

“The Hero’s Adventure”

Selections from chapter five of The Power of Myth,

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The Power of Myth is a book based on a documentary originally broadcast on PBS in 1988 as *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*. The documentary comprises six one-hour conversations between mythologist Joseph Campbell journalist Bill Moyers in 1987.

The placement of a ‘[. . .]’ identifies the location of a passage that was removed.

Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world. -- JOSEPH CAMPBELL

MOYERS: Why are there so many stories of the hero in mythology?

CAMPBELL: Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.

MOYERS: So in all of these cultures, whatever the local costume the hero might be wearing, what is the deed?

CAMPBELL: Well, there are two types of deed. One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life and then comes back with a message. The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning. But the structure and something of the spiritual sense of this adventure can be seen already anticipated in the puberty or initiation rituals of early tribal societies, through which a child is compelled to give up its childhood and become an adult -- to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo. We are in childhood in a condition of dependency under someone's protection

and supervision for some fourteen to twenty-one years - - and if you're going on for your Ph.D., this may continue to perhaps thirty-five. You are in no way a self-responsible, free agent, but an obedient dependent, expecting and receiving punishments and rewards. To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance requires a death and a resurrection. That's the basic motif of the universal hero's journey -- leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition.

MOYERS: So even if we happen not to be heroes in the grand sense of redeeming society, we still have to take that journey inside ourselves, spiritually and psychologically.

CAMPBELL: That's right. Otto Rank in his important little book *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* declares that everyone is a hero in birth, where he undergoes a tremendous psychological as well as physical transformation, from the condition of a little water creature living in a realm of amniotic fluid into an air-breathing mammal which ultimately will be standing. That's an enormous transformation, and had it been consciously undertaken, it would have been, indeed, a heroic act.

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MOYERS: But there's still a journey to be taken after that.

CAMPBELL: There's a large journey to be taken, of many trials.

MOYERS: What's the significance of the trials, and tests, and ordeals of the hero?

CAMPBELL: If you want to put it in terms of intentions, the trials are designed to see to it that the intending hero should be really a hero. Is he really a match for this task? Can he overcome the dangers? Does he have the courage, the knowledge, the capacity, to enable him to serve?

MOYERS: In this culture of easy religion, cheaply achieved, it seems to me we've forgotten that all three of the great religions teach that the trials of the hero journey are a significant part of life, that there's no

reward without renunciation, without paying the price. The Koran says, "Do you think that you shall enter the Garden of Bliss without such trials as came to those who passed before you?" And Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew, "Great is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth to life, and few there be who find it." And the heroes of the Jewish tradition undergo great tests before they arrive at their redemption.

CAMPBELL: If you realize what the real problem is -- losing yourself, giving yourself to some higher end, or to another -- you realize that this itself is the ultimate trial. When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another. You have been thinking one way, you now have to think a different way.

MOYERS: How is consciousness transformed?

CAMPBELL: Either by the trials themselves or by illuminating revelations. Trials and revelations are what it's all about.

MOYERS: Isn't there a moment of redemption in all of these stories? The woman is saved from the dragon, the city is spared from obliteration, the hero is snatched from danger in the nick of time.

CAMPBELL: Well, yes. There would be no hero deed unless there were an achievement. We can have the hero who fails, but he's usually represented as a kind of clown, someone pretending to more than he can achieve.

MOYERS: How is a hero different from a leader?

CAMPBELL: That is a problem Tolstoy dealt with in *War and Peace*. Here you have Napoleon ravaging Europe and now about to invade Russia, and Tolstoy raises this question: Is the leader really a leader, or is he simply the one out in front on a wave? In psychological terms, the leader might be analyzed as the one who perceived what could be achieved and did it.

MOYERS: It has been said that a leader is someone who discerned the inevitable and got in front of it. Napoleon was a leader, but he wasn't a hero in the sense that what he accomplished was grand for humanity's sake. It was for France, the glory of France.

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CAMPBELL: The moral objective is that of saving a people, or saving a person, or supporting an idea. The hero sacrifices himself for something -- that's the morality of it. Now, from another position, of course, you might say that the idea for which he sacrificed himself was something that should not have been respected. That's a judgment from the other side, but it doesn't destroy the intrinsic heroism of the deed performed.

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MOYERS: Does your study of mythology lead you to conclude that a single human quest, a standard pattern of human aspiration and thought, constitutes for all mankind something that we have in common, whether we lived a million years ago or will live a thousand years from now?

CAMPBELL: There's a certain type of myth which one might call the vision quest, going in quest of a boon, a vision, which has the same form in every mythology. That is the thing that I tried to present in the first book I wrote, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. All these different mythologies give us the same essential quest. You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem either of staying with that, and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again. That's not an easy thing to do.

MOYERS: So the hero goes for something, he doesn't just go along for the ride, he's not simply an adventurer?

CAMPBELL: There are both kinds of heroes, some that choose to undertake the journey and some that don't. In one kind of adventure, the hero sets out responsibly and intentionally to perform the deed. For instance, Odysseus' son Telemachus was told by Athena, "Go find your father." That father quest is a major hero adventure for young people. That is the adventure of finding what your career is, what your nature is, what your source is. You undertake that intentionally. Or there is the legend of the Sumerian sky goddess, Inanna, who descended into the underworld and underwent death to bring her beloved back to life. Then there are adventures into which you are thrown -- for example, being drafted into the army. You didn't intend it, but you're in now. You've undergone a death and resurrection, you've put on a uniform, and you're another creature. One kind of hero that often appears in Celtic myths is the princely hunter, who has followed the lure of a deer into a range of forest that he has never been in before. The animal there undergoes a transformation, becoming the Queen of the Faerie Hills, or something of that kind. This is a type of adventure in which the hero has no idea what he is doing but suddenly finds himself in a transformed realm.

MOYERS: Is the adventurer who takes that kind of trip a hero in the mythological sense?

CAMPBELL: Yes, because he is always ready for it. In these stories, the adventure that the hero is ready for is the one he gets. The adventure is symbolically a manifestation of his character. Even the landscape and the conditions of the environment match his readiness.

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MOYERS: So perhaps the hero lurks in each one of us when we don't know it?

CAMPBELL: Our life evokes our character. You find out more about yourself as you go on. That's why it's good to be able to put yourself in situations that will evoke your higher nature rather than your lower. "Lead us not into temptation." Ortega y Gasset talks about the environment and the hero in his *Meditations on Don Quixote*. Don Quixote was the last hero of the Middle Ages. He rode out to encounter giants, but instead of giants, his environment produced windmills. Ortega points out that this story takes place about the time that a mechanistic interpretation of the world came in, so that the environment was no longer spiritually responsive to the hero. The hero is today running up against a hard world that is in no way responsive to his spiritual need.

MOYERS: A windmill.

CAMPBELL: Yes, but Quixote saved the adventure for himself by inventing a magician who had just transformed the giants he had gone forth to encounter into windmills. You can do that, too, if you have a poetic imagination. Earlier, though, it was not a mechanistic world in which the hero moved but a world alive and responsive to his spiritual readiness. Now it has become to such an extent a sheerly mechanistic world, as interpreted through our physical sciences, Marxist sociology, and behavioristic psychology, that we're nothing but a predictable pattern of wires responding to stimuli. This nineteenth-century interpretation has squeezed the freedom of the human will out of modern life.

MOYERS: In the political sense, is there a danger that these myths of heroes teach us to look at the deeds of others as if we were in an amphitheater or coliseum or a movie, watching others perform great deeds while consoling ourselves to impotence?

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We seem to worship celebrities today, not heroes.

CAMPBELL: Yes, and that's too bad. A questionnaire was once sent around one of the high schools in Brooklyn which asked, "What would you like to be?" Two thirds of the students responded, "A celebrity." They had no notion of having to give of themselves in order to achieve something.

MOYERS: Just to be known.

CAMPBELL: Just to be known, to have fame-name and fame. It's too bad.

MOYERS: But does a society need heroes?

CAMPBELL: Yes, I think so.

MOYERS: Why?

CAMPBELL: Because it has to have constellating images to pull together all these tendencies to separation, to pull them together into some intention.

MOYERS: To follow some path.

CAMPBELL: I think so. The nation has to have an intention somehow to operate as a single power.

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MOYERS: Don't many of the heroes in mythology die to the world? They suffer, they're crucified.

CAMPBELL: Many of them give their lives. But then the myth also says that out of the given life comes a new life. It may not be the hero's life, but it's a new life, a new way of being of becoming.

MOYERS: These stories of the hero vary from culture to culture. Is the hero from the East different from the hero in our culture?

CAMPBELL: It's the degree of the illumination or action that makes them different. There is a typical early culture hero who goes around slaying monsters. Now, that is a form of adventure from the period of prehistory when man was shaping his world out of a dangerous, unshaped wilderness. He goes about killing monsters.

MOYERS: So the hero evolves over time like most other concepts and ideas?

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MOYERS: Why did you call your book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*?

CAMPBELL: Because there is a certain typical hero sequence of actions which can be detected in stories from all over the world and from many periods of history. Essentially, it might even be said there is but one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many lands by many, many people. A legendary hero is usually the founder of something -- the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life. In order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, a germinal idea that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing. The founders of all religions have gone on quests like that. The Buddha went into solitude and then sat beneath the bo tree, the tree of immortal knowledge, where he received an illumination that has enlightened all of Asia for twenty-five hundred years. After baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus went into the desert for forty days; and it was out of that desert that he came with his message. Moses went to the top of a mountain and came down with the tables of the law. Then you have the one who founds a new city -- almost all the old Greek cities were founded by heroes who went off on quests and had surprising adventures, out of which each then founded a city. You might also say that the founder of a life -- your life or mine, if we live our own lives, instead of imitating everybody else's life -- comes from a quest as well.

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CAMPBELL: Myths inspire the realization of the possibility of your perfection, the fullness of your strength, and the bringing of solar light into the world. Slaying monsters is slaying the dark things. Myths grab you somewhere down inside. As a boy, you go at it one

way, as I did reading my Indian stories. Later on, myths tell you more, and more, and still more. I think that anyone who has ever dealt seriously with religious or mythic ideas will tell you that we learn them as a child on one level, but then many different levels are revealed. Myths are infinite in their revelation.

MOYERS: How do I slay that dragon in me? What's the journey each of us has to make, what you call "the soul's high adventure"?

CAMPBELL: My general formula for my students is "Follow your bliss." Find where it is, and don't be afraid to follow it.

MOYERS: Is it my work or my life?

CAMPBELL: If the work that you're doing is the work that you chose to do because you are enjoying it, that's it. But if you think, "Oh, no! I couldn't do that!" that's the dragon locking you in. "No, no, I couldn't be a writer," or "No, no, I couldn't possibly do what So-and-so is doing."

MOYERS: In this sense, unlike heroes such as Prometheus or Jesus, we're not going on our journey to save the world but to save ourselves.

CAMPBELL: But in doing that, you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes, there's no doubt about it. The world without spirit is a wasteland. People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules, and who's on top, and so forth. No, no! Any world is a valid world if it's alive. The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself.

MOYERS: When I take that journey and go down there and slay those dragons, do I have to go alone?

CAMPBELL: If you have someone who can help you, that's fine, too. But, ultimately, the last deed has to be done by oneself. Psychologically, the dragon is one's own binding of oneself to one's ego. We're captured in our own dragon cage. The problem of the psychiatrist is to disintegrate that dragon, break him up, so that you may expand to a larger field of relationships. The ultimate dragon is within you, it is your ego clamping you down.

MOYERS: What's my ego?

CAMPBELL: What you think you want, what you will to believe, what you think you can afford, what you decide to love, what you regard yourself as bound to. It may be all much too small, in which case it will nail you down. And if you simply do what your neighbors tell you to do, you're certainly going to be nailed down. Your neighbors are then your dragon as it reflects from within yourself. Our Western dragons represent greed. However, the Chinese dragon is different. It represents the vitality of the swamps and comes up beating its belly and bellowing, "Haw ha ha haww." That's a lovely kind of dragon, one that yields the bounty of the waters, a great, glorious gift. But the dragon of our Western tales tries to collect and keep everything to himself. In his secret cave he guards things: heaps of gold and perhaps a captured virgin. He doesn't know

what to do with either, so he just guards and keeps. There are people like that, and we call them creeps. There's no life from them, no giving. They just glue themselves to you and hang around and try to suck out of you their life.

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MOYERS: Would you tell [. . .] your students as an illustration of how, if they follow their bliss, if they take chances with their lives, if they do what they want to, the adventure is its own reward?

CAMPBELL: The adventure is its own reward -- but it's necessarily dangerous, having both negative and positive possibilities, all of them beyond control. We are following our own way, not our daddy's or our mother's way. So we are beyond protection in a field of higher powers than we know. One has to have some sense of what the conflict possibilities will be in this field, and here a few good archetypal stories like this may help us to know what to expect. If we have been impudent and altogether ineligible for the role into which we have cast ourselves, it is going to be a demon marriage and a real mess. However, even here there may be heard a rescuing voice, to convert the adventure into a glory beyond anything ever imagined.

MOYERS: It's easier to stay home, stay in the womb, not take the journey.

CAMPBELL: Yes, but then life can dry up because you're not off on your own adventure.

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CAMPBELL: "All life is suffering," said the Buddha, and Joyce has a line -- "Is life worth leaving?"

MOYERS: But what about the young person who says, "I didn't choose to be born -- my mother and father made the choice for me."

CAMPBELL: Freud tells us to blame our parents for all the shortcomings of our life, and Marx tells us to blame the upper class of our society. But the only one to blame is oneself. That's the helpful thing about the Indian idea of karma. Your life is the fruit of your own doing. You have no one to blame but yourself.

MOYERS: But what about chance? A drunken driver turns the corner and hits you. That isn't your fault. You haven't done that to yourself.

CAMPBELL: From that point of view, is there anything in your life that did not occur as by chance? This is a matter of being able to accept chance. The ultimate backing of life is chance -- the chance that your parents met, for example! Chance, or what might seem to be chance, is the means through which life is realized. The problem is not to blame or explain but to handle the life that arises. Another war has been declared somewhere, and you are drafted into an army, and there go five or six years of your life with a whole new set of chance events. The best advice is to take it all as if it had been

of your intention -- with that, you evoke the participation of your will.

MOYERS: In all of these journeys of mythology, there's a place everyone wishes to find. The Buddhists talk of Nirvana, and Jesus talks of peace, of the mansion with many rooms. Is that typical of the hero's journey -- that there's a place to find?

CAMPBELL: The place to find is within yourself. I learned a little about this in athletics. The athlete who is in top form has a quiet place within himself, and it's around this, somehow, that his action occurs. If he's all out there in the action field, he will not be performing properly. My wife is a dancer, and she tells me that this is true in dance as well. There's a center of quietness within, which has to be known and held. If you lose that center, you are in tension and begin to fall apart. The Buddhist Nirvana is a center of peace of this kind. Buddhism is a psychological religion. It starts with the psychological problem of suffering: all life is sorrowful; there is, however, an escape from sorrow; the escape is Nirvana -- which is a state of mind or consciousness, not a place somewhere, like heaven. It is right here, in the midst of the turmoil of life. It is the state you find when you are no longer driven to live by compelling desires, fears, and social commitments, when you have found your center of freedom and can act by choice out of that. Voluntary action out of this

center is the action of the bodhisattvas -- joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.

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MOYERS: But people ask, isn't a myth a lie?

CAMPBELL: No, mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth -- penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words, beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told. So this is the penultimate truth. It's important to live life with the experience, and therefore the knowledge, of its mystery and of your own mystery. This gives life a new radiance, a new harmony, a new splendor. Thinking in mythological terms helps to put you in accord with the inevitables of this vale of tears. You learn to recognize the positive values in what appear to be the negative moments and aspects of your life. The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure.

MOYERS: The adventure of the hero?

CAMPBELL: Yes, the adventure of the hero -- the adventure of being alive.