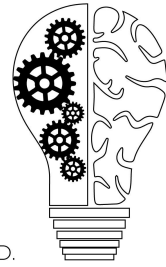


Episode 107: Hero's Journey: Getting Rid of the Faulty Narratives

David Puder, M.D.

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There are no conflicts of interest in this episode.

Seeing The Hero's Journey

Before I begin, I wanted to give a short update on my life. I have moved to Florida and at the time am still running the IOP/Partial in California. I am also seeing patients in California and Florida (out of network, or cash pay psychotherapy or psychotherapy with med management patients over zoom). I am also devoting time to helping people grow, such as walking people through microexpression training, therapeutic alliance, advanced skills training, and taking people through their big five personality profile. Several people want to get going with creative stuff and I enjoy helping them find their own voice, overcome resistance, looking at what is blocking them from moving forward. I am looking to eventually do private practice here in Winter Park but right now everything is over video calls. Prior to the move I was not accepting new people, but now have some time so send me a message [through the website](#) if you want to inquire about being a patient or being coached.

The Hero's Journey

“The Hero's Journey” entails several predictable steps of leaving and returning transformed. The hero subordinates self in dedication to and identification with a cause outside oneself. Striving towards one's heroic possibilities and unfolding one's potentials is deeply pleasurable. Part of the pleasure is in the striving, the journey itself. Realizing that our narratives can be seen as part of a journey can encourage these pleasurable aspirational attempts and reframe hardships. After all, every great story has conflicts; every hero struggles. This concept of The Hero's Journey is something I use often in my practice and find very useful.

The Hero's Journey was first described by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor and then discussed further by psychoanalyst Otto Rank in his book, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, in 1909. It went on to be described further by Lord Raglan in 1936 and then Joseph Campbell went

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on to extensively describe the ultimate hero archetype in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Interestingly, you can see these themes in modern books and movies. George Lucas said Joseph Campbell's ideas heavily influenced *Star Wars*. It can also be seen in the protagonist of the book and movie *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen.

She is this very authentic character with a struggle to simply to survive and ultimately to save her sister while up against a harsh, materialistic, gluttonous society that has forgotten how to struggle. It can be seen in Mel Gibson's character in *Braveheart* as he struggles to fight against the English in the quest for freedom for his people. Another great example is Neo from *The Matrix*. His struggle is the process of comprehending that his whole reality has been false. He journeys to discover the truth for himself and others.

Joseph Campbell really talks about the role psychoanalysis and the role the therapist plays in helping the person move into another domain where they are learning about themselves. Then they come out changed on the other side. He suggests that talking about yourself and processing your struggles changes the way you view yourself and others. To support this, he combines Jungian archetypes, the concept of unconscious force, and rites of passage to describe these processes.

What is a hero?

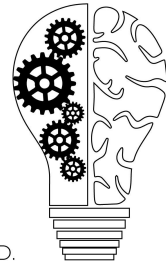
A hero is the role of the person that is giving their life to something bigger than or other than themselves, such as saving a person, people, or idea. To some degree it is about sacrifice with the conception of a higher purpose, meaning, goal, or aspiration than one can encapsulate in purely self-loving actions.

In the journey, they have a transformation of consciousness through trials and revelations in which they see self-protection (protecting the ego) as not as important as helping another.

Sometimes the hero's act is a physical deed: saving a life, sacrificing oneself to another, slaying monsters. Sometimes the act is a spiritual deed: learning or finding a new way of living, for example, bringing a unifying message for the time.

So the questions become:

1. How are we doing in our hero's journey?
2. How are the patients we treat doing in their hero's journey?



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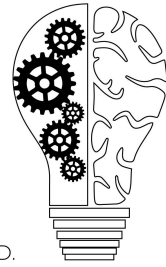
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If we see ourselves and the people we meet as going through this journey, we are different characters for other people. As a therapist, we may be a guide or a helper. Sometimes we are a partner helping them in their journey.

A lot of people are talking about the hero's journey in our culture right now. I am most concerned about the commercialization of products with branding targeting the hero (you) and your journey. I almost laugh when I see this, and I think after you understand how this works you will start to see it everywhere.



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The Departure in the Hero's Journey

The first stage in the hero's journey is **departure**, or separation. This begins with the hero living their ordinary life and then receiving a call to adventure in which they must depart the ordinary world. They have some reluctance or hesitation towards the call or perhaps struggle with imposter syndrome, but a mentor comes along and helps them. They may simply be thrown into the adventure without a choice, while other times they spend some time deciding what to do.

So within the departure journey itself there are several stages.

1. The Call to Adventure
2. The Refusal of the Call
3. The Supernatural Aid (Gandalf, Yoda). Often the guide gives the hero some sort of artifact or special object. Frodo is given his ring. Spiderman is given his ability to shoot webs.
4. The Crossing of the First Threshold
5. The "Belly of the Whale" Moment

In this "belly of the whale" moment they are thrown into a situation they don't want to be in. This can be seen with Jonah being thrown in the belly of the whale for three days or Katniss being thrown into the Hunger Games. They are dark moments. It can be seen as coming up against all that is unconscious, not something we can access with our conscious mind. It is coming up against this shadow, the unconscious id, the dark part of a personality (unrecognized by the ego) where we see that we are capable of evil, aggression, destruction, hurting others, jealousy, anger, malice, and lust.

Normally we have a social veneer, which Jung called "The Persona." That is usually all we know. It is an ideal we desire to align with or believe we are. The danger in this is not realizing we are capable of having this shadow. As therapists, we often focus on our patients' hurt behind their anger instead of the anger, and we can neglect to see that people are actually capable of

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aggression, competition or fighting. Even someone with a highly agreeable personality may try to live out this fantasy life of being that type of person by being drawn to, for example, gangster movies with these destructive, power-hungry characters.

Here are a few quotes that resonate with me about the concept of the shadow:

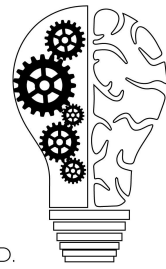
“Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on a whole, less good than he imagines himself to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is at all counts. It forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions.” (Carl Jung)

“This thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine.” (William Shakespeare)

“This confrontation is the first test of courage on the inner way. A test sufficient to frighten off most people, for the meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we can project everything negative into the environment. But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved, so we have at least brought up the personal unconscious. The shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness. This problem is exceedingly difficult, because it not only challenges the whole man, but reminds him at the same time of his helplessness and ineffectuality.” (Carl Jung)

“...this integration [of the shadow] cannot take place and be put to a useful purpose unless one can admit the tendencies bound up with the shadow and allow them some measure of realization – tempered, of course, with the necessary criticism. This leads to disobedience and self-disgust, but also to self-reliance, without which individuation is unthinkable.” (A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity, Carl Jung)

“In myths the hero is the one who conquers the dragon, not the one who is devoured by it. And yet both have to deal with the same dragon. Also, he is no hero who never met the dragon, or who, if once he saw it, declared afterwards that he saw nothing. Equally, only one who has risked the fight with the dragon and is not overcome by it wins the hoard, the “treasure hard to attain.” He alone has a genuine claim to self-confidence, for he has faced the dark ground of his self and thereby has gained himself. This experience gives some faith and trust, the pistis in the ability of the self to sustain him, for everything that menaced him from the inside he has made



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his own. He has acquired the right to believe that he will be able to overcome all future threats by the same means. He has arrived at an inner certainty that makes him capable of self-reliance.” (Carl Jung)

“There is in every one of us, even those who seem to be most moderate, a type of desire that is terrible, wild and lawless.” (Republic, Plato)

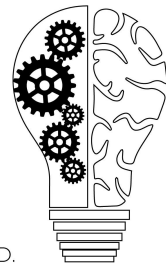
“Fear of wild animals that has been bred into the human being for the longest time, including the animal that he harbors within and fears, Zarathustra calls it ‘the beast within.’” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Friedrich Nietzsche)

So with these thoughts considered, what happens if a person, such as a mother, does not find their shadow and in the process, keeps their child from the departure/separation stage? The child’s independence is thwarted and feelings of guilt are instilled upon any movement towards leaving her. The child is protected from developing competence. At an extreme, in my practice we see this in something called “**Munchausen Syndrome by proxy**” in which the parent creates an illness or injury in the child to keep the child infantile and the mother in complete control. Through this the mother gets power of some sort.

I was lying awake thinking about this episode the other night and this story about “Munchausen Syndrome by proxy” came to me. It is a story in which a mother, let’s call her, by Jung’s term, the **Devouring Oedipal Mother**, refused to let her kid depart into life. It is a true account of a case I had where a mother (I am going to change some details) came in with her daughter who had knee contractures. The mother was demanding that her daughter’s leg be put in a cast. Orthopedics took a look at her under anesthesia and did not see any contractures. I spoke with the doctor after he put her back in the cast. Due to the mother’s anger, the ortho did not want to take the child out of the cast. I told the ortho to take her out of the cast, document the evidence and that there is no contracture and clearly communicate this to the mother. Then I could step in. Well, the mother became completely irate when she was told nothing was physically wrong with her daughter’s labs, x rays, movement, and that she did not actually have contractures. They left and went to another hospital.

I think about this in regards to the Eriksonian stages, where the parent is supposed to be the guide for the child through the early stages. The early Eriksonian stages are trust, autonomy, and initiative. Without them, the hero might be stuck without turning outward.

Stage 1: Trust vs Mistrust (0-1.5): requires a guide who is empathic and you can attach to. Success leads to the ability to trust and form stable attachment.



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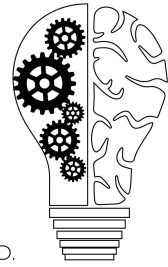
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Stage 2: Autonomy vs Shame (1.5-3): requires a guide to let them have some freedom and also emotional refueling.

Exploration is rejoiced in. Success leads to ability to explore limits of ability, autonomy. Failure leads to feeling excessive shame about abilities, excessive inability to venture out and explore due to fear.

Stage 3: Initiative vs. Guilt (3-5): requires a guide without criticism or overcontrol to allow for play, not restricting initiative but allowing initiative, and questions are answered. When successful, the child has initiative, able to make up games, play with others, plan activities.

You can also see this as the journey from adolescence to adulthood. Going from an infantile dependent person to an adult, willing to bear the burden of moral, legal, and mental accountability, which can be difficult. In short, the failure to not accept the departure/separation leads to a childish adult who lacks moral responsibility. In extreme cases they may display characteristics of the dark triad- psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism along with other things like pedophilia.



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The Initiation of the Hero's Journey

The second part of the hero's journey is the **Initiation**. Here the hero goes into the unknown or special world and begins down a road of trials. Sometimes the hero is alone, sometimes with helpers or the guide. The hero is tested along the way and eventually reaches "the ordeal" where they have to overcome the main enemy or obstacle. Through this the hero undergoes "apotheosis" and gains a reward "elixir" or treasure. Just like in the departure stage, the initiation stage has within itself a few stages that are common.

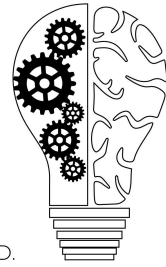
1. The Road of Trials
2. The Meeting with the Goddess
3. Woman as Temptress
4. Atonement with the Father/Abyss
5. Apotheosis
6. The Ultimate Boon

Heroes get off course through trials and temptations. Trials come in the form of sickness, loss. They can also look like addiction, hedonism, materialism. The hero loses sight of what originally captured their attention and can get pulled into seeking comfort instead of pursuing clarity of mind.

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I think about Jesus and his three temptations. I believe Christians and non-Christians alike can appreciate this. His initial temptation, “Turn this stone into bread,” can symbolize comforting yourself instead of pursuing clarity of mind and truth. The second was, “Throw yourself off this building and the angels will pick you up,” and can symbolize performing to the crowds for personal glory versus doing what you are called to do. The third temptation was, “Bow down to me and I will give you all power,” and symbolizes fame for fame’s sake. In rejecting these temptations, Jesus basically states that power without meaning is worthless.



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The largest buildings used to be churches. Now they are often banks, which shows you what in society has the most power and money. That’s why this whole Robinhood/GameStop thing is so ironic because the very name of Robin Hood suggests their purpose is to help the everyday traders and not the hedge fund managers, and yet this situation shows them doing just the opposite.

Another trial we go through is rejecting the mentor, which I consider a fall into narcissism. We can decide to not invest in the mentor. We have this idealized version of ourselves while the guide is trying to point out the discrepancy and instead of being authentically transformed, we reject the guidance. We can’t change if we don’t know that the discrepancy, the shadow, exists. Instead, the pointing out of the discrepancy is met with anger, hostility, or running away.

As a therapist, I have to monitor my thoughts as well as the patient’s. It is possible to respond to our patients out of our own competitiveness, for example. That’s why receiving our own therapy, as a therapist, is so important. You could end up serving your own psychological needs instead of the client’s if you aren’t aware of your own subconscious thoughts.

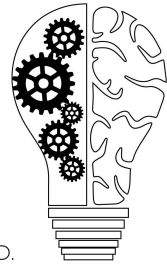
Listen to what a qualitative study noted about master therapists ([Jennings, Skovholt 1999](#)):

1. “Master therapists are voracious learners”- often having a thirst and hunger for learning experiences, curiosity is a notable trait.
2. “Accumulated experiences have become a major resource for master therapists.” They have had “experiences upon which to draw in their work.” “It was a commitment and openness to learning from one’s experiences that counted.”

“I don’t think years of experience by itself does it...I might have the same year of experience 20 times. So [one] needs to put together with good consultation and a good collegial system so that you actually are learning from what you’re doing, [learning] more about yourself and about how you are impacting people.”

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3. Master therapists are open to feedback.
Emotional Domain, Category 4: “Master therapists appear to have emotional receptivity defined as being self-aware, reflective, non defensive, and open to feedback. Respondents spoke of engaging in personal therapy, peer consultation, and supervision to obtain various sources of feedback to heighten their awareness of themselves and others. Respondents seem to be constantly striving to learn more about their work and themselves. For example, one respondent spoke of a need for continuous self-reflection and feedback: “[I need to be] fully aware of myself and my own motivational system, what’s moving me inside...So I get a chance to look at myself on the outside over and over and over again, through personal therapy, through lots of supervision, through ongoing consultation. That helps incredibly.”

Conclusion

The hero’s Journey starts with leaving and then returning transformed. Our journeys through education, sport, or hardships can be seen as part of our own hero’s journey, but also taking part in other’s journeys as well. Finding a cause outside of ourselves and striving towards it is deeply pleasurable. Aspirational attempts towards these goals are pleasurable and reframe hardship.

In part 2, I will go through the third step which is, **return**, along with key components of listening and helping someone in their journey.