



The Belly of the Beast: Surrendering To Something Larger and Other

Paradox – *defined* - a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.

**The hero goes inward, disappears;
only to re-appear, born again.**



The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died.

- *Joseph Campbell*



There is an unknown territory, a mysterious area where the presence of death does not equal the end of life....

The point is to be able to undergo a little death in order to find the genuine thread of one's life.

- *Michael Meade*

This essay offers a reflection on the paradoxical nature of surrender. How throughout our lives, we are continually subjected to the little ego deaths that must happen, in order to give birth to a larger soul presence, then allowing that presence of soul to become more incarnate in this world.

This surrendering happens within and beyond the ego that contains the personalities that we are. This is a profound letting go that must happen, again and again, while we live into the adventures and ordeals that take place throughout our lifetime.

Each time we let go, we have the opportunity to bring back more depth and substance from the intangible realm of the psyche or soul, and bring it forth into this

world we live in. This depth of ego surrender is perhaps our most fundamental hero's task to be undertaken and fulfilled in our lives, before we one day literally journey back to the origins from which we came.



*"This thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, but only seekers find it."
- Abu Yazid*

Surrender is not something we can willfully choose to make happen, though we may assent to the letting go process with our full being. Even though surrender cannot be a conscious choice of will, we have to be willing to allow it, in order to experience it. We can't just say, "I choose to surrender now", and then it becomes so.

We can only ask for the best conditions to come into being that will necessitate a softening into the surrendering process within us. Then we can choose to say 'yes' to this inner yielding as it happens in us – perhaps when the timing and is right, when our defenses can let down enough to be taken beyond our will, the way a raft is taken by a flowing river.

Surrendering is more of a conscious attitude than a definitive action step; it is not a thing that we do. It is more of 'a being done to', a state of being that allows something to happen inside of us. It is a position of depth and humility that comes from inner strength; it can also be a deeper yielding to a force or a power that is much greater than one's own self.

As these moments of surrender arrive, the ego is given the opportunity to know its true place in relation to something we might call 'divine will'. A healthy ego knows something about both its genuine capacities as well as its true limitations, especially in relation to something larger than itself.

Despite the usual resistances and fears put forth by the ego, there is inevitably some place deeper inside the self that *wants* to surrender itself over, in order to enlarge one's sense of self in a humble way. The mythic nature of the journey is the very process that helps one to become ready enough and strong enough to do so.

The hero's task is to bear the dynamic tension that holds the fear and the awe of yielding over to something mysterious and beyond itself, until the softening happens on its own.

Surrender is not submission. When we humble ourselves, when we bow down in front of something we perceive as holy or sublime, we do not give away our power to some 'other' presence. We instead join with this 'otherness', which also joins with us. In doing so, we surrender over more deeply to a presence that is found inside of ourselves. In this way of dissolving, a water drop joins with the pool, and the pool also enters the water drop.

True surrender is always towards something larger within the self, not to something outside of the self.

Surrendering is an expansive, not a contracted, state of being. The paradoxical nature of surrender is such that when we honor the limits of the self and the smallness of our being, we can then grow beyond those limitations into a new identification with something much larger than the self.

This is very different from an inflated ego state, where one's sense of largeness is over-estimated, easily threatened, and continuously being defended. This is not a self in proper relationship to the 'otherness' of this world.

As we engage in the realm of mythic adventure, we at times enter exchanges that allow us to feel and accept our smallness, like a boat that bobs on the sea; we can then open to surrendering to the flow of the water, in order to join with the sea. As we do, we become more able to feel the largeness of the sea alive within us, while still in the small boat that we call the 'self'.

As we continue along the hero's path of mythic adventures and ordeals, we find ourselves journeying further and further into regions unknown to us. Inevitably, we come to grips with the precise encounters and exchanges that will take us directly into 'the belly of the beast'.

Entering this realm of surrender, we look within ourselves to confront the very things in our human nature that hold us back from realizing the boon of our lifetime, and prevent us from becoming signposts, transparent towards what is transcendent and everlasting.



Facing the Dragon – Going Against the Ego's Initial Impulse

Learning to face the dragons in our lives – what Joseph Campbell considered to be a direct confrontation with the internalized demands of the society or culture upon the individual – is facing all those primal commandments of "Thou Shalt" and "Thou Shalt Nots" we absorbed as young children. We learned to abide by these spoken and unspoken cultural expectations and demands, often in order to be received and accepted by our families, our social networks and our institutions.

Once we have internalized the cultural expectations that give us a sense of place or status in our culture, we begin to organize ourselves by these externally-based values and determinants. As we do so, we tend to lose sight of our deepest longings and desires for meaningful and life-giving pursuits, and passionately lived experiences.

When we decide at last to follow our own bliss, we come up against deeply embedded internalized forces that can feel monstrous in their size - as if these forces could and would swallow us whole, and annihilate our most cherished longings and impulses.

These internalized mythic energies are the fire-breathing dragons that live within our psyches. They are the internal beasts that lie in wait for us, whenever we venture out beyond the protection of societal rules and cultural norms. And we inevitably must confront and wrestle with these inner dragons or beasts.



Ordeals bring us towards epic internal encounters with forces that would apparently seek to annihilate our deepest wishes. When the self begins to experience a deep sense of threat, *it may not yet realize that the threat comes from energies are disowned aspects of one's own true nature.* Rather than running from this life force energy within the self, at some crucial transition point in our lives, we have to face and confront them. This is what we might call 'facing the dragon', from a mythic perspective.

The late 19th – early 20th century German poet Rilke intimately understood this internal wrestling process. He knew what must be undertaken by the ego, to allow for a surrender into a 'communion with the ineffable'. He offers us words to better understand the dynamics of such a challenge, of the courage and effort needed to come up against opposing forces within, and how that can lead towards the creation of the exact conditions necessary for surrender to take place within us.

*And if only we arrange our life
according to that principle which counsels us
that we must always hold to the difficult,
then that which now still seems to us the most alien
will become what we most trust and find most faithful.*

If only we live our lives according to the principle that we must hold to the difficult. Frankly, this rarely holds much appeal to anyone at first. Who purposely asks for or seeks out difficulties in life?

The paradoxical effect here is that when we exert our efforts to avoid difficulty as a way of life, we can begin to perceive our lives as being more difficult than they actually are. We learn to see struggle as a bad and unnecessary thing, and we form a life-negating relationship to life's challenges. Thus, our character becomes avoidant and passive, and gradually begins to wither.



Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

By living our lives as a mythic hero's journey, we understand that adventures and ordeals help bring meaning and vitality into our lives, through facing and overcoming challenges that can bring forth our un-lived potential. We accept that anything worthwhile involves some sort of ordeal at some point, beyond the conceptual ideals we tend to hold. Marriage, parenting, commitment to vocations - these are all worthwhile, and they are all ordeals - as desirable, meaningful and fulfilling as they may ultimately be. Surrendering to the reality of the ordeal is essential, in order to open ourselves to the boon. And this takes us into the "belly of the beast".

When we ready ourselves, and gather support to ourselves, we become more capable of surrendering to the ordeals of life, facing 'what is' - life on life's terms.

We become more able to look towards what is right in front of us, as it is, and we confront the demons of fear held inside when necessary. We face all that holds us back from what we could become. Rather than willfully conquering this fear, and striving to overpower or overcome it - or reflexively fleeing from it, and hoping to rid its presence from in our lives - we relax into its threat or tension, and learn to be attentive to what happens inside as we do.

This is how we join with threatening external or internal forces. This is how we don't just not succumb to it, or reinforce it or argue against it. We learn about ourselves when we face the dragons within us in this way. We begin to see exactly what keeps us from changing. We let this trouble us in the best possible way. This and this alone is what shifts one's *internal* motivations, which in turn give us the energy and the focus to change our thinking, and eventually, more and more, our behaviors.



When we face the mythic dragons in our psyche, we face what we perceive to be most threatening to us in our lives. When we enter the belly of the beast, we are required to enter a metaphorical space in which we are more intimately relating to what most disturbs our peace, usually in some variation of depressiveness or anxiousness. We when are swallowed by whatever 'whale of an issue' we are facing, we invariably will enter a place of darkness, a place of tension, a place of deep unknowing. But we are also given an opportunity to become more intimately connected to, *and eventually expanded by*, something that has previously been too threatening for us to see with clarity, or to engage with presence.

When in the belly of the beast, we face what we perceive to be '*other than us*', something outside of our identification - that which is distinctly felt as 'not me'. Opening to a connection with this disowned and threatening presence is indeed uncomfortable, and it feels most un-natural in the beginning. We can tend to use this sense of threat to project evil onto this aspect of what is alien or foreign to us.

This distancing posture is the very thing that allows us to justify, maintain and reinforce our fixed ego positions towards life.

This is precisely what keeps us closed, small and defended about our positions, viewpoints, and attitudes towards the world. This is ultimately what is deadly, as it prevents us from venturing forth towards what is alive, and worth living for.



But when we can know ourselves well enough, when we feel a connection to others and to a power greater than ourselves, we gain the resources we need to face the dragon of differentness, or that which feels alien to us. By facing this presence, and bearing what happens inside us as we do, we grow stronger. We gradually learn, little by little, and only by our own lived-through experience with the dragon of difference, that we do not get annihilated by the fire-breathing 'not me'-ness – nor do we have to annihilate the presence of the dragon! In fact, we incorporate it as a vital and even healthy part of ourselves. This is the hard-work miracle of personal transformation.

We endure the encounter, we live through the experience, we continue to exist, we expand our capacity, we incorporate new (and previously foreign) energies, and in doing so, we begin to feel how we are no longer the same. And we grow a gladness about and appreciation for the encounter; we feel a deep satisfaction, and a growing inner confidence, through our participation with previously unknown worlds.

Rilke says that when we can face that which is most threatening to our well-being, or even to our very sense of existence, when we can tolerate the intense powerlessness we may feel, *then that which now still seems to us the most alien will become what we most trust and find most faithful.*

So again, this is the transformative dynamic that comes into awakening inside of us. We begin to grow stronger right at our broken (open) places, deeper at our most threatened (vital) places, when we do not remain small or defended. We can trust our ability to encounter people, places and things which are increasingly different from our ways, without losing ourselves, or without having to eliminate the other, or the 'otherness' from our minds, or from our lives. This is how we mature and grow, as vulnerable and as magnificent as human beings can become.

*How should we be able to forget those ancient myths
about dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses;
perhaps all the dragons of our lives are princesses
who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave.
Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being
something helpless that wants help from us.*

How does something so threatening, so beyond our ability to control - and thus beastly, or monstrous - turn into a princess - something of beauty, vulnerability and honor? How do we find the strength to change our minds, and thus our experience, about inner demons? How do we learn to open ourselves to the external, beast-like, threatening encounters with other-ness, that which is “not-yet-me”? How can we stay present to ourselves as we are taken, or swallowed by, our emotional reactions to unpleasant or hostile situations, to the things in life we cannot control?

This is being in the belly of the beast.

In the end, what allows us to realize, from a heroic perspective, that all the dragons of our lives have contained within them princesses, who have gone unattended to for so long? Can we gradually learn to recognize that buried within each potentially horrible person, within each potentially horrific outcome, is the as-yet-unrealized potential of the jewel point?

This awakening requires of us the hero’s valor of courage – a certain strength of heart in the midst of threat or fear – which will awaken the ‘sleeping beauty’ in our lives; and which will bring forth all that is beautiful in this world, as well.

Joseph Campbell once said that “*any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life*”. He would speak of this heroic way of developing one’s self as a privilege, as something that provides us with the opportunity of becoming who we truly are, and providing us with a chance for a spontaneous pouring forth of our own nature.



In the ways of mythic adventure, as we embrace the journey of living, there is room for failures, fallings, losses, downward arcs, and the ego deaths that come with them. These places of failure and defeat seem to be the polarized opposite of the ‘apotheosis’ point, the highest culmination of one’s true potential. Yet paradoxically, by bearing these dark inner spaces, one can be made ripe and ready for surrendering and softening into states of love, acceptance and peace that would not come through any other means.

Campbell speaks unequivocally of this, in *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. When we enter a state of surrendering over to what is divine and eternal, we can do so through suffering or through joy. Through whichever doorway will open us, and can be made open to us. Both deep suffering and deep joy can bring forth the profound sense of reverence, right at that very threshold point of joining with something frightening, beautiful and mysterious.

This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation....The hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshiper into the temple – where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is...The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond...are one and the same.



Perhaps what Rilke says in the last line of his prose is true, that *everything terrible is in its deepest being something helpless that wants help from us*. Or, in the least, something that needs help from someone who is in a better space or position than the ‘terrible-ness’ one finds themselves in.

Both the science of modern day systems theory, as well as the ancient wisdom teachings on compassion down through the ages, have stressed this very point: That a larger force of nature, when moved by both its ability to respond (agency), and its desire to respond (compassion), can bend towards and accommodate the weaker force. This in turn, allows for an opportunity for the weaker force to adapt itself towards, and join with, the stronger force - until it can identify that larger presence within itself.

We all tend to reflexively do whatever is most familiar when placed in our greatest stress positions. Here, the heroic action step is to move from beyond the most familiar pattern, to the one most appropriate and necessary for the current situation, especially when that has been foreign or alien to one’s historical sense of self.



Tomorrow is Father’s Day here in the United States. My extended family will gather together for a Sunday dinner, and most likely, share stories that weave together the earlier times of our family life. These days, my father, who is approaching his 90th year, has grown quite frail. Struggling with limited lung functioning from his early years of smoking, and 35 years working in the steel mills of Pittsburgh, his heart is now also giving him trouble. He is physically weak, and on medications, for the first time in his life. This fierce and fiery man has now become childlike and vulnerable. I am getting to know new things about him, through his story telling, that I never knew before.

I am surrendering to the fact that this could very well be our last father’s day with my father. This awareness softens me into tender feelings, both as a son, and as father myself. Confronting the finality of a loved one’s departure and death is like entering the belly of the beast called ‘time’, offering me another profound opportunity to reconcile with the ceaseless nature of impermanence.

I look towards what will be everlasting for him, which he says is the love of family. I look towards what will live on everlastingly inside of me, which is what his presence

has meant to me. This for me is like approaching the threshold crossing into the shrine room, into holy ground. I can sense the mystery of how 'the belly of the beast' is both fearsome and wondrous. How surrendering to something larger pulls us towards the place where timelessness and time intersect. This fills me with wistfulness, wonder, and somehow, peace.

These days, I have many memories of my own youth. I remember my father's involvement in my many sports activities, of how present and involved he was in the fabric of my sporting life from the age of five, well into my late twenties. How his showing up for me, lives on in me. I can feel how I am deeply motivated to do the same for the family and loved ones in my life that I have been committed to and responsible for, to this very day. (Today, I taught my niece how to drive a car with a manual transmission. Talk about facing the dragon!)

I am feeling the ways I am going back and forth between this time of Father's Day, and the many memories of fatherhood that I have been having, my own and of my father's, that live in me outside of time. Today, I am walking in two worlds.

This weekend, through the hero archetype of the father, I am reflecting upon many things that matter: How deeply love is rooted in the core our being; how we learn to survive loving and hating the same person, how we learn many essential lessons from those significant to us, beyond the disappointments and conflicts we encounter with them.

I am grateful for what lives on in me - born out of the belly of the beast of significant parental relationships - and for the meaning and gratitude and the peace that can only surface once we have ripened enough, and mature enough as human beings, to surrender into love, beyond all else.

- Michael Mervosh



The hero whose attachment to ego is already annihilate passes back and forth across the horizons of the world, in and out of the dragon, as readily as a king through all the rooms of his house. Therein lies his power to save; for his passing and returning demonstrate that through all the contraries of phenomenality the Uncreate-Imperishable remains, and there is nothing to fear.

- Joseph Campbell

