

The Hero's Journey & Martial Arts

Every great story starts with a Call to Adventure. Answering this Call transforms an ordinary person into a hero. A hero, as defined by Joseph Campbell, is someone who accepts this challenge and willingly gives their life to something bigger than themselves. The hero goes out into the world to accomplish great deeds on behalf of their group, tribe, or civilization. This is the Hero's Journey, and I've made a career out of motivating parents to encourage their child to answer the Call to Adventure and become a hero.

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Joseph Campbell was an American mythologist, writer, and lecturer. In 1949, he published a wonderful book titled *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Whether or not you've read it, you've certainly encountered its ideas every time you've turned on the television, gone to a movie, or read a novel. It's about storytelling: myths, legends, and tales of heroes that started in caves around campfires. Every culture on the planet has had its own stories. Campbell picked up common themes in each one, details that are found all over the cultural landscape going back to the dawn of civilization.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he analyzed myths from all over the world that illustrated the stages that a hero goes through on his adventure—appropriately called The Hero's Journey. The book compared myths from different cultures that all have the same basic structure, such as the story of Ulysses, the Chinese tales of the Buddha, and the Christian parables from the Bible. While not all myths or stories have events that correspond to each stage, we can break the events in stories down into the various segments of the overall Hero's Journey.

The segments Campbell wrote about correspond with the life of the hero: separation, initiation, and return. In the separation piece, the hero is born, grows up, and is called away on a quest or adventure of some sort. The initiation is where much of the journey happens, where the hero crosses the threshold into their new world. The return signifies not only the hero coming home, but also the passing on of what they have learned.

Within these three sections, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* details the stories even further. There is the birth of the hero and the circumstances surrounding this, the stories about his upbringing, and then the introduction of an older, mentor figure. Stories often follow with an event that initiates the adventure, and from there, the hero faces many tests or obstacles he must overcome, usually with the help of some newly made acquaintances. This builds up to a final confrontation, after which the hero leaves the adventuring world and returns home, usually with knowledge or an item he brings back with him.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces demonstrates how this has been a way of telling stories from the earliest days of human interaction up until the present. It illustrates how this time-honored storytelling tradition has become rooted in the human imagination and how it can apply to any kind of tale without the story losing its mystery and power. Even though there are some stories in which this pattern may be heavily shrouded, it can still be found throughout literature and religion.

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We were introduced to Luke Skywalker in George Lucas's 1977 classic *Star Wars*, and Luke's story perfectly exemplifies The Hero's Journey. If you happen to be one of the very few people who have never seen the film, I recommend you do so immediately. It tells of an epic civil war in which a Rebel Alliance fights against the tyrannical oppression of the Galactic Empire, embodied in the dark evil of Darth Vader. The central character is Luke Skywalker, a simple farm boy living with his aunt and uncle (after his parents died, or so you're meant to think) on the sparsely inhabited desert planet of Tatooine. This is Luke's Ordinary World.

Luke has a fairly humdrum existence on Tatooine. He works on his uncle's moisture farm, and he's in charge of cleaning the droids that also work on the farm. His life is dull, and he dreams of leaving Tatooine to have adventures. His greatest complaint is that his uncle won't let him "waste time with his friends." By the time he's nineteen, most of his friends have attended the Imperial Academy, and his best friend has defected to the Rebel Alliance. While Luke's home planet seems safe and secure, there's a growing unrest in the form of the expanding conflict between the Rebels and the Empire. Luke's Ordinary World, his false sense of security, is beginning to fracture.

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The Call to Adventure sets everything in motion by disrupting the comfort of the hero's Ordinary World, presenting a challenge or quest that must be undertaken. It throws the Ordinary World off balance and establishes the stakes involved if the challenge is rejected.

Often, in literature, the Call to Adventure is referred to as the Inciting Incident, though there are a few differences. An Inciting Incident is also an "exciting incident," in that it's meant to grab the attention of the reader and initiate the action of the story. The Call to Adventure, on the other hand, isn't an attention-grabbing device. In fact, it can be something seemingly mundane: a phone call, a letter, an internal drive. The hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Once presented with this, he can no longer remain indefinitely in the comfort of the Ordinary World.

Perhaps the land is dying, as in the King Arthur stories of the search for the Holy Grail, the only treasure that can heal the wounded land. In *Star Wars*, the Call to Adventure

is Princess Leia's desperate holographic message to Obi-Wan Kenobi who then asks Luke to join him in the quest. More on that later.

The Call to Adventure establishes the stakes of the situation and makes clear the hero's goal: to win the treasure or save his home, to get revenge or right a wrong, to achieve a dream, confront a challenge, or change a life. A key point here is that the Call to Adventure will force the hero to leave everything that he knows behind. He will have to venture out into the unknown.

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Back to Luke Skywalker. In the last chapter we talked about how Luke was existing in his Ordinary World with his aunt and uncle on Tatooine, and he was feeling restless and bored with his existence. Unbeknownst to him, Princess Leia, who will later become a vitally important figure in Luke's life, had hidden information about the Empire's Death Star in R2-D2, a resourceful and spunky droid, just before the ship they were on was captured by Imperial forces. She told R2-D2 to continue her mission to contact the long-lost Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi. Commandeering an escape pod, R2-D2 and his friend C-3PO rocket away and subsequently crash land on Tatooine.

The droids were captured by little robed creatures called Jawas and sold to Owen Lars and his nephew Luke Skywalker. Later, in his attempt to clean out a jam in R2-D2, Luke releases a holographic message of Princess Leia saying, "Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope." R2 tells him (through C-3PO who frequently functions as R2's interpreter) that he is the property of Obi-Wan Kenobi. Luke doesn't know an Obi-Wan, but he is familiar with an Old Ben Kenobi who lives out beyond the Dune Sea and describes him as, "a strange old hermit."

R2-D2 escapes to find Obi-Wan, and Luke and C-3PO go after him. After an encounter with the Sand People, Ben Kenobi finds them. Luke Skywalker's Call to Adventure is beginning. Obi-Wan reveals information to Luke about his father, including that Luke's father was a Jedi. He gives Luke his father's lightsaber, "the weapon of a Jedi Knight" and tells Luke that his father was killed by Darth Vader (which, if you are familiar with the Star Wars story, isn't entirely a lie). When Obi-Wan plays Princess Leia's entire message, Luke's fate is sealed.

Here, R2-D2 is the Herald. He is bearing the desperate message from Princess Leia, one that will set Luke on his Hero's Journey. When a Herald arrives, it's best to act on whatever message he's carrying.

In Luke Skywalker we see a young man who is comfortable and safe in his Ordinary World, albeit a bit bored. There's an impending sense of doom with the conflict between the Rebel Alliance and the Empire escalating, and Luke's home will soon be in danger. A

seemingly uneventful occurrence, the purchase of a new droid, releases an imperative to act, the Call to Adventure.

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The hero, upon hearing the Call to Adventure, initially may hesitate, reluctant to leave the comfort and tasks of their everyday existence. Perhaps they're afraid of what might happen to them. Perhaps they don't see the call as important, being more engrossed in their current activity. Or perhaps they have responsibilities and do not want to leave their family.

Wavering or hesitating is part of every journey. Whenever an initiate faces the gateway to the unknown, they begin to seriously consider the risks and dangers they will face. This isn't surprising. The resistance forces the hero to understand and commit to the transformation ahead, but as the specifics of that transformation are unknown, being at least a little afraid is to be expected.

A hero is resistant to the journey because of fears and insecurities that have surfaced from the Call to Adventure. The Hero is initially not willing to make changes, preferring the safe haven of the Ordinary World. He resists the call, but with this, on some level, the hero knows that he can't REFUSE the call.

Refusing the Call to Adventure is an exit from the Journey itself. The Refusal would anchor the hero in the Ordinary World with its dissatisfaction and impending doom. Campbell recognized this danger and wrote that, "experiences that would have offered growth and liberation become threats." They remind us that, by refusing the call, we have sabotaged our future to protect our present. We have "solved" the problem by sacrificing our potentials.

Your mind isn't here to help you evolve. The job of the mind is to keep you safe. The energy of Hero's Journey is exciting and scary at the same time. It's a pulling and stretching between what you are now and what you could become. To evolve is painful and wrenching business. When you resist the Call to Adventure, the energy of the mind is coming in to protect you. Your hard-wired bias toward anything unknown and therefore unsafe is coming in and doing what it is meant to do. It is the operating system following its design to keep you safe. The shadow of doubt that has kept you safe is simply doing its job of protecting you. If you listen to this voice, let it do its job, and refuse the call to adventure, you'll wind up right back where you started. Back in safety, feeling protected.

Listening to the refusal of the call is the "Go to Jail" card in Monopoly. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200, go directly to jail! Left to your own devices, you may embrace the refusal of the call and let your mind overpower the Call to Adventure. There will be no journey down the rabbit hole, no building of the baseball field in the middle of an Iowa

cornfield, no refusing to sit at the back of the bus. Relying on your fear and uncertainty will land you back at the starting point of your dilemma.

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The hero, in his Ordinary World, has heard the Call to Adventure and, feeling afraid and uncertain, resists it. The task ahead seems incredibly difficult, and the hero is reluctant to forge into it. Okay, so the hero got cold feet. Nothing a little pep talk can't fix! Enter the Mentor or Teacher (I'll use these terms interchangeably). The Teacher provides the hero with the necessary physical, mental, and spiritual training and often accompanies the hero on the journey. The Teacher is frequently an older, wiser person who has completed their own Hero's Journey which is often one of a greater dimension.

The term "mentor" goes all the way back to Homer's classic, *The Odyssey*. In his famous epic, a character named Mentor (who is actually Athena, the goddess of wisdom in disguise), instructs Odysseus' son, Telemachus, that he must stand up against his enemies, and search for knowledge. In this instance, the knowledge in question is the whereabouts of his father. The power of what a mentor is transcends this legendary story, and finds itself present in the *Star Wars* saga in many different forms. A mentor shares knowledge and wisdom with a less experienced companion. The *Star Wars* films have some of the most beloved and inspirational Heroes in all of fiction.

Mentors exist to pass on knowledge and teach skill. They usually exhibit an intriguing balance between physical skill and existential knowledge, like Morpheus in *The Matrix*, who fights Neo while teaching him the nature of the Matrix, or Dumbledore, who teaches Harry about the power of love while standing up to Voldemort's most powerful magic throughout the Harry Potter books.

Mentors are at their best when they push the hero out of their comfort zone. Mentors don't coddle. They are often tough to the point of seeming villainous, yet they frequently build an emotional attachment to the hero. They provide situational advice flavored with personal experience and an authentic interaction with their subject. These elements add incredible depth to the relationship between hero and teacher.

The mentor's role is a fateful one. Think about it: The mentor is the character with abounding knowledge and skill. Why, then, are they not the hero? Most Hero's Journey stories are about young protagonists who come of age as they progress on their journey: Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Simba, Peter Parker/Spider Man, Dorothy. Even stories like *The Odyssey* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which feature middle-aged protagonists (Frodo seems young, but by human standards, he IS middle-aged), have Mentor characters who are much older and wiser than their heroes.

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In *Star Wars*, when we first meet Luke's mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, he is wearing an earth-tone brown robe, representative of monks, and imparts wisdom to the young Luke Skywalker. Obi-Wan Kenobi is typical of the mentor archetype: he is old, wise, bearded, and filled with Zen-inspired advice. He tells satisfying stories about the "old days" and provides gentle, constructive criticism to Luke as he learns the ways of the force.

All of these factors are reminiscent of a father figure of which, aside from Luke's Uncle Owen, who does his best but is more reminiscent of a drill sergeant, Luke is utterly lacking. Luke receives these lessons with a willingness to learn, and a hope to discover more about his real father. Ultimately, this is Luke's quest. Steeped in his Ordinary World with his aunt and uncle and his duties on their moisture farm (which itself is symbolically interesting, but I don't want to get too far off track), Luke is unaware of his destiny. He doesn't know where he came from, and he doesn't know what sort of genetic or cultural heritage awaits him.

Obi-Wan gives Luke knowledge of his father, albeit spotty and selective. He awakens in Luke the desire to learn more, to explore. Princess Leia's plea for help initially sends Luke into a tailspin of excuses and denial, but Obi-Wan mentors him until he transitions to becoming one with the living Force, and even then, his lessons help lead Luke towards his growth into adulthood.

I mentioned earlier that the Teacher often gives the hero a gift. For Luke, the gift was a lightsaber, the weapon of a Jedi knight. This lightsaber is particularly significant because it is a literal heirloom, having once belonged to his father. Obi-Wan calls it "an elegant weapon of a more civilized age." It represents a legacy Call to an Adventure that is sure to change Luke's life, yet it is incredibly dangerous to those who don't know how to use it.

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Our hero is now ready to act upon his Call to Adventure and truly begin his quest, whether it be mental, physical, spiritual, or emotional. He may go willingly, or he may be pushed, but either way, he finally crosses the threshold between the world he is familiar with and that which he is not. It may be leaving home for the first time in his life or just doing something he has always been scared to do. However, the threshold presents itself, this action signifies the hero's commitment to his journey and whatever it may have in store for him.

For Joseph Campbell, this is the stage where the hero fully enters the story's special world for the first time. This is the moment in which the story takes off, and the adventure gets going. The balloon goes up, the romance begins, the plane or spaceship blasts off, the wagon train gets rolling, or Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road. The hero is now committed to his journey, and there's no turning back.

A great example of this happens early in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Frodo has been given the One Ring, instructions from Gandalf, a magical sword, and a mithril shirt. He has set off with his closest friend, Samwise Gamgee. After they've traveled a while, there comes a point where Samwise stops, and he says, "This is it. If I take one more step, this will be the farthest away from home I've ever been." There's a great uneasiness within Sam. He hesitates and marks the moment when he crosses the threshold into what is truly unknown to him. Sam understands that it's the point of no return, and if he takes even one step further, he will be committed to the adventure, and there will be no avoiding what's to come.

Frodo tells him, "Remember what Bilbo used to say, 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step out onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.'" And Bilbo was right. Anything can happen, and there's no way out but through.

Gateways have power. When we pass through from one phase of life into another, it marks a time of great change, an unfolding into something new. We know what it means to come to a gateway, face the inevitable trials, and finally pass through. It occurs in all sorts of ways. The most common gateways are the great rites of passage which happen to all of us: birth and death. This is where we pass from the known into the unknown. This is where most philosophies and religions are able to really spread their wings and fly around in endless speculation.

There are other gateways we go through of our own accord—those gateways we work and plan toward, like graduations, marriages, and starting a family. These are thresholds we build ourselves that are of great importance and will stick in the mind because the results are truly life changing. One moment you're single, then you arrive at a church, make your vows, get a ring, and BAM! You're married! Yesterday you were a student, tomorrow you're officially a teacher, or a chemist, or an economist. One minute you've got a giant belly, and you're screaming in pain, the next, you're a mother, holding your new baby, and crying with joy at finally seeing that face you've been wondering about for so long. The gateway is crossed in a moment, but the work to get there was probably done over years.

Then there are all the small transitions that take place over the course of a life; thousands of tiny, great moments that change us, bit by bit. Maybe it's realizing we have a skill, encouraging words from a teacher, a terrific new job, a special day with a parent or child, making a wonderful new friend, or finally getting to kiss that person you've had a crush on. These might be small events, but they go far in shaping who we are, creating a patchwork of experiences.

Back to the hero's threshold, which is no small thing. Idioms like, "the die is cast" and "crossing the Rubicon" point to this moment of crossing the threshold. The hero must

complete the journey if they ever want to get back home. There is no turning back, and there is opposition at the threshold.

In Joseph Campbell's research, he found a whole category of characters known as "Threshold Guardians" who appear right when the hero starts his quest. Sometimes they guard the threshold consciously, like castle guards or protectors of a certain territory. Other times they guard it unconsciously, forcing the hero to act in a way that complicates the action. More on this later.

Thresholds are dangerous places. They present a barrier to prevent us from crossing into places even more dangerous. We've been warned from day one about the dangers of going into the woods at night, onto the moors, into deserted places, on the open oceans for "Here be dragons." Our folklore has populated these places with demons, ogres, and all manner of evil spirits meant to scare us and keep us safely in the world we know. The hero forges past this and so begins his adventures.

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So far, we've seen Luke in his Ordinary World where he has responsibilities and obligations, but he's mostly bored with what's going on around him. He receives his Call to Adventure when one of his uncle's new droids plays a portion of a message from Princess Leia. He then meets Obi-Wan Kenobi who tells Luke that he must come with him to Alderaan to help the Princess. Luke basically tells him, "No way José! I can't do that! But I can take you as far as Anchorhead and you can get a transport there."

Upon finding that his aunt and uncle have been killed, Luke's resistance to the Call has vanished. He's ready to Cross the Threshold, and the first step he takes is smack into Mos Eisley Spaceport. Obi-Wan tells him, "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy." The transition is striking. Here, Luke doesn't know the rules. He has entered an entirely new, foreign realm and truly leaves his past behind him.

But first, there, right on the Welcome mat just the other side of the threshold, are the Threshold Guardians. For Luke, they take the form of Stormtroopers stopping his landspeeder. They pose a definite threat, and if Luke is unable to get past them, he cannot continue on his Hero's Journey. He cannot go any further than the Threshold. Here, Luke's Teacher steps in and uses the Force, something Luke will begin training in, to persuade them to leave Luke alone. "You don't need to see his identification.... these aren't the droids you're looking for."

The new, unexplored territory is precisely the galaxy that Luke will encounter once he leaves Tatooine. The Cantina, then, serves as a microcosm of the galaxy-at-large, a cross-section of intriguing and frightening beings he may (and will) come across as he ventures forth. Very quickly, though, Luke discovers that this realm, with all of its fascinating strangeness, is also incredibly dangerous. Only moments after his entrance

into the Cantina, Luke is accosted by two individuals who wish him harm because they “don’t like him.” In fact, one will even level a death threat at the Luke. Nothing says “Welcome to the Real World” like your life being threatened.

Of course, we can feel bad for the poor kid receiving the threat, but this danger is also necessary for Luke, even if it seems sudden and extreme. More dangers await Luke in the future and, frankly, he has to start growing up at some point, leaving his boyish immaturity behind. Metamorphosis is crucial for the hero, and transformation will only happen as he encounters the realities of this new realm. The Cantina in Mos Eisley will launch Luke headlong into his journey.

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When Joseph Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he was drawing upon millennia of myths and stories that described the journey a hero takes from his starting point, or Ordinary World, out into the unknown where he encounters all manner of challenges and then returning to his home a changed individual, better for his travels. The book ranks among the top one hundred most influential books because it strikes a chord. We see our lives in its pages.

The Hero’s Journey is important because it’s personal. We are all the heroes of our own lives. We are the protagonist in our own story, and the Hero’s Journey is a map to life. Whether you wield a lightsaber or not, we are all on this same journey, and knowing where you are will give you a glimpse into where you are headed.

Our children need heroes. As a parent, we can inspire them and be a powerful role-model. We are a character who shows that life is an adventure that comes with troubles and hardships, enemies, and danger, but always ends well. As long as the hero doesn’t give up, victory is possible.

Every good movie, book, or story typically has a myth in the middle – The Hero’s Journey. Helping your child understand the Hero’s Journey within a movie, cartoon, or fairytale (here we used *Star Wars*) is a fantastic way to teach them how to develop a moral compass of integrity, resilience, and compassion.

The Hero’s Journey contains central resilience-forming ideas:

- Helps children understand the importance of individual strengths
- Introduces the benefits of learning from mistakes
- Empowers children to make decisions
- Recognizes the importance of being open to support
- Promotes qualities such as integrity, persistence, and kindness

- Demonstrates how behaviors affect others
- Stresses the importance of generosity
- Helps kids understand that life's events aren't random
- Teaches the importance of discipline in life

Your children will face massive change throughout their lives, just like you did. Through that change, they will gain greater insight into their identity and capabilities. The sooner they find out that life carries trials, tests, and difficulties, the better equipped they will be to face them. With morally balanced and highly accountable heroes in your child's immediate surroundings, they will learn to embrace change in life as they embark on their beautiful journeys and adventures. Including you, the biggest hero of all.

Are you ready to become that hero for your child? Are you ready to set them on a path in martial arts training? Are you ready for your child to meet their teachers and cross their thresholds? Show them that their hero's story is evolving and beginning, and that you will be there for them every step of the way.