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Portraits Worth Hanging

If you were to hang a portrait in your office or your home of someone you most admired and wanted to emulate, whose portrait would you hang? Apparently the great Albert Einstein once had portraits of two famous scientists, Isaac Newton and James Clerk Maxwell, on his office wall. Perhaps they served as role-models or heroes to young Einstein.

We know our children and grandchildren have heroes. That's why every school lunch box and every child's backpack seems to have an action figure or sports hero emblazoned upon it. And we never outgrow the impulse for that sort of admiration, do we?. We adults have heroes, too. Why else would celebrity endorsements of everything from golf clubs to cell phones to insurance plans be worth such extraordinarily large sums of money?

So who are your heroes? Are they people with a special skill, or talent, or a unique character, or set of values, or life-style? Who do you most admire and whose lives influence yours?

One of our heroes is the late Albert Schweitzer. By the time Schweitzer had reached the age of twenty-nine in 1904, he was a pastor, a professor at a theological seminary, the author of a number of books, an acclaimed organist, an authority on J. S. Bach, as well as a university professor with a doctorate in philosophy. He was something of a super-star of his era. But then one day, Schweitzer heard a sermon about Jesus' parable concerning the imperative to care for those in need, and something happened. He left his career and his promising future, and he entered medical school. Then, at the age of thirty-seven, Schweitzer and his wife, Helene, moved to Gabon in central Africa where they opened a hospital to serve the needs of the poor and indigent. He continued there until his death at the age of ninety.

We wonder, what could switch on that kind of light bulb for us? What could summon us to set aside the things to which we have given time and attention, if they are no longer meaningful and fulfilling? What could encourage us to get out of our comfort zone in order to serve and give in ways that make a difference, with self-abandon? We suspect Schweitzer would have said it was only possible for him because of his hero and role model, who had made a compelling case for life-review and life-change in one of his hauntingly beautiful parables.

By the way, apparently near the end of his life, Einstein decided to replace the portraits of the two scientists on his office wall with two different portraits. Do you know whose portraits he hung? Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer. When asked why, he said, "I think it is about time that I no longer had on my wall images of success but rather, images of service."

Are our role models and heroes nudging us toward meaningful commitments, matters of lasting value, or significant service? If not, maybe it's time to take down the portraits of our current heroes, and replace them with the portrait of someone capable of challenging us to make lasting life-changes. After all, we all need occasional course-adjustment.