The Hero’s Journey

A guide to the Joseph Campbell Monomyth: *The Hero Has a Thousand Faces.*

**Who is Joseph Campbell?**

Perhaps the best-known comparative mythologist of this age, Joseph Campbell was born March 26, 1904, in New York, to a middle class, Roman Catholic family. As a child he saw, and was enchanted with, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show; subsequently he developed, while still a youth, a keen interest in Native American cultures and mythologies. As he grew up and as his education continued, this early fascination with culture and myth expanded to include the myths of many cultures worldwide – it could well be said of him that he “followed his bliss,” something he would ultimately exhort his readers and students to do.

His education – he studied at Dartmouth, Columbia, and the Universities of Paris and Munich – was extensive, including linguistic, anthropological and literary studies. He was well-traveled, and had an open and inquisitive mind. In the course of his studies, he came to feel that there was a strong commonality linking the various myths and legends of disparate lands and cultures. Campbell believed that myth was universal, because it sprang from the common imagination of the collective unconscious. He went so far as to enumerate the particular themes and features that different myths shared, theorising, in the case of these heroic myths, the standard storyline which he called the monomyth.

In his seminal book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he mapped the universal Hero’s Journey in detail, using as example myths from many cultures and traditions.

**What is a ‘hero’?**

While individually we may each come up with a different definition due to differences in our cultural/religious backgrounds, upbringing, education, age or individual interpretation – for this exercise we’ll be basing the core definition of a ‘hero’ on mythical symbolism.

Historically, most ‘heros’ are ‘reluctant heros’. If we look at film and modern literature it’s often a term used to describe someone who was ‘ordinary’ in the sense of being an everyday person who through certain events developed skills beyond their ‘ordinary world’ to resolve a challenge facing either themselves, their family or their community.

Essentially, from a mythological and ‘story’ perspective, a hero is a person who develops traits (internal and external) which inspire cultures to thrive and flourish.

We often think of a hero as a person who ‘saves others’ – yet for us, we’ll be considering how each one of us is taking a ‘hero’s journey’ by growing and developing personally to overcome life challenges and to ultimately step into that place of leadership (whatever that may mean for each of us).
Campbell’s theory of a hero’s journey is that the human psyche strives to make a literal or figurative journey. That journey primarily involves traveling into darkness (death, chaos, evil, hell) in order to bring back an object that will save the hero and/or society.

Campbell suggests that all people in all times and all cultures possess the same psychological belief, the same monomyth (meaning the principle story that creates meaning for life).

He believes that the same story, the journey of the hero, is told again and again in various manifestations, hence his book’s title.

“If you go looking for Adventure, you usually find as much of it as you can manage. And it often happens that when you think it is ahead, it comes on you unexpectedly from behind.”

J.R.R. Tolkien

“I have a strong feeling about interesting people in space exploration...And the only way it’s going to happen is to have some kid fantasise about getting his ray gun, jumping into his spaceship, and flying into outer space.”

George Lucas (Director and Creator of Star Wars)

TAKING THE HERO’S JOURNEY: An Introduction
The Hero’s Journey is the pattern of human experience. It underlies virtually all literature and film.

What do we mean by Myth?
A myth is a sacred narrative explaining aspects of human life and the world we live in.

Most cultures, for instance, from ancient times through the present, have creation stories which tell how the world came to be. These stories are sacred in more than one respect: they are sacred in that they frequently deal with deities and divine mysteries, and they are sacred in that they are worthy of reverence and respect.

In modern usage, the word myth has acquired an additional, negative meaning – we often hear the word used to denote falsehood, as in That’s just a myth. This use of the word is ironic because myth – in the sense in which we are discussing it here, as a sacred narrative – is something that transcends any assessment of true/false.

Myths speak to us in symbolic and metaphoric language. The stories are meaningful and poetic, rich in truths about human life.

“The hero symbolises a man’s unconscious self, and this manifests itself empirically as the sum total of all archetypes and therefore includes the archetype of the father and of the wise old man. To that extent the hero is his own father and his own begetter.”

Carl G. Jung
The Monomyth of the Hero

Joseph Campbell saw an underlying similarity throughout the stories, and in fact perceived and articulated a storyline-structure he believed to be universal for hero-myths. This storyline he called the monomyth.

Here is an outline of the basic structure of the universal hero's monomyth, as Campbell discussed it in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces:

Not only does the monomythic structure apply to classical Hero mythology, it can often be applied to modern stories, also.

I. Departure (from the familiar world)

1. The Ordinary World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting the Mentor
5. The Crossing of the First Threshold

II. Initiation

1. The Road of Trials, Find Friends, Allies and Enemies
2. The Approach
3. The Ordeal
4. The Reward
5. The Road Back
6. Resurrection

III. Return

1. Return with the Magic Elixir

Joseph Campbell’s Suggestions for Reading Mythology

1. Read myths with the eyes of wonder: the myths are transparent to their universal meaning, their meaning is transparent to its mysterious source.

2. Read myths in the present tense: Eternity is now.


4. Any myth worth its salt exerts a powerful magnetism. Notice the images and stories that you are drawn to and repelled by. Investigate the field of associated images and stories.

5. Look for patterns; don’t get lost in the details. What is needed is not more specialised scholarship, but more interdisciplinary vision. Make connections; break old patterns of thought.

6. Re-explore hidden meanings: even a dollar bill reveals the imprint of Eternity.
7. If God is everywhere, then myths can be generated anywhere, anytime, by anything.

8. Know your tribe! Myths never arise in a vacuum; they are the connective tissue of the social body which enjoys synergistic relations with dreams (private myths) and rituals (the enactment of a myth).

9. Expand your horizon! Any mythology worth remembering will be global in scope. The earth is our home and humankind is our family.

10. Read between the lines! Literalism kills; imagination quickens.

**Digging Up A Hero**

**Star Wars and the Hero Quest**

In the 1970’s a young film director named George Lucas became fascinated with Campbell's research and set out to recreate the hero journey as a science-fiction movie. The result was the movie Star Wars, which may very well be the most popular movie of all time.

To a mythologist like Campbell, the popularity of Star Wars (and its sequels) owes less to its spectacular special effects than to its use of mythic symbols and archetypes that are hundreds of thousands of years old and are part of every human being's psychological makeup.

*For example:*

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope follows the hero quest pattern quite closely. Consider the following chronology:

1. A young hero (Luke Skywalker) receives a call to adventure when, in cleaning a newly purchased droid (R2-D2) he discovers a distress call from a beautiful princess.

2. The hero encounters an older, wiser man (Obi-Wan Kenobi) to serve as his mentor/teacher as he prepares to cross into a world of adventure.

3. The hero and the mentor go to a holding place in which they encounter all kinds of strange and wonderful creatures and make the final preparations for the adventure.

4. The hero travels to a land associated with death (the Death Star) and crosses into a world of adventure. Though the mentor accompanies him part of the way, they become separated and the hero must finish the journey alone.

5. While in the land of death, the hero rescues the Princess and, in the process, retrieves the sacred plans to the Death Star (the elixir) that will help his people with their mission (to destroy the battle station).

6. The hero returns with the elixir, but is pursued by the forces of evil.

7. When the hero finally returns to the culture, the elixir that he has brought with him (the secret plans) allow the people to destroy the Death Star (symbolically speaking, to overcome death).

George Lucas read the works of Joseph Campbell and created the movie Star Wars.
To find your own way is to follow your own bliss. This involves analysis, watching yourself and seeing where the real deep bliss is – not the quick little excitement, but the real, deep, life-filling bliss.”

Joseph Campbell

The Hero's Journey: Life's Great Adventure
Adapted from an article by Reg Harris

The Pattern of Human Experience
Most of us were introduced to the Heroic Journey through mythology. Mythological heroes take great journeys: to slay Medusa, to kill the minotaur, to find the golden fleece.

But The Hero's Journey isn't just a pattern from myth. It's the pattern of life, growth and experience – for all of us. We see it reflected everywhere, from a television comedy to the great works of literature to the experiences in our own lives.

(Note: The term "Hero" refers to both male and female.)

A Mirror of the Rite of Passage
The Hero's Journey duplicates the stages of the Rite of Passage. First the initiate faces separation from his own, familiar world. Once separated, he undergoes initiation and transformation, where the old ways of thinking and acting are altered or destroyed, opening the way to a new level of awareness, skill and freedom. After successfully meeting the challenges of the initiation, the initiate takes the journey's final step, the return to his world. When he does, he will find that he is more confident, perceptive, and capable, and he will discover that his community now treats him as an adult, with all of the respect, rights and privileges which that status implies.

A Map to Experience
Why study The Hero's Journey? Why learn a pattern that dates from before recorded history?

The answer is simple: we should study it because it's the pattern of human experience, of our experience, and we will live it for the rest of our lives.

In a sense, every challenge or change we face in life is a Journey: every love found, every love lost, every birth or death, every move to a new job, school or city: every situation which confronts us with something new or which forces us to re-evaluate our thinking, behaviour or perspective.

The journey is a process of self-discovery and self-integration, of maintaining balance and harmony in our lives. As with any process of growth and change, a journey can be confusing and painful, but it brings opportunities to develop confidence, perspective and understanding.

Understanding the Journey pattern can help us understand the literature we read, the movies we see, and the experiences which shape your life. By recognising the Journey's stages and how they function, we will develop a sense of the flow of our own experience and be better able to make decisions and solve problems.
More importantly, we will begin to recognise our own points of passage and respect the significance they have for us.

**12-step transformation**
We usually divide the Journey into eight steps, but you must remember that the journey is a single process and an individual adventure towards growth and transformation. As such, the sequence of elements and the duration of the experiences will vary from one person to another.

**Separation (from the known)**
- The Ordinary World
- The Call to Adventure
- Refusal of the Call
- Meeting the Mentor
- Crossing The Threshold (with guardians, helpers, and mentor)

**Initiation and Transformation**
- Tests, Allies and Enemies
- The Approach
- The Ordeal
- The Reward
- The Road Back
- The Final Test

**The Return (with a Gift)**
- The Return (to the known world)

Remember that the journey is a process of separation, transformation, and return.

Each stage must be completed successfully if we are to become Heroic. To turn back is to reject our innate need to grow, and unless we set out again, we severely limit our potential.

**The Separation**
**The Ordinary World**

The hero’s journey begins with the hero in the ordinary world, going about ordinary life, except that something isn’t quite right. We often know that we’re not what we could be, that there’s a gap between where we are and our potential. To reach our potential, however, we need to become aware of a flaw of some kind, a lacking that we need to overcome.

**The Call**

The Call invites us into the adventure, offers us the opportunity to face the unknown and gain something of physical or spiritual value. We may choose willingly to undertake the quest, or we may be dragged into it unwillingly.

The Call may come boldly as a "transformative crisis," a sudden, often traumatic change in our lives. Or it can sneak up on us gradually, with our first perception of it being a vague sense of discontent, imbalance or incongruity in our lives.
Within this range the Call can take many forms:

- We have had something taken from us, our family, or our society; our quest is to reclaim it,
- We sense that there is something lacking in our life, and we must find what is missing,
- We want to save or restore honour – our own, our family's, or our country's.
- We realise that something is not permitted to members of our society, and we must win these rights for our people.

On a psychological level, the call might be an awareness of a shift in our spiritual or emotional "centre of gravity." We discover that we have outgrown the roles we are playing or the environment in which we live.

**Refusal of the Call**

Almost always, we initially balk at the call. We’re being asked to face the greatest of all fears, the ‘terrible unknown’. It is in overcoming this reluctance that we begin thinking of what could be possible.

“This hesitation signals that the adventure is risky, the stakes are high, and the hero could lose fortune or life,” says Vogler.

According to Vogler, the hero’s doubt serves to warn us that the hero may not succeed on this adventure, and it is often a threshold guardian who sounds the alarm and cautions the hero not to go.


**Meeting the Mentor**

The mentor represents the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, God and man. The function of the mentor is to prepare the hero to face the unknown, to accept the adventure.

The mentor is one of the most recognisable symbols in all literature. Consider Merlin, Yoda, Q from the James Bond series.

The mentor gives the hero the supplies, knowledge and confidence required to overcome his or her fear and face the adventure. The mentor doesn't have to be a person. The job can be accomplished by a map or experience from a previous adventure.

**Crossing the Threshold**

Once called to the adventure, we must pass over the Threshold. The Threshold is the "jumping off point" for the adventure. It is the interface between the known and the unknown. In the known
world, we feel secure because we know the landscape and the rules. Once past the threshold, however, we enter the unknown, a world filled with challenges and dangers.

Often at the threshold, we encounter people, beings, or situations which block our passage. These "threshold guardians" have two functions. They protect us by keeping us from taking journeys for which we are unready or unprepared.

However, once we are ready to meet the challenge, they step aside and point the way. More importantly, to pass the guardian is to make a commitment, to say:

"I'm ready. I can do this."

Early in our lives, our parents function as our threshold guardians. They try to keep us from doing things which would cause us harm. As we get older, our parents' job becomes more difficult. They must both protect and push, measuring our capabilities against the challenges we must face.

As adults, our threshold guardians are much more insidious. They are our fears, our doubts, our ineffective thought and behavior patterns.

In fact, they may be the "dragon in disguise," our greatest fear, the catalyst for the journey, taunting and threatening, daring us to face him in the abyss.

The mentor keeps us focused on our goal and gives us stability, a psychological foundation for when the danger is greatest.

Tests, Allies and Friends

Also at the threshold (and very often later in the journey), we will encounter a helper (or helpers). Helpers provide assistance or direction. Often they bring us a divine gift, such as a talisman, which will help our through the ordeal ahead.

Helpers and guides may appear throughout the journey. Fortunately, they tend to appear at the most opportune moments. The Swiss psychologist and psychotherapist, Carl Jung, called these "meaningful coincidences" synchronicity.

We need to understand, too, that the journey is ours. Our mentor and helpers can assist and point the way, but they cannot take the journey for us. The challenge is ours, must be ours if we are to benefit from it and grow.

Once past the Threshold, we begin the journey into the unknown. The voyage can be outward into a physical unknown or inward to a psychological unknown. Whichever direction the voyage takes, our adventure puts us more and more at risk, emotionally and physically.

On our quest, we face a series of challenges or temptations. The early challenges are relatively easy. By meeting them successfully, we build maturity, skill and confidence. As our journey progresses, the challenges become more and more difficult, testing us to the utmost, forcing us to change and grow.

One of our greatest tests on the journey is to differentiate real helpers from "tempters." Tempters try to pull us away from our path. They use fear, doubt or distraction. They may pretend to be a friend or counselor in an effort to divert our energy to their own needs, uses or beliefs. We must rely
on our sense of purpose and judgment and the advice of our mentor to help us recognize true helpers.

The Approach

Whatever the challenges we face, they always seem to strike our greatest weakness: our poorest skill, our shakiest knowledge, our most vulnerable emotions. Furthermore, the challenges always reflect needs and fears, for it is only by directly facing these weaknesses that we can acknowledge and incorporate them, turn them from demons to gods. If we can't do this, the adventure ends and we must turn back.

The Challenge or Ordeal

When we reach the Abyss, we face the greatest challenge of the journey. The challenge is so great at this point that we must surrender ourselves completely to the adventure and become one with it. In the Abyss he must face our greatest fear, and we must face alone.

Here is where he must "slay the dragon," which often takes the shape of something we dread, or have repressed or need to resolve.

There is always the possibility that, because we are unprepared or have a flaw in our character, the challenge beats us. Or perhaps we can't surrender ourselves to it and must retreat. In any case, unless we set off to try again, our life becomes a bitter shadow of what it could have been.

The Reward

As we conquer the Abyss and overcome our fears, our transformation becomes complete. The final step in the process is a moment of death and rebirth: a part of us dies so that a new part can be born. Fear must die to make way for courage.

Ignorance must die for the birth of enlightenment.

Dependency and irresponsibility must die so that independence and power can grow.

Part of the Transformation process is a Revelation, a sudden, dramatic change in the way we think or view life. This change in thinking is crucial because it makes us truly a different person.

The Road Back

After we have been transformed, we are "at-one" with our new self. We have incorporated the changes caused by the Journey and we are fully "reborn." In a spiritual sense, the Transformation has brought us into harmony with life and the world. The imbalance which sent us on the journey has been corrected – until the next call.

The Final Challenge and the Return

After Transformation and Atonement, we face the final stage of our journey: our Return to everyday life. Upon our return, we discover our gift, which has been bestowed upon us based on our new level of skill and awareness.
We may become richer or stronger, we may become a great leader, or we may become enlightened spiritually.

The essence of the return is to begin contributing to our society. In mythology, some heroes return to save or renew their community in some way. Other mythological heroes return to create a city, nation, or religion.

Sometimes, however, things don't go smoothly. For example, we may return with a great spiritual message, but find that our message is rejected.

We are ostracized or even killed for our ideal. We also run the risk of losing our new understanding, having it corrupted by putting ourselves back in the same situation or environment we left earlier.

In some cases, the hero discovers that his/her new level of awareness and understanding is far greater than the people around him/her. He/She may then become disillusioned or frustrated and leave society to be on his/her own. On the other hand, many great heroes, such as Buddha and Jesus, have sacrificed the bliss of enlightenment or heaven to remain in the world and teach others.

The Journey is a Map

While the story of the Journey first manifested itself in the ancient myths and legends, it is still around us today. It is the basis for almost all of the books and plays we read. We see it in television programs such as "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman", "The Adventures of Lois and Clark", and (believe it or not) in "The Simpsons." Even the movies we enjoy -- Forrest, Gump, Groundhog Day, Labyrinth, Field of Dreams, Matrix, The Lion King-- are fictional depictions of the Hero’s Journey.

The Journey gives you a means for understanding and benefiting from these fictional adventures. Even if the characters aren't real, the journeys they take and challenges they face are reflections of the real journeys and challenges we all face in life. As you watch them move through their quests, you can learn from their experiences.

Perhaps most importantly, though, the Journey is the pattern that we follow in our own lives as we face challenges and move from child to teenager, from teenager to adult, from adult to old age, and from old age into death.

The adventures we face will be challenging and exciting. They can open the doors to knowledge and understanding. If we understand the Journey pattern, we will be better able to face difficulties and use our experiences to become stronger and more capable. Understanding the pattern can help us achieve wisdom, growth, and independence, and taking our Journeys helps us become the people we want to be.

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

Joseph Campbell

What’s the good of a man Unless there’s the glimpse of a god in him?
And what’s the good of a woman Unless she’s a glimpse of a goddess of some sort?”

D. H. Lawrence

Why Study Myth?
Myths offer us a metaphorical map of human experience. The heroic quest belongs to each of us, just as it belongs to Taliesin, Inanna, Merlin, Gilgamesh. Our lives are a process, a journey consisting of challenges to be faced, trials to be endured, and adventures to be had.

The Monomyth: A comparison
Campbell: Star Wars, The Matrix

I: Departure
The call to adventure
Princess Leia’s message
"Follow the white rabbit"
Refusal of the call
Must help with the harvest
Neo won’t climb out window
Mentor
Obi-wan rescues Luke from
Trinity extracts the "bug" from Neo
Crossing the first threshold
Escaping Tatooing
Agents capture Neo

II: Initiation
The road of trials

- Light-saber practice
- Sparring with Morpheus
The meeting with the goddess

- Princess Leia
- Trinity

Temptation away from the true path

- Luke is tempted by the Dark Side
• Cypher (the failed messiah) is tempted by the world of comfortable illusions

**Atonement with the Father**

• Darth and Luke reconcile
• Neo rescues and comes to agree (that he's The One) with his father-figure, Morpheus

**Apotheosis**

• Neo becomes The One
• Luke becomes a Jedi

**The ultimate boon**

• Death Star destroyed – Humanity's salvation now within reach

**III: Return**

**Refusal of the return**

• "Luke, come on!" Luke wants to stay to avenge Obi-Wan
• Neo fights agent instead of running

**The magic flight**

• Millennium Falcon

**Rescue from without**

• Han saves Luke from Darth
• Trinity saves Neo from agents

**Crossing the return threshold**

• Millennium Falcon destroys
• Neo fights agent Smith

**Master of the two worlds**

• Victory ceremony
• Neo declares victory over machines in final phone call

**Freedom to live**

• Rebellion is victorious over Empire
• Humans are victorious over machines

**Common Mythic Elements**

**Two Worlds (mundane and special)**

• Planetside vs. The Death Star
Reality vs. The Matrix

The Mentor
Obi-Wan Kenobi, Morpheus, The Oracle, Yoda

The Prophecy
- Luke will overthrow the Emperor
- Morpheus will find (and Trinity will fall for) "The One"

Failed Hero
- Morpheus once believed that Cypher was "The One"

Wearing Enemy's Skin
- Luke and Han wear storm trooper outfits
- Neo jumps into agent's skin

Chasing a lone animal into the enchanted wood (and the animal gets away)
- The Millennium Falcon follows a lone TIE fighter into range of the Death Star
- Neo "follows the white rabbit" to the nightclub where he meets Trinity
Reflection Sheet 1: The Hero in You
1. Describe a time when you felt you were on a ‘hero’s journey’ – as depicted in the light that we’re discussing.

2. Was this a spontaneous act or something that you thought about for some time?

3. What were the obstacles to your success? Were there any foes?

4. Was there someone older, wiser, or more experienced who was able to help you?

5. Were your affections involved? If so, toward whom?

6. What do you think were those qualities in you that helped you to act so heroically?

7. If you were to compare yourself to any other hero, who would it be?
Reflection Sheet 2: Independent Film Viewing

Watch or read some of the titles below (or read one of the books referenced) and see if you can track or map the ‘Hero’s Journey’.

"A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself"

Joseph Campbell

What do you think?

It has been said that a hero and his quest personify the dreams and desires of the society that spawned this hero. Given that premise, what values seem to be important to the society reflected in the film you chose to watch.

Movie list:

1. The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe
2. Harry Potter I (II-VI are optional)
3. Lord of the Rings I-III
4. Star Wars Trilogy IV-VI
5. The Matrix I
6. National Treasure I
7. Shrek I
8. Superman I (Christopher Reeve)
9. Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.)
10. The Da Vinci Code

Literature

1. Chronicles of Narnia by CS Lewis
2. Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie
3. Pygmalion by George B. Shaw
4. The Hobbit by Tolkien
5. Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by C Doyle
6. Brave New World by Aldus Huxley
7. Scarlet Pimpernel by Orczy
8. Three Musketeers by A Dumas
9. Faust by Goethe
10. Emma by Jane Austen
11. Gulliver’s Travels by J. Swift
12. Rob Roy by W. Scott
13. Fahrenheit 451 by Bradbury
14. Dracula by B. Stoker
15. Tarzan by E. Burroughs
16. Oedipus Rex by Sophocles
17. Pride and Prejudice by J. Austen
18. Jane Eyre by C. Bronte