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.
"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."
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

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

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.
Superheroes always have foes who have similar powers.

Thor and Loki

Batman and the Joker

Prof. Charles Xavier and Magneto

Harry Potter and Voldemort

Spiderman and Venom

...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...
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...).
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).
3 Foci to situate the superhero

1) The Storytelling Animal
2) The Monomyth
3) Meaning
Humans are creatures of story; story touches every aspect of our lives. Cause - Effect, meaning...

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

Creation: Order out of Chaos: the unstructured, the anti-order

The Monomyth
The Hero (re-)establishe{s Order and
vanquishes Chaos

Beowulf
Odin
Buddha
Christ
Brahma
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.”


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
End of Days tells the story of a cop whose wife and child were murdered. He became a drunk. One day, he got 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.

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)
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.
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
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.
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
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
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 form 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.

Batthyany, Alexander: Logotherapy and Existential Analysis.
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.
They say that life is the most precious gift of all. They’re wrong!

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!
Any questions?
Bibliography:

- Campbell, Joseph. The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Princeton Univ. Pr. 2nd ed, 3rd printing, 1973
- Frankl, Viktor. Man's Search for Meaning [original: saying yes to life anyway. A psychologist lives through the concentration camp), Beacon Press 2006.
Superheroes to the Rescue

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