

What Makes Superman Interesting



Send him mail.



"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Fans of the Superman mythology know how hard it is to keep a character who can't be hurt interesting. There's no space for any real conflict, unless the writer goes to great lengths to introduce it in a usually over-the-top manner. In the recent *Man of Steel*, director Zack Snyder did an exceptional job (in my opinion, at least) of reinventing a tired and cliché hero into something spectacular and new. He did this by making Superman's central conflict a psychological burden, not a physical one. To me, this movie was more about the universal struggle of embracing destiny than it was super-powered fights.

Clark Kent is a man blessed and burdened with incomprehensible gifts. The greatest difficulty he faces is not learning to use these gifts; it's not even the pressure and fear of keeping his nature a secret from the world. Superman's moment of greatest glory comes when he embraces being a powerful and important figure in the world. When dire circumstances demand it, he steps up and learns to take purposeful action on a scale so much larger than the minor emergencies chance had brought upon his path previously. He graduates from exploding oil rigs to alien invasions because he recognizes an immediate need that only he can fill. That need gives him the boost in confidence he requires to reveal himself to the world and go further with his abilities than ever before.

In this way, all of us can relate to the man of steel. We so easily fall into the entrapment of routine that it can take a drastic change in our comfort and understanding of the world to instigate any meaningful or lasting progress. These moments can come as near-death experiences or the loss of some major fixture in life. Sometimes they happen when we witness something so big that what we previously cared about begins to seem insignificant. It happens when we fall in love, travel to unfamiliar lands, or undertake some major project that pushes us further than we knew we could go. I'm sure that all men who walked on the moon were forever different because of it.

Almost all of us have major gifts and abilities we do not nearly begin to make full use of.

Far more common than a lack of ability, is a lack of will. It takes major mental fortitude to begin to adopt a purpose-driven sense of identity and act on a much larger scale in the world. These mental barriers are what stop capable individuals from starting their own small businesses, or small businesses from growing into big businesses, or big businesses from changing the world. It's probably also the cause of much smaller mental inhibitions, like everyday writer's block or shyness around a pretty girl. We get so caught up in putting out the small fires that erupt constantly that we never move on to much larger ventures.

In *Man of Steel*, Clark only made the transition from "hero" to "superhero" when he learned to focus his unique talents on the highest amount of good he could do with them. That's the part that makes him admirable. That's what makes the story interesting. That's the part that gives him heart and makes him human. Everyone could make the same choice if they could recognize their respective abilities for what they were. What's easy for you might be amazing to others. What you consider normal may be completely unknown elsewhere. Every thinking person has something to offer the world, though devising a realistic plan for doing so may be the hardest part of the process. That's why a godly amount of determination is even more important to success than a godly amount of talent (though, having both is extremely useful).

The first years of my life were largely spent in contemplation of what I had to offer the world, which required also coming to understand what the world lacked. I feel I've finally reached a point where I have a solid impression of the state of humanity and myself. I see very clearly what I could do to have the most impact towards a better future. But part of me is still scared to really act. Part of me is still so comfortable with being a "normal" person that I limit my actions to accepted and standard practice. The first half of the journey is over for me, and now I focus on growing balls large enough to make larger and larger leaps in the world. I have to believe true flight is just around the corner.

I don't believe in "destiny" or predetermination of human will any more than I believe in fairies. But I believe every person has an optimal state of function, and there is a place in the present state of social development for everyone to make use of their respective abilities. Clark's optimum functions in the conditions on earth is to become the world-saving Superman. Mine lies elsewhere, though I have a pretty good idea where. Yours will be unique to you and the conditions you enter. It takes a certain skill to learn to evaluate situations well enough to identify what the world immediately around you needs and what you have to offer it. Learning to see the world in this way is a power unto itself. It requires an exceptional level of bravery and self-mastery.

Most everyone seeks to better themselves in one way or another, even if for no other reason than to be able to say they can go further than they were able to yesterday. It's in our nature to seek improvement, whether it be in how many pounds we can bench press, a high score in a video game, or the amount of money we make annually. A truly noble man

is one who also seeks to use his increasing abilities to improve the world outside of himself to the greatest possible extent, just as Superman finally stepped up to do after some three decades of wandering the globe feeling lost and alone. His character remains interesting to me because it is an accurate portrayal of the same struggle every aware person faces, whether or not they have the strength to topple skyscrapers.