

Of Superheroes, Mere Mortals and Saving the World (with and by Josiah Lau)

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I have a confession to make. I generally do my best to be positive and optimistic. In part because it's good for my physical and mental health but also because I know that my outlook affects the people around me: my family, my friends and my students. But it is not always easy. Some days, I don't feel like being positive. Sometimes, it feels like the world around you is so overwhelming in its negativity that one's small drop of positiveness in that ocean of negativity is insignificant. Sometimes, it feels like that world is taking your positive energy but giving nothing back, leaving one's soul empty and in despair. And the end of 2016 felt like one of those times.

And from time to time, something happens or something you read restores and recharges you. John Sturrock's [entry](#) for this month is an example of this (and if you haven't read it, what are you waiting for?). I want to devote this month's entry to another piece I recently read which too was restorative. This was published on Facebook and written by a former student of mine, Josiah Lau, who took a conflict resolution workshop with me at the Faculty of Law.

In his piece, his thoughts resonated with the sentiments I had expressed in my entry for December 2016 "Peacing Things Together". I considered using this month's entry to comment on his piece but it quickly became clear that there was no way I could improve upon his message. Further, not everyone would be able to access his note on Facebook to read. So, I decided to reproduce his note (with his permission) in its entirety in the hope that readers would be similarly inspired.

I give you Josiah Lau's "Of Superheroes, Mere Mortals and Saving the World"

Ever wondered why superpowers in popular media are almost always simple and somewhat "one-dimensional"?

Super strength. STRONK. LAIK RASHAN BEAR.
Super speed. Wheeeeeeeeeeeeee
Flight. Wheeeeeeeeeeeeee
Time manipulation. FF. FR. STOP. PLAY. REPLAY
Precognition. 4sightFTW.
Mind-reading/control. (*insert Yuri voiceover*) Your thoughts... are mine.
Regeneration. "Death is my bitch."
Fire manipulation. WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE
Ice manipulation. Let it go, let it go...

Ever wondered why we don't see superheroes with the following superpowers?

1. Emotional management/mastery
2. Conflict resolution
3. Analysis, problem-solving
4. Listening & empathy
5. Balance & decision-making

WAIT WHAT!? THESE POWERS ARE TOO COMPLICATED.

Who in the world would pay money to watch a movie about people peaceably resolving conflicts to the mutual satisfaction of hostile parties? (I wager the only reason people watch 12 Angry Men today is because they're MADE to, usually in school curriculum).

Everybody wants drama, action, cool CGI. ("The Incredible Hulk", for example, was a smashing movie.)

Super strength sells. Conscious exercise of intelligence, keen observation, analytical skills and critical thinking doesn't. (Unless it's Benedict Cumberbatch, apparently.) Keeping your cool and responding patiently to emotional outbursts, injustice, abuse, or unreasonable demands doesn't sell. Ice manipulation does.

Maybe we think of superpowers the way we do because such abilities are considered impossible or beyond human limits. Or perhaps, because such abilities are desired in order to solve problems in life. Super strength, super speed, time manipulation.

Think about it for a moment, then. Aren't the "perfect iterations" of emotional mastery, conflict resolution, critical thinking etc equally unattainable? None of us can claim to be complete masters of ourselves. Nobody can claim to be the perfect peacemaker. And yet, compared to adamantium-lined skeletons and amplified regeneration, these powers (that we so admire in great leaders, thinkers and influencers) are far more attainable for us mere mortals.

We would rather deify impossible/unattainable abilities than abilities attainable only through great effort.

Here's an excerpt of an interview with Emotionalmasterman:

"Oh you have a superpower? What's your superpower?"

"I'm very good at managing my emotions."

"That's not a very useful superpower, is it?"

"Well, I'm at peace within myself, I don't inflict my emotional problems upon others, people are always comfortable around me and come to me with problems which I try to help them work through."

"Isn't that very complicated and hard to do? Most can only dream of it."

"Well, it's my superpower. I was born with it. It just comes naturally to me."

"I don't suppose you could write a self-help book about it, could you?"

"I can't. You can't ask Superman to write a book teaching people how to fly, right?"

Years ago, I made a survey for fun, asking friends what superpower they thought I would choose if I was able to pick one. The most common (and expected) answers were super speed and time manipulation.

One, however, was mind-reading/telepathy, which struck me as a rather strange answer. Moreover, it came from a good friend, who provided this quote with it:

"The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen." — Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

It was only after many years and through many personal struggles that I began to understand the significance of the quote.

Today, I wish for only two superpowers.

1. Empathy

No, not just being able to put oneself in another's shoes and feel what they feel. (In any case, one can never fully do that.) I also don't want to simply read someone's mind. I do, however, want the ability to be able to sense that things aren't what they seem or what the person says they are. I want the ability to know if I should ask questions or talk, and if so, what is the most beneficial thing to ask or say at any point in time. I want the ability to be able to engage wisely yet warmly. I want to understand them and their circumstances better, that my 'empathy' may be closer to complete, closer to actually putting myself in their shoes, seeing more of what they see and feeling more of what they feel. I want to be approachable so people are comfortable with opening up to me. I want the ability to talk to people on both sides of a conflict and understand their concerns, their interests and motivations, their inner struggles and hurt, and yet not let that colour my perceptions against the other side.

2. Decision-making

I've preached the importance of context for a long time. I strongly believe there are differing actions appropriate to different circumstances. Empathy and understanding is the start but decision and action must be built on this foundation. Give me the ability to make wise decisions. Whether to intervene, and whether to do it now, or later; whether, knowing certain things, to choose action A or B; whether, feeling someone's pain, to give time to let the pain pass or to support the person in moving beyond it. To be creative about solutions and resolutions, to see past false dichotomies and closed options. To take in the full range of contextual factors and yet not be overwhelmed; to be disciplined and thorough in thinking matters through, to weigh options; to dare to decide and act even if the decision is painful and the course of action intimidating.

The superhero narrative almost invariably comes with the attempt to 'save the world'. In the vast majority of stories, heroes find that they are constrained by limitations both external and internal, no matter how extraordinary or legion their superpowers (hello Peter Petrelli). No, superheroes aren't perfect. They're just like the rest of us. They have emotions like we do, and are just as susceptible to temptations and errors of judgment (except maybe Dr. Manhattan, who nevertheless has his own problems). The narrative usually follows how the hero deals with or surmounts these challenges.

We just love superhero stories. I'm no stranger to them.

And yet, I cannot but think that among the greatest of superheroes was one Guido Orefice, whose superpower was an impregnable cheerfulness and resoluteness in a concentration camp, who hid and kept his son alive - achieving his glorious victory (posthumously) when his son ecstatically found himself face to face with a tank - his promised reward. How about five kids, all superheroes: a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, and a criminal, who awakened their superpowers together one day in detention and transcended their community-given identities?

Superheroes... they walk among us, invisible, unbeknownst to most. The young child who treks ten miles of dirt road to school every day and back. The single mom who moonlights to make ends meet, for her children's sake. The man suffering from depression who wears a funny face every day to make others laugh. The lady juggling her taxing work and taking care of her parents and yet excelling at both. The teenager who forces herself out of bed in the morning despite anxiety, menstrual cramps and harassment, because things need doing. The father who puts on a suit every morning to take his daughter to school (even though he later does all sorts of manual labour) to preserve her self-value and dignity. This list has no end.

No superhero has "saved the world". But they made (or tried to make) a difference wherever they are - nation, city, family, self - and that's all it takes.

What superpower(s) do you wield? How can you wield it/them better? How can you gain or exercise more superpowers? Forget saving 'the world'. What/whose world have you saved today?