

## **Superheroes in the Playroom**

*By Lawrence Rubin*

### **Then and Now**

Like scores of children, both past and present, I spent countless hours following the exploits of a legion of colorful superheroes. Each had powers and abilities far beyond those of anyone I knew. Many nights, while concealed beneath my blankets, flashlight in one hand and comic book in the other, I wondered silently and deeply. What would it be like to have x-ray vision, to retreat to a secret cave in my own basement, to ensnare villains in a powerful web of my own making-to fly? And if somehow I did manage to obtain such powers, how ever would I conceal them from parents, teachers and friends while confronting the daily rigors of childhood-all in a single bound?

Though I was to travel the long and treacherous road to adulthood, science fiction, fantasy and outer space, with all of its strange inhabitants, was always a friendly rest stop for me. I journeyed with James Kirk and the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise, eagerly anticipated each installment of the Star Wars saga, and ravenously consumed every new superhero television show and movie. Over the years, I moved away from comic books and into the realm of more serious scholarly and academic writings. I obtained my degrees, began my professional career, and finally found my way back to childhood, first through my clinical work with children and their families, and later as a father to two wonderful children, Zachary and Rebecca.

About a year ago, construction began on a unique building not far from my home. Its odd shape hinted of something different, and as I drove past it on my way to work, I played a guessing game with myself...what would it be? In 2006, Zaldiva opened its doors and with them, a portal linking my past and present. It was a comic emporium! Since that time, mine has been perhaps one of Zaldiva's strangest wish lists, and I would imagine that to be quite a distinction in a place where fantasy and science fiction abound. I have explained to the proprietors that I am a psychologist and play therapist, and am interested in comic book characters and stories that I can bring into my clinical work. I implored them to find me comics that showcase bullying, gender confusion, depression, sibling rivalry, parental abuse, neglect and abandonment, domestic violence, racism, sexism, HIV and AIDS and adolescent angst. I imagine that behind closed doors, the folks at Zaldiva say things like "Boy, that is one weird shrink" and "He sure knows how to have a good time." While they may indeed be correct on both counts, I do so look forward to visiting Zaldiva both on my own with my kids. These days, Rebecca likes She-Hulk and Zachary fancies Machine Teen.

### **Superheroes in the Playroom**

Of the various theories, tools and techniques available to the therapist, one of the most powerful resources for self-understanding, growth and healing may well be fantasy. It is the metaphoric place where problems of the past and present meet the possibilities of the future, in conflicts both minor and epic. It is the place in which children and adults escape from, but also make sense of their worlds by creating and then living their stories...their own personal mythologies. As is often the case with the world around them, this inner place is typically populated by villains who hurt and heroes who help. Most special among the latter is the superhero; the unique, larger-than-life figure, who by virtue of gift, accident, calling or legacy possesses powers and abilities far beyond those of mortals. With the advent of mass media and technology in the purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he seeks nothing for early twentieth century, superheroes have become a mainstay in popular and American culture. Given their endurance, ubiquity, popularity and appeal, it is not surprising that superheroes have found their way into the fantasies and metaphoric stories of children, adolescents and adults, and as we shall see, the therapist's office.

In order to appreciate the many ways in which superheroes can be therapeutic resources, it is important to sufficiently define the concept of the modern 'superhero'. While several authors have provided important defining features (Fingerhuth, 2002; Reynolds, 1992; Simpson, et al, 2004), it is Lawrence and Jewett's integrated conceptualization based on the notion that the genre is the modern-day variant of classical mythology, that is most helpful. According to them:

The [American] monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task and extraordinary powers. He originates outside of the community he is called to save, and in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. His identity is secret, either by virtue of his unknown origins or his alter ego: his motivation is a selfless zeal for justice. By elaborate conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is himself and withstands all temptations. He renounces sexual fulfillment for the duration for the mission, and the purity of his motivation ensures his moral infallibility in judging persons and situations. When he is threatened by violent adversaries, he finds answers in vigilantism, restoring justice and thus lifting the siege of paradise.

In order to accomplish this mission without incurring blame or causing undue injury to others, he requires superhuman powers. The superhero's aim is unerring, his fists irresistible, and his body incapable of suffering fatal injury (2002, p. 47).

Lawrence and Jewett's conceptualization of the superhero monomyth gives us a very helpful starting point for bringing superheroes into the playroom. Key aspects of their motif include the origin story, the dual identity, super powers and fatal flaws, the ongoing conflict between the forces of good and those of evil, transformative journeys, costumes and emblems, the sidekick and the family constellation.

### **Test Your SIQ (Superhero IQ)**

In order to fully detail the many ways that superheroes can aid us in our therapeutic journeys with children, teens and adults, and to address the application of Lawrence and Jewett's ideas in the playroom, would take a book (Rubin, 2006), or at very least a two-day workshop. And as I will just happen to be in the neighborhood around the same time as your state conference in April, we can put our heads together at that time. Until that time, and to get you in the groove, I will ask you to take the following SIQST (Superhero IQ Screening Test).

Questions 1-5 (matching):

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1. Batman        | a. superhero with an alcohol problem            |
| 2. Ironman       | b. superhero sidekick with HIV                  |
| 3. Speedy        | c. superhero high school students               |
| 4. Northstar     | d. superhero who lost parents to violent murder |
| 5. The Intimates | e. the first gay superhero                      |

Questions 6-10 (multiple choice):

This famous psychologist led the 1950's Congressional Hearings in support of superheroes.

Fredrick Wertham  
Thomas Szasz  
Albert Ellis  
Lauretta Bender

This superhero 'family' acquired its powers following exposure to cosmic radiation.

The Incredibles  
The Justice League of America  
The Fantastic Four  
The Inferior Five

This villain reflects the potential shadowy opposite within all of us

The Joker  
Bubbles  
Darth Vader  
Deadpool  
A and C

This popular movie follows the exploits of teens coming into their super powers

Elektra  
Sky High  
Transformers  
X-Men  
B and D

This superhero appeared on the inaugural cover of Ms. Magazine

The Scarlet Witch

Arana  
Wonder Woman  
She-Hulk

You may email your responses to me at [lrubin@stu.edu](mailto:lrubin@stu.edu). See you in April and don't forget to BYOS (bring your own Spandex).

## References

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