

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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*The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent;
the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult;
the day he forgives himself, he becomes wise.*

- Alden Nowlan, poet, novelist, and playwright (1933-1983)

I spent much of my youth dreaming of being a superhero.

In elementary and intermediate schools, this meant spending my allowance on Marvel comics and Hardy Boys books. Lost in their pages, I envisioned myself, accompanied by my chums or loyal sidekick, vanquishing bad guys with my pluck, courage and – after I’d survived some bizarre accident – superhuman powers.

Then I hit adolescence and had my “Puff the Magic Dragon” moment, realizing that the Hardys and Marvels weren’t realistic role models. When combined with hormones hitting, this new maturity led me to seek out new role models, ones who not only battled evildoers but also – critically – wooed women.

The pinnacle was, of course, James Bond, and I devoured the entire Bond oeuvre. These books, along with other movies, shows, and publications in the same genre, hit the trifecta of adolescent escapism, offering entertainment, fantasies, and role models. Whether teaching me how to deal with bad guys, order a martini, or attract women, here were my instruction manuals for life.

In high school, one other guide-to-life entered the mix: Atlas Shrugged, Ayn Rand’s magnum opus. Why? Not because it was great literature – it’s not. Instead, my friends and I became infatuated with Atlas Shrugged because, based upon our research, it was the only book in the high school library with sex scenes. Hence, we read Atlas Shrugged. A lot. Or at least parts of it. So much so that we earmarked all the pages with the “good parts,” making it much easier to find the book’s most important passages.

When I got around to reading the rest of Atlas Shrugged, I discovered that - bonus! - it too offered a larger-than-life role model, someone who not only saved a threatened world but made it with the ladies. James Bond had his double-0; Atlas Shrugged’s John Galt relied on his intellect and anti-authoritarian principles. Critically, both Bond and Galt succeeded at all that was important: living exotic lives, vanquishing evil-doers, and romancing beautiful women.

As I left adolescence, though, a funny thing happened. Just as, years earlier, I’d come to realize that the Hardy Boys and Marvel superheroes were fictional characters succeeding in a fictional world, so too did I come to realize that Bond, Galt, and my other adolescent role models were similarly fanciful – they may have been more mature than the Hardys and Spidey, but in the end they, too, were basically cartoon characters. As a result, I left them behind as well, for building my adult life around my adolescent role models was as silly as building my adolescent life around my childhood heroes.

All this has been on my mind because of recent political events. In particular, for decades I’ve been amazed at the number of prominent political figures influenced by Ayn Rand and her philosophy of Objectivism. My amazement stems from two sources. First, Rand’s characters aren’t role models for adults; they’re superheroes for adolescents. Second, the only world in which Objectivism has ever worked is the one Rand created in her novels.

Objectivism is a wonderfully adolescent philosophy: clean; simple; deeply appealing in its black and white purity. As Rand put it, Objectivism was an extension of her fundamental world view: “I am opposed to all forms of control. I am for an absolute, laissez-faire, free, unregulated economy.”

When I was an adolescent, dreaming of living in stately Wayne Manor or wearing a tux as I entered

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Casino Royale, I too hated all forms of control, especially when imposed by my parents, teachers, or other authority figures. As I matured, though, I came to see that all of us are parts of systems, and that in order to exist, all systems need controls. They may be the laws of man or nature, or just the simple warp-and-woof of relationships. Remove those controls though, and the initial euphoria of freedom is quickly overwhelmed by chaos.

This absence of controls is what allows cancer cells to propagate. At a much larger scale, the same phenomenon is causing the post-Arab Spring chaos, as countries which overthrew dictators struggle to create a new, different form of order. Egypt and Libya are much more Objectivist today than they were two years ago; they're also a mess.

Economies, too, need control. It's human nature for business owners – for anyone, really – to chafe when rules or requirements are imposed by others, but in the absence of adequate controls, what happens? Metastasis. As prominent Rand adherent Alan Greenspan noted after the financial system collapsed: "Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholder's equity — myself especially — are in a state of shocked disbelief."

I felt a similar shocked disbelief every time my dog ate food I left on the counter, for I believed in her just as deeply as Greenspan believes in Ayn Rand's philosophies. In both cases, though, our beliefs were trumped by innate instincts – dogs eat food left in front of them; humans act selfishly. You can't blame them, for that's what they do. What we do.

Hence the need for controls, for laws; whether natural or human, secular or religious. And in the face of that reality, the adolescent beauty and simplicity of the Randian worldview falls apart. However well Objectivism may have worked in Rand's novels, in practice it's created some pretty big messes. From that real-life perspective, basing economic regulations on the lessons learned from Atlas Shrugged is, in its own way, analogous to, say, dismantling fire-fighting crews based on the belief that Superman will show up to single-handedly put out a forest fire. Such beliefs make for great entertainment, but in the real world they just don't work.

Why raise this now? For two reasons, both related to the upcoming election.

One is that Ayn Rand has been thrust back into the spotlight because Paul Ryan, the Republican candidate for Vice-President, is as firm a Randian as Alan Greenspan, if not more so. As a result, because of Ryan's influence in the GOP, it's likely that, if Governor Romney is elected President, the nation will enjoy not just a new wave of Randian-influenced deregulation, but one far more liberating than anything that has occurred in the past. Combine this with the massive cuts in discretionary spending necessitated by Governor Romney's tax and budget promises, and in a few years the socio-economics of the nation will look very different than they do today. Here in Jackson Hole, those changes will be amplified by the inevitable large cuts in funding for agencies such as the Park Service and Forest Service, as well as the prospective elimination of income tax deductions for charitable donations.

I mention this not because I care whether you agree with Governor Romney's proposals. Instead, what I care about is that we know – before we vote – the likely consequences of our votes. Right now, we don't.

Consider, for example, the impending federal budget "sequestration" scheduled to take place in January. It looms because, last year, the Randian element in Congress held the nation's debt obligations hostage to their "no controls" philosophy. If sequestration occurs, in January the federal budget will have \$100 billion whacked out of it overnight. If that happens, the Forest Service will instantly have \$172 million less money to fight fires, a loss of 8.2 percent of its current budget. If that happens, and we don't have 8.2 percent fewer fires, we'll have a problem.

Now consider that Governor Romney is proposing trimming five times as much – \$500 billion – from the federal budget by 2016. Such a pledge helped Governor Romney win his nomination, but because he isn't saying where he'll make his cuts, we have no way of knowing what their actual consequences will be. Until he

does, we have to rely on outside analysts, who can make Governor Romney's various budget-related pledges add up only by whacking around 50 percent out of the budgets of all non-Defense departments, including the Forest Service and other fire-fighting agencies.

If this is what voters want; great. But if it's not – if we feel, for example, that the resources devoted to fire-fighting ought to reflect actual need rather than a hoped-for reduction in fires – then we ought to have such a debate ahead of time. But we're not having it. Instead, we're dealing in little more than cartoonish attacks and philosophical platitudes. That gets us nowhere. Fast.

The other reason I raise the Randian superhero approach to the world is because of what is not discussed during campaigns. In America, our representatives work within a system of checks and balances, both within a given body (e.g. a majority vote is needed to pass legislation) and within the overall system (e.g. the President has to sign any bill Congress passes). As a result, it's tremendously difficult for any one person alone to change the government, and completely impossible unless they cooperate with their fellow elected officials.

Hence the problem with a superhero, go-it-alone approach to the world. Whether it's within a family, business, community, or nation, the simple reality is that, to get anything done, you have to cooperate.

There's something deeply rooted in humans that wants superheroes. Rand's books and Hollywood movies thrive on narratives of intrepid individuals winning against all odds; newspapers and magazines build stories around individuals' actions; the books and comics that shaped my youth tapped into not just my superhero fantasies, but those of kids around the world.

The same dynamic plays out in political races, where candidates try to convince voters of their superhero abilities to single-handedly change the city, state, or nation. But while that may work as a vote-getting technique, the skills needed by a successful candidate are in many ways different than those needed by an effective elected official. To win, a candidate has to simplify ideas, demonize opponents, and generally assume the superhero mantle. This phenomenon is demeaning at best; at worst, it leads to kerfuffles such as Governor Romney's "I don't care about the 47 percent" remark. It's not that he doesn't care; it's just that the "candidate as cartoon character" dynamic means he has to say such things in order to stay in character.

To govern effectively, though, elected officials must work with others, find points of commonality, and generally let go of the ego so central to being a candidate. In other words, be anything but a cartoonish superhero.

Unfortunately, only rarely are our superhero candidates able to jump into phone booths and emerge as effective elected officials. This makes governing hard, and as this dynamic has accelerated, the result has been the gridlock we enjoy today. Worse, when officials do try to govern from their superhero persona, it gives one pause that increasing numbers of them look for guidance to the adolescent fiction they devoured as youths. Deep, profound pause.

In this environment, what I'd love the media to ask of all candidates is not just what their particular policies are, but how they are going to get those policies enacted. At the Presidential level, this means asking both candidates how they plan to deal with a Congress in which the minority will not only have the votes to stop any proposal, but will in all likelihood see stopping the President's agenda as its foremost task.

Thankfully, on a local level the partisanship is not toxic. But the simple fact remains that, in order for a county commissioner or town councilor to get a measure passed, he or she will have to attract at least two additional votes. How do local candidates see doing this? 50 percent plus one is the most fundamental rule of governance, yet it's one that gets exactly zero attention in campaigns. No wonder things are dysfunctional.

This isn't to say leaders aren't important or can't make a difference – clearly they are, and clearly they can. And it's also not to say that individuals shouldn't be rewarded for their efforts – clearly they should.

It is to say, though, that an over-reliance on individualism is as wrong in its way as an over-reliance on group action is in its. Communism failed because it violated a fundamental principle of being human – individuals matter. In the same way, a blind adherence to individuality and Objectivism is also doomed to failure, for it, too, violates a fundamental principle of being human – groups and systems matter too.

Acting on their own, Superman, the Hardy Boys, James Bond, and John Galt all accomplished great things. They did so, though, in a fictional world, one which didn't require cooperation, consensus, or even a respect for other people. In the real world, things are far more complex, and there's a noticeable absence of superheros with superpowers. Candidates and elected officials lose sight of this fact not just their peril, but ours.