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TJ WARREN

Superheroes and Origin Stories: Tools to Discover and Claim One's Callings

Clark Kent: "How can I decide what to do with my life when I don't even know who I am? I feel like I'm walking in a dream, and nothing's real, not even me."

Jonathan Clark: "Then maybe the answer is to wake up. There will come a day Clark, when for the very first time, you won't have to hold back...a day when you can cut loose...a day when you can finally be who you truly are... you're unique in all the world. Extraordinary. Not just *any* man...and more than just a man...a *SUPER*-man. Live Clark. Follow your passion. Show the whole world what you can do. Fly, Clark... Fly..."

From *Superman: Earth One*, by J. Michael Straczynski and Shane Davis



Origin stories—the stories of heroes coming to be—are fascinating. This is why we tend to get caught up in them. I can't tell you the number of times I have read or seen the origin of Superman. I never get sick of it, and apparently, neither do others, as the story gets told over and over again. Origin stories define characters: where they came from, who they were, what they've faced, and how they have discovered themselves, their strengths, and their calling. We know many characters within literature and film, but until we know their origin, we do not know their purpose in the world. I am convinced that discovering one's origin and referring to the stories of our fictional heroes can be powerful tools in helping individuals discover and claim their callings.

Joseph Campbell identified a "monomyth"—a single story—that can be observed within many forms of literature and film. As writers and filmmakers continued studying the pattern, they later referred to it as "The Hero's Journey." Although the pattern has been debated and modified throughout the years, many agree that it consists of 12 stages: the ordinary world; the call to adventure; refusal of the call; meeting with the mentor; crossing the threshold; tests, allies, and enemies; approach; the ordeal; the reward; the road back; the resurrection; and the return with the elixir. These stages can serve as a catalyst for helping individuals understand their own origins.

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For example, in my own journey (where I'm the hero—which is fantastic, I must say), identifying *my ordinary world* consisted of being a young Iowa boy who believed he was meant to impact the world in some way, but was also unsure of who he was and how he could contribute. Then, my freshman year of high school, I attended a youth leadership conference called Get a Grip where I *met my mentor*. By experiencing this leadership organization, I discovered that my way of impacting the world was by encouraging people, making them laugh, and helping them realize their true potential. After a few years of being mentored and continuing to discover myself, I *crossed the threshold* by attending college.

This is just one way we can take a look at our own origin stories. By walking through “The Hero’s Journey” stages, we can start to pinpoint significant moments in our lives that have shaped us and that demonstrate what we are good at. This method of reflection can lead to other questions, such as: “Does your origin story *decide* your vocation?” For example, does coming from a family of medical professionals mean you cannot pursue an art degree? The concept itself can at least start the discussion on a level that people understand and relate to.

As I have worked in higher education, I’ve noticed that we tend to make things incredibly complex as we work with students. Although college is a time for rigorous exploration and discovery, we need to find opportunities to meet students at their level and relate what we are trying to teach with their experiences and interests. Once we have their attention, the rigorous exploration and discovery can commence.

When an individual walks into my office, his or her attention is immediately drawn to my Superman and

other hero collectibles displayed there. These items generate discussion. Students, faculty, and staff ask, “Why Superman?” My response is always, “Because he humbly seeks to do good in the world using the many talents that he possesses.” And to the general question of, “Why superheroes?”, I say, “Because I believe we are all superheroes in our own way. The hero’s journey lives within all of us.”

Heroes—however we define them—speak to all of us. Whether they are fictional (Superman, Wonder Woman, Harry Potter) or real (Rosa Parks, Ghandi, Mother Theresa), they speak. Why do they speak to all of us? We can relate to their failures, hardships, and struggles. We can also relate to their successes, the moments at which they overcame adversity or some villainous foe. Heroes inspire us to do and be something more—to pursue our calling. We must find ways to help others become the hero in their own lives.

As higher education professionals, we have an opportunity to mentor students along their own journeys—as Professor Charles Xavier does with the X-Men. We get to challenge, support, and encourage students to focus on their strengths and manage their weaknesses so that when their true purpose does call, they can, as Jonathan Kent says, “fly.”

As you work with students, find stories of heroes that speak to you—superheroes, friends, family members, politicians, social justice leaders, and so forth. Use these role models, mentors, and leaders to help others realize who they are and how they can contribute to society. As you provide these examples, help others articulate their origin stories so they might find their purpose in the world and “wake up” to take their call.

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