



HJF ESSAY SERIES ON THE HERO'S JOURNEY

HJ ESSAY #8 – The Discovery of the Boon: Walking Two Worlds, We Become At Home In Both

Boon – *defined* - a symbol of life force energy, geared to the needs and requirements of the one on whom it is bestowed. The obtainment of the 'pearl beyond all price'.

**The hero moves beyond the world of opposites,
And discovers the vital life within, rooted in eternity.**



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



*Out beyond the ideas
Of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field.
I'll meet you there.*

*When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase
"each other" doesn't make sense anymore.*

- Rumi

What does it mean to let go of attachment to an outcome? What happens when we move beyond our grasping onto right and wrong, good and bad? What allows us to enter the inner space that Joseph Campbell refers to as "*moving beyond the pairs of opposites*"?

On one hand, this requires moving beyond clinging a sense of personal or moral righteousness, which carries a sense of superiority or indignation. From this

vantage point, we will view deficits and flaws as being external, as being in the realm of the 'other', or in the bane of society. Our wish becomes rising above or distancing ourselves from the deficit or the plight we perceive in the other.

On the other hand, it also requires a moving beyond an immobilizing sense of inadequacy, shame or 'badness'; beyond the heavy burden and deadening weight of guilt that we carry for the mistakes we have inevitably made. From this perspective, the deficit is experienced as internal, as residing deep within the core of the self. We feel unworthy, helpless, damned.

This "*moving beyond the pairs of opposites*" is obviously not easy to do. This realm of consciousness, which is often sought after and strived for, is not easily attained. In addition, it is difficult to remain anchored and centered within the realization of this boon.

This is why many of us must first enter "the belly of the beast" phase of the journey. There, the challenging conditions and the trying circumstances provide us with an ordeal that we not only must learn to say 'yes' to, but also must give ourselves over to with a wholehearted surrender. It creates the pre-conditions for the boon, it helps to undo our sense of unworthiness and helplessness. But this feels like being swallowed by a whale, whereby entering into its belly feels like impending and certain death.



These days life rarely feels simple. It often and easily becomes unmanageable, especially without a spiritual foundation rooted in meaningful relationship to what is eternal. The flourishing capacity of our global media keeps us in constant contact with the state of conflict playing out on the world's stage whether it be through the violent or oppressive political climates in Syria, Iran, or Egypt; the economic frailty playing out in Europe, or the chronic maelstrom of war that fuels the inevitable starvation epidemics in many parts of Africa. We also have to contend with growing concerns about the sustainability of our global environment as our populations continue to grow and consume valuable and finite resources at an alarming rate.

Closer to home in the United States, we have our own taxed two-party political landscape governed by severe bipartisanship; the ongoing revelations of sexual abuse of minors by those in positions of trust and regard in our religious institutions and sports worlds; we have our own troublesome concerns about our country's economic stagnation and urban deterioration.

How do we learn to walk in two worlds? How do we stay uplifted in daily life as we contend with socio-economic and political concerns, as well as the personal concerns of our significant relationships and our own hearts? How do we find entry into the world of mythic adventure? How do we actively explore the mystery of what is infinite? How do we learn to see that troubling social conditions create a

particular set of circumstances necessary to bring forth something unrealized from within our own individual souls, something that is rooted in what is wonder-filled and everlasting?

This is the hero's journey for modern times. This is the ancient wisdom path to be taken up by those of us currently living in a technologically advanced, economically stressed and environmentally distressed world. Who can afford to make the time and space necessary to look inward in the midst of such busy and demanding days?

And yet, who can afford not to?

Let's look how these very dynamics may be playing out right now in our lives.



Let's stop for just this one moment and slow everything down. Let's keep it simple. Pay attention to what (if any) troubling thoughts come to mind when we are attentive enough to notice. Pay attention to the precise matters of concern that come forward as you slow down and open up internal space.

What specific fears, upsets or anxieties rise up? Are they economic in nature? Are they related to your social world? Your interior world? Are they concerns about your physical, mental, or emotional well-being? Do you feel isolated, alone or overwhelmed by these thoughts? Do they govern your mood this day? Do they influence the decisions you might make or avoid making today? Do you have an impending sense of helplessness or powerlessness related to these issues or concerns?

Notice once more the impact of simply paying attention to what occupies your mind.

Can you find a way to bear these thoughts by simply allowing these thoughts to exist? Can you manage not to have to respond immediately, or react reflexively, to your thoughts for just the next few moments? Long enough to pay attention, to sense into what may be underneath these thoughts, feelings or worries?

Can you notice how the familiarity of these ongoing thoughts may define or shape your sense of how you view yourself, how you feel about yourself and the life you are presently living (or fail to live)?

The art of self-reflection requires us to slow down so we can look at what we have been unable to look at and live with thus far. Perhaps we have to look within at what we have been afraid to see – something that is lurking and is 'as yet unknown'.

Our fears project strong, negative, future-oriented thinking. *And we tend to most strongly project onto a future outcome something that has already happened to us in our past.* This is particularly so when it involves an unhealed wound or an unprocessed life experience.

When these deeply held thoughts go unaddressed and unprocessed, they tend to recede into our unconscious minds and shape our most fundamental beliefs about life. What we believe to be true we will tend to play out as true, positively or negatively. That is the nature of a self-fulfilling prophecy. We re-enact and live out what we most identify with and believe to be true about ourselves. We especially tend to do this with our unprocessed pain or our undeveloped, limited sense of self.

So go back now to whatever you are presently focusing your attention on in your daily world. What thoughts are pulling you away from your life in a negating or diminished way? Can you simply observe these thoughts? Don't ignore them, become distracted from them, and most significantly, do not succumb to them and over-identify with them. Then something else can begin to happen, that would not happen without bearing this challenge of the life-negating mind.



As I practice this mindfulness right now, I become aware of the pull of so many tasks I have created for myself. These thoughts give rise to a recognizable uneasiness, which brings on a vague, familiar anxiousness within me. These various tasks all feel important and yet they create a feeling in me of being unable to respond to them. As I track this old sense of "feeling unable", I notice how this feeling creates a tension in my stomach, then I also notice tension in my jaw.

This is fuel for a generalized sense of inadequacy for me. As if somehow I am not valuable or lovable if enough if these tasks are not completed in a timely fashion and also done well. There can be no peace until an un-definable amount of these endless tasks are completed.

This dynamic creates an immobilization, a subtle kind of trancelike state within me. This is precisely how I create a "stopping current" for my life force within. I can feel how I welcome any kind of distraction right now as I sit on my back porch. I can feel the sun's heat bearing down on my skin and on my mood, mid-way through this hot summer's morning.

Then right this very moment a small but striking synchronicity happens. Two young bucks (a eight-point and a ten-point) amble down my driveway about 15 feet from where I sit. I stop my typing. I drop my internal focus and feel what is happening inside. I am pulled right into my lived experience of the present moment. Suddenly I feel alive inside. I feel alert, relaxed and excited. Ahhh – excitement, once again! I watch them walk. I quietly whistle to them. They stop. They look at me for an instant and simply stroll on through my backyard, going own their way. I am alive.

In the next moment one of my neighbors is yelling at the deer, shoo-ing them from her yard. Then another neighbor cheers her on, also wanting the wildlife to go away. As I am a gardener in this neighborhood, I understand their emotional

reaction completely! However, as a journeyer in the world of mythic adventure, I am struck by this display of serendipity that just transpired. How something wild and untamable walked into the world of domestication, gardening and lawn care, suddenly disturbing the stasis and the status quo.

What makes something in us wish for the wild and untamable to quickly go away? Do not disturb the flower gardens of our lives, do not detour our plans for the beauty we want to create. Do not threaten those things that we possess, that we call “ours”, that we have invested our time and energy in.

How is it that the mystery seeker within us also hopes for this very spontaneity? Why does the mythic adventurer go searching for a wild and memorable encounter? Why do we long for a surprise that will pull us towards a rapture we cannot manufacture with our rationally well-planned lives?

Now I am walking in two worlds, yet again. In a subtle way, I am now in a very different internal space from the one I was in five minutes ago. I pass back and forth across the horizons between this world and another one, in and out of the mouths of dragons that I make up with my mind. I move between these worlds as readily as one who is free and adventure-filled one moment, then fretting and neurotic in the next one. Going through all the rooms of my own uniquely crafted interior space.



Now let's go back to our mindfulness practice, once more paying attention to the chronic and habitual ways of thinking that consume our energy and attention.

Can you observe your thinking again without having to act immediately and without having to distract yourself from what you think? Without succumbing to the underlying feelings they generate? Can you just let your thoughts pass through? Just let them be what they are. Watch how they pass by while you stay anchored, centered and still within yourself.

Now, another challenge – what can you extend yourself towards that holds meaning for you, that is not only of this world? Can you open to something vast, eternal, and benevolent in this moment? Can you open to something that is fundamentally useful or good? Perhaps this may be a nature setting, a sacred spiritual or religious symbol, or even a mantra. Can you say “yes” to any pathway that will open you to a different and larger energy, a bigger presence than just yourself and your own mind? This is another essential task for the hero of the modern age.

Let what comes towards you come now. Clearly visualize that presence; kinesthetically allow that sensate feeling. Breathe more deeply into the core of your being. Ground the lower half of your body by resting into the ground underneath you.

What happens when you make just a few moments of time for this internal shift to take place right now? Pay attention to the subtlety of any kind of internal shift you are experiencing in this moment. This is how you can deepen and root yourself more into the core of your being within you, as you attend to it.

Pause here for a little while, being with what you have just experienced...



Let's also work with the potency of the written word through the medium of poetry. Poetry helps us to explore further how we can consciously walk in two worlds. Poetic expression allows us to notice the place inside where two worlds become one. We will use a poem by R.S. Thomas, a 20th century Welsh poet and Anglican priest.

Before going any further, consider closing your eyes and taking a few slow, deep breaths into your belly. Inhale through your nose and exhale out from your mouth. Pay attention to the movement that happens through your body as a result of your breathing. Feel the sensations that begin to happen in your body as you breath. This is how you can have a direct experience of being a "life force in motion". Then you can drink from these words slowly, taking them in like a warm, refreshing tea.

Ready?

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it.*

Feel the impact of the first half of the line. This is what the two young bucks walking down my driveway and through my yard did for me. They were like sunlight breaking through, illuminating the small field of my interior life. I held a state of wonder for a few moments that were alive and outside of time, taking me beyond any ego concerns I was carrying. Then I gradually re-focused myself on the task at hand – continuing to write this essay. Soon I would go on with other tasks, taking a rest from my writing. On a conscious level of awareness, I will forget about my encounter with the young male deer. I can easily resume my concerns over the undone tasks for this day, or I may shift to a different way of orienting to life for a while.

Without help from something greater, without the structure and context of a soul's journey, we readily fall prey to our ego's concerns and our personality's worries. They are endless, varied, and well established, ready to come forth in any given moment.

*But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had*

*treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it.*

This capacity to go beyond our ego concerns, our self-interests, our sense of being right (or wronged), this is the pearl of great price. This is what is truly heroic for people of today: To look within our troubles and see our way *through* them, not simply to go away from them. To be taken beyond our identification with them and towards a larger sense of who we are.

Here is where we learn to accept the limitations of our fate. This is not to be confused with simply resigning ourselves to it, thus becoming “fated”. Here, we take hold of a gem of ancient and universal truth: *where our fate binds us, there our destiny will find us.*



Where has the sun momentarily broken through to illuminate your field of existence? How will you pay attention long enough, clearing the clouds of despair and confusion enough, to see where the illumination of eternity shines through for you right here in this world you live in, today?

Can you devote yourself to the hero’s task of focusing your attention on the breaking through of insight, awareness and synchronicity, right here and now in your life? Where you may least expect it or allow it?

Can you tolerate the internal disruption you must bear when a higher energy frequency wants to disrupt your lowered energy, your sameness, smallness or dullness, your familiar, stale and comfortably dark places within?

Can you stay with the journey of transformation long enough to bear witness to exactly how you walk away, over and over again, out of habit and out of discomfort, from that which illuminates your small field? Can you manage your ego enough in order to not be defeated by the witnessing of your own forgetting, failing, avoiding? We all fall short of our ideals day in and day out, so your failures aren’t really that special or unique. Learning from our mistakes, and even valuing them. Just come back to yourself for the next opening, the next opportunity when the sun breaks through and you notice that it is happening.

Resilience is a necessary skill for the mythic adventurer.

Now here is more wisdom medicine being offered by Thomas. Take a few more sips from his poem:

*Life is not hurrying on to a receding future,
nor hankering after an imagined past.*

*It is the turning aside
like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Isn't it true that we always seem to be hurrying towards our future? We must recognize that this hurrying is defensive in nature. It wards off the present moment, which we sub-consciously believe we cannot bear or withstand whether it be positive, negative or neutral in its nature. This is why *slowing down is essential to a developmental process*.

The paradox is the more we slow down to pay attention to our unfolding interior life, the faster we will cultivate our capacity to be a functional and compassionate human being.

Isn't it true that we tend to hold on to pain? We cling to the old, limiting belief systems that were formed by childhood minds. We become attached to a fear-based victim identity until we get the proper amount of support and regard to let it go. Many of us bury the past and confuse this with having let it go or having moved beyond it. Then the unfinished business of our past re-creates itself in the present day, like a ghost in the machine, until we unearth what went wrong early on and apply a compassionate and corrective response to our wounds now, from the present moment of our capable adult consciousness.

Our ability to transform ourselves will inevitably require the presence of "helpful others" in our present day lives, those who will need to be thought about and internalized. We have to learn to receive what we were never given, before we can truly give from a place of wholeness within. This requires us to open and to go where we have not gone before – the hero's act of courage.



Vital life force energy, accessed and revealed through the emergence of soul nature coming forth in the mind and body of the hero on his or her journey, is transitory. It is often potent, fleeting, and incremental. The revelation of soul consciousness can only happen little by little, across the span of a lifetime. It reveals itself to the one who has embraced the hero task of reclaiming one's life purpose, but only in its own time and way. There is no other way.

This is because each little revelation has profound magnitude and gravity for the ego self. Small glimpses of soul are all that we can manage without becoming blinded by the light or swallowed by the darkness.

What becomes understood is that time and eternity are two aspects of the same experience-whole, two planes of the same nondual ineffable; i.e. the jewel of eternity is in the lotus of birth and death: om mani padme hum.

- Joseph Campbell

The *boon*, the pearl beyond all price for the hero, is the discovery of an embodied sense of vital life force energy, often co-arising with penetrating insight, awareness and irony. This will be accompanied by a sense of surprise, wonder and awe, combined with a sense of place, right timing and a peace beyond all human comprehension.

This inward experience is very intimate. It is like that of a deeply personal visit from a universal presence that cannot ever be described and could not in any way be ignored. It is the felt sense of the eternal bending down to enter us, as Campbell says above, in the field of time - which can only be found here and now, in this present moment. This is how eternity awaits us all. This is not something to wish for only once we die. It is something to journey for while we are living. It becomes apparent to us only with a journeyer's awareness.



I recently visited my daughter in Dallas. She has just relocated there for a career opportunity, having just graduated from college this past May. I could feel the passing of time as a palpable experience, yet I also felt outside of time, all at once. This past Father's Day, my daughter gave me a picture of her and I in front of the golden dome at Notre Dame. She is in her graduation gown, I am in my suit and tie. Then serendipitously, I received from her mother a photo of my daughter and I at the bus stop, on the morning of her first day of school. She is six years old, wearing her backpack and carrying her lunch box. I am looking at both of these photos right now. The juxtaposition of these images touch me deeply.

Where does time go? Why does it feel like there is never enough of it? How is it that everything beyond this particular day and point in time feels so dream-like? How does a memory live on inside? How does captured images on photo paper create a sense of something meaningful inside of me, even though it happened so long ago? Why does it feel like it was just yesterday? How is it that this sense of time having passed moves me so deeply inside? Why does it feel so familiar, like an old and cherished friend?

Life is such a mystery. The way it moves us and takes us forward. Walking in two worlds, the way we as human beings walk on two legs. One foot moving through time and one foot rooted in eternity.

Living with this awareness, I have the privilege and the opportunity of being a living embodiment of that which is eternal – intangible in nature, infinite in possibility, and destined for what I have been born to do.

- Michael Mervosh



The world is filled and illumined by, but does not hold, the Bodhisattva, the one whose being has awakened. Rather, he is the one who holds the world, the lotus. Pain and pleasure do not enclose him, he encloses pain and pleasure, with profound repose. And since he is what all of us may be, his presence, his image, the mere naming of him, helps.

- Joseph Campbell



The boon bestowed upon a worshiper is always scaled to his or her stature and the the nature of one's dominant desire: the boon is simply a symbol of life energy stepped down to the requirements of a certain specific case. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that, whereas the hero who has won the favor of the god may be for the boon of perfect illumination, what he or she generally seeks are longer years to live, weapons with which to slay the neighbor, or the health of one's child.

- Joseph Campbell

