6. "In many so-called primitive cultures it is a requirement of tribal initiation to spend a lengthy period alone in the forests or mountains, a period of coming to terms with the solitude and nonhumanity of nature so as to discover who, or what, one really is — a discovery hardly possible while the community is telling you what you are, or ought to be. He may discover, for instance, that loneliness is the masked fear of an unknown which is himself, and that the alien-looking aspect of nature is a projection upon the forests of his fear of stepping outside habitual and conditioned patterns of feeling." (Alan Watts)

7. "Once upon a time, I, Chuang-Tzu, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering here and there, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. Suddenly, I awakened. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man."

8. "The adventure of change may be a tragic adventure for many — a sad uprooting of cherished customs and institutions. Yet change is the one constant of history. Not a decade has gone by in our nation’s history in which we did not undergo new experiences and seek new challenges." (Robert F. Kennedy)

9. Draw up a personal coat of arms. What images and symbols will you use to describe yourself in relation to your work, study, love, home, religion? How will you group these elements together? In pairs? Apart? What other elements will you include? What mythic figures will you depict?

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HEROIC TASK

Human lives are in every instance far more complex, elaborate, subtle, and indeterminate than any model can provide. Models can give us perspectives on our lives but not absolutely unchallengeable descriptions or prescriptions. Myths of heroes are such models, relevant for those experiences we have along with everyone else. Heroic myths provide a pattern for organizing data, a common thread for analyzing our reactions to our experiences as we pass from one stage of life to another. We are the heroes. We are Rama, or Odysseus, or Parsifal, for example. By understanding their heroic tasks or quests, we know more about what our universe looks like and our place in it.

The theme of the hero’s quest is among the earliest and best developed myth-narratives formulated by religious traditions and cultures. The quest pattern is known to us all, for it is the pattern of our own experience. The hero is not only the one who acts for all of us, who stands in our place to face dangers and risks, but his quest is really a model of our own quests. In the Odyssey and Aeneid, in the struggles of Perseus and Theseus and Heracles, in Parsifal’s search for the Holy Grail, we see enlarged in story form the pattern of our own experience. Again
and again, like the hero on his quest — entering the unknown, struggling with what lies there, finding something of value, and returning with it to the community — we find ourselves facing the unexpected, with its risks and opportunities. Heroic myth stories help us to create and interpret our own lives; they make us conscious of our various possibilities, both comic and tragic, and help us consent to experience them. The more we know about the hero’s quest and the more we identify with it, the more it helps us compensate for the insignificance and banality of the humdrum existence from which, in reality, very few of us can escape. Looking at the hero’s trials and participating in a life cycle greater than our own gives glamor to our own restricted quests and to the seemingly mild tests of everyday life.

Though the entire life of the hero is often considered a quest, our interest here is with the central task-struggle-journey that marks his adult life. The hero has gone through the period of withdrawal, the period of meditation and vision quest, and now he has to perform his adult task, the deed that will bring a real boon to the community. He has to prove his self with an action of universal importance in the prime of his life. He has established his origins by finding the divine destiny within the self, and now he has to act on that destiny. The quest is always toward a goal and should be distinguished from mere adventure, which may be undertaken for any number of reasons and may lead anywhere. The grave and serious nature of the undertaking contrasts with what may well be frolic in an adventure. The quest is always marked by a sense of struggle, of imminent or actual danger in which all of the hero’s will and power will be called forth in order to push on. The hero’s quest goes beyond self-fulfillment, culminating in a boon (gift) that has social and cultural value for the community as a whole.

The Ramayana

One of the most beloved myths in India and Southeast Asia is the love story of Rama and Sita found in the Ramayana. The Ramayana holds great religious significance as part of the Hindu sacred literature (which includes the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and the Mahabharata). Dating from about 200 B.C., it exists in different versions with many additions by later generations. Rama, along with Krishna, is a human avatar, incarnation, of the god Vishnu, the “preserver of the world.” He embodies the Hindu virtues, including a sense of duty and even-mindedness. Though Rama is a savior, it is his human quest that concerns us here. During his heroic odyssey, he meets many types of people who open his eyes to the nature of things. His strange adventures — living in a hermitage, fighting a battle with demons, and losing his wife — give him the wisdom and knowledge that eventually enable him to regain his country, throne, and wife.

Rama was sent to the world to save it from Ravana and his demons, who harassed the holy hermits and kept them from offering sacrifices to the gods. Rama was the handsomest and strongest of the four sons of the king since his mother had taken more magic potion from Vishnu than the women who bore the king’s other sons. When Rama grew to manhood, he heard of Sita, who was beautiful, talented, and virtuous. Her royal father had resolved that whoever could bend a bow would have Sita for a wife, knowing that no ordinary mortal could possibly accomplish it. Rama bent the bow with such strength that the weapon snapped in two, and Sita became his wife.

The heroic crisis in Rama’s life was precipitated when his father proposed that Rama should be crowned his successor. One of the queens, however, exploited her special position to prevent his succession to the throne. Because she had been promised two boons by the king, she demanded that her son, Bharata, should be made regent and that Rama be exiled for 14 years. Though the king was sad, he had given his word and had to fulfill his promises. As a dutiful son, Rama prepared to go into exile. Claiming that a wife’s place was with her husband, Sita and Rama’s brother, Lakshmana, both insisted on accompanying him. The three left and stayed at the hermitage of a holy man. Meanwhile, Bharata refused to accept the kingdom won so unfairly and set out to find Rama to ask forgiveness for his mother. Rama, however, had given his word to his father and remained in exile. Bharata placed Rama’s sandals on the throne as a symbol of his right to the kingship and himself lived a hermit’s life.

A demon-maiden fell in love with Rama. Spurned by him, she sought revenge and asked her brother Ravana (the demon-king of Sri Lanka) for help. Ravana’s power was so great that it could be broken only by an alliance of men and monkey people.
He sent a demon disguised as a deer to lead Rama astray while on a hunt. When he failed to return, Lakshmana went in search of him. Meanwhile Ravana came in the form of a hermit, and when Sita showed him hospitality, he assumed his horrible form as a ten-headed demon. He proposed that she become his wife, but she poured scorn on him. He lifted her by force into his chariot to take her to his kingdom. Sita threw off ornaments toward a group of monkeys so that news of her abduction would reach Rama. Put into Ravana’s harem under strict guard, Sita was given a year to make up her mind — marry him or die — but she spurned his advances with utter contempt. Rama, learning from a vulture of her imprisonment, allied himself with the monkey people.

Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys, was a valuable ally. On a spy mission, he went to Sita and told her of Rama’s plans. Then he mischievously began destroying Ravana’s city, tearing up trees and pulling down buildings. He mocked Ravana’s army as he continued his destruction. He was finally caught but escaped and set the whole city on fire with burning rags that had been tied to his tail.

Though Rama wanted the waters to part so that he could cross directly to Ravana’s island, he had to build a causeway. At last he and Hanuman’s army of monkeys besieged the city, and a great battle raged for days. All the demons except Ravana were killed, and he and Rama engaged in single combat. Ravana had ten heads, and when one was cut off, another grew in its place. Rama, however, had a powerful weapon, a magic spear from Brahma, and was able to kill Ravana.

Freed, Sita rushed into Rama’s arms, but he was cruel and cold. He said she could no longer be considered his wife since she had been defiled by another. Because Rama was adamantly in not listening to her pleading, Sita asked for wood to build a fire so that she could call on the gods to prove her innocence. When she threw herself on the flames, the flames lifted her from the ground and set her down in front of Rama. Because she had proved in ordeal by fire that she was still virtuous and worthy to be his wife, Rama embraced her joyfully.

Rama and Sita returned home, along with Lakshmana, and Rama became king. Rumors began to fly around, however, that Sita had been unfaithful. Since no one had seen the trial by fire except Rama and Lakshmana, there was no one to vindicate her, and she was sent into exile. Sita went to live in the ashram of Valmiki (who would compose the Ramayana) and shortly afterward gave birth to Rama’s sons. When these sons grew up, they came unknowingly to Rama’s court and sang the story of Rama and Sita. Rama claimed them as his sons and sent for Sita. When she was again asked for a proof that she had been true to her marriage vows, she refused to accept the man who had twice accused her of unfaithfulness. She cried out: “Mother Earth, if I have been pure, take me unto yourself.” The earth opened and Sita disappeared into it.

Rama went mad with rage and despair, and his friends feared that he would take his own life. But Brahma suddenly appeared to him and gave him this message: “Have you become so wrapped up in the world of illusion that you have forgotten who you are? You are the great Lord Vishnu, and this body you are in is only a temporary form you assumed in order to destroy Ravana. This woman you called Sita was an incarnation of your eternal wife, and she awaits you in your heavenly home.” Rama was again at peace and soon after disappeared from the earth into the heavens where, as Vishnu, he continues to watch over the world and wait for another time when he must come to earth again to save it from destruction.

This hero’s story is traditionally interpreted as placing before us the ideal of a harmonious pursuit of the principal goals of life, especially Dharma (duty and righteousness) and Moksha (liberation of soul). Happiness is based not on material possessions and environment but on proper human relations and performance of one’s duties as a member of the family and the community. Thus Rama’s submission to his father’s decision and his struggle against the forces of evil and adversity, and Sita’s obedience, patient suffering, and above all, faithfulness make them exemplars of ideal behavior.

Other Hindu religious ideals are also apparent. There is emphasis on proper social order and the orderly functioning of society. There are repeated references to the human will’s subservience to the divine order and the power of destiny — karma — over people’s lives. Though Rama occasionally swerves from these canons of conduct, he exemplifies the qualities of courage, truthfulness, generosity, forgiveness, deep respect for elders, and honoring one’s word at all costs. The message he receives from Brahma at the end regarding the illusory nature
of the world is the boon he leaves for the community: even-mindedness in success and failure, in joy and sorrow, in opulence and poverty is conducive to liberation and happiness.

The Heroic Monomyth

Perhaps to appreciate better what we can learn about ourselves from the hero Rama, it would be useful to look at elements from the Ramayana from the perspective of Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero. In The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Campbell has provided a schematic summary of the interpretative elements that function typically in heroic myths.

During Rama's 14-year exile, he had to go to the demon kingdom to rescue his wife Sita. In the call to adventure of Campbell's hero, this is where the hero sets forth from home, with its protective but unchallenging milieu, and is lured or voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure. In a condition of need, a crisis, with a symbolic deficiency — perhaps a golden ring is missing, or the people are living in a wasteland, or a monster is threatening the lives of those in the community — the hero is called to action. His call may be voluntary (Theseus desiring to go into the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur), involuntary (Odysseus being carried over the seas by the winds of the angered god Poseidon), or due to mere curiosity (Moses exploring the burning bush). In any case, the hero's activities must be directed toward some goal outside himself to lead to his authentic wholeness.

Rama learns of Sita's whereabouts through the vulture messenger and arrives at the demon kingdom through the aid of the monkey, Hanuman. These are examples of the protective figure that helps the hero as he journeys to the threshold of adventure. This protective figure may appear as a wizard, a hermit, a shepherd, or perhaps as talking birds in the forest. In some religious traditions, this helper may be a guru, a teacher, a ferryman, or a conductor of souls to the underworld (Hermes-Mercury). Perhaps the protector may be a goddess who lures, guides, or bids the hero to follow her wisdom and take her as she is, without undue commotion and with the kindness and assurance she requires. The protective figure aids the journey, whether in time or space, encouraging the hero in his uncertainty (for he cannot be certain in advance of success or failure).

All of this is necessary for the hero to establish his separate identity as a person of exceptional courage or wisdom.

Though Rama would like to take the easy way out and have the waters parted to the island of Sri Lanka, he has to build a causeway to the devil's kingdom. The passage of the threshold is never easy. Usually the passage to the other world involves getting past preliminary dangers. The realm of the unknown may be guarded by gargoyles, dragons, lions, or cherubim; perhaps there is a drawbridge, or Scylla (the six-headed monster) and Charybdis (the giant whirlpool). The hero has to defeat, or at least conciliate, these powers before he can encounter the object of his quest-struggle-trials. This passage over the threshold is a kind of self-annihilation, either inward or outward, a contest between contradictory forces within the self, which the hero must face before he can perform his life-renewing act.

After a long difficult struggle, Rama defeats the ten-headed demon Ravana. This he does with divine help, the sacred weapon of Brahma. This is the hero's task, the central act of the heroic quest, the struggle within the struggle. Beyond the threshold, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar forces that present him with his supreme ordeal. Such a series of tests would screen out someone unworthy, but in them the hero is revealed. The hero may have to slay a dragon, rescue some beleaguered maiden from unspeakable fate, fetch a cup of the water of life from the well at the world's end, or measure the dark in the belly of the whale. The hero Theseus, in order to prove himself worthy to be the heir to the throne, killed the robber Procrustes to make the road safe for travelers, killed the monster Minotaur which lived at the center of the labyrinth, and had to find his way back by means of the single linen thread of Ariadne. The hero Heracles, to be cleansed of the frenzied crime of killing his wife and three sons, had to undergo twelve tasks of labors, including killing the Hydra (a creature with nine heads and poisonous breath), obtaining the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, picking the golden apples of the Hesperides, and bringing back Cerberus, the dog that guards the underworld. In these and similar struggles the hero comes to wholeness and a new relationship to the world and is made suitable for his role within the culture.

Having conquered the demon, Rama rescues Sita, who proves to be a boon for the people as the queen of their kingdom.
The hero thus receives the boon, which is for the common good of the society the hero belongs to. Once he has proved he is worthy of it, he receives this gift from the gods and goddesses. It might be a miraculous energy, or wisdom, fire, Golden Fleece, or perhaps a peace pipe. Intrinsically, this gift will be an expansion of the hero’s and the people’s consciousness and their very being, through illumination or transfiguration.

Finally, there is the heroic return. Rama returns after fourteen years to reign as beneficent monarch. He winds up where he started, but with a difference. If the divine powers have blessed the hero in the struggle, as with Rama, he returns under their protection and as their emissary; if not, he flees and is pursued with further adventures and escapades, often with the “good” gods fighting the “bad” gods who try to set up magical obstructions to his return.

Sometimes the reintegration with society is difficult. Perhaps the desire to return has been lost, or perhaps he fears he will be misunderstood (Moses was reluctant to return from Mt. Sinai because he felt the people would never believe him). Still, the return has to be made for the heroic task to be complete. The boon must be shared for the quest to be successful; only then is the society re-created, only then does the hero spiral his egocentric nature, his small self, into a larger self that is identified to some extent with his culture.

The basic elements of Campbell’s paradigm we have outlined in skeletal form—the call, the protective figure, the passage over the threshold, the task, the boon, and the return—reveal the way each of us must travel toward wholeness. In the hero’s struggle we can anticipate the outlines of our own quests. This holds true whether we tell of a specific task (Rama defeating Ravana to rescue Sita) or of the quest of an entire lifetime (Rama incarnated to struggle against demons, in which case the boon is the message that he receives from the god Brahma about the illusory nature of the world, and the return is his ascent to the heavens).

The major benefit of this model has been well stated by Joseph Campbell:

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known: we have only to follow the thread of the hero path.

And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

The outward adventure of the hero reflects an odyssey of the spirit through which the hero in each of us explores the wilderness of his own selfhood. No one else can go where we must go; no one else can wrestle with our freedom and our dreams for us. It is both the heroic burden and the crowning gift of each of us to go on our quest for the self; it is our capacity for being heroes.

The Heroic Pattern

Many of the experiences of our lives are disjunct. Experiences seemingly not connected come together as each of us realizes that the hero in the myths is really our selves and that the hero’s actions are reminiscent of the activities in our own lives. Before looking at other benefits of this heroic model, I would like to introduce a second, similar pattern, one allied to the rites of passage we considered in the previous chapter. This second pattern highlights more the ritual element of the heroic quest. Religious traditions often ritualize the hero’s quest either to commemorate their reception of the divine boon or to provide a pattern for the initiatory rites of other members of the society. Ritualizing the hero’s quest and boon are both a commemoration and a preservation of the tradition.

During their exile, Rama and Sita had many adventures, and the places where they stayed are today reverently visited by throngs of pilgrims. In fact, in India each fall, the myth of the Ramayana is acted out in the ritual of Ram Lila. For over a week, segments of the story are acted out in songs and dance in religious fervor and excitement, becoming especially vivid at the moment when Hanuman, the monkey, burns down the demon’s kingdom. The people’s involvement in the ritual pageantry of the victory of Rama and the forces of good over the demons and the forces of evil is their own rite of passage. In this and similar rituals in other cultures, the dramatic reenactment helps conduct the people across thresholds of change and growth, both in their conscious and unconscious lives.
Similar to rites of passage, the hero's quest contains a crisis, an initiatory struggle, and a return. First, the hero is forced, due to some need, to leave the security of home. He then undergoes a series of tasks on his journey, generally for the community's benefit. Finally, after a symbolic undergoing of death in his trials, the hero receives a boon from the gods which he brings back to the people in his triumphant return. These are all vividly demonstrated in the heroic struggle of Perseus.

1. **Crisis:** The people are worried that Perseus's mother will have to marry the tyrant Polydectes, and the only way that this can be forestalled is for Perseus to bring him back the head of Medusa (a winged monster whose very look could turn man to stone).

2. **Initiatory Struggle:** First journeying to the land of the dead, he finds several boons that will help him: The gifts from the gods include winged sandals, a shrinkable pouch, a cap that makes him invisible, Hermes's sword, and Athena's breast plate. With this divine aid, he is able to trick Medusa and cut off her head.

3. **Return:** After saving princess Andromeda (who has been chained to a rock as a sacrifice to the sea serpent) and marrying her, he returns home with Medusa's head, and all Polydectes's cronies are turned to stone when he takes the head out of the bag. Perseus and Andromeda then live happily as king and queen.

The reason for introducing this second heroic pattern, similar to the rites of passage, is to remind us again of the key moments of liminality. It is precisely at those marginal points of transition between stages, those moments between the secure past and the untried future, where the mythic images spark and ignite new self-realization. These are the moments where, precisely through clashes with the unknown, the person dies to the old self and is born to a new self. From this perspective, the quest becomes a series of transformations, and each liminal moment becomes the grist for the mill of other similar transformations in the quest for wholeness.

The hero, and each of us, becomes separated from the ordinary flow of life with concomitant losses; in his struggle, he is betwixt and between, neither where he was and not yet what he will be; in his re-incorporation, he lets go of his former state and grows into a new one. In his crisis, the hero becomes aware of forces he cannot handle alone; in his struggle, he takes on the power of these other forces and incorporates them into his self; and finally, he returns to his community, a new self in a new relationship.

The two liminal moments are crucial: the first, when the hero commits himself to change his situation of existential need and, thus, permits new growth in the self; and the second, when the journey begins to reverse itself, that moment at which the task is finished, an insight attained, or a new power appropriated, and the hero begins the return with his gift for the community. These liminal moments are moments of grace, when the up-and-down, the now and then, the past and future come together, and the hero passes to a new stage of personal and human wholeness.

Both patterns of the heroic quest help individuals understand, appreciate, and consent to the human tasks in their own lives. Hidden in the adventures of the hero are the answers to life's questions, but none of these questions can be tackled until the individual is willing to undertake the quest. And there will always be stern tests before any concluding formula can be uttered. There are no automatic successes. Any victory must be dearly, rather than cheaply, won. Indeed, evil is a necessity in the hero's world, present under the aspect of terror and the imminence of defeat. There is no way to discount the reality of these risks and dangers or to guarantee the outcome before the very end. But the quest has to be undertaken, and there has to be a willingness to give of the self before a person can grow, before arriving at a "oneness" or reunion with all creation, with the spiralling self, and with the numinous forces active in each life. It is the giving of the self to the quest, the consent to the struggle, that opens up possibilities for a fuller life and a new relationship with the world.

Though we share in the hero's physical triumphs, their validity depends on the spiritual effects. Ultimately, the goal of the hero's quest, ours, is self-realization, a keener self-understanding that resolves our lives in new directions. The hero's quest corresponds to our subjective experience of life. In relating it, we do not escape to a world of fantasy but to a world through which we begin to see our own world more clearly. By participating in the hero's struggles and triumphs, we probe our spiritual nature and come into contact with the mysterious other world of the human soul. We find strength for our own struggles, our sojourn through sorrow, our attempt to define the nature
of good and evil, the quest for meaning and happiness. We find courage to continue our quest to work well and love well and to meet the still greater challenges that run the full gamut of human existence.

Participating in the hero’s quest helps us in our movement from the consciousness to consent throughout lifetime, for example, in moving from the awareness of our sexuality to our consent to intimacy with another, from the consciousness of death to consent to our own mortality, from our first job to consent to our life’s work. Sharing the hero’s quest helps our maturation from concern for the self, to concern for the self and another, to concern for the community — the ever-expanding self and circle of concern.

The two heroic quest patterns provide another benefit for us by dramatizing the value of life-enhancing qualities in our journey from childhood to adulthood, from arrogance and foolishness to humility and wisdom. The Ramayana extolled duty, submission to divine will, and concern for proper social order. Other cultures or religious traditions might highlight the courage to undertake a risk, or to labor and struggle against monster forces for the benefit of society. Evident, too, is the joyful disposition of the hero, not a joy apart from sorrow, but a joy distilled from the experience of agonizing choices and painful awareness of the errors in human decision making. Occasionally, too, the hero will show sacrificial compassion: Jesus, for example, not only cooperated in the events leading to his death but to a large degree he engineered them, as if he were acting out a painful but urgent ritual. Ingenuity is another heroic virtue, a certain resourcefulness in escaping from danger or overcoming the villain, a mental agility as thrilling as his physical prowess.

Other life-enhancing qualities are manifested not as virtues in the hero, but as flaws to be avoided. For though we create heroes through whom we can vicariously live out our fantasies of glamorous living without hardship, we also inevitably find ways to knock our creations off the pedestal, to show their weakness, folly, and commonness. Good judgment, for example, is more important than physical strength (Heracles and Samson may have been strong, but their strength was as often a source of harm as of benefits). Modesty is more important than the hero’s idle boasting, which often precipitates struggles not related to the quest. Also, confidence and enthusiasm are more effective than reticence or reluctance (Moses was an effective prophet in spite of his threefold attempt to get out of the task of freeing the Jews from slavery under the Egyptian pharaoh).

To delve further into some of these life-enhancing qualities that the hero personifies, let us take a closer look at two more hero quests, one from the Greek tradition (Odysseus) and one out of the medieval Christian tradition (Parsifal and the quest for the Holy Grail).

**Odysseus**

Homer’s *Odyssey*, dating back at least as far as the 8th century B.C., is part of the universal heritage of humanity. More than an epic romance of high adventure, it exemplifies the heroic pattern and points to many of the heroic virtues that make human life admirable. Odysseus goes through the spiritual process of loss and growth (that is, the dying to the old self and the rebirth of the larger self) and as restorer of the kingdom at Ithaca, he incarnates the socially responsible self.

Odysseus embodies several qualities the Greeks admired. Though he was at first reluctant, even feigning madness to avoid sailing hundreds of miles away, he did commit himself to battle, all to vindicate the honor of a minor Greek prince whose wife had run off with an Asian nobleman. A wanderer, Odysseus met emergencies with a cool head and was able to survive hazards by his resourcefulness as much as by his strength. He survived the ten years of battle and the next ten years of wandering through strange seas by his self-reliance and confidence in his own powers against fate, by his cunning and by his courage. Indeed, as the willing instigator of the ruse of the wooden Trojan horse (with the aid of Athena), he was instrumental in ending the war.

He had several soldiers hide in the hollow belly of a great wooden horse. The next day the other Greek soldiers were gone, and this huge mysterious horse was sitting before Troy. The Greeks left behind a solitary soldier, who claimed that he had been destined to be a human sacrifice to the gods, but had managed to escape. He told the Trojans that the Greeks had left the horse in order to placate the angry goddess, but they secretly hoped that the Trojans would desecrate it, earning Athena’s hatred. His lies were convincing. In spite of Cassandra’s
warnings, the Trojans dragged the horse into the city gates to honor Athena. That night, the Greek soldiers crept out, let the rest of the army in, set the city on fire, and massacred the Trojan soldiers and citizens.

Having avenged the honor of Helen’s husband in the war at Troy, as told in the Iliad, Odysseus desired to return home. This is the crisis that precipitates the many struggles, the heroic tasks, that are recounted in the Odyssey. His journey is presented retrospectively as a long and painful return to his homeland, hindered several times by the insubordination or madness of his companions. When they forget their troubles by eating the lotus in the land of the Lotus Eaters, he was obliged to take them back to the boats as prisoners. On the island of Aeolus, they thought that the god’s wind bags were full of great treasures. Opening the bags, they let loose the evil winds that flung the fleet far from its goal.

Enticed by drugs and other seductions of the nymph Circe, the companions drank her wine and were transformed into pigs and imprisoned in a pigsty. Odysseus freed them with the help of a magic potion from Hermes but then succumbed to her charms and had to be roused from a long hedonistic sojourn by his homesick and impatient men. Again, on the island of the Sun, the companions destroyed the sun god’s cattle, thus incurring his curse and their own death, as they were subsequently destroyed in a great storm.

Three of Odysseus’s tasks merit special attention: his adventures with Cyclops, with Tiresias in the land of the dead, and with Calypso. The Cyclops were a race of monsters with one eye in the middle of their forehead. One of them, Polyphemus, entrapped Odysseus and his search party in a cave, threw the men against the wall, dashing their brains out, and ate two of them at each meal. Devising a plan of escape, Odysseus got the Cyclops drunk with wine. Odysseus then said: “You haven’t asked my name, but I’ll tell you anyway. My name is Nobody.” His men took a sharp pole, made it hot in a fire, and drove it into the huge eye which hissed in the heat. When the Cyclops cried out, his friends asked who was hurting him. He replied: ‘Nobody is hurting me.’ They hollered that if nobody was hurting him, there wasn’t much they could do about it.

The next morning, Odysseus and his men escaped by hanging underneath the Cyclops’s sheep as he let them out to pasture.

This episode was just one of many in which Odysseus would mask his identity and give fictitious accounts of himself. On his return to Ithaca, he put on the mask of a ragged old wanderer and told stories of how he was a fugitive killer, a prince down on his luck, a rich youth sold into slavery by his protectors, and a beggar whose former prosperity had taught him the difficulties of fortune.

When Odysseus had persuaded Circe to assist him to find his way home, she included in her sailing instructions a visit to the spirit of the prophet, Tiresias, in the Hyperborean region, the Land of the Dead. Having escaped her charmed circle, he wanted to find out how to appease the sea god Poseidon. But the visit was much more than that, for here he had a vision of his past and of his future. He talked with his mother and his dead soldier friends, Achilles and Agamemnon. Tiresias warned Odysseus that lawless and violent men had taken over his royal hall and were courting his wife Penelope, and that he would face additional difficulties on the sea before his return. The good news was that he would eventually arrive home. Thus reoriented in the Land of the Dead, Odysseus was not afraid to continue the rest of his tasks and struggles to return home.

Many more dangers had to be endured. Odysseus had to stuff his men’s ears with wax to pass the Sirens, those beautiful women whose voices lured travelers to their death on the rocks. He had to expose them to the narrow channel of Scylla (a six-headed monster) and Charybdis (a giant whirlpool that could have easily sunk the whole ship), only to be washed up eventually on the island of Calypso where he would remain a prisoner for seven years. Calypso, whose name means “concealer,” kept beguiling and coaxing him, hiding Ithaca and Penelope from his mind. A conflict of interest was apparent in Odysseus: He found the goddess both dreadful and fascinating, yet still retained his wish to return home. Though he was held captive by this fascination, he gradually came to realize that he was a mortal and could never live with an immortal goddess. Though he had encountered the divine Calypso, he opted for the mortal Penelope. Conscious of his own humanity, he consented to return to the human Penelope rather than spend an eternity with Calypso. Acknowledging the link between his mortal humanity and his sexuality, he consented to his humanity and was now ready for his return to Penelope.
Having undergone all his tasks, Odysseus is now ready for the return home. Leaving Calypso, he is again shipwrecked, washed ashore, and received warmly by the Phaeacians, who listen as he recounts all his trials. After being nursed back to health, he is transported, asleep, to the shore at Ithaca. In this way Odysseus reaches his much longed-for home without knowing it. On awakening he doesn’t recognize where he is, until Athena, the goddess of wisdom and his divine protectress, lifts the fog and shows him his homeland. Athena advises him that more than a hundred men have divided up his land and cattle and even want to force his wife to marry one of them. Though Penelope has put off the suitors by telling them to wait till she has finished weaving a garment (which she then secretly unravels at night), they have caught on to her ruse, and have forced her to choose. At Athena’s suggestion, Odysseus makes himself known to a few loyal servants and to his son Telemachus.

Athena’s plan calls for Odysseus to disguise himself as a beggar. The suitors commit outrages against this stranger, refusing courtesy and hospitality, and force him to undergo humiliations. Meanwhile, Penelope, forced to marry one of them, decides to have a contest. In an episode reminiscent of Rama and Sita, she will marry the man who succeeds in stringing Odysseus’s bow and shooting an arrow through a dozen ax handles. None are able to string the bow, much less shoot it. When the beggar Odysseus asks to try, the suitors object but Penelope says that she will merely give him a new coat and tunic if he succeeds. He performs this task effortlessly, and with the suitors still stunned, he begins killing them. Athena, disguised as a bird watching from the rafters, aids Odysseus by fending off the arrows. In a massacre, Odysseus and his faithful few kill the suitors. At last, Odysseus manifests his true identity publicly.

But this is not enough for Penelope, for she demands her own private test. Unlike Sita who first proved her innocence to Rama and then to the public, Odysseus first proves his identity publicly and then has to do it privately. Penelope had already put him to the test. In addition to the bow and arrow episode, she had casually asked him what her husband was wearing when he departed twenty years earlier, and he had described perfectly the robe she had woven for him.

But she still wasn’t convinced. Their son Telemachus is angry that his mother is so hard-hearted, but she tells him, “If he’s truly home, beyond all doubt we two shall know each other better than you or anyone. There are secret signs we know, we two.” She then tells her maid to make up the big bed in her room and drag it outside into the hall. Odysseus cries out that it is impossible to move that bed, for he had built it himself using an olive tree with its roots still in the ground. This is the proof she needs. Her knees tremble, for no one but Odysseus could know the secret of the marriage bed, of how Odysseus had built it and rendered it immobile. She throws her arms around him and weeps for joy. At last the return — to their blissful beginning — is complete.

Odysseus finishes his heroic trials and returns home, a larger self. In many quest myths, the hero assumes the throne of the kingdom and claims as his bride a wonderfully beautiful woman he has delivered from imprisonment to some adverse power. We saw this in the Ramayana. But Odysseus’s quest is different, for the feminine principle plays a much larger role in tempering his virility to make him a well-rounded person. His rite of passage is centered on one woman, his wife Penelope; it is guaranteed by the female goddess Athena who instills in him cleverness, endurance, and adaptability; and it is foiled along the way by the charms of the sorceress Circe and the nympha Calypso. For the success of his quest, he has to become conscious of and consent to the feminine side in himself.

Another element is needed, too, for the success of his heroic quest. Every path toward wholeness requires that persons strip themselves of their ordinary and habitual self in order to truly become a larger self. This transformation doesn’t occur without sacrifice, humiliation, and self-denial. Thus Odysseus is Nobody to the Cyclops, loses all sense of direction after visiting Circe, and has to visit the land of the dead (that is, he has to die to his smaller self) to get his bearings once again. At the beginning of his quest, his ships and men are loaded down with treasures; at the end, everything is stripped away, and he is cast ashore naked and exhausted.

At the beginning, he is an egocentric, aggressive warrior; at the end, he has a deepened awareness of the meaning of home and his return there. He has learned, both in his visit to the land of the dead and among the hospitable people of Phaeacia, the model of domestic and community values. And this is the boon he brings back to his own people: In the role he has to play,
ultimately, he returns to Ithaca to restore the kingdom and set up the democratic way of life (so prized by the Greeks). This way of life, energized by his responsive and responsible self, is the gift he shares with the community.

**Parsifal and the Holy Grail**

Just as Odysseus exemplifies Greek ideals and virtues and symbolizes the person who enlarges the self by losing it, so from a Christian point of view does the medieval hero, Parsifal, in his quest for the Holy Grail. There are as many interpretations of the meaning of this quest as there are versions of the story. It has been suggested that the earliest versions transmitted glimpses of an initiation ritual that blended Christian and pagan ideas, glimpses of a series of initiatory ventures in which the ritual question (“Whom does the Grail serve?”) permitted entrance into the sacred mysteries. It serves equally well as another example of the hero’s quest, with its attendant crisis, struggle, and return.

The general setting belongs to the cycle of myths of King Arthur and his knights. Full of high purpose, valor, and strength, they all must undergo trials to test their courage, power, and nobility before they can perform their great deeds. The knights all have flaws (such as pride, lust, rashness, vengefulness), but they rise above these faults in the contribution they bring to the kingdom. Concerning the Grail itself, a few knights do attain a partial vision — Galahad (the stainless virgin knight who would have nothing to do with women), as well as Gawain and Lancelot. In the German and French versions, which I will blend together, the hero is Parsifal, the “holy fool,” who represents the ordinary person’s search for the supreme mystery of life.

The young Parsifal is so dazzled by some knights who ride by that he desires to be a member of Arthur’s court. His mother dresses him in fool’s garb, hoping that he will be disillusioned with the world and return to her. But she cannot dissuade him and he pulls up roots. Early in his travels, Parsifal is befriended by a woman who sends him off in the opposite direction from Arthur’s court, for she fears that in his innocence he will lose his life in knightly combat. He finds his way to the castle of Gurnemans where he goes through training to become a knight. When the rough edges have been taken off and he has finished his training, he is given precise instructions that when he reaches the Grail Castle he must ask the question “Whom does the Grail serve?” Departing, he meets a woman, Blanche Fleur, who asks him to conquer the enemy besieging her castle. He spends the night with her, marries her, and then leaves her.

Continuing his travels, Parsifal comes upon a fisherman, the Wounded Fisher King, who tells him where to find the only lodging in the region. This hostel turns out to be the Grail Castle (also called “Monsalvesche”). The Fisher King presides over this Grail Castle, but he cannot touch the Grail nor be healed by it. He is wounded and his kingdom is a barren, infertile wasteland. This curse on the king and his kingdom can be removed, the court fool had prophesied, only when an “innocent fool” arrives in the court. Thus Parsifal arrives at the Grail Castle for the first time.

His first glimpse of the Grail comes when a procession of youths and maidens carry the object through the hall of the castle. The appearance of the “grail” (literally, a dish) produces a banquet. As it goes through the throng, each knight receives, miraculously, the meat and drink of his choice. Perhaps Parsifal is dazed by all the splendor, by the knights, by all the festivities. At any rate, he fails to ask the question. When he awakens the next morning, he finds that the people of the castle have all disappeared. Then the castle itself disappears, but not before his horse’s hooves hit the drawbridge.

When Parsifal first entered Arthur’s court, he made a damsel laugh — no small feat, since the woman hadn’t laughed in six years. As a reward, Parsifal is told that he can have the horse and armor, if he can get them, of the Red Knight who had stolen a chalice from Arthur. Parsifal seeks out and kills the Red Knight, piercing him through the eye and taking his armor. His brave adventures continue and he subdues many knights. The women he meets berate him for failing to ask the question when he was in the Grail Castle. Arthur sends out knights to search for him so that he can be properly honored, but he is reluctant to go back. After many years of killing, he sees the blood of some geese in the snow. In a trance-like state, he thinks of Blanche Fleur, the wife he left behind, and becomes melancholy. Soon after, a hideous damsel, a sorceress, confronts him and tells him everything he has done wrong — the knights he has slain, the damsels he has left weeping, the lands he has
devastated, the children he has orphaned. As the women before her, she tells Parsifal to search for the Grail Castle again, and this time to ask the right question.

His adventures continue, for a short while or a long while depending on which version we read, when one day he meets some pilgrims who ask him why he is bearing knight’s arms on Good Friday. He suddenly remembers what he has forgotten all these years and goes to a hermit for confession. The hermit absolves him and tells him to go immediately to the Grail Castle. This he does, and this time he quickly asks the question, “Whom does the Grail serve?” The reply is given, “The Grail serves the Grail King.” At this moment the Fisher King is healed immediately, and the wasteland and all its people can now live in peace and joy. Parsifal soon has the joy of being reunited with his wife, and they have a son, Lohengrin.

In spite of the considerable variations of detail in the different versions—the role of King Arthur and his court, the identity and relationship of the Fisher King and the Grail King, the timing of his slaying the Red Knight and his marriage to Blanche Fleur (or another), and the wording of the crucial question—the main outline of the heroic quest remains. There is the call to knighthood; the advice from the protective Gurnemans, the women, and the hermit; the threshold crossing at the drawbridge; the tasks of fighting knights and searching for the Grail; the return to the castle; and the boon of restoration of the wasteland.

Parsifal’s crisis is precipitated when he doesn’t recognize the importance of the Grail on his first visit. His task is to ask the question after he proves his fitness through his knightly adventures. And his return, with the boon of health and life to the king and his kingdom, occurs gradually, only after he realizes that knighthood is not enough, and that the answer is really within himself.

What really is the Grail? Though a “grail” was a large “dish” on which meat was served at banquet, the Grail has been considered variously as a cup of wine, a stone, a product of alchemy, a divine person. In any case, the Grail is beyond all earthly joy; it is the source of life, both physical and spiritual. Whatever it is, it is considered to be so profound and mysterious that people believed it worthwhile to spend their whole lives searching for it. Through a play on words, the “sang real” (Holy Grail) becomes the “sang real” (royal blood). In the medieval Christian milieu, the life-giving properties of blood are extended to include the cup in which it is carried. The Grail is to be found in the Grail Castle, “Monsalvesche” (the mountain of salvation), a castle that has to be earned. It is the reward for fulfillment of a quest, not something that a knight can blindly stumble into and fully understand. The Grail doesn’t exist in physical reality. It is a powerful inner reality, a mystical perception, a vision of beauty and connectedness. At the heart of mystery, where only a few can recognize its truth, the Grail is the symbol of the supreme spiritual value, attained not by renouncing the world or social custom, but by participation in the pulling of the heart. It is achieved only gradually through self-consistent action.

The Grail myth carries the insight that self-realization does not depend on external qualities such as wealth, position, or physical strength, but rather on private integrity and valor in pursuing great goals. Each of us is on our Grail quest, too, and this quest never truly ends, for it is the quest of seeking to become a fuller self, of penetrating the Grail of one’s own being. When Parsifal first comes upon the Grail Castle, he fails to ask the required question because he does not perceive it to be his responsibility. Virtues entailed in the question, “Whom does the Grail serve?” (and its variant “Uncle, what ails thee?”), such as compassion and serving the needs of others, are developed only after a search, only as we learn to turn from the truths we can see to those we cannot see. With our first Grail visit, often in the innocence of youth, we have a vision of our self as unique and very precious. But we can’t cope with or fully understand this experience, so we lose it. Much of our adult lives is the time between the two Grail visits, when we search for something that is within us all along.

When we become conscious of and consent to the reality that it is we who serve the Grail, then there is a paradoxical surprise in store: The Grail serves us. Beyond earthly joy, the Grail is the happiness that comes through serving others and healing their wounds. The Grail—happiness—comes when we no longer make it the goal of our lives, but rather seek happiness of others. If we ask the Grail to make us happy, we preclude happiness; if we serve the Grail and the Grail King, we will be flooded with happiness.
In the Christian context of the myth, serving the Grail is doing what God does — healing and serving, forgiving and loving. Failure to recognize this spiritual truth means expulsion from the castle, and the search has to begin again. But the lost Grail can be found again, and the afflicted wasteland can blossom anew. That makes the search worthwhile.

The Archetypal Quest

Mythic heroes embody the accepted culture traits and the collective achievement of the religious tradition. Thus, for example, the Hindu hero Rama exemplified the ideals of duty and destiny, Odysseus reminded the Greeks of the virtues of a democratic society, and Parsifal recalled the virtues of compassion and service. In the intuitive vision of the world and life that they represent, we see that the individual and society are not in conflict but require each other. That is, the significance of the hero’s quest is not in pulling up his imperial self but in spiraling the self into a greater self by bringing a boon to the community. The gift he brings to the community affects his own wholeness. His heroic accomplishments are realized at the cost of his symbolic death: a dissolution of his childish innocence and selfishness and a gradual rebirth into a new world of interdependence.

The adventure elements in the hero’s quest — destroying cities, conquering demons, and slaying monsters — serve only a subordinate function. It is the inner component that brings about genuine change and makes the hero’s story a valid paradigm for others. That is why the heroes we looked at in this chapter are more than just cultural heroes; they are archetypal. They reflect and symbolize the essential developments and real conditions of every human’s existence. They are bigger-than-life figures around whom people of all religious traditions can weave their growth. Through cycles of life and death, good and evil, temptation and intrigue, weakness and innocence, despair and guidance, the myths of these heroes can help every individual achieve harmonious growth as they gradually become aware of the unseen real spiritual world.

The hero myths may not be true stories, but they are not unreal. They are the story of each human soul. They tell us that every path leading toward spiritual wholeness requires that we strip ourselves of our ordinary self in order to become a religious self. Our personal quests for self-realization are heroic to the extent that we attend to the crucial process of crisis, struggle, and return, to the rounds of destruction and re-creation that occur at graced moments throughout our lives. And the quests are successful to the extent that we assume a public destiny and are involved in the fulfillment of all humanity rather than merely our own personal self-fulfillment.

Review Questions

1. Describe the crisis, struggle, and return of the hero Rama.
2. What are the major stages in the heroic monomyth as described by Campbell?
3. Explain: The heroic quest pattern dramatizes the value of life-enhancing qualities.
4. What is the mythic significance of Odysseus’s adventures with Cyclops, his visit to Tiresias, and his stay with Calypso?
5. What is the significance of the Holy Grail?
6. Explain: “Much of our adult lives is the time between the two Grail visits.” What is the difference between the two Grail visits?
7. The Parsifal-Holy Grail myth has been called “The Christian myth of the Middle Ages.” Show how the answer to the question “Whom does the Grail serve?” summarizes the “truth” of Christianity.

Discussion Starters

1. “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the problem is to change it.” (Karl Marx)
2. "Whether I win or lose is not important, only that I follow the quest . . . the effort remains sublime." (Don Quixote)

3. "Man does not always win his quests. Sometimes the hero loses because he is too weak and the task must wait for a stronger man. But sometimes the task itself may be too great. Throughout history man has been very sensitive to his limits and to the differences between himself and his god. Only in the past fifty years has man begun to feel that his only limit is himself." (Barbara Stanford)

4. "The end of life is now not so terribly far away — you can see it the way you see the finish line when you come into the stretch — and your mind says, 'Have I worked enough? Have I eaten enough? Have I loved enough?' All of these, of course, are the foundation of man's greatest curse, and perhaps his greatest glory. 'What has my life meant so far, and what can it mean in the time left to me?' And now we are coming to the wicked, poisoned dart: 'What have I contributed to the Great Ledger? What am I worth?'" (John Steinbeck)

5. St. Paul's hymn in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians is an account of the paschal journey, or hero's quest, of Jesus. Describe the various stages of that quest.

6. "Life is death for those who do not have adventure. Adventure comes to those who are willing to take chances and daring enough to take the risk." (Prince, the musician)

7. "Odysseus heading into the Atlantic was going in the wrong direction, but his errancy was what taught him to value what he eventually found."

8. If you could meet one of the heroes of the classical traditions, which one would you choose? Why? What would you like to ask him? What advice would you give?

9. Have your heroes and villains switched places over the years? Why?

10. What movie and TV characters today remind you of the heroes in this chapter?

CHAPTER NINE

THE GENTLE HERO

Up to this point we have studied the heroic myths as masculine quests. We have overlooked the roles of the women, although the stories, especially in the Ramayana and the Odyssey (and to a lesser extent the Grail myth), are as much Sita's and Penelope's as Rama's and Odysseus's. When Rama sees Sita for the first time after her abduction, he is overcome by a combination of joy, sorrow, and anger. This is natural, but it is difficult to appreciate his harsh expressions in sending her away because he finds it difficult to believe that she could have preserved her purity while in the demon Ravana's bondage. On this occasion, as on others, Sita displays remarkable calm, dignity, and courage. After telling him in plain language that it is unworthy of him to suspect her, she still prepares herself for the purificatory fire ordeal. Of course, she comes through this ordeal with honor. But her trials are not over. Having convinced him, she is still the subject of uncomplimentary remarks in the community. She is sent away again, though in the advanced stages of pregnancy. On this occasion, too, Sita rises to magnificent heights. Though sorrowful at this turn of events, she appreciates Rama's desire to respect the wishes of his subjects