

Stop Waiting for Superheroes. No One is Coming. It's Up to Us

By Terri Willingham, Delivered July 2018 at Spirit of Life UU

The superhero genre has always been fun. But in our oversaturated pop culture of 2018, it may well be contributing to a general weakness of spirit, infantilizing us into dependency on some mystically superhuman being to save us from ourselves. The super hero myths cannot inspire us to great deeds in the real world, though, says writer Larry Kummer. "These are fun fantasies of despair, an admission that we can no longer imagine a way to become strong."

The fact is, no one single person, real or imagined, can fix "it" – our lives, our businesses, our communities, our policies, or our politics. It's up to all of us, as many of us as possible, working together, to improve our collective lot.

I'll weight this at the front end for you before we start - Here's the takeaways I'm hoping for you:

- **There are no super heroes.** No one single person, real or imagined, can make it better all by his or herself.
- **We have to challenge ourselves** to do things the hard things to become the fully realized, critically thinking, capable beings we can and should be. There's no way around it. **We have to overcome ourselves to become ourselves.**
- **We have to be brutally honest with ourselves and willing to constantly reconsider what we believe to be true, as new information presents itself.** "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," said Ralph Waldo Emerson. If you still believe today what you believed 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, you're doing it wrong. There are some central truisms of course – most of us will always believe that murder is wrong, that kindness and love

are powerful and good. But if you've never changed your mind personally, politically, ethically, socially, or philosophically, maybe you've got some reexamining to do. Maybe it's fine, and maybe you're right. But maybe you've just settled into easy habits of thought.

- **We have to step up and speak up – wherever and whenever necessary.** If it feels like you should say something you probably should. If it feels like you should do something, you probably should.

A few years of missteps as a result of misplaced trust and misguided hope, along with the general social malaise induced by the machinations of our megalomaniacal president and the hideous culture of boorish entitlement that's engendered, compel me to share this message today – a message that is less one of feel good idealism than what I hope is good strong dose of elbow grease realism. I take my text from a motley collection of writings ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson's very apropos essay "Self-Reliance" and a couple of contemporary writers waxing philosophic on the superhero trope.

"There is a time in every man's education," wrote Emerson, "when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till."

In my experience, no one is going to till that ground of promise for you. There are no magic beans, no GMO seeds that prevent bugs or weeds in the garden of your life. You need to get down on your hands and knees and do the hard work of planting, nourishing, tending, harvesting and doing it all over again, until the day when you can't do it anymore.

Ask me how I know. Never mind, I'll just tell you...

The last four or five years of my life have been variously interesting, exciting, perspective setting and trying. I've always tried to do work that matters to me personally, and which I hoped had some social value. I've always tried to be collaborative, because I know I don't know everything. However, it's possible to over-collaborate, to put trust in what others tell you, or persuade you to believe about them, because you get tired, because you hope. The work that I had hoped others could contribute, who I naively believed brought, in my case, corporate super powers to the table, have largely failed, and often left me with even bigger challenges to address.

Part of the reason for this is because I've always believed it's important to trust the process and that, in the most collaborative spirit possible, it's equally important to trust the people who are part of that process. It's when the promises started to sound too good to be true that I should have heeded the old adage, "If it sounds too good to be true ..." (*invite congregation to finish the sentence*). Live, get burned and learn.

Except that often we don't. Scaling my experiences – and likely some of yours - up to a larger social level, where people have hopes and dreams about things like health care, economic well-being, food security and comfort, and our very human tendency to fall for mass delusions that appeal to our shared hopes and dreams can produce burns are commensurately that much bigger. And when the challenges we face as human societies are as complex and far reaching as they are today, it's easy to look for relief from some kind of iconic savior, appointed or self-promoted.

It's natural for human beings to seek the path of least-resistance, to adapt and adjust. It's a survival mechanism that has served us well for

millennia. However, the purpose that adaptation once served – to identify safe and secure places for rest and recharging, for village building – no longer, for the most part exists. We’ve made everything convenient, climate controlled, sanitized and comfortable. And our natural biological response to that is to keep wanting it, because it feels good.

However, we’re endowed with brains and increasingly, neuroscience, which says you can’t always believe what your primitive brain, that pleasure palace of the body, tells you. That just because it’s easy doesn’t mean it’s right. That just because you’re comfortable doesn’t mean you stop moving. That just because there’s an abundance of food, doesn’t mean you have to eat it all. That just because someone promises to take care of everything for you, doesn’t mean that they actually will, or even that you should let them.

The super hero phenomenon feeds right into these basic human tendencies. It says, don’t worry about anything. It says, “I’ll take care of you. Trust me. You don’t even have to think!”

As a result, I and several other folks would argue that the super hero culture has made us weak and dependent, it has infantilized us. Author Larry Kummer, editor and writer on at the geopolitically focused website, Fabius Maximus, (<https://fabiusmaximus.com/2017/06/29/superheroes-are-a-problem-for-america/>) has some choice words on the subject.

“Somehow all this has become neurotic, making us weak. It’s always High Noon in America. Heroes save the day while we watch as ignorant, passive, perhaps even cowardly bystanders. These myths cannot inspire us to great deeds in the real world. These are fun fantasies of despair, an admission that we can no longer imagine a way to become strong.”

Super heroes are nothing new. The Gods and Goddesses of ancient Rome and Greece were types of superheroes. In Joseph Campbell's 1949 book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, he contended that all the great enduring myths the world over shared an underlying structure he called the "monomyth," or the hero's journey. Storytellers, graphic artists and movie directors drew from this basic storytelling element to flesh out the first American superhero tales during the Great Depression, a period when Americans truly wanted saving. The genre hasn't waned since, and in fact, in recent years, has doubled down.

45 super hero films were released between 2010 and 2017 alone and there were nearly 40 in the decade prior to that.

(<http://parlaystudios.com/blog/anyone-else-getting-tired-superhero-movies/>)

The preponderance of super hero films suggests, says Kummer, that "we have lost the ability to take collective action, or even see that as our greatest strength."

It also empowers the egomaniacal among us who will be happy to step into the superhero void to save us, and forward their own agendas in the process.

Even James Cameron has expressed super hero fatigue, telling IndieWire earlier this year. (<http://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/james-cameron-avengers-sci-fi-avatar-2-1201955644/>)

"Not that I don't love the movies. It's just, come on guys, there are other stories to tell besides hyper-gonadal males without families doing death-defying things for two hours and wrecking cities in the process. It's like, oy!"

“Superheroes don't exist to solve problems, they just exist to punch bad guys ,” observed Vlad Savov, in the Verge.

(<https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2014/11/20/7253383/superheroes-exist-to-punch>)

“Batman’s stated goal is to rid Gotham City of crime,” Savov notes. “but he rarely undertakes the actions that can tackle the causes rather than the effects of criminality. Bruce Wayne could use his lofty social standing to lobby for more education funding, tighter gun control, and a social safety net that would prevent young people from resorting to a life of crime. His wealth could be used to support drug clinics and foster prisoner rehabilitation programs to reduce recidivism. Instead, he puts on a black mask and a husky voice and goes to pound hapless street thugs in the night.”

If fist fights were effective, he said, Batman would have retired his cape by now.

Superman, he says, “can hear, see, smell, and remember things in ways the rest of us can only dream of. His strength is otherworldly, and he can literally fly out into space on a whim. Think of all the impossible construction and exploration projects we could complete if we had a real Superman to help us. Instead, he gels his hair back, puts on a cape, and manhandles a different set of anonymous thugs to the ones Batman’s taking care of.”

“To be my hero,” he says, “you have to do something to change these awful societal habits, not merely contain them. Batman celebrates the 75th anniversary of his debut this year (2014), and in all that time the only thing he’s truly improved is the muscularity of his physique.”

The entire superhero genre, says Savov, “is predicated on having someone to guard against.”

“The crazy thing about superhero tales is that, more often than not, they move to the rhythm of the active and dynamic anti-hero rather than the reactive and theatrically overdressed good guys.”

Think about that for a minute. The super hero philosophy is reactionary – it needs a singular, over simplified enemy for a spectacular boss fight that will impress the masses. Does that sound familiar? Super heroes just protect the status quo, says Savov.

Bill Mahr sees a more insidious side to our national popular culture preoccupation with super heroes. (<https://deadline.com/2017/05/bill-maher-hbo-real-time-superheroes-new-rules-1202098782/>)

“Super hero movies imprint this mindset that we are not masters of our own destiny and the best we can do is sit back and wait" for super heroes to rescue us, he says. "Forget hard work, government institutions , diplomacy, investment, we just need a hero to rise, so we just put out the bat signal for one man who can step in and solve all of our problems, very quickly..."

Kummer believes things went south during the 60s and 70s when, he says, “ we became alienated from our institutions. Organizations which should have led us into the future, like NASA, failed us. Organizations that should have protected us, like the FBI and CIA, were shown to be criminal oppressors. Institutions which we admired, like the military, displayed gross incompetence in Vietnam.

“Our response was not reform, at whatever cost and effort. Instead we retreated into fantasy. We exult in our individualism while our social cohesion frays — wrecking our ability to work together.”

As a result, says Kummer, we “...dream of either being superheroes, or having superheroes fix our problems. Neither paint visions of a heroic

future in which teams reform America. These seduce us from the real path to successful self-government, through the difficult work of organizing ourselves.”

The title of this talk – No one is coming. It’s up to us. – hails from the work of a technologist named Dan Hon (<https://medium.com/@hondanhon/no-ones-coming-it-s-up-to-us-de8d9442d0d>), in an article by the same name, and is a phrase that was recently championed by the national civic tech organization, Code for America, of which I’m a part. When that phrase started making the rounds of the Code for America community earlier this year, it became something of a wake up a call, a rallying cry.

It’s a refutation of learned helplessness, of willful hopelessness.

“Saying “there isn’t anything better we can do” isn’t how society works,” says Hon. “It isn’t how civilization works. It isn’t how people work together and protect those amongst us who cannot protect themselves.

“It is a little bit like saying on the one hand that the condition underlying human existence is nasty, brutish and short, and on the other, writing off any progress humanity has made to make our lives less nasty, kinder and longer.”

... “Saying “we can do nothing” is what America says in response to the latest mass shooting when every other civilized country is able to regulate the responsible ownership of firearms.

“Saying “we can do nothing” is like saying it’s not worth having laws or standards because we can’t achieve perfection.

“We would do better to be clear: is it true that we can do nothing? Or is it true that we choose to do nothing?”

“There’s no one coming,” Hon asserts. “It’s up to us.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson would have completely agreed.

“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs,” Emerson wrote in his essay, Self Reliance.

“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think,” he said. “This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

“The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency,” Emerson contended. “ a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them.”

Emerson launches into a defense of changing one’s mind, here.

“ Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. ...

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' — Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

A caveat here of, course. Your basic superhero model could claim to be a misunderstood genius, perhaps a very stable one at that. Our president is difficult to understand, and variable as the weather, but I would not esteem him a great thinker, changing his mind as a result of thoughtful consideration of new information, which is what Emerson is talking about here, a completely different caliber of humanity.

What we're talking about here is the need to be able to weigh new information intelligently, independently, and to adapt or adjust accordingly – and especially to be able to honestly asses that the emperor may have no clothes on, and that the superhero is wearing a cape under false pretenses. If I had remained unable to course correct when I finally realized what was happening with the poor partnerships in my life, with those who thought they were exercising heroics, when they were, in fact, merely exercising their personal agendas, I'd never have recovered and gotten back on track.

“The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks,” wrote Emerson. “See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing.”

“We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other,” Emerson wrote over 150 years ago.

Not much has changed, which may be why we look to super heroes, to that one standout, for the star quarterback, to the Elon Musks and Bill Gates and, even the Donald Trumps – because we hope they can save us when we don’t know how to save ourselves, and are too afraid to try, to take a chance, to risk the effort.

“Our age yields no great and perfect persons. We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force, and do lean and beg day and night continually. Our housekeeping is mendicant, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion, we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us. We are parlour soldiers. We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born,” said Emerson.

And today, the movie theater - or the cosplay conference - is our parlor, where we’re relieved of even the illusion of being a parlor soldier, because we now have Hollywood heroes with outsized physical qualities that conveniently free us of the burden of trying to be anything remotely like them, unless we want to spend the day dressed up like them.

In a fascinating diatribe against the emasculating effects of the “modern world” of 1841, with all its morally tenderizing conveniences, Emerson lamented that,

“ The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky.

The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy...”

It is the reliance on things outside of ourselves, believed Emerson, that weakens us.

“... the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property. They measure their esteem of each other by what each has, and not by what each is.”

“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.” Emerson said.

By extension we can add that reliance on superheroes and saviors, as on millionaires and innovators – on any one individual we believe can save the day, is misguided at best, and unempowering at worst. It outsources the hard work that requires the exercise of our own special powers of personal engagement, critical thought, insight, empathy, outrage against injustice and cruelty, and physical action to be successful, especially with respect to social challenges.

We need to find the courage to question things, especially “traditions” – which separate but equal was, and male only voting, and child marriages – and to speak up and out when we know things aren’t right, instead of waiting for “someone in charge” to do it, for someone else to fix what’s broken.

These days, in my own work, and in my own life, I'm less likely to trust without verifying, to throw my lot in with anyone until they've consistently shown they share similar ideals and goals, that they're truly collaborative and consensus building, that they're someone I truly enjoy working with. This isn't to say I only want to be with people with whom I completely agree all the time – there are lots of paths up the mountain.

But I will never trust anyone again who even remotely suggests he can carry me up that mountain by himself. That's an ego-maniacal self-serving promise that isn't at all about shared purpose and goals. It's about self-aggrandizement. And besides, it's not like I can't use the exercise.

We can do great deeds in the future, says Kummer, adding, “We need no new myths to do so. The old ones remain potent; when we wish to act we will find them as inspiring as they were for our forefathers. Today we lack only the will to put aside fantasies and act together as citizens.”

No one is coming. It's up to us.

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