The Hero's Journey, Transformation, and Spirituality

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The ingredients of heroism are well known to storytellers. A hero embarks on a journey of some kind that begins when he or she is cast into a dangerous, unfamiliar world. The hero is charged with accomplishing a daunting task and receives assistance from unlikely sources. There are frightening obstacles along the way and villainous characters to overcome. After many trials and much suffering, the hero prevails and then bestows a gift to society.

Often overlooked in this journey is the key to the hero’s success, namely, the hero’s acquisition of an important quality that he or she lacks. All heroes start out “incomplete” in some sense. They lack some essential inner quality that they must develop to succeed. This quality can be self-confidence, humility, courage, compassion, faith, resilience, or some fundamental truth about themselves and the world.

The question I have for you, the reader, is: What inner quality are you missing that is holding you back from becoming the hero of your own life story? Another way to put it: What attributes are you missing that you need for success?

If you’re like millions of people, you aren’t sure what you’re missing. Circumstances may not yet have revealed your missing quality. Or people have yet to enter your life who can guide you. If that’s the case, be patient. Buddhists have a saying: “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Who are the teachers in your life? Let’s look at two examples of how heroes in the movies have received help from others to receive their missing qualities.

The Wizard of Oz. In the classic 1939 movie, The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy is sent by a tornado to the strange Land of Oz. Her quest is to find her way home, and she receives help from three unlikely sources—a scarecrow, a tin man, and a lion. She is mentored by a friendly witch named Glinda and, later, by a mysterious wizard. Along the way she overcomes an evil witch, flying monkeys, and apple-throwing trees.

Dorothy’s missing quality is an understanding of “home”. Her new friends teach her that she has always possessed the power to get home. She discovers that home means more than just your house or apartment. It’s wherever the people you love—and who love you—are found.

Gravity. Nominated for Best Picture in 2013, Gravity stars Sandra Bullock as Dr. Ryan Stone, a scientist stranded in space after her space capsule is damaged. Dr. Stone is terrified and appears to lack the confidence and inner resources to survive her dire situation.

Veteran astronaut Matt Kowalski, played by George Clooney, is there to mentor her and instill her with confidence. Dr. Stone summons the courage and resourcefulness to cheat death and return to earth safely.
Movie heroes are not the only ones who benefit from good mentor figures. Rocker Gene Simmons credits his mother for teaching him prudence and self-control. Actor Jennifer Lawrence has thanked her father for helping her learn how to deal with adversity. Barack Obama has said that his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, taught him the importance of sacrifice: “She’s the one who put off buying a new car or a new dress for herself so that I could have a better life.”

In every good hero story, the hero discovers that he or she is missing something and receives help from others to acquire what’s missing. Every human life is a hero-like journey, making it imperative that each one of us identifies our missing quality.

Here are four steps you can take—not necessarily in this order:

1. Make an inventory of your strengths and weaknesses as a person.

2. Develop a list of your life goals.

3. Assess what’s missing to achieve your goals. List the strengths you lack and the weaknesses that need removal.

4. Find mentor figures to help you.

Some people do Step 4 first. A good mentor can help you identify your strengths and pinpoint what qualities are needed to fulfill your goals. Good mentors should be brutally honest about what you’re missing and how to acquire the qualities you lack.

Many of us fail, and fail badly, before we are willing to seek the help of a mentor figure. Learning from our failures and getting help from mentors is a sign of healthy human development.

Identifying missing qualities and acquiring them is essential for heroes to succeed with their missions. The discovery (or recovery) of these attributes is the basis for the personal transformation that the hero undergoes during the journey. The most satisfying heroes we encounter in storytelling and in real life are heroes who experience this transformative discovery of their missing quality.

Caution: Beware the dark mentor. As movies such as Whiplash and Fifty Shades of Grey show us, there are false mentors out there who will send you in the wrong direction. Choose your teachers carefully.

Transformation: Every Easter season, about three billion Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. In earlier writings, I’ve discussed the heroism of Jesus and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection. For Christians, resurrection signifies the immense power of God, and it validates who Jesus claimed to be, namely, the son of God.

But there is more.
According to many scholars, including Joseph Campbell and Richard Rohr, the rise, suffering and resurrection of Jesus are all significant because they model the human journey of growth, setback, and heroic transformation. I use the word “model” deliberately. We’re all destined to rise, fall, and become resurrected. Jesus showed us that our lives are all about — or should be about — transformation.

*The life of Jesus is a blueprint for all human life.* You don’t have to be a Christian to appreciate the significance of Jesus’ life and death.

For now, let’s focus on transformation, which I believe is *the centerpiece of the hero’s journey.* All good heroes in storytelling undergo a transformation that forever changes them morally, emotionally, mentally, physically, and/or spiritually. My friend and colleague Greg Smith and I talk about the significance of these types of transformations in our 2015 book, *Reel Heroes & Villains.*

There is no more dramatic transformation than the one undergone by Jesus of Nazareth. His life followed the classic pattern in hero storytelling. Denied proper shelter and born in a manger, Jesus overcame poverty to grow into the wisest spiritual leader of his time – a remarkable transformation. This transformative rise of the hero represents the first part of the heroic arc.

As with all heroes, his ascendency had to come to an end. Jesus was arrested for threatening the established order, and he was tortured and brutally murdered. This tragic fall of the hero is part two of the classic heroic arc.

The third act in the heroic journey is the hero’s rising from the ashes of defeat. As Joseph Campbell wrote, “The crucifixion is not a calamity if it leads to new life.” The resurrection was a dramatic physical and spiritual transformation that not only represented the transcendence of Jesus – it transformed all of Western civilization for two millennia and beyond.

More from Campbell: “Through Christ’s crucifixion we were unshelled, which enabled us to be born to resurrection. The imitation of Christ, then, is participating in the suffering and joys of the world, all the while seeing through them the radiance of the divine presence.”

And from Richard Rohr: “Jesus is actually *naming and revealing what is happening everywhere and all the time* in God. Jesus’ resurrection is a statement about how reality works: always moving toward resurrection.”

Resurrection, then, is transcendence. For Christians, it can also be likened to other phenomena of spiritual change, including *conversion* and *salvation.* Hindus call dramatic growth of this type *enlightenment,* and Buddhists call it *bodhicitta.* Twelve step programs call it an *awakening.* The Greeks called it *metamorphosis.* Psychologists like myself label it plain old development.

But development is clearly an understatement. Transformation is a complete change in form, not unlike a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. The resurrection of Jesus is the most dramatic form of transformation possible, at personal level and at the level of an entire society or culture.
The pattern in Jesus’ life, and in our own lives, is clear. We move from order to disorder to reorder. And psychologists who study post-traumatic growth will tell you that the final reorder is a more beautiful place to be than the original order.

Transformation gives us hope that no matter how dire our circumstances, we can be redeemed. Hero stories move us all because they call us all. This Easter season, we can pay attention to the story of resurrection and thereby learn much about the hero’s journey that awaits each of us.

**The Role of God in Transformation.** In November of 2012, Paramount Pictures released a film called *Rise of the Guardians*, based loosely on William Joyce’s *The Guardians of Childhood* book series. The opening scene of the movie is jarring. The dead body of an adolescent boy, Jack, floats upward toward the ice-covered surface of the lake in which he has just drowned. We see what Jack would see were he alive – a jagged hole in the ice above him, growing closer as he rises in the water, and beyond that hole we see an impossibly big, beautiful full moon shining down on his lifeless body.

You probably know the rest of the story. Not because you’ve necessarily seen the movie or because the story is particularly predictable. You know it because the tale of the hero’s journey has been told countless times in different forms across all human cultures. Our hero, Jack, is dead physically but not dead in spirit. That beautiful moon, which pulled him toward its light, decides to endow Jack with immortality along with the power to create instant snow and ice. He is now Jack Frost.

*Rise of the Guardians* is a secularized version of an ancient tale of God’s role in creating and assisting heroes on their journeys. The moon, of course, symbolizes a divine or higher power, a source of immense light, wisdom, and authority. The moon is also a mystery to Jack; he does not know why the moon has transformed him into Jack Frost, nor does he understand why the other guardians of the world – Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy — wish to recruit him into their heroic fold to fight the story’s villain. Jack’s efforts to infer the moon’s intentions and motives are a recurring theme in the film.

The spiritual significance of the hero’s journey has been aptly described by Richard Rohr in his 2011 book *Falling Upward*. Rohr argues that all heroes are summoned by a higher power to a great journey, and that the catalytic agent of this journey is some type of death, deficit, or wounding suffered by the hero. The story is as old as the fall of Adam and Eve in the first chapter of Genesis, and it emerges in countless stories of ugly ducklings, Cinderellas, and other underdogs who through magic or divine intervention turn their wounds into triumph.

In *Rise of the Guardians*, the large, luminous moon pulls Jack toward its light in a manner consistent with many accounts of near-death experiences. His physical failing is necessary for his spiritual rising and for his true identity to emerge. In his new life as Jack Frost, the boy is troubled by the fact that no one can see him or his icy cold handiwork. For centuries he remains unrecognized and unloved, and he is haunted by his lack of memory over the circumstances of his death in the icy waters.
With the help of another character, Baby Tooth, Jack’s memory is restored. He comes to understand that he died on the icy lake while saving his sister’s life, thus illuminating his destiny as a deserving guardian. This knowledge empowers Jack to complete the heroic journey that the moon set in motion centuries earlier. He uses his wounds to transform himself and to redeem the world, much like the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. Richard Rohr argues that nearly all hero stories follow this pattern. Unlocking the divine secret of our wounds is the surest path to heroism.

*Rise of the Guardians* is not the best film of 2012, nor is it the best hero story of the year. But it skillfully uses the classic elements of the hero’s journey to craft a compelling tale of loss, pain, transformation, and redemption. The moon’s portrayal of a higher power that instigates the entire journey is unmistakable. Richard Rohr believes that a higher power summons all humans on this heroic path. Our falling is necessary for our rising, with setbacks serving as the essential redemptive seeds of our own heroism. Rohr quotes Julian of Norwich: “First, there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.”

**References**


