



What if superheroes are nothing but spirit in the form of a human body dressed up in a snazzy costume, perhaps a cape and a mask, who believe in their power to do good, and have moved past fear to let their soul's wings unfurl, because how else do you think they have the power to fly right now? I'll admit I'm not as knowledgeable about superheroes as I'm sure some of you in this room are, but having eight-year-olds whose favorite books to bring home from the library every time are superhero tales, it has my interest piqued anew. I have also been returning to memories of the superheroes of my childhood. I am a child of the '90s, the era of the TV show Captain Planet and the Planeteers. Did anybody else watch that?

Yeah, I was a big fan. Every episode of this show began with the same opening narrative voiced by LeVar Burton that says, "Our world is in peril. Gaia, the spirit of the earth can no longer stand the terrible destruction plaguing our planet. She sends five magic rings to five special young people. From Africa, Kwame with the power of Earth. From North America, Wheeler with the power of fire. From Eastern Europe, Linka with the power of wind. From Asia Gi with the power of water. And from South America, Ma-Ti with the power of heart. With the five powers combined, they summon Earth's greatest champion, Captain Planet." Yes. Each episode addresses some environmental or sociopolitical issue. When a Planeteer can't solve the problem with their power alone, they combine their powers of earth, fire, wind, water, and heart to summon Captain Planet. Every episode ends with a clip in which Captain Planet talks to the viewer about how they can join him and the Planeteers in saving our planet, and being part of the solution rather than the pollution.

In addition to solving planetary and environmental issues, Captain Planet also had important timely messages about issues that are very human. It was the first American children's animated series to deal directly with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the episode, A Formula for Hate, the evil villain Skumm brainwashes a community into thinking that the virus can be spread just through touching someone, causing an HIV positive young man to be feared and ostracized. With the help of the young man's basketball coach, Captain Planet talks to the team, telling them the truth about AIDS, and of course catches and brings to justice the evil Skumm. Every time Captain Planet is summoned, he arrives on the scene saying, "By your powers combined, I am Captain Planet." And when his work is done, he departs with the message, "The power is yours."

Each generation has its superheroes. Beginning in the 1930s and '40, DC Comics told the stories of heroes such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Anybody grow up with those? Okay, yeah. Superman was born on the planet Krypton and sent to Earth as a baby just before Krypton was apocalyptically destroyed. He was adopted and named Clark Kent by a family of farmers in Kansas who quickly realized that he had superpowers. These superpowers that he possesses combined with the strong morals instilled in him by his adoptive parents are the foundation of his superhero persona. Superman uses his powers for good and to fight crime, but when his home planet exploded, fragments of Kryptonite landed on earth, and these are Superman's greatest weakness. Like many superheroes that follow, he is haunted by the threat of his past and where he comes from.

Batman is the alias of Bruce Wayne, a wealthy industrialist. He vows to fight crime after witnessing a traumatic incident as a child involving his parents. While Batman does not have superpowers like Superman, his power comes from fear, his own fear and the fear that he inspires in others. He was terrified of bats as a child, and so he creates a bat-inspired persona to frighten criminals and to keep the streets of Gotham City safe. Wonder Woman is a princess from the island nation of Themyscira, sculpted from clay by her mother, queen Hippolyta and given superhuman powers by the Greek gods. She wins the right to return Steve Trevor, a US intelligence officer whose plane crashed on her island, to man's world where she fights crime and the evil of the Nazis. Her power comes not from violence, but from a rare balance of strong conscience and the forces of love, empathy, and compassion. The man who created this character, Wonder Woman, said that she was the kind of woman who should rule the world.

Both Superman and Batman were orphans, as was Spider-Man who appeared on the scene a couple decades later. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman were all far away from their homelands and fighting against villains in a scary world. For the most part, especially in the early years of these heroes, they acted alone. It wasn't until the 1960s when a new generation of superheroes were born who represented the power of teamwork. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman all became part of the Justice League. Marvel Comics introduced the Avengers, The Fantastic Four, and X-Men. In the 1990s we got Captain Planet and the Planetegers, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, the Power Rangers. And today of course, we have groups like KPop Demon Hunters, Rumi, Mira, and Zoey, a K-pop girl group who used their voices to keep demons at Bay. Rumi, however, is troubled by her demon

heritage and tries to keep this part of herself hidden, but coming to terms with this part of herself ends up being a source of her power.

These superheroes are no longer lone rangers adrift in a perilous world. They are part of powerful teams, each individual hero bringing their own strengths and gifts and powers to the whole to do good in the world. Some of them also have wise mentors. The X-Men had Professor X, who was a mentor, moral compass and father figure to the X-Men training young mutants to navigate a world that is against them and to use their powers for good. He also guides them to work for peace between mutants in humans. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have Splinter, a mutant rat who exudes incredible calm even in the most tough situations. He is their ninja master, a wise, intelligent guide, and keeps those turtles in line when they get into little sibling squabbles. And the Power Rangers have Zordon, who is not only a mentor, but a dispatcher, running the command center, giving the Power Rangers their powers and missions, and offering strategic advice.

Excuse me. We are now seeing a generation of superheroes, some around since the '70s, but some newer creations as well, who are remarkably human. They have the same personal problems and struggles as you and I. They grapple with doing the right thing. They live, breathe, worry, have families, and they also have superpowers. They ask questions like, "How do I balance duty and staying true to myself? What does it mean to pledge myself to a cause? How do I know what's right? How do I honor where I come from and my family? Am I my superhero persona, or what's underneath, or some combination of the two? How do I understand my role in a team of heroes? Am I using my powers because I can or because I should?" Do any of these questions feel familiar? Yeah.

The generation of heroes that we grew up with or with which we identify most can profoundly shape how we see our role in the scheme of things, the nature of humans and our relationship to the holy. Some superheroes are heroes because they have superhuman powers. They are stronger, faster, and more intimidating than any mere human. They have overcome tragedy in their lives and left behind where they come from to be great. When the ordinary people are helpless, the superhero swoops in and saves the day. It sounds a lot like the story of an all-powerful God. Whether you believe that people are helpless and need heroes to save them, or that humans themselves, all of us are superheroes, there's a pitfall in thinking that one hero alone can know everything, do everything, be the best, and answer the needs of our society.

It's a dangerous, elusive expectation, whether placed on a comic book character or on a human like Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa, or Mr. Rogers, or on a God. Many of us have learned the hard way that we can't do and be everything, that we need each other. And this truth that we need each other is what has shaped the generation of superheroes who work as a team. How do they see their role in the scheme of things? They know that to make a difference and to save the world, they must work together. When they come together, a power beyond what any one of them alone has is summoned, or generated, or is simply present, some would say this is how God is.

There's a story about this told by Rabbi Marc Gellman that I love so much, so I want to share this with you. It goes, before there was anything, there was a God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of

rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?" So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be just rocks." Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans and some will be clouds, and some of this water will be just water." Then the angels said, "Well, God, it's neater now, but is it finished?" And God answered, "Nope." On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that God only knows what they are.

And when God had done all of this, the angels asked, God, "Is the world finished now?" And God answered, "Nope." God made two humans from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I'm tired now. Please finish up the world for me. Really, it's almost done." But the humans said, "We can't finish the world alone. You have the plans and we are too little." "You are big enough," God answered them, "But I agree to this, if you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner." The humans asked, "What's a partner?" And God answered, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up because your partner is depending on you. On the days that you think, 'I am not doing enough,' and on the days I think that you are not doing enough, even on those days, we are still partners, and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal." They all agreed to that deal. Then the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet?" And God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."

So I wonder, what if being a superhero means being a partner and creating the world that we live in and the world that we dream of? Superheroes spark our imagination, that's part of their magic. The characters represent ideals and strengths and impacts that we can strive for. And if you look across time from the ancient Greek gods and goddesses to today's comic books, there are some qualities that these superheroes share. First, they know the powers that they possess, and they courageously draw on those powers. Second, they sacrifice some of their personal needs and desires for the greater good, which in the comic book world is confronting evil and defeating villains. And third, they are flawed and vulnerable. Whether human or superhuman, mutant or something else, they have something, their kryptonite, their Achilles heel, that is their weakness, just like each of us. And we can see ourselves in them more easily because of this.

Did you know that Unitarian Universalists have our own real-life superhero? Christopher Reeve, known for his role as Superman in the movies of the late 1970s and '80s, became a Unitarian Universalist late in his life. Reeve was injured in an equestrian accident in 1995 and lived the rest of his life paralyzed from the neck down. He used this experience, seeing through the pain and the loss of what could have been, to support spinal cord research and embryonic stem cell research. He wrote two books, he lobbied for federal research funding and more. He devoted the remainder of his life to these efforts. He opened his second book entitled *Nothing Is Impossible* with these words, "So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable. And then when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable. If we can conquer outer space, we can conquer inner space too."

Facing his own mortality led him to seek some spiritual grounding, and ultimately it led him to Unitarian Universalism. When asked why he became a Unitarian Universalist, he said, "It gives me a moral compass. I often refer to Abe Lincoln who said, 'When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad.' And that is my religion." I think he says that we all have a little voice inside us that will guide us. It may be God, I don't know, but I think that if we shut out all the noise and clutter from our lives and listen to that voice, it will tell us the right thing to do.

Reeve was an imperfect human being who knew the power that he possessed. He devoted his life to doing good and to supporting research that would help others to live better lives. I hope that all of this talk of superheroes who are out there in books, in the movies, has you thinking about what your superpower is, not what superpower you wish you had, but what is the superpower that you possess? Some put on a mask or a cape or a costume to feel like a superhero, but you don't have to. It's really about being most fully yourself. I think about superheroes like Black Widow, she's one of my daughter's favorites, she's a spy who is required to take on various personas without blowing her cover, but it can be hard to remember who you are when you're constantly trying to be someone else. But when you pull back the mask, the hero that you've always been will still be there. This is what Christopher Reeve learned through his life post-Superman. Seeing the hero in yourself and allowing others to see it as well is pretty powerful, if you ask me. You just have to let your soul's wings unfurl.

So what superpower do you have? What are your strengths and your gifts? What superpower do you use to help others? Are you a great listener? Are you tall and able to help people reach things up high? I used that one just this morning. Are you creative when it comes to problem solving or making beautiful art? Do you have a really amazing memory? Do you have a powerful speaking or singing voice that people can't help but listen to and be moved by? Are you strong physically or spiritually? Are you fearless? Do you cry easily, giving others permission to do so as well? Have you had the experience of overcoming some challenge that you can use to affirm and support others going through something similar? All of these are superpowers.

I read an interview recently with Ocean Vuong, the Vietnamese American writer who credits his work with the English language, which of course is his second language, to the influence of his native language. As he explains, Vietnamese is monosyllabic and tonal. He says, "Every sound has its own life. If you are a Vietnamese child listening in a Vietnamese household, your life depends on every syllable. By the time I listened to English..." He said, "... I realized that Vietnamese became almost like a superpower. I could hear the music under everything." So whatever your superpower may be, believe in its power, in your power. Know that you need not act alone, but can join with others, your friends, your family, your church and other communities to amplify it. Remember what Captain Planet said, "The power is yours." How will you use it? May it be for love and for the common good. Amen.

