

# endangered species: Heroes

teemed for their character, we have celebrities and "superstars," idolized for their wealth and fame, promoted by People magazine and *Entertainment Tonight* and treated like philosopher-kings.

Gibbon cited more depressing evidence:

- Fifth-graders more readily identify Freddy Krueger (from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies) than Abraham Lincoln.
- In a Gallup poll, the most admired Americans listed by teens were all TV or movie stars.
- Americans can remember who got Oscars and Grammys but are clueless about winners of the Medal of Honor.
- Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame attracts a million visitors a year; New York City's Hall of Fame for Great Americans draws 15,000.
- Graceland, the Elvis estate, is almost as popular a national shrine as the White House.

"We are entertaining ourselves to death," Gibbon said. "All of us should be embarrassed by how much we know about stars and how little we know about heroes."

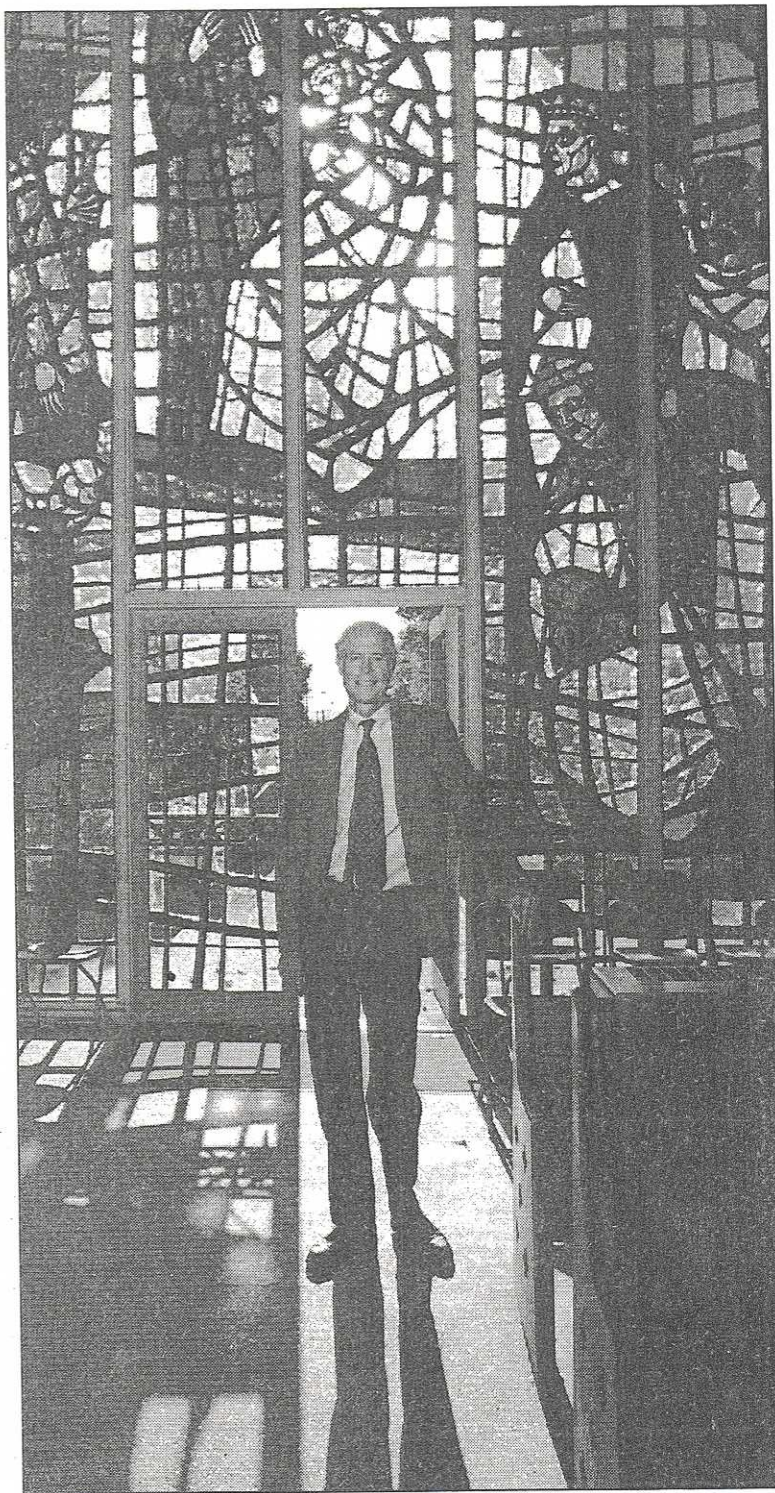
In the early 19th century, E.A. alum Stephen Decatur, the bold naval warrior, was a hero. In today's world, Nelson Mandela is an authentic hero, Gibbon said. Yet in a class after Gibbon's chapel speech, one Academy lad offered his own idea of a hero: Jimi Hendrix.

Not quite. True heroes, Gibbon said, meet three criteria: They accomplish something extraordinary; they show moral valor, especially in adversity; and they are "great souls" who lift us up through their high-minded, noble example.

Heroes are an endangered species these days, partly because of affluence and comfort, partly because of "a critical, sneering spirit that looks down, not up." To the media, sleaze is everywhere, nothing is sacred. Biography has degenerated into "pathography," and every book is "an intimate life." Said Gibbon: "Sex takes everyone off the pedestal." The title of a recent book about Mother Teresa: *The Missionary Position*.

Maybe we trash heroes because they make us feel inferior, reminding us how ordinary we are, Gibbon said. But heroes also inspire us by setting the bar high, by making life richer and more challenging.

That's why Gibbon believes in the value of heroes, why he's writing a



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Peter Gibbon** prepares to address students at Episcopal Academy about the absence of heroes — and a sense of the heroic — in American society.

book about it, and why he was dismayed recently when he visited New Haven. There, in a courtyard at Yale, was a statue of Nathan Hale, the hero of the American Revolution who said, as he was about to

be hanged, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Eli undergrads had plastered the pedestal with invitations to a "Ho and Pimp" party.