

Ruth Ann Baker / Creating a blueprint for heroism

Anyone want to stand up for Britney Spears?"

A murmur of self-conscious laughter ran through the crowd of students as Peter Gibbon's question drove home his point. No one stood or lifted a hand, not even as a joke.

"We live in a world without heroes," Gibbon said matter-of-factly to a senior English class at Fox Chapel High School on Thursday.

Without belaboring a comparison of Spears to the criteria for heroism the class had already discussed, he paid his listeners the compliment of summing up her shortfall in one phrase: "Her handlers tell her when to expose her navel."

Navel-baring doesn't make the list. Heroes, as Gibbon and the teen-agers agreed, are people who achieve extraordinary things, display unusual physical or moral bravery, and possess "great souls." Great bodies are irrelevant.

Gibbon, a research associate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, spent 30 years as an educator and private school headmaster. A lifelong consumer of biographies, he has made it his mission to find out why the hero

has disappeared from the American imagination. His two-year quest for a book in progress has taken him from lecturing at the Smithsonian Institution to fielding questions at local schools last week.

Gibbon was going straight to what ought to be fertile ground for hero worship: the teen-age mind. Instead, celebrities occupy mental space once reserved for grander folk. And teens are far from the only group guilty of confusing the two. Even high-minded National Public Radio, Gibbon noted, now announces movie stars' birthdays.

Heroism also takes a pounding from two of America's building blocks: democracy itself, and freedom of the press.

"A democracy is hard on heroes," Gibbon said. "Heroism is an elitist concept. It says that certain people are superior to others."

In the cultural creation of heroes, "it helps to have less information," he said. "Martha Washington burned all of George's love letters.



Smart move."

Although the presence of prisoner-of-war John McCain and scholarly athlete Bill Bradley in the recent political primaries revived widespread admiration of men who are larger than life, today's wall-to-wall media coverage makes it unlikely that a president will ever again be a hero, Gibbon said. "We know too much about their lives."

Can't heroes make mistakes? a few kids asked.

Yes. "Heroes are imperfect," he said. "They suffer; they fail."

When Gibbon spoke of the country's great 16th president, the passion of his pursuit was evident in the torrent of words. "What made Abraham Lincoln, born poor, become an ambitious, successful lawyer?"

"How did an ambitious, successful lawyer become a wise, cunning and compassionate president?"

"How did he write such memorable speeches without a formal education?"

"How did he carry on through the Civil War, when his son died and his generals failed?"

For the only time that morning, the students looked a little stunned. How, indeed? Knowing the answers to Gibbon's questions

might not be possible. But wanting to know is, and that's where the cure for Gibbon's cultural diagnosis may lie.

When teachers take their charges through a lengthy study of heroes in literature, and when Gibbon begs them for anything they could write on the topic ("I'd kill for hero essays"), they are asking young minds not just to know the difference between heroism and its counterfeits, but to dwell there.

Why does it matter? That was left almost unspoken, except when Gibbon remarked, "Heroes breed heroes." Einstein, he told the kids, had portraits of his heroes — Isaac Newton, Michael Farraday — posted on his walls. What? No Pamela Anderson Lee?

Gibbon never preached; he didn't have to. In an offhand comment, this lifelong educator said, "Education is the gentle rubbing away of innocence." Judging from his example, education may also be the gentle restoring of the ideal.

Perhaps it's worth noting, though, that in exchange for essays on the heroic, Gibbon promised students not a copy of his own book, but a copy of a relative's biography of the rock band Phish.