

HEROES

By Sue Jackson

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I have been thinking about the necessity for heroes in the developing human psyche. I guess this has been on my mind because over the last couple of months I have had the privilege of hearing Maude Barlow (as discussed in the last VAFT newsletter), Nelson Mandela, Reuben (Hurricane) Carter and on the eve of the recent World Economic Forum, Vandana Shiva. I can feel the difference in my level of hope and energy because of this exposure and so I'd like to pass some of that on to you.

I am also intrigued by how we as therapists keep ourselves in good shape psychically so that our conversations with people are full of optimism and hope, rather than cynicism and despair. The psychic space we occupy is undoubtedly fundamental in terms of our contribution to the conversations we have with clients and yet this is not an issue which, in my experience, is discussed much by therapists.

Exposure to heroes as role models and what that does for me is fundamental to how I look after myself and prevent myself from running on empty. If your work is all about giving out, you need to ensure that you are simultaneously being filled up. Much of this comes from the reciprocity of the exchange with clients, but there are times when I feel drained, especially when I am the witness to someone's distress and that is the only thing they want from me. At those times I find it very helpful to reflect on some of the wisdom and experiences gleaned from the heroes with whom I have had contact. In this way I am reminded of the heroism in myself and in the people with whom I work.

Nelson Mandela and Reuben Carter were invited to Melbourne for the recent Reconciliation Day Celebration at Colonial stadium. Therein lies a very pertinent story. A schoolboy, researching his paper on Nelson Mandela as part of a segment on outstanding figures of the Twentieth Century, decided to write to his hero and ask him to Melbourne. To his amazement, Mr. Mandela agreed and the celebration (with an audience of 20,000) was born. If that schoolboy had not had the courage to ask - to operate from his own heroism - a wonderful evening might never have happened, and thousands of dollars would not have been raised for the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund.

Nelson Mandela's story is very familiar – 27 years in gaol, release to head the African National Congress and leader in the dismantling of Apartheid. It felt fantastic to be part of an enthusiastic audience that gave him a lengthy standing ovation. The positive energy was palpable. So much that he said was inspiring, but the highlight for me was towards the end of his talk when he discarded his notes and spoke straight from the heart about the courage and heroism of ordinary people, about how we **can** make an impact and how important it is for all of us to take a stand,

Also I particularly enjoyed his playfulness with the children on stage. To have experienced so much pain and injustice and emerge as he has in such fine shape is amazing. I was reminded of a newspaper article I read some months ago about a woman sculptor in her 80s, who said that when she was younger her sculptures were heavy like her heart, but they have become lighter, whimsical, ephemeral as she has aged. She suggested that at a certain point in life earlier angsts tend to drop away and you are happy just to be alive. That was the sense I got from Nelson Mandela.

Reuben Carter was not a familiar name to me. However, he seemed very well known to the majority of the audience, particularly the young. This is possibly because a film based on

his life, starring Denzel Washington, had recently been released. In fact, he joked that since the film came out several people had come up to him in the street and told him he is not as good looking in the flesh!

Reuben Carter was apparently a famous boxer in the United States, living a flamboyant superstar life style, with his name even emblazoned in silver on the side of his convertible. But at the peak on his career he was charged with the racist murder of three white men. In the New Jersey court the judge, jury and lawyers were all white. The only blacks were Reuben Carter and his loved ones. He was found guilty and spent 20 years in prison, half of which was in solitary confinement, before the original judgment was overturned and he was released.

Reuben Carter had the compelling presence of a deep Southern preacher and utilised his powerful oratorical skills to such effect that it was difficult not to believe his recurring refrain: 'There are changes afoot'. He described how in the darkness of solitary confinement, when it was impossible to see his skin colour, he finally appreciated that there was no such thing as race – "only the human race". Like Nelson Mandela, Reuben Carter's years of incarceration were a long dark night of the soul. But instead of becoming bitter and vengeful about the miscarriage of justice, they both emerged as wise, warm, funny and optimistic about the human race.