

Three times Delilah asked the question... from where does your power come?

It's a good question, one we don't ask ourselves or each other very often...

From where does YOUR power come?

a perfectly coiffed hairdo, done up just right, a hairstyle that sets your day off right. Or maybe a particular shade of crimson lipstick, that makes you pretty certain you could take on anything that the world sees fit to throw at you? You wear it and you dare anyone to say anything cross to you or about you, because in that one swipe, you've made it clear that you won't take any of that, and your armor to take on the danger of the world is in place?

From WHERE does your power come?

Is it a well tailored suit, the fit just so, the shoulders square just so, the pocket square neatly in place that makes you feel like you could move theoretical mountains if you had to? You put on the suit just so, and you button the buttons just so, and you know that you are the master of the universe around you.. just so, and your armor to take on the danger of the world is in place?

From where does your power come? What is your armor.

And HOW does your power come?

in fits and starts, on one fell swoop and then it's done, slow but steady wins the race, a burst of energy and then a snail's pace, when the armor is gone and the day is done, how does your power come?

Why does your power come?

A hidden history, a story you can't bear to speak out loud but that drives you forward anyway, daring you to quit or give up.

A thought that pokes the back of your brain whenever you're confronted with the possibility of stepping past, and you find yourself unable to do so.

A thought. A whisper. An inclination. A creator, a redeemer, a spirit of gentleness.

A hero story that inspires.

A hero figure you admire.

From where does your power come?

We've been talking for the past few months about heroes, and I find it a somewhat auspicious time in our collective consciousness to do so. It is well known that one of the easiest ways to gauge a cultural mood over the ages is to analyze that particular age's entertainment. You can tell a lot about a specific era by looking at where the people of that era went or what they did in order to achieve some measure of escape. And with that in mind, I don't think it's a coincidence that we live in an era of superhero

movies. In a time of terror, uncertainty, regular disaster narratives taking place right in front of eyes, we hold out for a hero in the morning light. Real life may be scary and divisive, but superheroes rush in and do their thing, and the world is a safer and better place because of it.

And because this particular era happens to coincide with the information age, a time of tireless armchair research and data analysis, not to mention rampant consumerism, a shocking amount of research has gone into what exactly makes a successful superhero franchise. What formula can studio executives follow in order to make a fool proof monetary success of a film?

For awhile, the prevailing narrative has been that it all lies in the origin story. In order for an audience to be invested enough in a character that they spend their money to see the first movie and the subsequent sequels, we first have to know where that character originates from. And it makes sense: Batman is only Batman if Batman is first a traumatized little boy who has witnessed the horrific murder of his parents and thereby becomes determined to right the wrongs that led to that trauma in the first place. Superman is only Superman if he's an orphan from the planet Krypton - turned gawky teenager in Smallville. Spiderman is only Spiderman because of the spider bite, Ironman is only Ironman if he's a bored brilliant bazillionaire, Wonder Woman is only Wonder Woman if she's first the sheltered daughter of an Amazonian warrior and a god, etc. The theory was that if you knew where these heroes came from, you inevitably cared about who they then became.

But a few origin story flops later, it was back to the drawing board.

And what these data analysts have figured out now is that it's not so much the origin story that makes us care about these impossible heroes... it's the superhero training montage. The struggle. The bumps and bruises that are inevitable for anyone who is on their way to becoming something greater than they are. That's what we want to see and that's what makes a successful hero film. Without that, it's too easy. The training montage makes the impossible attainable. Relatable. Understandable, even. We may not all of us have billions of dollars of disposable wealth, but we've all struggled to get something we really wanted. We may not all have been born on the planet Krypton or raised amongst fierce Amazonian warriors, but we've all had to prove ourselves, we've all had to confront our prejudices about the world before we could even think about trying to help it. We WANT to see these heroes broken down and bleeding and temporarily powerless, because it's only by witnessing the hard stuff that we can truly begin to understand from where their power originates. Turns out that we may be initially drawn to superheroes for escape, but what we really want is to know where exactly their power truly comes from. If we know that... we may be able to find a little piece of that power ourselves and borrow it for awhile. And in a world in which powerlessness continually knocks on our door... that's some strong currency to borrow, even if it's just for a little while. We can be heroes, even if it is just for one day.

And as we finish up our summer of heroes and songs, it occurs to me that the Biblical storytellers may have known something about the training montage phenomenon. Jonah, far from perfect, found his way via the belly of a giant fish. Ballaam, far from perfect, required a few not-so-gentle

nudges from a terrified donkey. Shadrach Meshach and Abednego walked straight into a fire furnace. Esther had to face her fears and imagine herself to be more than she could have ever dreamed of.

And Samson... Samson and his superhero strength... a gritty hero, far from perfect who accomplished the impossible, was first brought down by a wily woman who broke his throne and cut his hair, and from his lips she drew the hallelujah ....

Heroes. People who sometimes - and perhaps often - didn't get it right the first time. or the second. or the third. Flawed folks with weaknesses for wily women, folks who initially bought fully into the idea that a life of ease is achievable by self service alone, who initially thought their earthly armor had to be enough to get them through. Bright shiny examples of the general moral ambiguity of human existence, these people who God just couldn't seem to give up on. Human made hero through dire circumstance and unwavering belief in something greater than themselves.

From where did their power come?

As we've been living and walking with our superheroes and our Biblical heroes, this week we've been confronted with the opportunities to see heroes in action every time we turn on the TV or open an internet browser. Neighbors helping neighbors, strangers helping strangers. It seems we humans are usually at our best when tragedy strikes. And while that is incredibly annoying and it would be great if we could access that all the time, right now, at this juncture in which we reside as a nation, we need all

the heroes we can get, fictional or real.

Many times this week, I've seen Facebook images of humans of all backgrounds and races and hues being heroes, helping each other or carrying each other through the aftermath of destruction, with a caption that reads something along the lines of, "see, we are not a divided nation, this picture proves that we are not a divided nation," and I agree to a point. But my caption would read, "we are totally a divided nation, but this picture proves that at our core, when push comes to shove, we just can't quite make ourselves believe in the division." When hope is lost and the chips are down and powerlessness threatens from all sides, ordinary people become heroes simply by being incapable of walking away. Regular people can do amazing things when simply confronted with mutual, messy humanity.

From where does our power originate?

I can't answer that for anyone else. But I suspect it's in our training montages. It has very little to do with hair or lipstick or a suit or anything else quite so material. That can help, but that's just the armor. No, I think our power might actually come from times when our power seems absent at first. Which sounds weird.

But I think sometimes... maybe often... it's only when we face powerlessness that we are actually able to fully realize our own power and in that moment, see God. Powerlessness simply makes it impossible to ignore the connection that we feel with one another, a connection that

transcends race or religion, creed or allegiance. The most primal of human instincts is recognition of mutual humanity. Mutual existence. We get bombarded by messages of right vs. wrong, left vs. right, us vs. them, but when all that armor of prescribed identity is stripped away, we come to realize that there is no them after all, there's actually only us. As the great Desmond Tutu famously said, My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together. We can only be human together. Connection runs deeper than division, God is glimpsed through connection. It's why we were created. It's this that those heroes in the bible clung to when the chips were down: that they were precisely whom God created them to be, and that that was heroic.

We may spend an awful lot of time searching for superheroes to save us, relying on larger-than-life characters to pull us out of our reality, even if only for a moment... but then again I can't help but wonder.... what if God created us to be the heroes we've been looking for all along.

From where does your power come?