

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

“ First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win. ”

*Mahatma Gandhi*

The art of telling a good story is to keep the audience rapt and engaged – lost in the moment. There are a couple of skills that all storytellers have up their sleeves which will be really important for you to get to grips with to see yourself as the hero in your own life. The first skill is being able to recognize a polarity. The second is the ability to master and respect narrative flow.

The word “polarity” comes from the same root as the North and South Poles. A polarity means a contrast of opposites like hot and cold, dark and light or night and day. As human beings, our storytelling has focused on the contrast of good and evil, and love and loss. We recognize that to know what is good we must also know what is evil. To know happiness we must also know sorrow, one cannot make any sense of one without the other. We cannot always be happy, nor should we strive to be. When we look at any story of success, it always includes a period of doubt or of trial. This polarity is the nature of life and to avoid this is unhealthy. If we were always happy and had no polarity, life would be very boring indeed.

Have you noticed that all stories follow the same basic narrative? There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. We follow a character during a snapshot of their life. Sometimes their journey is tense

and tight, at other times joyful and expansive. For example, the narrative flow of Shrek is broadly similar to that of James Bond. There is a universal structure to stories which doesn't change whether the tale is told by the fireside or as a 3D blockbuster at the local cinema. This chapter will introduce you to this secret story structure and help you align it with your own life experience. Once we know the rules in which we operate, we can begin to play a bigger game.

## The Hero's Journey

Once, not all that long ago, there was an American professor called Joseph Campbell. Joseph was a professor of literature and one of the pre-eminent thinkers on myth and legend. He was an expert in stories and collected them from all over the world, examining them to find out what they had in common. From the fairy stories in the UK to the Green Man stories of Arabia, and from the religious tales of the Buddha to the teaching stories of the Aborigines, there was no storytelling tradition in the whole of the world that Joseph didn't know about. When he looked at all these tales, he found something very interesting. Everyone, everywhere, seemed to know what a hero or heroine was. And these heroes were the focus of all kinds of stories, of battle, of adventure, of love, of learning.

Not only that, everywhere you went in the world, people also knew what a "Hero's Quest" was. The idea of going on a great journey, undertaking challenges and coming back transformed by your experience. Wherever you were in the world, local people recognized what a Quest involved.

The most interesting thing he learned was that really, when you looked at it, there was only ONE story. In all the stories from different cultures, belief systems and heroes, the essential structure of the tale told about the hero was the same. Because there was only one story, Joseph called this structure the "monomyth." The myth

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from which all other tales are derived. This structure eventually became known as “The Hero’s Journey.”

Why is this relevant to us, here in the real world, I hear you cry? Well, apart from the fact that this structure makes for a super story, the Hero’s Journey relates not just to fantasy and imaginary characters, but to REAL ones. This structure is actually a map for HOW LIFE HAPPENS. Once you can read this map, you are in a much stronger place to understand where you are in the process of change. We have a tendency to think that when things get hard, we are in the wrong place. We become uncomfortable. We want to stop or give up. We become disorientated. When you know where you are and appreciate that the polarity of easy/hard, strong/weak, lost/found is in operation, you can feel a lot more relaxed about the journey, knowing you are exactly where you should be and pressing on until the polarity in your story changes.

Not one to take things as given, I tested this idea out. Is it really true that anyone, anywhere can understand the Hero’s Journey and relate it to their own feelings and their own lives? I have now run workshops on this model for seven years sharing these ideas with hundreds of people across several continents here in the UK, in India, New Zealand, the USA and Kosovo. Every single person who I showed it to, from the very young to the very old, could relate it to their lives and experience.

Let’s take a look at the structure. To help us, let’s call on one of the best-loved cinematic stories ever told. The original *Star Wars*. In developing what was to become a film classic, George Lucas hired Joseph Campbell as a consultant to give him advice on the monomyth. No doubt the special effects, the whopping budget and some marvellous acting helped to make the film such a success. But it was the Hero’s Journey structure that made it possible to create such a memorable film. Lucas claimed that he knew the pieces of what made a classic tale, but wasn’t clear about the order they came in or how to make the most of them. *Star Wars* combines many of

the key elements of great storytelling – the hero we can relate to, enjoyable and likeable sidekicks, the rescue of a princess, the defeat of evil and the surprising turn of events. Let's look in more detail at what Campbell and Lucas created as we break down the Hero's Journey.

## **The Headlines of the Hero's Journey – the Path to the Quest**

### **Part One – the Call**

The hero is looking for something – either to leave an unsuitable situation or to move toward an exciting dream or goal. But they feel stuck. They know there is more out there for them – they want to stretch beyond the known, but it feels frightening. Then one day, for whatever reason, they are “Called” – something happens that makes them decide they must commit and take action. This usually takes quite a bit of courage.

Luke Skywalker is cleaning the robot R2-D2 when he accidentally triggers a hidden message from Princess Leia, who has been kidnapped by Darth Vader. The message begs for help and rescue. When Luke visits Obi-Wan Kenobi to tell him about the message, he asks about his father – who is he? Luke is now “Called” to rescue the princess.

### **Part Two – the Commitment**

The hero crosses the threshold into the unknown. They leave behind what is familiar and commit to their Quest. In this time they receive support, mentoring and assistance. They make a plan and pull together the resources to get started.

Luke hires Hans Solo and Chewbacca to transport him to Alderaan, Leia's home world. Obi-wan Kenobi serves as his mentor and sidekick.

## Part Three – the Quest

**The Belly of the Whale:** It gets dark and lonely, the hero feels lost. They wonder why they ever started and if they can ever complete their Quest. There are tests and trials that prove they are up to the Quest.

**The Supreme Ordeal:** They face a final battle or challenge that is often life threatening, or they do battle with their own limitations or fears. The hero's commitment and integrity is put to the test.

Obi-Wan Kenobi gets killed in a battle with Darth Vader. He makes the ultimate sacrifice to help the higher cause. Luke faces Darth Vader, in a great lightsaber duel and Darth reveals that he is Luke's father attempting to lure him to the Dark Side (Belly of the Whale). Luke returns to Yoda (his mentor) to complete his training and it is revealed that he will have to face his father to become a true Jedi. He discovers that Leia is his sister. A final battle ensues (Supreme Ordeal) and Luke overpowers Darth, but refrains from killing him. His father then saves him in a final act of heroism before he dies.

## Part Four – the Return

Transformed by their experience, the heroic character needs time to recover. They then return across the threshold back into the "ordinary" world, able to share the gifts and wisdom they have accumulated through their Heroes' Journey. They are greeted with great joy and fanfare.

Anakin Skywalker (aka Darth Vader) dies in his son's arms. Luke graduates to become a Jedi Knight and the Death Star is destroyed. Luke returns home, a very different man to the one who began the Quest.

This structure can be found in any of the religious stories, fairy tales, in Disney and in Dickens. Writers have used it for centuries. Why? Because it echoes our own life experience. The Heroes' Journey is the structure of our life – when we change and learn, we move from highs to lows, from confidence to anxiety and we have to be persistent, against all odds or face giving up on our dreams.

## YOUR LIFE PLAN

My grandmother was born in Russia and in spite of being a Jewish woman in a Communist state, became a very successful physicist. She loved her job. She was the only woman in Russia responsible for a scientific institute. But she, her husband, her mother and her son, dreamed of the freedom they might have if they lived in the West. Her husband, my grandfather, had lost his whole family in World War II in Poland. He was a Zionist and wanted the family to move to Israel where they could live safe from persecution. The family took the opportunity to apply to leave Russia. This was their Call. Everyone applied, steadily going through the paperwork and bureaucracy that was designed by the Communist regime to wear you down and make you give up. They waited and waited. The answer finally came back; only my father, her son, had permission to leave. The rest of the family were now "traitors" to the regime. There was a family conference and they agreed that my father, who was only 21 years old, would leave Russia. He began his own Hero's Quest that took him to Israel and then to England.

Life now became very difficult for my grandparents. My grandmother lost the job she loved. One day shortly after my father left, she went to work and there was someone else sitting at her desk. She was barred from the building and the world of work. My grandfather was accused of "making up" his medals won for courageous fighting on behalf of the Soviets. They were exiled from their country whilst still living there. With nowhere to go and in the Belly of the Whale, my grandmother joined the resistance movement, the Refuseniks, a community of activists who had been refused permission to leave Russia. She fought for the rights of others to leave the country, was arrested by the KGB and often did not know whether she would "disappear." Those were terrible times for my father, not least because my grandfather and my great-grandmother died during that time. Finally, after much campaigning and strain, my grandmother was able to leave. She, like my father before, had to leave almost everything behind, go to a strange country and start life all over again. She brought with her her courage, her expertise and her eccentricity. She is one of my heroes. Her story stands for me, for others and for anyone who has had to leave everything behind to be free.

## Finding Your Direction

The Hero's Journey is our roadmap for life. Life is always giving us opportunities to respond and stretch and grow. There are Calls happening in our lives all the time. How we respond to the challenges helps us better understand who we are. As we deal with the challenges along the way, we shape who we are and we grow into a fuller version of ourselves. A bit like a snake shedding its skin as it outgrows it, we retain the basic essence of ourselves and we discard the life and habits that we have outgrown and no longer need.

When you look at your own life, where can you see the pattern of a Hero's Journey? Where have you outgrown an old skin, a place, a way of being and explored something altogether new?

Have you ever:

- Moved house?
- Had a family?
- Been in love?
- Ended a relationship?
- Started a new job? Left an old one?
- Started a business or a campaign?
- Passed an exam?
- Grown your own fruit or vegetables?
- Learned a new skill or hobby from scratch?
- Lived or travelled somewhere new?

All of these life changes and transitions constitute a Heroes' Journey.

## Going Deeper

When we allow ourselves to believe that *our lives* follow the same story structure as the classic heroic Quest story, we can begin to use this structure to make sense of our experience. If we cultivate

the qualities and characteristics of successful heroes, this could help us develop and follow through on the kinds of plans that change our whole lives.

So, let's get into the detail of the four different stages of the Hero's Journey which make up the four main parts of this book.

## Part One – the Call

Brrrring, Brrring.

“Hello?”

“Quick! I need a hero!”

OK, so it may not happen exactly like the above phone call. It might be a text message, an email, a whisper, something you hear on the radio, something you read that inspires you; but somehow inside of you, something starts to shift. You begin to imagine a great goal or achievement, something you really want. Or you may decide that you won't allow something negative that has been going on for a long time to continue. We could say that being motivated to get rid of something is like a *push*, and being motivated to get something we do want, feels more like a *pull*. So the Call is a push or a pull that moves you in the direction of something different and inspires you to start on a journey. Examples of this might be:

- You decide you want to learn guitar/a language/a new sport.
- You decide that you want to work in a new field.
- You decide it is time to start a family.
- You decide that you will stop being a doormat in relationships or at work.
- You decide to get fit/get healthy/stop smoking/tackle an addiction.
- You decide to leave a job/relationship/life that is no longer working for you.



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- You decide to launch a magazine/DJ on the radio/start a charity/launch a campaign/start a business.

Sometimes we may resist a Call because even if we know that something would be a great thing to do, we don't want to be told to do it by someone else. Or we feel like what we are proposing is unrealistic, or not normal, or even impossible. We may be scared what the effects of the change might be in our lives or what other people might say or think. We are often held back by our own fear of failure. Sometimes change just seems plain inconvenient, awkward or uncomfortable.

Sooner or later though, a Call comes along that you just cannot resist. Either it becomes too painful to continue in a relationship/job/body/lifestyle that is not working, or you become overwhelmed by the feeling that if you don't give what you are dreaming of a try, you will regret it for the whole of your life. Once the Call is inside you, once the seed has been sown, it just keeps on coming up again and again until you throw in the towel and say "OK, I am going to give it a try." And that's when the magic starts to happen.

Part One will help you unlock your motivation, discover your talents and learn to hear your Call. We will address how to uncover your Quest and how to make the decision to commit.

## Part Two – the Commitment: Letting Go of the Certain and Stepping into the New

“ And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom. ”  
*Anaïs Nin*

Accepting the Call means stepping into the unknown. It is Eve eating the apple. Once it is done, it cannot be undone. To do this, we need to step through our fear, the concerns and anxieties of those around us and the “practical and logical” limitations that seem to keep us bound to what is familiar and safe. As we work through the resistance and keep moving forward, we finally reach the jumping-off point. This is the point where we leave the normal and enter a world of magic and extraordinary potential. When we allow ourselves to jump, the world seems to come up to meet us. Have you seen the scene in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where he has to take a step into nothingness and a bridge suddenly appears below his feet? That’s what we are aiming for. To step out with faith, cross the threshold and trust that the world will “rise up” to meet us.

This is arguably the most feel-good part of the Hero’s Journey. There’s something very powerful that happens when you make a commitment and take a really firm decision. Somehow, support, help and encouragement come around you to help you to succeed. David, who is just 14, gave me a great example of this:

“I’d always loved markets. Ever since I was a kid, I used to go to the Sunday markets and car boot sales, just to look at the huge range of stuff you could get there. My dad suggested that I open a stall. At first, I wasn’t too sure. It seemed like there was a lot of organization involved and anyway, I didn’t know what I could sell. But then I came across this website for a warehouse not so far from my town, where you could buy all kinds of cheap games and toys and tricks. It was like a light bulb went off in my mind. I got really excited about having the best mini-toy stall in town. After I decided to do it, my nan offered me £50 to buy my first stock and the community centre youth workers offered me a table and cash tin. And my best mate promised to help me organize it and to set up and sell on the day . . . and suddenly I was in business!”

When you say yes to the Call, weird stuff starts happening. You start to find the things you need to succeed in your Quest. People,

resources, support and skills come into your life with surprising ease. It's as though the world conspires to help you make the vision of yourself that your Quest symbolizes a reality.

Think about David. When he said yes to his market stall, he got money for stock and the kit he needed for his stall. Harry Potter got an owl, a wand and – crucially – some allies to help him along the way, Hermione and Ron. Accepting the Call is a time of positive energy and good support. In Part Two, The Commitment, we will explore how to step through resistance, “initiate” ourselves into our Quest and take our first steps into this brave new world.

### **Part Three – the Quest: Getting Going, Getting Lost and Getting Through**

The start of the Quest looks a lot like the montage action training scenes you get in big-screen action movies. It's the “time is passing and we are arming up for a great adventure” bit. In Part Three we get into the practical realities of being on a Quest and I show you how to make a plan, align other people around your vision and use the energy that comes with the start of your Quest to take positive action, explore, try new things and get results.

#### **Belly of the Whale: Getting Lost**

The name of this part of the Hero's Journey refers to the story of Jonah in the Bible. Jonah is thrown into the sea during a storm and a whale comes and swallows him up. As you can imagine, the belly of a whale is not a nice place to be – dark and smelling strongly of decomposing fish. Jonah is not happy at all. This is the time when the doubt sets in. Having found friends and mentors, the hero has set off on the journey and as time goes on, the path gets lonelier and darker. They lose confidence, their commitment is tested, perhaps they even lose their way and forget why they ever started on their Quest. This is a difficult and challenging time, which often

occurs when we are working hard to master something or to get somewhere, but wonder if we will ever make it.

Imagine the long years spent training by a rower for the Olympics – breaking the ice at five o'clock in the morning on the Thames you must wonder – is this really worth it? What if I am wasting my time? This stage of our life journey teaches us about determination, focus, planning and calling on the support of those around us.

I am sure that there have been times in your life when you have been in this position. You began something with energy and enthusiasm, then as time went on, you lost your focus. Everything took a thousand times longer than you had hoped. Did you keep going? How did you find the will to do so?

## The Supreme Ordeal

“ Changes are the products of intensive efforts. ”  
*Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank*

A hero story wouldn't be a great story without some kind of supreme challenge or battle. The things we really want in life don't come easily and they often require the star of the story to stretch further than they ever thought they could. We love this part of a story, whether it is a real life one or a fantasy tale. Think about reality TV for a moment. Love it or hate it, there is always a tense battle for places in the final and we become emotionally involved, rooting for our favourites to win. For a football team, this could be the final game, for a student with dreams of going to drama school, it could be the audition. For an amateur celebrity dancer, it could be winning the TV competition, *Strictly Come Dancing*. For Harry Potter, it is always an encounter with Voldemort.

The Supreme Ordeal is the ultimate test, the baptism of fire we need to endure in order to have a breakthrough. It is the facing of our fears, the lifting of the curtain, it is show time, the birthing table, the battle.

These are the times when our emotional resources, courage and wisdom are really put to the test. Part Three of the book explores how to prepare for and handle the Grand Challenge stage, giving you tools to stay positive and determined when the terrain gets really rough.

## Part Four – the Return

Post-battle, every hero needs a little downtime. Time to reflect on what has happened, regroup and return to the world you came from a little different from when you started. Will Luke Skywalker ever be the same after discovering Darth Vader is his father? He's going to need a bit of time to integrate the learning from his experience into his life again. The same is true for the recovery stage of our own Heroes' Journey. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is taken to the Undying Lands to recover as best he can. Most probably, after you have run the marathon, got over the big shock, worked hard to make your first gig/theatre production/invention a success, you will need to relax and to explore how you might have been changed by the experience. Later in the book, we will explore the idea of how to learn lessons from reflecting on what has happened to you and use these to grow as a person.

Every great story ends with the hero returning to a great welcome – the Hunchback of Notre Dame went from being a scary monster hiding in the shadows to the saviour of Paris, Harry's return to Hogwarts after a battle is always met with elation from his fellow students. The hero is transformed by their experience – they have grown richer, wiser, deeper and they return with the victory or the learning or the gifts that they then share with others around them.

## YOUR LIFE PLAN

Real life is not always like fairy stories or the world of Disney. We lack the happy ending. Our Supreme Ordeal leaves us worn down. Even a seemingly happy ending like a windfall lottery win can create as many problems as opportunities.

Or perhaps we don't receive the recognition we may deserve or crave. Rosalind Franklin's work was crucial to the discovery of DNA, but it was Watson and Crick who took the glory. The lessons in the quiet downtime after battle can be just as valuable to us as a glorious fanfare. Part Four will help you to integrate the lessons of your Quest in a way that makes them valuable, even when the outcome looks rather different from what you had planned.

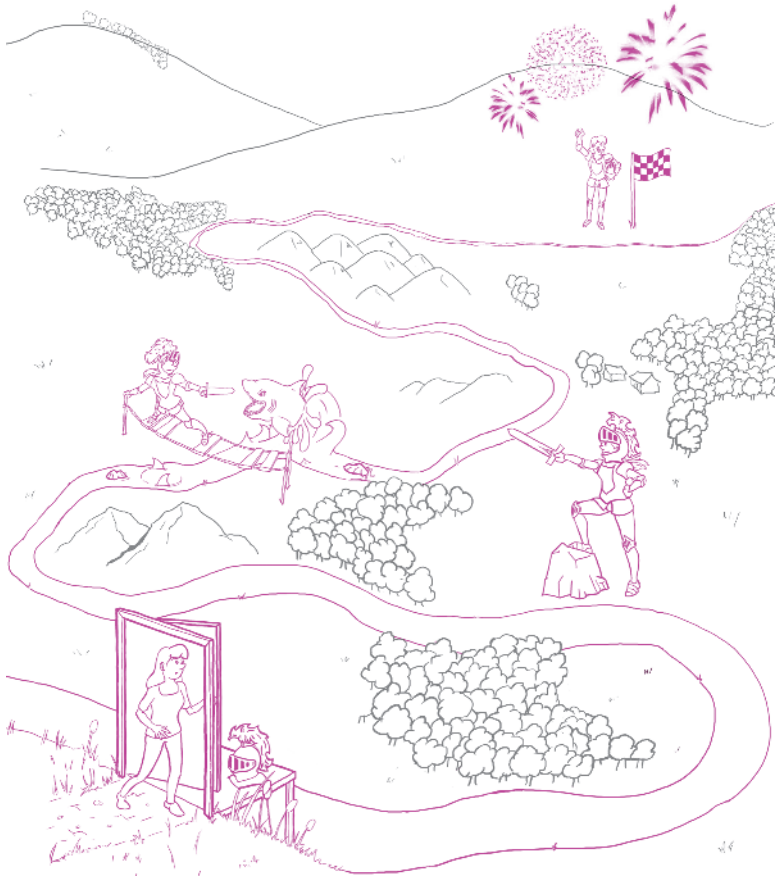
Whatever the result, the learning from your adventure will need to be integrated, consolidated and shared. Part Four also explores the importance of marking and recognizing your transition, returning from a state of heightened reality to "normal" life and how to package your learning so that you can share it with others.

These experiences will enable you to do and think differently.

Experience is always our greatest teacher.

So this Hero's Journey is a model for the way life works. Hopefully now you can see how this model both relates to good storytelling and is a way to understand the transformations and choices we may be called to make in our own lives.

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- How does it feel to know that it is normal to struggle with a decision or choice that seems too big to achieve?
- Or that once you have set out on your way it is part of the process to feel a bit lost?
- Or that we all face battles and challenges that are on a grand scale and sometimes we have to encounter them again and again before we get to the other side?

We will be using this model to explore the kinds of feelings and situations that come up in your Hero's Quest. But before we can work with these, we need to find out a bit more about you and the way you work.



## Chapter Summary

- The contrasts of story and the narrative flow of the Hero's Journey make sense to us because they mirror how life happens.
- We see this structure in operation in great fiction as well as in real life.
- Each stage of the journey has a distinct flavour and quality.
- When we understand this narrative, it helps us to cope with "how life happens."
- We can use the Hero's Journey as a way to structure our thinking about our own goals, dreams and Quests.