

# Navigating the Hero's Journey: Principles and Processes for a Meaningful Life

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One of the hallmarks of successful and effective people is a deep sense of purpose and intention. Without this deep sense, it is easy to get lost in the infinite dramas of everyday life, to be pulled by the many forces trying to use you in one way or another. By sensing and aligning with an inner calling, it is possible to steer one's life course in a meaningful way. One of the best models for describing this path is the "Hero's Journey," first described by the mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949) in his seminal book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

Campbell examined stories of heroes, historical and mythical, spanning all ages, cultures, religions and genders. He noted how across many cultures and throughout time there was a common deep structure pattern—that is, a basic myth—about a person who lived an extraordinary life that brought new gifts and transformations to both self and community.

The path of the hero's journey generally follows three steps: (1) living in the garden, (2) exile into the desert, and (3) return to the garden with new gifts. That is, a person starts in the consensus "trance" or "identity box" of the mainstream community; then gets pushed out of the ordinary "box" of reality in ways that force him or her to let go of old maps and forge new resources and understandings. This heroic journey involves crossing a threshold into a new territory outside of his or her comfort zone, finding the proper guardians (resources), and facing and transforming inner "demons" or "shadows" (i.e., major problems). Then, having successfully navigated the trials and tribulations of these thresholds and ordeals, the "re-born" person returns to the community as a different person, with many contributions to make.

There are many well-known examples of the hero's journey—healers like Jesus or Milton Erickson, social change agents like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, artists like Bob Dylan or Picasso; inventors and scientists like Thomas Edison or Carl

Jung. Each of these individuals went through long ordeals to transform themselves into a human being that had something extraordinary to contribute.

Of course, there are even more instances of lesser known people who venture on the hero's journey—regular people who move through transformational paths as parents, children, citizens, and workers. The journey may be initiated by failed relationships, physical illness, career challenges, unexpected events, or significant traumas. Whatever the case, the myth of the hero's journey provides a way to understand such crises as doorways into a deep journey of transformation and positive change. The hero's journey is a beautiful guide for anybody interested in living a life with deep meaning and contribution; a life imbued with happiness, helpfulness, health, and healing to self and community alike.

To realize the hero's journey, a person needs maps, tools, and resources. So what we'd like to do in this article is briefly overview how the hero's journey may be navigated. We will first begin with an overview of what we call the Generative Self, which is a model for how to develop and maintain the extraordinary consciousness needed to meet extraordinary challenges. We will then examine what some of the major challenges of the Hero's Journey might be, and suggest some ways in which they can be successfully met. Finally, we will briefly address the relevance of the Hero's Journey for contemporary times.

## **T**he Generative Self

The question of identity—“Who are you and in what larger world do you belong?”—is central to both of us (see Gilligan, 1987, 1997, 2004; Dilts, 1987, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2003). We see identity as multi-leveled and unfolding in a developmental series of “death and rebirth” cycles. We see some experiences as “ordinary” in that in order to navigate them, you can stay within your established identity; you don't have to leave your present frame of reference. You can respond with learned strategies with reasonable expectations of success. Other experiences and challenges are “extra-ordinary,” that is, they move you outside the “box” of your “ordinary” self and thus require “extra-ordinary” responses, that is, experiential understandings and responses beyond what you've done before. In the Hero's Journey, it is especially important to know the difference between these two levels of consciousness.

Generative Self is a process developed from the field of Self-Relations (Gilligan, 1997, 2003, 2005). Self-relations emphasizes that the relational response to experiences determines its shape, value, and outcome. That is, experiences do not exist independent of an experiencer. The experience is being constructed in each ongoing moment by a person or persons. Self-relations examines how a

person can optimally relate to a given experience so that positive outcomes may be achieved. Furthermore, it emphasizes how negative experiences reflect unskillful relationships that can be shifted to produce positive outcomes. This work is based in no small part on the legacy of Milton Erickson, who was legendary for his capacity to accept and transform the most difficult patterns of behavior.

In modeling Erickson's generative strategies, Self-Relations distinguishes three Minds: (1) the Somatic Mind (as a local embodied intelligence), (2) the Relational Field Mind (as a non-local or collective intelligence), and (3) the Cognitive Mind as a sort of bridge between the two worlds. SR further emphasizes two levels of each Mind: (a) a Basic Level, concerned with remedial operations, and (b) a Generative Level that occurs when all three Minds are harmonized and aligned. The Generative Self is a sort of subtle meta-field that holds all the basic operations with awareness and skillfulness, while adding other features that transform its form and function in significant ways. SR suggests that while the Basic Levels are sufficient for ordinary adaptive functions, the Generative Levels are needed to navigate and transform the extraordinary states of consciousness that occur, intentionally or unwanted, on the Hero's Journey. Thus, if individuals are going to successfully meet these great challenges, they need to develop some capacity to develop a Generative Self. The next sections suggest a few ways this might happen.

## **T**he Somatic Mind and the Principle of Centering

The Somatic Mind may be considered the ground floor or the platform for the Generative Self. At its Basic Level, the Somatic Mind operates with mammalian instinctual drives for food, sex, territory, and hierarchy. It carries an emotional history that guides its behaviors. In stress, it uses fight/flight/freeze responses. It is especially connected with the limbic system and its mammalian orientation to relational connection (see Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000); that is, it knows how to "hook up" and be in subtle resonance with others. It does most of this without self-awareness, that is, it responds to a situation in either an instinctual or conditioned (learned) way.

In extraordinary states of consciousness, however, something more is needed. For example, say a loved one dies. Or you really want to make a difference in the world, but don't know how. Or you are under extreme stress at work. Or you are going through a divorce. Or you are traveling in a dangerous neighborhood and feel exceptionally vulnerable. In such instances, your Somatic Mind needs more capacities. It needs to be able to hold confusion, to experience intense challenges and emotions, to tolerate contradictory emotions, to shift into states of rest, to relax while staying alert, to attune to intuitive and non-rational wisdom,

and to take creative action. At such times, a Generative level of Somatic Mind is needed.

One general method for entering this advanced level is the art of centering. Centering is a process of unifying mind and body, in order to quiet and focus the mind, relax and attune the body, and align with the energies of the relational fields. Centering is a form of balancing attention, finding the point where complementary qualities are simultaneously present—e.g., inner/outer, relaxed/focused, intentional/effortless. When this happens, a simple “awareness beyond opposites” may emerge. It is a field of awareness that extends beyond the body, to the environmental field in which the body is operating.

One simple method of centering is to find a quiet place to sit and settle. One can then follow a 4-step cycle of (1) sensing good posture, (2) relaxing the muscles, (3) focusing attention through the solar plexus, and (4) imagining breathing one’s thoughts into a liquid that moves through the body, then out into the world. Repeating these 4 steps (with eyes opened or closed) can help a person shift into a felt sense of quiet, alert awareness. One might then remember an experience of great well-being—e.g., in nature, with a loved one, or by one’s self. As you breathe the memory of well-being through your body, notice where the core feeling of the experience is felt in your body. Most people experience it in their belly, or solar plexus, or heart area. These are different possible “centers” to which one can attune. Many people find it helpful to place their hand gently on the felt center, bringing their awareness more integrated into it.

The process of centering has many values. First, it promotes calm yet alert awareness. Internal dialogue reduces and somatic attunement increases, thereby allowing more effective responsiveness. Second, centering can stabilize attention under stressful conditions. For example, say an aggressive person is talking to you in an intimidating fashion. Centering allows you to give “first attention” (see Gilligan, 1997) to your core in a grounded, relaxing way, rather than have it get locked onto a stressful person, memory, or internal image. You can then open and extend your awareness beyond the stressor, so that a spacious feeling of openness beyond the problem is experienced. Third, centering allows unitive, non-dualistic experiencing. The typical “either/or” splits of mind vs. body, self vs. other, good vs. bad dissolve into a more integrated sensing of “what is”. This allows consciousness to align with the life force energy—the “ki” of aikido, “chi” of tai chi, feeling of “the zone”, the grace of “spirit”, etc. This doesn’t mean the capacity for cognitive differentiation is reduced; rather, it is re-connected with its deeper platform of natural intelligence in a way that promotes the experience of concentrated “flow” (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)) and integrated functioning. Control is replaced by cooperation, domination by resourceful utilization, and clashing by harmonizing. This can be done even under stressful, antagonistic conditions, as the martial art of aikido is able to reliably show.

To reiterate, this access to a Generative Somatic Mind is made available whenever experience takes one outside their normal identity parameters. This can involve either experiences of well-being or experiences of ill-being—e.g., a trauma. In both cases, the disruption of an identity state activates the Generative Somatic Mind and its centers, thereby amplifying non-rational archetypal/emotional processes. If a person is disconnected from Somatic Mind, the resulting experiences may be experienced as frightening, overwhelming, and confusing. Reactive measures to control such uncomfortable experiences are what create symptomatic experiences. Alternatively, a centered person can welcome and work with the emerging experiences in ways that transform identity.

## **T**he Cognitive Mind and the Principle of Sponsorship

The Cognitive Mind constitutes a second type of human intelligence. In healthy development, the cognitive self “transcends yet includes” (see Wilber, 1995; Pearce, 2002) the somatic self; in unhealthy development, the cognitive self disconnects and opposes the somatic self.

As with the Somatic Mind, two levels of the Cognitive Mind may be distinguished. The Basic Level involves the processes used to navigate the social/psychological world: Plans, strategies, rules, frameworks, schema, social roles, etc. It also holds the shared means of social life, and the fixed values of an individual identity. Generally speaking, it is responsible for social adaptation, control of environment, advancement of self-interest, and maintenance of self-identity. It generally operates by taking a fixed point of view, holding some intention (consciously or unconsciously), then acting to realize those intentions. Obviously, it is a crucial aspect of healthy functioning, one that needs continuous attention and practice. As we say in California, don’t leave home without it!

While this Basic Level is generally sufficient for ordinary circumstances, it will fail to meet the challenges of extraordinary experiences. The Basic Level of Cognitive Mind has difficulty thinking “outside the box.” It gets locked into a particular point of view, and has difficulty allowing creative chaos, multiple points of view, contradictory points of view, or conflict. It cannot easily surrender to “death and rebirth” experiences. For example, say you have a daughter who is entering adolescence, and all of her “sweet young girl” behaviors are being replaced with hip-hop, intense interest in boys, and a need for greater freedom. Or that you are in multicultural environments, where clashing views of religion, freedom, and ethics are being expressed. Or that you attempted to get rid of some undesirable experience or behavior, and it keeps returning with a vengeance. In such contexts, a Generative Level of Cognitive Mind is needed to successfully navigate such experiences and their inherent challenges.

The Generative Level of Cognitive Mind “includes yet transcends” the Basic Level, allowing creative thinking, systemic (i.e., field-based) identity, and resonant intentionality. That is, it maintains rationality, intentionality, strategic planning and acting, and social meanings; but expands beyond it to include something more. This advanced level is more a meta-cognitive principle and process, something self-relations refers to as sponsorship (see Gilligan, 1997). The principle of sponsorship is the cornerstone of all self-relations work. The word “sponsorship” comes from the Latin “spons”, meaning, “to pledge solemnly”. So sponsorship is a vow to help a person (including one’s self) to use each and every event and experience to awaken to the goodness and gifts of the self, the world, and the connections between the two. Self-relations suggests that experiences that come into a person’s life are not yet fully human; they have no human value until a person is able to sponsor them. This is the creative process of art, culture, therapy, parenting, and self-development: how to receive and absorb the river of life in creative ways. This relational process literally transforms an experience that seems to have no human value into something whose value is evident.

There are many ways to practice sponsorship. The “yin” (receptive) aspect of sponsorship involves receiving, allowing your heart to be opened, bearing witness, providing place or sanctuary, soothing, gently holding, being curious, deep listening, and beholding a presence with the eyes of kindness and understanding. The “yang” (active) aspect includes relentless commitment, fierce attentiveness, providing guidance, proper naming, setting limits and boundaries, challenging self-limitations, and introducing the sponsored experience to other resources. Through a skillful combination of these and related sponsorship processes, an experience or behavior that seems to have no value to the self or community can be transformed from an “it” that should be destroyed to a “thou” than can be listened to, appreciated, and allowed to develop within self and community.

## **T**he Field Mind and the Principle of Field Resonance

In addition to the intelligence of the body and of the intellect, a third type of intelligence may be seen: The relational fields in which all consciousness and identity are embedded. For example, the physical environment may be thought of as a living “Gaia” field of intelligence, at many levels. Family and culture are fields within which each person operates. Art, science, and religion are fields that organize and inform many activities. The collective history of consciousness, what Jung called the “collective unconscious”, may be thought of as a field of archetypal patterns. Many other “fields” may be distinguished: one’s immediate surroundings, personal history, social circles, mood states, physical states, etc. All these are contexts that shape, constrain, guide, and create the texts of local and focal awareness. One would be hard-pressed to deny the tremendous influence of fields on a person’s consciousness.

At the Basic Level, these fields operate primarily as constraints, helpful or unhelpful. They shape, limit, and guide the flow and content of consciousness. At the Basic Level, one can operate within the boundaries established by previous creations. This is not a bad thing, of course: it allows one to not have to re-invent the wheel every day, and permits successful approaches to be replicated. But at the Basic Level, a person's Somatic and Cognitive Minds are attuned to the Field Mind in set ways, such that only certain types of field-based information are received in certain types of ways.

But when an old pattern or identity needs to be transcended or transformed, or a significant creative effort is desired, the Generative Level of the Field Mind is required. In such instances, a person needs to be able to sense and receive from the Field Mind in many different ways. To achieve this, consciousness must radiate "through and beyond" the surrounding fields, creating an experiential "field of fields" that is beyond any particular content or form. As with the other domains, this Generative Level is a subtle energy meta-field that "transcends yet includes" all of the informational fields of the Basic Level.

For example, in the martial art of aikido, one trains to "Never give your eyes (or Mind) to the attacker." That is, you let your eyes become soft and extend beyond the antagonist, so that you're not locked into a reactive mode. It is easy to try this experiment by centering to establish relaxed, attentive awareness. Then orient to some focal point (a person or an object), but let your eyes be soft and let your perceptual awareness open outwards, extending infinitely even as you sense a connection with the perceptual object. You will likely find a different way of sensing the object, one that allows it to be included within your experience, but not limiting your attention. This actually allows you to better sense the subtle details of a person's movement, while also keeping yourself opened and connected to the larger field. If you continue this experiment, you can begin to sense an implicit space beyond what your conscious attention can focus on; this is an example of opening to the Generative Field. You could train yourself to do this while interacting with a person, or focusing on a subject matter (e.g., a poem to be written, a problem to be solved). By focusing in this "open field" fashion, you will have the pleasant discovery of being "fed" creatively by fields of information beyond your local self.

## **M**eeting the Challenges of the Hero's Journey

With the resources of the Generative Self, a person is ready to meet the rigorous challenges of the Hero's Journey. According to Campbell, the fundamental tasks of the hero's journey include:

1. Hearing a calling that relates to our identity, life purpose or mission. These callings can come in many forms and frequently represent transition points in our lives. Becoming a parent, changing jobs, recovering from a serious illness, producing a creative work, entering a new stage of life, etc., all represent different

types of callings. Such callings generally arise as a result of life's changing circumstances and are typically quite challenging (otherwise it would not need to be a "hero's" journey). They typically involve an expansion or evolution of our identities. For example, a very successful businesswoman began to fall into depressive states as she neared 50; these "symptoms" turned out to be a calling for her to expand her life beyond narrow achievement and into a deeper connection with her family and with nature.

It is evident that callings come from the various fields surrounding us and they frequently have a deep archetypal character. Developing the skills of field awareness and opening to the Generative Field is key in being able to clearly receive and be guided by one's calling. For example, the above businesswoman developed great pleasure and further success by listening more to her colleagues and employees.

2. Accepting the calling leads us to confront a boundary or threshold in our existing abilities or map of the world. We can choose to either accept or try to ignore the calling. Refusing the calling, however, frequently leads to the formation or intensification of problems or symptoms in our lives, precipitating crises that we cannot ignore. For example, a woman who grew up in very hyper-masculine, power-oriented family weathered many years of physical illnesses until a breast cancer proved to be a "wake-up call" for her to more fully claim and develop her calling into the female wisdom traditions.

Committing to a calling involves being able to receive it into your center and maintain a felt sense of connection to both yourself and the larger field around you. In this sense, a calling is thought of as distinct from your ego-identity; it is an energy that you feel tingling or burning in your belly or heart, a touchstone to guide you in each moment, a source of feedback to let you know whether you are "on the path" or straying from it.

3. Crossing the threshold propels us into some new life "territory" outside of our current comfort zone. This new territory forces us to grow and evolve, and requires us to find support and guidance. According to Campbell, this threshold is generally a "point of no return," meaning that, once we are across it, we cannot go back to the way things used to be. We must move forward into the unknown. Often such thresholds are represented by "double binds" that suggest that whatever choice we make, the old status quo cannot be maintained. For example, a person's lifelong strategy of "being independent" resulted in a deep loneliness; however, the fear (and limited understanding) of "being dependent" seemed equally unacceptable. Trembling at the threshold of this double bind led to a new path of "autonomy/connection".

In addition to centering and opening to the field, crossing the threshold requires sponsorship; both of our potential to be heroes and of the fears and hesitations that arise as we face the threshold.

4. Finding guardians, mentors or sponsors is something that often comes naturally from having the courage to cross a threshold. As the saying goes, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” “Guardians” are the key relationships we develop that support us to build skills, believe in ourselves and stay focused on our objectives. Although a hero’s journey is a very personal journey, it is not something that we can do alone. We need to be open and willing to receive support. For example, a person might sense others who have successfully traversed similar hero’s journeys, and connect with such models in different ways.

Finding guardians also requires that we stay centered and remain open to the field. Because the territory beyond the threshold is new for us, we cannot necessarily know what type of guardianship we will need ahead of time or who those guardians will be. Sometimes guardians will come from surprising places. Thus, we must stay open and available to receiving guidance and support at every step on our journey.

5. Facing a challenge (or “demon”) is also a natural result of crossing a threshold. A demon is generally something that appears to oppose, tempt or negate us as heroes. It might be another person or group; an addiction or emotional suffering; a traumatic event or severe challenge. Demons,” however, are not necessarily evil or bad; they are simply a type of “energy” that we need to learn to contend with, accept and redirect. Often, demons are simply a reflection of one of our own inner fears and shadows. It is here that we confront “negative sponsorship”—messages, coming from either inside of us or from significant others, that imply, “You should not be here,” “You do not deserve to exist,” “You are incapable,” “You will never be good enough,” “You are unwelcome,” etc. Clearly, facing demons requires all of the resources of the Generative Self: centering, sponsorship and connection to the Generative Field. The general challenge is how to find a relationship with this “negative other” (Gilligan, 1997) that transforms it into a solution or resource.

6. Developing new resources is necessary to deal with uncertainty and transform the “demon.” A hero’s journey is ultimately a path of learning and self-evolution. The resources that help us to cross the threshold into new territory and transform the demon are the beliefs, capabilities, behavioral skills and tools we are able to put into action in order to deal with complexity, uncertainty and resistance. This is the area where we ourselves must grow in order to develop the flexibility and increased competence necessary to successfully navigate new territory (internal and external) and overcome the obstacles that arise along the way.

The resources necessary to successfully complete a hero’s journey include increased self-awareness, the ability to access, integrate and balance key “archetypal energies”—such as fierceness, tenderness and playfulness— and ultimately lead to an evolution of our consciousness. This evolution involves an

expansion of ourselves in a way that includes yet transcends all of the previous dimensions of our being.

7. Completing the task for which we have been called. Finding a way to fulfill the calling is ultimately achieved by creating a new map of the world that incorporates the growth and discoveries brought about by the journey.

8. Finding the way home as a transformed person, and sharing with others the knowledge and experience gained as a result of the journey. Until we bring our new identity into the world, the journey is not complete. It must be seen and acknowledged in some way, and also be a gift that is given to the community.

## **M**apping Your Hero's Journey

While Campbell's description of steps the hero's journey begins with hearing and accepting a "calling," our real life experiences often call us to the hero's journey by presenting us with the challenge first. The many heroes who emerged as a result of the September 11 terrorist attacks, for instance, were thrown into their journey by a direct confrontation with the "demon." They had to face their threshold and recognize their calling within the crisis they were facing.

This is also frequently the case in our own lives. It is a crisis that presents the calling. Certainly, dealing with any sort of crisis is a type of hero's journey in and of itself. To help explore and prepare yourself for some of the challenges of your own hero's journey, consider the following questions:

1. What is the "demon" (challenge) you are currently facing? What is a situation in which you feel more of a "victim" than a "hero?" A simple way of finding this is to use the statement, "If only X didn't exist, my life would be great." "X" is the "dragon" that the "hero" needs to transform. [Again, this will typically be a situation in which you are confronting some type of self-negation or "negative sponsorship" messages, either from yourself in response to an external challenge, or from a significant other.]

2. What is your "threshold"? What is the unknown territory, outside of your comfort zone, that either a) the crisis is forcing you into or b) you must enter in order to deal with the crisis? For example, a hard-driving business executive developed an alcohol problem that was affecting his work. Inner work revealed a belief that he always had to perform, and that if he stopped performing he would literally "disappear". (Such non-rational beliefs, while seemingly silly to the conscious mind, can be very compelling at an unconscious level.) His threshold was learning how to be in the world without having to compulsively perform.

3. Given the demon you are facing and the threshold you must cross, what is the "call to action" — what are you being "called" to do or become? (It is often useful

to answer this question in the form of a symbol or metaphor; e.g., “I am being called to become an eagle/warrior/magician, etc.”)

4. What resources do you have and which do you need to develop more fully in order to face the challenge, cross your threshold and accomplish your calling?

5. Who are (or will be) your “guardians” for those resources? When you have identified your guardians, imagine where they would be located physically around you in order to best support you. One by one, put yourself into the shoes of each of the guardians, and look at yourself through their eyes (second position). What message or advice does each guardian have for you? Return to your own perspective (first position) and receive the messages.

## Summary

What we have presented above is but a general sketch of a deep and fascinating model for achieving profound happiness, health, healing, and helpfulness in the world. In his book *Of Water and Spirit*, Malidoma Somé speaks of his life growing up in a West African village. In that culture, it is assumed that each new baby has crossed from the spirit world into this world in order to bring a gift to the community. He describes a village ritual in which each newborn is brought to the elders, who take several days to commune with the newly arrived spirit. The basic question the elders ask of the newborn is, “Why have you come here?” They assume that each person has come with a special mission, and that their life should be organized around honoring and realizing this mission. Based on the response they receive, the elders seek to support the child’s development so that their mission may be realized.

In a similar way, the mythological path of the hero’s journey seeks to honor the deeper value and calling of each person’s life. It assumes that each difficulty, crisis, or setback a person faces is both an opportunity and feedback about the nature of that person’s deeper calling. It also recognizes the need to find the resources, both internally and in the collective field, that will help a person realize their deeper journey. It is this profound appreciation for the dignity and value of each person’s life that draw us to this myth. We have found it exceptionally helpful for coaching and supporting individuals and groups to discover and live a fulfilling and helpful existence. The few notes and suggestions we have made in this paper are taken from workshops we have co-led, and represent the framework for a book we are working on. We hope you find them as helpful as we have, in terms of creating a world that works for all.

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