According to legend, when a Roman general achieved an important victory or conquest, he was treated to a hero's welcome by the citizenry and Senate of Rome. A march was organized around the central city forum, and the general was paraded through the adoring crowds on a chariot of gold drawn by white horses. Standing next to the general was an attendant who held over his heart the laurel of victory. As the chariot rode through the crowd, the attendant would continuously whisper into the conqueror's ear: "Remember that all glory is but fleeting!"

As individuals and as people, we want heroes, we need heroes, we seek out heroes and when the real thing isn't available, we often create heroes. Heroes offer us lessons, visions and values about life. Heroes offer us maps, guidelines and directions on how to live our lives and how to conduct ourselves with others.

Heroes take us away from the commonplace, failings and failures of the ordinary life. Heroes gives us something to believe in; something to cherish; something to hold dear; something untouched and unsullied by the pedestrian life that most of us lead.

But when heroes stumble, when they fall from grace, when they show themselves to be susceptible to temptation, we are shocked, and we often disbelieve or deny their failings. However, when the evidence builds and we can no longer deny their culpability, we are depressed, disillusioned and very angry.

Heroes often serve the purpose of being "true north" on our individual and collective moral compasses. They establish standards, offer models of behavior, suggest how we "ought to" live, how we "ought to" be. When they deceive us, when they fail us, we are cast adrift, we are unsure about how to proceed.

The heroes' loss of place is our loss of place. When heroes fall from grace, what hope do any of us have? When heroes are dethroned, we too are diminished. The heroes' failure doesn't just breed disappointment; it breeds disbelief, discontent and reinforces a deep skepticism and cynicism about the possibility of ever achieving honor, decency and dignity in life. When heroes burn out and die, all of us die a little too.

Al Gini is a professor of business ethics in the School of Business Administration at Loyola University Chicago. He is also a regular commentator on WBEZ-FM.