



## **Awakening the Ensemble Hero: Taking Action Steps That Create the Adventure**

### **An Essay On ~ The Call To Adventure ~**

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations-  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.*

*It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,  
which you slowly recognized as your own,*

*that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do-  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.*

*- Mary Oliver*



## **Taking The Journey Inward**

Joseph Campbell once said that those of us in the Western world have both the freedom and the obligation of finding out what our destiny is.

- ***What can help us to find out more about what truly awakens us, while we are also immersed in the midst of our day-to-day living routines?***
- ***How do we let ourselves reach out far enough from all that which is so familiar to us, in order to activate something deeper in us - that we do not yet know enough about - related to our calling and our own unique sense of meaning and purpose?***
- ***How do we do we stretch ourselves, and take the do-able risks necessary to explore the unknown, while still managing our routines and responsibilities?***

Are we too attached to the security of what is familiar, are we too identified with our confines and the world that day to day reflecting mirror? Are we afraid to embrace a larger opportunity, a deeper capacity, a more dynamic and active role as the hero of our own lives?

In his book *Pathways to Bliss*, Campbell poses this question to us: *“What is the great thing for which you would sacrifice your life? What makes you do what you do? What is the call of your life to you – do you know it?”*

He goes on to say, *“a person who is truly gripped by a calling, by a dedication or a belief, by a certain zeal, will sacrifice his (or her) security, personal relationships, prestige. He (or she) will give themselves entirely to their personal myth”*.

He acknowledges, *“it is not always easy or possible to know by what it is that we are seized”*. But it does require us to become increasingly fascinated with (and decreasingly threatened by) the arrival of some kind of compelling mystery that calls to us.

What is that unconscious, intangible thing that has us feeling that peculiar, compelling 'pull' towards a certain place, activity or desire? What is that undeniable, subtle sense of awakening we feel in certain circumstances or nature settings?

How do we find ourselves caught in repetitive, fated patterns or situations, again and again? How does a certain 'something' seem to cleave us to certain troubles that our conscious minds have to face, explore, and eventually resolve?

We are often haunted by this ongoing play of *fate* and *destiny* in our lives. We wonder about our true place in the material universe, we seek to know our purpose, we long for a vital, meaningful connection to something larger than ourselves. This is rarely found in the terrain of the pre-ordained course prescribed by others.



In order to make space for one's soul calling, we have two fundamental and complimentary tasks: ***leaving the familiar behind and venturing forth***. We have to loosen our grip on the familiar, while turning our inner compass heading towards the unknown.

As we venture deeper into the unknown within us, we inevitably wade through fears, confusion, doubts, despair, ambivalence, trepidation, numbness, failures and fogginess. This fuels our anxieties and depressions, and keeps our energy too low to move forward. These aspects of the human experience, and the life-negating behaviors they call forth, can stem from a common denominator: *the fear of the unknown, and not knowing*.

When we live into the hero's journey myth, all roads eventually lead us here.

Rumi speaks of this in the beginning of Coleman Barks' rendition of *Who Says Words With My Mouth?*

*All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,  
and I intend to end up there.  
This drunkenness began in some other tavern.*

This clarity about our purpose for being here, it began somewhere else, before we were dulled by our identification with our physical world, our culture, our family.

What and where is our origin point? Even the mystics say they *have no idea*. I suppose the difference between the mystics and us is that a lack of knowing troubles

them less, and makes them wonder more. They may even aim for that place, to be free of the identification with the self.

When we are troubled by unknowing, we become restless and anxious. When we are bound to anxiety, we become less and less able to listen. When we can't listen within ourselves, we can't hear what calls to us.

What else actually keeps us from listening for the call to action? I have been pre-occupied lately with a great deal of wondering about this very thing. I am coming to the conclusion that many of us are simply unwilling to do what it takes to get close enough to ourselves, or go deep enough within ourselves, to really listen. Yet this inward descent and space making is what's needed, if we are to become more able to listen to what is down there in the depths, waiting to be heard.



If we are willing and able to arrive at a quiet, centered, and still place inside, we might also be looking and listening for something *in particular*. We may tend to go searching for the projection of our ego's wishes.

Joseph Campbell says, "*one way to deprive yourself of an experience is indeed to expect it. Another is to have a name for it before you have the experience.*"

When we look for something in particular, we are unable to hear or see what is actually arriving and making itself known within our interior worlds. When we are pre-occupied with a compelling fantasy created from our own deep wishes and projections, and when we look for the perfect match for those projections, we lose sight of everything else, and we can't see what is actually there.

Sometimes we unconsciously look to have a call of the soul magically provided *for* us. We want it packaged all at once, and with a 'literal' clarity. Clear visions of beings, clearly heard voices delivering the message we wish for word by word. The fallacy of crystal clarity of vision, the fantasy of everything we need clearly revealed, so that we can avoid the hard work of creating the conditions and disciplines we need to be genuinely summoned and guided by a call.

In other words, we may want our interior life to look and sound just like our exterior world. We become 'fundamentalists' of the soul. We tend to make the mistake of taking our dreams, imaginings, and inner calls all too concretely, historically, and literally.

We fail to understand that mythic or metaphorical energies are underneath it all, that a deep unknowable source drives the creation of these potent symbols, images and words we begin sense within us.

If we are to listen deeply to an inner call of the soul, we learn to accept the way that fleeting, dreamlike awareness comes. We learn to pay closer attention to our night dreams. We respect our creative imaginings during guided meditations or creative visualizations. We reflect back on these images time and again. We have to do the work of 'meaning-making' by getting underneath the symbols, stories, people or words we encounter.

***The hero adventure begins with listening to the soul's call – it brings us alive and calls us towards action.***



The call of the soul, most of the time, starts as a subtle herald.

Initially, the call of the soul often tends to be very gentle and fleeting. When we *don't* listen, that the messenger eventually comes much louder, sometimes coming with an un-ignorable *thud* that wakes us up.

The paradox here is that once we accept the condition of our *not knowing*, we open up to what might not yet be there. We open a space inside to begin paying attention more deeply, more subtly, less literally. We also start to orient ourselves to what is actually *already there*.

This is a different way of being, in which we shift from a *searching* consciousness, which is needed initially to take up the journey, to a *finding* consciousness, which sustains and renews us as we explore the deeper terrains of what is most real and authentic within our interior.

These unknown aspects of our explorations will feel foreign to the self, at first. They have an 'otherness' to them, a 'not me' feeling. There is no way around this initial, threatening otherness, but there are certainly many ways to avoid it.



*Going from searching to finding* is helped along by a neutral attitude and an openness to transitional experiences within the self. I call this open, unrecognized, unrealized space ***not-yet-ness***. It implies that *something will inevitably happen*, even though that has not yet happened. This is the crucial shift in conscious one has to make.

If we can only take up 'waiting in the unknown' more positively, more actively, with curiosity, with even a sense of play, something will inevitably begin to happen that hasn't happened thus far. This is because something is *already* happening, and we have not yet become aware of its presence.

Today we are less and less inclined to wait for anything anymore, mostly because we often no longer have to. Our modern culture is built upon the value of speed. But speed often is no help with heroic venturing.

For the soul's journey, **active waiting** is a necessary function that must be cultivated within, and practiced over and over, to in order to support the gradual realization of a lifelong destiny.



See if you can feel what happens within you when you try on a question from two different internal perspectives:

*Are you following that thing that brings you utterly alive on the inside?* **No.**

*Are you following that thing that brings you utterly alive on the inside?* **Not yet.**

Going from 'no' to 'not yet' engenders hope. It brings the sense of possibility forward. It makes the challenge of venturing forth into the unknown worth the while. It allows things too become more interesting, worthy of curiosity.

"Not-yet-ness" implies that something is coming, eventually or inevitably. Can being in an open-minded state in fact help what's coming, to come?

This attitude of possibility brings us to the point when something fleeting but noticeable starts to happen within us, so we can bear hope when leaning into the shadows of the unknown.



Perhaps the most troubling awareness we can have when we are distraught about *not knowing* something, is the awareness that *not knowing* is actually an unconscious defense against *knowing*.

Has it ever occurred to you that you might in some way be invested in your own not knowing, that there is a pay off to a passive sense of becoming dulled? There may be a secondary gain we experience when we quit or give up, whenever we come against what we don't yet know or understand.

*Searching* is often the *easy* part of the journey, precisely because something has not yet been found. It is in the *finding* that the spirit of adventure brings forth the inevitable ordeal. Bill Plotkin says the calling of the soul can often feel like a summoning, like something daunting is being asked of us.

When we begin to hear the call of the soul, the deeper trouble of knowing what is calling to us can really get us unnerved, and yet also excited, as we feel the traction and tension of the compelling pull to take the journey further than we ever have before.



Once we begin to tune into an inner voice, hearing more of the call towards new life potential within us, it will always and at some point bump against the voices of those around us.

These are the voices of people who matter to us, and people who have power over us. These are the voices of people whose opinions we may value and seek out, and people who annoy us by offering their unsolicited opinions about what we should choose for our lives.

When listening to what authentically calls to our own soul's longings, advice from another is mostly of no use. In the same way that following a path already made makes it clear you are following somebody else's path, following another's advice without listening within means that you're not coming from your own inner source, not following your own life force energy. Therefore, your endeavors are not likely to bear fruit, or take you very far, or hold much meaning, or go very well.

Once we hear and feel the call from within, ***we have to begin to follow it***, and not readily abandon it.

How many times, when we don't know what to do with our lives, do we ask someone to please tell us what to do? It sets us up for a dynamic in which we become unwitting '*help-rejecting complainers*', a phrase coined by Irving Yalom. You tell me what to do, so I can either not do that, or I *will* do that and then complain about it, especially when it doesn't appear to be working.

The only advice that has seemed of use to me when it comes to answering the soul's calling is this sage advice I was given more than once, from people I trusted and valued: *In matters of great importance, I must listen to my own heart, and follow what I find there, and claim it as my own bliss.*

That doesn't mean I don't talk with others about it, or share with those capable of understanding me or challenging me. I do this, but I share it selectively, discern whether the other is willing and capable of listening. There is nothing else we can do if we want meaning and vitality in our lives but follow our own authentic inner life, and no one else's.



***When we follow an inner call, we inevitably become more alive.*** We become more than what we already are, we become more of who we already are, as we discover ourselves.

To do so, *we must begin to move out beyond our comfort zone*, we start to cross the first thresholds that take us beyond our knowing. We leave the familiarity of 'home' and fixed routines. As we do, we will cross over into places of inner dissonance. We feel something going against the grain of the usual way. We breach old boundaries; we go past our homeostatic tendencies.

As soon as something starts to go wrong or makes us uncomfortable, we sound the inner alarms. Sometimes, others may also start to question our judgment; or they become upset with our new movement.

Getting further away from the familiar, we feel some panic; we doubt our path. We feel this tug pulling us back to our old lives; our feet want to stop going forward. We feel an inevitable and reflexive desire to turn back, a desperate need to return to security, to the stagnant, the fixed and the constraining. Ironically, we may then find ourselves longing for the very thing we wanted to be free from.

Somewhere along the journey towards adventure, there must be a gradual and unable *shift in allegiance* towards our most basic reality orientations. In order to better listen to the inner call to adventure, **we must shift from security-seeking mode to a vitality-seeking mode.**

We must therefore make a shift in consciousness - from the safety we have come to know (which must come first), to the enlivening we desire with all our heart (which must come next).

***Responding to the call to adventure helps to do exactly that.***



*"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.*

There is another obstacle that prevents us from listening to, and feeling silently pulled by that which brings us alive, that which we truly love. This increase in energy and excitement is hard to adjust to, as we feel our own life force energies begin to pour through our bodies in a direct and potent way. Sometimes, we unconsciously defend against this in-flow of energy, and we do it in a culturally sanctioned way: We try to fix things.

First we try to fix others. Many of us "givers" have devoted our lives to caretaking tasks. One day it strikes us how futile this actually is. (This takes a while to realize.)

We then turn our attention back to correcting ourselves, which is a much more efficient and effective use of our energy and attention. Except that when we resort back to a mental 'problem solving' mode for matters of the heart, it doesn't work, either.

We begin to chase our tails with mental thinking, or better said, we chase after all of our problems, and think that if we can just fix them all, we will be more okay, if not more alive. Fixing problems rarely brings more aliveness, though. It simply provides temporary relief. Until the next problem comes. And it does. It says "*Mend my life!*" Now we have a mission, a sense of purpose.

The deeper call to "*Grow my life!*" lies buried beneath all of the surface repairs of a 'fix-it' mentality. The next threshold crossed is a letting go of mending everything, or mending anything, for that matter - so we can go into a deeper state of awareness, beyond mental thinking and problem solving.

Here, we stumble upon a crucial awareness about our world, and more importantly, about our selves. *Nothing's broken.* Well now, what does someone *do* about that? New trouble.

At least, it is different trouble. Better trouble. And it leads us, once again, back to the unknown.



*You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations-  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.*

If we listen long enough, and aren't looking to find something in particular, like a lost object - and we instead start looking for what is already there, waiting for us (and only us), we have crossed over into the hero's mythic realm of adventure.

***We listen as a practice***, simply to listen, and to hear, feel and sense what comes. If you stick with this approach, inevitably something enlivening begins to come into awareness. You start to realize what you have to do. It simply becomes obvious, and it's a surprise, at the same time.

The trouble here is that once you begin realizing that what you have to do, it *isn't what you thought you had to do*. You start to see that what you thought was so important to do, what you endlessly tried to do, isn't really *the thing to do* any more.

This is one of those 'oh, shit' moments, and it can be a big one. A new threshold to cross: Letting go of the mind's incessant demands, obligations, barter, deals, fretting, etc.

Realizing that you have wasted time, energy and resources trying to fix someone else or yourself, hold something together, fit into something that doesn't really fit you now. Realizing that this just doesn't work. Perhaps it once did, or never did.

But you face the fact that you have invested yourself in something that no longer bears fruit, or gives life. Depending on your state of mind, this is really bad news, or really good news.

If we listen to the deeper callings of the soul, we begin to shed what no longer serves life, in order to be pulled towards that which gives new life. There is no way around this universal truth. This often brings on some necessary grief, along with a pervasive sense of something being lost.

As we head towards a new way of sensing, feeling, knowing what we have to do, we move beyond all external motivations, and become driven by a persistent and steady inner energy source. It just keeps welling up from within. Keeps us on track, keeps us enlivened, keeps wanting to move our lives in the only direction it can go – forward.

Becoming moved by an inner longing, however undefined or mysterious, will have to move beyond the 'stiff fingers' of grasping that a rigidified ego holds, and the foundations of an old consciousness that clings to our bodies and minds, saying to us 'fool, don't leave what you know behind'!

And finally, in order to venture into the new fields of play, we confront the vestiges of 'terrible melancholy', an authentic mourning of what will never be, and especially, what could never be to begin with. Dis-illusion is a kind of mourning period for our fantasies. Which, of course, is the only cure for an illusion.

So listening for the call to adventure requires us, at some point along the journey, to let go of a 'stiff fingers'- our long held, illusions about safety and security. In preparation for the new way...the way of mystery, which carries us towards the not-yet-known.



*It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.*

One more thing that would hold us back from crossing over and taking up the path of adventure is regret. Chasing another false and illusionary belief that it is too late for you, that you missed your time. That the windows of opportunity have all closed for you.

Too old, too uneducated, too broken, too poor, too much failure...well, you name it. This is another wily defensive strategy, yet more clinging to an old identity. It is also an indication that you must be getting closer to the source of the new wellspring, actually, to desperately resort back to the oldest of entrapments – ‘it’s too late’ and ‘I am not enough’.

So back to this essential reframing of the terrain – ***So what now, if I am not too broken, and it is not too late for me?***



*Responding to the call to adventure opens us towards our heart's desire for playfulness, fun, eros, vitality and mystery:*

- We all want rapture to overtake us.
- We all desire mystery to reveal itself to us in all of its gradual, curious, enlightening and surprising ways.
- We learn to accept that we cannot know the outcomes of real adventures in advance. We learn that things of the soul are revealed to us in their own time as we journey forth, little by little.

*little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,  
which you slowly recognized as your own*

As we cross the thresholds that prevent us from listening deeply, we come closer and closer towards an inner voice, one that has been there all along, waiting. Waiting until we are ready to listen, before it will begin speaking to us in the silent, still space within the heart.

What is authentic and true will gradually burn through the clouds of confusion and despair. We begin to recognize a familiar messenger within us, pointing the way as it will, like a compass seeking north. This will allow for the sound your own true voice, and the feeling of aliveness from your own wellspring of vitality.

*that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,*

As long as we can practice the art of going inward and downward into the wellspring within our selves, we can learn to listen deeply to what emerges. This inner voice, this pull or feeling, becomes a steady companion through the trials and ordeals we face. We know what we have to do, simply because it feels more and more unbearable when we are not doing it.

Following our bliss, as Joseph Campbell said, it is not self indulgent, it is essential. This life force energy becomes a companion to us, and is reflected in our countenance, and in our “*en-theos*”, our God-filled-ness, our enthusiasm for life. It keeps us company as silent and invisible companion, and gives us the impetus and the courage to go forth ever deeper and deeper into the world, giving what is alive in us to the world.

In summary, we sense a call coming from the intangible world to step more and more into this material world. As we walk further into the material world, we also long to be more connected to this vital myth (ever near, ever ineffable) unfolding in the background of our lives.

We walk between these two worlds, and it is in this very ‘in between’ space that soul is cultivated, activated, and ignited. None of us can say for sure exactly how or when soul will speak to us, but when and as it does, we can open to the embodiment of eternity’s zeal to become incarnate, and express itself through us in the field of time.

*determined to do  
the only thing you could do-  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.*

As we stay attuned to the call towards adventure, we gather momentum, we move forward, and we can be gifted with a powerful insight: “There is only one life we can save, and it is saved by bringing forth what is within the self.”

The Gnostic gospels quote Jesus as having spoken, “*if you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.*”

So let each of us, fellow travelers on this path of mythic adventure, listen deeply and closely to what is being whispered to our awakening minds from the inner depths of our souls. Each of us has to find a way to tune in, listen deeply, and hear what the divine breezes blow our way.

Deep listening inspires something to move in us. Then we let go of our ego wishes and fantasies, so to follow the call that takes us forth, leads us towards our bliss. What else could human beings want to do?



By following the call to bliss, Joseph Campbell said that doors would open for us that would not open before now, and would not open for any others. But in order for the doors to open for us, we will have to be on the authentic path of the heroic endeavor. Here is his reflection, from *Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

*“The call to adventure signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his (or her) spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of this society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delights.”*

The price to be paid for answering the call to adventure is to have encounters that involve ordeals. But before facing the actual ordeals themselves, we must face the crossing of thresholds, in order to enter the mythic terrains of adventure and ordeal. In our next essay, we will explore what it takes to cross these inner thresholds of consciousness, so that we might enter fully into the mythic adventure.

For now, it is our time to listen deeply to the call coming from within, without looking for any particular kind of summons. Then notice what comes...because another universal truth is this: whatever you have been looking for, is already looking for you. Be on the watch. And let yourself be surprised.

- Michael Mervosh