

Origin Stories and How to Be a Superhero
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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READING

Untitled song by Will Arnett from the *Lego Movie*.

<https://genius.com/Batman-untitled-self-portrait-annotated>

INTRODUCTION

“The caped crusader.”

The “dark avenger of the night.”

A dark fellow. But I’ll get back to that in a moment.

Another rather moody person, this one real, was the great Czech writer Franz Kafka. Kafka kept a journal. His journal entry for August 2, 1914 was: “Germany has declared war on Russia—went swimming in the afternoon.”

Over the years scholars have puzzled about this entry. Why would a well-informed person living in the city of Prague, situated as it is *between* Germany and Russia and therefore likely to suffer catastrophe, why would such a person write only, “Germany has declared war on Russia—went swimming in the afternoon” at the beginning of an event that would take the lives of sixteen million human beings?

Was he naive?

Was he *that* wrapped up in his own stuff?

What gives?

I suspect the answer is very simple: Kafka was human. Sometimes we fret and speculate over world politics and the future of humanity and what we can do about it, and sometimes we go swimming. Or walking. Or shopping . . . And that's a good thing!

Nobody can be a hero all the time: it's impossible to ask of anyone; it's folly to ask of ourselves.

The British novelist Terry Pratchett puts it fairly succinctly: “. . . what he didn't like about heroes was that they were usually suicidally gloomy when sober and homicidally insane when drunk.”

Mark Twain wrote, “If everybody was satisfied with himself, there would be no heroes.”

But I think perhaps the novelist Brad Meltzer came closest to the truth when he wrote, “We are all ordinary. We are all boring. We are all spectacular. We are all shy. We are all bold. We are all heroes. We are all helpless. It just depends on the day.”

ONE

Yet our times call us to action. The question is how to act wisely and how to sustain action over time.

For my money the philosopher Hannah Arendt offers the most profound analysis of the causes of totalitarianism. During and after the Second World War, Arendt spent a lot of time researching and thinking about totalitarianism and wrote such classics as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt's conclusions were controversial at the time because she argued that “evil” isn't an isolated anomaly of the human condition, but a function of human social systems. As a matter of fact, Arendt thought, societies, not individuals, create evil.

She wrote,

Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men (*sic*), so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationship with reality.

The term “motivated reasoning” wasn’t around when Arendt wrote those words. But she fairly well sums up the idea: “the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationship with reality.” Arendt isn’t talking about just the political right wing here. All of us are susceptible. Individuals don’t think in the broad brush strokes of ideologies—groups of isolated people do. She goes on:

The preparation has succeeded when men have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought.

Arendt thought that totalitarianism is born—paradoxically—from a combination of lost community and group-think. Losing the ability to act in accord with one’s own experience goes beyond what has come to be called alienation. In late-capitalist societies, the preexisting competitiveness, isolation, and loneliness that is so prevalent in our “bowling alone” society makes acting communally and acting in accord with personal experience—rather than in accord with media-induced collective angst—very difficult. In an anti-intellectual society such as the United States, the prevalent dismissal of individual thought has likewise paved the way for group-think.

Isolation, angst, and group-think are a potent brew.

Arendt sums up:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.

“The reality of experience” and “the standards of thought.” Arendt’s greatest insight is that evil is “banal.” We don’t see it coming in a red cloud of dust like the horsemen of the Apocalypse. Rather, evil seeps into societies as motivated reasoning and a mistrust of personal experience (ie, “Hey, my grandparents were immigrants”). These combine with an inability to gather into community and talk about issues. Without recourse to community—alone in an inane and isolated redundancy of false rage—evil corrupts a society as people forget their own experience and lose the ability to think without fear. (This is not unique to our place and time.”

Arendt's formula for avoiding the call of totalitarianism is clear: find community, trust your personal experience; question everything, even your own deepest commitments.

TWO

Think for a moment about our fantasy heroes—those characters who have capes and wear their underwear on the outside of their tights. Superman, for example.

The creators of Superman—Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster—were both the children of Jewish immigrants who had come to the United States in the early twentieth century. Superman is of course an immigrant—from another planet—who becomes . . . all-American.

The character Batman was created by Milton "Bill" Finger—the writer—and illustrator Bob Kane, who had changed his name from Kahn. The creators of both Superman and Batman were the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. They were creating their superheroes at a time when they were hopping into the American melting pot to avoid looking like the new wave of Jewish immigrants arriving in the 1930s and 1940s, escaping the Nazis.

If we get Freudian about it, the fact that the creators of Superman and Batman killed off the parents of their creations probably shows us their attitudes toward their immigrant parents and their parents' "foreign" ways.

Superman is a mild-mannered reporter with a good Protestant work ethic, and Batman is Bruce Wayne, about as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant as it gets.

As Will Arnett puts it in the Batman song:

Darkness
No parents
Super rich
Kinda makes it better

In the song, Arnett puts his finger on the problem with many —if not most—fictional American heroes: They are isolated and individualistic. As Arnett puts it,

The opposite of light
Black hole
Curtains drawn
In the basement
Middle of the night

Arendt would say, a prime audience for fascism.

Batman, Superman. Shane. Dirty Harry and the cops in most of the crime procedurals in TV and film: they're individualistic vigilantes. The bureaucracy and the legal system are portrayed as a hindrance to justice. In the context of the plot, we always know the bad guys are bad guys. But in reality, that's not so clear. Not when we trust personal experience.

Hannah Arendt understood the thinking pattern that results from this sort of fiction.

One of the most profound shifts in our time in terms of social justice work has been a transition from that lone-vigilante savior paradigm that Superman and Batman were heroes of to a collective-liberation model.

Recent incarnations of Batman, even in the current Batman Lego movie, is a critique of the lone wolf model. The fact is, do-gooders acting on their own recognizance can often do more harm than good.

Superman and Batman are incarnations of the savior impulse that is based in Christian theology and laced with European colonial assumptions about the might and right of European thought—"Truth, justice, and the American Way."

We do well to remember that the first major act of European colonialism was Pope Urban II's call for a holy crusade into Palestine during the Middle Ages. That crusade led to the wholesale slaughter of both Muslims and Jews, who had been living together in peace. White saviors in Palestine, Africa, the Pacific, and this hemisphere—to name a few places—have made a bloody mess.

In international affairs, "unilateral" is a four-letter word!

THREE

My father was a decorated combat veteran in the Second World War. Once in a while when someone discovered that fact, they'd ask a question: "So, you were a war hero . . . " My father always had the same answer: "I ain't no hero. Heroes get people killed."

This was clearly a truism that my dad had picked up. I don't know if it was basic training or front line training. But the dichotomy for him was: heroes do stupid, individualistic things, soldiers work as a team.

My father learned the lesson of community that Hannah Arendt thought is the best bulwark against totalitarianism.

The lone vigilante can fight but can never win because the values that laws uphold are communal values. You can't be an effective hero alone.

Look at the Black Lives Matter movement. Or the Women's March. Or the spontaneous airport protests that erupted with the initial Muslim ban. None of these have those charismatic leaders that past movements had. There are no Emma Goldmans or Martin Luther Kings. Instead, there are networks of concerned people joining together. These are made up not of individualists, but of concerned people . . . who take time to swim in the afternoon.

CONCLUSION

For us—progressives gathering in community—quietism and resignation are not options because we refuse to be confused, and we refuse to ignore our own very human, personal, experiences. This is why we will work for the common good, no matter what.

I look at it this way: For those of us of a progressive, liberal bent, the United States is an idea, an ideal that has not yet been realized. Our search is for that ideal place of tolerance, understanding, liberation, personal freedom, and the universal right to knowledge and free expression.

For us, theocracy and monoculture are the greatest enemies because they limit freedoms and ideas, and they limit us, as we miss the lovely differences among people.

Race, class, nationality, gender, LGBTQ—for us difference is invigorating. Fun. We will never lose that place of wonder and joy.

Roxane Gay is a Haitian-American writer who published an essay collection she calls, *Bad Feminist: Essays*.

Roxane Gay writes,

I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I'm right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself.

In other words, Roxane Gay is not going to apologize for writing in her journal, “Germany has declared war on Russia—went swimming in the afternoon.”

That’s how to be a superhero—being your on messy self. “Just trying.”