

# The Hero's Journey: Life's Great Adventure

by Reg Harris (revised May 18, 2007)

(This article was adapted from *The Hero's Journey: A Guide to Literature and Life*.)

## **1. 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 show to the great works of literature to the experiences in our own lives.

## **2. 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 the world. When he does, he will find that he is more confident, perceptive, and capable. He will bring back gifts for his people, such as insight, leadership, understanding and expertise. He will also discover that his community now treats him as an adult, with all of the respect, rights and privileges which that status implies.

## **3. 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. We live it now, 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 and every death becomes carries the potential of transformation to a new level of understanding. Every move to a new school, job, or city opens the chance to stop being what we were and to start being what we can become. Every situation which confronts us with something new or which forces us to re-evaluate our thinking, behavior or perspective presents us with possibilities for insight and growth.

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 a new way of being in our world.

Understanding the Journey pattern can help us understand the literature we read, the movies we see, and the experiences which shape our life. By recognizing 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 recognize our own points of passage and respect the significance they have for us.

## **4. Summary of Basic Journey Pattern**

Remember that the journey is a process of separation, transformation, and return. The stages tend to be cumulative: each must be completed successfully if we are to become heroic. To turn back is to reject our innate need to grow. Unless we set out again, we may lock ourselves in a defensive shell that protects us from the pain of rejecting our potentials, but also imprisons us from authentic engagement and contact with the world. The Separation

## **5. 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.

On a mythical level, the Call may come when:

- we have had something taken from us, our family, or our society; our quest is to reclaim it,
- we want to save or restore honor: our own, our family's, or our country's.
- we realize 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:

- we sense that there is something lacking in our life, and we must find what is missing,
- an awareness of a shift in our spiritual or emotional "center of gravity;" our the world in which we live no longer provides the stimulation or possibilities we need to grow,
- a realization that the story we are living no longer matches the story that we are; our world has become constricting rather than expanding.

## **6. 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, and because it is unknown, it is 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, the guardians step aside and point the way, often becoming a helper or mentor in our quest. 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 patterns of thought and behavior. In fact, they may be the "dragon in disguise," our greatest fear in masquerade, becoming the catalyst for the journey, taunting and threatening, daring us to face him in the abyss.

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.

The most important of these helpers is the mentor or guide. The mentor keeps us focused on our goal and gives us stability, a psychological foundation for when the danger is greatest.

Helpers and guides may appear throughout the journey. Fortunately, they tend to appear at the most opportune or coincidental moments. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung called these "meaningful coincidences" synchronicity. If we look closely at a synchronistic event, we may find a possibility we had not considered or a path we had not seen.

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. If we allow our companions to help us too much, the growth value of the challenge is lost.

## **The Initiation**

### **7. The Challenges**

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 usually relatively easy. By meeting them successfully, we build maturity, skill and confidence. As our journey progresses, the challenges often become more and more difficult, testing us to the utmost, burning away old, ineffective understandings and beliefs to make way for the new self.

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. Their temptations may take the form of rationalizations and excuses or the form of escapes, such as drugs or alcohol. It is when we face these temptations that we must rely on our sense of purpose and judgment and the advice of our mentor to help keep us on our quest.

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.

### **8. Into the Abyss**

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 we usually face our greatest fear, and we must face it alone. Here is where he must "slay the dragon," which often takes the shape of confrontation we dread, a great fear we have repressed or deep need we must 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 may not be able to 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.

### **9. Transformation and Revelation**

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 Revelation usually occurs during or after the Abyss, but sometimes it may actually lead us into the Abyss.)

### **10. The Atonement**

After we have been transformed, we go on to achieve Atonement, that is we are "at-one" with our new self. We have incorporated the changes we made in 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.

### **11. 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 is the result of 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 ideals. We also run the risk of losing our new understanding, having it corrupted by allowing ourselves to slide back in the same situation or environment we left.

In some cases, the hero discovers that her new level of awareness and understanding is far greater than the people around her can grasp or accept. She may then become disillusioned or frustrated and leave society to be on 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.

### **12. 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 of all levels, from great drama to "The Simpson's" and anime cartoons. Even the movies we enjoy -- *Forrest Gump*, *Finding Nemo*, *Spiderman*, *Field of Dreams*, *The Matrix*, and *The Lion King* -- are fictional depictions of the Hero's Journey.

The Journey gives you a path toward 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.