

# Beyond The Hero's Journey

'Joseph [Campbell] is my Yoda.' – George Lucas<sup>1</sup>

IN 1984, AT AN EIGHTIETH BIRTHDAY celebration for mythologist, philosopher and scholar, Joseph Campbell, George Lucas suggested that, were it not for Campbell he might still have been writing *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977). Lucas' infamous indebtedness to Campbell has introduced film-makers, screenwriters and movie buffs the world over to Campbell's mythological tome, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*,<sup>2</sup> which distils all stories down to a monomyth – 'the hero's journey'. *The Hero ...* is, undoubtedly, Campbell's most famous work, with the ideas it espouses becoming a twelve-step programme in mythic story structure for Hollywood screenwriters in recent years; however, Campbell's body of work is vast and he has far more to share with the film-maker than just his work on mythical structure and Jungian archetypes.

Alongside his better-known work on myth, it is Campbell's personal observations on the operation of the human psyche in his journals and lecture notes, that give valuable insight into the artistic process, steeling the director/screenwriter for the tumultuous journey of bringing a film to the screen, and providing clues as to why



characters do what they do in our stories. In these less-renowned writings, Campbell beautifully articulates hunches that the reader may have had about human behaviour, based on their own observations. As one Campbell fan put it, 'Joe helped me know what I knew'.<sup>3</sup>

For those who are unaware of how Campbell's ideas came to be Hollywood gospel, what follows is a potted history woven from the many varied translations of the story. In the early 1990s, a Disney script assessor, Christopher Vogler, released a seven-page memo on Campbell's thesis to the heads of the studio. The suits went buck-wild over it and promptly released the memo to all creatives working with Disney at the time.<sup>4</sup> The 'hero's journey' would become a standard structure for Hollywood

movies, with many execs looking for hallmarks of the hero's journey in all scripts that passed their desks. Vogler turned his memo into *The Writer's Journey*,<sup>5</sup> a 315-page practical guide to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* which boils the hero's journey down to its essential elements in a less scholarly fashion than the original Campbell text, and relates it directly to the screenwriter. In a nutshell, the hero is discovered in the 'ordinary world' before a call to adventure. The hero refuses the call but meets a mentor who gives the hero the strength to cross the first 'threshold' (into act two). The hero is then tested by enemies and obstacles of increasing magnitude until a 'supreme ordeal' followed by a reward. There is then (in act three) a return to the 'ordinary world' but with an elixir, something to make the ordinary world a better place.

Critics suggest that Hollywood has too strictly adhered to the 'hero's journey' structure and there has been backlash in recent years, not so much against Campbell's work but against Hollywood's appropriation of his ideas and the standardization of screen stories. The hero's journey, however, need not be anywhere as simplistic as in the brief *précis* above.

As Vogler puts it, the myriad possibilities within 'the hero's journey structure' is why the hero is said to have 'a thousand faces'.<sup>6</sup> Whether 'the hero's journey' continues to dictate the structure of Hollywood movies, or some other proposed monomyth is seized upon, those who choose to discover Campbell's other revelations on the meanderings of the human spirit will unearth a direct analysis and commentary on the inner search that the myths point us towards.

## BEYOND THE HERO

Lucas acknowledged the enormous value of Campbell's understanding of human nature beyond *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* when he facilitated American journalist Bill Moyers in bringing Campbell out to Skywalker Ranch for a series of one-on-one

reference to 'the Force' and 'the Dark Side' is 'good, sound teaching', explaining that the idea of a 'God' on high has been blown away and that young people are now being taught to go and find the Force inside themselves, rather than looking to some external power for guidance. 'This is why Oriental gurus are so convincing to young people today.'<sup>10</sup>

Campbell discussed the writer's process with Moyers, quoting Tonio from Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kroger*: 'The writer must be true to truth'. Of this idea Campbell said, 'The only way you can describe a human being, truly, is by describing his imperfections ... This is what Mann called "erotic irony", the love for that which you are killing with your cruel, analytical word'.<sup>11</sup>

Campbell was a great proponent of

impulse', paralleling W.B. Yeats who said, 'The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens which have fallen from the shoulders of the priests'.<sup>12</sup>

*However small be the size of the thing that the true Artist creates there is in that thing The totality of the universe.*<sup>13</sup>

Campbell urged creative artists and students to 'Live from [their] own center'<sup>14</sup> famously coining the phrase, 'Follow your bliss'.

*If you follow your bliss, you will always have your bliss, money or not. If you follow money, you my lose it, and you will have nothing.*<sup>15</sup>

Campbell told Moyers that *Star Wars'* reference to 'the Force' and 'the Dark Side' is 'good, sound teaching', explaining that the idea of a 'God' on high has been blown away and that young people are now being taught to go and find the Force inside themselves, rather than looking to some external power for guidance.

interviews. According to Campbell biographers Stephen and Robin Larsen, Lucas funded the project with no real knowledge of how the interviews would be used.<sup>7</sup> Campbell was eighty years old at the time and, in over forty hours of conversations from 1985-1987, he riffed on everything from the Upanishads' revelation that 'all the gods, all the heavens, all the worlds, are within us'<sup>8</sup> to the *Star Wars* garbage compactor's likeness to the belly of the whale into which Jonah was swallowed.<sup>9</sup> The interviews would become *The Power of Myth*, the PBS series that brought Campbell's academic ideas into the consciousness of the wider American population.

In the Skywalker Ranch interviews, Campbell discussed many ideas relevant to storytelling and the process of film-making, relating ancient teachings to popular cultural elements and modern life.

Campbell told Moyers that *Star Wars'*

ritual, of investing secular activities with greater spiritual significance. When asked by Moyers why television creates celebrities, objects of gossip, while cinema creates 'gods', models for society, Campbell suggested that it may be 'because we see TV personalities in the home instead of in a special temple like the movie theater'. Interpreting the act of gathering at the cinema as a ritualistic deed and recognizing the deep-seated need for humans to share entertainment in a group together, invests the work of making movies with a significance that we don't often recognize.

## ART AND BLISS

Campbell spent much of his life connecting with artists and attempting to understand the artistic process and from where in the unconscious great art arises. Biographers Larsen and Larsen write that 'Campbell depicted the artist as the contemporary inheritor of the living human spiritual

Another of Campbell's ideas that is relevant to the movie-maker is his belief that 'the warrior's approach is to say "yes" to life: "yea" to it all'.<sup>16</sup> This is similar to the Buddhist idea of 'participating joyfully in the sorrows of the world', and Campbell believed that we must accept and move forward in spite of the less attractive and joyful aspects of existence. 'The world is not perfect. It's a mess. It has always been a mess ... Our job is to straighten out our own lives.'<sup>17</sup> This seems to be essential advice for anyone heading out on a creative path, particularly a creative path as fraught with logistical, economic and technical landmines as is that of the film-maker.

In terms of the writer and director's approach to story and subject-matter, Campbell maintained that great storytelling dwells beyond all opposites, beyond duality:

*When you distinguish between good and evil*

*you've lost the art.  
Art goes beyond morality.*<sup>18</sup>

Campbell also held that the individual life is art, often relaying a phrase from his French artist friend Bourdelle, who said 'It is the personality which tells the tale'. The Larsens offer an interpretation of this idea:

*For he or she who would be a major creative artist or authentic contributor to world culture, the personality becomes his/her instrument, well-tuned, through which the inexhaustible creative forces of life will manifest.*<sup>19</sup>

This seems to be an important concept for the writer or storyteller but also, perhaps, for the individual character. If you can invest your own life with rich and rowdy experience then perhaps your characters are also destined to dance. As Campbell aptly charges, 'Experience is the food of the soul'.<sup>20</sup>

#### **ADVICE FOR THE FILM-MAKER**

The turbulent and chaotic process of film-making necessitates that a great number of people have an impact on a story on its way to the screen. It is the most logistical of all art-forms and the writer or director can easily fall prey to the storm of production concerns involved in bringing a story before the cameras, drowning the initial seed of creative instinct that attracted them to the project in the first place, and crushing that connection to story that must be preserved in order to allow the tale to unfold over the months and years it takes to bring the film to fruition. Campbell articulates the need to maintain connection to that initial seed, in spite of the turbulent production process, with a relevant anecdote from his days as an athlete at Columbia University:

*The handling of the body in combat or in competition is a function, really, of a psychological posture. There has got to be a still place in there and the movement has to take place around it. I can remember two important races that I lost because I lost the still place. The race was so important that I put myself out there to win the race*

*instead of to run the race. And the whole thing got thrown off.*<sup>21</sup>

Like much of Campbell's writing, this idea seems relevant to almost every aspect of life but is particularly apt for the peculiar challenges of making movies. On another obstacle, one of the most common impediments for the writer, Campbell wrote:

*Writer's block results from too much head. Cut off your head. Pegasus, poetry, was born of Medusa when her head was cut off. You have to be reckless when writing. Be as crazy as your conscience will allow.*<sup>22</sup>

This license to be bold is one of the most attractive aspects of Campbell's writing. Drawing on ancient teachings from all the world's cultures he provides the motivation and courage that is so necessary for traversing the seemingly impracticable road towards bringing something coherent to the screen.

A bit of advice given to a young Native American at the time of his initiation:

*As you go the way of life,  
you will see a great chasm.  
Jump.  
It is not as wide as you think.*<sup>23</sup>

The ideas relayed in this essay no doubt fuel and are fueled by the mythical concepts depicted in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, but they also stand alone as, perhaps, a more palatable and readily understood guide for life and for character than the direct re-telling of a myth. These writings are commentary on the interior journey presented as an exterior metaphor in myth. For those who gripe that Campbell's take on Jung's theory of archetypes is too prescriptive and results in broad, undefined characters, this other aspect of Campbell's writing feeds material for characters who move beyond archetype and become living, thinking, awkward, grappling beings like us. To reduce one's reading of Campbell to 'The Hero ...' is to miss some of the juiciest and most life-affirming aspects of Campbell's knowledge,

which kept thousands of students at New York's Sarah Lawrence College enthralled and in awe of Campbell for his thirty-eight years of teaching; and this is why, I imagine, George Lucas calls Campbell his 'Yoda'.

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#### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Stephen and Robin Larsen, *Joseph Campbell, A Fire in the Mind*, Inner Traditions, Vermont, 1991, p. 542.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, 1993.
- <sup>3</sup> Stephen and Robin Larsen, op.cit., p. 550.
- <sup>4</sup> David Dale, *Essential Places*, Picador, Sydney, 1996, p. 96.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Michael Wise Productions, Studio City, California, 2nd edition, 1998.
- <sup>6</sup> Vogler, *ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen and Robin Larsen, op. cit., p. 549.
- <sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Main Street Books, Doubleday, New York, 1988, p. 39.
- <sup>9</sup> Campbell with Moyers, *ibid*, p. 146.
- <sup>10</sup> Brian D. Johnson and Susan Oh. 'The Second Coming: As the newest *Star Wars* film illustrates, pop culture has become a new religion', *Mark Maclean's*, May 24, 1999, p.14.
- <sup>11</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, op. cit., p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Stephen and Robin Larsen, op. cit., p. 102.
- <sup>13</sup> Larsen, *ibid*.
- <sup>14</sup> Joseph Campbell, Diane K. Osbon (eds), *Reflections on The Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion*, Harper Collins, New York, 1991.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 286.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 281.
- <sup>19</sup> Stephen and Robin Larsen, op. cit., p. 94.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 101.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 270.
- <sup>23</sup> Joseph Campbell, Diane K. Osbon (ed), op. cit. p. 26.

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