

Homily - A Real Hero Is Humble

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Joseph Campbell was a professor of literature who worked in comparative religion. And, in his 1949 work “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, Campbell described the basic narrative pattern of the heroes journey as follows:

“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

Campbell breaks down the heroes journey into the following classic stages. First, the departure includes a call to adventure, a refusal of the call, a mentor, and the crossing of the first threshold into the adventure.

Second, the initiation includes challenges and temptations, a helper, and a falling into the abyss with its subsequent revelation and transformation.

Finally, there is the return home with the gifts of atonement and healing. With the return the hero is able to live both in the world of the journey and the world of home. They can act as a bridge between these two worlds.

Many of you will recognize this journey from the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, but you will also see it in books and films. In the film the Matrix, Neo is called out into the world by Morpheus so that Neo can save the world. In the Lord of the Rings, the hobbit, Frodo, is called out by Gandalf to destroy the ring and defeat evil.

Perhaps you recognize some of the heroes journey in your own life or in the life of a loved one. And, some of you with the personality type that seeks out adventure will be chomping at the bit to begin the call to a journey. And, others will be very reluctant to leave home.

Recently I read an article by Cate Hall called “Everyone Is the Hero of Their Own Story. This article takes the hero’s journey down a pathway that I think is relevant for our own spiritual journeys and illuminates life in the twenty-first center. It may make you squirm. The following is a condensed and shorted version of that article. Cate Hall begins, If there’s a universal law of human behavior, I think it’s this: People will believe whatever allows them to be the hero of their own story. When I say “hero,” I don’t mean someone thoroughly virtuous. Few people walk around with an exalted sense of self, thinking they’re a prophet or Great Man of History. By hero I

mean someone whose choices matter to the overall plot, and whose faults are redeemed by their good qualities. In other words, a sympathetic character in a struggle of real significance.

What this boils down to is: We all need to maintain a belief that we are fundamentally good, reasonable, decent people. We are doing the best we can, given what we have to work with. This belief is so important to our sense of self that abandoning it is basically never on the table. If we come into contact with evidence that might contradict our place as a hero, we will instead do one of two things: (1) deny the evidence, or (2) revise our concepts of what it means to be good, reasonable, or decent.

There are several significant downsides to our need to be the hero. First, facts are the first thing to go, which is why it's typically impossible to persuade someone via direct debate. If you're the protagonist of your story, and you find yourself beset by people who are telling you that what you believe is wrong, who are those people? Antagonists, obviously. They must be bravely opposed, even if you can't answer their arguments — after all it takes a real hero to resist the clever, well-rehearsed words of a deceiver! Doesn't it?

In addition and to our detriment, hero stories contribute to a deep level of hyper-partisanship by dividing us into teams that not only disagree with one another but essentially inhabit totally different realities. The more loudly our opponents insist that we're wrong, bad, deranged — the more intensely they oppose the hero of the story — the more we're forced to conclude that they're villains, and must be reflexively resisted at every turn, even on the occasions when what they say aligns with our own interests. Belief in our own goodness, and therefore their badness, is the one non-negotiable, the one central pillar around which facts and positions and interests can all warp and bend.

Now, Hall finds this “everyone's a hero” framing useful for several reasons. First, it makes the world more comprehensible. If you really absorb this frame, the need to stay the hero and the contorting of facts and of the other side, with this frame you don't find yourself bewildered and alienated by the behavior of others as often. You start to get the core mechanism, even if its manifestations confuse and sometimes repulse you.

And here's a second benefit of understanding this frame. It helps us to be more compassionate. Many, if not all of us, cling to the story that we are trying to be a good person in a way that is attuned to the reality of the world, and other people are deliberately deciding to be bad people, and they are the ones who reject reality. This is a story I tell myself, and I am guessing that this rings true for many of you here

today. It is very easy for me to maintain my belief that I am the hero of the story when I feel the world is conspiring against me. This framing also helps me realize that I am almost certainly wrong about some things in my own life — that I, too, am seeing things through a lens distorted by my psychological needs. When I say “people will believe whatever allows them to be the hero of their own story,” I am people too.

Cate Hall believes that as we embrace the framework that we are all the heroes of our own story then it reveals a pathway forward and out of the mess. That facts don't matter doesn't mean nothing matters, or that people do things for no reason. It also doesn't mean changing minds is impossible. It's just unpleasant, because it requires stepping into their frame in a way the whole psychological immune system we've been talking about is designed to avoid. If your goal is to actually change someone's mind then you should be operating in the conversation as if you're talking to the hero of the story, who is basically good. And, if you do want to persuade, you have to offer people an alternative narrative. A new heroic story they can inhabit. With some emotional intelligence, you can make someone feel as if you're not a villain mocking them, but rather, a sympathetic helper who can bring them new information. After all, many heroic plots involve the hero breaking free from a false allegiance, with the help of an unlikely sidekick who alerts them to some deception. In fact, this is maybe the only approach that allows us to make progress. You will never find the bottom of people's willingness to change their factual views about the world in order to maintain their own self-image as a hero. And it is a good thing to look in the mirror for all do the same thing.

Now, I am guessing that most of us here today want to be part of the solution to get out of our current mess and the key personal quality we must assume is to live into a state of humility. Yes, our old friend humility is the key. *“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor... But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”* Sometimes we think humility is a form of weakness. We think we are being a door mat. However, humility is an openness to new learning combined with a balanced and accurate assessment of one's own contributions, including our strengths, imperfections, and opportunities for growth. We can sum up humility with one sentence. I'm here to get it right not to be right.

The escape from the mess is a state of suspended judgement, in which you don't believe that you're either a hero or a villain, a loser or a winner. Instead, we are each a human animal who, with limited information, is trying our best to be good. And everyone else is, too. Let me repeat that. With limited information we are trying to be good. And everyone else is too.

We are all in this together, in a state of almost complete ignorance, hurtling through the darkness, occasionally capable of small acts of true nobility — spontaneous gifts of love and charity that are beyond what could be expected. Entering into this perspective of non-superiority, briefly, is what allows us to actually be better, to temporarily see the ways we could really be kinder, more curious, more humble. It's what empowers us to think daring thoughts like "maybe this company I'm building isn't good for the world" or "maybe I'm the problem in this relationship." The challenge is to walk humbly.

Cate Hall ends her article with the following. [Humility] is not something one can reside in permanently. This is one of the things we face when we step out of the hero mindset: the frightening knowledge that we can only achieve temporary glimpses beyond our moral frame, that our frail human psychology isn't built for consistent re-examination. The best we can hope for is to demand a few moments of lucidity, a few seconds here and there when we can rise above our automatic trajectory, or maybe even try to set a slightly better one.

This is what Jesus calls us into and it is what a real hero would do. A real hero is humble.