

# **The Hero's Journey: A Case Study**

by

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In this essay I explore the potential healing power of mythology and its use as a professional coaching tool. The twelve stages of the “Hero’s Journey”, as set forth by Joseph Campbell, will provide the paradigm in which to view a contemporary case study. Joseph Campbell believed that mythology had the power to heal. Campbell was a follower of Carl G. Jung. Followers of Campbell and Jung have captured essential ideologies from both men and termed it, Depth Psychology. For the purpose of this paper, these essential ideologies include the beliefs that the unconscious mind contains an historical record of all human experiences and that the language of the unconscious is rooted in symbols.

## **A Brief History**

“Freud and Jung both felt that myth is grounded in the unconscious” (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pg. 58). Both also believed that it is logical to assume, the mind like the body, contained the history of our evolution. That is, we have inherited essential social information which resonates in us through the use of mythology and makes itself known in our dreams and even in psychotic fantasies. Our dreams and fantasies have a sort of direct access to the unconscious. Joseph Campbell tells us that mythology is the language of the unconscious and in myth resides transcendence, healing, and growth. Campbell reveals that mythology plays a profound role in the human psyche. Throughout the ages and across all cultures, myths have guided the stages of life for mankind. Jung believed that the unconscious contained:

Everything of which I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking.

Everything of which I was once conscious but have not forgotten.

Everything perceived by my senses but not noted by my conscious mind.

Everything which involuntarily without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want and do.

All future things that are taking place in me and will sometime come to conscious.

All this is the content of the unconscious. (Jung, *The Wisdom of the Dream*, Vol.1)

Jung supported this idea in his book, *Man and His Symbols*. He cited numerous examples in which children who had never been exposed to particular ideologies vividly dreamed detailed representations of those ideologies. Myths appear to tap into our deep psyche, otherwise known as the unconscious, through the use of symbolism. Some myths activate our deep psyches more than others and clients engaging in depth psychology are instructed to pay close attention to such triggers.

Rituals provide physical enactments of myth which in turn root us in deeper meaning and connect us to our ancestors. Jung and Campbell believed that human beings, particularly western civilizations, have lost their connection to the earth. We no longer participate in the rituals of agricultural or hunting societies and we have lost the ceremonies and rights-of-passage that once transformed boys into men and girls into women. With the loss of rituals come social and psychological maladies such as gangs and neurosis.

Archetypal images and universal symbols reveal themselves in our dreams and are capable of providing us with knowledge and insight when interpreted in light of their meaning to the individual. "The function of myth is to put man in accord with nature." (*The Hero's Journey*) The hero can be anything from an explorer to a philosopher, artist or scientist. The title doesn't matter. The journey through life's struggles is universal and follows age-old patterns. Each passage through a struggle constitutes a journey and some journeys are more intense than others. The hero's journey typically begins with feelings of restlessness and a gnawing sensation that there is a better life out there somewhere. Separation from the past becomes necessary and courage to change must be harnessed. A mentor is needed to guide the way, the descent into the unknown begins and the hero is put through trials which involve the threat of death. Death can be figurative as well as literal. The hero's decision to make the journey must come from within the individual and he must act from his heart, "not from the desires of the government or clergy." To follow other than one's own path is to "capitulate to the devil", (*The Hero's Journey*).

We all set forth on many journeys throughout our lifetime. Campbell believed, “that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our inner most being and reality...Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of life.” (Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pg. 5). “Mythology teaches you what’s behind literature and the arts. It teaches you about your own life.” (ibid pg. 11).

Campbell believed in a connection between myth, dreams and art. Mankind has been relaying the human experience since the beginning of his presence on earth. Cave drawings, folk tales, ceremonial dances, song, and the written word have all been handed down from one generation to the next in order that information is carried forward. This enormous drive to convey life’s messages and meanings permeates all cultures and exists in the form of symbolism. Even our neurons constantly strive to provide us with the most up to date information about the world around us and they do so without our awareness. It would appear that life is intent upon teaching us. So what is it that we need so desperately to know? Initially we are kept alive by our parents. Later we have to learn to survive on our own. As we learn to become successful human beings we experience many life altering events. One difficult event helps to prepare us for the next and possibly more difficult challenge.

Life's journeys are believed by Jung and Campbell, as well as their followers, to be that which moves us toward attainment of psychic wholeness or "Self". For Jung, the attainment of "Self" implied a transcended level of psychic growth. “Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life. The initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state. All of those rituals are mythological rights. They have to do with the new role that you’re in.” (ibid pg. 12) Contemporary rituals could include graduations, bar-mitzvahs, and marriage. "A ritual is the enactment of a myth." (ibid pg. 83) They are meant to change us, move us on to another stage of life or into another level of consciousness. They connect us to that which has taken place for thousands of years.

“Myths provide guidance for difficult times. They can give encouragement as we struggle to survive horrendous ordeals. I have found that in clinical work, and in my own journey, it is useful to study mythic stories for hope. After all, those classic heroic seekers did get through

their awesome challenges. The tales also provide hints on dealing with mid-life crises or other difficult transitions.” (Jonathan Young)

Campbell distinguishes the folk tale from the myth in the following way: “The folk tale is for entertainment. The myth is for spiritual instruction.” (The Power of Myth, pg. 59). Campbell tells us that myths exist in two forms; the personal myth and the societal myth. He says that dreams are personal experiences of “that deep dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives. A myth is society’s dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth...If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn’t, you’ve got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you” (ibid pg 40). It would appear that mental health therapy must consider the time period in which the individual feels he belongs.

While there are several variations of the Hero's Journey, the themes of these variations remain consistent. These adaptations seem to exist in order to accommodate the movie industry. Other variations include meetings with a goddess. The following twelve stages are in keeping with Joseph Campbell's structure found in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

### **Case Study**

Melissa (not her real name) is a mid-life woman who has gone through many trying experiences in her life, including a very difficult divorce. She has a grown daughter who is living independently. Melissa has returned to school and is studying business and art. If we apply the twelve stages of The Hero’s Journey to Melissa’s personal history it becomes a tangible tool for observing her life challenges and changes. She can clearly acknowledge her personal growth and transformations. More importantly, however, she can see how far she has come in her hero's journey.

**1. The Ordinary World: The hero knows something is wrong and that something needs to be done.** Melissa saw insurmountable problems in her marriage.

**2. The Call to Adventure: The hero realizes that the problem is unavoidable.** Melissa saw how the marriage was dysfunctional and that her daughter was now being affected.

**3. Refusal of the call: The fear comes up. The hero doesn't think she is up to the task.**

Melissa did not know what to expect if she left the marriage. She was afraid of the unknown and felt paralyzed.

**4. Meeting with the Mentor: The hero seeks help to overcome the fear.** Melissa needed to be a source of support for her daughter so she sought help through a local women's support group. She was assisted through the steps of gaining financial support for independent living.

**5. Crossing the First Threshold: Preparations have been made and the hero is committed to the unknown journey.** Melissa no longer believed that she was a helpless victim. She was determined for her life to change.

**6. The Belly of the Whale: Once the threshold is crossed, the hero finds herself engulfed by trials.** Melissa found herself in what she called, "Psychological hell." The process of healing and recovery was underway.

**7. The Road of Trials: The hero is put through physical and or psychological trials with the aid of her previously acquired mentor.** Melissa stabilizes her life which enabled her to interact more effectively with the outer world. Melissa began making appointments with health care professionals in order to work on her physical and emotional health. She began taking on more and more tasks in the outer world.

**8. The Ordeal: The hero faces her greatest fear but after doing so, she is rewarded.** Melissa sought the services of a coach/counselor at her local community college. She was extremely relieved and proud of herself in making the decision to seek this support.

**9. The Payoff: The hero's accomplishments are recognized and rewarded.** Melissa was accepted as a student at the college and she received a scholarship which meant that her tuition

and books would be partially paid for. Her daughter was proud of her and Melissa felt her life was getting better.

**10. The Road Back Home: The hero established a new life.** Melissa enrolled at the college, began receiving financial assistance, and continued to seek out support from the women's group. She said she felt that she was on the mend. She felt good about herself but knew that further psychological work was looming in the future.

**11. Resurrection: The hero has to face death one more time on a bigger scale and a deeper level.** Melissa entered therapy. The therapeutic process requires the client to relive past traumas in the safety of the therapeutic setting. Melissa felt that this stage of therapy was very difficult, but essential.

**12. Return with the Magic Elixir: The hero is changed and has something to give back to society.** After presenting Melissa with the summation of her "Hero's Journey" during a coaching session, she said, "Wow! I did all that." She said she was proud of herself and that it made her feel stronger. She sat back thoughtfully in her chair and said, "You know . . . I had no idea how close I was or even that it was okay to feel yourself mucking about in the dark."

## **Conclusion**

Jung, Campbell and their followers reach far below the surface of conscious thought. They awaken our senses and alert our deepest knowing, a knowing that even the most scholarly can only feebly allude to with limited vocabulary. This visceral reaction that erupts in us when we suddenly feel the unknown become known, this feeling that is all at once earth shattering and minuscule in its simplicity, these deeply personal moments of transcendence that move us from one stage of life to the next are age old and universal yet can only be experienced by the individual. For this author there is a sense of comfort, excitement, and willingness to forge ahead that comes with the knowledge of the hero's journey. The path is available to us if we allow ourselves to put one foot in front of the other.

For those of us who find ourselves disheartened by an increasingly global lack of concern for the earth, for those of us who find only hypocrisy and separatism in the monotheistic religions, for those of us who feel disconnected and that there must be something more, perhaps the answers are not out there. Maybe all that can be known is available within us but we have been looking in the wrong place. If life must be approached in terms of opposites, then we have but to spend equal time within. If we are all heroes at varying stages in our journey, possibly, through the use of symbolism and mythology we can directly approach that which needs healing.

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