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### Re-Visioning the Heroes Journey: A Story of Something Old, Something New

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# Re-Visioning the Heroes Journey: A Story of Something Old, Something New

2014-11-24 08:11:44 Ginger Grant

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## Summary



Ginger Grant

Whether they admit it or not, our organizations are in trouble and face an uncertain future. The world in which they operate is changing rapidly and fundamentally yet the majority of our current organizational leaders continue to be command-control driven and to operate in much the same way as they have done since taken the helm. Paradoxically, this organizational vulnerability is also occurring at a time when generational diversity has the potential to exert the greatest influence over the course of an organization's development and generate the leadership so needed to help it weather the storms ahead.

In order to adapt to the realities of a globally networked economy and meet the rising expectations of consumers, both internal and external, leaders must grasp the opportunities afforded by technology and the insights of modern science to re-think their role and practice at the most fundamental level. Forty years have passed since Argyris and Schön offered new insights in personal and organizational competencies in their text, *Theory in Practice* (1974). One of the primary implications in the text was that organizational learning begins with the self, with the individual. Organizational change must start first with the leader, not with some external group that the leader directs. In other words, leaders must learn that change starts from the inside out – and that means personal change before organizational change. This learning involves more than mastering technical skills – it requires a fundamental shift in orientation from product-centric promotion to customer-led involvement that impacts all aspects of leadership and management. Forty years later, this is a major cultural shift that many organizations have still to address, let alone implement.

According to Confucius, today's leaders are cursed by living in such interesting times and, seemingly, bouncing from one unforeseen crisis to another. Yet within each crisis, opportunities abound. In fact the Chinese ideogram for the word crisis is composed of two characters: one meaning danger and the other opportunity. Our leaders increasingly find themselves walking along the razor's edge of paradox: knowing they need to move away from the familiar and unpredictable (from order), while being simultaneously attracted and repelled by the unpredictable and new (towards chaos). It feels very uncomfortable. And so it should. For it is on the razor sharp boundary that separates order and chaos that creativity is ignited and new more adaptable forms can emerge.

As our leaders prepare to meet an uncertain future, I suggest an ancient tool that can be used to ensure that the people within the organization fully understand the core ideology of the organization (Grant, 2005, 2014). Leaders must return to an ancient role that can be made new again – the role of explorers and adventurers. There are no charts or checklists and precious few "best practices" for the pioneers of today. But a map for this type of transformational journey is available and it is a map that crosses all cultural and demographic barriers. It is this map that we use as a methodology for first personal and then organizational change, thereby combining the wisdom of the ages with the fresh lens of current events. The role of the explorer has been an active and open job description for many centuries. When a people,

or culture, or organization can look down the road into the future and realize that a course correction is required, the role of the explorer is to change the ending of the story. Such an exploration throughout the ages has been called a “hero’s journey” and the tales of such journeys have been told throughout time by storytellers.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell believed that there was a monomyth that crossed all cultural barriers, all age groups, gender, and race and described this role in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968). He made his views on mythology and the Hero’s Journey popular with the general public in the PBS *Power of Myth* series hosted by Bill Moyers, aired in the late 1980s just before Campbell’s death.

Campbell claimed that the story of the hero is as old as time itself, understanding that the story of the hero is one that all individuals follow, aware or not. The Heroic Path can and does mirror a life. Whether Campbell’s body of work is considered scholarly or not is debated; I will make no claim here as to its scholarly value. Campbell termed the Hero’s Journey a monomyth, a term he borrowed from author James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*. My interest in Campbell’s work is a practical one, for I have found no other model that provides such easy access to the world of mythological systems. Using the Heroic Journey as a life-stage model resonates with every individual in an organizational setting, regardless of age or race. Whether or not Campbell’s concept of a monomyth is accurate, I have yet to find an individual that does not recognize and, more importantly, is able to personally identify and connect with this journey. The Heroic Journey provides a common language easily accessible to all. Campbell offers us the insight that regardless of the sphere of interest, creative acts represent a death/rebirth motif. Motifs give us a reference point that demarks both ancient wisdom and future trends by constantly referencing the human spirit in all its aspirations. The universal adventure to which Campbell refers provides a map of the territory of the Heroic Journey. As such, it provides an entry into the world of corporate life and, indeed, can be used to parallel the existence of the organization as well as the individual. Many business books have been written that utilize the idea of the Hero, but most play at a superficial level, failing to address the power of the archetype itself.

To use a depth or archetypal psychological approach to organizational culture necessitates deepening our view in order to access the *archai*, or the first principles of the organization. Those first principles come from the individuals who founded or gave birth to the organization. The map of the Heroic Journey can be used as a way of exploring the associations made by individuals that will, in turn, help reiterate and further clarify and identify those foundational beliefs.

Recognizing that myth is both current and past allows for one to develop the myth as a vehicle toward the future. Using or employing a mythic approach can help identify what myths or belief systems are being lived by members of an organization. Easy to say, but how to start? In his classes on mythology at Sarah Lawrence, Campbell advised his students to follow their bliss in order to reach that unquenched source. Not in the sense of a drugged-out state or a Pollyanna-like feel good group-hug, but in the sense to follow the deepest desire within that drives a life forward into the unknown. No individual lives the life originally planned, for life itself intervenes. Each individual will experience loss of some kind in life and will be forced to come to terms with that loss. To have passion for something or someone denotes previous suffering; the word *passion*, borrowed from Old French and Middle English, means to suffer or endure loss. It is only through such losses that passions become evident, become clear. To “follow your bliss,” as directed by Campbell, means to follow lived passion, to heed the knowledge so dearly paid for through suffering and loss. Campbell suggests that the Hero can be one who is either appreciated by society or one who is mocked. In either case the Hero finds that the symbols or images currently available are not working. The composite Hero hidden without our organizations is a personage of exceptional gifts. But the vision that he or she sees for the future is usually hidden from others. To point to something that is not easily visible to another is to risk ridicule, which may explain why our organizations tend to hold individuals who cannot speak.

To “follow your bliss” is a path where an individual speaks his or her truth, an ability that is a gift in itself. Jung called this authentic voice “individuation,” the courage to be one’s self. The concept of individuation plays a large role in our psychology. In general, it is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual ... as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology. Individuation, therefore is a process of *differentiation* ... having for its goal the development of the individual personality (Jung, CW6: 757). Such an act is sometimes dangerous in an organizational setting if the individual harbors a different belief than a more senior member of the group or the collective group. To claim an authentic voice is to claim the role of the leader, even for an instant. To choose to serve personal belief or core values rather than enhance personal

career goals in the face of opposition is to embark on a Hero's Journey. There is no return without consequence, either to career or personal core value system.

### *The Structure of the Heroic Adventure*

Campbell's original map is divided into five sections: innocence, the call, initiation, ordeal, reflection, and celebration. I have added another two: telling the story and re-visioning. The basic story of an individual can be described and documented through these components and through the process. The individual first learns to work with his or her own story before attempting to map the journey for a larger group or entire organization. To begin the story, the leader needs to establish the background of the hero and the conditions under which the budding hero began. Then, there is a threat or challenge to the hero; this is the call to adventure. The hero may be tricked or lured into a new path, refuse the call entirely or enter the adventure voluntarily. The demand being made is for the hero to embark on a quest – a sacred journey that is transformative. Mythic tradition states that our hero will receive advice from mentor(s) on the path and also be challenged by threshold guardians, those who will block the way forward. This is the initiation of the hero into a new ways of being and involves a descent into the unknown. Through trial and error, the hero will advance deeper into the journey and will encounter supreme tests that cost 'everything'. This is the ordeal phase of the journey and the hero will confront his or her opponent or shadow self. After several difficult confrontations, the hero may fail and death could be the result. There are no guarantees for those brave enough to attempt the journey. If victorious, the hero must return home and communicate his or her insights into the adventure to the community so that the community may grow and prosper. Many difficulties still present themselves on the road to return and the hero is once again transformed by the experience, returning to the death and rebirth motif. The community may or may not accept the gifts from the hero; this may precipitate yet another adventure. And the cycle continues.

It is necessary to claim the power to choose to undertake this type of leadership journey. Such an act involves risk, as the individual becomes vulnerable to loss. The choice might be refused. The choice may be ridiculed. But, if the choice is not made, a deeper loss may be sustained. To live an inauthentic life means never to stand fast in personal beliefs or in a coherent value system and instead choose personal or organizational safety over individuality. Thus the importance of the Heroic Journey – it provides a visual image for the territory of choice towards individuation and the foundation by which an organization creates a sustainable brand. The journey provides the experience necessary to brand from the inside out.

I examine in more detail the stages first articulated by Campbell, as steps that will be useful in promoting clearer communication in an atmosphere of change. Most importantly, these stages provide a clear visual map or image that can act as a container for tacit knowledge, which, as stated above, are the stories that best represent both the soul of the individual and the soul of the organization on the path to individuation, the authentic Self.

### **Innocence/Threshold**

This is the place of beginnings. A decision has been made to change aspects of a career or to change aspects of the organization. In either case, the traditional way of being is to shift. Such a change may be freely chosen or imposed. It may come as a result of a merger of two organizations where two cultures must combine; it may be a personal promotion or failure, or it may be a change in circumstance in one's personal life, such as marriage or divorce, or an illness or death of someone close to the individual. Campbell suggested that we turn to the mythologies of past civilizations for guidance to suggest that such aid is available to all who seek it:

When we turn now [ . . . ] to consider the numerous strange rituals that have been reported from the primitive tribes and great civilizations of the past, it becomes apparent that the purpose and actual effort of these was to conduct people across the difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life (1968, pg. 10).

Such a demand for change may come from what Campbell termed a "Call." Whether such a call is answered or not, the old way of being is to be forcibly bent to a new circumstance.

### **The Call**

To follow this map of the Hero consciously means to view individual circumstance from a mythic perspective. Campbell suggests that a death is required:

But whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings us the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand (1968, pg. 51).

There is no guarantee that a “call” is a pleasant situation; indeed, most “calls” result from a perceived or actual loss. As the call “rings us the curtain,” it serves as the beginning of the transformational journey. Depending on the circumstances in one’s life, this call may occur not just once but many times. Death and rebirth may become a repetitive theme. As a result of this circumstance the world has changed and a demand placed on the individual to change with it. The individual must claim his or her own story as well as the right to live it. To seek others who share commitment and common beliefs provides a group of allies for the new and unknown journey. In a corporation, such a shared story can be considered the rock-solid foundation of the organization and the essence of its corporate brand. To lose this living link to the story is to lose the ability to choose, or in sequence, to change. A spiritual journey is called for, beliefs will be tested and fear will surface to deflect one from the journey. The Call formulates the beginning of the Core, the essence of the individual.

The first stage of the mythological journey – which we have designated the “call to adventure” – signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown (1968, pg. 58).

Not everyone willingly participates, and some will refuse to answer, for the unknown represents too great a leap of faith.

In *Pathways to Bliss*, Campbell revisits his work on the Heroic Journey and states:

If the call is heeded, however, the individual is invoked to engage in a dangerous adventure. It’s always a dangerous adventure because you’re moving out of the known sphere altogether into the great beyond. I call this crossing the threshold. This is the crossing from the conscious into the unconscious world, but the unconscious world is represented in many, many, many different images, depending on the culture mythos (2004, pg. 114).

Crossing the threshold can be considered a rite of passage, or initiation.

## ***Initiation***

Initiation is meant to be painful, for it marks the ending of one state of being and the beginning of a new. In ancient times, it involved bloodletting of some kind, a ritual that demanded courage. Initiation marks the place of those who are brave and those who are cowards. To claim or to choose passion requires an act of bravery. There will be those who can’t muster the requisite courage, and thus fall into the misery of possessing a job they have no love for, or a profession they pretend to serve. The Hero/ine must make the courageous step forward and claim the Call to Adventure for its effect on the individual both personally and professionally. In *Pathways to Bliss*, Campbell expands on the use of one of his favourite metaphors to describe this place of being caught between a rock and a hard place or, “clashing rocks” and explains:

We live, on this side of the mystery, in the realm of the pairs of opposites: true and false, light and dark, good and evil, male and female, and all that dualistic rational worldview. One can have an intuition that is beyond good and evil that goes beyond pairs of opposites—that’s the opening of this gateway into the mystery. But it’s just one of those little intuitive flashes, because the conscious mind comes back again and closes the door. The idea in the hero adventure is to walk bodily through the door into the world where the dualistic rules don’t apply (pg. 114).

Walking through this “door” leads the Hero/ine deeper into the journey, the Ordeal. It is here that your faith and courage will be tested.

## **The Ordeal**

Campbell continues his deepening of the metaphor:

This motif is known also, mythologically, as the active door. This mythic device appears in American Indian stories, in Greek stories, in Eskimo stories, in stories from all over. It is an archetypal image that communicates the sense of going past judgment (2004, pg. 115).

Those who love the status quo will attack the Hero/ine viciously. In a perusal through history, one sees that those who have held to innovative ideas have been sorely tested. To survive this test of loyalty to one's own choice presents difficult tests. The Hero/ine may falter under the attack. Now is the time to look around and discover who is also undergoing this trial. If allies can be found that hold a shared value system, the Hero/ine will survive the Ordeal and be stronger for the initiation. Campbell ventures to say:

Once you have crossed the threshold, if it really is your adventure—if it is a journey that is appropriate to your deep spiritual need or readiness—helpers will come along the way to provide magical aid. [ . . . ] The deeper you get into this gauntlet, the heavier the resistance. You are coming into areas of the unconscious that have been repressed: the shadow, the anima/animus, and the rest of the unintegrated self; it is that repression system that you have to pass through. This, of course, is where the magical aid is most required (2004, pg. 117).

If there are no obvious allies, perhaps the Hero/ine is with the wrong tribe. If no allies are apparent, perhaps the ally that you are seeking is within. Campbell referred to this condition as apotheosis, where you realize that **you** are what you are seeking (2004, pg. 118).

In organizational terms, the common core value system can be explored to ensure that there is a common understanding of language. Incongruence will produce gaps in communication where an organization says one thing and does another. If the core value system is truly shared and repeatedly communicated, the organization has cohesion and a workable living brand.

## Breakthrough

Once the Hero/ine has found a tribe that shares this level of commitment, then innovation and growth become normative. There is no need to attack another because now a sense of self has been achieved that allows for both the individual journey and a collective vision.

In organizational terms, there is no “buy-in,” for there is nothing to sell. Instead, what arises is a sense of community that has a unified purpose. Goals may change as circumstances alter but there is no major discomfort or distress. The foundation of the community rests in its shared beliefs, which constitute its core value system. In this case, the Hero/ine can fight many battles because the safety and stability of the community allows for separation and return. The community supports the individual journey as it recognizes the value of separation from the status quo seeks an act of innovation that can be returned to the community as the prize or boon. Such a separation necessitates personal growth. In Campbell's words,

The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth. Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy, and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realization (1968, pg. 190).

This expansive realization, Jim Collins in *Good to Great*, calls this Level 5 Leadership (2001). A Level 5 Leader is one who is not an egomaniac. A Level 5 Leader does not create a firm that will fall apart if that leader leaves it. A Level 5 Leader is a Hero/ine that lives his or her values-in-action and serves the organization to which the leader belongs. When an environment is created that permits the growth of such a leader, a community of shared practice is created with a shared, living story that is grounded in a coherent core set of values. Such a process is indeed difficult and many who attempt it fail. But when success does result in this journey, the reward is increased potential. Campbell explains:

The whole idea is that you've got to bring out again that which you went to recover, the unrealized, unutilized potential in yourself. The whole point of this journey is the reintroduction of this potential into the world; that is to say, to you living in the world. You are to bring this treasure of understanding back and integrate it in a rational life. It goes without saying that this is difficult. Bringing the boon back can be even more difficult than going down into your own depths in the first place (2004, pg. 119).

## ***Celebration***

Celebration is an important part of both individual and organizational life. To recognize the Heroes and Heroines within any organization, to give appreciations for the risks taken and the courage exhibited, again helps cement the core foundation on which the organization rests. To tell the stories of each and every Hero/ine allows us to form a living history from which to learn. Mentoring becomes a natural event—for those who are drawn to a particular story can gain insight as well as practical, workable tools in how to proceed on their own journey of exploration. To provide concrete guidance may be impossible, for each individual brings a unique skill set. Campbell elaborates:

How render back into light-world language the speech-defying pronouncements of the dark?  
How represent on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional form, or in a three-dimensional image a multi-dimensional meaning? How translate into terms of “yes” and “no” revelations that shatter into meaninglessness every attempt to define the pairs of opposites?  
How communicate to people who insist on the exclusive evidence of their senses the message of the all-generating void? (1968, pg. 218)

Those who have the courage to make this story a conscious one in any organization will reap great rewards. To focus only on bottom line profitability sucks the life-blood out of an organization. To demand instant “return on investment” or ROI is to lose sight of the fact that business is about building relationships, and relationships take time. To honor the relationship between the old warrior and the new is to honor the story as a living, breathing entity. When individuals collaborate to compete, a space is created for both/and rather than either/or. To honor the relationship enables both client and employee retention, because the story is one that continues as a living entity. At heart, we are all storytellers and who would not want to be part of a great story?

## ***Tell The Story***

Every corporate culture consists of a group of individuals, and each individual has a particular motivation in joining the organization. Every individual also brings his or her story into the organization, a collection of life experiences that informs behaviour. The collection of individual stories will also be influenced by the stories of the organization itself. Both will inform and potentially transform the other.

Both individual and organizational story is context-dependent, meaning that the story is constantly changing due to external and internal shifts in perspective or in circumstance. Thus, the use of archetypal psychology as a lens by which to view this living story of individual or organization has a unique values, as archetypal psychology concerns itself with pluralities of meaning from a multivocal stance.

In accessing and using story in either an individual or organizational context, the story will contain a potential archetype of transformation. By identifying these archetypes through a tool such as the Heroic Journey, a structure may be formed that enables mythopoesis, an act of the imagination in which a prevailing mythic images is reshaped, reformed, and given new life. Behind the concrete particulars of any situation, a mythical move provides a “seeing-through” to the mystery or unconscious beyond, to a field of potential that has not yet been accessed, which cannot be known directly but is rather intuited. Understanding a corporate culture can be thought of as breaking a code. Understanding the why

of change is crucial for business because it predicts what people will do, whether employee or client. Archetypes and their associated images provide a form of cultural logic by which to translate either individual or organizational behaviour. By identification of these archetypes of transformation in any given story, a safe space for the story to unfold is created.

Collective organizational beliefs can also be carried within the container of story and used to further the relationship between individuals. Stories told in an organizational setting carry the core values and beliefs of the organization in the same way that the stories told by an individual carry personal beliefs, prejudices and core values. All provide information that can be utilized in understanding behavior. By having a common model such as the Heroic Journey so easily accessible by any individual in the organization, similarities and differences can be explore in a visual context using images garnered from the story itself. It has been my experience as an organizational consultant that such a visual context allows each story to be honored and expressed in a way that is more easily understood by both self and others. Employing this type of visual tool in an organizational context may enable a more effective form of communication and

promote both generational and cultural diversity, through the visual expression of images collected.

I cannot emphasize enough the immediate transformative effect when image is used as a developmental and expressive tool in organizational settings. To capture such internal images, I use a variety of postcards and/or photographs that can be utilized to provoke or stimulate imaginative projection. The images evoke different meanings for each individual and therein lies the value. The plurality of meaning expressed by values inherent in any group becomes immediately apparent. As such, the image becomes a vehicle for communication in that it provides a starting point whereby each individual claims a personal interpretation. To claim a personal interpretation is to claim responsibility for the Self, to be willing to step away from collective beliefs and stand firm on potentially new ground. Jung believed that most individuals walk in 'shoes too small' (CW8:739). To step into larger shoes is a necessary ingredient to advance consciousness. In organizational terms, such as advance in consciousness unlocks the door to innovation and provides a key to future growth and a successful, sustainable brand.

## ***ReVisioning***

The value of the Heroic Journey is that it provides a guide that enables a shift in perspective. In order to claim the future, one must also retrieve and re-claim the past. Holding this tension of opposites, two seemingly opposing stances, requires a mental shift that can be made and then expanded through the understanding that archetypal psychology promotes. To use story as a container or *temenos* for this movement or shift in traditional thinking provides a place of comfort. On the future value of the Heroic Journey, perhaps Campbell should have the last word:

What I think is that a good life is one hero journey after another. Over and over again, you are called to the realm of adventure, you are called to new horizons. Each time, there is the same problem: do I dare? And then if you do dare, the dangers are there, and the help also, and the fulfillment or the fiasco. There's always the possibility of a fiasco. But there's also the possibility of bliss (Campbell, 2004, pg. 133).

I believe that the use of the Heroic Journey as a metemap, a tool for transformation, will have lasting significance. Suffice to say that an opportunity exists for archetypal theory to be utilized in strategically enhancing the success rate of business enterprise. Notwithstanding the impact on the organizations concerned, the impact on the people that make up the organization is far more important because they represent the long-term viability of the organization. Sustainability through investment in human capital will be a touchstone for the successful organization of the future.

We need to revision the way we work. To open the mind to the power of story as an archetypal force is to allow the power of the mythic imagination to break through. Perhaps the purpose in human life is to help creation and all acts of creativity by being the agent of consciousness and in the act of storytelling, carry the fertile seeds for a viable future not just for organizations but for the human race.

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**Ginger Grant, PhD.** Lives and breathes the transformational power of narrative – for every company and every person has a story. Coming from the world of mergers and acquisitions, midlife drove her back to school to study creativity and values-based cultures. Dr. Grant's focus is on the use of business anthropology, ethnography and market intelligence analytics for strategic initiatives. As an Innovation Researcher, her passion is business by design – the creation, development and implementation of values-based programs that transform corporate culture and drive market share for competitive advantage. She has held senior leadership and consulted in a variety of fields including engineering, telecommunications, education, transportation, government, law, software development, community development, gaming and the arts. Dr. Grant is a Professor of Marketing and Innovation at Sheridan College in Toronto, Canada and a Visiting Professor at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark. She can be reached at [gingergrant@me.com](mailto:gingergrant@me.com).