

Changing Heroes

The widespread destruction of the tallgrass prairie in North America resulted from a particular model of the hero and heroic action that has dominated Western thought since antiquity. It isn't our only model of heroic action, but it may be the most common. Changing heroes by renouncing that model and cultivating a different one would be an important step in reconnecting ourselves to the land.

The greatest hero in the ancient world was Herakles (or Hercules, as the Romans called him). As a boy he had learned archery from Apollo's grandson, wrestling from a son of Hermes, and arms from a son of Zeus. When Herakles grew to manhood he embarked on a storied career of far-flung travels and remarkable exploits. He captured the Minoan bull, restored a queen from Hades, slaughtered the nine-headed Hydra, fought and defeated a river-god, briefly held up the sky on his powerful shoulders, and freed Prometheus from his barren cliffside. He once cleaned the foulest stables in the known world by diverting a river to flush them out. Herakles epitomizes courage, physical strength, endurance, and the ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. As one of the very first heroes in Western lore he has become a model.

Yet despite his legendary deeds and unequivocal prowess, the thing that strikes me most about Herakles is a deficiency: he lacks a clear and strong connection to place. He is rootless. He roams, he conquers, he never settles down, never has a place to care for. How different in this respect he is from the ancient hero Odysseus, who traveled as widely and for as long as Herakles, but always thought of home. Herakles has no home. He is disconnected, and furthermore his actions often disconnect others from their places, most vividly in his wrestling match with Antaeus, about which more in a moment. Significantly, the stories about Herakles do not present his disconnection from place as in any way problematic, and therein lies their relevance to one of our current predicaments.

The reason for Herakles's displacement can be traced to before his birth. Zeus, enamored of the wife of a Theban general, visited her in the guise of her husband, who was away at war. Their union produced a child, Herakles, half god and half human; Zeus's wife Hera vindictively blamed the child for the affront to her honor. Perhaps Hera had some hand, then, in the fits of anger that occasionally possessed Herakles. As a youth, he became enraged at his music teacher over an unnamed affront and slew him with a lyre. More bizarre still was the temporary lapse of self-consciousness he once experienced during which he killed his own wife and children. His howling remorse was genuine, and he was only dissuaded from taking his own life by his friend Theseus, but the episode ended any semblance of a normal life for Herakles. Unable to find rest at Theseus's home in Athens, he traveled to Delphi and accepted the Oracle's pronouncement that he should do extreme

penance for his action. Then either the Oracle or Apollo ordered him to serve King Eurystheus, who designed the famous "Labors of Herakles" as a series of apparently impossible tests. From then on, even after successfully completing the labors (one of which was to clean the Augean stables), Herakles traveled from one adventure to another, virtually without respite, until his death, whereupon the gods granted him immortality.

Antaeus is said to have been a son or grandson of the sea god Poseidon, a dweller in "wheat-bearing Libya" and (according to the ancient writer Apollodorus) a king of that land. It was Antaeus's custom to challenge heroic visitors to a wrestling match, which he invariably won. The secret of his success paradoxically lay in being thrown to the ground by his opponent, for there Antaeus drew strength from the earth, who was his mother, Gaia, and rose up more powerful than before. Herakles arrived in Libya, discovered Antaeus's secret, and during their match lifted him off the ground, defeating him by breaking his connection with Mother Earth. Legend rationalizes Herakles's actions by demonizing Antaeus, claiming that he was roofing a temple with the skulls of his victims. The old stories portray Antaeus as a monster and Herakles as a hero. Modern readers are far more likely to know (or at least to have heard of) Herakles's exploits than his crime for which the labors were penance. If we know Antaeus at all, it is as one in the series of Herakles's admirable conquests.

The western world has long admired the Herakles type. To embark on projects in foreign lands, to face seemingly impossible odds, to persevere in the task, ultimately to achieve the goal, win the race, clean up the mess, vanquish the opposition – this is the stuff of Alexander the Great, the Roman conquests, the Crusades, Cortez's overthrow of the Aztecs, Andrew Jackson's subjugation of the Cherokees, the British defeat of the Zulus, or George Bush's Iraq War. In a different vein (but not that different), it is also the stuff of Columbus's voyages, the Lewis and Clark expedition, Henry M. Stanley's African projects, and, with some qualifications, Sir Edmund Hillary's "conquest" of Mt. Everest. Even those exploits that have neither individual instigator nor adversary, such as the various enterprises of the Hudson's Bay Company, are portrayed as heroic if they involve travel to a far land, long odds, a struggle, and achievement.

The "breaking" of the prairie in the middle of the nineteenth century is another example of this last kind of heroic exploit. Though lacking a hero (John Deere, the Illinois blacksmith who perfected the plow that did the job, falls short), the episode has the features of one of Herakles's labors. Vaster than the Augean stables, the prairie represented a grand, impressive, daunting challenge west of the woodlands where the horizon began. An army of surveyors, sodbusters, pioneers, homesteaders, and speculators, each carrying a fragment of Heraklean might and resolve, was loosed upon the undertaking and through

sweat and toil collectively tamed the land. Their stories have been told and retold, their memory enshrined, their actions commemorated in music, art, and literature. They embody Heraklean heroism on a human scale.

Unfortunately, the episode had other, less heroic features as well. In the first place, the people who were already living in the prairie – the Ioway, Oto, Omaha, Ponca, Santee Sioux, Missouri, Kansa, Pawnee -- had to be eliminated or at least dispossessed. In world mythology, monsters (such as the sphinx, or the Hydra killed by Herakles) often symbolize autochthony, the condition of being native to a place. Conversely, native peoples have often been viewed by conquerors as monstrous or subhuman to justify their conquest. Antaeus is so depicted in the Herakles story, and the Indians of the prairie/plains were similarly viewed as inferior, if not wicked. Their dispossession was accomplished by a literal army, which pried them from the land as surely as Herakles lifted up Antaeus. In keeping with their actions, the intruders largely rejected the possibility of learning from them anything useful about the place..

This helps to explain a second lamentable aspect of the dispossession: the intruders' tendency to view the land they took as Other – a malleable object of basically instrumental value or, as Aldo Leopold might have put it, something outside their own moral community. That the intruders came from elsewhere might also explain this inclination but for the fact that they had treated elsewhere in much the same way (which is why some of them, at least, had to come west to the prairie). The result, in any case, was that they misunderstood the land. At first they called it "the great American desert;" later they simply mistreated it, with little comprehension of the source of the soil's fertility, the value of the prairie's diversity, or the inevitability that plowed ground erodes in the heavy spring rains. They mistook the vastness of the prairie for infinity and the deep richness of its soil for immortality. They thought the bounty would last forever.

Oddly, they thought this even though they immediately set about making changes. After breaking the prairie (an idea totally foreign to the Indians), they suppressed all fire and built railroads. They replaced native plants with new ones: little bluestem with wheat, big bluestem with corn, Indian grass with alfalfa and Hungarian brome. They introduced their roses, irises, peonies, begonias, hostas, willows, and pines as if the native plants were unlovely or had nothing to tell them. They even brought their weeds – plantain, dandelion, crabgrass, wild parsnip, Queen Anne's lace, and Canada thistle among them. Few people, then or now, use native prairie plants to landscape their yards or decorate their homes. The newcomers did not make themselves part of the place they came to, but remade the place into an image of themselves. In short, they transformed Other into Self.

But isn't this the hero's way? Is it really a cause for concern? The answer to the second question

depends entirely on whom one asks. The Indians, surviving today as best they can, have been concerned for over 150 years. If ecosystems have minds – and the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in a provocative book called *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, argued thirty years ago that they do – then the prairie, 99.9 percent of which in Iowa has been destroyed, is concerned. Some individuals are concerned about specific plants and animals that have been extirpated, endangered, or exterminated and support efforts to protect those that still can be saved. But most people are not concerned, at least not to the point of action. They say either, "though regrettable, it happened, and we have to move forward," or (more ambiguously) "it was inevitable," or (less generously) "it is the price of progress."

The last two viewpoints silently invoke the heroic narrative, asking rhetorically, "isn't it the hero's way?" The answer to this question is both yes and no. Yes, it is the hero's way if Herakles is the model of a hero one chooses. Breaking the prairie is just the sort of thing Herakles and hundreds of heroes whose actions are modeled on his do: journey, struggle, conquer, impose. This course of action severs connections to place, both in the sense that it displaces others from the land and in the sense that it displaces the invaders, who take possession of a place but lack deep and full connections to it. It empowers, but it is morally questionable and ecologically unsound. It may also be the beginning of a pervasive disconnection between the American population and nature that psychologists and other scholars have recently been documenting, summarized in journalist Richard Louv's disturbing book, *Last Child in the Woods*.

But is Herakles's way the only way? What if we were to claim another hero, a different kind of hero? What if we were to claim Antaeus? His heroic "credentials" are good: the son or grandson of gods (whereas only one of Herakles's parents was a deity, and he used deception to commit adultery), as well as a dweller in a fertile land and by some accounts its king (more than can be said for Herakles). Antaeus not only dwells in a place but is intimately connected with it and is famous because of the prowess which the strength he draws from that connection gives him. So far, so good, but what of Antaeus's reputed skull collection and his apparent hostility to outsiders? The former, in my view, looks like an invention of Herakles's admirers to justify his killing of Antaeus. While this is a self-serving interpretation, it fits the pattern of the cant of conquest too well to be dismissed out of hand. The other concern, however -- Antaeus's hostility to outsiders -- is frankly troubling. Even if it is directed only toward heroic visitors, ones who arrive full of braggadocio, it is unattractive, only in part because of the lack of forthrightness. Alas, Antaeus is not a perfect hero, but he is a big improvement on Herakles.

What would things look like on the prairie if the Antaeus-type was our prototypical hero? We would at least know that our strength came from the

land and would want to stay connected to it. We would plant crops (Antaeus's Libya, recall, was "wheat-bearing"), but we would do so in a way that did not hurt the earth. Beyond that, I like to think that we would view the land's value in more than instrumental terms, that our connection to it would be mediated by filial devotion. The legend does not speak of the earth being diminished by Herakles's victory over Antaeus, but what mother does not grieve over her slain son? If Antaeus had won the match, the earth would not have come to grief. Perhaps it is not too late. If the Antaeus-type, or someone even better, becomes our hero, we will take important steps toward what Wes Jackson calls "becoming native to this place."

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