

Separation—Encounter—Return

Whom does the Grail serve?

—Parsifal's crucial question after completing the
quest for the grail

The journey toward wisdom finds amazingly uniform patterns in universal mythologies. The hero might have a thousand paths to walk, but there seem to be classic and constant patterns beneath his meanderings. Barry Lopez mirrors my own belief when he says that the truth is best found by looking for a discernible pattern.¹ It is *no* surprise that *the* essential mystery of faith for Christians is not a credal statement as much as a Christ-revealed, but also discernible *pattern*. We call it the *paschal mystery*. It is not so much something you *believe*, as something you learn to do. The mythic and liturgical acclamation is lovely: *Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again*. Life will be death, failure and absurdity, which can lead to renewal, joy and beauty. This pattern is *inevitable, universal and transformative*. It is almost the story line of every good novel you have ever read. Jesus for Christians is the cosmic and classic mythmaker who reveals and lives this pattern for us and tells us we can trust it. Of course, if we have eyes, the pattern

From Wild Man to Wise Man

is everywhere, but we just don't want to surrender to it. We need a model and guide.

It is rather common to speak of two births that are necessary to come to enlightenment. The first is natural and biological; the second we must be initiated into and choose. It is not certain that it will happen. Thus great spiritual teachers invariably speak of the necessity of conversion, search and surrender. Before we are "born again" we basically do not understand. We are either innocent, cynical or trapped in passing images. The East calls it blindness, illusion or aimless desire; the Christian West tends to call this once-born state "sin." Sin is much more a state of consciousness (or unconsciousness!) than it is individual immoral actions. Jesus came to take away the "sin" (singular) of the world (see John 1:30). Without the spiritual journey, we have the strange phenomenon of people who supposedly avoid "sins" but are still in the state of sin! They don't cuss, drink or run around, but do so from a totally unenlightened consciousness of fear, disguised self-interest, social convention or even hatred of others who do such things. Let's look at some of the normal patterns of the classic spiritual journey.

Out of a formless, uninitiated life there somehow comes a *call*. Probably it takes the form of longing, loneliness, desire, the knowledge that there must be *more*, a falling apart of the game that once sustained you. The hero is somehow directed beyond his private self on a search toward some transcendent or larger goal. This call can come from within or from without, but the would-be hero is enticed by Otherness, by Mystery, what some would call the Holy. This is the first invitation to rebirth. At this point our yes can take many forms, but eventually there must

Separation—Encounter—Return

be a clear trusting and a clear “yes.” Many are unfortunately hesitant at this stage. There is no one to tell them what this holy longing means, where it comes from and where it is leading—and that it is God.


The journey continues often with a *protective figure*. Invariably, there is a friend, a “god father,” a biography, a saint, a mythical image which aids, encourages and gives strength and direction to the would-be hero. The journey never happens alone. There is always a wise elder, a guardian angel, a patron saint, a spirit guide, a wise teacher who somehow sends us in one crucial direction and warns of the dangers and obstacles that will be encountered along the way. Somehow that guide makes you aware, like Jack Palance in *City Slickers*, of the importance of “one thing.” When you come to the “one thing important,” as Jesus said to Martha, you move almost instantly from profane space to sacred space.² There are always many demons and dragons to be faced, but invariably there is one overriding teacher or guide, whether that be Jesus, Buddha or Krishna. Without that protective figure we lack both courage and focus. Although the negative side has many faces and forms, the positive journey is usually presented as *clear, simple and beautiful*—although still mysterious. Actually, you need to fall in love with your model and guide. You cannot usually have “many gods before you,” or your ego will remain the god who picks and chooses which god to obey today. This was why the biblical prophets were always trying to get the Jews to “love only Yahweh” and no other god. It is good psychology, if nothing else.

Next the *threshold experience* normally happens when one’s own system of logic, meaning, success and truth break down.




From Wild Man to Wise Man

As Carl Jung said, a true encounter with the numinous is *always* an annihilation for the ego! It's when Perseus confronts the serpented head of Medusa; it's when Jesus feels betrayed by Peter, Judas, the crowds and finally his own Father; it's when the modern man faces his shadow head on by failure, imprisonment or accusation. For the man to be born, the boy must die. The difficulty with an affluent culture like our own is that "infantile grandiosity" can be maintained well into late life by money, meddling or moving away. Quite simply, there is no room for God within us as long as we are filled with our false selves.³ As Jesus said, "unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains just a grain of wheat" (see John 12:24). That phrase, by the way, is a classic initiation phrase used in the mystery religions of Asia Minor.



As the cocoon of the false self ("sin") is gradually let go, the true self stands revealed. The true self knows who it is, what it must do and, most excitingly, has the energy to do it—no matter what the price. This is *the task* itself, the sense of vocation, the sense of goal, purpose and challenge that guides every hero's life. Quite simply, a hero is one who gives his life to something bigger than himself. He goes for something and is not just along for the ride, but that something must be larger than his own life. We have grown *very* cynical about the possibility of true heroes. Feathering *your* own nest has become so acceptable that we largely substitute celebrities for heroes. Now you are a "hero" if you make a million dollars, and a fool if you give it away. To turn around the classic hero's journey in favor of self-interest puts us at odds with almost all known literature, legend and oral tradition. It certainly puts us at odds with Jesus, Buddha, Abraham





Separation—Encounter—Return

and the saints. When a man cannot do greatness in some real sense, his life has no universal significance or transcendent meaning. He is disconnected from the “love that moves the sun and the other stars,” as Dante said. In that sense, his life is a disaster, literally “disconnected from the stars.”

But there is one more subtle but crucial step. If you read spiritual stories closely, you will see that there is always *a task within the task*, a struggle alongside the struggle. It is not enough to kill the dragon, save the maiden or even die on the cross. *The real hero's task is to keep love, to find humor, to maintain freedom, to discover joy, to expand vision in the process of killing dragons!* There is no room for pettiness or petulance or self-pity, or one is not, by definition, a hero. The sour saint is no saint at all. Our real demons are interior, quiet and disguised and often show themselves as the “noonday devil,” which is that pride, negativity or self-absorption that reveals itself in midlife and spoils the seeming good fruit of early accomplishments. Without spiritual disciplines and regular repentance, far too many of us win many battles but finally lose the war. How utterly sad it has been in my work to meet retired, bitter bishops; sad but “successful” priests; and angry old widowers blaming the world for their loneliness. They had no Sancho Panza to accompany them, it seems, as they tilted at life's windmills. They did the task, but not the real task.



The final stages of “the monomyth of the hero,” as Joseph Campbell calls it,⁴ are the issues of *return*. The hero typically receives some kind of *gift* or bonus at the end of his quest. Don Quixote is forever searching for the “bread that is better than wheat.” Prometheus receives fire, Solomon receives wisdom,





From Wild Man to Wise Man

Jason receives the golden fleece and Jesus hands over the Spirit. Often the hero receives the eternal feminine in the person of a fair maiden or queen or princess. The holy marriage is completed when they become one and live happily ever after. The kingdom is now healthy and fertile because the masculine and the feminine have become one new reality. But the important thing is that the gift is given over *for others*. The grail is not for power, prestige or private possession. It is always for the sake of the community, for the common good. I wonder if we even understand this stage anymore. Far too often our concern seems to be developing our retirement account, self-serving politics and developing our personal image. No civilization has ever survived unless the elders saw it their duty to pass on gifts of Spirit to the young ones. Is it that we are selfish, or is it that we ourselves have never found the gift ourselves? I suspect it is largely the latter. I don't think most people are terribly selfish. They just don't *know*.



There are no loners among the great heroes. There are no self-made men who clean up the town and ride off into the sunset. It is always obvious in the stories that many characters, advisors and circumstances have formed them by the end—usually in spite of themselves. What the pagan mythologies would have seen as fate or destiny, Christian stories would see as grace or Providence. But in either case the hero is formed and created by his times and his struggles and, most of all, by his enemies. He never creates himself. He is created and almost in spite of himself. He has tragic flaws but learns to use them—or let God use them. In the final paragraphs of the story, the hero invariably *returns home*, back to his community. He rejoins the folk

Separation—Encounter—Return

with his transforming gift. Odysseus must return to Ithaca, the saints must help us here on earth, Jesus says his disciples will meet him not in imperial Jerusalem but on the humble roads of hometown Galilee. Finally, the hero is a hero precisely because he knows how to go back home.

Enlightened consciousness, looked at externally, looks amazingly like simple consciousness. Second naïveté can be confused with first innocence by the uninitiated. The sayings of wise and wild men look harmless and irrelevant to those trapped in the complex middle. True wisdom looks amazingly like naïve, silly and even dangerous simplicity—although we would never say it in polite company. The Sermon on the Mount has been deemed poetic nonsense by 95 percent of the Christian establishment for two thousand years. And that, in a word, is why true spiritual teachers like Jesus are always marginalized, dismissed, killed, or worst of all, worshipped. Then we can admire them at a safe distance, like a pious icon, but cleverly ignore both their message and their actual journey.

There is no alternative, no other way to understand, than to go on the whole journey ourselves.

Notes

1. Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p. 69.



From Wild Man to Wise Man

2. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1957).
3. Richard Rohr, “True Self/False Self,” a professionally recorded conference on CD (Center for Action and Contemplation, Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195, 2017).
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1949), p. 30ff.