



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

We Could Be Heroes

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At the end of each December, the New York Times Magazine annually dedicates an issue to reflecting on the extraordinary lives of those who have died. This year's issue began with an article by journalist Jenna Wortham entitled "Ghosts in the Machine: Social Media Has Changed the Way We Mourn for the Better." Wortham writes:

In the age of social media, mourning feels increasingly public, more communal and more collective. The near pervasiveness of social technology has delivered death back into our daily interactions. With the exception of our friends and closest kin, we typically encounter news of deaths through social media. The same feed that informs us about sports scores and plot twists on "Empire" also tells us, without any ceremony, that a life has come to an end.

This is how I discovered the death of the glam rock legend and visionary artist David Bowie. Waking up early, I began the bad habit of browsing Facebook to discover the collective lament. Bowie had disappeared into the ether of our imaginations with a creative flourish, leaving behind on his 69th birthday a final album and companion video, hauntingly titled "Lazarus."

Three days after Bowie's passing, this is also how I discovered that a no less brilliant tree fell in Brooklyn as a beloved transgender writer and performer Bryn Kelley left the world by her own choice. No fanfare, no album dropped. It was only Facebook that rippled the terrible loss out into the community with a similar response of outrage and disbelief. First, the graphic parade of broken hearts after her last message, a simple charge to "Be kind to one another." A huge outpouring of grief and heartbreak continues to flood my feed, a silent memorial to the stories of her living and shock at her dying.

The age of social media makes death more imminent and present, literally delivered into our hands. "This could be a blurring of a sacred line, the conflation of the profound with something profane," writes Wortham. "Perhaps the most profound side effect is that death no longer obeys any laws of finality. We know that time can be influenced by physics: clocks run slower at extremely high speeds and faster at higher altitudes—where they can begin to escape the pull of gravity. Is it possible that social media somehow warps our notion of time, too?"

Wortham's question is worth asking. We first lost Lemmy Kilmister, then Bowie, then the death of Glenn Frey of Eagles fame – three pillars of 70s rock. While many rock stars never had the privilege of aging, their white-hot success snuffed out before it reached its peak, these men did age. Their youthful glory remains frozen in time, not in social media, but in their music, enshrined in our own youthful cultural memory.

"A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself," once wrote American mythologist and author Joseph Campbell. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Campbell describes the hero's journey as beginning with someone "from whom something has

been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available to him or permitted to the members of his society."

This dissonance, a cultural dis-ease with the way things are sends the hero on a quest to recover what has been lost as an individual calling to serve the greater good. The hero finds him or herself in the company of unexpected others. They encounter a series of physical and spiritual trials, often dangerous and involving great risk, courage and bravery. Through the trials, the hero sheds their sense of ego and worldly cares and their true character is revealed. Along the way, they may seek and discover some life-giving elixir, something redemptive sorely lacking in the collective consciousness. Ultimately, the hero must return back to the everyday of their place of origin to give this gift. In Campbell's words, the hero's journey is "a cycle, a going and a returning."

We often think of the epic heroes of Greek and Roman mythology, and those of our cultural and literary history – Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Frodo in the Lord of the Rings, Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, and of course, Katniss in the Hunger Games. Heroes can be fiction or real life superstars. For David Bowie, rock and roll became the vehicle for his own hero's journey. His life began with humble working class origins with a dream of stardom. The lyrics on the song *Star* tells this story.

He sings:

Johnny went to fight in Belfast.
Rudi stayed at home to starve.
I could make it all worthwhile as a rock & roll star.
Bevan tried to change the nation.
Sonny wants to turn the world, well he can tell you that he tried.
So inviting, so enticing to play the part.
I could play the wild mutation as a rock & roll star.
I could make a transformation as a rock & roll star.

Bowie's lyrics soared with his ambition for transformation, marked by the ordinary heart-expanding thrills of falling in love and the pursuit of pleasure. When the earthy elements of rock and roll threatened to become mundane, in a flair of the mythic Bowie sought the cosmic. His 1972 epic album "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" created the alter-ego Ziggy Stardust, a sweeping science fiction telling the story of an alien taking human form as a rock star. As the earth nears its end, in peril with a dearth of natural resources, Ziggy visits from space as a messenger of hope, trying to communicate to earthlings that there are beings like the Starman, called "infinities," waiting to come to their aid. From the song, Bowie sings:

There's a starman waiting in the sky
He'd like to come and meet us
But he thinks he'd blow our minds

When the infinites finally do arrive, Ziggy doesn't survive as the cosmic beings take on his form to help save the world. The story mimicked the meteoric rise and fall of fame of the rock star as hero: powerful but ultimately mortal, transcendent but not God.

Bowie's own journey from ambitious musician to larger than life rock star led him back to a quieter but no less artistically prolific life of marriage and family. Many remarked on his elusive nature, living normally amongst New Yorkers as an unassuming citizen. The African American poet Tracy K. Smith makes Bowie's *Life on Mars* the title of her 2011 book of poems, which use the musician's opus to explore questions of space, time and legacy. In her poem "Don't You Wonder Sometimes," she remarks on his dual nature of ordinary citizen and rock legend.

Bowie is among us. Right here
In New York City. In a baseball cap
And expensive jeans. Ducking into
A deli. Flashing all those teeth
At the doorman on his way back up.
He's in no rush. Doesn't feel
The way you'd think he feels.
Doesn't strut or gloat. Tells jokes.
I've lived here all these years
And never seen him. Like not knowing
A comet from a shooting star.

In an unaired interview with 60 Minutes from 2003, David Bowie discussed his life's quest to discover meaning through his music.

Searching for music is like searching for God. They're very similar. There's an effort to reclaim the unmentionable, the unsayable, the unseeable, the unspeakable, all those things, comes into being a composer and to writing music and to searching for notes and pieces of musical information that don't exist.

Through his quest for creative transformation, Bowie swelled the ordinary moments of life into the heroic. "We can be heroes, just for one day," his anthem *Heroes* proclaimed. If the heroic is a quest to recover what has been lost, in our own lives and in our world, we need a world full of heroes, each of us recovering a piece of what is lost. We need to quest for our own deepest truth and plumb the undiscovered mysteries and truths of the universe.

This week brought the news out of Pasadena's own Cal Tech of the possibility of another enormous planet lurking in the icy outer rings of our solar system. Mike Brown, who made the headlines not too long ago for his role in dumping Pluto for Eris, a planet of more significant substance, and his discovery of Sedna, an unparalleled dwarf planet. Brown and his colleague, Konstantin Batygin, teamed up to study the particularities of Neptune's frigid orbiting objects.

Their research found that all of the orbiting bodies followed a pattern all lining up in the same direction, pointing away from the solar system. Brown and Batygin believe that these objects point to the existence of another massive planet lined up in the opposite direction, which they are calling "Planet Nine." There is more research to be done, but the excitement of this potential discovery is palpable. Speaking with NPR, another researcher Scott Sheppard of the Carnegie Institution for Science says if the news about Planet Nine is true — "that, I think, is something that would blow the mind of anyone here on Earth." Is it any coincidence that after David Bowie died, a potential new planet is discovered? You decide!

I close with another excerpt from Tracy Smith's poem:

After dark, stars glisten like ice, and the distance they span
hides something elemental. Not God, exactly. More like
Some thin-hipped glittering Bowie-being —
a Starman or cosmic ace hovering, swaying, aching to make us see.
And what would we do, you and I, if we could know for sure that someone was there
squinting through the dust,
Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only
To be wanted back badly enough?

Amen and blessed be.