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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Our greatest superpower is forgiveness

MY sons have spent the last week of their summer holidays dressing up as superheroes. Having recently watched the film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, they are giving us the full treatment at home. In fact, only a moment ago, I very nearly tripped over Superman's silk cape.

'I want to be a superhero when I grow up,' says our youngest. It is difficult to dash his hopes, especially when you see how convincing he is at leaping through the air. However, it is a parent's sad duty to do just that.

This does not mean that we tell our children they can't be superheroes, but only that being Batman's heir is out of the question. But beyond the special powers, the gimmicks and gadgets, what other kind of superhero can you possibly be? Surely you must be able to fly, save the planet from oblivion and rescue all those in mortal danger?

Our world has always been obsessed with superheroes. Classical Greek literature is full of them, as are the great mythic writings of authors such as JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis. It seems that human beings invariably look to other worlds to seek redemption from their own.

Today, we live in a secular society that is no less religious than that which it replaced. The difference is that our gods and idols are born of the imagination.

We project our longings on to characters like Superman, someone whose moral and physical courage inspires a new hope.

In telling my children that there is no such person as Batman, they do not dwell on the disappointment. Within minutes, they are back in costume soaring through the sky. The honoured place of the superhero in popular culture suggests, however, that we still need gods who will protect and care for all creation.

The truth is, of course, that it is not necessary to fly or have superhuman strength to be Godlike.

'What do you mean by that, Dad? Can't we at least have costumes?'

It seems that you can forget about the magic powers so long as you can parade around in a Lycra suit.

A 3rd-Century theologian wrote: 'We do not pray to get benefits from God but to become like God.'

Becoming Godlike is not something that requires special powers. It is within the capacity of each and every person.

Does this mean that we, too, can perform miracles? In a way it does mean this, because we all possess the power of healing. We can all heal broken lives, even those shattered beyond hope.

I don't mean only the heroic sacri-

fices of those who care for the sick, the elderly, the war-weary and the homeless. I mean the way in which we can alter the very course of time itself. In a second, we can lift the burdens of the past as if they never existed.

It is neither sexy nor exciting to claim that we are most like God when we forgive. And yet, can there be a greater experience of healing this side of eternity? Through forgiveness, the structure of time is altered so that future is relieved of the past.

True forgiveness is not just an act of mercy. It is the very act of wiping the slate clean. It is a gift of time, an act of love whereby the past is totally purified of everything you would rather forget.

The most miraculous healings happen when people, weighed down by their past, are given such a gift.

A person can be fully transformed when they are freed from history and liberated from their demons. And all it takes are three life-altering words: 'I forgive you.'

To forgive is truly heroic. It takes courage and great power to let go of deep hurt, to wipe away wounds that you believe are beyond healing. That miracle of healing is, however, something we can all perform.

NOBODY can live to the full so long as they are burdened by baggage. The miracle happens when someone says: 'It never happened.' It is then that the past is transfigured through an act that cancels all debts.

This does not demand superhuman strength or a colourful outfit. All it demands are those Godlike virtues of love, compassion and kindness. It is strength that comes wrapped in humility. Valour that comes clothed in vulnerability.

To forgive is to defy the logic of give-and-take, of cause and effect, of action and reaction. It is a giving away that expects nothing in return. And that is why it is so difficult, for when we humans give we naturally expect to get something back.

The wonder of it is that we can rise higher than our nature.

We can fly to barely imaginable heights. We can move mountains of emotional and psychological baggage with a simple healing word.

The great irony is that my sons' superheroes go to incredible lengths to do things that we can do with far less effort. You don't need alien powers or an affinity with bats to heal and help, to restore and console. You don't need to turn back time in order to cancel the past. All you need is a loving heart and a willingness to let go.

The other night, as I put my own little 'Superman' to bed, I apologised for something I said earlier in the day. 'It's all right, Dad, I forgive you,' he replied. Little did he know that his dream had just become a reality.

mark.dooley@daily@mail.ie