

Find Your Superman



By Nancy Sharp

In November I saw Davis Guggenheim's powerful documentary, *Waiting for "Superman."* Have you seen it? It's about the failures of the public school system and how we as a society fail to reward outstanding teachers. Yes, the film has a point of view: that charter schools offer a superior education. I don't necessarily agree with this premise, but I do believe that every child has the right not to attend a failing school.

But this isn't a column about what is and isn't working in education. It's about Superman. The film gets its name from a story told by Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, a family advocacy group. Canada reflects on his chaotic childhood in the South Bronx and his fantasy of wanting Superman to rescue him and his friends from the gangs, violence and drugs that marred their world. Canada remembers feeling crushed when his mother told him that Superman was a fictitious character. Over time, however, he came to learn that instead of looking to others to save him, he would have to trust in his own abilities to move beyond despair, disappointment and shattered dreams. He would have to touch down on the greatness buried within him and visualize his own success. Which he did. And now he tries to pass that philosophy along to other children growing up in poverty.

Canada discovered his own Superman. So can you. If it helps, you can look to the sky and conjure Christopher Reeve flying overhead in his red cape or Lynda Carter twirling her way to Wonder Woman. You can imagine any superhero you please: Batman, Captain America, the Bionic Woman or Lara Croft. How do these characters make you feel? Mighty? Vibrant? Sexy? Alive? Invincible? Morally strong? Unafraid? Silly? The hero myth has existed for ages, even though we all know superheroes aren't real. And yet there is something fundamentally human about how superheroes evoke our deepest fantasies.

Think about it: It's far easier to look beyond ourselves than within. It's easier to blame our circumstances, fault our birthrights, bemoan our fate. To feel singled out and not singular. I've done this more times than I care to admit, but not so much in recent years. I learned even before my first husband, Brett, got cancer that, on some level, my own happiness was not tethered to any one person or place or event. That ultimately I would have to rely on myself - while occasionally leaning on others - to perpetuate a mindset of happiness. Over and over this wisdom has been reinforced, never more so than after Brett's death, because then I really was alone, left with the choice of either giving up (never a plausible option) or going forward.

No Superman person or ideology could bring Brett back, no Superman could make the hurt stop, and no Superman could force me to face my financial fears, something Brett had always tended to, which embarrasses me now, even though he loved managing money and I trusted him to take care of such matters. I had ten thousand things to learn, or so it felt, after he died, most of which scared me to the bone, like single parenting. I wasn't always brave, graceful or confident, yet by the time I decided to move to Denver in 2006, two and a half years after Brett died, I felt sturdier and more capable of being on my own. I had already proved to myself that I could endure something horrible but still want a good life, still want to give my children the best shot at happiness. Without even realizing it, I suppose I had found my own Superman.

I want to be very clear about what I'm advocating. First, the obvious: Superman isn't a person or a gender or a religion or a myth or an exotic destination that draws you like the red-footed booby to the Galapagos Islands. Superman is not about overachieving, seeking perfection or excellence or tapping yourself dry, trying to juggle 10 things at the same time without dropping one of them. Rather, Superman is the inalienable spirit that exists within each of us. It's the gentlest, truest part of what makes us individuals. When we come to know it, to understand its power, to stroke that unquestionable beauty and strength and goodness, those feelings multiply.

Some of you might have read the feature "Akewak's Blessing" in the last issue of ColoradoView and how an American-born doctor, Rick Hodes, is saving the lives of hundreds of Ethiopian children, adopting many of them to be sure they receive proper medical care. Hodes is an excellent living example of what happens when you allow Superman to soar. When you look at the choices he's made, you see clearly how acting with humanity becomes infectious.

Hodes' work is extraordinary, but so many people embody heroism every day. Some are famous, most are not. Further, what's heroic to one person could feel downright uncomfortable to another. Maybe your style is more private, more insular. Maybe you've always wanted to learn Spanish and finally commit to dusting off that Rosetta Stone software you purchased a year ago. Maybe you have the opportunity to mentor a child or bring a meal to a friend in need. Maybe you've always wanted to hike a 14'er, just to say you could, and you did. Finding Superman - the process, the discovery, the output - is an individual quest.

We've just begun a new year, an opportune time to be conscious of the tiny moments when you might summon your own Superman. Not everything will operate according to plan this year, and that's a certainty. It helps, though, to

have buffers, to rely on a Superman stockpile when life temporarily taxes you, which at some point it will, because that's just life.

I'm in the midst of working toward my Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction writing. At 44, with a (still) new husband and four children between us, regular writing, speechwriting, Steve's campaign for Denver City Council and the daily business of life, school has been an ambitious undertaking. But if not now, when? This is what I realized. That now really is the time to write my memoir. That I needed the structure and mentorship and expertise of a graduate program to help me touch down on this dream. *If not now, when?*

Go ahead. Be the architect of your own life in 2011.

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