

From Cerebral Palsy to Drug Rehab, Discover the Heroism in Weakness

In the midst of a culture that prizes and praises strength as a portent of success, could weakness actually be heroic? If I told you that weakness is worthwhile, would you believe it? These are questions to wrestle with, and this Saturday a panel discussion on “The Heroics of Weakness” will do just that at AwesomeCon coming to Washington, D.C.

With popular superheroes—think Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America and Iron Man—we often focus on their powers and abilities as what makes them heroic. We do this because we desperately want to see even a small part of ourselves in these characters. Culture has conditioned us to desire strength and success by parading before us film, TV, sports, music and other celebrities who seem to have what most of us can only dream of.

We don't focus on the weaknesses present in some of these role models and superheroes, things that might make them seem “less.” Anyone who has spent much time on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has, at times, played this same game: doing what we can to present our best self.

To inject an alternative to this narrative at AwesomeCon, my co-panelist Jennifer Breedon and I will be looking at weakness through the lens of some of the on-screen Marvel characters—notably Iron Man and Black Widow.

As someone who lives with cerebral palsy, a disability affecting balance, dexterity, muscle tone and mobility, I live with an inescapable weakness. My diagnosis occurred shortly after being born 10 weeks premature. Today, that's not as bad as it sounds thanks to medical advances that help preemie

babies. But about 30 years ago, it was a death sentence for most little lives. Except me.

Standing with my parents in an elevator days after my birth, a doctor explained how grave my situation was and that they expected me to die. My parents had to decide if they wanted to either “distance themselves” from me—cold words to hear from a doctor—so that when I died the pain would be less. Or they could press into the situation and, in the words of family and friends, “love me to life.”

So it is that I gravitate toward heroic characters who also live with weakness, superheroes like Iron Man. Billionaire industrialist Tony Stark has a heart disability because of shrapnel clawing its way toward his heart. That shrapnel is kept in check by an electromagnet turned miniature power source which also powers his Iron Man armor.

To overcome his challenges, Tony has his Iron Man suits. Like him, I have The FENX Project. The FENX is an experimental scooter, built by my dad, that takes design inspiration from the aviation industry, Star Wars and Tron. Because of it, opportunities to share my story of perseverance and hope—from television, to print, to radio and live events like the Students for Life of America conference—have arisen like the mythological bird the phoenix. My father’s love, ingenuity and appreciation for heroic characters has been instilled in me.

In the first Avengers film, Tony entertains the idea of “terrible privilege”: that the heroic can emerge from the terrible and purpose can arise from pain. This idea has had a profound effect on me. I’ve embraced that living with a disability is a terrible privilege; without it, I wouldn’t be able to step into the opportunities I’ve been given to speak into the lives of others.

Though I didn’t realize it then, my parents modeled this for me. Decades before Tony Stark ever uttered the words, my

parents embraced the “terrible privilege” they knew I was. I think back to the one callous doctor they spoke to in that elevator. (I’ve since worked with many skilled physicians full of heart.) Maybe my parents responded a bit like Tony’s half-android creation, another superhero called Vision, who once said: “I am on the side of life.”

Jennifer’s origin story couldn’t be more different. She, like Black Widow from *The Avengers*, walked a darker path before redemption found her. This darker path led to substance abuse, multiple stints in rehabilitation centers, at least one attempt to end her life and, finally, a short time in jail.

Alone on the floor of a dark room in a rehab center in Mississippi, she cried out for something more—for God to just take her life, because she felt she had nothing to offer this world. At that moment, Jesus showed up. Knowing her heart’s desires intimately, He “held” her with unconditional love in a way she had never been held.

In *The Avengers*, we learn that Hawkeye was sent to kill a broken and dark assassin known as Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanova). However, he saw something in her and “made a different call”—choosing to bring her on board in the fight for good. Just like Hawkeye made that different call, Christ made a different call for Jennifer. He told her He had a specific plan for her in this life, and that He wasn’t ready for her to come home yet.

Suddenly, Jennifer felt purpose—a higher calling that prompted her into a long and difficult road of recovery. Like Black Widow, Jennifer began that journey feeling undeserving of life, surrounded by the feelings of guilt and debilitating shame. She feared those who met her would see through to her past, and sought to wipe out the “red on her ledger” from those she had hurt in her destructive years.

But once again, God showed up and revealed her true identity,

as His child. If she did nothing objectively great in this world, she would still have inherent value as His daughter and heir to Christ. That's when "battle prep" started. Jennifer now had one purpose: to follow Christ. She knew He kept her alive for His purposes, so she saw her mission as His mission and nothing else.

Jennifer went back to school to receive her bachelor's degree and then she felt called to law school. Knowing this was a God-ordained plan, she completed a three-year law degree in two years and jumped into a life of advocacy where she remains.

She feared her past mistakes being made public, much like Natasha did in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, but her weakness allowed her to see past her fears to God's mission plan for her life. Today, Jennifer faces her earthly fears and moves forward serving the King of nations whose "ways are just and true," to quote Revelation 15:3.

This type of strength and fearless nature will always threaten the enemy, though. He knows best how to weaken his opponents through guilt and shame, forcing them to lose hope. But Jennifer has experienced the unfathomable grace of God firsthand. I have too in the midst of cerebral palsy and all the struggles that come with it.

Like Iron Man and Black Widow, we are not in this fight alone. Friends sharpen us and keep us accountable as we work together in the body of Christ, telling a multi-part narrative larger even than the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Advancing His mission in the world, we endeavor to build trust and shine light where God has placed us. We encourage each other in struggles, without allowing our differences to become a civil war, but that's another story. {eoa}

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federal government. He is a graduate of Cedarville University. An inspiring speaker who has addressed Star Wars Celebration, Welty has been featured on NBC Nightly News, Roll Call and The Daily Signal. **Jennifer Breedon**, legal analyst for The Clarion Project and a graduate of Regent University School of Law, contributed to this article.

Aaron and Jennifer will share their stories together at “The Heroics of Weakness” panel during AwesomeCon Comic Convention in Washington, D.C., June 4.

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