

# When the Hero Gets the Blues - Lesson from Willie King

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the storytelling metaphor of the quest to examine the challenges social entrepreneurs face when working in nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the human condition. Similar to the hero on a quest, a social entrepreneur can face a point of deep despair and lose confidence in the organization's mission. From this place of deep despair, the powerful images from American Blues Music as presented by bluesman Willie King, offer a vision for hope, faith and love. Accordingly, the stories found in blues music can inspire a social entrepreneur on the quest for a more just society.

## Introduction

I have often been engaged in organizations created to address social problems within a particular community. For the most part, these enterprises are organized as nonprofit corporation or associations with a mission of providing opportunities for individual self-improvement aligned within a framework of community development. David Boorstein calls this work social entrepreneurship and posits that such organizations have the capacity to change the world by changing the life conditions of individuals and communities that are oppressed, impoverished or disenfranchised, especially within a larger society that has significant wealth. In my experience, the work of a social entrepreneur is animated by a desire to seek social justice, to paraphrase the words of the Prophet Micah, and to thereby reaffirm the intrinsic dignity within all human beings.

The story of nonprofit organizations is one which narrates this fundamental human desire to engage in eleemosynary activities designed to improve society and the lives of persons with a variety of basic human needs. Individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to work as a team addressing such problems as healthcare, environmental issues, endemic poverty, social injustice, educational inadequacies and a host of other conditions which limit human potential. Work

is also done to prevent human disequilibrium from occurring. For example, youth organizations such as Girl Scouts, youth sports leagues, and 4-H, offer young people positive growth experiences which promote resiliency. Nonprofits also work in creative collaboration with other groups and institutions, both private and public. At the center of such efforts is the expansion of shared meaning about the human story as it emerges in history. Moreover, the stories of this work and the personal stories of the individuals who commit to such entrepreneurial enterprises "... have the power to expand the horizon of possibilities between the exceptional and the ordinary, they point to emancipatory possibilities," as noted in the call for papers for this special issue on the power of relatedness (see introduction to the issue). Society often lauds social entrepreneurs as heroes or heroines, and so their work is similarly viewed as heroic.

This work of a social entrepreneur, while heroic, is tough, challenging and can be extremely discouraging. If it were easy, anyone could do it. This essay will explore what happens when the admirable plans for social change and empowerment do not go as planned (Durant, 2002). In spite of the best charitable intentions, there are moments when the social entrepreneurial hero gets discouraged, or more descriptively, gets the

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*blues*. Here the term blues is used metaphorically to describe the pain, sorrow and heartbreak experienced by a participant in a nonprofit enterprise. This can happen when things go wrong, when organizational difficulties appear intractable, or when the underlying goals appear hopelessly out of reach and unachievable.

The term “blues” is an apt metaphor, particularly through its connotation of blues music, the most distinctive American music genre emanating from the African roots of black Americans held in captivity and forced to labor without remuneration. Each blues song offers a unique story of loss and discouragement that strikes a universal human experience. At the same time, blues music has a healing quality which can revive the soul of a weary traveler and give hope to the hopeless. Central to this inquiry will be the music of bluesman Willie King from Pickens County, Alabama. Through his music, and the stories that are embodied therein, we will distill lessons for the social entrepreneurial hero to use when faced with tough times.

### The Quest of the Social Entrepreneur

A social entrepreneur's effort has much in common with the travails of the Hero, made famous by Joseph Campbell in his exploration of the quest as a recurrent theme in the world's myths and folklore. A hero is actually just an ordinary person existing in a state of status quo within his or her community. Unexpectedly, a change demands a response from the hero. The change can assume any number of guises: from a threat to the community from an outside force to an internal change of perception within the hero. In any event, the current state of the community becomes unacceptable or untenable.

Hence the social entrepreneur hero is *called* to action, to engage in a quest for a solution to the problem that is threatening the integrity of the community and the security of the individuals within the community. The call to

pursue a quest activates that entrepreneurial spirit, motivating the individual to devise creative solutions to the challenge facing the community. The hero is tasked to bring back the solution that will improve the community and establish a more just society. Campbell would call this bringing back a “boon,” by which the hero will serve the greater good. This spirit pushes the hero into a new realm, one beyond his current reality, where seemingly impossible obstacles await to threaten the quest's completion. The hero is tested to the depths of his soul to determine whether he is indeed worthy of accomplishing the goal or obtaining the boon.

In the typical quest cycle, there comes a time when the hero must confront his own personal demons. At this juncture the hero is said to be swallowed up by a beast or a whale. This has also been identified as a place that is a deep, dark pit or as a temporal experience called the Dark Night of the Soul. Campbell talks about this place or time as the place of death and resurrection. The hero is fighting to preserve his or her very existence and to arrive at a newer, more powerful place from which to pursue the quest. While seemingly contradictory, the idea is to preserve the essence and yet be ready to receive transformation. A place or moment such as this usually occurs at the threshold of the journey or the adventure, a threshold that must be crossed in order to achieve a rebirth. The place within the beast or the moment of the darkest night is, literally and figuratively, where the hero's prior consciousness about the world as he once knew it must be altered. This transformative phase is necessary as the hero will be forever changed by the quest itself.

At the heart of the rebirth experience in the belly of the beast or during the dark night of the soul is self-discovery: that point of realization when you discover your powers and strengths and prepare to develop a higher order of inner wisdom.

Only when you are within this dark place can you confront your own inadequacies and misgivings and find the vital connections with hope, faith, and love. Hope is that sense that all will be well even in the face of overwhelming odds. We often think of this as the light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Faith is the belief, often in a higher power, that persistence will lead to success. Moreover, faith allows for a spiritual connection with our own divinity, our sense of *namaste*, the God/Goddess within placed there from the beginning of time and the beginning of our time. Faith is may also be the force that connects the hero with his or her sense of destiny. (In the *Star Wars* movie series, the hero is admonished to “use the Force.”) Whether destiny is preordained or occurs based on the prior choices that are made, the hero is propelled forward to accomplish a greater good that is beyond anything previously imagined. And finally, as Paul declares in Corinthians, the greatest of these is love. For it through love and by love that we make connections with persons who can aid us on our journey and it is for the love of those in whose behalf we were called to the quest that can provide us with the spiritual bread needed (our own source of Manna) to sustain the long trials and travails of the quest.

### **When the Hero Gets the Blues**

Just like the mythical hero, the social entrepreneur is called to rise up and do battle with a contemporary ogre or dragon. The call is to confront evil or to make life better, to invent something that changes lives for the better. Such a hero is called upon to develop new ideas and new ways of moving in the world. The quest, if successful, will challenge the status quo because the boon that is brought back to the community will make the community better for those who are powerless. The inspiration to do good in behalf of the community is never an easy road. As it has been said, a tall tree catches the strong wind. Stepping out to speak truth to power and to demand a redress of injustice will makes the hero vulnerable.

Those with much to lose will attempt to undermine your efforts. People who say that they are with you will desert you, laugh at you, and criticize your efforts. People who are not on your side will be skeptical of the enterprise and be reluctant to buy-in to the hero's plan. This is devastating for a nonprofit organization, which relies heavily on volunteerism. One's first attempts may fail, and the mission will seem impossible to achieve. Self-doubt and a sense of failure can overwhelm the would-be hero, and the sluggish pair of depression and melancholy set in to impede progress. This is when the hero gets the BLUES.

### **Willie King and the Blues**

Willie King was raised in Mississippi and was profoundly shaped by his country surroundings in the cotton fields and woods. Out of this environment he was deeply influenced by the blues and gospel music he heard, taking up playing his own handmade guitar at an early age. He played in local juke joints and traveled around the country before settling in Pickens County, Alabama where he develops his music and works to improve the lives of his neighbors. He has through his music offered a unique explanation of what the blues is all about. The underlying mission of his music is best presented in his own words:

The spirit led me to write these songs trying to bring unity and love to all people, and especially the African-American community, that we may have understanding and trust for each other, with peace and loving for a brighter America. I hope to spread that same kind of love across the world, helping us to come together and working out our differences with music. [liner notes -Jukin' at Bettie's]

Blues music then is an antidote to the troubles of the world and of people, providing a healing balm to extant conditions which trouble the soul. The music connects people to the positive forces in their lives and to each other when the music is played and sang and

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danced collectively.

We often conceive of the blues as a music which records the stories of lost love, hard times, and a general low down feeling which is often correlated to depression. One of my favorite lines might be, I have been down so long it looks like up to me. The idea of being down could include mental, emotional, or physical conditions of the body and spirit. Further, it can also represent one's position within society, indicating a lack of opportunities for the achievement of basic human dignity. Again, this definition of the blues focuses on FEELINGS that are experienced by the trials of life. These feelings can arise from the mistreatment by other people or by the institutions of power within a given community. They occur after the failure of personal relationships or professional failures in our vocational life. And the feelings arise from observing tragedies in our society and communities, such as war, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks. This is not unlike the sense of being in the belly of the beast or going through the dark night of the soul in that there appears to be no way out of these feelings of despair. As King suggest, if one is not careful, the feelings "can take you under." [Willie's Testament]

The challenge is to find a way out of this feeling of down-ness and here we consider the PURPOSE of the music called the blues. For King, the blues is a gift from god because he knew that we would need that healing balm of music. The blues is not just a form of music but it is a way of life, a way to achieve connectivity with other human who have or will experience that "down" feeling. Blues offers a music tonic that help get the blues "off of you before it brings you down." To be part of this blues life you have to sing and dance the blues and you sometimes have to howl the blues in order to get over that

feeling.

Beyond taking care of the feelings, the blues also has a communal quality to it. That is way it is the people's music and is played in juke joints, although it has a large following on the mainstage of musical performances and festivals. Through the enjoyment of music, people can be reconciled and united for the most important of human feelings-the expression of love. It is through this expression of love that human progress can be achieved.

Finally, the blues is also a call to action-a call to respond to the message of hope, faith and love that is embedded in the music.

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