

Confessions of a Superhero Junkie

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Editor's Note: As with all human interactions, teaching is an interpersonal skill with great emotional subtext. Creative insights that highlight our motivations for teaching should be shared. When well-expressed, memorable teaching moments can inspire the larger audience of readers. Similarly, described from the learner point of view, interactions that led to a light-bulb "flash" of awareness between teacher and learner may positively affect our next teaching encounter. In the new category of "On Teaching," JGME invites personal essays about teaching or learning that are entertaining, enlightening, or thought-provoking and of interest to other teachers of graduate physicians—the readership of JGME. Please contact jgme@acgme.org for questions. — Gail Sullivan, MD, MPH, Editor-in-Chief

I am a superhero junkie. When I was a kid, I sat in front of the "boob tube" for hours watching the Green Hornet, Eight Man, Gigantor the Space Age Robot, and even Wonder Dog. At first, I was limited to cartoons and cereal, but the 1970s zeitgeist of the TV dinner extended my viewing hours. In zombie bliss, I lapped up every bit of Salisbury steak and moved from 1 tin triangle to the next, without ever taking my eyes off the screen. When I did rouse from my TV trance, it was only to consider such questions as "What is Salisbury steak?" and "Why does Batman hang out with the blundering Boy Wonder?" Even these fleeting thoughts were few and far between. "Crunch!!" "Bam!!!" "Kerplop!" Batman's blue-fisted glove was indomitable. I was riding the hero train, and it was cool.

By the time that Xena, the bodacious warrior princess, hit the screen, I had made a profound leap in my understanding of superheroes. Being a superhero wasn't all about power. In fact, superheroes were as human as the rest of us and, consequently, vulnerable. Xena's triple cow-tow twist with brandished sword, although a stupendous feat of athleticism, couldn't protect her from the ache of her unspoken passion for Gabrielle, and Batman's mask did not shield him from grief over his murdered parents. Even the man of steel could be brought to his knees. Don't get me wrong. The realization that superheroes were human didn't detract from their greatness. After all, to save the world from suffering is impressive, but to save the world from suffering while shouldering one's own considerable burdens is remarkable. In fact, these sacrifices—the constant struggle of balancing work and family, the burden of overwhelming decisions, the exhaustion of perpetual alertness, the ball and chain of always being on call—are the essence of superheroes.

About now, you're wondering whether I've developed beyond my childhood obsessions. I rarely watch the boob tube anymore, and when I do, I stick to the Home and Garden channel. I've given up TV dinners altogether. In fact, the thought of a fork grazing aluminum gives me the willies. But I have to be honest, I haven't completely dispensed with my fixation. You see, I teach residents, and they are my superheroes. Whether macho or manicured, green or blue, all true superheroes display a willingness to care for the unlovable, to feel deeply about the fate of humanity, and to give when wrung dry; I see these qualities in my residents all the time.

Like superheroes, residents rescue victims of train wrecks and start hearts that stop beating. They often prioritize the care of others above personal gratification. Like Superman, they have x-ray vision and, like Batman, they have fancy, life-saving gizmos on their tool belts. Residents are often on call, so even their free time is not solely their own. As a result, they suffer the pain of lost time with families. They suffer lost Lois Lanes. And, like Superman, residents display a willingness to make critical decisions under time pressures. They do this with full knowledge that a missed diagnosis, like Kryptonite, can bring them to their knees.

Training young heroes is an exciting, but delicate, task because, ironically, superheroes are easily broken in the making. Batman's Alfred understood the paradox of superhero strength and vulnerability. Alfred saw the individual behind the mask; medical faculty must do the same. Alfred was not your typical lugubrious butler just doing his duty. He was a trustworthy, insightful friend who understood the mental machinations of the Caped Crusader. He understood Batman's dreams and values, as well as his fears and foibles. Alfred never abused that knowledge. Batman's vulnerabilities were safe in Alfred's wise and steady hands. A teacher is also more than a conduit of knowledge.

From the superhero point of view, a teacher must model fidelity to the vision. Residents need a coach to show them how to fly above bureaucratic rubble and resist the gravitational pull of indifference and cynicism. They need to see that idealism can persist beyond the early years of training. There are those who will say that idealism must

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DOI: 10.4300/JGME-D-10-00197.1

eventually give way to pragmatism, yet remarkable deeds rarely result from average efforts. In truth, the tasks facing healers are often far more complex than freeing a citizen from a vat of bubbling green goo; residents must keep faith in their ability to find solutions, even in the direst of circumstances, even after failure. Let's face it: Falling is a natural consequence of flight. When Batman came crashing to the ground, Alfred was ready with the Batmobile and a coat brush. Alfred's unwavering vision gave Batman the confidence to try again. Like Alfred, we must be ready to mend our resident's bruised and limping idealism. If we fail in this, he or she may refuse to fly again.

Comparing residents to superheroes is not to ignore burnout. Although burnout can result from failing to recognize when a goal is beyond one's control, burnout

can also result from giving up prematurely or failing to strive for a goal in the first place. Although residents need to set goals that are achievable, they should be goals that stretch them and stretch the communities within their sphere of influence.

The next time you're walking a hospital corridor and you hear a crisp snap followed by a warm gush of air, think twice. It may not be the lunch special playing tricks with your digestive tract. It may be a *resident*, hard at work. She could be on her way to the medical library to rule out a rare disease in one of her patients. He could be rushing to the ICU to begin an overnight call. I know how I react when I see those billowing white coats. In the trail of their flapping tails, I whisper, "Thank you, Caped Crusaders. Thank you."