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Our culture permeates with archetypal images of superheroes in everything from blockbuster films, television programs, books to trading cards, jewelry, and even art. The superhero is usually a brazen man or woman clad in a brightly colored, figure-fitting suit that's embellished with a silky cape or other flamboyant accoutrement. The superhero bravely swoops in to pull a crying baby from the perilous depths of a burning building, or dashes out of the bright sky to scoop up a pedestrian from the pathway of an out-of-control taxicab. These acts of bravery are always performed at just the right moment before tragedy occurs. The superhero is depicted as doing these things regularly, in fact, daily.

The superhero is often calm and mild-mannered, but strong. No matter what the "bad guy" says to the superhero (or hits him with), the superhero triumphs over the evildoer with an elegant, well-mannered, and mystical panache. Although superheroes are understood to be fictitious, we go out of our way to honor them in our culture. We devote entire movies to their ethereal, gilded qualities. Actors are paid huge sums to portray them. We give our children toys of their likenesses. We dress up as these champions for costume parties.

Our culture is most certainly enamored with what the superhero embodies—the bold, aggressive presence of someone who knows what to do in any situation. We prize the showing of courage, the taking of action, and the righting of wrong. However, what many of us have yet to recognize is that real superheroes exist. We are surrounded by ordinary superheroes that do good in the world, but by simply living honest, spiritual lives, and by working in the community to help others. These are people who love truth more than ego, clarity more than power over others, and honesty more than self-aggrandizement.

What type of people are ordinary superheroes? They are all types. Where do they work and live? They live all over. They are librarians, teachers, garbage collectors, high-powered CEOs, monks, and mothers raising babies. They are all genders, and they are all religions. They are all ages, races, and persuasions. But, the ordinary superheroes among us do not necessarily stand out. You probably wouldn't notice them seated next to you on the bus or in the Laundromat, but they are there. And, if you happen to know one of these people, you know

that they are remarkable and have amazing powers (without the flashy costumes).

My friend Ellen C. is an ordinary superhero, though she would probably balk at the suggestion, blush, and quickly change the subject. Ellen works (more than full time) as a Director of Program Management at a large, Fortune 500 company in Silicon Valley, California and is the mother of two school-age children. In her limited free time, Ellen participates in the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team in Training program, which raises funds for research to find a cure for leukemia, lymphoma, and other blood cancers.

Ellen spends hours-upon-hours promoting the cause, fundraising, supporting her athlete teammates, and supporting her Honorees—people who are valiantly battling leukemia, lymphoma, or other blood cancers, all while giving of themselves and encouraging the team athletes to persevere in their training. Ellen does this volunteer work in the community not only because she's passionate, intelligent, and empathetic, but also because she realizes that human beings have a responsibility to help each other. "It's the right thing to do," she tells me. "I can't even imagine the pain and suffering that people with cancer endure. The burning in my legs while peddling up a huge hill, the pain in my lungs and back is nothing compared to the agony of undergoing chemotherapy and spinal taps. This is what I tell myself to get up those mountains. The more I ride, run, or swim, the better I make it for others. I am compelled to help".

Ellen uses her time to help other people, because she realizes how important it is for the strong to bolster those of us who are weakened. "We really are all in this together," she says, "and it's no more apparent than when you see what was once was a strong, vital, and healthy person lying in a hospital bed weakened to the point that they can hardly lift their head."

Though the ordinary superheroes among us could just go about their work, go on with their lives, and pretend that these challenges don't exist, they consciously choose to give of themselves, work in the community, and help in whatever way they can. As a result, we all benefit from their tremendous spirit, energy, and compassion; energy that they willingly give translates to stronger bonds between people and stronger communities.

By varied methods, many ordinary superheroes devote themselves to understanding the self first. This is often a difficult and arduous process, but one that they undertake anyway. Ordinary superheroes know that only through examining one's motives, thoughts, and feelings, can one truly emerge from childhood behaviors, heal past trauma, and move into a deeper, more-connected way of living. In her book *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*, the author, Marsha Sinetar writes: "Wholeness exists to the extent an individual is conscious of and receptive to his innermost self. The more aware and accepting a person becomes of his inner images and motivations, the more he becomes healed." And, the more a person can know the self and heal, the more that person can do for themselves, other people, and the community. If you make the self stronger, you have more to offer other people. If you work to understand your motivations, seek healing, and emerge from dysfunctional patterns, you can more easily support others around you. This is what the ordinary superhero among us does.

These strong souls bravely face the darkness of the self to heal past wounds and then turn that self-awareness, that "health", outward to begin helping other people. They find creative ways to be useful in the community, to serve others, and to give. We're not necessarily talking about a "Mother Theresa-level" of service and giving. Quite mundane tasks are undertaken by the ordinary superhero but are done so with a sense of duty and passion.

Ordinary superheroes are the folks who volunteer to stand on street corners wearing bright vests and waving flags so school kids can safely cross-busy streets. These are the folks who go to nursing homes and visit with the residents. These are parents, who accept their children's separateness, look deeply into their children's eyes, and regularly ask their kids, "Who are you becoming? I really want to know." And, they do want to know. These are the doctors who devote part of their office schedules to healing the underprivileged, and in many cases, those who are unable to pay. These are bosses who treat their employees with kindness and respect and as a result, engender abiding loyalty in their co-workers by

providing an atmosphere of openness, communication, and trust.



Ordinary superheroes know that their words are powerful, influential, and self-fulfilling. As a result, they take ownership of their emotions—all of them. For example, they often admit when they are angry and, as often as possible, they take steps to express their anger in useful, safe, and constructive ways. Why? Because the ordinary superhero remembers that people are sensitive to strong emotions and that the expression of one's emotions might not be completely appropriate in a given situation. People who take responsibility for the way they feel and avoid blaming others for their feelings are ordinary superheroes, because they understand that feelings are valid and can be dealt with in constructive ways. These people discuss problems openly, hear other people's truth without unnecessary defenses, and resolve disputes with candor and acceptance.

Some people might think that the acts, gestures, and qualities of the ordinary superhero are insignificant, but clearly, we would all benefit if more people took these positive qualities and behaviors to heart and acted from a place of deep awareness, knowing, and acceptance. What if more of our bosses, parents, siblings, and friends were ordinary superheroes? How might our culture be different? How might our government behave? Would we be better at listening to each other? Would we find it easier to accept other people's truth if we were more secure in our own? Would we be more patient with ourselves when we behave less than loving? Would we more easily forgive others when they behave less than honorably? We would, because all of these behaviors are natural by-products of living an examined and honest life. All of these behaviors are natural results of realizing our true connection to each other.

So, the man collecting your garbage could very well be enlightened. The woman at the corner sandwich place who looks every customer in the eyes and smiles is an "awake" individual, an ordinary superhero. The single mother who raises three children with integrity and compassion is making society a better place because, despite the difficulties, she's bringing up three children who know that they are adored and have the necessary self-esteem to bring good energy into our sometimes troubled world. As M. Scott Peck wrote in his book *The Road Less Traveled*: "Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them?"

The ordinary superheroes among us are devoted to living consciously and solving life's problems no matter how difficult it might be to stick to that path. They can speak up and stand in the center of their feelings despite the fact that others do not always honor those feelings. They watch their thoughts, even when their minds are scrambled, speak their truth, even when afraid to do so, and meditate or pray, despite a pervasive and daily fatigue. As a natural by-product of this earnestness and devotion to truth, the ordinary superhero often volunteers in the community to help other less-advantaged people.

Human beings who are devoted to a spiritual, awake, and connected life are our culture's true superheroes. They anchor society with positive thoughts, do good works because they know that helping others is not only wonderful but right and necessary, and they set positive examples for everyone around them. If we as a species are to thrive, truly thrive, and continue sustaining ourselves on this wonderful earth, we must find ways to honor the qualities that the ordinary superheroes among us represent.

These folks not only create a better environment directly around themselves, they lend balance to all of humanity by dealing with problems honestly, seeking truth, working at communication, and devoting themselves to activism. This important work does manifest itself in better bonds between people and stronger communities. These qualities do make a positive

difference in our world. This devotion to healing and helping others makes the ordinary superheroes among us much more influential, powerful, and valuable than any two-dimensional character in a film or comic book.

For more information about the cited work, *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*, by Marsha Sinetar visit www.marshasinetar.com. To purchase *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* by M. Scott Peck, visit www.mscottpeck.com.