

## **We DO Need Another Hero-With Apologies to Tina Turner**

The recent death of Stephen Hawking got me thinking that there are no real major scientific/medical heroes in our contemporary culture. Let me explain. Even though Hawking was an epochal figure in astrophysics, my guess is that the man on the street would probably have a difficult time recalling him, much less know of any of his accomplishments. Contrast this with prior generations. The names of Curie, Pasteur, Salk, Watson & Crick and Einstein were all celebrated as true heroes with an aura of iconic celebrity status.

The argument today cannot be that there is a lack of scientific accomplishment and therefore less need of heroes. Year after year the Nobel laureates are dutifully named in Sweden with substantive scientific accomplishments. Take for example, the joint identification of the AIDS virus by Luc Montagnier and Francois Barre-Sinoussi. This was a breakthrough discovery and the first step towards developing a vaccine for the world. However, these names hardly spring from anyone's lips. Why is that? Why is it important that we all remember these scientific heroes?

Ulysses, Achilles and the Caesars all had great accomplishments, however, there was one difference. These ancient Hellenic and Roman heroes were no longer flesh and blood. Over time, admiration transformed into veneration. They were no longer bound by earthly constraints based on factual occurrences, but their exploits and ultimately themselves became legend. They ultimately became the embodiment of all that was good in these societies and served as a foundation and anchor. Their stories of interactions with their gods, codified by poets and scribes were retold countless times by both emperors and the people. Ulysses and Achilles became the embodiment of Greece itself. Similarly, Caesar was all things Roman. They preserved, protected and advanced their respective cultures.

Elizabethan England, Napoleonic France, and post World War II America were masters of the political and scientific world at their respective zeniths, much like Greece and Rome. Scientists were feted and in return they unified our world and humankind; we were in awe of them. They not only defined their respective contemporaneous eras, they became immortalized in our culture and improved our future lives.

Maybe it is too difficult to repeat history. One can argue that the times are different, that we live in a fragmented universal society and world with short attention spans and information overload. Are we so callous that we can no longer recognize and celebrate scientific greatness? I think not. As human beings we have an innate need for self-preservation. The advancement of mankind on this planet is predicated on scientific discovery. It's as simple as that. Without science heroes, our world will languish and ultimately extinguish itself. That is why we need to remember and revere them. We DO need heroes.