their employees with constructive messages that come in the form of honest feedback, encouraging words, proper instruction, and sufficient information.

Finally, many students reflected upon their experiences as immigrants and second language learners. Rodolfo noted that only people who have lived abroad and away from their families can appreciate how exhausting it is to adapt to a new society, a new culture, and a new language. Yet it should not be surprising. Both language and culture are systems of messages. It takes years to learn them, and once they are mastered, they make our lives easier and more meaningful. In a new country, however, these benefits are lost and once again we find ourselves to be like children – understanding only a small portion of what is communicated around us -- yet expected to deal with all the responsibilities of adult life. One does not even know to whom turn for assistance or inspiration! As Lili concluded, in such a situation, it is best to be one’s own hero. Myung Huyn reflected upon his own experience. He came to the U.S. only five months ago. These months have been like a vacation compared to the previous seven years, when he worked fourteen hours a day seven days a week, studying and then taking a prestigious position at Korea’s major company Samsung. And yet, strangely, he does not feel in the U.S. like he is on vacation. Just the opposite: every day brings a new challenge and a new discomfort.

From these discussions, we have learned that unless we chose to adopt a very conscious attitude to what we see and hear, we will not be informed, but misinformed, by the multitude of incoming messages; that unless we decide to make a constant effort to put ourselves in the shoes of the other person, we will not hear what they are saying, only what we are saying; and that unless we choose to help others grow, we will never grow ourselves.