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Joseph Campbell Mythology

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THE NEVERENDING HERO'S JOURNEY

Within each of us lies the longing for our own unique life journey or adventure, a longing that expresses itself through our fascination with myths and stories. The writer, lecturer, and mythologist Joseph Campbell spent most of his life interpreting this magic of myth and dissecting its value in the everyday experience. Humans appear to have an unconscious draw to fantasy “like moths caught in its allure”¹ of light and infinite space, as Campbell describes it that invokes an innate curiosity about the world we inhabit and its meaning.

“Myth” derives from the Greek word “mythos” for story and since ancient times has been seen on some level as false. With the ascendancy of rationality and the rise of the modern scientific worldview, this idea of falsity has become especially dominant. The Greek philosopher Plato was credited by many for coining the word “mythology,” even though interpretations of myth precede Plato, more than two thousand years ago while referring to stories that contained invented figures, or elaborate fiction that may or may not contain elements of truth. Davis points out myth touches us much deeper than intellect as it makes us who we are (Davis 17). Joseph Campbell² goes even further, by describing myth as the “living inspiration” for everyday life. He explains:

¹ Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 266.

² Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I.

Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries of science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.

For Campbell mythology wasn't just about stories but about using myths as a way to gain deep insight into our lives. In the *Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers he encourages us to see the connotation and not the denotation of what appears to be mythic fantasy. For Campbell, and now myself, myths represent a place and time where meaning and meaninglessness can co-exist. Myths possess numinosity and deep significance that can go unseen without a trained eye to help us discover a curiosity that has, in effect, "driven us from dark caves to the outermost edges of the universe" since the beginning of time.³

Cultures all over the world have myths and stories that inspire them and give significance to existence -- some of them even explaining its creation. In the United States today, for many people the most accessible and relevant mythology comes in the form of films such as *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Matrix*, and most recently *Avatar*. Campbell's work points to the similarities in all of these forms of myths by identifying a standard universal formula called the "Hero's Journey." The three main portions of this cyclical journey and rite of passage are separation, initiation, and. In this paper I will use the 1984 Warner Brothers' movie *The NeverEnding Story* as an example of the archetypal hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell.

The 92-minute film takes viewers on a journey with a young man, Bastian, who borrows a mysterious book drawing him into the enchanted world of Fantasia. A childlike warrior Atreyu is sent to save Fantasia from a dreaded "Nothing" threatening to devour the land and causing the "Childlike Empress" to be ill. Along the way Atreyu meets a host of characters including Morla

³ Davis, *Don't Know Much About Mythology*, 17.

the Ancient One, Gmork, and Falkor the luckdragon. He faces many trials and tribulations on his journey to find a cure for the Empress and help Fantasia. In the end, Atreyu's success depends upon Bastian who thought himself only a bystander or reader of the story.

As a child I watched the *The NeverEnding Story* for pure entertainment and wanted to be a brave warrior who rode luckdragons. Seeing it as an adult, more than 20 years later, I realize its inspiration value and now know I am the brave warrior Atreyu and have my own luckdragon. Joseph Campbell's teachings prompt us to view myths and fantasy as having a unique way of shedding light onto our own struggles and individual "hero's journeys" and this movie demonstrates it. The sacred narrative conveyed in the film has a spiritual power glowing with metaphors and the innocence of the "Childlike Empress." The story in particular fulfills the pedagogical function of myth by giving all who watch, or read the book, guidance and enrichment. It follows the hero's journey schema well with very pronounced phases of separation, initiation, and return.

Many of the metaphors present in *The Neverending Story* could be analyzed using to Carl Jung's theory of the archetypes and the collective unconscious. Campbell's work was greatly influenced by Jung. Both theorists' work inform the hero's journey model and *The Neverending Story's* message of creativity. In psychological terms, the hero's journey represents the process of coming to the realization of our "true self." In this case our "true selves" means the deeper identity that must be realized through the process of individuation by which the hero, representing the individual self, must undergo a disassociation from the old egoic identity and achieve a mastery of the instinct to become who we were meant to be. According to Jung⁴,

⁴ Jung, *The Basic Writings of C.J. Jung*, 200.

everyone's psyche possesses the same universal symbols, because each psyche is shaped by a larger collective unconscious mind that we all share with or without knowing of its being.

Jung's concept of the shadow represents the unknown aspects of the self. Each person has many shadows to overcome in their journey to the self and it takes strength to prevail:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. With a little self-criticism one can see through the shadow -- so far as its nature is personal.⁵

For Campbell, each hero's journey represents the individuation process through myth. *The Neverending Story* is about the individuation process through the character of Bastian, and his confrontation against his own Shadow with the help of a Wise Old Man and his own intuition.

The Separation/Departure phase begins the Hero's Journey and marks a time when things will never be the same -- a point of no return (although the full course of the journey demonstrates this isn't actually the case at all as the return marks the final phase). This experience and awakening of the self makes one feel separated from the mass, and possibly even from the self, as things change and a new reality emerges. A Call to Adventure initiates the journey through an inward call, persistent restlessness, or sometimes a transcendent accident.⁶ Some myths also include a Refusal of the Call representing the ego that is unwilling to respond, often out of a fear of survival and the unknown. In *The NeverEnding Story* the call initially seems to be refused in several instances, once with a stern talk between Bastian and his father

⁵ Jung, *Psyche; Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C.G. Jung*, 534.

⁶ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 42.

about “keeping both feet on the ground” and then again when bullies chase Bastian down an alley and into a garbage bin. He finds his way into a book store to hide and the rational manager in the form of a Wise Old Man warns him to stay with “safe books.” The young hero disregards his advice and takes the book warned against with a promise to return it.

The actual Call to Adventure occurs when Bastian opens the book and begins reading about the “Nothing” destroying Fantasia and with our introduction to Atreyu, the main character of the book. We are taken to the Ivory Tower, with a lotus-shaped top symbolizing enlightenment, where inhabitants have gathered in fear of the Nothing. The Nothing perhaps represents the dark, destructive power of the instinctual unconscious; the Ivory Tower might suggest a retreat into the safety of the intellectual and scholarly pursuits, and the lotus at the top the ultimate escape into enlightenment. The Child Warrior Atreyu arrives and the residents question his ability to perform the task because of his age. Often as adults and children we question our own capacity for success based on our age, for Bastian it seems the world he lives in wants him to grow up and quit being a child.

Supernatural Aid is used in the Hero’s Journey for guidance and wisdom and is also apparent during moments of surrender. The aid reminds us that although we are our own path we are not entirely on our own. Atreyu takes on the task of rescuing the Empress and Fantasia, and receives Supernatural Aid in the form of an amulet necklace, Orion. A protective male figure hands the Orion to guide and protect Atreyu, telling him with the pendant he speaks for the Empress.

The Crossing of the First Threshold occurs during the journey as the symbol of an instinctual power being confronted. The instinctual power, often represented by a wild anima., is

a threshold guardian that bars the way, indicating the ego's inability at that time to master the instinctual power of the unconscious. In *The Neverending Story*, a "Creature of Darkness" resembling a wolf symbolizes this power and makes its entrance into the story at the same time as Atreyu and begins chasing him. Wolves are associated with fierceness and the darker forces of evil⁷ and on a psychological level represent Atreyu's shadow following him as his hero's journey begins.

Perhaps the darkest part of the Hero's Journey takes place in the Belly of the Whale with a descent upon which the hero finds him or herself at a firm dividing line of first loss and pain followed by the desire to go back to normalcy. Psychologically it indicates that consciousness is engulfed by the unconscious; one is swallowed, falling to a world of darkness such that the rational will is utterly overpowered. Campbell describes this as a rebirthing process symbolized by the image of a worldwide womb and the swallowed one as something dying.⁸ The Descent into the Underworld brings forth something from the depths of the unconscious and involves a struggle with the instincts. In *The NeverEnding Story* Atreyu makes his way through the "Swamp of Sadness" to search for Morla the Ancient One to find answers for the Nothing and the Empress's illness. Here the water of his unconscious and quicksand make the situation seem hopeless and he experiences the first loss of his journey when his white horse Artex drowns. In ancient Buddhist texts white horses were considered sacred and symbolized purity and loyalty.⁹

⁷ Sheperd, *1000 Symbols*, 183.

⁸ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 74.

⁹ Sheperd, *1000 Symbols*, 191.

In this sense Artyu's purity drowns in sadness during his descent to the Underworld/unconscious.

After completing the initial Separation phase, the Hero's Journey continues with the Initiation and Transformation segment, which is the journey itself and challenges the hero to establish some sort of control of one's life and mind. During this "favorite phase" the hero embarks upon a Road of Trials and is covertly aided by advice, amulets, and other secret agents of the supernatural realm.¹⁰ Ultimately these tests serve as stepping stones in the process of mastery of oneself, and to adapt the ego consciously to a new way of being. Atreyu's Road of Trials contains a fantastical host of characters including Morla the Ancient One, being rescued by Falcor the luckdragon, gnomes, the Oracles of the First Gate, the Mirror Gate, the Rockbiter, and the Gmork. Rich imagery occurs during this part of the movie with the most notable being the Mirror Gate and the final slaying of the Gmork. Before reaching his final test Atreyu must pass through the Mirror Gate reflecting back his darkest side or Shadow, as a passing between the opposites. At the Mirror Gate Atreyu discovered Bastian, the young fearful boy, and Bastian sees Atreyu with his strength and confidence. He and Bastian faced each other and their duality at this obstacle.

A common test of power during the Road of Trials involves the slaying of some sort of demon. In this story when Atreyu kills the Gmork he slays his own Creature of Darkness. Before being killed, the Gmork says he is the servant behind the Nothing and tells Atreyu "People who have no hopes are easy to control. He who has control has the power." As Campbell would say, "the demon you swallow gives you its power. These statements also examines the idea behind

¹⁰ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 81.

true power and control of our instinctual nature. By killing the Gmork, Atreyu gains back his power and the control of overcoming his mind and ego/darkness. Once this power is mastered it is used by consciousness to continue to keep it under influence.

The next portion of the Initiation, the Meeting with the Goddess, shows the hero his/her opposite personified through someone of the opposite gender. Jung explains this opposite as an anima (in men) and the animus (in women) as the repression of certain traits of another gender to become repressed into our unconscious.¹¹ The Goddess in this function represents an ideal of wholeness and identification with the collective unconscious. It also holds life with childlike/angelic innocence. Here Atreyu meets the ill, nameless “Childlike Empress,” who informs him he must give her a new name (interpreted as an identity) to save her from the Nothing. The caveat being the name must come from a human child; Atreyu believes he has failed because he doesn’t know a human child. In this scene Bastian and Atreyu must come face to face with their non-duality and unify through some sort of amends.

The Atonement with the Father theme is that of the releasing of a dictatorship or being at one with the negative dark side depicted as the father. The negative father principle represents the dogma and moral imperative often through reprimanding by the father; it is “reflex of the victim’s own ego.”¹² In *The NeverEnding Story* Bastian must call out a new name for the Empress before Fantasia completely disappears. This emotional scene involves him running to an open window during a storm and screaming his mother’s name saying, “I will do what I dream.” The process of individuation is about coming into our own unique set of possibilities for

¹¹ Jung, *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, 201.

¹² Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 107.

our lives. This process of parts of us dying so that other parts can be birthed, creates an identity not associated with parents as we become separate from our identity associated with them. Individuation is an advanced process of transrational development. The hero myth has been applied here to understand the “growing up” process as the conscious ego’s struggle for identity and also the death-rebirth of the ego and realization of the self, as individuation. For Bastian the Atonement with the Father was actually making peace with his mother’s death that forced him to “grow-up” and live only with his somewhat Alpha male father who tells him to “keep both feet on the ground and stop dreaming.” Living under this kind of parental mode, Bastian needed the escape to Fantasia to bring him back to himself.

During Apotheosis the hero has become divine and can recognize his/her own unity with spirit making what was once two into one and reconciling the opposites created by gender and perceived duality. I believe the most memorable scene in *The Neverending Story* represents the Apotheosis. After Bastian yells his mothers name out the window the journey seems to have ended. Then a scene takes place in the dark except for a tiny, lit grain of sand (as the spark of consciousness) in the Empress’s hands and Bastian next to her. She says things always begin in the dark and clarifies that Fantasia arises in him and all of us through our wishes and dreams. Bastian wonders how many wishes he gets to which she replies, “The more wishes you make the more magnificent Fantasia becomes.” The message becomes clear that through our connection with the divine and “following our bliss” as Campbell’s adage goes we create world.

After the Apotheosis, the Ultimate Boon is the treasure at the center of the experience and the achievement of the goal or quest. Everything from the entire journey led to this point of

realization when the hero accomplishes the original task. Bastian's Ultimate Boon arises with the realization he does get as many wishes as he desires and it all lives inside of him.

Finally the Hero must undergo a return to the world from which he/she came. With the Refusal of the Return the adventurer returns to life with the treasure with hesitancy, reluctant to leave behind the magical world of the adventure. The hero may not want to return now that he/she has experienced enlightenment and bliss has ensued. There may be doubt or uncertainty where boon be celebrated and how spark of consciousness can be reignited. Bastian's hesitancy to return happens with the Empress when he doesn't know what to wish for or where to begin.

After the Refusal and upon the Return the journey contains the Magic Flight and the hero is supported by the new powers. The hero or heroine must sometimes escape with the boon to get back to the origination. The return from Fantasia in *The NeverEnding Story* doesn't have much of an escape mentality to it when Bastian appears on Falcor overlooking Fantasia and commenting, "It's as if nothing every happened." In fact it's as if the "Nothing" and "nothing" has happened and yet somehow the world is transformed.

The Rescue from Without assists the hero on the return in case they have become weakened or uncertain about what to do next. "For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state."¹³ The hero is liberated by another force and the self and attention is forced out of the mythic world with assistance. Falcor the luckdragon serves as this assistance during Atreyu and Bastian's the Rescue from Without,

¹³ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 178.

guiding Bastian back to his city where he came and scaring away bullies in the process. In metaphorical terms, nothing chases Bastian away and instead he chases his own bullies and fears.

In the Crossing of the Return Threshold the two worlds are actually one and normal waking consciousness becomes remembered. Now the hero must integrate the knowledge received into human life and reengage with the human reality –giving up blissful attainment. In *The Neverending Story* the last line of the film implies both the Master of both worlds and the Crossing of the Return Threshold. The Master of Both Worlds now the hero as a cosmic dancer free to move between the worlds of conscious and unconscious. Freedom to go back and forth didn't exist before and a balance of between the material and spiritual worlds. Riding Falcor and in his town able to make wishes with his own creativity.

The Mastery of Both Worlds leads to freedom from the fear of death, which in turn is the Freedom to Live. It could be expressed as living in the moment without thoughts of the future or regretting the past. In *The NeverEnding Story* the final scene of a city pans out as the narrator tells us “Bastian made many other wishes and had many amazing adventures before returning to the ordinary world.” Here implies he did eventually full return, but the Freedom to Live didn't capture him right away.

The NeverEnding Story does actually end! It challenges us to keep it neverending through our own imaginations, whether it is through relearning to “read again their symbolic language”¹⁴ or become re-enchanted with myth through the fulfillment of our own Hero's Journey. In relearning metaphors, we unite with parts of ourselves we forgot about long ago, or in some

¹⁴ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, xii.

cases didn't know existed. We see ourselves as our own luckdragon, childlike empress, Old Man, and also the fearless warrior Atreyu.

When we perceive life as hero's myth (and in this case a neverending one) it sustains us and brings forth a deeper way of relating to ourselves and others. Just as Bastian had the courage to activate his adventure, so must we. When the "Nothing" seems to pervade, or our hopes and dreams shatter it becomes even more important that we unearth the true nature of ourself. To embark once again on our own neverending Hero's Journey through which we come to appreciate our own path without being alone. In each of us resides a Falcor guiding us through the midst of the neverending eternity. It knows how to understand the unspoken symbols signs. It is mysterious, like luck and the luckdragon, and when befriended and not frightened of becomes our ally in our journey to fulfillment, peace, and the following of our bliss.

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