A few months ago G.B. Trudeau’s comic strip, *Doonesbury*, featured a scene where Mark, the son of a corporate magnate, sat at his father’s bedside. His father looked old, perhaps on his deathbed. In the strip the father and son were discussing the father’s war memoir, *Hell in Triplicate*, a title that suggests Mark’s father spent the war years out of danger, shuffling papers at a desk. As Mark stumbled over strained compliments, such as “a fresh perspective,” to praise and to in a sense validate his father’s war experiences, the older man finally grew impatient and acknowledged the essential problem with his memoir: “But one that nobody cares about, right? They don’t make movies about company clerks.”
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n this comic strip, Trudeau exposes a core conflict in Western culture. We are a society that idolizes the hero and holds ourselves, and everyone else, to this heroic standard. In a sense, if you have not passed through trials of fire, or pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, you do not deserve admiration. Not surprisingly, this is a tradition that is deeply imbedded in our cultural history. Even Homer’s Odyssey, one of literature’s earliest surviving epics, plays out the “drama of the hero.” Near the end of his journey, Odysseus washes up on the shores of the Isle of Skheria, where he is treated with all the polite respect that the culture demands for its guests. But once its true identity as the hero of the Trojan War and the survivor of many deadly trials is revealed, he becomes the focus of even greater courtesy.

In contrast, Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, faces his own trials, minor as they are, and finds humiliation his reward. As a mere boy who has accomplished no significant deeds, he is barely noticed by the suitors who have encamped in his father’s home to woo his mother. To compound the insult, when Telemachus gathers the courage to get rid of these men, he is cast out. Telemachus is clearly not of heroic stature, and his fate demonstrates one of the themes of his poem “Ulysses” by poet Alfred Lord Tennyson made this conflict one of the core conflicts in Western culture. We are a society that idolizes the hero and holds ourselves, and everyone else, to this heroic standard. In a sense, if you have not passed through trials of fire, or pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, you do not deserve admiration. Not surprisingly, this is a tradition that is deeply imbedded in our cultural history. Even Homer’s Odyssey, one of literature’s earliest surviving epics, plays out the “drama of the hero.” Near the end of his journey, Odysseus washes up on the shores of the Isle of Skheria, where he is treated with all the polite respect that the culture demands for its guests. But once its true identity as the hero of the Trojan War and the survivor of many deadly trials is revealed, he becomes the focus of even greater courtesy.

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him about wearing Vietnam combat decorations he might not have earned. Boorda was the first sailor in the Navy to rise from the lowest enlisted rank to become a four-star admiral and later the supreme commander. He was one of the most highly respected officers in the service. After his death the secretary of the Navy, John H. Dalton, inserted

...a person may find the truth of his or her mundane life so intolerable and valueless that he or she must fabricate a heroic past...