

David Quintero-Lopez

Professor Dezso J. Bartha

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The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Great masterpieces in art such as Michelangelo's statue of David, and in literature as are the writings of Dostoevsky, or in science as have been Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species*, are bodies of works that have not only shaped but effectively changed the course of human events—these are works that have brought us pass a threshold of our expansive reality, redefined our perception of beauty, enriched our grasp on consciousness and the human condition, as well as enlightened us to the scientific truths of our days. Among these things with the creative power to transform our lives, our future and societies is found the most definitive guide for comparative mythology: Joseph Campbell's masterpiece *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a work which for the first time unveiled the mysteries surrounding the Hero's Journey and the rituals encompassing each stage of the adventure the hero embarks upon as well as an exploration of what he termed as the Cosmogonic Cycle which outlines the pattern of creation and destruction of the world in myths.

From its opening lines is found one of the first gems of wisdom and insight hidden within this sometimes mystifying text that effectively sets the tone and importance of the subject at hand, because in truth, “it would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestation” (Campbell I); from which we should read that “cultural manifestation” can only be enacted by the individual, thus myth is the vessel from which these energies of the cosmos flow through ourselves and find their expression in the way we live, regard and approach our lives in this world. Joseph Campbell in the preface to the 1949 edition of this work, spoke of learning to read this symbolic language as the first step in diving

into the unknown waters of mythology, he compared this language as one containing rules, syntax and grammar of the symbols by which to unveil the mysteries woven within myth, and that he knew “of no better modern tool than psychoanalysis” (Campbell xii) to approach this subject. It is then with the use of these tools that the exploration of this work, which can best be considered as a journey unto itself, begins.

Divided into three main parts, the book begins by laying a firm foundation into the realm of myth in the section titled “The Monomyth” where an exploration of the human psyche begins to take form and Campbell reveals to us that “it has always been the prime function of mythology to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward” (Campbell 7), a statement that fills the reader with meaning and significance, as only Campbell is able to convey in his interpretation of this collective unconscious that conforms world mythology. He speaks to the individual of truths that resonate deeply within our being about that sense or desire for expression that fuels our dreams and greatest hopes, but which often we feel unable to bring forth into the realm of our reality. He offers the soothing words of inspiration as he explains that “all the life potentialities that we never managed to bring to adult realization, those portions of ourselves, are there; for such golden seeds do not die” and that “if only a portion of that lost totality could be dredged up into the light of day, we should experience a marvelous expansion of our powers,” and “a vivid renewal of life” (Campbell 12). This is the power of myth of which he would speak to us in the future in his conversations with Bill Moyers. The power that storytelling has over the aspirations and convictions of human beings.

But even Joseph Campbell, living in a world of dreams, was a realist. His life and his philosophy were grounded on the idea that the individual (let us call him “the hero”) was bound to live in the real world. And that it was precisely embracing life in all its forms, with all its truths that provided for a more heroic existence. He was quick to be sobering and admonish us that “the fairy tale of happiness ever after [could] not be taken seriously” (Campbell 21). Campbell was aware of this and

he understood that mythology merely provided the tools necessary for man to confront this. Myth was not a means to change the world, but to incite “a shift of emphasis within the subject” (Campbell 21). As the unfortunate hero Nietzsche created would himself find out, Zarathustra upon his descend from the mountain was met with “blank misunderstanding and disregard from those whom he [had] come to help” (Campbell 29), because his boon upon his return had not been for mankind to assimilate, but for himself to understand. Zarathustra became obsessed with the *Übermensch* because he had the revelation that man was limited and yet craved for more. And this Campbell also understood. Consciousness seeks expression, it craves endless expression and eternity—but we are entities confined to a physical mortal body. Campbell said the individual was “limited either as male or as female; at any given period of his life” and “again limited as child, youth, mature adult, or ancient; furthermore, in his life-role he is necessarily specialized as craftsman, tradesman, servant or thief, priest, leader, wife, nun, or harlot; he cannot be all” (Campbell 330).

The Hero with a Thousand Faces is above all a deeply spiritual work. It is a book capable of reframing the worldview of the reader and a text worthy of a lifetime of study. After all, it is an interpretation of our most sacred beliefs and hopes only distilled by the mind of what Ernest Becker would have called “a thinker of heroic proportions,” a term he did apply when referring to psychologist Abraham Maslow during his research on heroism which culminated with the publication of *The Denial of Death* where some light is shed on the reluctance of the hero to embark on his journey. Maslow had this to say:

“We fear our highest possibilities (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments. [...] We enjoy and even thrill to the godlike possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe and fear before these very same possibilities. *We are just not strong enough to endure more!* [...] Our organisms are too weak for any large doses of

greatness. . . .” (Becker 48-49).

Yet, here too Campbell provided us with hope, “not all who hesitate are lost” he would go on to say, “the psyche has many secrets in reserve. And these are not disclosed unless required” (Campbell 53). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* could be regarded as a practical guide not only into the world of mythology, but into the world of adventure. I recall in one of his lectures Campbell admonishing us to say “a hearty “yes!” to adventure” that we may put ourselves in the position of confronting truths about ourselves, perhaps emanating from our unconscious mind, and find a pathway in which to realize our own personal version of cosmic heroism. Once we learn to read the symbolic language and grammar of mythology, it becomes evident that *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is the thread that weaves all the content of our collective unconscious together. It takes us in a journey through the cycle of our life, from sunrise to sunset, through the pairs of opposites, and into the belly of the beast where our strength and determination will be tested and will be rewarded with a new understanding and “The Meeting with the Goddess” whose radiance of beauty, love and wisdom heals the wounds of the heart.

As we relive this cycle, and experience rebirth into a new self each time, it is not the world that was changing because of our journey, but our perception within ourselves. Our ability to relate with others and recognize these divine qualities within themselves. No better way to incite others to explore this masterpiece than to let it speak for itself. Campbell concludes the last chapter of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* with these words:

“The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding. “Live,” Nietzsche says, “as though the day was here.” It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal—carries the cross of the redeemer— not into the bright moments of his tribe's

great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair” (Campbell 337).

Works Cited

Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: The Free Press, 1997. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008. Print.