

The Hero's Journey

A road map for change



By Melanie Richens

When we set out on our journey, it is useful to have a map so that we can plan our route, have an idea of anything that may hinder our progress, and know what supplies we will need.

The journey of life is no different – sometimes it is useful to have a map, if for no other reason than to know that we are on track and to anticipate challenges that may lie ahead.

I first came across the term, the Hero's Journey, during what is often described as a 'dark night of the soul'.

I was in my mid-thirties and had a successful career as a lawyer. Unbeknownst to me it was burning

me out. I suffered a complete physical and emotional breakdown. I woke up in hospital knowing things had to change, but not knowing how or what.

Fortunately, I knew an NLP Practitioner and Life Coach; during one of our sessions he introduced me to the idea of the hero's journey and it immediately resonated with me.

I could identify the stages of the journey I had been through and it gave me a clear route towards better times.

So I used the time I had on my hands to read Joseph Campbell's works and anything else I could find that used or incorporated the Hero's Journey.

Although I did eventually return to work, my heart wasn't in it.

My passion for personal development had been unlocked; I studied various approaches, met new friends and was inspired by new teachers and mentors.

Ultimately, I came to the point I'm at now, where I get to share what I have learnt through my personal experience and my studies as an NLP trainer, practitioner and coach.

I use the Hero's Journey metaphor in my client work and as a template for the journey to mastery on the UK College of Personal Development's Master Practitioner program.



A big fear will need to be faced and overcome to claim their prize or achieve their goal



Origins

In the 1940s, Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist found that hero myths and stories from around the globe had the same basic archetypal structure, he named this the 'monomyth'.

The stories are universal so we do not need to have them explained to us – they are part of the collective unconscious.

In 1985, screenwriter Christopher Vogler wrote a famous memo to Disney executives after studying Campbell's work.

He suggested that the hero's journey provided a blueprint for anyone wishing to 'compose a story to meet any situation, a story that will be dramatic, entertaining, and psychologically true'.

He went on to work on modern Disney films like *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, *Hercules* and *Aladdin* – all of which follow the path of the hero's journey.

George Lucas credits Joseph Campbell as one of the sources of inspiration for *Star Wars*. The same pattern is also followed in countless Hollywood classics such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Superman* and *Toy Story* – to name but a few.

The stages of the Hero's Journey

The *ordinary world* represents the status quo, a place where everything seems ok, but there may be a little voice telling you that there should be something more.

You probably can't define it yet, but you have a sense that change has to happen. This is the *call to adventure*.

In NLP parlance, the call may be an 'away from' (identifying the pain of something you are no longer willing to accept) or a 'towards' (the pleasure of a new goal). When the call has been heard, the sense of dissatisfaction with the ordinary world grows.

The call has been heard, but there is often a *refusal of the call*, usually because we fear the challenges we may have to face, or because we are looking for guarantees of success. We know we don't want to stay as we are but there can be comfort in the familiarity of an uncomfortable place.

As practitioners, this is the point at which clients may need help to define what they want (and what they don't want). This stage is about preparation and developing motivation – getting to the point where (for the towards motivated) the goal is irresistible, or (for

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the away from) the pain of staying put is too great. When we are at this point doubts may still exist, but the balance has swung towards taking action.

At this stage the hero usually meets a coach or *mentor* who helps to develop his or her confidence, gives insights or training and helps the hero overcome his or her fears. In *The Hobbit* it is Gandalf, in *Star Wars* it is Obi Wan Kenobi and in *Cinderella*, the Fairy Godmother.

As a coach you may adopt this role or encourage your clients to find a mentor of their own.

With the mentor's assistance the path to be taken becomes clear and the hero is ready to **cross the threshold**.

Commitment is required to take this first step – going past the point of no return. The hero has left the familiar and embarked upon the quest.

As well as being highly symbolic, in the coaching sense it overcomes the previous

'stuckness' – to be stuck is a digital state – you are either stuck or not stuck and you cannot be simultaneously stuck and moving. This change in state and physiology will allow new resources to surface and new strategies to develop.

At this point, clients often feel anxious and a lot of 'what if' questions tend to surface. The coach will need address these in order to assist the client to keep moving.

After committing to the journey and crossing the threshold, they are charting unknown territory. It is helpful here to remind the client of the NLP presupposition: If you want to understand – ACT. They have taken action and understanding will follow. Too often we think we need to wait for all the answers before acting, when in fact the answers will only come after taking action.

As they move forwards towards the goal, they will be stretching past their previously imagined limitations, acquiring new skills and resources along the way.

The challenges our clients face will test their limits, but every time they surmount them they will grow, and

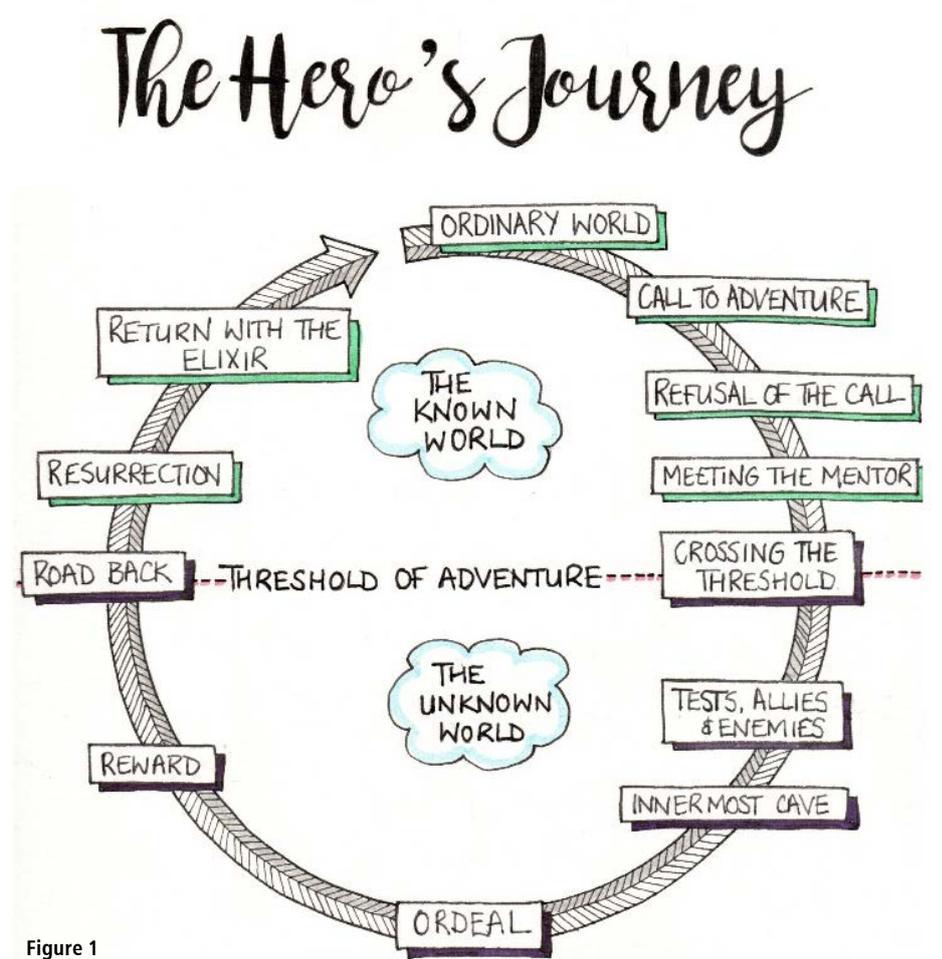


Figure 1

► every time they don't, they will learn and try a different approach next time.

As they continue, stronger, more resourceful and committed to their goal we can encourage them to notice evidence of progress as well as other sources of support and assistance along the way.

At some point the hero will face a big challenge, a big fear will need to be faced and overcome to claim their prize or achieve their goal. This stage is sometimes referred to as the Innermost Cave.

The entire journey up to this point has been preparation for this final challenge. It may be an outward step in the journey – like a client walking into the office of someone who previously been causing them difficulties, or having a difficult conversation, or it may be an inner journey to confront fears and doubts.

'The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.'

Joseph Campbell

Success in the final ordeal (whatever form it takes) means that they have mastered the old negative patterns that held them back.

They have stretched so far beyond their old self from the ordinary world that they will no longer return to that state. It represents an initiation or a rite of passage and is symbolic of a rebirth or regeneration.

The challenges of the journey have been overcome and it is time to claim *the reward*.

This may be in the achievement of the goal the client set out with, or something intangible like knowledge or self-worth.



It is useful to have a map, to know we are on track and anticipate challenges

Now is the time to celebrate success. Celebrating these victories helps to build self-confidence and self-esteem. As coaches, this is why it is so important to set a well-formed outcome with clearly defined criteria (evidence) for achievement.

All that remains is *the return* to the ordinary world, but the journey has created change, the client is no longer the person they used to be.

They have been strengthened and grown in confidence; the area beyond their old comfort zone is now a place they are familiar with. With friends and allies they can count upon, it is no longer an unknown to be fearful of and they are free to explore further with confidence.

Maybe the client is now ready to be a mentor for others reluctant to take the first step on their own journey.

Being familiar with the template of the hero's journey can help us to guide our clients through unfamiliar territory, and because the journey theme is so embedded in our collective unconscious,

framing the goal or challenge as a hero's journey can help a client to appreciate the steps that need to be taken and anticipate obstacles.

Of course, the best way to be familiar with a journey is actually to have travelled the route yourself.

You might want to take some time to review some major life changes in your own life to see how they fit into the template. This will enable you to authentically act as a guide to your clients.

After all, would you trust a mountain guide who had never set foot on a mountain?

'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.'

Joseph Campbell ●

The Innermost Cave

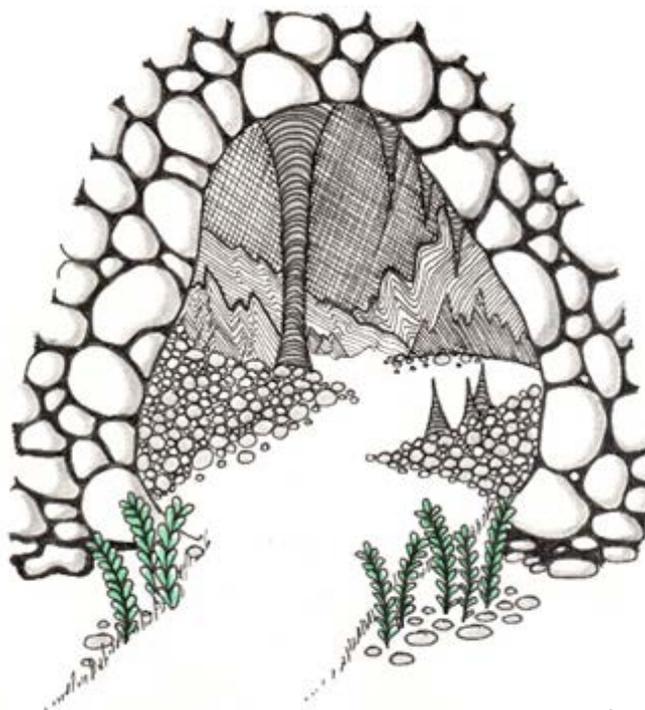


Figure 2