

In Search of Harmony: Becoming Your Own Hero at Work

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Chapter 1

The Hero's Journey

Heroes take journeys, confront dragons, and discover the treasure of their true selves.

—Carol Pearson

A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.

—Joseph Campbell

I have strongly identified with “victims” because I have often felt like one. In my childhood, the feeling was legitimate—I *was* powerless in dealing with most of the difficulties which I encountered. I did not have many options except to take it. As an adult, when I believed I had the power to do something about the mistreatment encountered in life, it often took little to bring my buried feelings of anger and sometimes rage to the surface. Consequently, I have jousting at many windmills in my defense of the “defenseless”—more often than not, stabbing myself in the foot in the process. Also, by exercising my individuality and resisting a system of pretense, I have disturbed the “peace” that comes with being willing to “live within the lie” of the false reality of the workplace. I have learned the distinction between real heroes, real victims, and false ones:

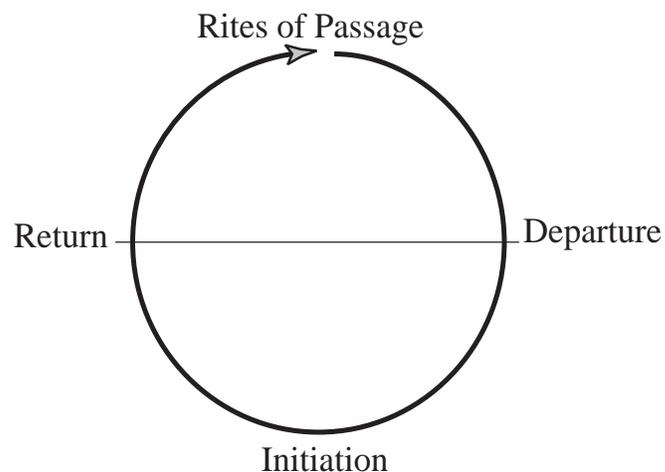
Model of True/False Hero and Victim

	True	False
Victims	Individuals who are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or intellectually handicapped by the unrighteous dominion, coercion, control, violence, and abuse inflicted upon them.	Individuals who use their handicaps as excuses to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — demand entitlements. — avoid personal change. — vent their rage and anger. — manipulate and control others.
Heroes	Individuals who turn their weaknesses into strengths through self-control, positive mental attitude, discipline, and inner integrity (or spiritual life). Then they forgive their victimizers and try to help them through compassion, setting boundaries, open dialogue, and bonds of reciprocity.	Individuals who turn their strengths into weaknesses by trying to justify and legitimize the use of power outside of the bonds and controls of compassion, mutual reciprocity, open dialogue, and personal integrity. Outside of these bounds, power becomes a destructive and dysfunctional force on everyone involved with it because it enables their unrighteous lusts and desires.

When we assume the roles of false hero or false victim we unwittingly produced the very thing we most deplore. Real heroes focus their energy on making merciful judgments concerning the difficulties inherent in their worklife. Unforgiving judgments of others and ourselves (even if only mental) diminish self-worth, invoking a chain of retribution and self-defeating reactions—all of which reduce our ability to fulfill our unique purposes in life. Taking sides in disputes unconsciously separates us even from those we are trying to help; we fail to recognize that victims also victimize even when there are *legitimate* reasons for disagreement. By jumping too quickly to the defense of others, we sometimes naively communicate the message, “You can't really take care of yourself,” thus eroding self-confidence and reinforcing dependency. On the opposite end of the spectrum, as idealists needing to believe that people will be “good” if we just try harder to be “good” ourselves, we deny or ignore information vital to self-protection and survival, naively walking into one ambush after another.

Real heroes learn there are traps and detours, paradoxes and dilemmas all along the way. Heroes learn how to manage the delicate balances in relationships, not helping too much or too little, to take a stand without becoming alienated or alienating. They understand how to ask the right questions: Am I a part of the problem? Is the solution worse than the problem? Is the battle worth the price? Do I have the power and influence to positively change things when the stakes are high and the problem really matters? Or, will I become too marginal to make much of a difference in the minds of my organization's power holders? When is moral indignation degenerating into self-righteousness? Am I being a true hero or a false hero who merely has the conceit to judge others and play God?

The world is built upon the courage of men and women who prevail in spite of suffering of every kind, giving hope to all who follow. Throughout history in every known culture, the plight of the hero is the same. The hero separates from protective innocence, departs on a journey into the unknown, encounters a period of chastening, and returns to bestow blessings upon his or her fellowman. Even in our dreams, we see these same patterns of *Departure*, *Initiation*, and *Return*.



In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell's seminal study of the mythological and spiritual connections of the journey of the hero, Campbell traces the rites of passage of the hero's journey from childlike naivete to the wisdom of adulthood: "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 [blessings] on his fellow man."¹

Lacking worldliness and sophistication, the hero in embryo detaches from the safety of the status quo, the safe way, stepping onto the “road of trials,” where he or she battles past personal and historical limitations. Painfully, the hero recognizes that “All serious daring starts within.”² She embarks on a journey to the center of the soul, identifying and conquering the reckless reactions that lead to destruction and defeat. The hero embraces the superhuman or godly powers that lie within and discovers the nature of her true self.

During the journey, among the most wonderful discoveries awaiting the hero is that she is not alone: “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; where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world.”³

Relieved and satisfied with victory, the hero is tempted to withdraw from the world with his newfound wisdom. But the hero battles onward to complete the journey by sharing with others what he has learned: the journey is incomplete until the knowledge is passed on for the benefit of mankind. With this passing of knowledge and support, the hero comes full circle, at last enjoying harmony with himself and others. Then, a new journey begins.

Heroism is not a formula, it is a process to



*Be the change we want to see in the world.*⁴

Heroes give their all to something bigger than themselves. They blaze through history enduring well the surprises of life. “Heroes take journeys, confront dragons, and discover the treasure of their true selves.”⁵

This process of sorting out the truths about ourselves—defining who and what we are—can occur only within an organizational context: the workplace, the church, the school, the family, the community. The dynamic tension between the individual and organization provides opportunity and challenge against which to form and test our character, thus generating a high probability of troublesome outcomes. Indeed, we don’t need a tensionless state at work or any place else, but rather the commitment to struggle toward some goal worthy of ourselves. Real heroes learn to

accept adversity and suffering at work (though certainly t exploration of who and what we are. This is the nature of organizational life.not to like it!) as a necessary and normal part of the human condition, requiring the deepest exploration of who and what we are. This the nature of organizational life.

Using Campbell's focus on mythology, through the Frog Prince fairy tale we can examine how the hero may be called to adventure:

Long long ago, when wishing still could lead to something, there lived a king whose daughters all were beautiful, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, who had seen so many things, simply marveled every time it shone on her face. Now close to the castle of this king was a great dark forest, and in the forest under an old lime tree a spring, and when the day was very hot, the king's child would go out into the wood and sit on the edge of the cool spring. And to pass the time she would take a golden ball, toss it up and catch it; and this was her favorite plaything.

Now it so happened one day that the golden ball of the princess did not fall into the little hand lifted into the air, but passed it, bounced on the ground, and rolled directly into the water. The princess followed it with her eyes, but the ball disappeared; and the spring was deep, so deep that the bottom could not be seen. Thereupon she began to cry, and her crying became louder and louder, and she was unable to find consolation. And while she was lamenting in this way, she heard someone call to her: "What is the matter, Princess? You are crying so hard, a stone would be forced to pity you." She looked around to see where the voice had come from, and there she beheld a frog, holding its fat, ugly head out of the water. "Oh, it's you, old Water Plopper," she said. "I am crying over my golden ball, which has fallen into the spring."

"Be calm; don't cry," answered the frog. "I can surely be of assistance. But what will you give me if I fetch your toy for you?"

"Whatever you would like to have, dear frog," she said; "my clothes, my pearls and jewels, even the golden crown that I wear."

The frog replied, "Your clothes, your pearls and jewels, and your golden crown, I do not want; but if you will care for me and let me be your companion and playmate, let me sit beside you at your little table, eat from your little golden plate, drink from your little cup, sleep in your little bed: if you will promise me that, I will go straight down and fetch your golden ball."

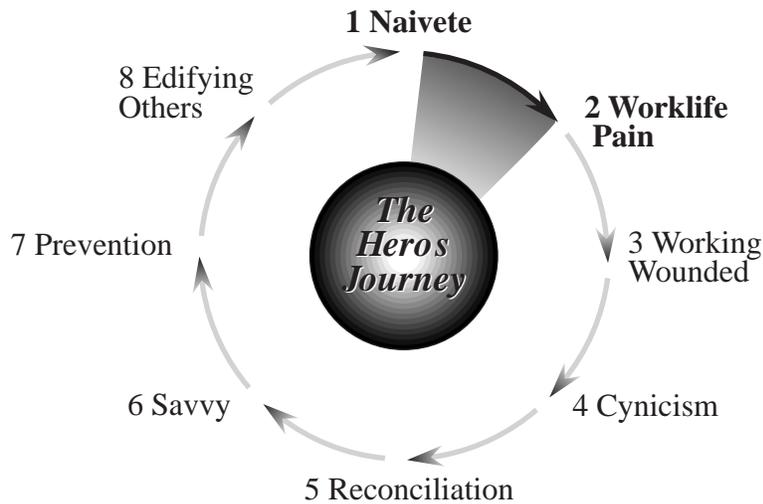
"All right" she said. "I promise you anything you want, if you will only bring me back the ball." But she thought: "How that simple frog chatters! There he sits in the water with his own kind, and could never be the companion of a human being."

As soon as the frog had obtained her promise, he ducked his head and sank, and after a little while came swimming up again; he had the ball in his mouth, and tossed it on the grass. The princess was elated when she saw her pretty toy. She picked it up and scampered away. "Wait, wait," called the frog, "take me along; I can't run

like you.” But, what good did it do, though he croaked after her as loudly as he could? She paid not the slightest heed, but hurried home, and soon had completely forgotten the poor frog—who must have hopped back again into his spring.⁶

Like the frog, in relationships at work we start out innocent, full of wonder, excitement, and hope. We have “uninformed optimism.” We want to be accepted and appreciated. Princesses at work make promises to us, giving hope for improving our lives. Feeling invincible, frog workers make errors in judgment and dive into the dark pool to complete their tasks at considerable effort and sacrifice only to end up betrayed, hurt, humiliated, and disillusioned. In a heartbeat, a blunder or betrayal—something quite unexpected—shatters our dreams, forcing us on to the road of trials. We believe, we blunder, we betray our values and the true nature of our personal destiny.

The Hero’s Journey is a healing journey—a dynamic process involving eight different stages. The first stage is shown:



The workplace provides dozens of

similar opportunities each day to become a victim to be rescued or to develop the hero within. Organizations are by their very nature chaotic, confusing, and paradoxical. They are despairing depots and promising portals for a journey to the center of the soul. Our challenges and abilities to cope with them are as unique as each of our fingerprints. Some of us move through these challenges with ease—we travel through the hero’s journey in a dynamic but fluid manner. Hurt and disappointment are minor disruptions. For others, the journey is more distressing, moving

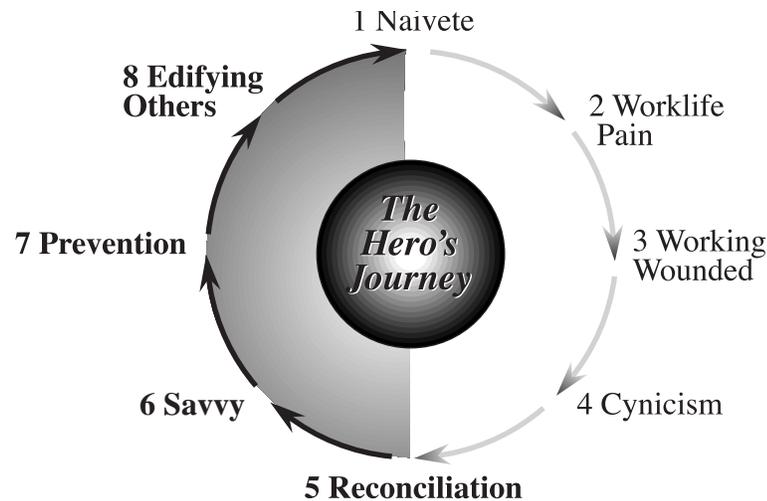
erratically through the different stages and sometimes getting stuck altogether. The fateful call to adventure at work represents both hope and fear, the promise of treasure and peril. The choice is ours: will we awaken the self to discover the hero within or will we choose the destructive, self-limiting responses of the past?

Called to action, our first response is often shock, confusion, and hurt: “What shall I make of it?” “What does this mean about me?” “What should I do about it?” “Maybe it did not happen at all.” Needing to reduce the lack of agreement between what we *expected* to happen and what *really* happened, we have a choice to make: (1) force the situation to fit what we think and feel or (2) change ourselves to fit the situation. It is much easier to make the situation fit our belief system than to change our own values and assumptions. Hence, we often express our hurt and feelings of betrayal through disloyalty to our best self—blaming others for the violation. Sometimes we turn our anger inward, feeling unhealthy shame and guilt. Feeling powerless to change things for the better, disillusioned and discouraged, we become victims. Without reconciliation, we come to expect that things are just “bad around here” and respond by being cynical and indifferent, limiting our contribution for personal and organizational growth.



To detach from the world, we must see the world anew. Learning to work through different stages of adjustment, real heroes learn not to be deceived by the obvious; they move through the complete journey encountered at work. Instead of getting and staying stuck in the self-defeating and self-perpetuating stages in the right-hand side of the cycle, they force themselves to reconcile their losses and focus their energies in the stages following the reconciliation; they learn to predict and to

prevent adversity and organizational pain. Heroes change the workplace and the world one person at a time by changing themselves and then by helping and edifying others:



Becoming your own hero is an arduous lifelong spiritual journey, unpopular with the fainthearted, impatient, and self-centered. The journey is *not* about completing checklists of things to do assuming all will be fine. A quick look at the abundance of self-help literature in any bookstore will convince even the novice that the “quick fixes” actually are anything but, often leading to more disillusionment and increased despair in the long run. If we could only *do* what we already *know* to do! While most of us are somewhat deficient in skills in how to behave at work, we are more deficient in how to analyze and understand what is happening. As a woman said, “I find myself bleeding at every pore, but I don’t know where the blood is coming from.”

Endnotes

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1948), 30.
2. Eudora Welty, quoted in *Words of Courage*, edited by Helen Exley (New York: Exley Publications, 1997).
- 3.3. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 25.
4. Mahatma Gandhi, *Words of Wisdom*, edited by Helen Exley (New York and Watford, UK: Exley Publications, 1997).
5. Carol Pearson, *The Hero Within* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 1.
6. "The Frog King," Grimms' Fairy Tales, quoted in Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 49.