

Personal risk

Role models and other demands



Peter Geyer

Gene Autry and Roy Rogers

*Were singin' cowboy men
But I can ride as hard and fast
And shoot as straight as them*

Skip Battin

*Where'd you get that dress?
Where'd you learn to talk like that?
Don't talk back!
Tell me where you've been!
Maybe I don't want to know ...*

*You were so much, so much mine
Now I reach for you
And I cannot find you ...*

*You know you've got my hands
And you've got your father's eyes ...*

*I know that it's not fair
But things aren't always what they seem
Where's the heart in me
That made the one in you so cold?*

*Please don't go
You were so much, so much mine
Now I reach for you and I cannot find you*

Jonatha Brooke

*One of the few ambitions I have left is to work
with Scott Walker. He's a pioneer and a renegade,
an artist who is a great role model.*

David Bowie

*Just like Velasquez
I see myself clearly
In the space between players
The space between words
The movements
The gestures
The glances
Dissolve into silence
Dissolve into hues ...
Towards me*

Jack Bruce

*How could Marilyn Manson turn young people
into Satanists and drug-addicts in the two hours
of his act?*

Anton Bobas

One of the curious things about contemporary life—a world that says (without much evidence) ‘you can be whoever you want to be’—is the constant call for *role models*, people who will presumably ‘send the right message’ and ensure we’re ‘on the same page’—if we can read it, at any rate.

The autonomy of modern/postmodern life (if that’s really the case) is juxtaposed with a call for leaders, whatever they do. Usually, though, it’s not about role modelling democracy.

This seems rather incongruous, once you think about it, although there may be more balance than confusion, providing one takes one or the other of the positions available. Taking *both* sides seems a little too Janus-like without a few well-crafted sentences in explanation; otherwise it’s just unreflective spin.

As an idea, role models provide an induction into any society: what to do, how to behave, and so on. Parents are the most obvious people in this regard, yet it does not follow that they either take on the role or have that role accepted by their child. My father (not a tradesman) tried hard to interest me in hammers, chisels and the like, but we really connected only on football and cricket, the utility of reading, and maps.

There do not have to be any negative consequences from this role modelling, or lack of it, just as the parent or caregiver who does take up such a role is not necessarily successful by definition. In some ways, successful role-modelling is subtle, at a distance.

If role modelling is about fitting in, then certain types will adjust more readily than others. In some ways, it’s futile to expect everyone to fit into society in the same

Peter Geyer (INTP) researches and teaches personality from an MBTI and Jungian perspective in his own way.

alchymia@ozemail.com.au
www.petergeyer.com.au

way, and dangerous to insist that it should be attempted nonetheless. Other role models have to be selected, or encountered—like Scott Walker for David Bowie—that fit into a different perspective on life.

If you had a religious upbringing, as I did, there are some variables for role models. Your first name will be taken from a saint who, by definition, will be watching over you; and there will be books on saints' lives for inspiration and for imitation. This had variable success. Early in my school days my class was asked to select a personal role model. I chose Gene Autry, a TV cowboy who generally eschewed guns, and played the guitar and sang.

I had no idea, even though I took religion seriously, that 'Jesus' was the only answer required, as my classmate Laurie Zelunka informed me. I was embarrassed, but the 'correct' answer made little sense to me, as it does even today. For me the difficulty of Jesus as role model is, at least partly, in otherness. I can't read about him and think he's like me, although I like to read about how he *might* have been as a person (e.g. Vermes 1981), rather than books that present him as an exemplar, an Everyman.

Looking at Autry's work today makes me cringe a little. But clearly he was being himself, yet seemed to fit in with his peers, particularly with females when singing, notwithstanding his unprepossessing looks. Something like this can indicate that role models might provide affinity, but they don't guarantee you success or emulation. Biggles and several superheroes come into mind here, as well as several musicians.

Historically, musicians—like actors and writers—have been situated on the edges of society. Troubadours come to mind, and it still goes on: Bruce Springsteen's mother has been portrayed as wondering when her boy was going to get a proper job, even after he had become successful.

And a musician or entertainer's message may not be acceptable in the best society. Accusations of corruption of others and encouragement of evil practices abound, and, while the reported antics of a number of people in this field are almost common knowledge, Croatian priest Anton Bobas suggests that credulity often strays far from facts, or at any rate, from what is *possible*.

Some people make their own idiosyncratic judgements. I recall reading in 1967 of a young woman who wrote to *Listener-In TV*, a Melbourne publication of the time. In her letter she stated that, in the future, she was going to buy records by the then popular and presentable group The Seekers rather than the material she had been purchasing (presumably rock acts), because when she was older and more mature, that would be the music she would like. For her, the future was being sober and clean-cut. I wonder where she is now, and what music, if any, she listens to.

Australian values have recently become a topic for discussion, prompted by terrorism in its various forms, as well as globalisation. The Federal Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, has resurrected the Gallipoli legend of Simpson and his donkey—neither of whom was Australian, nor toed the line.

Facts can get in the way of a role model. Perhaps that's why there are many people who decide to walk or travel somewhere for some idea or charity: curing cancer, for instance. This structured riding into the distance is apparently an admirable thing to do. I've never understood it myself, but it must appeal to large numbers of people, otherwise it wouldn't be done.

Perhaps it's because Australia appears a physical culture, and physical deeds are applauded. Sporting role models proliferate, but they must be paragons of virtue, not a Shane Warne, for instance, notwithstanding his sporting credentials and his obvious Australianness. Sporting culture being what it is, being a role model might pose difficulties for some people. Indeed, the champion AFL footballer Chris Judd, by no means a rogue, rejects altogether the notion that he is, or is supposed to be, a role model, arousing general consternation.

In reporting on the rise to celebrity status of Pauline Hanson, Kerryn Goldsworthy makes comment on her normality as far as current society goes (2005). A role model is not implied, but perhaps that's for the future and a reinterpretation of facts, or even a forgetting of them, like Simpson and his donkey.

If a recent survey of 40 people who have reached 'the top' is any indication (Dow, 2005), the language of role models seems



Gene Autry, role model

to be about working hard, persistence or passion. Their brief explanations of their success were presented as what you have to do to succeed: a fairly glib assessment, in my view, as many people work hard without any reward or success, passion and so on notwithstanding.

Part of the battle over Australian values has extended to television shows such as *Big Brother*, which reportedly pushes the boundaries of decency and good taste and sets a bad example for its viewers and fans. In an articulate version of ‘you don’t have to watch it’, Helen Razer (2005) admits to a tendency to pursue such things, ‘on screen or in literature’, considered reprehensible by others—but points out that the latter opinion might merely be in the eye of the beholder.

Razer’s view on the liberality of what may be watched and consumed is mirrored to some extent by Stephen Matchett, who criticises what used to be called ‘Marxian’ attitudes to the market. This view presumes that people in the Western world can be, and are, gulled by the continuous offering of consumer goods they don’t need, and that this doesn’t help their happiness in particular, nor the planet in general (2005).

For Matchett, this is ‘an elitist argument that assumes most of us are idiots.’ By rejecting these market criticisms with this flush of rhetoric, Matchett opens himself up to criticism in his presumption that Australians are all the same, and make choices for themselves *knowingly*. I would not classify myself as an ‘idiot’, but I can be one when buying a car, or even wine, books and CDs: things I do regularly, depending on moods and situations.

And a generalised non-elitist equality, as Matchett seems to imply, ignores the fact that people do not have equal amounts of ‘the same level or types of ability’, as the philosopher Julian Baggini puts it (2003). This does not mean that people are not of equal value; simply that they have different interests and abilities, even personalities, as we know from research into psychological type and other ideas.

Yet these kinds of generalised statements proliferate these days. A recent statement from the senior Labor politician Lindsay

Tanner that ‘the Australian people got it right’ in the last election, ‘as they always do’, is, at the least, a curious description of a national election where substantial numbers of people preferred an alternative to the current situation.

Similar statements regarding the intelligence and knowledge, or even *wisdom*, of the Australian people are also indefensible, perhaps even patronising. There might be a general presumption of equality amongst citizens, yet ability, skills and potential, to say nothing of finance, locality, etc, suggest a more complex answer.

Like role models, though, these statements seem to present to the unconscious, perhaps as an archetype held about the nature of Australians. This can mean that, in times of pressure and stress, the acceptance of one type of role model is acceptable, and any others must be jettisoned, or lie low for a while anyway—particularly if you are a boat-rocker.

And in general, we need to look at the information regarding role models and their implications, and make considered and open decisions—whether ‘logical’ or personal.

References

- Gene Autry, Smiley Burnette, Carol Hughes, *Rootin’ tootin’ rhythm*, Golden Years of Hollywood Film Library, 1938.
- Julian Baggini, *Making sense: Philosophy behind the headlines*, Oxford, 2003.
- Skip Battin, ‘Singing cowboy’ (Battin–Fowley), from *New Riders of the Purple Sage LP Brujo*, Columbia, 1974.
- Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A guide for the perplexed*, Allen Lane, 2005.
- Anton Bobas, quoted in *SpeakEASY* column, *Mojo* 143, October 2005, 18.
- David Bowie, quoted in the booklet with the CD anthology *Scott Walker in five easy pieces*, Mercury, 2003.
- Jonatha Brooke 1993, ‘So much mine’ (Jonatha Brooke), from *The Story CD The angel in the house*, Elektra, 1993.
- Jack Bruce, ‘Velasquez’ (Kip Hanrahan), from *Kip Hanrahan CD Desire develops an edge*, American Clave, 1986.
- Steve Dow, ‘Secrets of success’, *Sunday Life* (supplement to the *Sunday Age*), 19 June 2005.
- Kerryn Goldsworthy, ‘This is your afterlife’, *The Monthly*, September 2005, 16-17.
- Stephen Matchett, ‘I think, therefore I buy’, *The Weekend Australian Review*, 23–24 July 2005, 40
- Helen Razer, ‘I wouldn’t even ban *The Footy Show*’, *The Age*, 23 July 2005, 9.
- Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A historian’s reading of the Gospels*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981 (1973).

Gene Autry is my hero. He was my first musical experience. I’d get shivers up my back when he sang ‘South of the Border’.

Ringo Starr

If anyone’s going to be a hero, it’s Jesus Christ downward—and I’m not going too far down.

Pete Townshend

Roger Merrett may have been a star, but I wasn’t overawed by him. He could play football, but he was only flesh and blood.

Jason Akermanis

When I was a nipper I asked my dad why our neighbour was always so happy, waving to us as we walked past his house. Dad said, ‘That’s because he’s retired.’ I made up my mind that I would retire there and then. I’ve never regretted it.

Barry Humphries

To desire to be a combination of Silvana Mangano and Joe Orton at the age of 23 is a bad case of arrested development.

Louis Nowra

