

## **Multi-Player Mentoring**

**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**

**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

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I have a mental block when it comes to heroes. Now and then someone asks this question: “Who do you admire?” or “Who inspires you?” I do not have a ready answer. I envy people who can honestly and quickly point to an historical figure. I found out the hard way about my hero-less inner universe a few years ago in Florida. I was competing in a Toastmasters contest at the regional level. Toastmasters is an organization which helps people regarding public speaking.

I was competing in what is called “Table Topics.” That is where a contestant has no more than three minutes to speak extemporaneously on a topic. I was on stage in a hotel ballroom filled with about 300 people. I tried to quiet my mind and to get my “butterflies” to “fly in formation,” as the Toastmasters mantra goes. The person announcing my topic cleared his throat and said “Eros.” What?! I am supposed to talk about “eros” (a Greek word for passionate love) for three minutes in front of 300 strangers? You have got to be kidding!

Fortunately, the speaker repeated the topic. Just as clearly as I heard “eros” the first time, the second time I heard “heroes.” Oh, heroes! I said something – knowing me, I probably said that I did not relate much to heroes. I did not win, place, or show, but I was so relieved not to have to speak about “eros” that I did not care. I would like to think that my relative impermeability to the influence of heroes is because I believe everyone has strengths and weaknesses, heroes included. I also believe that any strength, taken to an extreme, turns into a weakness.

But that is my adult self talking. Looking back, when I was ages 10 to 13, I loved the television show “Star Trek.” The original series ran from 1966 to 1969. I never missed an episode. My

parents teased me about it: “Star Trek? Oh, that’s the show where doors are always opening and closing.” [gesture how doors opened and closed] For a girl, the years leading up to the start of the teenage years can be a time of insecurity. High school looms, and the outlines of social strata become apparent in middle school: Popularity is the currency of the realm, and many of the elements of popularity are not within the control of a pre-teen.

Two life lessons from Star Trek served me well in navigating teenage and young adult years. First, women can have adventures, too. It is not just men who got to have adventures. Second, women did not have to choose between being smart and being attractive. Communications Officer Lt. Uhura epitomized this for me. She was bright, important, and attractive. I could aspire to brains and beauty. Now I’m ready to answer a Table Topic question regarding heroes. I would name Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Uhura. I would also name everyone who had a hand in shaping the multiracial, multi-ethnic cast on Star Trek. My parents were half right: Star Trek was about doors opening.

Which comic book character or TV show character is your hero or heroine? Your answer may say quite a bit about you. This morning’s service is based on the insights of Doug Muder in a recent *UU World* magazine entitled “Reclaiming Krypton.” He writes, “As a boy I watched cartoons and read comic books, and my heroes were orphans,” he says.<sup>1</sup> Batman’s murdered parents lived on only as a portrait above the fireplace and a gravestone on which to swear vengeance. Spider-Man’s mother and father were also long dead, and even the uncle who raised him had to die to give him a proper superhero origin. But the most extreme case was my favorite hero, Superman: The whole planet of Krypton blew up behind his escaping rocket, and its shards became the deadly kryptonite. Watch out for the past. It can kill you . . . “

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/172751.shtml>

“I was not consciously thinking about superheroes when I came to Unitarian Universalism in the late eighties. But looking back, I can see how the fantasies of my youth foreshadowed both the virtues and vices of my adult religion. The Unitarian Universalist church I joined in my thirties was an ideal place for orphans whose birth-planets had exploded. Its three centuries of history were visible but ignorable, like a statue in the park whose plaque is never read. We might begin a service with a pithy quote from William Ellery Channing or Hosea Ballou, or bring the colonial silver out of its safe-deposit box once a year to reenact communion. But we never seriously engaged with the Christian worldviews of those Unitarian and Universalist giants or with the rituals they found meaningful.”

“Instead, we called ourselves heretics and reveled in our rebellion. We framed our history as a series of exploded birth-planets: UU Buddhists and Pagans had escaped from Humanism, Humanists from liberal Christianity, liberal Christians from Calvinism, Calvin and Luther from Catholicism, Catholics from Judaism, Jews from Paganism . . . it was rocket ships and sole survivors all the way back. And whatever planet you had come from, the shards of its explosion were deadly kryptonite now.”

In contrast to Doug Muder’s generation (which is also my generation), those who are young adults today are comfortable having a mentor. The comic book characters they grew up with (such as the X-Men and Buffy the Vampire Slayer) had mentors. If you were going to be a force for good in the world, you no longer had to figure things out on your own; allies were there to help you. Doug Muder writes, “The generation that is now in young adulthood has grown up with an expectation—or maybe just a hope—that would have been foreign to me as a boy: *Somewhere, someone ought to have a wisdom worth passing on, a legacy worth living up to.* As that generation shows up on the doorsteps of UU churches (with their toddlers in tow) what kind of Unitarian Universalism will they be looking for?”

In a moment, Robert Tidwell will share his perspective on comic book heroes and present day mentors. I will conclude with exciting news from last Sunday's Board of Trustees meeting. Beginning next fall, a student minister will do his or her internship here with us! As background, the congregation has served as an intern minister teaching site at least three times in the past. Former interns include Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford, the Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson, and the Rev. Monica Cummings.

The congregations benefits from being a teaching site in several ways.

A good teaching site is dedicated to excellence in ministry, perceives the "formation" of ministerial interns as part of its mission, gives an intern the opportunity to make a significant contribution, enables an intern to pursue learning goals in a supportive atmosphere, provides opportunities for a variety of professional experiences, and understands the value of Unitarian Universalism in the larger community. Each of these qualities strengthens a congregation.

Interns bring vitality, enthusiasm, curiosity, openness, fresh perspectives, and contemporary theology school perspectives to a congregation. Having an intern minister can help strengthen lay leadership through the work of the intern committee. In addition, congregation members tend to "stretch" in positive ways when a student minister is interacting with them. Over time and in conjunction with other cultural shifts, having an intern may indirectly help a congregation to grow from the "pastoral" size to the "program" size.

We will once again have the opportunity to mentor a student minister. It will be "multi-player mentoring." "Multi-player" is a reference to a video game where there are hundreds, thousands, or more players on line at the same time, playing the same game. Not only are the multi-player games, there are MMOG's (*massively* multi-player online games), and they may have millions of players online playing the same game in the course of a day.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively\\_multiplayer\\_online\\_game](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively_multiplayer_online_game).

I will be the intern minister's supervisor, but I am not the only person who will mentor the student minister. You – members, visitors, congregants – will also mentor the intern minister. True, next year's intern minister will not experience *massively* multi-player mentoring, but he or she will experience mentoring from all of us, each in distinct ways. May we share our wisdom with each other. May learning together be our goal. May it be so!