

The Mature Hero's Journey

The Hero's Journey for those past midlife and entering the elderhood life stage, is different in intent and outcome to more youthful hero's journeys. The "hero" is quieter and with more opportunity for reflection and often seeking meaning, enters a quest for inner leadership, deeper self-knowledge and insight and a desire to contribute.

The Hero's Journey is an approach to transition and an initiation. The journey of transition from the everyday to the archetypal hero was developed over many years by scholar and mythologist Joseph Campbell. In his seminal work on the hero archetype¹ he studied many different cultures and their histories. The modern-day equivalent of the term "hero" in western culture is leader or in our case, wise elder.

Campbell stresses the essential journey trait of a hero starts with restlessness, (see 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces'). When unfulfilled by the familiar environment and circumstances, inner unrest eats away prompting us to question the very nature of our existence. This is the early stirring that something greater lies ahead and we have potential to be realised.

The evolution of the hero is generally summarized from Campbell's seventeen stages to five main stages:

- 1) The Call to Adventure
- 2) Crossing of the Threshold
- 3) Trials and Tribulations of the Journey
- 4) Attainment of Enlightenment
- 5) Return of the Hero

These progressive stages can be seen mirrored in the Buddha's journey and other accounts of spiritual awakening. The gold lies in being able to listen mythologically or metaphorically to the words and hear the truth of them rather than hear it literally, and go beyond the information into meaning.

The Mature Hero's Journey is different to both the youthful hero's journey and mid-life hero's journey, with each having significance for the life stage. In general archetypal terms, we start as the youth to explore identity (the Wanderer); rise to

the duties and pressures of adulthood to perform, gather, provide (the Warrior and Mother/Father archetypes), and continue through later life to explore meaning and wisdom (the Sage). The mature hero's journey is of profound significance because the transition is to the last major life stage.

The metaphor of the hero's journey treats the trials, obstacles and tests that are encountered in a life, especially going into unknown territory (as we all must do from time to time) as the normal and necessary part of a noble path. Tired stories we carry around with us and the comparison to others tend to surface when things aren't going well and keep us stunted in our growth when we don't have a wider view. With awareness, the dated stories and attitudes about life and the self can be reformed, stories that have become too small for us such as, "Life isn't meant to be like this", "I'm entitled to better", "I must be getting it wrong", "I'm a failure", "Everyone else is okay/happy/safe why not me", "I'm unworthy/unlovable", "It's just not fair" ... you get the drift.

Regarding life's setbacks and obstacles as part of a strengthening and developmental journey with trials and ordeals, can liberate us from the prescriptive stories we all grow up with about the way 'life is' or is 'meant to be'. Life has ups and downs. Full stop. In addition, the language associated with the "journey of a hero" reframes experience and calls on the notion of courage and noble intent.

There is something else to keep in mind. There aren't any short cuts with the inner work involved in the journey. As a rule of thumb, plan on taking between one and several years to complete the hero's journey since setting off on a path of developing consciousness and enriching the quality of life is not to be rushed. In fact, for elders it is really a life-long commitment.

The Hero's Journey Maker

Joseph Campbell had a gift for identifying meta-patterns. Out of massive amounts and disparate information, he formed insights, distinguished common threads, and drew them together into a tapestry of life with clear resonance for people across cultures and time. Distinguishing patterns and insights is one of the wisdom attributes to cultivate that improves with age and experience.

Campbell's focus was the mythological stories handed down through generations all over the world. He noted that in every culture, these symbolic stories were remarkably similar in form and purpose--they were teaching tales. It was mostly the role of the elders to tell the teaching tales to younger leaders and the community. The elders were the guides and teachers, especially prominent during

major life transitions from childhood to youth; youth to adult; from adult to elder; and finally for the passage into death.

The Universal Themes

Although these teaching tales were different throughout the globe, Campbell saw the main theme was the same. He named the theme The Hero's Journey, which carries significance for elders because the metaphor makes sense of current chaotic, distressing, or confusing experience and reveals a way forward. It helps with the realisation that each of us are the hero (leader) in our own life story and it's up to us to make our own path with noble intent.

The theme starts with the "call" for mature heroes generally triggered by something to get our attention: a crisis, injury, fall from grace, or a loss. Early on we get into the "belly of the whale", a place we are tricked into entering because we would never enter into it in our right mind. When the illusion wears off and we see the reality of the dead-end place we have landed in, all hope seems lost. There are various attempts to make the most of it before the way out is found that carries grave risk. We can see it is dangerous but staying where we are is just as bad.

If we say yes to the risk, we enter the threshold where we must leave old ways behind and venture into the unknown. Guides may appear to assist us on our way, and although not all guides are who they seem to be and we may encounter various pranksters and frauds, if we make it through the long journey, we will be enormously strengthened and enriched.

Trials and Underlying Fears

In between the threshold and completing the journey there is tough ground to cover with the road of trials explicitly to test us. The trials are about meeting our fears: face them and we are renewed and fortified. Turn away or hide from them, and our fears continue to weaken and plague us.

The stakes are high and not everyone makes it through to become an elder either literally or psycho-spiritually and remain stuck in an earlier life-stage. There's a difference between being "young at heart" and puerile, that is acting or talking as though you're a little boy or little girl, an adolescent or young adult.

For those fortunate enough to make it through the trials we will have been weathered by life's losses, ordeals and obstacles and emerge more ourselves and in touch with our soul. You and I are different because we have walked in

different gardens, lived in different houses, and stood at different graves, yet with all our differences the themes we experience are universal.

Transformation is complete with our return, bringing back the gift of what we have learned and who we are. When we return to the community, we are ready to be a guide for others and to shower some wonderment and hope into the world. Each time we do this, we increase in proficiency and the quality of what we offer others. Like a painting, it gets done one brush stroke at a time, a fitting purpose for any elder.

¹ Campbell, J., (1949), *The hero With A Thousand Faces*, Pantheon Books
Campbell, J., (1988), *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Harper and Row
Campbell, J., (1987), *The Hero's Journey*, HarperCollins

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