

The Hero's Journey

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was working with the psychiatric staff of Emmanuel Hospital in Turlock, California, teaching them various gestalt and bio-energetic practices which I thought might aid them in their work with psychosis. These doctors and nurses believed that a psychotic episode is not an "illness" someone should be drugged or shocked out of, but a healing process the person should be allowed to work through. "When I see what happens to some of our patients after they have gone through their madness," one of the nurses said to me one evening, "when I see the integration that takes place, I'm jealous. I would like to be able to go crazy myself, but I can't; I don't seem to have the talent or the chemistry or whatever it takes."

Her comment set me thinking. My study of ritual drama had made me aware of various forms of ritualized insanity developed by tribal cultures to assist people through major life changes. Perhaps I could find a formula, some device from which I could create a modern healing ritual for Western men and women - a formula coming out of our own cultural heritage that would be strong enough to evoke the kind of altered states of consciousness experienced, for instance, in schizophrenia.

I recalled Joseph Campbell's study of the hero myth, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press/Bollingen Series XVII, Second Edition, 1968). In that work, Campbell has simplified the hero story into what he calls the basic monomyth, an extraordinarily simple plot line that can be found in most, if not all, adventure tales. Curiously enough, the formula can also be applied to many primitive rituals as well as to many of the images and struggles that seem to emerge in a schizophrenic episode. And so, working with the plot as I would with a play, I designed a process to facilitate groups of people in experiencing their own mythological drama as fully as possible.

The Story

The story of the hero's journey follows a basic pattern.

The hero is someone who hears the call to adventure and follows it. Generally this person, man or woman, is reasonably well adapted to the social-cultural environment, but there is a yearning, an inclination toward the extraordinary. This inclination is, at some point, intensified into an experience of a call. This call may come from outside in the form of an invitation or suggestion from another, "Come to India with me"; "You should see the strange things that are happening in Paris these days." Or it may come in the form of an inner voice that says, "There could be more to life than I'm living." However it comes, it sinks deeply into the hero's being and remains there until it is

either acted upon or killed by one who will not follow the striving of his or her own heart.

The call sets up the first level of resistance: immediate life problems such as one's home or one's job. These must be met and dealt with before the hero can begin the journey.

Somewhere along the way, helpers appear, people who give encouragement, guides, friends who point out the dangerous places. There is a spirit guide who gives the hero an instrument of power to arm him for the battles at the threshold or tests within the mysterium. King Arthur was given his sword, Excalibur, by Merlin; Orpheus, the lyre of Apollo; a traveller to India might have her map, a letter of reference and a handbook of basic Indian phrases.

Armed thus, the hero proceeds to the point of no return, called the threshold of adventure. It generally appears as a gate, a cave mouth or the entrance to a forest. When the hero arrives, she encounters the threshold guardian, a dragon, a castle guard or a three-headed dog that refuses admittance. This guardian is the second level of resistance, representing all the self-negating forces within the personality.

A confrontation takes place between the hero and the demon of resistance until a resolution is reached. The hero, frequently accompanied by the transformed demon, then proceeds into the mysterious inner world.

This is generally quite an extraordinary place, a kind of enchanted forest of supernatural wonder. The hero continues along his way like Alice in Wonderland, encountering the new and the strange. But armed now with the knowledge of his confrontation at the threshold, he knows he can cope with any situation that presents itself.

Soon enough, however, the hero encounters the supreme ordeal, a monumental struggle with the most basic fear - the fear of death.

Finally the hero has earned the reward of the journey - the grail, the treasure, or the inner marriage for which this particular hero has been searching. This is the gift of life that comes after the long night of death, and it finds expression in some sort of symbol with which the hero returns to homeground. The magical aspects of the mysterium are left behind the hero departs once again beyond the threshold, but the awareness and the fullness of the voyager remain to enhance or change the situation at home. Thus the journey is complete.

The Process

The process itself is divided into two major segments, *The Hero's Journey* and *Death and Resurrection*. Together they comprise a complete journey, although they are sometimes done at different times. When taken separately, each process is complete in itself. In this article I will describe only *The*

Hero's Journey. This part of the process works specifically at the level of archetype, creating a kind of fantasy-drama that people enact together. The second half, *Death and Resurrection*, works at the historic level. The situation presented is one of forthcoming death. It develops an overview of life in preparation for its ending.

The Hero's Journey is developed around the theme of the hero and her counterpart, the demon of resistance. It consists of a series of calibrated challenges, risks that, if taken, develop a broader base for fuller self-realization by releasing the person's creative self-expression. In the course of the process, groups of people get to know each other in very special ways and a kind of tribal unity occurs to support the individual voyager on her path.

The idea of the process is that the participants become a tribe, a group of people who have agreed to work through this particular form or ritual together. I work with the concept that the main function of the group or tribe is to support the evolution of the individual. This, in turn, strengthens the group, for the gestalt of the tribal energy can only be as strong as that of each of its members. Because the formation of the tribe is specifically designed to encourage each individual member to achieve his highest, most spiritual, most evolved goal, the tribe itself comes together at a very strong level of participation. People are willing to support each other because they feel supported. As each person works through the stages of his own process, the group supports them in a variety of tribal ways - with music, with dancing, with shouts and cheers of encouragement. This creates a powerful feeling of *ensemble*, of group activity and group energy. And so the participants get the sense, as time goes on, that they are actually a tribe that is taking a journey, that even though each person's journey is highly individual, the whole tribe is journeying together.

Every journey begins with a point of departure: the place that, physically, psychologically, and spiritually feels like home. This includes the home itself, one's life-work, loved ones, and oneself. How, in short, do the voyagers feel about their lives right now? Is anything missing? Do things flow harmoniously? Are they satisfied?

Then, as in a fable, they are given one wish. "If you could have a miracle in your life, what would it be?" This is the first statement of the hero's mission and generally it fulfills itself in the reward.

The picture of "homeground" and the nature of the miracle desired give a good sense of what is going on in each person's life and what needs concentration. It will happen, from time to time, that the wish and the reward do not coincide. Most of the time this seems to indicate a lack of self-awareness of one's deeper needs on the part of the individual. For example, someone may wish for a mate but find as his reward inner peace, or his own power symbolized by a throne, placing him in the centre of his universe. Most frequently, however, either the original wish is fulfilled or the reward is a tool, a state of mind necessary to the accomplishment of the wish.

In order to take this fantastic journey into the world of miracles and dreams, a fantastic personality must be evoked. Most people tend to limit themselves to a very mundane, practical self-image, allowing movies, television and dreams to act out these other, more extraordinary aspects of their natures. In the process, we use just these tools - movies, fairytales, childhood memories, and dreams - to put together a characterization called *The Hero*. This process is climaxed by a celebration with costume and music, an heroic presentation in which each person projects her heroic personality outward to the group and is received with cheers of affirmation. The hero has been awakened.

Most hero stories include the discovery of some magical instrument of power, an externalization of the power that the hero feels he lacks. This power, of course, already resides deeply within the heart of the hero, but it needs to be awakened and projected into a symbol so that the hero can finally realize it for himself. At this time in the process, the heroes go out in search of some object in the environment to symbolize that power. Something always appears. When the hero has found it, he pauses to meditate on the setting, particularly on whatever immediately surrounds the object. Then he allows his active imagination to create a spirit guide to tell him about the magical weapon, its power and uses for the journey, as well as its application to his mundane life.

Every hero has a mission to accomplish: Parsifal is in search of the holy grail; Frodo, of the ring; Orpheus is searching for Eurydice, and Buddha, for surcease of suffering or nirvana. Each of our heroes also has a mission. The mission or goal come spontaneously from subconscious and is generally a further development of the miracle, of the call that the hero discovers early in the drama. After the instrument of power has been found and explored, the group does a blessing ritual in which they dedicate their power objects to the accomplishment of their missions and to the fulfillment of their lives.

The demon of resistance

Once the heroes have experienced the kind of spiritual grounding that comes with the revelation of the instrument of power, they take time to assimilate what has been discovered and to prepare for the development of the other side of the story: the great guardian at the threshold of adventure, the demon of resistance.

The demon exists on all levels, physical, emotional and intellectual; it is the archtypal "No." This is the inner limitation we always confront whenever a new situation presents itself, a situation that we want to experience and that we know will not physically or emotionally harm us, and yet one that still frightens us - in short, a situation of potential growth.

The demon is evolved out of the physical and emotional blocks to self-expression as they are manifest in the body armour. By examining the bone structure of the body, finding where it is balanced and mobile and where it is restricted, we discover a pattern of resistance. "What muscles do you have to tighten

in order to maintain that immobility in the chest, and how does that connect to the angle of the head and the retraction of the pelvis?" Soon enough there emerges a full picture which, as each tension is exaggerated, creates in the body a paralysis of intensified body armour. People begin to see quite clearly how it is they both keep themselves in and keep the rest of the world out.

I call this intensification process the "battlefield" because it is a clear dramatization of inner conflict, the battle between the life-seeking hero and the stasis-demanding demon who are continually at war.

The process of exorcizing the demon, in gestalt terms, is called reversing the retroflection. It means simply owning the fact that the person himself is doing the holding, finding out the nature of the expression that is being stifled (i.e., choking back a scream, smothering violence) and then transforming from the suffering victim into the victimizer (i.e., the choked-back scream becomes the screaming strangler; the smothered violence becomes the violent smotherer).

Safe techniques are taught to allow for discharge of any violent emotions that may be triggered. This discharge is encouraged and provided for, but the primary focus is the completion of the archetype. The expression of pent-up negative emotions in a safe situation gives people a chance to learn various ways of dealing with their own hostility and fear. The development of the demon teaches how to change these feelings into assertiveness and excitement.

Through a series of theatre games, the demons have a chance to play out all the thwarted malevolence of childhood with both the humour and the full emotional investment of a child playing monster.

The two "characterizations" then confront each other in the gestalt mode of self-dramatization. Each person creates her own situation while the rest of the group supports with music, sound effects and protective pillows to provide physical resistance when it is called for. There is usually a guide who aids the hero in battle, reminding her from time to time of her instrument of power or suggesting that she change roles to experience what is going on from the other point of view. However, at the heart of her struggle all decisions are in the hands of the hero.

Most of the time the hero wins the battle, but there have been situations when the demon wins. Generally when this happens some form of transformation takes place in which the two characters meld into a new configuration. There are many possible outcomes to this struggle, as many as there are people. I have found that the results are most powerful when synthesis occurs between hero and demon. The person begins to find that it is possible to say "yes" to himself and "no" to unreasonable external interference. The hero who can at least make friends with the demon is halfway to owning his own power. To kill the demon is to kill part of oneself and some reincorporation is necessary, such as transforming the defeated demon into a potion of power that can

be drunk and reintegrated into the body as strength rather than pain. Behind every demon there is always a hurt child that needs to express his hurt and perhaps find a little comfort. Often the hero realizes this, and once he finds that he can care for that much maligned part of himself, the battle is over.

Now voyagers are ready to enter the land of miracles. A series of guided fantasies and waking dreams are employed to investigate the inner panorama. Sometimes these are ecstatic experiences; people find themselves in beautiful gardens, on watery beaches or in strange, multidimensional wonderlands. Other times, these can be frightening as people find themselves in caves and dark places deep in the bowels of the earth. They explore these inner realms, generally with a companion to whom they report their experiences and with whom they work through their fears.

This exploration is completed in the discovery of the reward. Each person's reward appears in symbolic form, pictured perhaps as a ring, a chalice, or a jewel. It will most often answer the need expressed in the first wish at the beginning of the journey. The voyagers find out the meaning and application of this reward to their life situations by taking the symbol back into the original homeground fantasy with which they began. They can then see what happens to the home, the life-work, the beloved, and the self if, for instance, the magic wand of creativity, the sword of truth, or the warmth of human contact is applied to them.

The return to homeground is in many ways the most important step of the process because, now that the entire journey has been experienced, it is only meaningful if the voyager can incorporate what has been learned into the real journey of life.

And so all decide on some simple concrete action, some first step they can take to bring the results of their journey back with them. It may be as simple as a phone call to a friend they suddenly realize is very important to them. Or it may be to begin looking for more satisfying work or a different living situation. It may simply mean taking more time for oneself. Whatever it is, the voyagers contract with themselves to take that first step on their return journey home.

Theatre or therapy?

As to whether this process does ritualize schizophrenia, I have had several responses. Some voyagers who have experienced previous psychotic episodes have found many similarities; others, none. People in the field of mental health with whom I have worked will often say, "Ah, now I understand what X was going through last night in the hospital." Sometimes there will be no recognition. So I make no absolute conclusions.

Many people have asked me if this is theatre or therapy. I'm not sure if there is a clear-cut difference. After all, the roots of our theatre are in the ritual drama of ancient Greece. Eons ago people travelled miles on foot or in donkey-

cart to share in what I imagine was a kind of tribal exorcism. They did not go to find out what happens to Electra or Medea; they already knew the myths that today form the basis of much psychological speculation. Something beyond suspense brought those people. It was called Enthusiasm, *En theus*, the god within. The intense identification with the hero at his or her moment of catharsis must have been similar to the release felt during the discharge of a primal scream. I think, however, that more than therapy, there was a kind of transcendence - a wakening of the god within. The chaos of creative energies was released in the form and structure of art. And that is what I believe *The Hero's Journey* to be: a chance for people to create a work of art out of the basic materials of their own lives.

Paul Rebillot is a teacher and independent group leader who has spent the last seven years integrating a wide variety of experiential techniques into a holistic approach to the growth process. Formerly of the faculties of San Francisco State and Stanford Universities, he has been a resident group leader at Esalen Institute in California and manager of its study centre. Schedules and descriptions of his workshops, which he offers throughout the United States, Canada and Europe may be obtained from - Mr. Bret Davenport, P.O. Box 748, Mill Valley, CA 94941.

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