

The Heroic Journey

The Great Adventure

In mythology, heroes take great journeys: to slay Medusa, to kill the minotaur, to find the golden fleece, to rescue the sun. But The Hero's Journey (or Quest) 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 simple television comedy to the great works of classical literature.

Parallels the Rite of Passage

The Journey has the same three stages as 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 a more confident, perceptive, and capable person.

A map to experience

Why study the Hero's Journey? Why learn a pattern that dates back to 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 "falling in" or "falling out," every birth or death, every move to a new town or school—every situation which confronts us with something new. Some journeys are longer and more difficult than others, but they are all journeys we must face throughout life.

As with any process of change, journeys can be confusing and painful, but these challenges bring opportunities for discovery and growth. The struggle helps us develop confidence, perspective and un-

derstanding. It is a process of self-discovery and self-integration, of maintaining balance and harmony in our lives.

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

Eight-step transformation

We usually divide the Journey into eight steps, but you must remember that the journey is an individual process of growth and transformation. The sequence and duration of the experiences will vary from one

The essence of the journey is the same in every life, whether it is lived in the Stone Age or the 20th century, in the jungles of Africa or the barrios of Los Angeles. The pattern is constant; only the scenery changes.



person to another. Here are the basic elements in the Hero's Journey:

Separation (from the known)

- The Call
- The Threshold (with guardians, helpers, and mentor)

Initiation and Transformation

- The Challenges
- The Abyss
- The Transformation
- The Revelation
- The Atonement

The Return (to the known world)

- The Return (with a Gift)

It's important to remember that the journey is a process of separation, transformation, and return. It is a process where each stage must be completed successfully if the initiate is to become a hero. To turn back would mean that the initiate is rejecting her own need to grow. Unless the initiate sets out again, he may be locking himself into unending adolescence and giving up the benefits, freedom and fulfillment of adulthood.

The Separation

The Call

The **Call** invites the initiate into the adventure, offers her the opportunity to face the unknown and gain something of physical or spiritual value. The initiate may

choose willingly to undertake the quest, or she may be dragged into it unwillingly.

In general, the Call comes as a realization of an imbalance or injustice in her life. The Call can take many forms:

- the initiate has had something taken from her, her family, or her society. Her quest is to reclaim it.
- the initiate senses that there is something lacking in her life, and she must find what is missing.
- the initiate wants to save or restore honor — her own, her family's, or her country's.
- the initiate realizes that something is not permitted to members of her society, and she goes out to win these rights for her people.

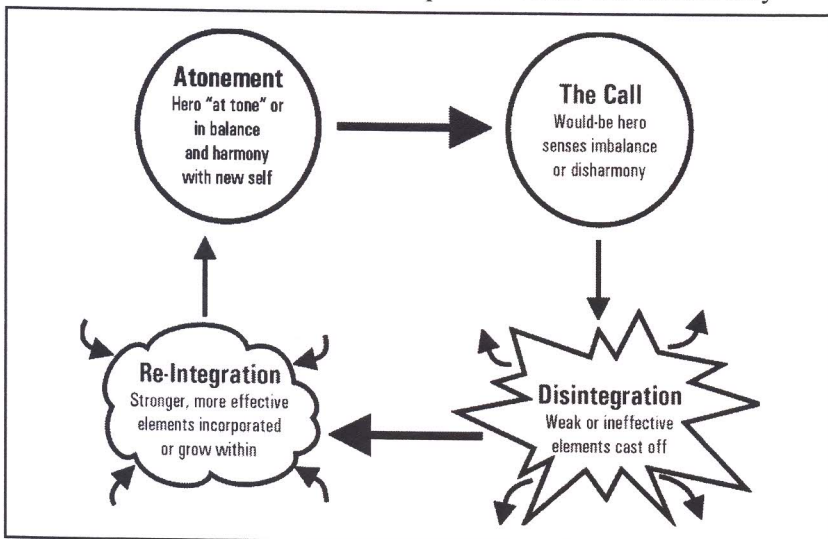
The Threshold

Once called to the adventure, the initiate 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, the initiate feels secure because she knows the landscape and the rules. Once past the threshold, however, the initiate enters the unknown, a different world full of dangers and challenges.

Often at the threshold, the initiate may encounter people, beings, or situations which block her passage into the journey. These **threshold guardians** have two functions. They protect us by keeping us from taking journeys before we are ready. 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 want to face.

The Journey is like being taken apart and reassembled. During the process, ineffective parts of our character are discarded, and stronger, more capable elements emerge.



The Disney film *The Lion King* offers another example of a threshold guardian: the king's advisor, Zazu. Zazu seems to be a busy-body, but he is actually trying to protect the over-eager Simba from taking on challenges he is not ready to assume.

Also at the threshold (and very often later during the journey), the initiate will encounter a **helper** (or helpers). Helpers provide assistance or direction. Often the help comes in the form of a divine gift, such as a talisman, which will help her through the ordeal ahead.

The most important of these helpers is the **mentor** or **guide**. The mentor keeps the initiate focused on her goal and gives her 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 moments, just when the initiate is about to be killed, for example. We call this fortunate timing "synchronicity."

The Initiation

The Challenges

Once past the Threshold, the initiate begins 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, as the initiate goes deeper into the unknown, he puts himself more and more at risk, emotionally and physically.

On his quest, the initiate faces a series of challenges or temptations. The early challenges are relatively easy. By meeting them successfully, he builds maturity, skill and confidence. As his journey progresses, the challenges become more and more difficult, testing him to the utmost, forcing him to change and grow. Thus begins the process of transformation.

The journey's challenges always seem to strike the initiate's greatest weakness: his poorest skill, his shakiest knowledge, his most vulnerable emotions. Challenges always reflect the initiate's

needs and fears, for it is only by directly facing these weaknesses that they can be overcome. If they can't be overcome, the initiate can't go on: the adventure ends and the initiate must turn back.

Into the Abyss

When he reaches the *Abyss*, the initiate faces the greatest challenge of the journey. The challenge is so great at this point that our initiate must surrender himself completely to the quest, lose himself in the adventure and become one with it. In the Abyss he must overcome his greatest fears, and he must face them alone. Here is where he must "slay the dragon," which often takes the shape of something he dreads or needs to resolve.

There is always the possibility that the initiate is not ready or has a flaw in his character, and the challenge beats him. Or perhaps he can't surrender himself to it and must retreat. In any case, unless he sets off to try again, life becomes a shadow of what it should be, and he will become dissatisfied and bitter.

Transformation and Revelation

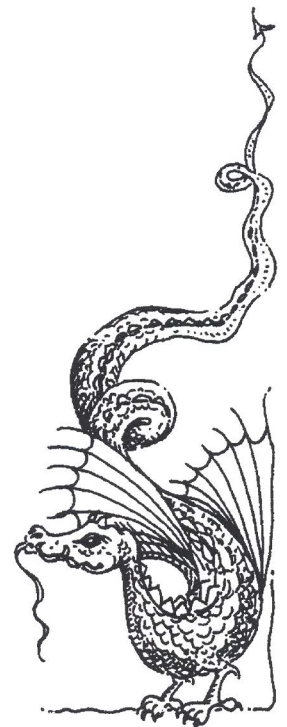
As the initiate conquers the Abyss and overcomes his fears, his transformation becomes complete. Often the final step in the process is a moment of death and rebirth: a part of the initiate dies so that a new part can be born. Fear must die to make way for courage. Ignorance must die for the birth of enlightenment. Dependence and irresponsibility must die so that independence and power can grow.

This part of the Journey is similar to the Rite of Passage, where the child moves from dependence to independence, from selfish to giving; he accepts independence and the responsibility it brings.

Part of the Transformation process is a **Revelation**, a sudden, dramatic change in the way one thinks or views life. This change in thinking is crucial because it makes the initiate a truly different person. The Revelation usually occurs during or after the Abyss, but sometimes it may actually lead the initiate into the Abyss.

"When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you."

Friedrich Nietzsche



The Revelation leads to a change in behavior, a change in being, called the **Transformation**. Our behavior is different not because we know we should act differently, but because we are different. Our new self leads to a new way of acting.

The Atonement

After the initiate has been transformed, he goes on to achieve **Atonement**, that is he is “at-one” with his new self. He has absorbed the changes caused by the Journey and he is fully “reborn.” In a spiritual sense, the Transformation has brought the initiate into harmony with life and the world. The imbalance that sent him on the journey has been corrected—until the next call. The initiate is now truly a “hero.”

At this he receives or becomes aware of a “boon,” a gift which is his based on his new level of skill and awareness. He may become richer or stronger, he may become a great leader, or he may become enlightened spiritually.

The Return

After Transformation and Atonement, the hero faces the final stage of her journey: her Return to everyday life. The essence of the return is to begin contributing to one’s society. In mythology, the initiate may return as a great hero because she has saved or renewed her community in some way. Other mythological heroes return to create a city, nation, or religion.

Sometimes, however, things don’t go smoothly. For example, she may return with a great spiritual message, but find that

her message is rejected and that she is ostracized or even crucified for her ideal. The hero also runs the risk of losing her new understanding, having it corrupted by putting herself back in the same situation or environment she left earlier.

Because she is on a higher spiritual level than her people, the hero may become disillusioned or frustrated and leave society to be on her own. Other 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

We know the story of the Journey originated with the ancient myths and legends, but 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 we watch every day, and we see it in the movies we enjoy again and again. All are fictional depictions of the Hero’s Journey or of elements of the Hero’s Journey.

The Journey gives you a means for understanding and benefitting 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 share their quests with them, 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 you face in life will be challenging and exciting. They can open the doors to knowledge and understanding. If you understand the Journey pattern, you will be better able to face difficulties and use your experiences to become stronger and more capable rather than fearful and defensive. Understanding the pattern can help you achieve wisdom, growth, and independence. The Journey helps us become the people we want to be.

“Heroism is a matter of integrity—becoming more and more at each step ourselves.”

Joseph Campbell

