

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAMILTON WORSHIP SERVICE

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Title: Watching Zack Snyder's Justice League through a Unitarian Universalist Lens

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CALL TO WORSHIP

From Superman, a refugee's success story by Sarah Newgarden & Mensch of Steel: Superman's Jewish Roots by Ethan Lewis

You probably know the story of Superman. Born on the dying planet Krypton, baby Kal-El was rocketed to Earth with moments to spare, and was found and raised by a couple in Kansas who named him Clark Kent ... and the rest is comic-book history.

As an outsider, Superman had a unique view of the forces of good and evil shaping his new world. Although he gained a new identity and built a successful career in America, he isn't celebrated for being an assimilated refugee; he's beloved because he used his abilities to improve and protect the society that gave him refuge.

Superman's original creators, Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, were children of poor Jewish immigrants.

When Jerry Siegel was asked what led him to co-create Superman in the 1930's he replied: "Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany ... seeing movies depicting the horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden ... I had the great urge to help... help the downtrodden masses, somehow. How could I help them when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer."

Superman's identity is shaped both by where he came from and the strong morals and values instilled in him by his adoptive parents. He inherited his abilities from Krypton ... but it was the Kents who inspired him to become a hero.

Superman was something new and special ... and not just because he had superpowers. Apart from his normal crime-fighting activity, he spoke out against issues including social injustice, corruption, domestic violence and racial inequality.

His dual identity, an American and a refugee, is the true reason why Superman is the embodiment of American culture. He escaped from the perils of his home, integrated himself in American culture, then made the choice to give back to those who gave him safety, using his original heritage for the greater good.

CONTEMPLATION

I Am The Night: An Interview with Kevin Conroy written by Sarah Miles

This morning's reading is from Kevin Conroy. He is an actor and has been the voice of Batman in various animated television series and movies since 1993 to present day.

I think the reason Batman is so iconic, is because of all the superheroes he's the only one who has no superpowers at all. He's just an ordinary person, but what he has is a super amount of passion. And a super sense of right and wrong, morality, and so he's just an average guy – with a billion dollars – who transforms himself into this champion of pure good, there's nothing in it for him, he gets nothing out of this except the knowledge that he's healing the world. And it's all because of what happened to him as a child, avenging what happened to, the murder of his parents, and his being left as an orphan. Life throws him this huge curve ball as a child, and he takes it and he turns it into something good, and that's why audiences love him so much. People relate to him because every-one has had dark nights of the soul, we all do, people with the most charmed lives have had dark periods. So everyone relates to the darkness that Bruce Wayne goes through, and what they admire about him is his ability to overcome it, and to turn it into something good.

HOMILY

Since I was born in 1974 it feels like I was raised on the modern mythology of Comic Book Superhero movies. Starting with 1978's Superman directed by Richard Donner starring Christopher Reeve, to 1989's Batman directed by Tim Burton starring Michael Keaton, to 2000's X-Men directed by Bryan Singer and starring Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellan, to 2002's Spiderman directed by Sam Raimi starring Tobey Maguire, to 2005's Batman Begins directed by Christopher Nolan and starring Christian Bale, to 2017's Wonder Woman directed by Patty Jenkins and starring Gal Gadot, to 2018's Black Panther directed by Ryan Coogler and starring Chadwick Boseman.

Now with the Disney corporation buying the Marvel Cinematic Universe there seems to be a brand new Superhero movie or television series every other month. Like so many of us during this pandemic I have been binge watching media via various streaming sites and one of the many I things I watched was Zack Snyder's Justice League.

I first saw Justice League in a sold out movie theatre back in 2017. I had read that Buffy: The Vampire Slayer's Joss Whedon was brought in to "save" the film because the original Director, Zack Snyder, had to step down due to a family tragedy. The buzz was that Joss was Zack's personal pick to rescue the project that he had to step away from. Joss had come to even more prominence in the superhero movie world for writing and directing the box office blockbuster Avengers films for Marvel, so his reputation was stellar and gave the project some legitimacy.

Sadly 2017's Justice League was a tonal mess that felt and looked like it was assembled by committee. I remember being profoundly underwhelmed and angered by the casual sexism and toxic male gaze throughout the film. Suddenly all the Amazons were in skimpier outfits than what they wore in the Wonder Woman film and every

time Gal Gadot appeared on screen she was wearing skin tight apparel.

Since 2017 some skeletons have come out of the closet.

Joss not so beloved. Not actually Zack's pick. Allegations of abusive behaviour from Joss towards his cast and crew during the making of the film have been made public. Further allegations of abusive and predatory behavior have been made by the casts of his two hit TV series, Buffy and Angel, as well.

Zack's daughter Autumn died due to suicide during the making of the film and yes that is officially why Zack stepped away from the project, but there were problems brewing between him and the studio long before this tragedy.

Zack had a creative vision that was going to follow what he already laid out in Man of Steel and Batman Vs. Superman. Problem was Batman Vs. Superman was almost universally panned and the studios were weary of yet another grim and gloomy depiction of the DC Universe.

The suits ordered the film's Producers to babysit and monitor Snyder while he was filming to ensure that they didn't have another dour depressing superhero film and also to keep him under budget. So Zack had many reasons to walk away from things.

Then Zack's fan base started a campaign, #ReleaseTheSnyderCut, that seemed like a never to be fulfilled pipe dream.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened.

Suddenly movie theatres were shuttered for over a year. Everyone started watching movies at home on their TVs or digital devices on streaming services.

HBO Max was launched, but had no new content.

It was a perfect storm for fans to finally get to see that Snyder Cut.

Zack had a vision. That vision was on his personal laptop and he would occasionally show it to friends. Rumours swirled amongst his fans about the #SnyderCut and they clamoured hard for his version of Justice League to be shared with everyone. This project was also very personal for him as its creation was intertwined with the tragic death of his daughter. The final title card at the end of his version of the film says For Autumn and Allison Crowe sings Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah during the final credits. A song she sung at Autumn's funeral at Zack's request because it was his daughter's favourite song. I'm happy for him that he was able to find a creative outlet for his grief. He asked to not be paid a salary for making this new version of the film and instead wanted any profits from the film to go towards the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in honour of his daughter. His fan base is super excited and thrilled with this new version of the film and I'm happy for them too.

But ...

Is Zack Snyder's Justice League any good? More on that later.

Is it better than the 2017 Joss Whedon version? Yes. But that's not saying much.

Tonally Zack's version of the film goes in the direction of Peter Jackson's original Lord of The Rings trilogy. Super epic good against evil since the dawn of time kind of vibe.

Far far far removed from Joss Whedon's Avenger-esque style original version with loads of quip filled humour moments.

Plots and characters are more fleshed out in Zack Snyder's version. Well they had better be when you have an over four hour running time. Ray Fisher's Cyborg is given a far more substantial arc. And Martian Manhunter even shows up!

But ...

I have the same problem with this film that I have with so many of Snyder's films.

He can create a beautiful image like no one's business.

Each frame is like a painting.

Or more specifically like a splash page in a graphic novel.

But I often find character development is his fatal flaw. He directs and writes to get his characters to that perfect image. He doesn't follow his characters and their motivations in order for the plot to unfold and surprise us.

I think back to Snyder's film adaptation of Watchmen. He slavishly recreated images from that iconic graphic novel, but he never really understood them. He didn't seem to get the subversion of the comic book genre and the American mindset that Alan Moore was doing with that seminal work. He even turned the graphic novel's INCEL character Rorschach into a redemptive hero. So the tone of the film was all wrong. Unlike the recent television miniseries adaptation of Watchmen which totally did get that subversive tone and then took it in directions that Moore hadn't and elevated them even further by exploring issues surrounding race and White Supremacy in the United States.

After the Snyder Cut was released I tuned in to several of my favourite YouTubers to find out their takes on it and it was while watching and listening to them that I discovered that Zack Snyder is a devotee of Ayn Rand. Rand was a Russian-American writer who developed a philosophical system she named Objectivism. Rand described Objectivism as "the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute". Rand's philosophy is very much rooted in her

rejection of the Communist system she escaped from in Russia. Her philosophy is also one that far right conservatives have taken to with an almost fanatical fervor as her philosophy rejects altruism and lifts up selfishness.

This explains a lot about why I feel that when a comic book hero story is told through Snyder's lens it never really quite works.

In the first film of Snyder's Superman Trilogy, 2013's Man Of Steel, with Henry Cavil in the title role there is a moment between a young Clark Kent and his adoptive Father Jonathan Kent where he gives his son a reprimand for saving his classmates lives after their school bus falls off a bridge and into a lake. He actually tells Clark that he should have let his classmates die. Later in the same film Jonathan refuses to let Clark save him during a Tornado mostly to make a point. Whoah! What!?!?! We then have a trilogy of films about a broody and moody guy with god like powers and Daddy issues. And don't even get me started with the scene in Batman vs. Superman where the two title characters stop beating the crap out of each other and destroying multiple buildings because they discover their Mommies had the same name – Martha. Ugh!

Comic Books are meant to be a modern day American mythology. The stories of the gods and goddess of ancient Greece were often fables to teach lessons or explain the complexity of the universe. Superheroes in comic books have for generations taught similar lessons to their readers.

I remember watching the cheesy Super Friends cartoons on Saturday mornings when I was a little kid. Wonder Twin Powers Activate! As basic as those animated episodes may seem now there was always the theme of people with different extraordinary talents coming together for a common positive purpose and using teamwork to save the day.

In Zack Snyder's Justice League there isn't consensus building, community collective awareness or a rising solidarity movement to

align the people of Earth against a hostile alien invader. A handful of people with extraordinary powers make decisions on behalf of all of humanity often times with tragic results. Even amongst Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Aquaman and Cyborg there isn't a lot of teamwork going on. Watch those fight scenes. Very few times do all of the Supers go up against the heavy together in a coordinated attack. They kind of each do their own thing and on occasion another character might offer a hand.

Even in Justice League, when we flashback to the dawn of time ALL the people of the earth, air and sky go into a battle together much like the battle against Sauron in The Lord of the Rings. In Justice League's present day it is just the Supers going against the army of baddies. Humans are just in the way, even though we are the ones they are supposedly "saving".

If you are motivated by Objectivism in the way you perceive the world then you aren't too interested in creating community, protecting the environment, providing education, sharing the wealth ... etc. because your purpose is focused on self. So if you are an all-powerful being who is not using democratic, socialist or even collectivist tools in your decision making that makes you a very dangerous person.

And if this is how you want your Superheroes to navigate the world we all live in then the title of Hero is dubious at best. The question Agatha throws at Wanda in the series finale of Wandavision flashes to my mind: "Are you a hero or are you a villain? Heroes don't torture people."

I'll always remember that scene in Spiderman 2 where Tobey Maguire's Spiderman goes into a battle against Alfred Molina's Doc Ock to save people riding on an elevated train. Peter Parker gets beaten up. Badly. He even loses his mask in the midst of the battle. After saving everyone on the train he collapses from the exhaustion and the strain. The passengers then lift him up and save him. No one whips out a camera to take a picture and expose his secret identity.

They not only show their gratitude and respect for everything he has done, but also loving concern and solidarity especially once they all realize that he's just a kid. They even put their bodies between Spidey and Doc Ock's when the villain comes back for round two.

Spidey's Christ-Like pose in that scene makes me think on this Bible verse ...

"Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each has his own gift from God, one in this way, and another in that." - 1 Corinthians 7:7

A thought that is echoed in a slightly different way from Gandalf to Frodo in The Lord of The Rings.

Frodo: I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

So in the end this is what is missing from Zack Snyder's Justice League.

A sense of joy and hope.

A commitment from all humanity to aspire to be more than we are now, not so we can attain power and better ourselves, but so we can leave this world a better and more sustainable one for future generations yet to come.

A willingness to share power and resources so everyone can have access to those things that make life worth living.

Because Superheroes are supposed to represent the best of us. They are who we aspire to be. They are the epitome of what it means to

be our “best selves”. They should bring people together so that all of humanity can demonstrate their “gifts” and “decide to do” the right thing in “the time that is given to us”.

And that’s the kind of justice team I’m rooting for.

BENEDICTION

Diana Prince’s final words from the end of the 1997 film Wonder Woman written by Allan Heinberg

Our Benediction comes for the 2017 film Wonder Woman written by Allan Heinberg. These are Diana Prince’s final words at the end of the film.

I used to want to save the world. To end war and bring peace to mankind. But then, I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their light. I learned that inside every one of them, there will always be both. The choice each must make for themselves - something no hero will ever defeat. I've touched the darkness that lives in between the light. Seen the worst of this world, and the best. Seen the terrible things men do to each other in the name of hatred, and the lengths they'll go to for love. Now I know. Only love can save this world. So I stay. I fight, and I give... for the world I know can be. This is my mission, now. Forever.