

THE ONE TRUE SUPERPOWER

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I am thirteen and convinced, that it's finally going to happen.
No, not my menstrual period, although I've been waiting for that, too.
I mean.... Magic.

I am convinced that someone at the post office is a hater,
and has returned-to-sender my Hogwarts letter.

I am convinced my parents are afraid
of what I'd do with immense super powers,
so they haven't put me in the right high-pressure situation
to express my mutant gene.

I am convinced the Mal de Ojo bracelet my grandma gave me
secretly hides Dominican dragon balls,
and I'm a super saiyan bruja in the making.

See, I've watched all the TV shows,
and read the books: I know the signs for magic.

Just last week, I had a dream where my teeth
shattered in my mouth like dropped dinner plates...
and when I woke, I learned my mother's uncle's friend had died.
And everyone knows shattered teeth dreams always mean
someone's died. So, basically, I must be able to predict the future.

And yesterday,
after Jessica Martinez made fun of my fat big toe in gym again,
I gave her a squinty look
out the corner of my eye and she tripped.
OVER NOTHING. Except for my supernatural shade.

And last month, after September 11th,

and the attacks at the World Trade Center
Mami & I went to a candlelight vigil
and when two doves were released into the sky
one of them landed right on my shoulder!

And I don't know if "Dove Calling" is technically a super power,
but when everyone looked at me, eyes full of wonder,
I knew I could stop landslides, or battle sea monsters,
one pretty pigeon at a time.

Plus! A couple of days ago,
I woke up in the middle of the night for absolutely no reason,
I just felt something telling me to walk to the kitchen
and there my mother stood alone silently crying.
And when I hugged her she stopped.

There had to be a reason why I knew to wake up, right?
There had to be a reason why I had a healing touch, right?

Sometimes, when my parents fight
I can make myself small and invisible,
I can close my eyes and teleport into another family.
One that my imagination has created from scratch,
a family where I don't need to be fluent in silence and slammed doors.
An Incredibles-like family where we battle dysfunctional villains,
not where we become them.

A family that doesn't blink an eye when I tell them I think I'm magical.
That doesn't say "Those are just Coincidences, Liz. Just coincidences..."

But the magic keeps me waiting.
So, I lay at night praying to the Capital "G" God,
& The Capital "G" Green Lantern,
praying to every being in between to give me whatever powers I need.

And when the magic finally does arrive,

I know it'll be just like an express train
one that I heard rumbling before anyone else in the station,
something enchanted, something inside me chanting, roaring through my
body,
loud big fast and entering at just the right time to save the day...

When I was thirteen years old, I began to take my writing seriously. I don't think it's a coincidence that during that age there were a lot of personal situations at home that I only knew how to process through words. I come from a family where we hide our pain behind our smiles and pretend there is nothing knocking against our teeth trying to escape.

I come from a family where we buried our hurt and confusion in silence, and then turned our backs when that same hurt and confusion pushed the dirt away from the burial and began to haunt us.

Writing was a way for me to provide safe passage to some of the feelings I had, because I could mask them behind metaphor, or disassociate them into the third person, or when I felt too vulnerable, I could always say, it was simply fiction.

But my personal tragedies weren't the only ones with which I was grappling.

The autumn that I was thirteen years old, two planes were deliberately crashed into the tallest skyscrapers in my hometown of New York City. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers was horrific in a multitude of ways. I watched with confusion as it changed my hometown. I saw how it amplified the negative rhetoric around immigrants. I saw how it created scapegoats out of my community members. I didn't know that what I was really seeing was how language was utilized to feed fear, and spark hate.

None of the conflicts that I was immediately surrounded by had easy answers, and yet, I was full of nothing but questions. So, I looked to writing. I looked to stories. Literature gave me an outlet, it offered me an opportunity to reimagine the world. To reconsider who was allowed to speak up and be a hero.

I was born and raised in the United States of America, a country that is inundated with terrorist attacks. The majority of these terrorist attacks are homegrown. Mostly led by angry white men who are afraid, seemingly, of anything and everything that is different than what they know. In the country where I am from, it is a scary time to be a person of a background that is not a white, straight, cis-man. So much of the language that is being used by homegrown-terrorists is a mimicry of the most isolationist and fearmongering myths that any country has ever propagated.

And yet, the kind of hate pandering that is taking place in the United States is not merely a United States issue. As I have increasingly been reading global news with more and more dismay, I see the kind of rhetoric that is prevalent in American politics also being touted by other world leaders; leaders who are dividing their nations using callous and hateful speech.

As a former language arts and literature teacher, I truly believe that I can listen to a world leader speak and determine what kind of literature they read, or if they even read at all. As an educator, it was my job to determine what

kinds of book would inspire a person. And as I watch the news, I find myself fictively supplying reading lists to politicians.

For the ones who don't believe in climate change I want to assign them science fiction. I wish they could see how speculative writers have been describing the circumstances we are currently living: food insecurity, rising waters and temperatures, a lack of drinkable water and high rates of species going extinct. Speculative writers were imagining the future when only a glimpse of what we are currently living was available for them to draw their stories upon. And sci-fi writers are still doing it: foretelling a dystopian world that is coming if we do not pay attention and address these massive concerns.

I wish I could give the nativist and populist politicians who would run campaigns on hate, romance novels. I wish I could have them delve into stories about love. Stories that have happily ever after constraints but that are required by the form they are written to *earn* that joy. I think those politicians would learn a lot about what it could mean to backwards plan a narrative of nation from a place of hope and possibility. From the place we

want to end up, not merely the place we are currently in. And showing them an example of what a shining knight *actually* acts like doesn't seem remiss.

I wish I could give anyone who ran for office my favorite collections of poetry. I don't know how you can promise to serve and be a servant of the people if you don't read poems. I don't know that anything gets us closer to decent personhood than partaking in the human experience of someone else from such an intimate form of writing.

Fantasy novels for folks who need a lesson on power dynamics. Historical fiction for the willfully ignorant. Over and over I listen to the people who lead our world and I think about all the stories that would make them better equipped to do their jobs.

And yes, I would assign every single world leader a book list of the best fiction for children and young adults. As a reminder to them that their ultimate goal should not benefit their own greed or advancements of power; it should not be centered around their own individual biases and localized

agendas, but the center of their decisions should be about the generations coming next, you all, who have to run with the baton we pass.

Unfortunately, I cannot assign reading to anyone these days. I berate the television, and huff at social media, and yell at podcasts, and bang my metaphorical fists. And most days it is difficult not to feel despondent. Not to wonder what the point of any of this writing is when perhaps we may not have a world in eighty years for anyone to enjoy a story. Isn't all this writing a luxury when language is being used to destroy the world around us?

And then I come to festivals like this one. Where I meet readers like you, and realize that this assembly is an example of how humans were first brought together: around a myth about the crops, to spread the gossip of a gatherer, to raise their voice in song. We return to what first made individuals into community every time an author pens a story, and every time a reader picks it up.

As I have written and re-written this speech, that single truth about storytelling, is what I keep holding up to the light. Story is what brings us back to each other. Whether it is our own individual hurt, or the hurt of all in our land, storytelling as a way to the truth, to light, is the only glinting thing I clasp in my hand.

The magic arriving into my body, that feeling I described in the opening poem, was my learning that writing could save me. But I believe now, the magic wasn't only in the writing, it was in the sharing. It was in the reading of other people's work as much as it was in the making of my own. Because if I learned one thing from reading Harry Potter, or listening to Dominican folktales, it is that a spell is always best cast when there are multiple people chanting.

Through storytelling there is an exchange of information, of ideas and feelings, of an intergenerational linkage that is foundational to battling the fear that would tell us we are alone. That would tell us, we should be left alone; That would lie to us and say our hearts must be a graveyard where

pain and shame is buried, as if we do not know, that polluted feelings rot the earth where they are planted. Our very lives depend on us learning ourselves, and learning about others.

And what better way HH to do that than storytelling? When it *is* the original magic, the tissue that connected individuals and created, and recreated, and still manifests society. And so, I hope we all keep calling on and deploying our own super powers to tell the stories that matter, and reading the ones that both comfort and challenge us. That comfort **AND** challenge us.

Because I truly believe that engaging in literature is like an offering of bread being passed around the dinner table: it gives us a chance to touch fingertips, it feeds us in our hungriest places, it requires us to break the hard parts with our teeth, and it is an entryway into empathy. And the latter, ultimately the latter, is the only thing that will save the day, that will heal this world where it hurts.