

Superhero Values

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As we reach out to build bridges in contentious times, I am wondering about role models. It seems to me that mythology, fiction, and maybe even history can supply us with examples of values we can agree on, values such as commitment and sacrifice. Stories that have captured our imaginations in the past may remind us of the people we hope to become.

When I was a kid, Batman was the lead character in some of those stories. He showed up in comic books and Pez dispensers, but the most influential form of Batman from my childhood was the Adam West character on television. When I was six or seven years old, the other kids who went to my babysitter and I used to run around the yard chasing super villains, pretending the basement steps were the Bat Cave, and generally doing our part for the good of Gotham City. I was always Batgirl, of course, while the other kids traded roles as Batman, Robin, and the various arch-nemeses.

I learned a couple of things from Batman and Batgirl. I learned that superheroes have remarkable origin stories, events that changed the direction of their lives. You might not be able to tell from looking at them, especially in their secret identities, but every superhero has a past.* Batgirl also taught me that superheroes struggle with power. Whether the super skills come from hard work, cool gadgets, or another planet, heroes have to figure out the most effective and responsible way to use those skills. Finally, I learned that superheroes form coalitions. Batman and Robin and Batgirl worked together, not to mention Commissioner Gordon and Chief O'Hara. Even an independent vigilante needs other people for the toughest problems.

Come to think of it, those same three things are true for all of us. Each of us has to decide how to respond to the past. Individually and as a group, we are faced with questions of power and responsibility. Teaming up with other people is a source of

strength, in spite of and perhaps because of our differences. I think these characteristics of superheroes call attention to our future as a spiritual community.

Heroes Have Origins

First, superheroes have origin stories. Some event from the past sparked the character's discovery of talents and passions, leading to a new sense of identity and purpose. Those events might be associated with death or separation from a loved one, or with the loss of the character's pre-heroic dreams.

Superman's powers come from his extra-planetary birth, but his ideas about truth, justice, and the American way come from Martha and Jonathan Kent. There is some [speculation](#) that Superman's creators (Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster) modeled him after Moses, a baby whose people faced destruction, and was carried in a small vessel to a land where his birth identity had to be concealed.

Some superheroes start off with an unlikely accident, like Peter Parker's radioactive spider bite to become Spiderman. Some superheroes have qualities that were typical in their place of origin, but something called them to a world similar to our own, where their profound difference turned out to be a gift. Wonder Woman, AquaMan, and Valkyrie fall into this category.

Whatever the story, most extra-human comic book characters have faced a life-changing event that seems to isolate them from other people. Often, the character will acquire or discover or place new value on a gift during that experience. Picking up these pieces of loss, loneliness, and strength, the character eventually forges a new sense of purpose.

[Michael Servetus](#) (Miguel Serveto) is someone from Unitarian history whose story follows this pattern a bit. He wasn't always brave, and he wasn't known for being kind, but he did set himself apart and commit his life to the truth as he saw it. When he read the Bible for himself for the first time as a young student in the 1520s, he was shocked

to discover no evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1531, he published a tract, *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (On the Errors of the Trinity), seemingly convinced that people would see it his way if only they would listen. That's not what happened. He was run out of town, his books were confiscated, and the Supreme Council of the Inquisition started looking for him.

This is where the secret identity comes in. Servetus fled to Paris and assumed the name of Michel de Villeneuve. He had a varied career as de Villeneuve, first as an editor and publisher, then as a doctor. He worked on a seven-volume edition of the Bible, adding insightful footnotes. He was the first to publish about the link between the pulmonary and respiratory systems, which was an important point in a discussion about the Virgin birth. During his time as the personal physician for the Archbishop of Vienne, he secretly worked on his next theological treatise, *Christianismi Restitutio* (The Restoration of Christianity). He also struck up a correspondence with his old classmate, John Calvin. Servetus was not diplomatic in his criticisms of Calvin's writing, and Calvin broke off correspondence. Servetus seemed to think that their exchange was illuminating, because he included copies of the letters when he sent an advance copy of the *Restitutio* to Geneva.

The publication of the *Restitutio* in 1553 marked the end of Servetus' secret identity. Both Protestant and Catholic authorities pursued him as a dangerous heretic. He was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553, by the order of The Council of Geneva. Reportedly, he maintained his beliefs until the end, shouting heretical prayers from the flames. The Catholic Inquisition in France burned Servetus in effigy a few months later. There were a lot of people who didn't want his ideas to be heard. Luckily for us, a few copies of his books were preserved, and went on to generate new ideas among religious reformers for over 450 years.

Now, I'm not saying Michael Servetus was a superhero, or even that UU's today would agree with most of what he wrote, but I do think we can see how a turning point in someone's life can bring isolation, energy, purpose, abilities, and vulnerabilities, all at the same time. His origins were more like Spiderman than Superman: Being in the right place at the right time, Servetus was bitten by the theology bug. He had to adopt an

alter ego, but the bug also afforded him the drive and the insight to make great contributions to religious scholarship and religious freedom.

How often is it the same for those of us who are regular folks? The events that make us who we are may bring loss or a sense of being alone in the world. These same events may bring a chance for us to develop new talents, or personal connection to the work we aspire to do. Passion and vulnerability can come from a single point in time. The Universalist side of our heritage teaches us that we—whole people with flaws and past mistakes and experiences that leave us broken—we human beings are welcome in the universe just as we are. Unitarian Universalism is inclusive, not because we believe that everyone is perfect, but because we have faith that the qualities that make us human also open doors for greater love and compassion.

The thing that sets a superhero origin story apart from a villain origin story is how the character translates their past into a future of meaning and purpose. Most of us are not consistently villains or heroes; we have to choose in every moment how to draw from our past to make choices in the present. We can't control our origin stories. Even if our own choices led to the turning points in our lives, they are in the past now. What we can do is bring our values to the way we understand those turning points, and to our decisions about what to do with the gifts we have now. Let's do our best to choose to use our origins well.

Heroes Form Coalitions

The very first appearance of Spiderman (in *Amazing Fantasy #15* in 1962) saw the teenage Peter Parker misusing his new powers, only to have his negligence contribute to the death of his Uncle Ben, one of his adoptive parents. Peter's understanding of Ben's teaching that "With great power there must also come—great responsibility!" shaped his character from then on.

Peter Parker's realization might just as easily come from the Unitarian Universalist theologian [James Luther Adams](#). Adams had a great deal to say about power and what that meant for the responsibilities of the liberating church.

As a minister between 1927 and the late 1930s, Adams made several trips to Germany, a country that was renowned for theological scholarship. He spoke with church and intellectual leaders, was detained for questioning by the Gestapo, and developed a sense of urgency about the political, cultural, moral, and spiritual crisis that went along with the rise of the Nazi party. While Adams developed great respect for the anti-Nazi Confessing Church movement, he noticed that Germany's churches as a whole were not pushing back against the crisis.

Under Adams' theology, individual and organized spirituality should be "examined." There must be a path for critique, self-correction, and development. In his essay, "A Faith for the Free," Adams wrote, "the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power."

I get the impression from Adams that organization doesn't just mean people together, it means people together on purpose, with a method and a discipline to move forward. Paraphrasing Jesus, Adams is quoted as saying, "By their groups you shall know them." For voluntary groups to be a significant force, they need to include diverse members. That is easier said than done.

In fiction, superheroes seem to gravitate to one another. From the X-Men to the Avengers to the Super Friends, collections of lead characters become ensembles. They have very different abilities and outlooks. Teaming up isn't always easy, and it can be risky. Household squabbles may become epic battles if super abilities get out of hand. However, when they combine their gifts in the same direction, they can tackle complex problems that none of them would be able to handle alone.

This is why we form coalitions, too. Our congregation is a microcosm, with atheists, theists, polytheists, agnostics, and everybody else worshipping and volunteering side by side. Out in the world, we don't worry too much about theological differences when we're working with other groups to serve our community. It does happen, though, that we forget, or we retreat into what we think is a bubble of sameness, or we narrow our scope of what seems possible.

Let's build on what is already going well as we resist the shrinking of our horizons. There may be partners in our community that we have yet to meet. There may be institutes for exceptional heroes, or halls of justice, that we have to overcome our internalized hurdles of classism and racism before we can join.

At the very least, we can ensure that we're making the most of our super team in this congregation. Like the superheroes, we can do more and support each other when we come together.

Conclusion

There is a lot that our congregation has in common with an assembly of superheroes. Each one of us has an origin story, a set of events that shaped our talents, passions, and vulnerabilities. Each one of us has the opportunity to shape that story into a life of meaning and purpose. Like superheroes, it is incumbent on us to come to terms with power. Our collective abilities and assets make us a force to be reckoned with, and it is up to us to do the moral and religious discernment to make sure we're doing a good job wielding that power. Our honesty with each other and our other spiritual practices will help. Like the best superheroes, we form alliances. Within the congregation, we share our specialized powers and support one another to accomplish goals none of us could handle alone. In our coalitions with other groups, we build bridges that support compassion. May all that has been divided be made whole.

Maybe all that's left is to come up superhero names and costumes. The Avengers is taken, and doesn't sound like us. The Reconcilers? The Uncommon U-Folks? The Fantastic Fellowship?

I've heard from some UU friends who have consistently showed up for immigration reform, civil rights, and economic equality that the non-UUs in their coalitions have started to recognize them by their bright yellow shirts with red hearts. They've been

nicknamed “the Love People.” Sounds super to me. I hope it sticks, and I hope we stick with it.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.