

“Heroes of Imperfection”

Delivered at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday, November 11th, 2007

In September of 2006, 14.3 million Americans tuned their TV’s to what then became one of the highest rated debuts of any television show in history, and many of them came back with one phrase stuck in their minds: “Save the Cheerleader, save the world.”¹

Now, for anyone who doesn’t recognize this phrase, it is from the new television drama, *Heroes*. *Heroes* is a weekly program about a group of “ordinary people who discover they possess extraordinary abilities.”² Various blogs, fan sites, and watching groups around America are devoted to this show with the tagline “It’s time to save the world.”³

Now, to put 14.3 million people in context, that means that roughly 1 out of every 9 people who voted in the last presidential election follow this program.

So what is behind this program that has people so interested? I wonder if it would be possible to stand here in this church today and present a message that seems so simple and yet compelling: “It’s time to save the world.”

When this came onto my radar, I began paying attention to what else in popular culture involved this idea. Everywhere I looked, at least in television, I was confronted with this notion of changing the world through having extraordinary abilities: the Bionic Woman is back on TV,

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heroes_(TV_series))

² <http://www.nbc.com/Heroes/about/>

³ *Ibid.*

one hit show portrays a man traveling through time, and yet another is a reality show about magic in which real people display their powers.

There is something about this idea of superpowers that seems to enamor us here in our religious communities as well, though. So many of us come to places like this looking for change - in ourselves and in the world. It doesn't take long in front of a computer or newspaper to be bogged down by the injustice and suffering on our planet, and many of us would like to be able to wave a magic wand over the world and solve all of its ills.

One problem, though, is that, for a lot of us, our own roles in this larger drama don't always seem so capable of transforming the world. The characters of "Sermon-Writing Guy," "The Invisible Multitasker," or "Student Loan Woman" don't appear as engaging as those whom we see on TV.

So I'm not surprised that so many shows are focused on people with amazing powers. The idea of becoming something greater than ourselves so that we may do good in the world seems to follow us around wherever we go. I don't know about you, but I would definitely like to be extraordinary. I would love to save the world.

The writer John Hodgeman has some of his own thoughts on superheroes. Some years back, when he was at parties, he began asking the people around him one question and then recording their answers: "Flight, vs. invisibility?"

Hodgeman says this about their response: "typically this is how it goes – people who turn invisible sneak into the movies or onto airplanes. People who fly stop taking the bus. Here's one thing that pretty much no one ever says – 'I would use my power to fight crime.'"

When asked about this, most of the people he interviews explain that having their super power would not be enough to work toward the common good. Flight without strength means that you are still weak when you arrive at your destination. An invisible woman saving a baby from a fire still gets burned.

“You need a whole package,” one man tells him. “There’s not much you can do with any one thing.”⁴⁵

So what? What do these characters on television shows and people on radio interviews have to do with us? Even in these people’s fantasies, they still imagine themselves as unable to do good because they are still not perfect. Often, I have to admit that I feel the same way: What can I do like I am right now? I tell myself that there are people out there who are stronger, smarter, more powerful, and more determined than I will ever be, and so too often, I do nothing at all. Anyone else?

In our tradition of Unitarian Universalism, we have inherited a somewhat mixed message about what it means to be the best human being possible. Our denomination asserts that each and every one of us is welcome here just as we are. Yet this living tradition challenges us to continue growing spiritually and beyond. Our first principle states that we affirm and promote the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

This focus on the value of every individual began to take formal hold in our denomination hundreds of years ago when our Unitarian ancestors distanced themselves from the Calvinism of their day. At the time, it was broadly thought in American religious circles that because humanity was so sinful, so depraved, we deserved the punishment of Hell simply for being

⁴ Quotations from this radio program come from John Hodgeman, Segment from “Superheroes,” *This American Life*, National Public Radio, March 17 2003.

⁵ The idea for this sermon came about as an adaptation of a speech originally intended (but not delivered) for the Harvard Divinity School graduation address of 2007. The first two pages of this sermon come almost directly from the initial draft of that address.

born. Many Unitarian and Universalist thinkers of the time began to use their reason and conscious as a means of deciding for themselves that humanity was not depraved. As time went on, our religious forbearers took part in what was a growing optimism among religious liberals in the 19th century about the human condition.

Transcendentalists like Luisa May Alcott, Henry David Thorough, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, began to write and speak about the holy being present in all things and people.

At around the same time, the abolitionist Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁶ If this is all we ever read of Parker, we might think that his confidence in the future of justice would lead him to take a hands-off stance in the world. But this would be far from true.

While Parker believed that justice would eventually come in this world, he had no misunderstandings about the reality of humans’ capacity for evil or the necessity of his joining in the struggle for equality. While hiding freed slaves in his church, Parker preached with a gun behind his pulpit in case he would have to defend them. Now, you shouldn’t worry, this isn’t a common practice for ministers now. But I can’t hide from the question, what in our world would make us take a similar risk in our religious community?

One of the greatest things about this faith, one of the driving forces that has led me to devote my life’s vocation to working for this church and its vision of justice, is that we will not give up on the power and goodness of humanity.

However, one of the largest critiques about our community and those of other religious liberals is that in our optimism about what is possible in this

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker

world, we either ignore or spend little time facing up to the fact that in creation (and in ourselves) there is also so much potential for violence and destruction.

I know that this critique definitely includes me. I left a church years ago that spent most of its time talking about sin and how undeserving I was as a human being. I surely didn't join another religious community to hear how badly I am doing as a person or join the ministry to tell others that for themselves.

But I made the mistake in my own life of believing that if I simply stopped talking about my failings, they would go away – if I just stopped using that word “sin,” there would be no more of it. Well, I might have left some old language at the door this morning, but I brought my whole self with me anyway.

Often, I think I have misunderstood what our tradition has been about. I spend so much time wanting to promote what is good and sacred about humanity, that I often have a hard time being honest in my religious life about my failings, what others might call “sin,” or even just my weaknesses. Deep inside me somewhere, I mistook the notion that I have inherent worth to mean somehow that I could become perfect, and I've spent many hours critiquing myself for not hitting that mark. I wonder if I am the only person here that has been mad at themselves lately for not being perfect?

What is it though that makes it so hard for us to live with our imperfect selves? Many times, for me, it is the fear that I will be the only one. When I first entered graduate school, I spent the first few months believing that I had been accepted by mistake. I was worried to death that someone would eventually figure out that I had no idea what I was doing

When I got the courage to ask my friends, it turned out that almost everyone else I knew was experiencing something similar, sitting scared in

silence afraid to admit that we didn't know everything already. When we found out that we weren't the only non-geniuses in the room, it was like a fog lifted. We actually began to ask questions and learn. It was not through denying my faults, but in expressing them that I was transformed.

This is just one example, though, and a pretty minor one at that. How many people with us here in this room today have a similar story? How many people here probably worry day to day that if they slip up one bit, things are going to fall apart. Many people within our religious community and out in the world are bearing an enormous weight, the weight of appearing perfect.

Some here carry almost all the responsibility for a family or an ageing parent and worry they will fail those they love if they don't perform at 100 percent. Many here are in new jobs, in school, or still looking for work and feel the pressure to look flawless in the face of competition to that they can make a living. We think in terms of evolution and progress, yet many (including myself) repeatedly do not feel brighter, more caring, or stronger than the day before.

My spiritual friends, we now carry the gift and the responsibility of a free religious community, one that acknowledges that if we want to be a major voice in the religious landscape, if we want to be a driving force for change in this country and in the world, we must face with courage what is wonderful and frightening in ourselves. It is with these hands, with these selves that we will change the world, and no others.

We can be imperfect and divine, all at the same time.

We have joined together, not just in any community, but in religious community to shape the world in which we want to live. While many of us do not believe we must be "saved" in the sense that others use that term, it does not mean there is not saving to do in this world. People in this

community and others have been saved from loneliness and despair, saved from lives in which they felt worthless or uncared for. There is saving to do. No one in this church will ask you to be perfect, but you will be asked to serve humanity, just as you are.

In his message to new ministers at our General Assembly in 2005, the Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neil made reference to the fact that churches can become retreats from the world if we're not careful. He noted that while Thorough did retreat to the beautiful woods of Walden Pond, he came out again to fight for justice. Here is part of what O'Neil said:

“For, Brothers and Sisters, I come to announce to you some rather alarming news tonight: In case you haven't yet noticed, Walden is burning! The woods, our beloved woods, are on fire! Our Eden, our idyllic retreat, our sylvan sanctuary from the mundane cares of the world, Eden is ablaze tonight! ... Remember, and never let anyone forget ... your churches' role and function is never merely to serve as just another perennially underfunded non-profit agency in town. The Church's reason for being is to make real the Beloved Community on earth, nothing less.”⁷

Well, it's a good thing that we have a shared ministry in our churches!

This call, however, has been echoing for centuries, we must simply choose to hear it. During my time at Harvard Divinity School, students led weekly UU worship services, and once a month they were led in Emerson chapel, where Ralph Waldo Emerson gave his famous “Divinity School Address.” Each of us had the chance to preach from the same pulpit in which Emerson addressed graduates of the school hundreds of years ago. And to remind us of how weighty the task of a religious community is, a large plaque hung on the wall directly in front of the preacher with a quote from Emerson's speech that day. This quote stared you right in the face as you

⁷ Rev. Dr. Patrick Oneil, “Out From Walden,” 2005 - http://archive.uua.org/ga/ga05/2124_sermon.html

led worship: "...cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."⁸

Aside from its somewhat outdated language, Emerson's vision calls to us just like that of Rev. O'Neil. As a religious community, we are called to do nothing less than to acquaint the people of this world first-hand with the stunning and transforming power of love and justice. A sanctuary, a place to be comfortable, is nice at times, but we will be only that if we settle for anything less than changing our society in radical ways. I guess "It's time to save the world" doesn't seem so silly after all. Each of us is worthy of love, even while we continue to be flawed. Sometimes, we are so afraid of letting this show that we say nothing at all. In our work we will continue to be imperfect, and no one a superhuman. Yet we remain powerful and extraordinary nonetheless, and together we already have within us the ability to transform the world.

What better time than now?

Amen.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in David M. Robinson ed. *The Spiritual Emerson*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 79.