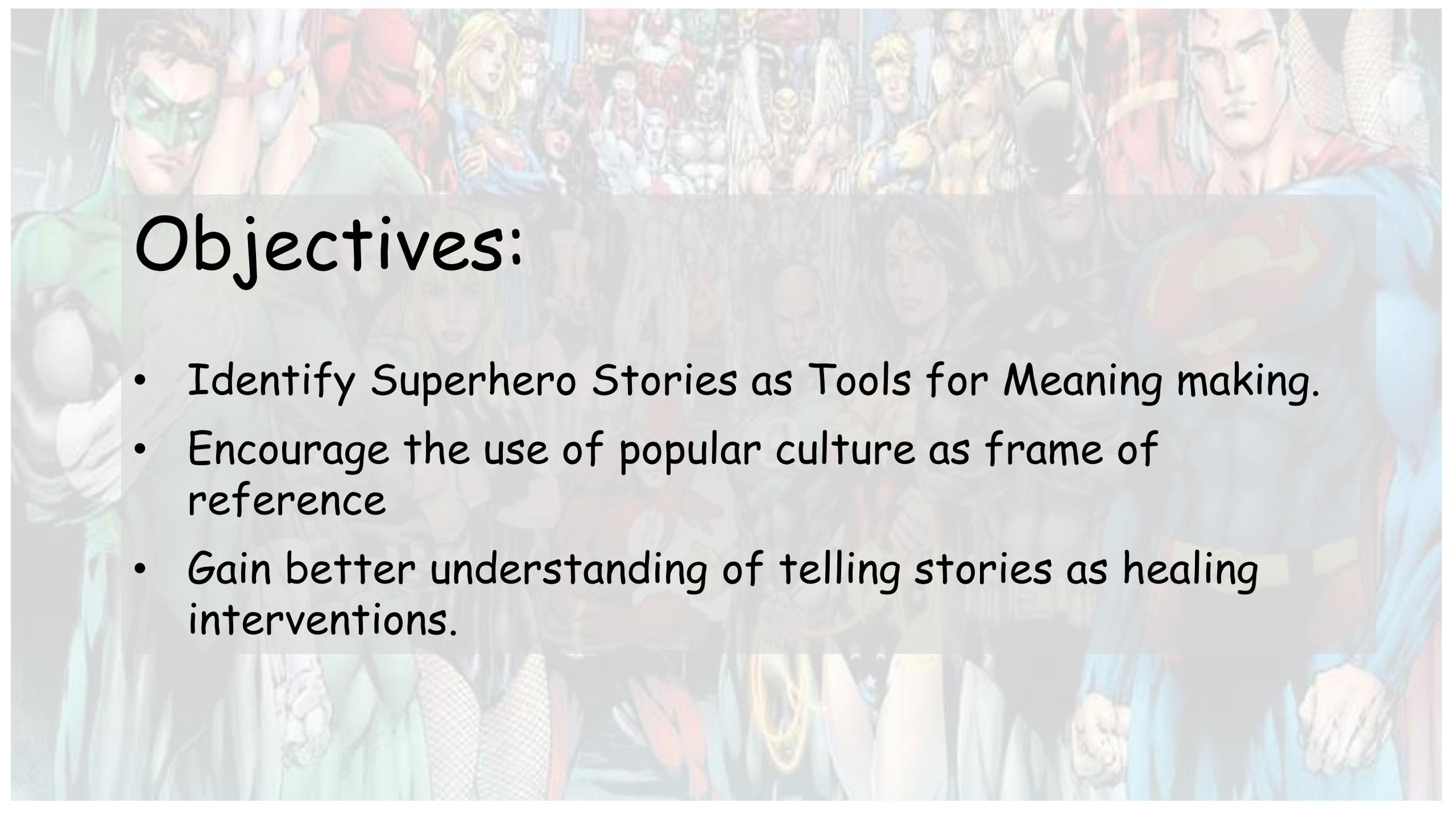




Superheroes to the Rescue

Ben Janzen, Dr. Theol., PhD., APBCC

VITAS® Healthcare



Objectives:

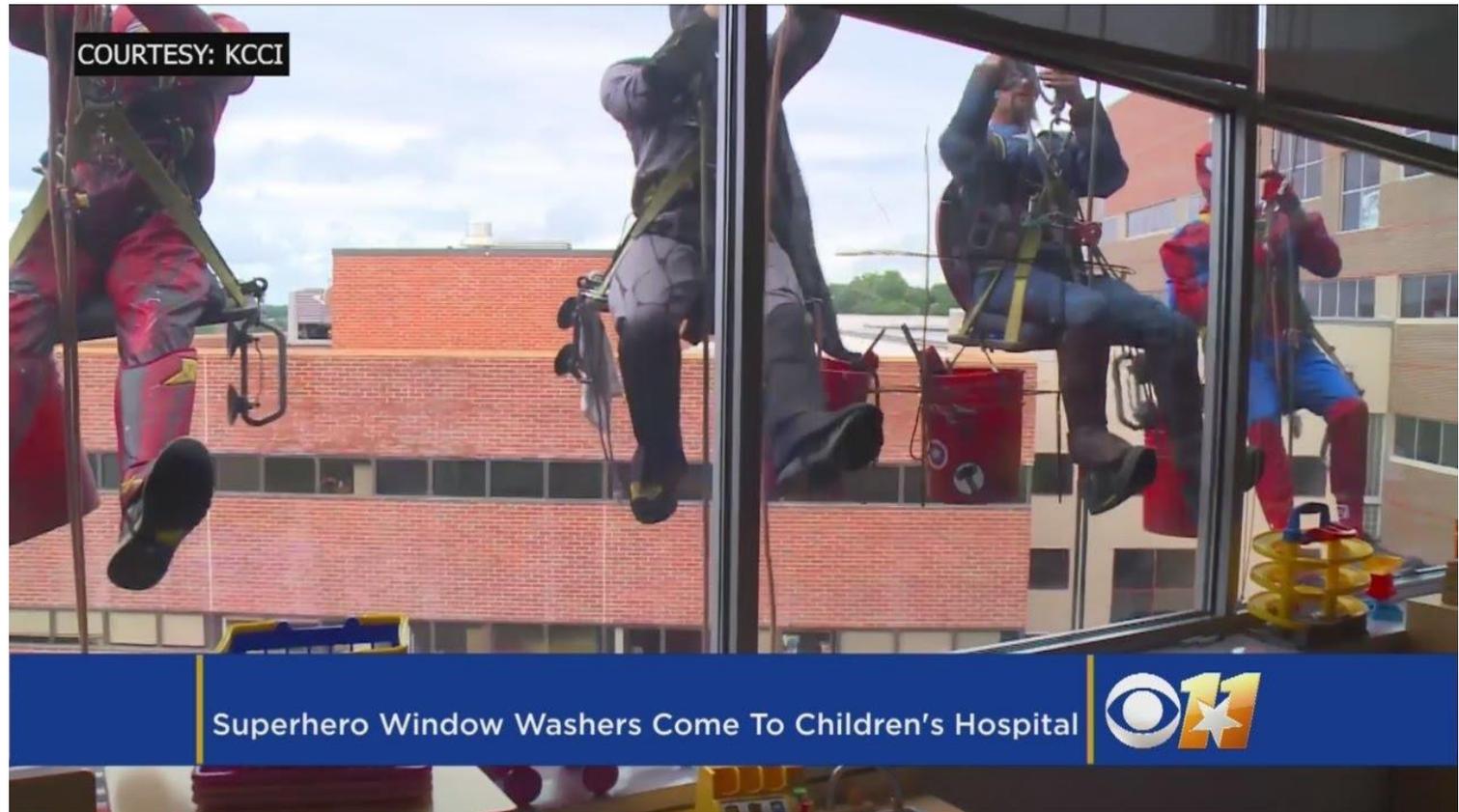
- Identify Superhero Stories as Tools for Meaning making.
- Encourage the use of popular culture as frame of reference
- Gain better understanding of telling stories as healing interventions.



Bringing joy to sick children

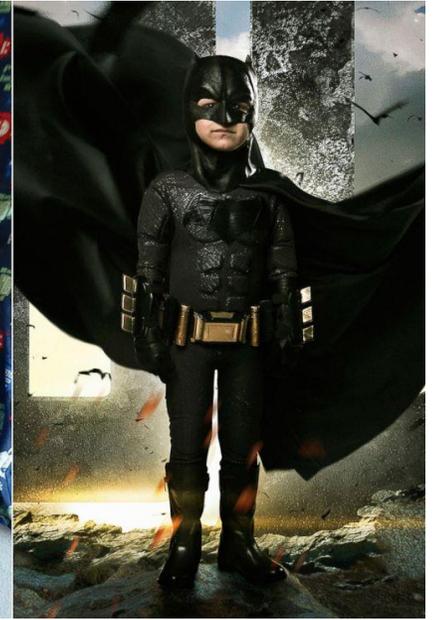
Window washers at the children hospital in Iowa dress up as superheroes.

"The smiles say it all when these special friends fly by their room," said Amy Varcoe, a spokesperson at the hospital. "The kids at Blank Children's Hospital are true super heroes every day. Laughter and smiles are the best medicine."

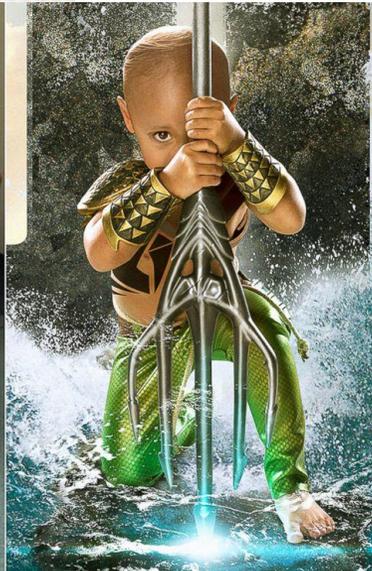




Sofie Loftus has a rare form of eye cancer called embryonal rhabdomyosarcoma. | Sofie Loftus



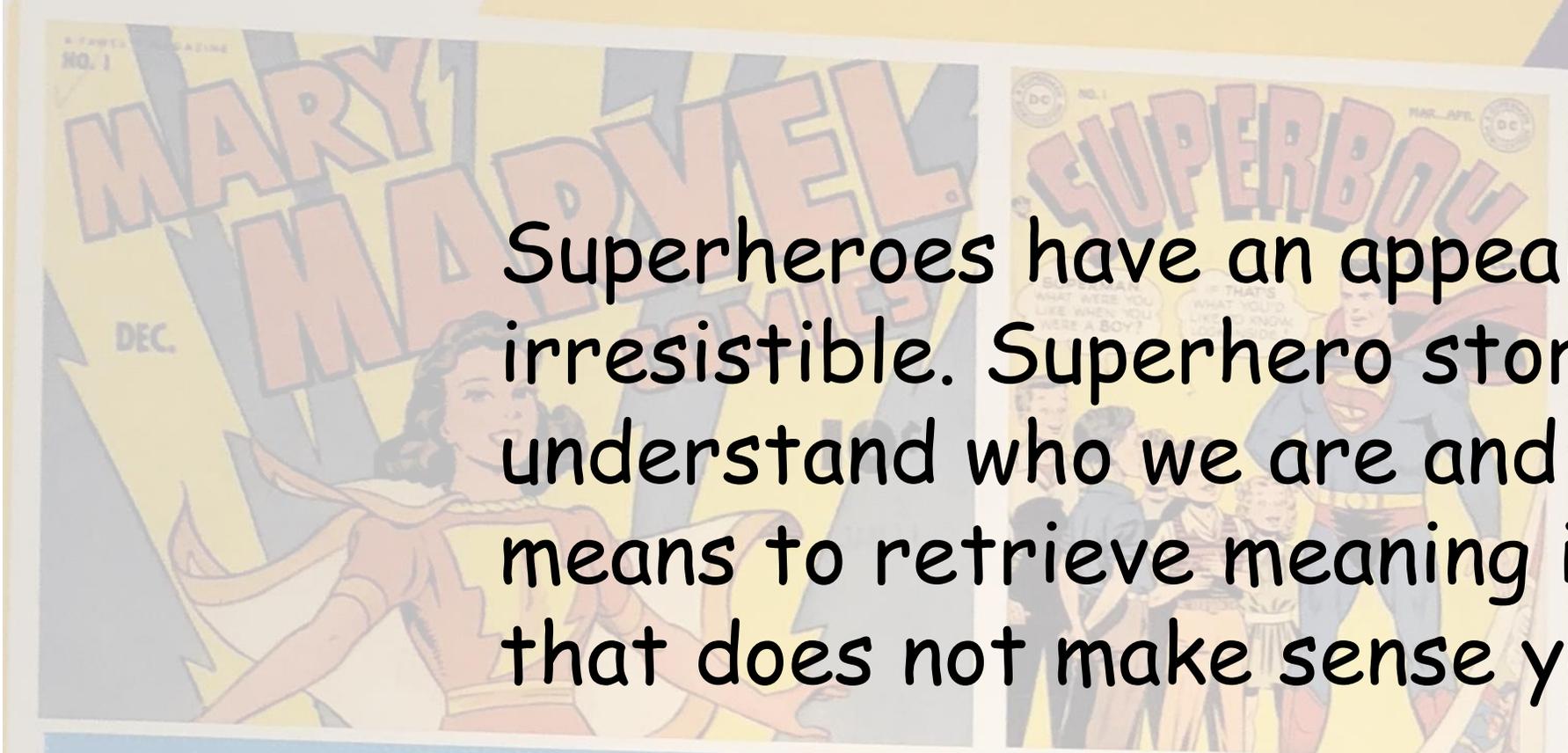
Simon Fullmer was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a cancer of the nerves. | Simon Fullmer



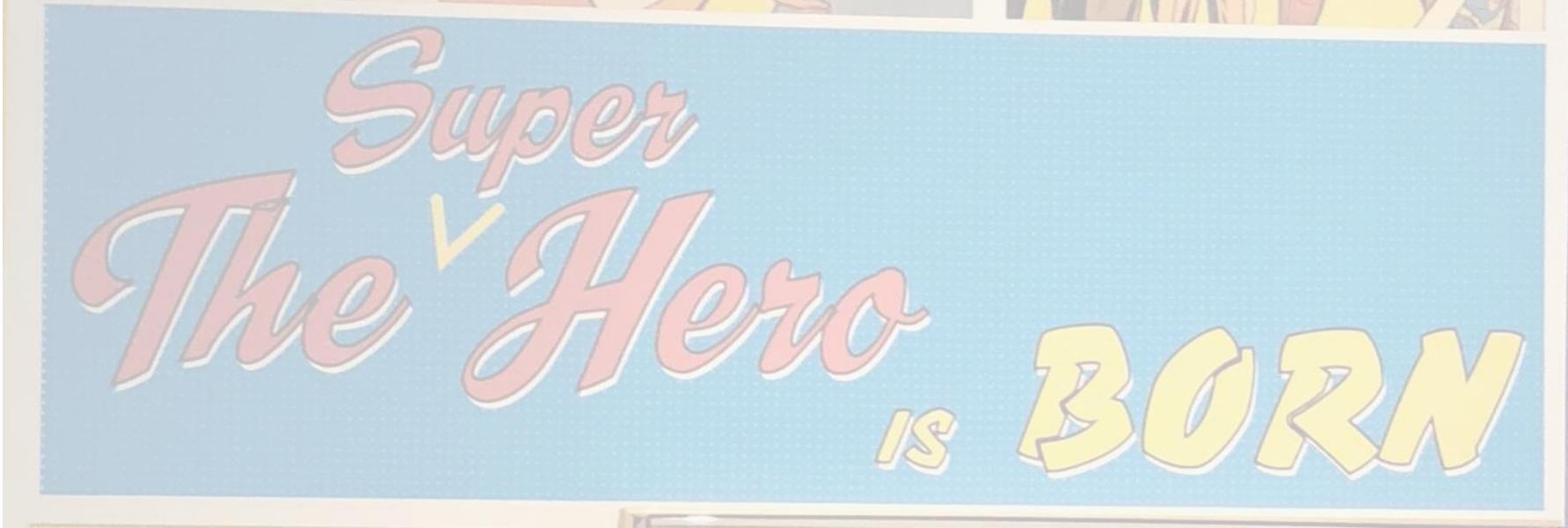
Mataese Manuma has a rare form of cancer called acute megakaryoblastic leukemia. | Mataese Manuma



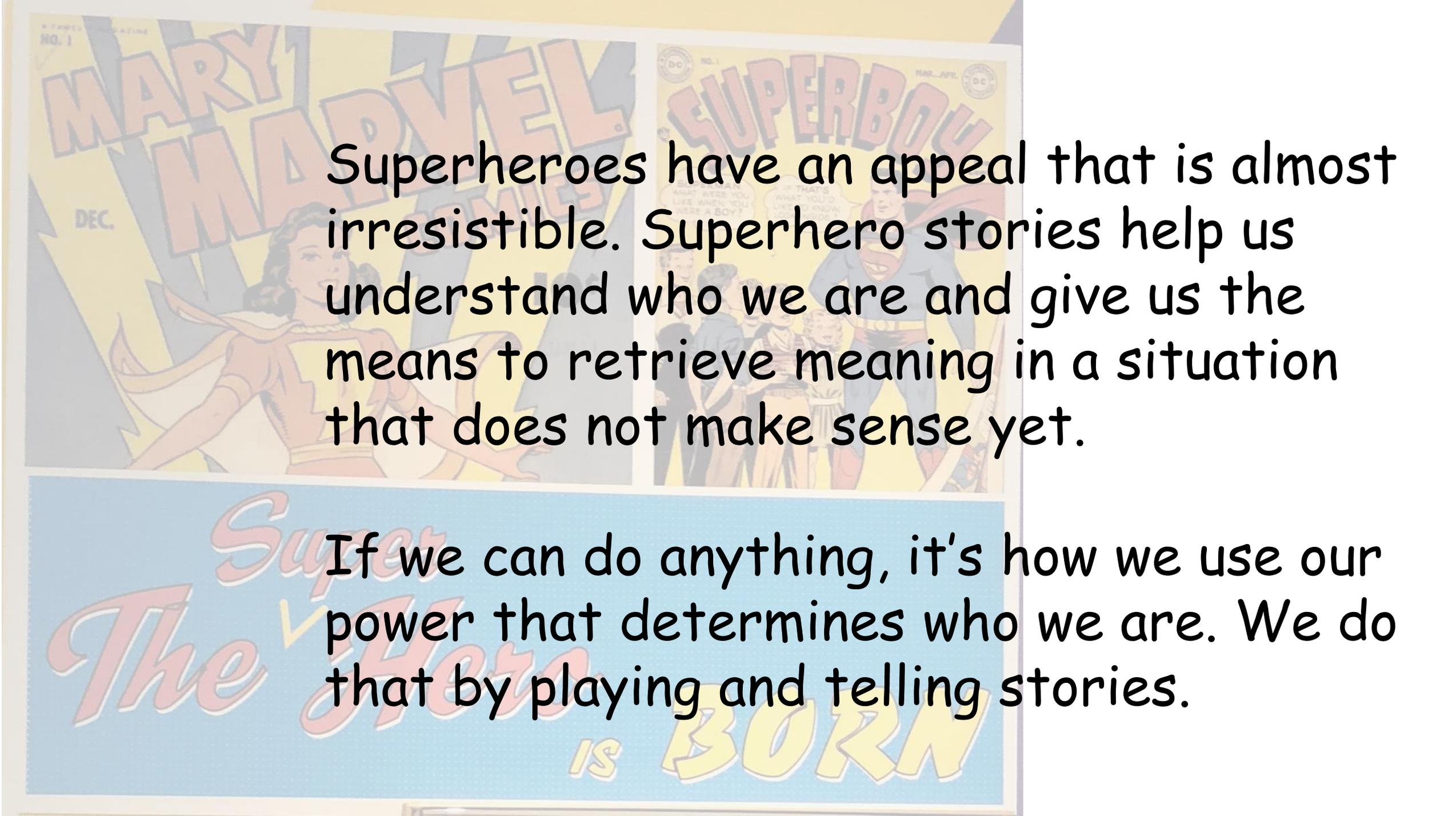
Josh Rossi, Photographer



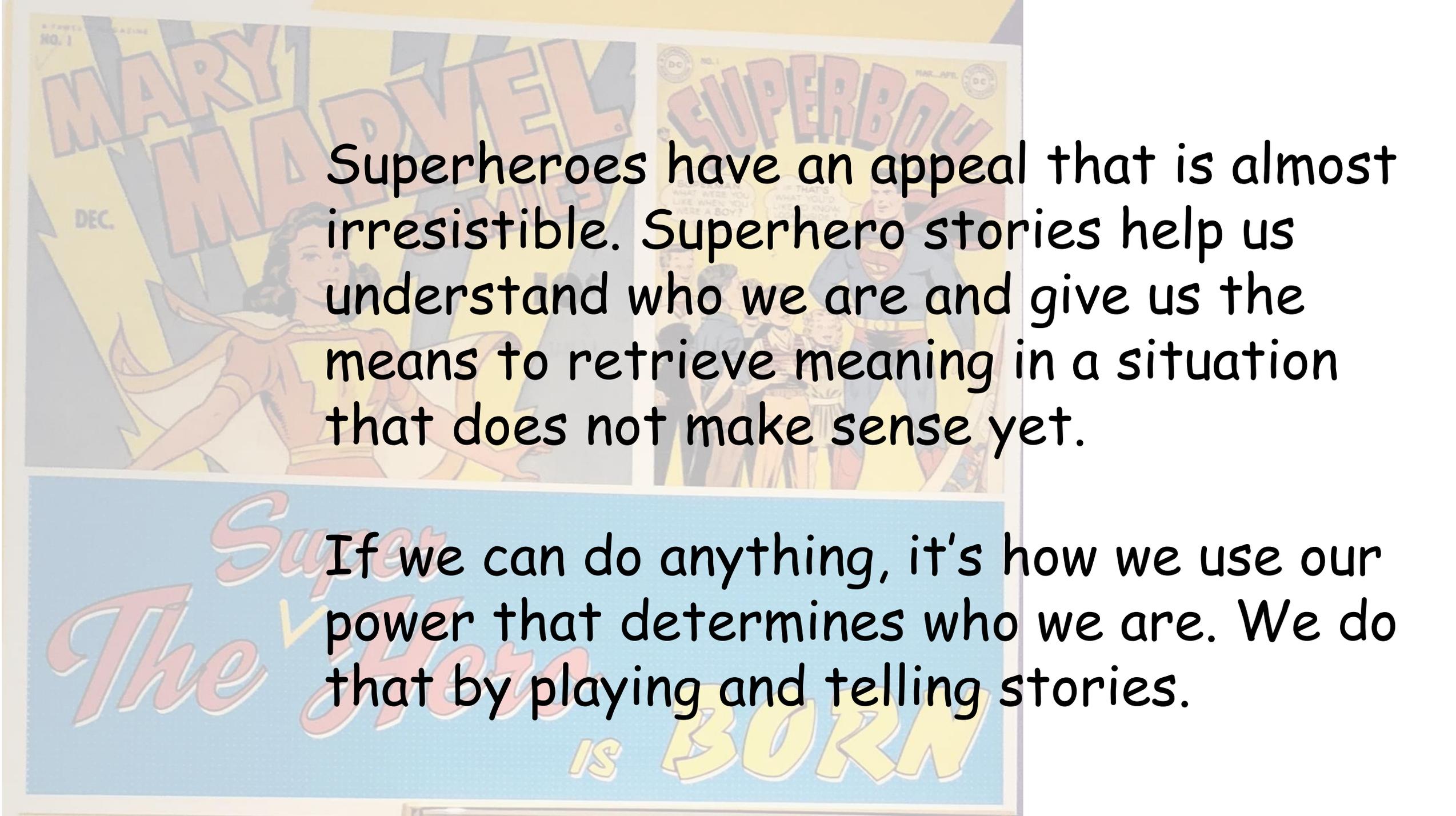
Superheroes have an appeal that is almost irresistible. Superhero stories help us understand who we are and give us the means to retrieve meaning in a situation that does not make sense yet.



Super
The Hero *is* **BORN**

The background of the slide features two comic book covers. On the left is the cover of 'Mary Marvel' magazine, issue No. 1, dated December. It shows Mary Marvel in her red and white costume with a yellow lightning bolt on her chest. On the right is the cover of 'Superboy' magazine, issue No. 1, dated Fall-April. It shows Superboy in his blue and red costume with the 'S' shield on his chest. The text of the slide is overlaid on these covers.

Superheroes have an appeal that is almost irresistible. Superhero stories help us understand who we are and give us the means to retrieve meaning in a situation that does not make sense yet.

The background of the slide features a blue banner with the text 'Superhero The Hero is BORN' in a stylized, cursive font. The word 'Superhero' is in red, 'The Hero' is in red, and 'is BORN' is in yellow. The text of the slide is overlaid on this banner.

If we can do anything, it's how we use our power that determines who we are. We do that by playing and telling stories.



Thor and Loki



Batman and the Joker



Superheroes always have foes who have similar powers.



Prof. Charles Xavier
and Magneto

Harry Potter and Voldemort



...and then there is the story where a very rare incident occurs that miraculously robs our superheroes of their powers and they need to prove that they have strength of character...

Spiderman and Venom



... *a propos* monsters...



One of the functions of stories and games is to help children rehearse for what they'll be in later life. Anthropologists and psychologists who study play, however, have shown that there are many other functions as well - one of which is to enable children to pretend to be what they know they'll *never* be...

Children need to feel strong. They need to feel powerful in the face of a scary, uncontrollable world. Superheroes, video game warriors, rappers, and movie gunmen are symbols of strength. By pretending to be them, young people are being strong (11).

(Girard).

Japanese producers followed the formula of Giant Monsters with the first *Godzilla* in 1954, but they noticed what Hollywood had failed or refused to see: Kids loved the monsters, not the authorities. "Kaiju" are very popular (cf. Pacific Rim movies...)





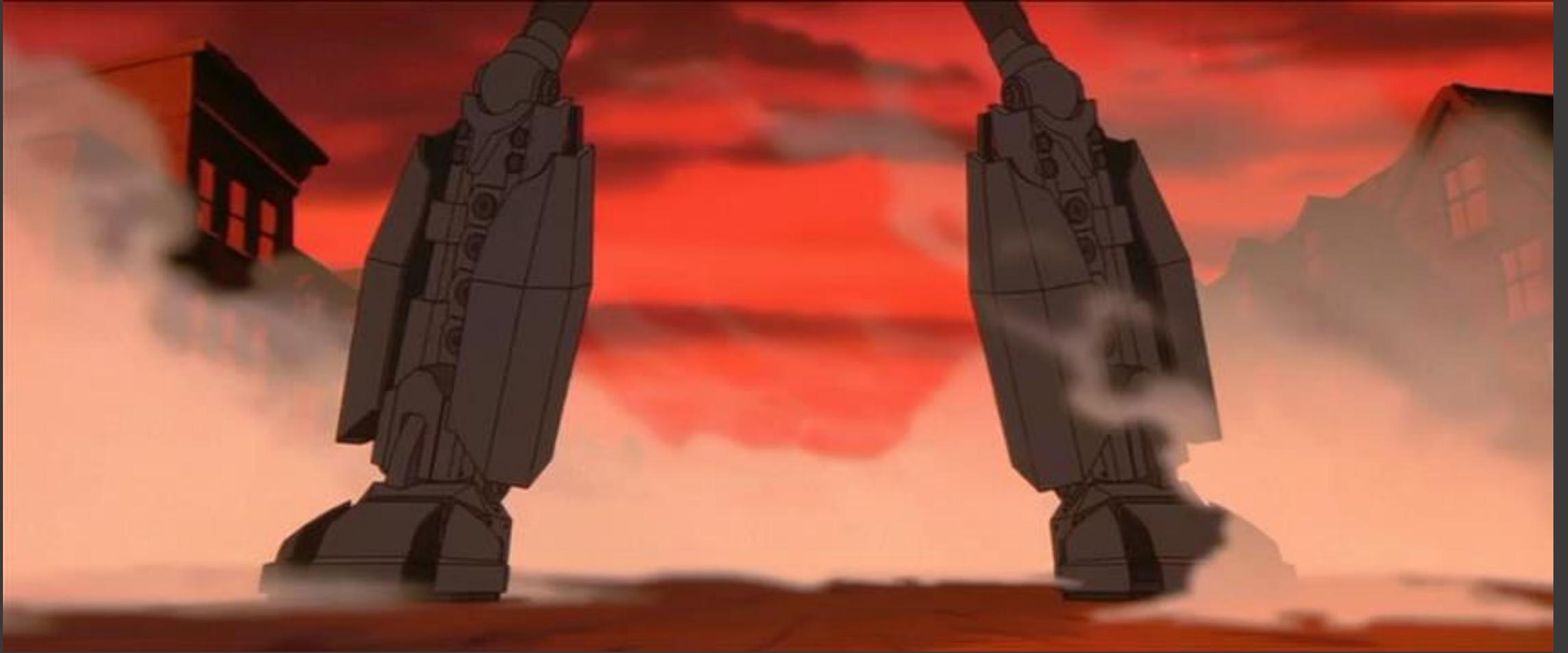
... *related thoughts...*

Playing and telling stories are part of the different modes of communication: speech acts. Austin's work specifies that rather than conveying information, these are actions: **speech acts**. (J.L. Austin. *How to do things with words*.)

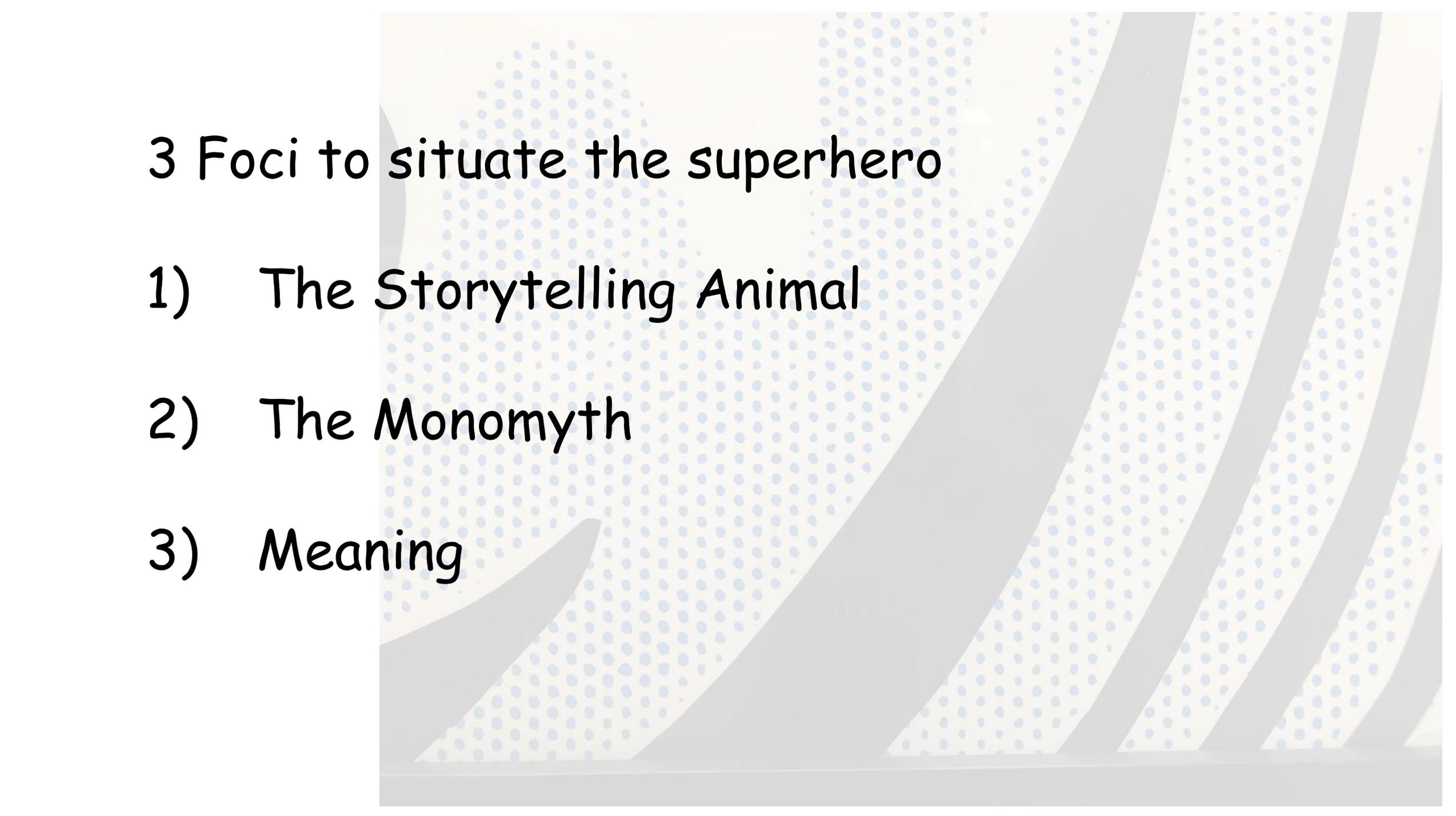
Performative actions are for the purpose of self-expression rather than intending to provide additional information. They help the speaker express themselves. They provide information about rather than for the speaker. (THE question "Why did this happen to me?")

Theater is another mode of communication. Performances are often attended more than once. Being in the audience allows the spectator to **experience the story** on stage (Audience participation: Rocky Horror, Jesus Christ Superstar, The Voice, _____ Got Talent). The audience can participate by identifying with either protagonist or antagonist, to experience the hero overcome obstacles and get recognized.

Other **parallels** are the *Catholic sacrament* (baptism and marriage are performative utterance: I hereby...) or making a historic event present and relevant (*Catholic mass, Jewish Passover*).



The Iron Giant. Dir. by Brad Bird. With Eli Marienthal, Harry Connick Jr., Jennifer Aniston et. al., Warner Bros. Animation, 1999.

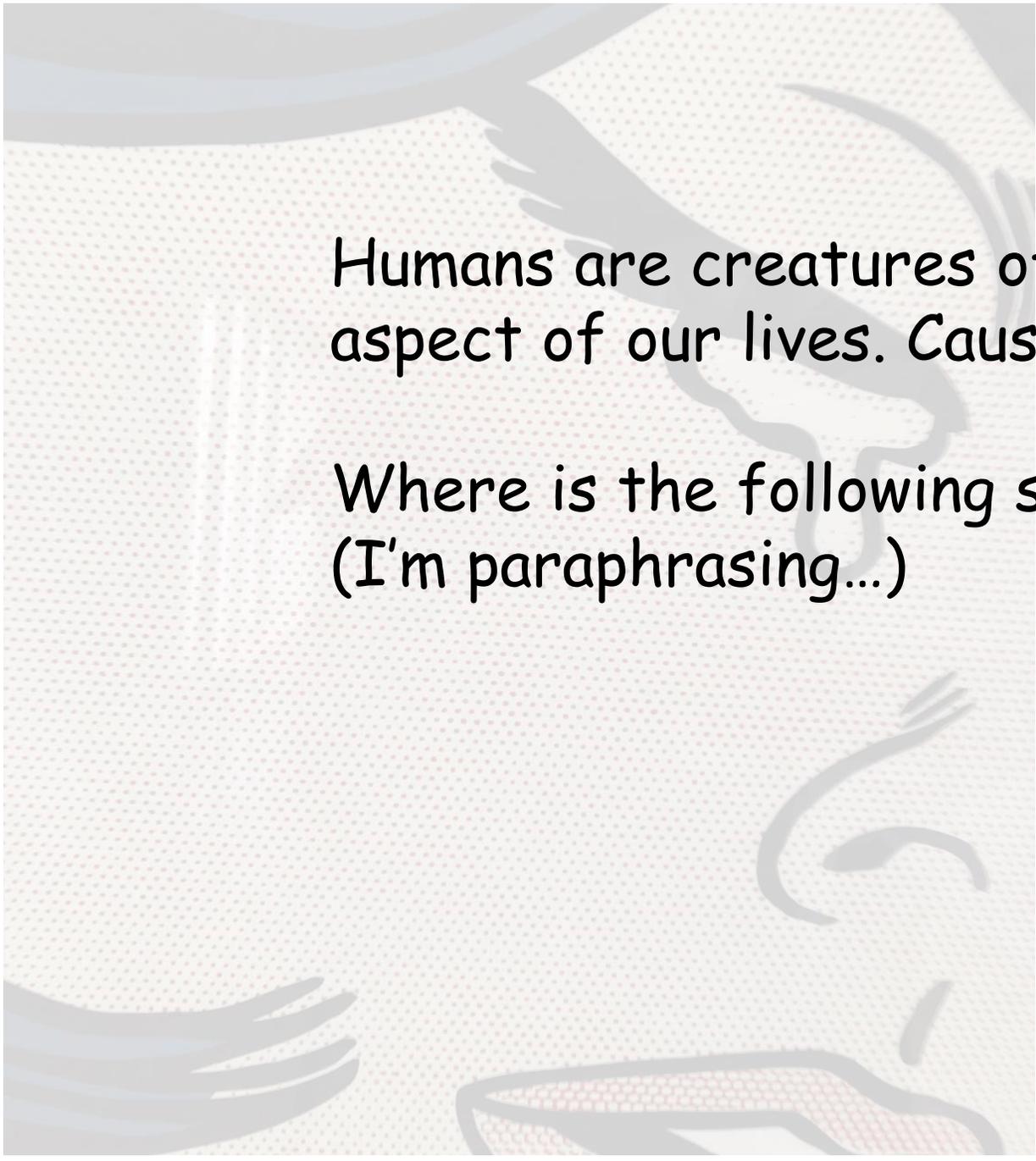


3 Foci to situate the superhero

1) The Storytelling Animal

2) The Monomyth

3) Meaning



The Storytelling Animal

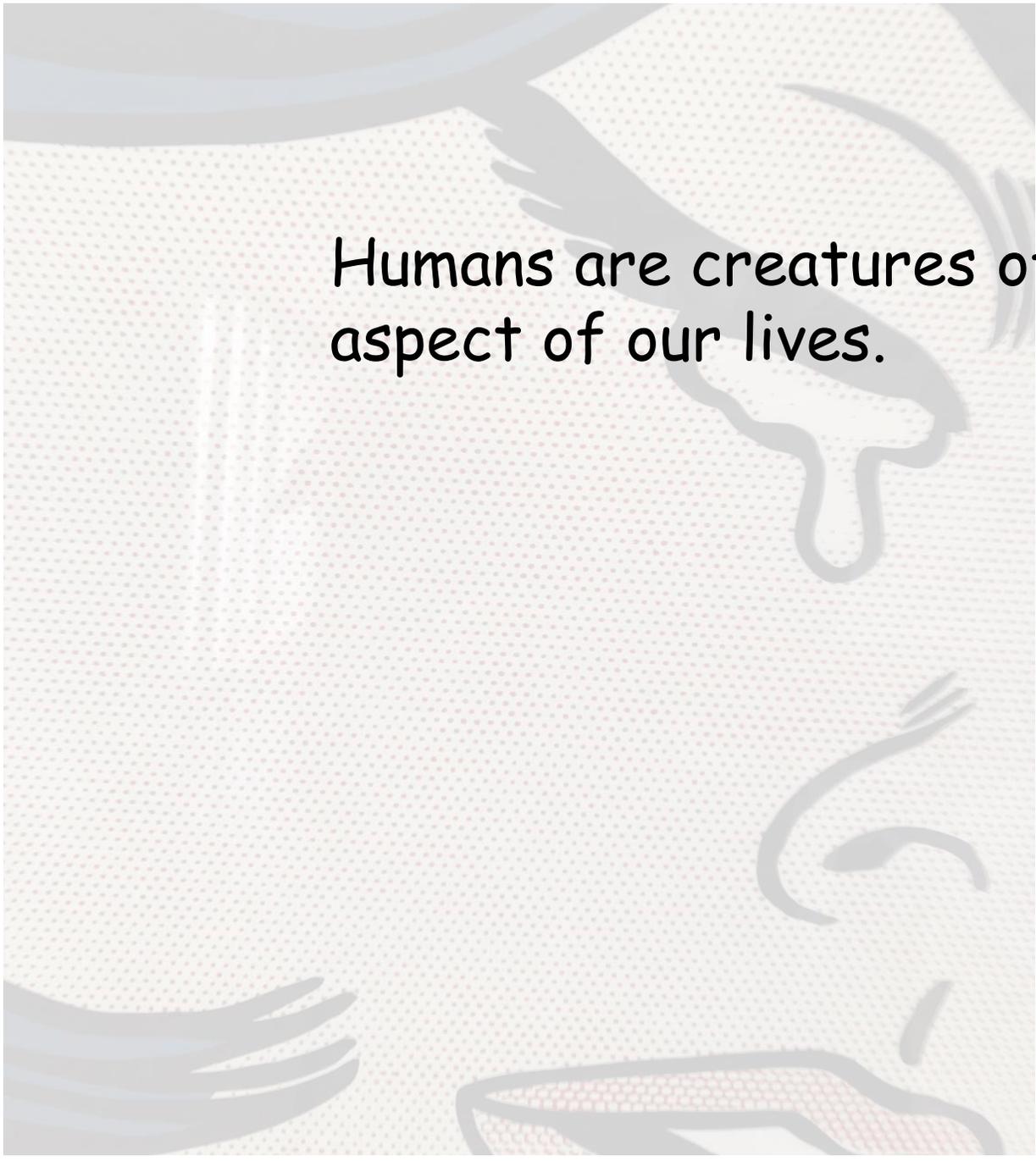
Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives. Cause - Effect, meaning...

Where is the following story from?
(I'm paraphrasing...)

The Storytelling Animal

Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives.

Deep in the center of the _____
lurks a monstrous giant _____.
It sits there waiting to devour any
stray _____ and _____
that come too close to escape.
By devouring its victim, it becomes
bigger and bigger and if we
weren't beyond the _____,
it would devour us all.



The Storytelling Animal

Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives.

Deep in the center of the galaxy lurks a monstrous giant black hole. It sits there waiting to devour any stray interstellar gas and dust that come too close to escape. By devouring its victim, it becomes bigger and bigger and if we weren't beyond the event horizon, it would devour us all.

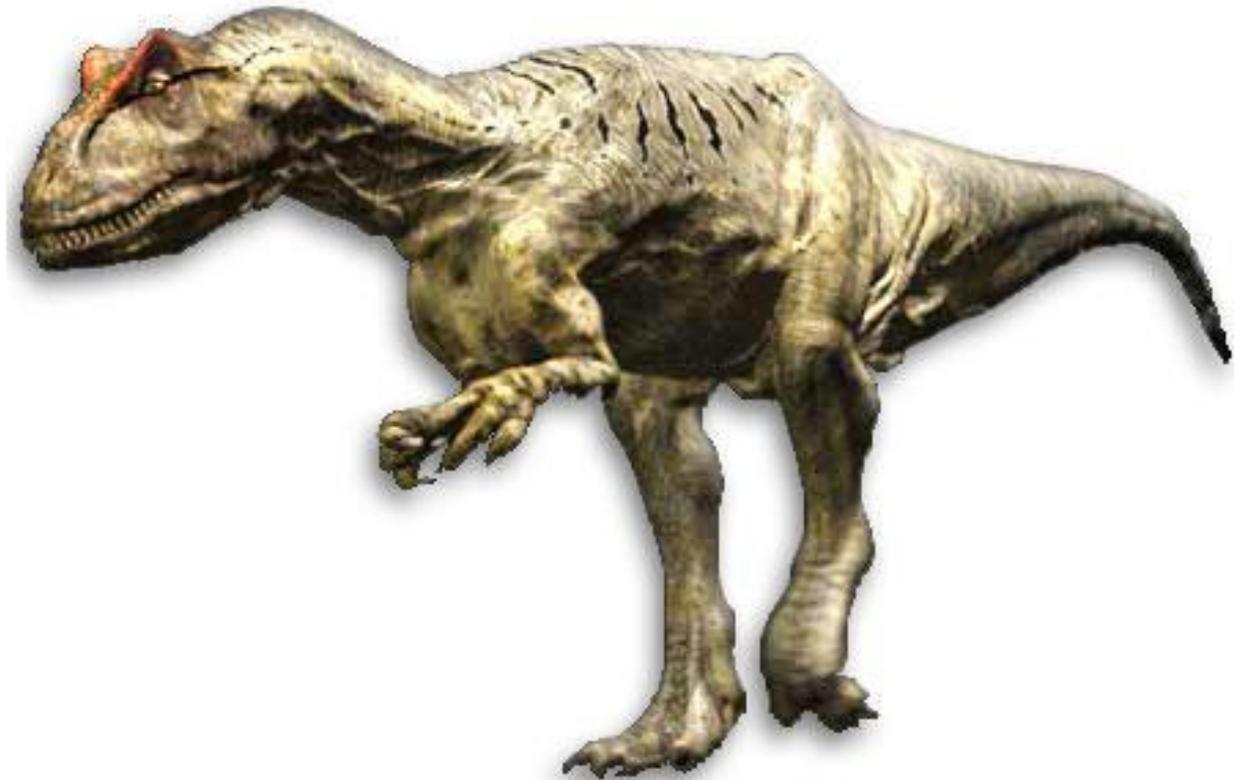
The Storytelling Animal

Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives.

In 2000, BBC published a special of their hit series *Walking With Dinosaurs: Allosaurus Special*.

They found the skeleton of an Allosaurus "Big Al" with a broken femur. The special featured the story "Big Al" who broke his leg in a fight for his life only to succumb to starvation because of his broken femur.

It was marketed as "Scientific Documentary".



The Storytelling Animal

Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives.

Fiction is not escapism in the sense that we are experiencing wish-fulfillment. Those stories tend to be boring.

The Storytelling Animal

Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives.

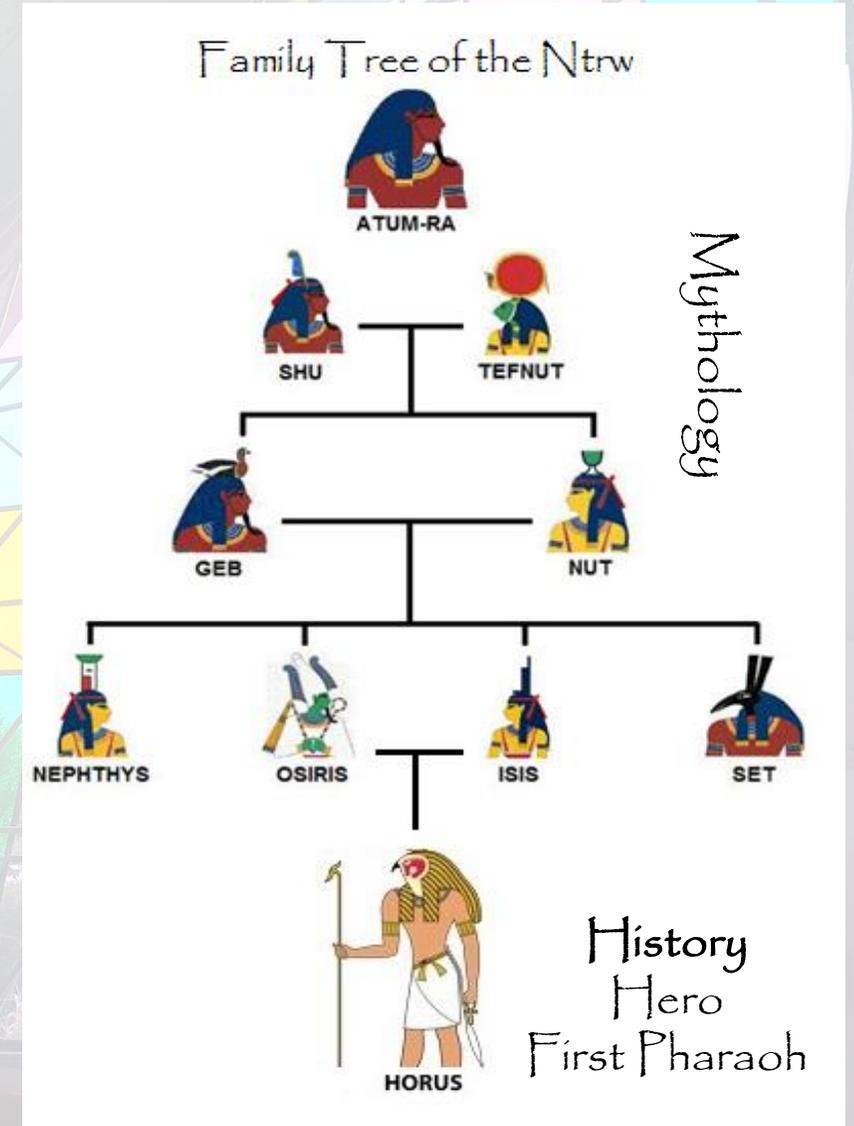
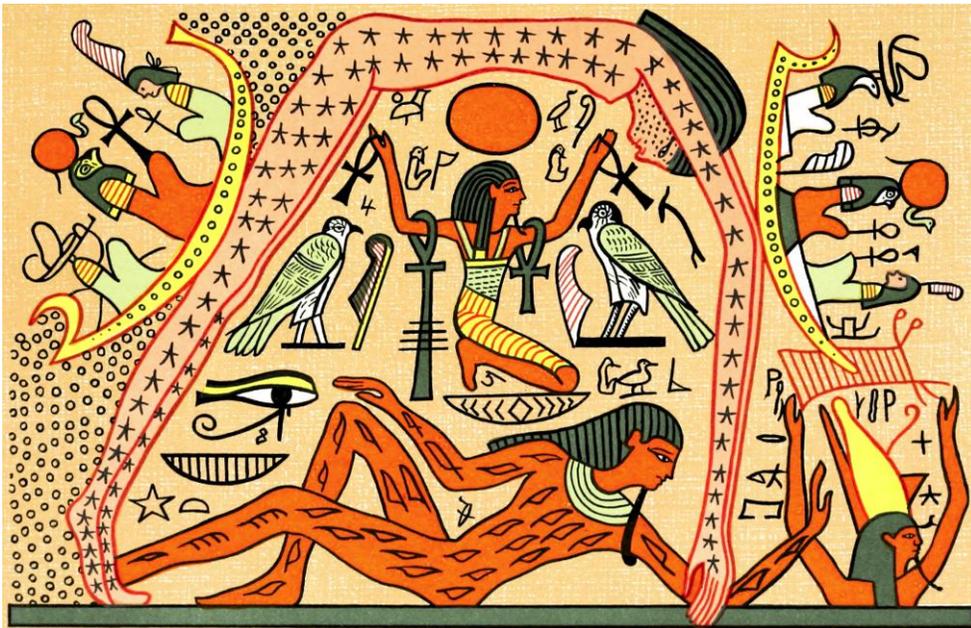
Fiction is not escapism in the sense that we are experiencing wish-fulfillment. Those stories tend to be boring.

The exciting stories tell us how a protagonist overcame struggles and grew as a person. This is 'a universal grammar'.

The Monomyth

Creation: Order out of Chaos : the un-structured, the anti-order

In Egypt one-ness is Chaos.
It is unstructured, and does not relate to anything.
Order means pairs of complimentary forces.
It comes from separating and identifying elements from the chaos.



The Monomyth

Creation: Order out of Chaos : the un-structured, the anti-order

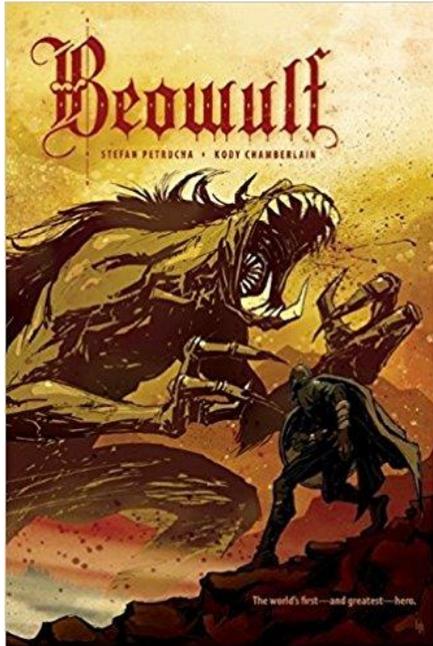
In the beginning Elohim created hashomayim (the heavens, himel) and haaretz (the earth). And the earth was tohu vavohu (without form, and void); and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Ruach Elohim was hovering upon the face of the waters. And Elohim said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Orthodox Jewish Bible [OJB])

(כ"ו) 1 בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: 2 וְהָאָרֶץ
הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי
הַמַּיִם: 3 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אֹר וְהָיָה אֹר: 4 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת
הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחָשֶׁךְ:

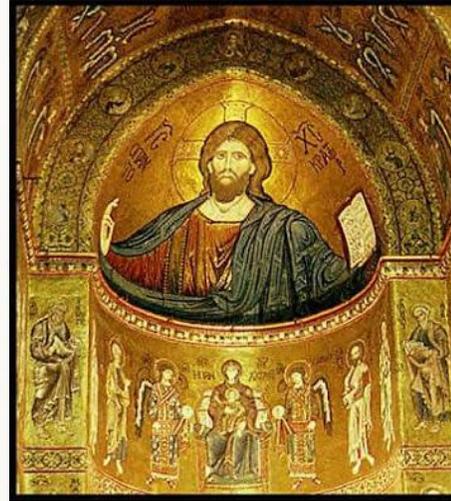


*The Hero (re-)establishes Order and
vanquishes Chaos*

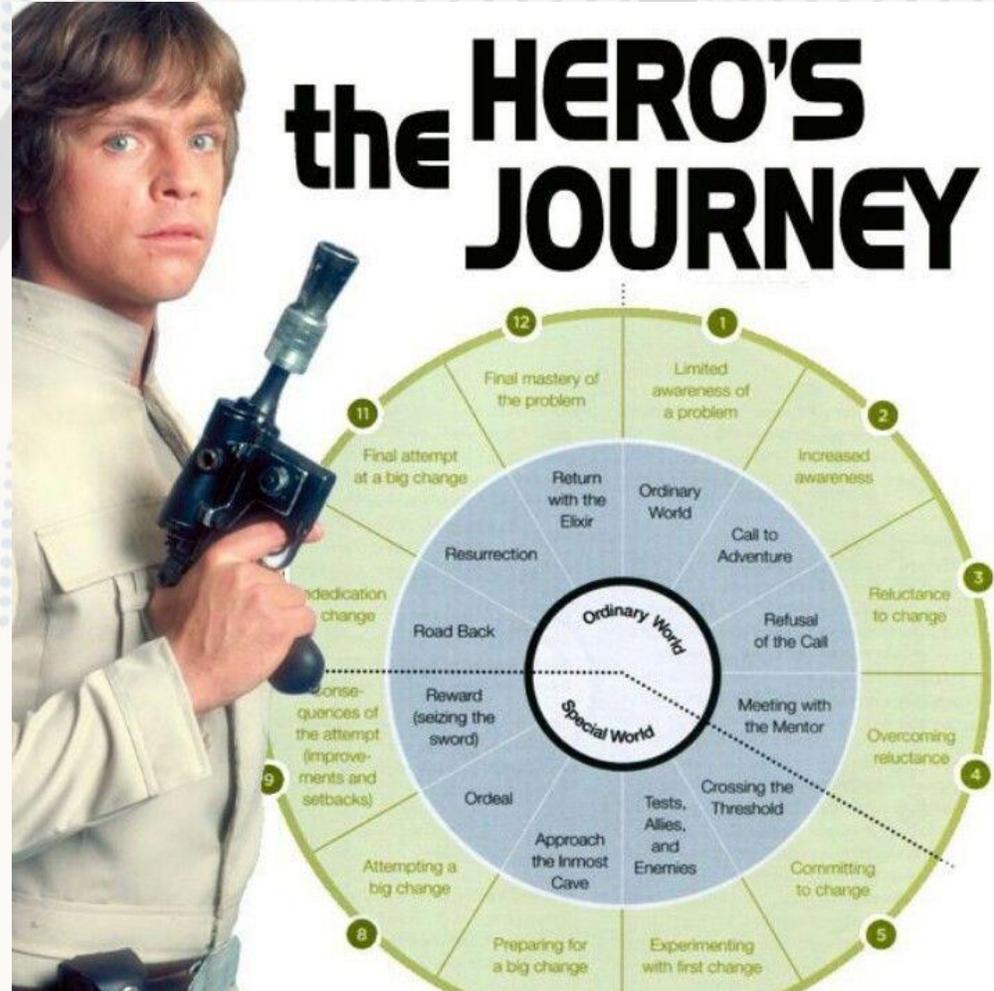
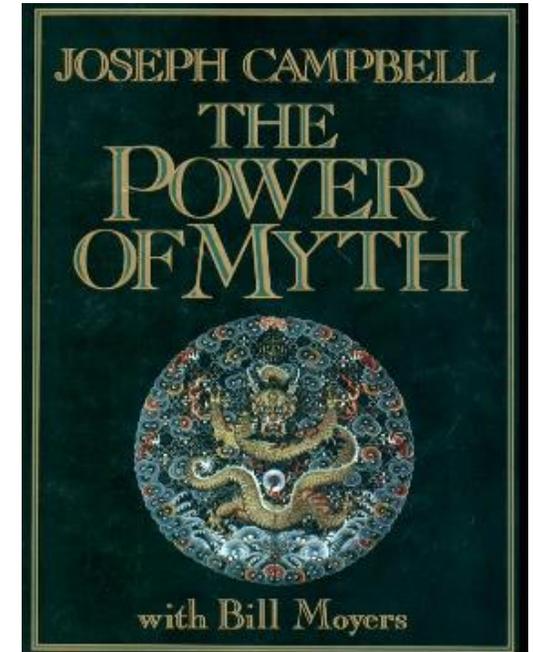
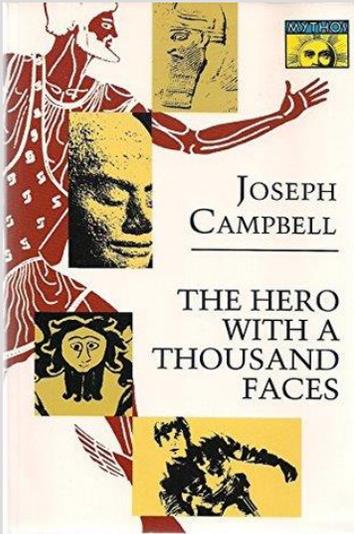
The Monomyth



Beowulf
Odin
Buddha
Christ
Brahma



The Monomyth



MOYERS: Does a movie like Star Wars fill some of that need for the spiritual adventure, for the hero?

CAMPBELL: Oh, perfect. It does the cycle perfectly.

Campbell, Joseph: The Power of Myth.





“The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero.”

Frye, N., *Anatomy of Criticism*. 187.



The Monomyth

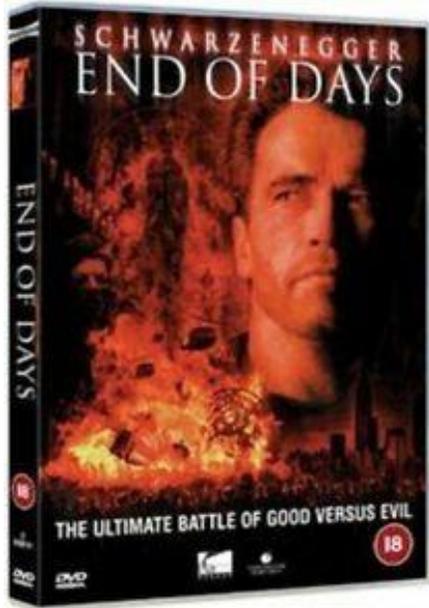
Often, the hero is a *wounded healer*, or has an *impediment*, through the quest and the reestablishment of order, he is healed on a personal level, and received recognition for being a hero.

Hence the structure:

- 1) Conflict
- 2) Death Struggle
- 3) Discovery / Recognition



The Monomyth



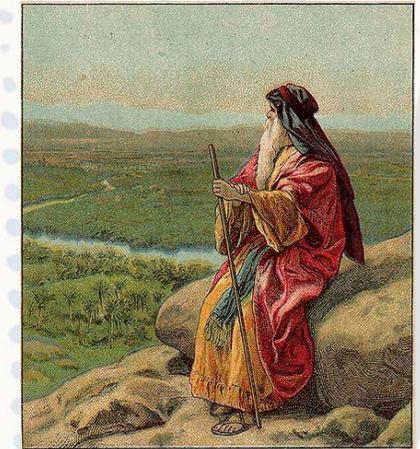
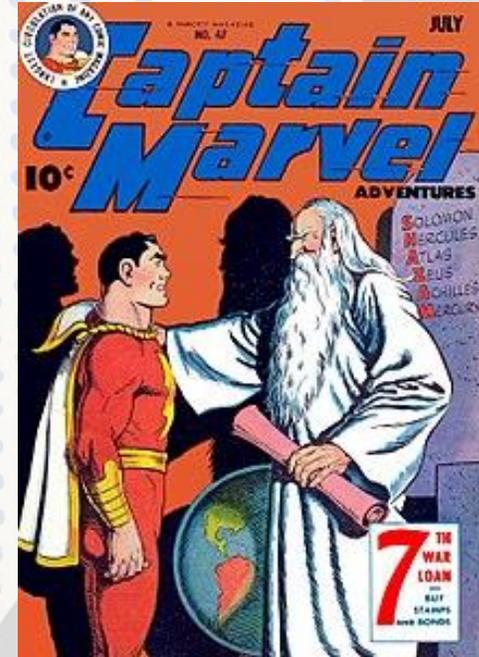
End of Days tells the story of cop whose wife and child were murdered. He became a drunk. One day, he gets involved in the battle of good and evil on New Year's Eve of 2000 (Y2K panic). The pregnant heroine should birth the demon.

Originally, End of Days was supposed to end with the Hero and the Heroine to be together and live happily ever after.

This version flopped with a test-audience.

Schwarzenegger claims that he took the script to his pastor who told him that the hero must die.

The story would not work if the hero didn't give up his life to save the girl and be reunited with his wife.



THE DEATH OF MOSES

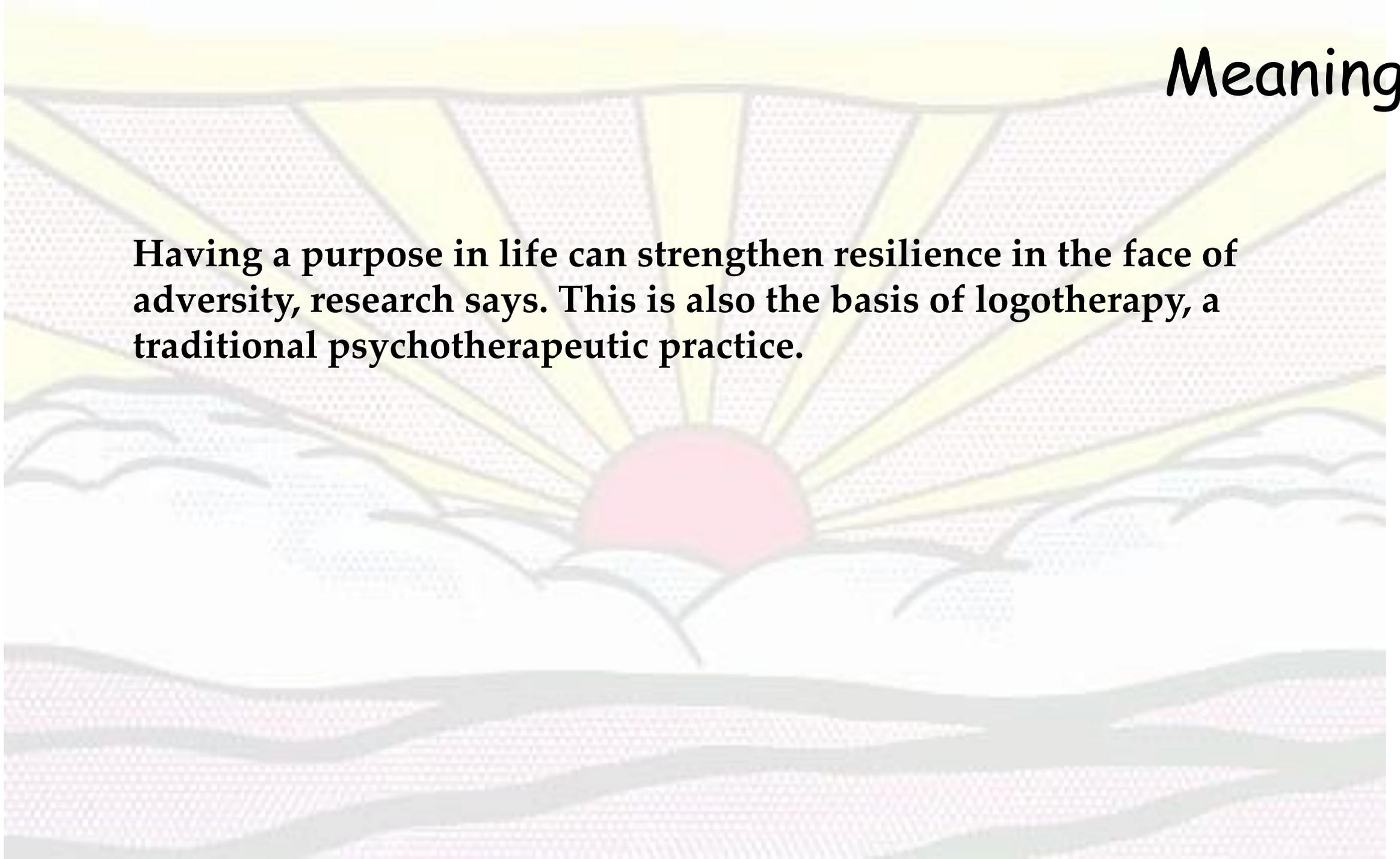
Deut. 34:1-12.

GOLDEN TEXT:—Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Ps. 116:15.

Sometimes, the heroine is not allowed to return to her old world. The adventure changed her to a point that she does not fit into the old world anymore but must enter into a new world. She must leave his body behind but sends her people into a new world and hence, will shine as an example and moral authority. (Moses; Gladiator movie; also: Shazam, Dr. Strange)

Meaning

Having a purpose in life can strengthen resilience in the face of adversity, research says. This is also the basis of logotherapy, a traditional psychotherapeutic practice.



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Having a purpose in life can strengthen resilience in the face of adversity, research says. This is also the basis of logotherapy, a traditional psychotherapeutic practice.

Logotherapy considers meaning as something that is important to a human being's life and that is independent of a person's circumstances. Based on Victor Frankl personal experience, it states that meaning is possible even in the bleakest situations – for himself, that was his stay in a concentration camp.

3 basic statements of Logotherapy

- . Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones.**
- . Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.**
- . We have freedom to find meaning in what we do, and what we experience, or at least in the stance we take when faced with a situation of unchangeable suffering**

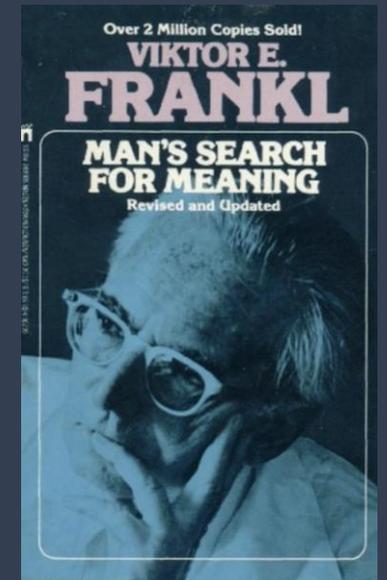


Magneto tearing down the barbed wire gates in Auschwitz in X-Men

Meaning

We can discover this meaning in life in three different ways:

- 1) By creating a work or a deed;
- 2) By experiencing something or encountering someone;
- 3) By the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering.



Meaning

Everything can be taken from a human being but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Victor Frankl

Meaning

Creative activities that engage our talents, openness to finding pleasure and beauty in the world, and the ability to master our responses to circumstances beyond our control are good ways of living purposefully and becoming more resilient. (Cohut)

Everything can be taken from a human being but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Victor Frankl

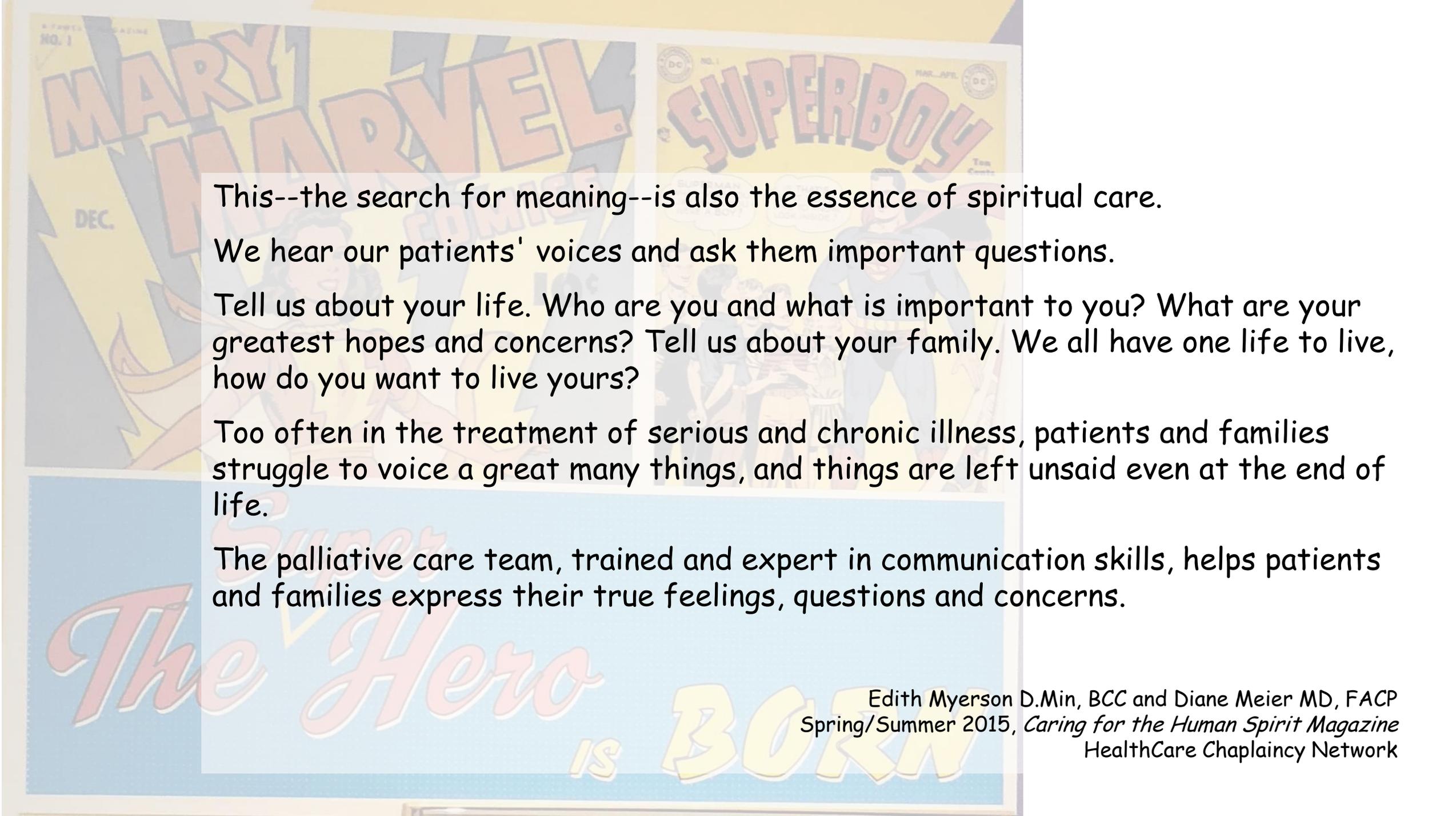
Meaning

Human beings are free to decide and capable of taking their stance towards internal and external conditions. Freedom is here defined as the space of shaping one's own life within the limits of the given possibilities.

The search for meaning is seen as the primary motivation of humans.

Meaning is an objective category rather than an illusion although it varies according to the specific situation and person.

Meaning is flexible and needs to be gained continuously.



This--the search for meaning--is also the essence of spiritual care.

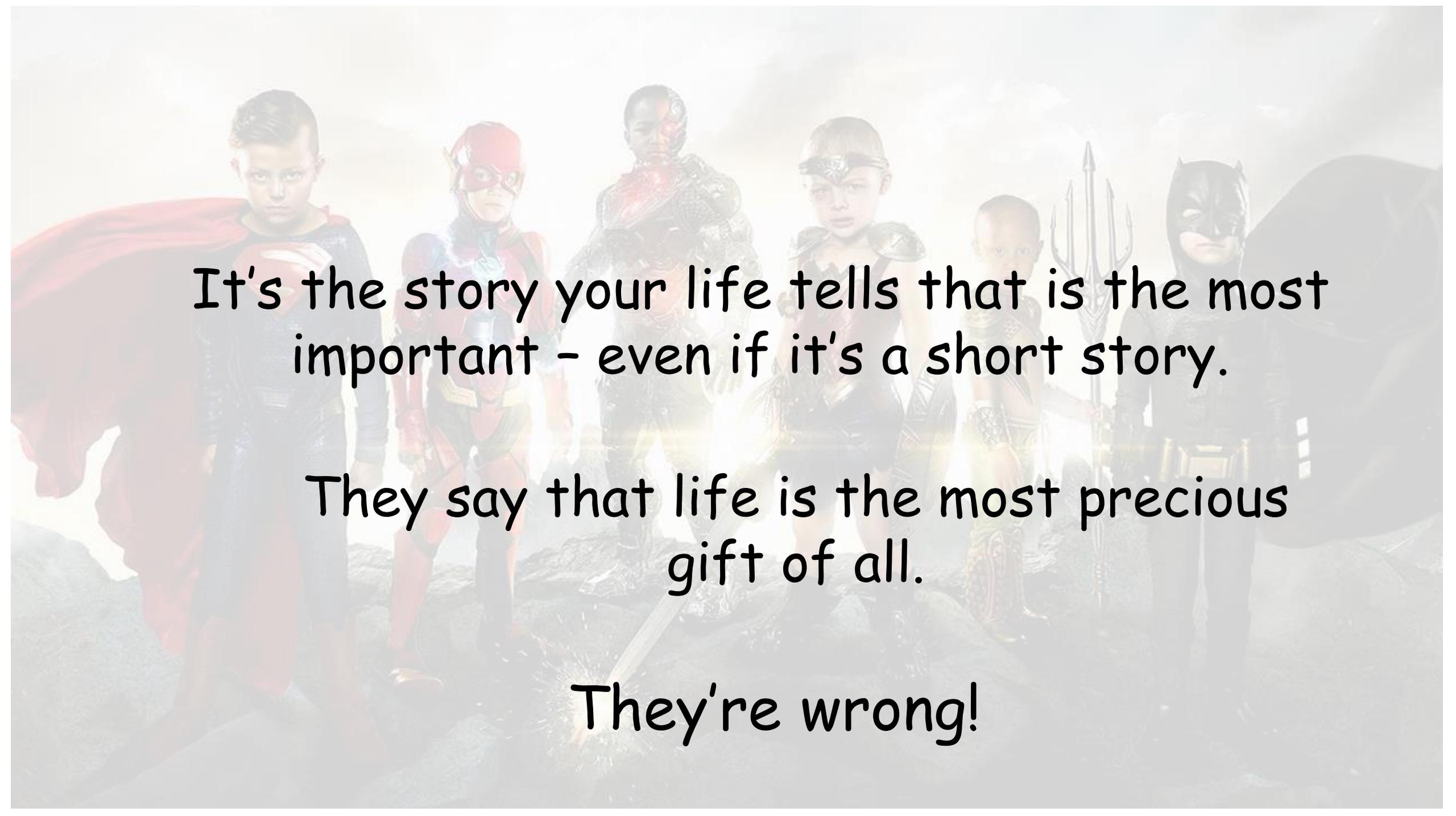
We hear our patients' voices and ask them important questions.

Tell us about your life. Who are you and what is important to you? What are your greatest hopes and concerns? Tell us about your family. We all have one life to live, how do you want to live yours?

Too often in the treatment of serious and chronic illness, patients and families struggle to voice a great many things, and things are left unsaid even at the end of life.

The palliative care team, trained and expert in communication skills, helps patients and families express their true feelings, questions and concerns.

Edith Myerson D.Min, BCC and Diane Meier MD, FACP
Spring/Summer 2015, *Caring for the Human Spirit Magazine*
HealthCare Chaplaincy Network

A group of six children dressed as superheroes from the Justice League. From left to right: Superman (blue suit with red cape), The Flash (red and yellow suit with lightning bolt), Cyborg (black and red mechanical suit), Wonder Woman (gold and red armor with lasso), Aquaman (gold and green armor with trident), and Batman (black tactical suit with cowl). They are standing on a rocky surface with a bright, hazy background.

It's the story your life tells that is the most important - even if it's a short story.

They say that life is the most precious gift of all.

They're wrong!



Spider-Man 2. Dir. by Sam Raimi. With Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, Alfred Molina. Writers Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, Columbia Pictures 2004.



Any
questions?



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