

**CRITICAL COMMENTARY FOR A *WRITER'S*  
*JOURNEY***

**The Hero's Journey as a Metaphor for the  
Creative Process**

**(25,600 words)**

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## INTRODUCTION: THE CREATIVE QUEST

*A Writer's Journey* is a memoir that relates how, after being successfully published, I develop a creative block during which I am no longer able to intuit a plot. I perceive this not as lack of knowledge or technique, but as a failure of the imagination. I can no longer make the imaginative leaps required to connect the dots and allow the storyline to unfold.

In researching the creative process in order to resolve this block, I discover that attitudes endorsed by Eastern philosophy and mindfulness (such as beginner's mind, mindful awareness, non-attachment and loss of ego) are also attitudes conducive to the creative process. I therefore embark on a quest to recover my creativity and complete my work-in-progress by adopting an attitude of mindful awareness and recovering my own 'beginner's mind'. Ultimately, I fail to complete my novel. However, accepting failure serves to deconstruct the successful 'persona' I had been clinging to, and facilitates the very attitudes I had been trying to cultivate: non-attachment, loss of ego, and beginner's mind. This allows me to start again as a beginner. *A Writer's Journey* therefore describes two simultaneous journeys: a journey through a creative block, and a spiritual journey.<sup>1</sup>

In writing the memoir, however, a third paradigm emerged: as a quest narrative in which the goal is creativity itself, *A Writer's Journey* aligns the stages of the creative process with the mythic archetype. So, the memoir aligns three paradigms: the mythic archetype, the creative process, and spiritual growth.

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<sup>1</sup> In using the term 'spiritual' I offer the definition provided by Sam Harris in *Waking Up: Searching for spirituality without religion*, in which he says that spirituality can be taken to mean simply, 'Deepening that understanding [of the way things are], and repeatedly cutting through the illusion of the self.' See: Sam Harris, *Waking Up: Searching for spirituality without religion*, (London: Black Swan, 2014), p. 9.

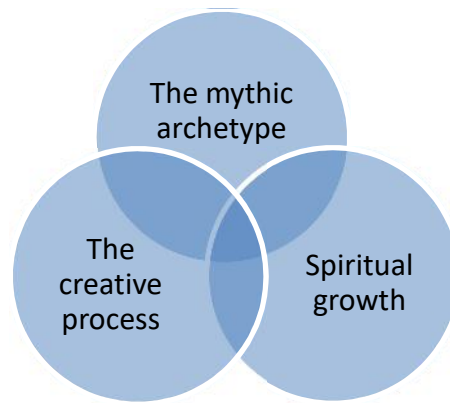


Fig. 1: *A Writer's Journey* aligns three paradigms: the mythic archetype, the creative process and spiritual growth.

In the following chapters I make a close analysis of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, *The Hero's Journey*, identifying parallels between each stage of this archetype and the stages of the creative process. I conclude that the archetype could be read as a metaphor for the creative process, and that the message implicit in all stories is 'live creatively'. I suggest that the central point at which all three paradigms overlap represents the 'deconstruction of the self' that occurs in the death of the egoic self during the Belly of the Whale motif, and during the incubation stage of the creative process. This is also the state of mind achieved through the practice of mindful awareness. I also identify the ways in which *A Writer's Journey* adheres to both paradigms, thereby supporting the mythic approach to creativity.

But first, in Chapter 1, I establish a critical context for *A Writer's Journey*. I also reflect on the process of writing the memoir and describe how, by 'storying' my creative journey as narrative nonfiction, the stages of the mythic archetype revealed themselves.

## CHAPTER 1: STORYING MY CREATIVE JOURNEY

In his article in the *New Yorker*, ‘Cry Me a River: the rise of the failure memoir,’ Giles Harvey reports an epidemic of failure memoirs,<sup>2</sup> in recent years, by ‘literary screw-ups’ who have failed to write and/or publish. ‘The formula is simple,’ says Harvey, ‘when all else fails, write about your failure.’<sup>3</sup> The appeal of these memoirs, Harvey suggests, lies in the fact that everyone is afraid of failure, and that these tales of personal unravelling allow us to feel a frisson of danger while simultaneously reaffirming our own relative security. However, these memoirs tend to be focussed on the repercussions of failure upon the narrators’ personal lives, rather than on their creative processes.

Whilst I also wanted *A Writer’s Journey* to address the impact that my creative block had on my personal life, my primary motive was to explore the effects of failure on the creative process itself. It was the acceptance of my own failure that allowed me to recover the mindfully aware attitudes of non-attachment, non-judgement, and beginner’s mind that are so conducive to creativity, and I wanted to show how these attitudes apply to the creative process of writing.

Although there are books on the market that approach creativity and creative writing as a mindful or spiritual process<sup>4</sup> I was unable to find a personal account of one author’s journey through a creative block. I hoped *A Writer’s Journey* might be the sort of book I myself had tried to find when struggling with my own creativity. As a blocked writer, I had wanted to explore the creative process vicariously, through the experiences of another individual, rather than read another instructional text on how to write or how to be creative.

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<sup>2</sup> Titles mentioned in the article include *Too Good to Be True* by Benjamin Anastas, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) *Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time* by David Goodwillie (Algonquin Books) and *Failure: An Autobiography* by Josh Gidding (Cyan Communications).

<sup>3</sup> Giles Harvey, ‘Cry Me a River: the rise of the failure memoir’, *The New Yorker*, 25 March 2013, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/03/25/cry-me-a-river>> [accessed 24 July 2016] (para. 1 of 29).

<sup>4</sup> Dorothea Brande’s book *Becoming a Writer* (Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (New York: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1981)) advocates relaxation and meditation as a way to prepare the mind for creative insight. Julia Cameron’s book *The Artists’ Way* (Julia Cameron, *The Artists’ Way*, (New York: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 2002)) draws heavily on spiritual quotes, and includes exercises and activities designed to promote a more spiritual attitude toward the creative process. Osho also writes about creativity from a spiritual perspective (Osho, *Creativity: Unleashing the Forces Within* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1999)). More recently, Dinty Moore’s book *The Mindful Writer* (Dinty Moore, *The Mindful Writer* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications; 2012)) promotes ‘mindfulness’ as a writing tool.

My initial drafts were arch and turgid. I knew that I was speaking down to the reader, because the material was all ‘telling’ and not ‘showing’. I was merely reporting what I had learned from the perspective of someone who had finished learning and wanted to inform the reader of the results, rather than allowing the reader to experience my journey with me.

## **Constructing the Self in Personal Narratives**

In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick explores the art of personal narrative. She states that, ‘good writing has two characteristics. It’s alive on the page and the reader is persuaded that the writer is on a voyage of discovery.’<sup>5</sup> As a fiction writer, I already knew that the most important thing in any story is that the reader must identify with a sympathetic protagonist and want to go with them on their adventure. Since I was the protagonist of *A Writer’s Journey*, my readers needed to be able to identify with me. I realized that I needed to adopt the stance of the learner, rather than the expert, and that I needed to relate my experiences themselves rather than the lessons I had taken from them.

Initially, I found it difficult to write about myself. The pronoun ‘I’ felt egotistical and self-absorbed. However, in her unfinished memoir, *A Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf makes the statement that although she reads many memoirs, most are failures because they are mere narratives of events and ‘leave out the person to whom things happened.’<sup>6</sup> So, instead of trying to take an objective, all-knowing stance, I decided to embrace my own subjectivity as being the only authentic perspective I could offer.

To adopt the stance of a learner I began writing fragments in the present tense, describing my experiences as accurately as I could from the perspective of the person I had been when I experienced them. Curiously, the more closely I described my thoughts and actions, the more objective awareness I was able to achieve – exactly the premise upon which mindful awareness rests. I began regarding myself as a character, instinctively exaggerating for effect, or leaving certain scenes or feelings out because they didn’t serve the narrative. For example, I portrayed my despair in the opening chapter as being more demonstrative than it was in reality. Later, to make my motives clear to the reader, I depicted my desire to recover my creativity as being more purposeful and focused than it really was. I was effectively turning myself into a type by wilfully manipulating the ‘real’ me either by embellishment or

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<sup>5</sup> Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings by Virginia Woolf* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 73-161 (p. 79).

omission. Nonfiction was turning into creative nonfiction. I was ‘storying’ my experience. In the process I had become a character, and the most important characteristic of my persona was that I was a learner on a quest to recover my creativity. As Gornick observes, ‘out of the raw material of a writer’s own undisguised being a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told. This narrator becomes a persona.’<sup>7</sup> Like the protagonist of a novel, the persona of my memoir possesses false beliefs or flaws which, during the course of the story, are challenged and overturned to allow her to grow and develop.

Despite the freedom I felt to objectify myself, however, I knew that it was important that my persona be believable. One way to do this, says Gornick, is by becoming ‘the voluntary truth speaker, the one who implicates himself.’<sup>8</sup> With retrospect, I realized that this was what I was doing when I inserted the unflattering image of myself ‘slumped in a back alley,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 32) and later revealed the extent of my neuroticism at the emotional awareness retreat. Trust is also established if the narrator is able to laugh at herself, and invite the reader to laugh with her.<sup>9</sup> I was able to laugh at myself, and did so by (for example) including the image of the interview jacket with the bustle,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 9), which I actually purchased but didn’t hang on the back of the wardrobe door. None of this was premeditated. It arose as the result of achieving a more objective distance from my own persona as I wrote. The more objectivity I achieved, the more I was able to see the ridiculous side of things and was better able to make fun of (and implicate) myself.

According to Gornick, the detached perspective of the narrator also ‘allows the narrator to engage in a kind of self-investigation, the kind that means to provide motion, purpose, and dramatic tension’.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, without any distance between the persona in the story and the person narrating the story, there can be no story. It is the tension between who the author was then and who they are now that generates suspense. The reader reads in order to reconcile these two perspectives and understand *how* this transformation occurred, rather than whether the transformation happened or not. This sort of tension is can be found in memoirs like *Sunbathing in the Rain* by Gwyneth Lewis, who describes her journey through depression.<sup>11</sup> I

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<sup>7</sup> Gornick, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, *Tell it Slant: Creating, Refining and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, 2nd edn. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> Gornick, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Gwyneth Lewis, *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book About Depression* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).

had begun reading Lewis's memoir when I went to see her give a reading, so I already knew that she had triumphed over her condition. But knowing the outcome of her journey did nothing to lessen my desire to continue reading her book. On the contrary, my curiosity was heightened. I realized I was reading not to find out where Lewis ended up, but to find out how she got there. I wanted to go back and take the journey *with* Lewis so that I could learn what she had learned.

In order to create sufficient distance between my persona in the narrative and the person now recalling it, I exaggerated the *literal* truth in minor ways. Nevertheless, I did not feel that the exaggeration of my persona was a falsification of the *emotional* truth – and in some ways, I felt this manipulation was crucial, since only by focussing on (and exaggerating) certain aspects could I make the deeper truths more obvious. The aim of my memoir was to demonstrate how I had moved from a learner to a more experienced person in one particular aspect of my psyche: my creativity. To achieve this, I first needed to give the reader a clear sense of a 'learning' persona. Then, during the course of the narrative, I needed to deconstruct this persona before finally reconstructing it as a character who has learned and grown as a result of her experiences – just as I would if I was creating a character in a fictional narrative.

### **Narrative in Memoir**

As I wrote, I adhered to the true chronology of events as far as possible, and on a macro scale the narrative arc unfolded much as it did in reality. But particularly in the early chapters my learning journey was less linear than is depicted in the memoir. In reality, I encountered books in random order, dipping between several books at once, fitting new knowledge into my existing understanding, and often returning to books I had read previously with a new awareness.

In life (as in the mythic archetype), stages can be recursive or endure a disproportionate duration, relative to the stages represented in Campbell's model. In my memoir, for example, some stages are only momentary in real time – like my apotheosis on the hilltop (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 162). Others, like my Road of Trials, during which I dipped in and out of many books and tried many different ways of meditating and being mindful with inconsistent results, actually had/have no true beginning or end. However, lengthy and recursive learning journeys like this would bore readers if recounted with chronological accuracy. However, transient moments such as my experience on the hilltop require a disproportionately lengthy



analysis, in order to reflect their importance. So, it was with the reader's experience in mind that I instinctively manipulated the narrative so that events (and information) unfolded in a way that served the narrative and serviced what my persona most needed to know next. I crafted the narrative so that each section linked to the section before and after with a certain causality, and my persona's learning was scaffolded.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, it was the learning journey of my persona that dictated the order of events and the shape of the narrative.

I also manipulated the chronology of events by including dreams and memories that had surfaced in my consciousness while I was writing, but which had not necessarily occurred to my persona at the time suggested by the narrative. For example, I inserted a memory about my trip to Canada while sitting by the river Bute (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 18), and reflected on my childhood reading (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 27) a little later in the narrative – when neither recollection had occurred to my persona at that particular time. I also allowed my persona to re-read 'Cathedral' immediately after receiving the rejection email from her publisher, although this re-reading really happened much earlier – or later – I no longer know which. This process of constructing the narrative from real but chronologically disparate recollections felt like building a drystone wall out of memories. I often placed one stone beside the next only to realize it did not fit seamlessly, or that there was a gap in which a smaller piece of missing information needed to be inserted to maintain continuity. 'Fit' was my priority. I trusted that if each stone, or scene, locked into place, the finished structure would be strong. That the finished structure adhered to the mythic archetype occurred to me only much later, when I was assessing the overall structure of my narrative. The motifs of the Hero's Journey emerged as a by-product of my creative process, and as a consequence of the scaffolding of the stages in the learning journey of my 'protagonist'.

## **Memoirs About Reading**

My learning journey was directed and scaffolded by the texts I encountered. As I wrote my memoir, my explication of these texts expanded and the texts themselves began to provide the stepping stones around which I could structure the narrative. Describing my feelings about these books and their authors allowed me to acknowledge the emotional impact of my reading journey, and also to turn their authors into mentors who helped me on my journey.

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<sup>12</sup> In education 'scaffolding' can be defined as 'a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding.' Source: *The Glossary of Education Reform*, <<http://edglossary.org/scaffolding/>> [accessed 10 August 2016]

I began to realize that my memoir could be situated as a ‘reading memoir’. Reading memoirs are a relatively small and recent niche that includes titles such as *How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I’ve Learned from Reading Too Much* by Samantha Ellis<sup>13</sup>, *The Year of Reading Dangerously: How Fifty Great Books Saved My Life* by Andy Miller,<sup>14</sup> or *The Child that Books Built*, by Francis Spufford<sup>15</sup>. These authors reflect upon the books they’ve read, and/or the effect these books have had upon their lives. Reading memoirs can restrict themselves to titles on a particular theme; in Ellis’s memoir, she re-reads the novels featuring her favourite childhood heroines in order to reassess their qualities now that she’s an adult. In Spufford’s *The Child that Books Built*, Spufford reflects upon the books that influenced him as a child.

Alternatively, the narrative can revolve around the books the authors read to help them navigate a particularly challenging time in their lives. In Miller’s *Year of Reading Dangerously*, he reads to ‘better himself’ and re-engage with life. In Azar Nafisi’s, *The Republic of Imagination*<sup>16</sup>, Nafissi (previously a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran), meets with a group of women to read and discuss literature, after the Iranian government prohibits the teaching of certain classic texts. And in *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair*<sup>17</sup>, Nina Sankovitch discusses the therapeutic power of the books she read during the year following the death of her sister. The narrative of reading memoirs, like all narratives, builds around the learning journey of the narrator and/or reader.

Unlike the memoirs mentioned above, in *A Writer’s Way* I read nonfiction rather than fiction. My goal was not to read for pleasure or for therapeutic purposes, but to understand the mechanisms of a specific process: creativity. My reading journey takes place during (and as a consequence of) a creative block during which I am unable to finish writing my novel. I read texts that focus on the themes of creativity and/or Eastern philosophy (in the form of mindful meditation and mindful awareness). However, although I *begin* reading for the purpose of restoring my creative block, I conclude by having learned a new attitude for living.

My motivation for recording this reading journey in *A Writer’s Way* is to explicate the information contained within these texts from the perspective of a novice reader – in addition

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<sup>13</sup> Samantha Ellis, *How to Be a Heroine: Or, What I’ve Learned from Reading Too Much* (London: Vintage, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Andy Miller, *The Year of Reading Dangerously: How Fifty Great Books Saved My Life* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Azar Nafisi, *The Republic of Imagination* (London: William Heinemann, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Nina Sankovitch. *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

to showing how my reading journey influenced my own life. So, *A Writer's Way* differs from the reading memoirs I have found in two respects: it explicates nonfiction rather than fiction, and the texts focus on the themes of creativity and/or mindful awareness in an attempt to resolve a creative block.

The reading memoirs mentioned here alternate scenes from their daily lives with reflections on the texts and reflections on broader issues to which the texts relate. This allows the author to include 'the person to whom things happened',<sup>18</sup> and it creates narrative tension as well as making abstract ideas concrete. For example, Spufford introduces each chapter with a scene from his own childhood that introduces the topic the chapter discusses; he describes the experience of learning to read when he had mumps and began 'thinking in words' to introduce a chapter on the neurology of linguistics pp. 64-65, and a road trip to visit De Smet, the setting of *The Little House on the Prairie*, to introduce a chapter about community in children's books. Nafisi alternates conversations with the women in her book club with analysis of the texts they read, and wider political reflections.

In *A Writer's Way*, the texts I read inform my life experiences, and my life experiences inform my understanding of the texts themselves. To demonstrate this, as well as to reveal myself in the memoir and thereby create narrative tension, I introduced scenes describing my experiences at meditation retreats, mindfulness classes, conversations with my friends and family, and accounts of my writing and work life serve. This was a delicate balance, since much of my learning was taking place inside my own head, which can result in a disproportionate amount of internal monologue. Also, the activity of writing itself is uninteresting to watch. So, I introduced memories and conversations that I felt illuminated the ideas I was reading about, even if those particular scenes may not have taken place at that particular time or place.

## **Truth in Memoir**

As my narrative grew more 'creative' I began to fear that I would no longer be able to call it a memoir if places, names, and the chronology of events weren't literally true. But what is truth, in any case? How objectively do we remember anything? Memory is subjective and selective, and I had no way of gauging how objectively I had recalled even the scenes I believed I had described most truthfully. However, I did my best to preserve the integrity not

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<sup>18</sup> Woolf, p. 76.

only of the facts but of the emotional and intellectual truths that the narrative was revealing. As Siri Hustvedt describes in 'The Real Story':

The implied contract between writer and reader [of memoir or autobiography] is simple: the author is not prevaricating. This contract holds even though the explicit, conscious memories we retain are only a fraction of what we remember implicitly, unconsciously, and the autobiographical memories we keep are not stable but subject to change, as Freud repeatedly observed.<sup>19</sup>

Because of these limitations, says Terry Eagleton in *How to Read Literature*, 'all narratives must be ironic. They must deliver their accounts while keeping their own limitations constantly in mind. They must somehow incorporate what they do not know into what they know.'<sup>20</sup> In fact memory, say Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola in *Tell it Slant*, is 'an "imagining" of the past, re-creating the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches'.<sup>21</sup>

Recollection, then, is a creative process. Eagleton's phrase 'incorporating what we do not know into what we know' feels particularly significant here; it could serve as a description of the creative process itself. Recollection allows us to 'fill the gaps'. As Hustvedt explains, '[m]emory, like perception, is not passive retrieval but an active and creative process that involves the imagination.'<sup>22</sup> But this is not to imply that the imagination (or the creative process) fabricates the truth. On the contrary, as the process of writing my memoir became more creative, my unconscious provided many images, memories and symbols that I believe gave me a *more* accurate insight into the events I was recalling. Hustvedt describes this process in writing a novel, as follows:

In the free play of the imagination, in the words that rise from unconscious sources, as well as in the bodily rhythms that accompany the act of writing a novel, I am able to discover more than I can when I simply try to remember. This is not a method for disguising reality but for revealing the truth of experience in language.<sup>23</sup>

The memories and symbols that arose in the text as I was writing provided clues that were relevant to my persona's journey, but which may not have entered my consciousness at the time. For example, only while I was writing about the 'imperative' of the river Bute did it

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<sup>19</sup> Siri Hustvedt, 'The Real Story', in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2012), 94-115 (p. 94).

<sup>20</sup> Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Miller and Paola, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Hustvedt, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111.

occur to me that the river itself was a symbol of my own rushing imperative, and that what my persona really needed was to ‘merge with the tide’ or to ‘go with the flow’. This metaphor arose in the writing, and its appearance in the text itself informs both the reader (and the writer) about the underlying themes. I wonder now whether, if I had journaled this moment at the time, I might have made the connection then:

Today the river Bute is full and brown and sluggish, heavy with silt it picked up on its journey. It doesn’t have far to go now before it meets the estuary and becomes the sea. It must be a relief, I think, to let go of that imperative and merge with the tide,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 17).

Another example is the appearance of the falling leaves as a metaphor for surrender in the scene at the retreat where I am reflecting on the nature of freedom. I noticed the symbolism of the leaves only when I was writing – not when I was actually standing there, by the fire. And only later, after writing this scene, did I come across the Osho quote likening individuals to ‘small leaves on an infinite tree of life,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 124) and then insert it into the text as a way of highlighting the metaphor. It is as though my persona was noticing significant details that *I* may not actually have registered at that particular time. Only in the process of writing these recollections did the significance of these images enter my awareness.

Complete objectivity and truth might be neither an attainable nor useful goal in memoir, in any case. Gornick defines memoir in these terms: ‘memoir is neither testament nor fable nor analytic transcription. A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom’.<sup>24</sup> It is the job of the narrating self, then, to ‘shape experience’ in order to deliver to the reader the wisdom that the *self within the narrative* acquires as the result of their experiences. My primary loyalty was to the integrity of the narrative – just as in writing fiction – and my goal was always to reveal the true motives, emotions and underlying themes, and communicate these clearly to the reader. So, although events may not always have occurred in the order I describe, conversations have not been transcribed verbatim, the reactions of my persona may sometimes have been exaggerated for effect, and my recollection of events will have been subjective, my intention

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<sup>24</sup> Gornick, p. 91.

was not to mislead but to reveal truth. *A Writer's Journey* is therefore presented as a memoir. Nevertheless, as a precautionary measure I added a disclaimer to the front pages.

Most importantly, a memoir needs to make it clear that the narrator is on a journey of becoming. A narrative arc in which the hero or heroine 'emerges reborn', says Hustvedt, contributes to the fact that many successful memoirs *read like novels*.<sup>25</sup> In the narrative arc of both the successful memoir and the novel, the hero or heroine faces challenges and obstacles which nearly defeat them, then triumphs against all odds and grows as a result. The narrative arc of *A Writer's Journey* revealed the same pattern: I had constructed a persona who experiences a problem and then sets out into the unknown to face challenges and obstacles, before facing a crisis during which her identity as a writer is challenged. Finally, she emerges as a new type of writer with a new approach to creativity. Her personality has been transformed. This pattern emerges in most stories where the protagonist shows character development, and is reflected in the universal symbolic story structure (or mythic archetype) as depicted by Joseph Campbell in his monomyth, *The Hero's Journey*. The protagonist of the archetype is therefore constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

### **The Mythic Archetype, Personality Transformation and the Creative Process**

The relationship between the mythic archetype and personality transformation is recognized in psychotherapy. Ernest Lawrence Rossi, a Jungian psychoanalyst, draws on both Carl Jung and Campbell's work in exploring the role of the mythic archetype in the creative process of personality transformation.<sup>26</sup> To illustrate the parallels between psychology and the creative process, Rossi describes a case study in which Jung's 'constructive' or 'synthetic' method of mind-body healing is employed. This method explores the products of the unconscious in order to gain insights. Rossi describes four stages of the creative process (data collection, incubation, insight or illumination and verification) and compares them with the psychotherapy cycle (patients explain their problems, patient engages in an internal review, patient experiences an insight, patient and therapist develop a behavioural prescription to apply to life). Rossi's diagram (Fig. 2) shows how the four stages of the creative process are

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Ernest Lawrence Rossi, 'The Symptom Path to Enlightenment: The Psychobiology of Jung's Constructive Method,' *Psychological Perspectives*, 36:1, (1997), pp. 68-84.  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00332929708403330>> [accessed 18 February 2016]

aligned with the four stages of psychotherapy in order to facilitate personality transformation – and how these stages are also aligned with the stages of the mythic archetype.

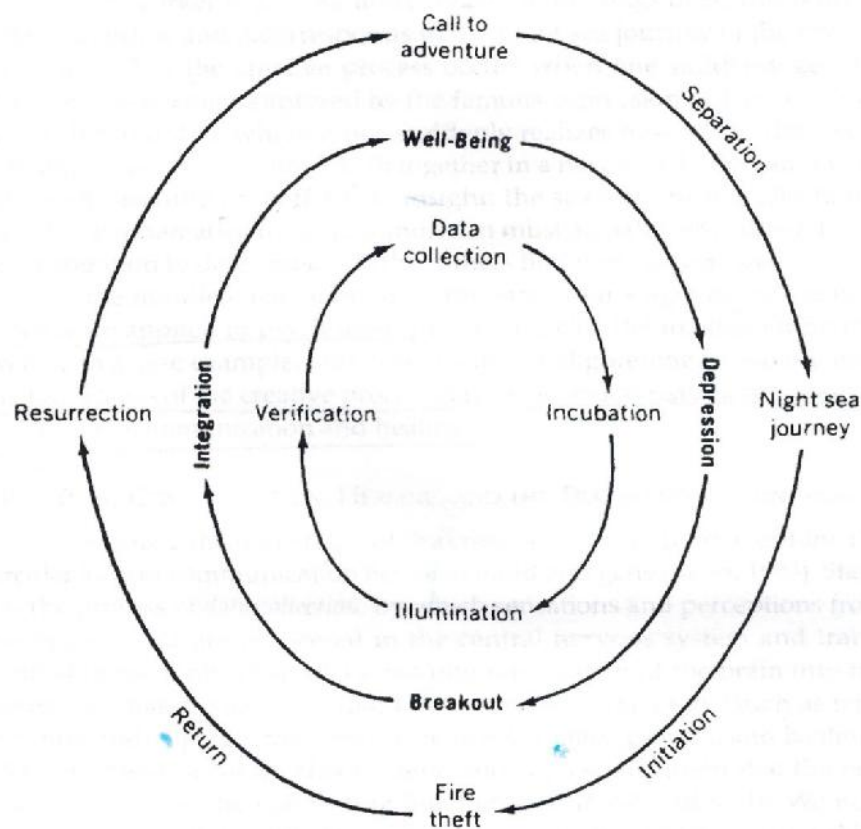


Fig. 2: A mapping of the four stages of the creative cycle (inner circle), onto the four stages of psychotherapy (middle circle), and Joseph Campbell's monomyth, The Hero's Journey (outer circle).<sup>27</sup>

Parallels between the mythic archetype and the stages of the creative process have also been noted by C. R. Ananth Rao in a study that compared Helmholtz's four-stage model for the creative process with the storylines of three Indian myths.<sup>28</sup> Rao identifies the stages of the creative process in all three stories. One particular story from the first section of the *Rama Yama* (which recounts how the story of Rama is revealed to Valmiki, inspiring him to produce the very first work of poetry) can be seen as a complete paradigm of the creative process, and Rao concludes that 'mythic models therefore offer a valuable vantage point from

<sup>27</sup> Rossi, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> C. R. Ananth Rao, 'Myth and the Creative Process: A View of Creativity in the Light of Three Indian Myths,' *Creativity Research Journal*, 17 Issue 2-3, (2005), pp. 221-240.

which to study real-life creativity.’<sup>29</sup> Rao calls this narrative approach to creativity the ‘mythic approach to creativity’, and believes that myths provide valuable insight into the creative process. This mythic approach to creativity is supported by *A Writer’s Journey*.

Rao then explores parallels between the archetypal motifs in these three Indian myths and the creative careers of the scientist Marie Curie, novelist Patrick White and mathematician Srinivasta Ramanujan.<sup>30</sup> Rao concludes that the creative careers of each of these individuals did not conform to the structure of any single myth exclusively. However, certain themes, such as a sense of marginality, a persistent physical and moral struggle, a defeat of the inner-ego, the existence of a mentor and the phenomenon of ‘revelations’ in the apparently inactive period after hard work – were common both to the characters in these Indian myths, and to Curie, Ramanujan and White.<sup>31</sup>

In the next section I show how *A Writer’s Journey* aligns the stages of my own creative process and the creative process more generally, with the structure of the mythic archetype, thereby demonstrating a mythic approach to creativity.

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<sup>29</sup> Rao, p. 222.

<sup>30</sup> Rao, p. 222.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.



## CHAPTER 2: A WRITER'S JOURNEY – THE MYTHIC APPROACH TO CREATIVITY

### The Mythic Archetype

Aristotle believed that the ability to plot a story was the most important aspect of writing.<sup>32</sup> As I discovered myself, without a satisfying structure a piece of work often feels unresolved and unsatisfying, no matter how well-crafted the sentences and paragraphs. A story without a plot doesn't seem to go anywhere. A plot, says Eagleton, is 'the significant action in the story. It signifies the way in which characters, events and situations are interconnected. Plot is the logic or inner dynamic of the narrative.'<sup>33</sup> A plot could also be described as a series of events linked by causality, which create a structure that provides dynamic tension for the reader. The structure of a story is not something arbitrary or stylistic, then, but is integral to the way a story functions. So, if there is a universal form or structure that myths adhere to, what shape might this form take, and what might it reveal about the function of stories?

The quest to identify a universal story structure is ongoing. 'From the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century', says John Yorke, in *Into the Woods*, 'via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, we have been trying to determine the mechanism by which stories "work"'.<sup>34</sup> These efforts have produced various models including the 3-Act paradigm, the 5-Act paradigm, and the 8-point story arc,<sup>35</sup> and despite their variations, these structures all tend to share common or archetypal elements or motifs, each reflecting a certain situation or pattern of behaviour. These archetypal elements were explored by Joseph Campbell in his monomyth, or universal story structure, *The Hero's Journey*.

Campbell wanted to understand why mythology everywhere was the same, 'beneath its varieties of costume',<sup>36</sup> and what this consistent structure had to teach. So, he organized these archetypal stages into a mythic pathway or 'monomyth' called *The Hero's Journey*, (Fig. 3).

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Tierno, *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, (New York: Hyperion, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Eagleton, p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How stories work and why we tell them* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. xii.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen May and Nigel Watts, *Write a Novel and Get it Published: Teach Yourself* (London: Hachette, 2012), p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 13.

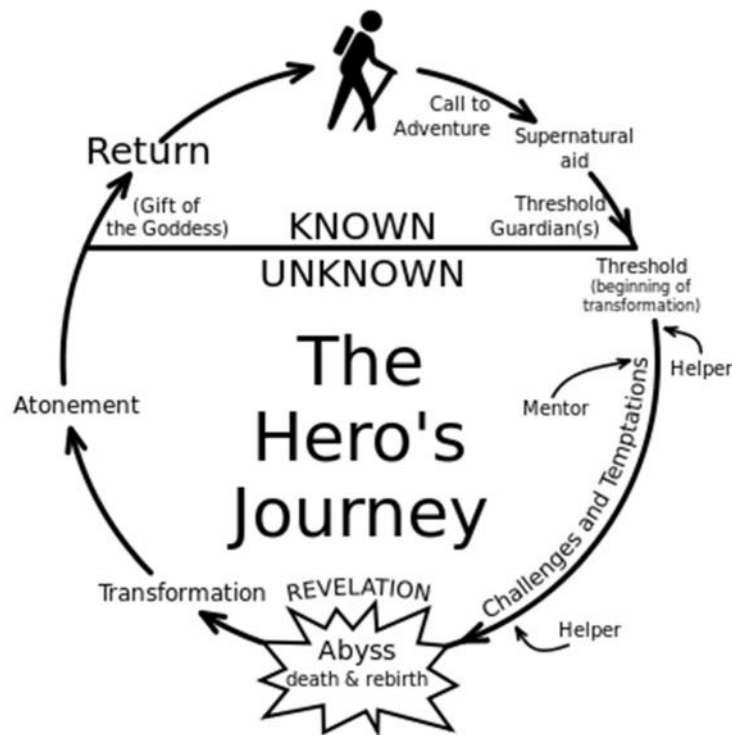


Fig. 3: The Hero's Journey.<sup>37</sup>

Campbell's succinct description of the monomyth is as follows: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.'<sup>38</sup> Typically, the hero faces various challenges and meets archetypal characters who perform specific roles. He confronts a dragon or the equivalent, and either dies or appears to die in order to be resurrected. Only then does he receive a boon, or gift, which he takes back to the known world to benefit humanity. Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey*, recognized the pattern of the monomyth in contemporary literature and film, and interpreted Campbell's structure for use by Hollywood screenwriters. The Hero's Journey, says Vogler, represents 'the pattern that lies behind every story ever told'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Unknown, The Hero's Journey, (Wikipedia Commons, 2009)  
 <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heroesjourney.svg?uselang=en-gb>> [accessed 20 February 2014]

<sup>38</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 10.

Despite its widespread application, Campbell's theory of the monomyth has received criticism from those who challenge its tendency to see things in generic terms and limit its focus to similarities.<sup>40</sup> Robert Ellwood states in *The Politics of Myth*, that the monomyth has, 'a tendency to think in generic terms of people, races ... is undoubtedly the profoundest flaw in mythological thinking.'<sup>41</sup> Ellwood says, 'While myth may have universal themes, concrete myths are always particular, of particular cultures and times, pointing to the specific form wisdom took in a certain people on a certain soil'.<sup>42</sup> To [Campbell's] scholarly tongue, says Ellwood, 'these particulars are subordinated, for it is the universal that gives power'.<sup>43</sup>

In *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, Alan Dundas accuses Campbell of being a universalist and a populariser. In the introduction to an essay by Robert A. Segal, Dundas draws attention to Campbell's description of 'the *worldwide* [Dundas's emphasis] womb image of the belly of the whale'. Campbell's description is inaccurate, claims Dundas, because Campbell can provide examples of only two myths in which a character finds themselves in the belly of a whale. Dundas also questions whether 'people who have never seen a whale have traditional myths recounting the adventures of a hero in the "belly of a whale"'? This criticism appears to be disingenuous, however, since Campbell describes this motif as symbolic of 'the unknown' and certainly does not believe that every culture contains a story in which a character – literally – finds themselves in the belly of a whale. In this example, an accusation of imprecise writing might be more accurate.

Nevertheless, that the monomyth lacks ethnographic context is undeniable. I would argue, however, that the purpose of Campbell's model is to identify *commonalities* across cultures rather than to draw attention to the differences. An exploration of how myths are influenced by different cultures is important from an ethnographic perspective, but by identifying the motifs and archetypes that cultures have in common, the monomyth offers a picture of what may link humanity beneath cultural differentiation.

At the same time, Ellwood raises concerns that 'it cannot be denied that Campbell had some sort of recurrent emotional problem with both Jews and Judaism' and that 'one is left with an unpleasant feeling of something very narrow lurking within the broad mind of the world-

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<sup>40</sup> Alan Dundas, 'Joseph Campbell's Theory of Myth' in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. x.

<sup>42</sup> Ellwood, p. 172.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

scanning mythologist'.<sup>44</sup> However, these accusations are largely founded, as Ellwood acknowledges, on anecdotes and second-hand reports, and there is little to support these claims in Campbell's own writing. In any case, myth, as Ellwood admits, 'deals almost entirely in generic "archetypal" categories, reducing individuals (and races or peoples) to types and roles, stereotyping them as Hero or Trickster, as Good or Evil.'<sup>45</sup> So, antisemitism is not inherent in the archetype.

Campbell has also been accused of making unsubstantiated claims. "Like most universalists," claims Dundas, "he is content to merely assert universality rather than bother to document it. [...] If Campbell's generalizations about myth are not substantiated, why should students consider his work?"<sup>46</sup> It may be true that, although Campbell provides many examples of myths that support his model, his theories are 'imposed and not derived'<sup>47</sup> and that 'instead of arguments, Campbell makes assertions'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as Segal suggests, Campbell has 'yet to prove that his interpretation of myth is correct'.<sup>49</sup> But popularizing an idea, or making assertions rather than academic arguments does not disprove a theory, either. If Segal could provide evidence that disproves Campbell's assertions that myths are psychological, symbolic, spiritual and universal, he might better substantiate his own claims here.

And although the monomyth is a generic model, it is not intended to be a prescriptive template. As Vogler demonstrates, contemporary writers have found it adaptable enough to be applied to a range of narratives in a variety of contexts. The motifs of the archetype can be represented by the type of characters and challenges that reflect the values of the author or society in which the myth originates; the hero of Campbell's monomyth can have – as the title of his book suggests – a thousand different faces. And the model is not static. Campbell himself admits that, 'Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle [...]. [O]thers string a number of independent cycles into a single series [...]. Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes.'<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, as Clarissa Pikhola Estes observes in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, 'for all the structural tumble-down in

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>47</sup> Segal, Robert A., 'Joseph Campbell's Theory of Myth' in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 264.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>50</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 213.

existing versions of tales, there is a strong pattern that still shines forth. [...] The more story bones [we discover] the more likely the integral structure can be found.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the adaptability and durability of the mythic archetype, some writers still view the structure of the monomyth as a manufactured construct with an ideological purpose, however. As Yorke states in *Into the Woods*, ‘there’s an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it’s where mediocrities seek a substitute muse’.<sup>52</sup> For some writers, this ‘formula’ feels restrictive. Frank Cottrell Boyce describes the three-act structure (which conforms to the shape of the monomyth) as ‘a useless model. It’s static.’<sup>53</sup> As a writer myself, I would agree that imposing any sort of template on the unknown while creating a first draft would inhibit creativity. And yet, as Vogler observes (and as my experience in *A Writer’s Way* supports) ‘the way stations of the Hero’s Journey emerge naturally even when the writer is unaware of them.’<sup>54</sup> I argue earlier that this is because the monomyth is not a social construct but a product of our psyche, which emerges despite our conscious intentions.

Another common criticism of the monomyth is that it focuses on the masculine journey. When Maureen Murdock, author of *The Heroine’s Journey*, spoke with Campbell to enquire about the feminine journey, she reports that Campbell told her women didn’t need to make the journey. He said, “In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is realize that she’s the place that people are trying to get to. When a woman realizes what her wonderful character is, she’s not going to get messed up with the notion of being a pseudo-male.”<sup>55</sup> This answer stunned Murdock, who found it deeply unsatisfying. Unsurprisingly, she and the women she knew did not want to be ‘there’, embodying Penelope, waiting for their hero to return. They did not want to be ‘handmaidens of the dominant male culture’.<sup>56</sup>

As the heroine of my own journey, I too would be dismayed if this was Campbell’s intention. But I wonder whether Campbell was describing *the role of the women in the myths* he studied – and the *symbol of the feminine* in his monomyth – rather than describing the role that

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<sup>51</sup> Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, (London: Random House, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> Yorke, p. xv.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 224.

<sup>54</sup> Vogler, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Murdock, Maureen, *The Heroine’s Journey: Woman’s Quest for Wholeness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1990), p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

Murdock other women should assume? It is no surprise that Campbell made the hero of the monomyth masculine – after all, the heroes in the myths that Campbell studied were mostly male. But this is surely a reflection of the patriarchal societies who told these stories; Campbell did not say that a woman could not choose to take the hero's role. In fact, Campbell specifically states that masculinity is not a prerequisite for the role of hero. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he defines the hero as 'the man *or woman* [my emphasis] who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms.'<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, it may be useful to apply a feminine language to the stages of the mythic archetype in a society in which women also want to be free to make heroic journeys. In *The Heroine's Journey*, Maureen Murdock uses feminine language to address a woman's search for wholeness in a society in which she believes the woman's role has been defined according to masculine values. She believes that women have suffered from a 'separation from the feminine' and describes society's definition of the feminine as 'dependent, overcontrolling, and full of rage'.<sup>58</sup> She claims that the shape of the monomyth has not served women in today's society because the male quest is not satisfying. Women who struggle to succeed in all spheres, she reports, find themselves 'filling every spare moment with *doing*'<sup>59</sup> and need to listen deeply to the self again and engage in '*being* instead of *doing*'<sup>60</sup>. What has happened to these women, says Murdock, is that 'they didn't travel far enough on the road to liberation. They learned how to be successful according to a masculine model, but that model did not satisfy the need to be a whole person'.<sup>61</sup> Milner advocates a return to the feminine, which is the reintegration of a woman's playful, sensuous, passionate, nurturing, intuitive, and creative aspects',<sup>62</sup> and she accepts that her model addresses the journeys of both genders, since men may be facing similar challenges.<sup>63</sup>

Milner then refers to the monomyth as 'the old story' and says that 'the quest for the "other", for title, attainment, acclaim, and riches, for one's fifteen seconds of fame in the news is no longer germane.'<sup>64</sup> However, Milner appears to have neglected to consider the stage of the

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<sup>57</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> Murdock, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. P. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

monomyth that comes *after* the struggle on the Road of Trials: death in the Belly of the Whale. As I describe later, the surrender or egoic death of the hero in the Belly of the Whale represents the dissolution of the hero's personal ambition, and an attitude of acceptance or passivity, which both heroes *and* heroines need to experience in order to be creative. Only then can the boon be achieved. So, the monomyth does not require the hero to keep on striving until they achieve their 'boon' and then return home a hero. Nor is it 'empty and dangerous for humanity'.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the monomyth requires that the hero *surrender* their egoic self and integrate their masculine and feminine aspects to move beyond duality. In addition, the Apotheosis motif of the monomyth represents a state of mind in which the hero is 'being' rather than 'doing', as Murdock advocates. In fact, with further investigation, Murdock and Campbell's models appear to be synonymous.

Finally, Campbell is criticized by Ellwood because he 'extols the heroic radical individualism he perceived in the American past and its traditions' and 'saw the saving of the world not in "collective" institutions, but in the transformation of individuals with the help of the power of myth'.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps Ellwood's real concern is that he mistrusts individuals and believes that people need 'telling where to go', rather than following their own bliss wherever it may lead. 'Living myth,' says Ellwood, 'tells us where we are culturally, but it does not tell us where to go, or what is right and wrong, until it has itself slipped into the past to become, officially or by consensus, received myth.'<sup>67</sup> But who would we look to, to tell us where to go or what was right or wrong, if not other individuals?

Ellwood seems to hint at an answer in the next passage. He says that, 'the mythologists have found a way to make values and feelings very close to those of religion accessible to many at least partially secularized people', but he criticizes these mythologists as having sidestepped the question of 'truth' and instead emphasising 'meaning'.<sup>68</sup> Does Ellwood believe we need an 'objective truth'? He says that:

In a semisecularized and rampantly pluralized world in which the hold of objective religious truth is increasingly problematic, but in which religious questions and yearnings are certainly real, mythology is a viable and not ignoble alternative to a stark choice between dogmatic religion and sheer secularism.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>67</sup> Ellwood, p. 175.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

What does this leave that is of enduring value? <sup>69</sup>

Robert Ellwood was Professor of Religion, Emeritus, at the University of Southern California. Perhaps he believes the ‘objective truth’ of a religious doctrine is necessary in order to prevent individuals seeking only to benefit themselves at the expense of others. On the back cover of *The Politics of Myth*, Carl Olson says, ‘Moreover, Ellwood helps us to understand why someone might be attracted to fascism, and how it can be interpreted as a spiritual revolution’.

But this fear neglects to consider (or misunderstands) the stage of the mythic archetype that requires the death of the hero’s egoic self. Self-sacrifice is required by the hero of the monomyth in order to receive the gift that they bring back to benefit society. The hero’s journey is not self-serving at the expense of his fellow man. On the contrary, the hero’s journey benefits himself *and* his fellow man. Azar Nafisi’s definition of American individualism in *The Republic of Imagination* reflects a more optimistic view of humanity. She says that, at its best, American individualism is:

‘... about ‘ordinary individuals [...] who have to choose between what they are told they should do and what they feel to be right. This, to me, is not phony adventurism of the kind advertised by Sarah Palin’s Alaska but a quiet and unobtrusive moral strength. [These heroes] ‘fight conformism, as well as the Ayn Randian concept of the superman who rises up against the inconsequential and vulgar mob and is free to implement his own self-serving conception of justice.’<sup>70</sup>

Ellwood asks what mythology leaves that is of enduring value. I suggest that mythology leaves the mythic archetype: a model for creative growth that shows how the individual can embark upon a spiritual quest directed not by any outside doctrine, but by an inner wisdom which adheres to universal laws for which the ‘objective truth’ of religious doctrine is just a metaphor.

So, regardless of the gender of the protagonist and the absence of ethnographic context, the ‘old story’ is not over, as Murdock suggests.<sup>71</sup> In fact, ‘when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions,’ says Campbell, ‘of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>70</sup> Nafisi, p. 144.

<sup>71</sup> Murdock, p. 184.



obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.’<sup>72</sup> As I state in Chapter 3, I believe this is because the function of the archetype is to map the process of creative and/or spiritual growth. It is significant that Vogler defines the hero as the individual who learns or grows most in the course of the story.<sup>73</sup> And Campbell himself claims that the mythic archetype maps ‘an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom)’.<sup>74</sup> Campbell describes the hero of the monomyth as ‘symbolical of that divine *creative* [my emphasis] and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and reordered into life’.<sup>75</sup> The ‘hero’ of the monomyth is therefore simply a character who demonstrates creative growth. Later in this chapter I explore the striking similarities between each stage of the mythic archetype and each stage of the creative process, and I suggest that the true value of the monomyth is that it is a metaphor for the creative process itself.

### **The Creative Process**

There are various theoretical models for the creative process. An early model was described in 1891 by Hermann von Helmholtz, a German physician and physicist, whose four-stage model of creativity (Preparation, Incubation, Illumination or Inspiration, and Verification) is still applied today.<sup>76</sup> In *A Writer’s Journey*, I record James Webb Young’s interpretation of the creative process as described in his book *A Technique for Producing Ideas*: gathering raw material, brooding over the material, giving up and turning your attention to something else, then bringing your idea in to the real world to see if it has merit (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 17). John Kounios and Mark Beeman, experts on the neurological basis for insight, divide the creative process into the four stages of Immersion, Impasse, Diversion and Insight.<sup>77</sup> And in *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discusses how the creative process traditionally involves five steps: a period of preparation, of ‘becoming immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues’, followed by a period of incubation, during which ‘ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness, which leads to one or more insights followed by a period of evaluation during which the

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<sup>72</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 323.

<sup>73</sup> Vogler, p. 37.

<sup>74</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 213.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> Rao, p. 237.

<sup>77</sup> John Kounios and Mark Beeman, *The Eureka Factor: Creative Insights and the Brain*, (London: Windmill Books, 2015), p. 18.

person ‘must decide whether the insight is valuable and worth pursuing’ – and finally, elaboration, which consists of applying the insight or doing the work.<sup>78</sup>

These models are not prescriptive. Each stage may not always be apparent, and certain stages may be revisited many times during the creative process. As Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges, ‘this classical analytic framework leading from preparation to elaboration gives a severely distorted picture of the creative process if it is taken too literally.’<sup>79</sup> The creative process is recursive rather than linear. Nevertheless, in models of both the creative process and the structure of the monomyth, certain motifs or stages can usually be recognized.

It is because *A Writer’s Journey* is both a quest narrative *and* an account of the creative process that the analogous stages in both the mythic archetype and the creative process became apparent. Initially, I realized that the mysterious process of incubation – during which the thinking mind ceases trying to work the problem out, and problems are instead churned over below the level of consciousness – could be compared with the process of surrender or egoic death in the archetypal motif of the Belly of the Whale. Here, the hero also momentarily lets go of conscious striving. It was also clear to me that in both the structure of the archetype and in the creative process, an egoic ‘death’ is followed by an insight or ‘gift’. Until we stop consciously thinking about creative problems, switch off our logical and rational mode of thinking and allow the mind to wander, we cannot achieve new insights.

In addition, the preparation stage of the creative process, during which the creative person gathers information and endures a period of uncertainty and dialectic tension, was similar to the Initiation stage of the monomyth during which the hero faces trials and challenges in the region of the unknown, and lessons are learned. And the denouement of *A Writer’s Journey* revealed parallels between the Return stage of the monomyth (where the hero returns home to share their new knowledge with their community) and the final stage of the creative process: verification, during which an insight is applied in practice and deemed useful or not. In my own case, my return involved bringing a new attitude and theme to my work, which I could then share with others (and potentially, publish). Only when I could stand back from my material and assess the shape of my memoir did it become apparent that the narrative arc of *A Writer’s Journey* closely followed the stages of The Hero’s Journey. Vogler also recognized

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<sup>78</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), pp. 79-80.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

the ‘jobs and despairs of being a writer’ in the pattern of the monomyth.<sup>80</sup> But of course, the hero of the journey need not be a writer, or indeed any other creative practitioner. The hero simply needs to be a person who grows.

In writing this commentary I did consider referring to the hero as ‘s/he’, but because the hero of the archetype is masculine, and Campbell consistently uses ‘he’ and ‘himself’ in referring to the hero, I felt that retaining the masculine pronouns allowed me to quote and paraphrase these ideas more congruently. However, while I continue to refer to the hero or creative individual as ‘he’, the hero can be assumed to be either male, female or gender-neutral throughout. The gender of the creative hero is not a defining factor either in the monomyth or in the ideas expressed in this commentary.

In the following sections, I show how *A Writer’s Journey* aligns the motifs of the monomyth with the stages of the creative process and conclude that this memoir supports a mythic view of the creative process.

## **Departure**

### **The World of Common Day**

The first stage of the hero’s journey identified in Campbell’s monomyth is The World of Common Day – also referred to by Vogler as The Ordinary World. This place represents the status quo that exists before the hero’s journey begins. It frames the hero and sets modern-day stories in motion.<sup>81</sup> Sometimes, heroes are unaware there is anything wrong with their Ordinary World and don’t see any need for change. They may be in a state of denial.<sup>82</sup> It is just as likely, however, that before their journey begins the hero may ‘be restless, uneasy, and out of sync with their environment or culture’.<sup>83</sup> In fact, the composite hero of the monomyth, says Campbell, is frequently unrecognized or disdained. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a sort of deficiency.<sup>84</sup>

In *A Writer’s Journey* the opening chapter frames my journey and introduces my World of Common Day. Here, I describe myself lying supine on my bed while the ‘sounds of the world’ can be heard outside, thereby setting myself apart from the hustle and bustle of life.

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>81</sup> Vogler, p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>84</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 36.

This reflects my feelings of being separate, or stuck. The rejection email on my computer screen presents me as being (or feeling) ‘unrecognized or disdained’, and my sense of unease is clear. Later, I provide context by introducing some backstory explaining that I had been trying to plot a novel for a long time, during which ‘my world has shrunk to the bedrooms of rented house shares’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 9). Like Campbell’s hero, I too am out of sync with my environment. I have marginalized myself, wilfully setting myself apart from my contemporaries and the rest of the world.

In fact, says Rao, ‘marginality appears to be an inherent condition of both the creative individual and the mythic protagonist.’<sup>85</sup> Marginality is not always imposed on heroes or creative individuals from the outside. It may be self-inflicted, as in my own case, and could be viewed not as *being* marginalized but as being independent or solitary. Indeed, most authorities, says Anthony Storr in *The Dynamics of Creation*, agree that ‘one of the most notable characteristics of creative people is their *independence*’.<sup>86</sup>

It may be a feeling of being out of sync with their environment or of not being whole or being deficient in some way, which spurs the hero to act and drives the creative individual to create. In fact, Storr speculates that the man impelled to create ‘may be impelled by the need to reunite himself with a world from which he feels alienated, and thus come to build creative bridges between subjective and objective.’<sup>87</sup>

### **The Call to Adventure**

The beginning of the hero’s journey is marked by the Call to Adventure. The Call to Adventure also goes by other names, says Vogler, such as the inciting or initiating incident, the catalyst, or the trigger.<sup>88</sup> It is something that disturbs the status quo and prompts the hero to leave home.

In *A Writer’s Journey*, the Call to Adventure or inciting incident is the rejection email that ends my state of denial and forces me to accept that my efforts in my World of Common Day have been unsatisfactory. I must face the fact that whatever I am doing is not effective. I cannot doggedly continue in the same way. I need to do something else, something different, something new – but I don’t know what. Consequently, I feel lost and anxious. ‘When

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<sup>85</sup> Rao, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 189.

<sup>87</sup> Storr, p. 188.

<sup>88</sup> Vogler, p. 99.

“something happens” to a hero at the beginning of a drama,’ says Yorke, ‘that something, at some level, is a disruption to their perceived security’.<sup>89</sup>

A disruption to perceived security would appear to be a precursor to the creative process, too. In *The Act of Creation*, Koestler claims that:

The challenge which sets the [creative] process going is in all cases a traumatic experience: physical mutilation or mental laceration – by data which do not fit, observations which contradict each other, emotions which disrupt approved styles in art: experiences which create mental conflict, dissonance, perplexity. The ‘creative stress’ of the artist or scientist corresponds to the ‘general alarm reaction’ of the traumatized animal; the anabolic-catabolic sequence of de-differentiation and reintegration corresponds to the destructive-constructive sequence in the creative act.<sup>90</sup>

So, creative growth requires the destruction of the status quo in some way. The status quo may be disrupted by a specific incident, or it could be disturbed by an increasing sense of dissatisfaction in the protagonist. Either way, there is a feeling that things are not quite right or do not ‘fit’, and this creates tension.

The hero may also encounter a Herald archetype during the Departure stage, and this motif serves as a catalyst for action. As Vogler describes:

Often a new force will appear in Act One to bring a challenge to the hero. This is the energy of the Herald archetype. Like the heralds of medieval chivalry, Herald characters issue challenges and announce the coming of significant change.<sup>91</sup>

The Herald motif in *A Writer’s Journey* could be represented by Raymond Carver’s short story, ‘Cathedral’. The story reminds me that change is necessary and possible. In the memoir I describe this incident as a chance encounter, since my eyes ‘happen to alight’ upon this book on the shelf. In reality, my re-reading of ‘Cathedral’ happened at another time and place entirely, but the memory of it surfaced while writing this scene, and it seemed the right moment to insert it. Appearing here, ‘Cathedral’ acts as the herald for my persona in *A Writer’s Journey*. It provides me with the inspiration I need to cross the threshold and enter the unknown.

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<sup>89</sup> Yorke, p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books, 1964), p. 467.

<sup>91</sup> Vogler, p. 61.

Because *A Writer's Journey* describes a quest for creativity itself rather than a creative quest for some other attribute or goal, the inspiration that my persona requires at this point is a reminder that creative growth in and of itself is possible and valuable – which is the message of ‘Cathedral’. In her book *The Storm of Creativity*, Kyna Leski describes the role of inspiration in the creative process as follows:

Inspiration induces an open mind through the realization that there is something unknown that is palpable or on the cusp of knowing. [...] In creative practice, it is important to dwell in that space, because when you do so, absent your preconceptions, you learn to dwell in the uncertain.<sup>92</sup>

The Call to Adventure, therefore, is an invitation to act: to do things differently and to enter the unknown. Any incident that serves as a call to adventure disturbs the status quo and creates a feeling of disharmony in the protagonist. Nothing will be the same again; what was once sufficient is now unsatisfactory. The creative hero now has a choice: he can act to rectify the situation, which requires him to venture into the unknown. Alternatively, he can refuse to change.

### **Refusal of the Call**

The hero goes forwards in his adventure until he comes to the ‘threshold guardian’ at the entrance to the zone of ‘magnified power’.<sup>93</sup> This zone of magnified power may be frightening and unknown, and entering it presents a challenge that is represented by the threshold guardian. At this point, fear often causes the hero to refuse the call to adventure.

A reluctance to leave the known world and enter a state of ‘not-knowing’ can also inhibit the creative process. Not-knowing is stressful; the unknown is frightening. It is no surprise then that, as Campbell points out, ‘[t]he usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored.’<sup>94</sup>

Describing the archetypal hero who refuses the call to adventure, Campbell says, ‘[w]alled in by boredom, hard work, or “culture”, the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved’.<sup>95</sup> In my own case, I suspect that I had been

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<sup>92</sup> Kyna Leski, *The Storm of Creativity*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 71.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

refusing the call for some time, walling myself in through hard work, remaining stubbornly in my World of Common Day for fear of abandoning my book and trying something new.

A similar 'refusal of the call' in the creative process might manifest itself as procrastination. Rollo May describes how the sculptor, painter and draughtsman Alberto Giacometti 'would often disconsolately occupy himself for half an hour or more doing odds and ends with his sculpture, literally afraid to start on the painting.'<sup>96</sup>

It should be said, however, that, not all who hesitate are lost. 'Willed introversion, in fact, is one of the classic implements of relative genius,' says Campbell, 'and can be employed as a deliberate device. It drives the psychic energies into depth and activates the lost continent of unconscious infantile and archetypal images.'<sup>97</sup> In this case, a refusal of the call may be a wise decision. Likewise, in the creative process, a refusal of the call may serve to prevent our forcing a creative piece of work on before we have mentally processed it sufficiently or made the unconscious connections that will bring the work to its full potential.

Eventually, however, a willingness to act is essential for both the hero of the monomyth and the creative individual – and the attitude required for crossing the threshold and entering the unknown is courage. Interestingly, the word 'courage' derives from the Latin *cor*, which means 'heart'. Now that the hero or the creative individual has left the known world they can no longer rely on their intellect, or what they know. Instead, they must act intuitively. This requires an open heart and a high tolerance for uncertainty.

A tolerance for the state of 'not-knowing' is a pre-requisite for creativity. After all, how will we make new connections if we refuse to (at least temporarily) let go of the old ones and reside in a state of uncertainty? As Leski describes:

When you rid yourself of your preconceptions through unlearning, you leave an absence. That absence creates both a need and awareness. The need is the want to know, induced by not knowing something or no longer "knowing" what you think you knew before.<sup>98</sup>

Not-knowing is also described as 'beginner's mind' in Zen Buddhism. Beginner's mind is open and receptive. It is non-judgemental. Buddhists believe that beginner's mind is essential to living fully and deeply, to being able to respond authentically in the moment and remain

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<sup>96</sup> Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 81.

<sup>97</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 62.

<sup>98</sup> Leski, p. 35.

open to possibility. ‘In the beginner’s mind,’ says Suzuki, ‘there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few’.<sup>99</sup> Beginner’s mind, says Shunryu Suzuki, is the secret to living truly and deeply. It is also the real secret of the arts.<sup>100</sup>

In his book *Creativity*, Osho describes beginner’s mind as follows:

What is the difference between a producer and a creator? A producer knows the right way of doing a thing, the most economical way of doing a thing: with the least effort he can create more results. A creator fools around. He does not know what is the right way to do a thing so he goes on seeking and searching again and again in different directions. Many times he moves in a wrong direction – but wherever he moves, he learns; he becomes more and more rich. He does something that nobody has ever done before. If he had followed the right way to do things he would not have been able to do it.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, then, the hero and creative individual must step off the ‘beaten track’ and leave the familiar world. Unless they are prepared to accept the call and venture across the threshold into the unknown they will not make progress either in life or in their creative endeavours. ‘The myths and folk tales of the whole world make clear,’ says Campbell, ‘that the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one’s own interest.’<sup>102</sup> Going into the unknown means letting go of what we might mistakenly believe to be ‘secure’, and stepping into an uncertain future.

### **Crossing the First Threshold**

In crossing the threshold the hero leaves the ordinary world and ventures into a world that Campbell refers to as a mysterious ‘region of supernatural wonder’<sup>103</sup>. In myths and fairy tales, the region of supernatural wonder is a world where magic is possible. The creative process is also perceived as mysterious. In his essay *The World as I See It*, Einstein says, ‘[t]he fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science’.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1979), p. 21.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>101</sup> Osho, *Creativity: Unleashing the Forces Within* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1999), p. 109.

<sup>102</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 59.

<sup>103</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 31.

<sup>104</sup> Albert Einstein, *The World as I See It* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), p. 5.



It is a willingness to experience mystery, then, that begins the creative process and the hero's journey. 'Mystery,' says John Loori, 'is the lifeblood that pumps through true religious and artistic practice. Mystery is the itch that you can't scratch, the driving force of spiritual and creative journeys. It sets in motion the basic questions of our existence. It fuels genuine scientific investigation. It invites us to peek around the next corner, into darkness'.<sup>105</sup>

In myths and fairy tales the forest motif often represents this region of supernatural wonder. Forests are dark, mysterious places that conceal secrets. 'Typical of the circumstances of the call are the dark forest, the great tree, the babbling spring, and the loathly, underestimated appearance of the carrier of the power of destiny', says Campbell.<sup>106</sup> The forest motif appears in *A Writer's Journey* at this point, with my recollection of visiting the Puntledge river in Canada. It is after walking through the forest that I receive the insight that I can return home with a different mindset.

As the truck accelerated the trees began to flicker past, innumerable. But if I softened the focus of my eyes I could see between them, into the depths of the forest. I half expected to see a deer, or a bear, or even Little Red Riding Hood, running hell-for-leather. But the woods were empty. I only hoped I could sustain this feeling, this optimism. The road ahead stretched on, interminable, towards distant peaks, and I had the curious sensation that we were simultaneously driving back the way we'd come and at the same time setting out anew, into the future. (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 20).

The forest is a motif that could symbolize the unknown in the creative process, too. In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Estes says that tapping into our creative lives means, '[c]onsenting to venture into the locus of deep initiation (entering the forest) and beginning to experience the new and dangerous-feeling numen of being in our intuitive power'.<sup>107</sup> In the unfamiliar region of forest it would appear that we can no longer rely solely upon our prior knowledge, but must tap into our intuitive intelligence, instead.

Pathways are another archetypal motif, which reflect the known and the familiar. In his book *Into the Woods*, Yorke says, 'the disruption that the hero experiences throws them off the beaten track'.<sup>108</sup> This forces them into a world they have never seen. It is interesting to note

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<sup>105</sup> John Daido Loori, *The Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), p. 192.

<sup>106</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 53.

<sup>107</sup> Estes, p. 84.

<sup>108</sup> Yorke, p. 7.

that Yorke's use of the phrase 'off the beaten track' might also usefully be compared with Edward de Bono's description of creativity as cognitive 'pattern-switching'<sup>109</sup> and Dennett's description of insight as 'jumping out of the system'.<sup>110</sup>

Paths and detours appear in *A Writer's Journey*, too, both in the Canadian forest and beside the river Bute. In Chapter 10 the forest and trail motifs occur again when I describe myself surfing the Web:

Can surfing the Web be creative? At least online (if not in my plot) I'm following the risky trail. One site links me to another. I subscribe to blog feeds. I listen to podcasts. I order new titles. [...] I feel as though I've wandered into a vast, wild forest. (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 62)

These motifs appeared spontaneously, while I was writing. Viewed with hindsight, these connections appear to be happy coincidences. However, '[a]s Freud has shown,' says Vogler, 'blunders are not the merest chance. They are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. They are ripples on the surface of life, produced by unsuspected springs'.<sup>111</sup> Apparently, my unconscious knew the archetypal motifs of the monomyth better than I did.

## Initiation

### Road of Trials

My visit to the library (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 22) marks the start of a long period of creative preparation, in which I gather information, consider the subject from all angles and 'try out' my new knowledge. The preparation stage of the creative process is analogous with the Initiation stage of the monomyth, during which the hero endures the Road of Trials. This is a time of transformation. Like the creative individual, the hero faces a series of challenges, and in both the Departure and Initiation stages of the monomyth, the hero may be aided by the appearance of mentors and supernatural helpers. In *The Writer's Journey*, my mentors appear in the form of books.

So, the early phase of the creative process and The Road of Trials are challenging periods of questing, tension, conflict and learning. Both the hero and the creative individual require a strong motivating impulse to continue. Yorke states, 'all archetypal stories are defined by this

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<sup>109</sup> Edward de Bono, *Edward de Bono's Thinking Course* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2004), pp. 52-54.

<sup>110</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 46.

<sup>111</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 52.

one essential tenet: the central character has an active goal. They desire something.’<sup>112</sup>

Usually a character’s desire manifests itself in something specific and concrete: in *A Writer’s Journey* I am driven by a desire to complete my book.

However, a character’s overt desires are often driven by a more abstract underlying psychological *need*. Typically, a character believes that if they get what they want, they will find harmony within themselves. What the hero wants, however, may not always be what they really need. The mismatch between what a character wants and what they need is caused by a character flaw that creates false thinking.

In *A Writer’s Journey* my own false thinking appears to be my underlying belief that I must ‘be someone’, which is driven by a fear of not being adequate. This manifests itself in my dogged determination to keep trying to finish my book, which is counterproductive both to achieving what I want *and* addressing my underlying need. Yorke states that, ‘[w]hat a character thinks is good for them is often at odds with what actually *is* good for them. This conflict, as we shall see, appears to be one of the fundamental tenets of [narrative] structure, because it embodies the battle between external and internal desire’.<sup>113</sup> What a character desires is usually external, but what they need can only be resolved internally. In *A Writer’s Journey*, for example, my external, egoic desire was to finish my book – but what I needed at a deeper level was to stop trying to ‘become’ someone, and thereby realize my creative freedom.

A reconciliation between a character’s desire and need is the ideal. However, this is difficult when the character is unaware of their flaws and unconscious deficits in the first place. In a story, an imbalance or flaw is often resolved only when the character experiences something that brings their unconscious needs out into the light of awareness. At this point, the character surrenders their attachment to external desire and realizes what they truly need, instead. A plot, therefore, might be defined as a series of events that must take place in order for the protagonist to reconcile the contradictory elements of his or her psyche, and find balance. It could also be described as the process whereby a character realizes their true nature, rather than being led astray by blind, egoic thinking. ‘Certainly,’ says Yorke, ‘the conflict between ego-driven desire and the deeper flaw-ridden id or need is at the heart of the archetype, and it is this, suggests Jung, that may offer us one of the best explanations for story.’<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Yorke, p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> Yorke, p. 10.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

From a Jungian perspective, stories seek to redress a psychological imbalance within the protagonist. Jung believed that stories were a route-map towards individuation of the individual, says Yorke, and individuation involves realizing one's full potential by exploring all facets of one's personality rather than repressing one aspect into the unconscious. Stories, then, can reflect a reconciliation between contradictory elements within the character's own psyche.<sup>115</sup> Campbell's Road of Trials represents a period of testing – of dialectic tension between opposites – and is a time where the hero is confronted with their own limitations. Similarly, the creative act, suggests May, 'arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them.'<sup>116</sup>

Like the hero, the creative individual also seeks balance. There may be an unconscious link between an artist's desire to create harmony externally, and their desire to achieve psychological balance. 'It seems probable,' says Storr, 'that when creative people produce a new work they are in fact attempting to reconcile opposites in exactly the way Jung describes.'<sup>117</sup>

Yorke, too, believes that we are driven to write stories out of a tension that arises from our natural urge to reconcile opposites. 'When Friedrich Nietzsche said in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "art owes its continuous evolution to the Apollonian-Dionysian duality",' says Yorke, 'he was implicitly declaring his belief that the tensions between form and content, head and heart, discipline and desire were the building blocks of dramatic structure'.<sup>118</sup>

The urge to reconcile opposites could account, at least in part, for the creative drive not just of artists but of scientists, too. Jerome Bruner suggests that 'it is in the working out of conflict and coalition within the set of identities that compose the person that one finds the source of many of the richest and most surprising combinations. It is not merely the artist and the writer, but the inventor too who is the beneficiary.'<sup>119</sup> And in *On Creativity*, David Bohm believes that the intrinsic appeal of all artistic or creative endeavour is the satisfaction of perceiving what he describes as 'a certain oneness and totality or wholeness, constituting a kind of harmony that is felt to be beautiful'.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Yorke, p. 207.

<sup>116</sup> May, p. 113.

<sup>117</sup> Storr, p. 233.

<sup>118</sup> Yorke, p. 77.

<sup>119</sup> Jerome Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 29.

<sup>120</sup> David Bohm, *On Creativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

But ‘fit’ can be found only through a process of dialectical opposition. A scientist tests a hypothesis, has it affirmed or negated, and then moves on from there. A writer ‘feels’ the way forward, guided by an intuition that the narrative is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. A painter weighs colours against each other and finds balance. ‘The idea of a search with feedback,’ says Leski, ‘an oscillation around an “intended” outcome, is analogous to the reiterative cycle of projecting/making/feedback/reflection/critique of creative practice.’<sup>121</sup> And so it is with story. Of the mythic archetype, Yorke says, ‘in any given act structure a character has to change and grow according to a pattern – a pattern decreed by a dramatic structure that itself is a product of the unconscious mind’.<sup>122</sup>

This pattern is reflected in the structure of scenes, as well as in acts and chapters and in the archetype as a whole. A scene, for example, might typically involve a quest for knowledge or some other goal, resulting in action met with conflict or resistance, and ending with a revelation that precipitates a new action or reaction. Yorke observes that ‘scenes work when they are juxtapositions of opposites – each opposite carrying a new reality or “truth”’.<sup>123</sup> For example, dialectic tension is created between what a character wants to know but doesn’t yet know, or what they want to do but can’t, or between what a character mistakenly believes and what the reader knows is true. Like an electrical charge, these differentials create tension.

In *A Writer’s Journey*, my persona understands that she is trying too hard, and that to be creative she needs to let go of her desire. But she remains trapped within the paradox of ‘trying not to try’. She is unable to stop trying to let go, and simply let go. Perhaps the reader perceives this paradox before my persona does; perhaps not. But at some point, the hero (and the creative individual) must reconcile these opposites by making an inductive leap between what is known and what is not-yet-known. To make this leap they must depart from their conditioned thinking, and this can only be achieved by surrendering their egoic desire in *The Belly of the Whale*.

### **The Belly of the Whale**

Campbell believes that the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale symbolizes the ‘transit into a sphere of rebirth’,<sup>124</sup> and is the place where the hero is swallowed into the unknown. This motif, claims Campbell, suggests that entry to the Belly of the Whale is a

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<sup>121</sup> Leski, p. 63.

<sup>122</sup> Yorke, p. 226.

<sup>123</sup> Yorke, p. 224.

<sup>124</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 80.

form of self-annihilation. ‘Once inside he may be said to have died to time [stopped] and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise.’<sup>125</sup>

In Vogler’s interpretation of Campbell’s monomyth, he refers to the Belly of the Whale as the Inmost Cave. This is the place, says Vogler, ‘where the greatest treasures are guarded by our greatest fears’.<sup>126</sup> In fact, the cellar, dungeon and cave are all symbols frequently used as motifs in stories, and they all represent the unconscious – the place where the psyche is transformed.<sup>127</sup>

It is notable that the time spent in the Belly of the Whale, or the place where the hero has appeared to have ‘died to time’, has much in common with the period of incubation or the ‘impasse’ stage of the creative process. The creative process typically requires a time of apparent inactivity while the unconscious processes information. These times may feel like fallow periods, or periods where we struggle for solutions without success. Koestler reports that the work methods of both artists and scientists often display this same contradiction: ‘Saturate yourself through and through with your subject... and wait,’ was Lloyd Morgan’s advice.<sup>128</sup>

In *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Csikszentmihalyi says that, ‘because of its mysterious quality, incubation has often been thought the most creative part of the entire process. The conscious sequences can be analysed, to a certain extent, by the rules of logic and rationality. But what happens in the ‘dark’ spaces defies ordinary analysis.’<sup>129</sup> So what is actually happening during this period of incubation in the unconscious?

Edmund Ware Sinnott believed that the unconscious works by rapidly scanning random images and ideas, rejecting most as unimportant but recognizing the significance in others. ‘By this means’, he claims, ‘order – intellectual, aesthetic, perhaps spiritual order – is here distinguished from randomness.’<sup>130</sup> It is as though our unconscious can arrange the pieces of the jigsaw, if only we allow it the opportunity. ‘The organizing power of life,’ says Sinnott, ‘fashions into orderly patterns the floating fantasies of the unconscious mind. Here, if

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<sup>125</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 81.

<sup>126</sup> Vogler, p. 145.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>128</sup> Lloyd Morgan quoted in Koestler, p. 145.

<sup>129</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, p. 98

<sup>130</sup> E. W. Sinnott, ‘The Creativeness of Life’, in *Creativity: Selected Readings* ed. by P. E. Vernon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 107-115, (p. 111)

anywhere, new patterns may be created.’<sup>131</sup> In *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande also claims that ‘the root of genius is in the unconscious, not the conscious, mind’, and describes the unconscious as the ‘great home of form’.<sup>132</sup>

New insights cannot be realized, however, until all conscious effort ceases, allowing these unconscious connections to be brought into the light of awareness. Koestler says that, ‘these periodic plunges into the unconscious are accompanied by the temporary disintegration of matrices of logical thought’.<sup>133</sup> This liberates the mind, says Koestler, from ‘certain constraints which are necessary to maintain the disciplined routines of thoughts but may become an impediment to the creative leap; at the same time other types of ideation on more primitive levels of mental organization are brought into activity.’<sup>134</sup>

These ‘other types of ideation’ are called upon not only in traditionally creative fields like art, but in the most rational and intellectual fields. Speaking of intuition in science and mathematical enquiry, Koestler says that ‘it seems paradoxical that a branch of knowledge which operates predominantly with abstract symbols, whose entire rationale and credo are objectivity, verifiability, logicity, turns out to be dependent on mental processes which are subjective, irrational, and verifiable only after the event’.<sup>135</sup> It is intuition, then, not intellect, which provides new insights.

But these breakthroughs from the unconscious during the incubation period do seem to depend upon a period of searching and dialectic tension beforehand. It is almost as if the tension generated by searching for solutions creates an energy that builds up until the unconscious breaks through with a solution. May describes how, after he had been working hard to solve a problem, ‘[t]he unconscious, so to speak, broke through in opposition to the conscious belief to which I was clinging’.<sup>136</sup> A prerequisite for ‘breaking through’, then, would appear to be a psychological differential, or tension, beforehand, followed by a letting-go, which results in insight.

Voluntarily relinquishing control can be difficult, particularly when we desire an outcome. But the ability to ‘stop striving’ is essential for creativity. As Leski says, ‘[t]here is an element of passivity, or dependence, even of humility in the creative process; and this

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<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1981) p. 62.

<sup>133</sup> Koestler, p. 466.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>136</sup> May, p. 58.

element is indeed a surprising finding in the man of notable ego-strength, which is used to relying upon his will'.<sup>137</sup> Egoic desire certainly seems to inhibit creativity, as the theoretical physicist David Bohm claims: 'the creative state is impossible if one is limited by narrow and petty aims, such as security, furthering of personal ambition, glorification of the individual or the state, getting "kicks" and other satisfying experiences out of one's work, and so forth'.<sup>138</sup>

This egoic death is analogous with the self-annihilation that occurs in the Belly of the Whale. In a story, the crisis or ordeal, says Yorke, usually involves some kind of death. 'Someone close to the hero dies (The Godfather) or the heroes themselves appear to die (E.T.). But death need not be a physical death; more commonly all hope passes away.'<sup>139</sup> So, it is not the hero but the hero's ego that needs to die before new growth can occur. 'The ordeal', says Campbell, 'is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: can the ego put itself to death?'<sup>140</sup>

Interestingly, neurology is now revealing more about activity in the brain during creative insight, and it has been discovered that activity in the frontal lobe decreases just prior to creative insight. The frontal lobe is involved in narrowing the possibilities we consider, like 'a jailer that keeps us trapped in a box'.<sup>141</sup> It attacks a problem 'head-on', and the reason that such a frontal attack often fails seems to be that the capacity for free association is blocked, so that new connections are not realized.<sup>142</sup> For creative insight to occur, the activity of the frontal lobe needs to be downregulated or disinhibited in order to allow thoughts to wander and realize new connections.<sup>143</sup> For creative connections to be made, it appears that the controlling frontal-lobe must temporarily 'die'.

In myths, the ego is often represented by a dragon or another type of monster which the hero must overcome. The dragon represents all our egoic fears and insecurities and serves to protect (and limit) our realization of ourselves as individuals. According to Campbell, 'atonement (at-one-ment) consists of no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster – the dragon thought to be God (superego), and the dragon thought to be Sin

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<sup>137</sup> Leski, p. 200.

<sup>138</sup> Bohm, p. 21.

<sup>139</sup> Yorke, p. 12.

<sup>140</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 98.

<sup>141</sup> Kounios and Beeman, p. 46.

<sup>142</sup> Sinnott, p. 112.

<sup>143</sup> Rex E. Jung and Richard J. Haier, Richard, J. 'Creativity and Intelligence: Brain Networks that Link and Differentiate in the Expression of Genius,' in *Neuroscience of Creativity*, ed. by Oshin Vartanian, Adam S. Bristol and James C. Kaufman, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 233-254.



(repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself – that is what is difficult.’<sup>144</sup> The secret of the Ordeal, says Campbell, is that heroes must die so that they can be reborn.<sup>145</sup> As Campbell says of those who take the hero’s journey, ‘where we had thought to slay another, we slay ourselves’.<sup>146</sup> Campbell describes the process as follows:

The meaning is very clear; it is the meaning of all religious practice. The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realisation of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment. His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. [...] Many are the figures, particularly in the social and mythological contexts of the Orient, who represent this ultimate state of anonymous presence.<sup>147</sup>

Once the hero of the monomyth has metaphorically died, says Vogler, he or she is now ‘fully part of the cosmos, dead to the old, limited vision of things and reborn into a new consciousness of connections’.<sup>148</sup> This is the moment, says Campbell, at which the mind is ‘dissolved in the perfect knowledge of the mind that has transcended the pairs of opposites.’<sup>149</sup> Now, the hero is no longer searching, trying to reconcile the opposites within his or her psyche, but is beyond the duality of subjective perception. This is the moment at which insight occurs – both for the hero and the creative individual. It is the moment, argues Campbell, when wisdom is regained.<sup>150</sup> The scientist sees the solution to a problem; the protagonist realizes what will make her happy. Consequently, the death of the hero’s egoic self allows him to regain his true humanity.

Of course, although the death of the ego is required for growth, the ego is a motivating factor in bringing the hero or the creative individual to the Belly of the Whale in the first place. Without desire, the hero would never leave home and begin the creative or mythic journey, nor would they endure the challenges of the Road of Trials. As Koestler observes, ‘The

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<sup>144</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 130.

<sup>145</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 159.

<sup>146</sup> Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. by Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 123.

<sup>147</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 203.

<sup>148</sup> Vogler, p. 177.

<sup>149</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 28.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

scientist's motivational drive is a blend of passions in which both the self-asserting and self-transcending tendencies participate.'<sup>151</sup>

In *A Writer's Journey*, egoic desire sustains me on my journey to some extent, but I finally relinquish control in the metaphoric Belly of the Whale in Chapter 22, when Jill tells me 'there's nothing to achieve' (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 156). Here, I face my greatest crisis when I realize that, even if I were successful in finishing my story, it would still not secure my immortality nor bring me lasting peace. Accepting the truth of Jill's statement and realizing that nothing I produce will last forever strikes a fatal blow to my ego and my sense of purpose. There follows a short period of incubation during which I sit at my desk unable to write, then take a walk on the dark beach, feeling as though I have 'disappeared':

Standing out here alone, in the darkness, it's as though I'm already dead and gone. The people in the restaurants can't see me. Even if they looked toward the windows they'd see nothing but their own reflections. *I am nothing*, I think. The moon looks down from its lofty vantage point, impassive and disinterested, as it has done since the Earth was formed. In the scheme of things, I'm insignificant. (*A Writer's Journey*, p. 157)

Both creativity and the process of individuation would seem to require this 'self-annihilation' at a certain stage in the process. In this moment, conscious thought ceases, desire dies, and new insights can occur. Without this relinquishment of conscious control it would appear that we are unable to assimilate new knowledge into our pre-existing knowledge. In *Buddha*, Karen Armstrong calls this place of calm and non-striving the 'Axis Mundi', and defines it as 'the still point of calm where human beings, in many world myths, encounter the Real and Unconditioned; it is the "place" where things that seem diametrically opposed in the profane world come together in that *coincidentia oppositorum* that constitutes an experience of the Sacred.'<sup>152</sup> 'Artists, poets and musicians,' says Armstrong, 'can only be fully creative if they work from this inner core of peace and integrity. Once a person has learned to access this nucleus of calm, he or she is no longer driven by conflicting fears and desires, and is able to face pain, sorrow and grief with equanimity.'<sup>153</sup> This self-annihilation marks the lowest point in the mythic archetype, and comes shortly before the protagonist's apotheosis, or highest point.

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<sup>151</sup> Koestler, p. 269.

<sup>152</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Buddha*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 90.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86.

## **Apotheosis**

To succeed, a character may simply get what they want and live happily ever after. But, as Yorke suggests, ‘the true, more universal and more powerful archetype occurs when the initial, ego-driven goal is abandoned for something more important, more nourishing’.<sup>154</sup> A more important and more nourishing reward may be granted in the form of a new insight or understanding, which allows the character to realize that what they wanted is not what they need. It is the ‘gap’ between these two perspectives – between the ego-driven desire and a greater truth – that Robert McKee believes is the source of energy in story.<sup>155</sup> ‘As a charge of electricity leaps from pole to pole in a magnet,’ says McKee, ‘so the spark of life ignites across the gap between the self and reality. With this flash of energy we ignite the power of story and move the heart of the audience.’<sup>156</sup>

This is the moment at which a character expands their awareness. It marks the attainment of insight and results in a change in the character and a turning point in the storyline. This process might be usefully compared with Edward de Bono’s process of pattern-switching in the brain,<sup>157</sup> which provides a theoretical model for creative insight.

Koestler’s bisociation theory of creativity might also be helpfully compared with the process of apotheosis. Koestler’s bisociation theory explains creative insight as the process whereby two previously unrelated skills or matrices of experience bisect, resulting in a moment of creative insight.<sup>158</sup> To illustrate the process, Koestler relates an experiment where a banana is placed just beyond the reach of a chimpanzee in a cage. Later, the chimp is given a stick and plays with it for a while, exploring the ‘reaching’ nature of the stick, then suddenly realizes he could use the stick to drag the banana closer. He ‘connects’ the two unrelated ideas: the out-of-reach banana and the ‘reaching’ qualities of the stick, thereby reconciling the two concepts. The moment of insight is represented below (L) at the intersection of the two different matrices of thought (M1 and M2).

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<sup>154</sup> Yorke, p. 12.

<sup>155</sup> Robert McKee, *Story* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 179.

<sup>156</sup> McKee, p. 180.

<sup>157</sup> De Bono, pp. 52-54.

<sup>158</sup> Koestler, p. 44.

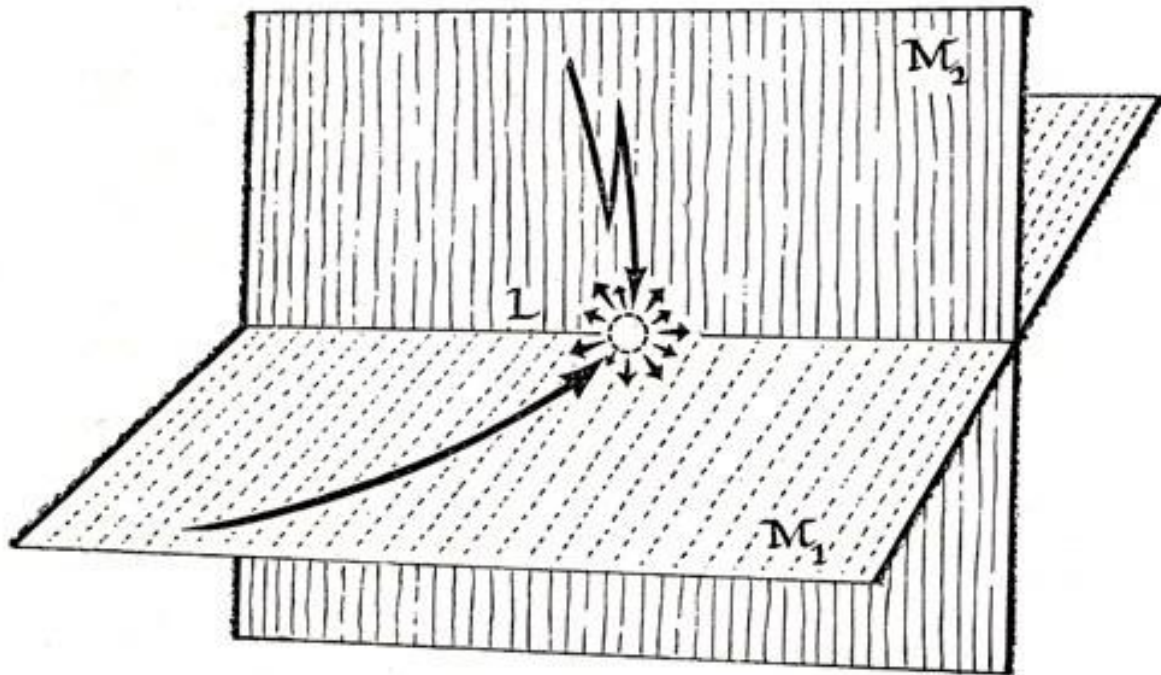


Fig. 4: Koestler's bisociation theory of creativity.<sup>159</sup>

Another illustration of creative insight in which the recipient connects two previously unconnected ideas might be illustrated by the moment in which Helen Keller, blind and deaf, first learned what a word was:

[Anne] took Helen to the well house and directed her to hold her mug under the spout while Anne pumped water. As the water poured over Helen's mug and hand, Anne traced the letters "w-a-t-e-r" on Helen's other hand. [...] According to Anne, "The coming so close upon the sensation of the cold water rushing over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face."<sup>160</sup>

This is the moment in which Helen connected the letters on her hand with the water itself, and in one stroke the mystery of language was revealed to her. She said later, "[t]hat living joy awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"<sup>161</sup>

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>160</sup> Helen Keller quoted in Kounios and Beeman, pp. 3-4.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

Discovery is often simply the uncovering of something which has always been there but was concealed by the blinkers of habit, says Koestler.<sup>162</sup> ‘It does not create something out of nothing; it uncovers, selects, reshuffles, combines, synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties, skills’.<sup>163</sup> Insight doesn’t appear out of nowhere, then. Two matrices of thought need to exist before they can be connected. The chimpanzee must first know that the banana is out of reach, and have experienced the ‘reachingness’ of the stick. Insight occurs the moment these two previously unrelated matrices are connected.

According to Koestler there are two planes of thought from which to synthesize: the trivial (small) and the tragic (great). If, before the moment of insight, our consciousness resides along the great or tragic plane, then moves to the small or trivial plane, the result will be a comic experience. When consciousness moves from the small or trivial plane to a great or tragic plane, the result is creative insight. The artist, says Koestler, ‘walks on a tightrope, as it were, along the line where the exalted and the trivial planes meet. [...] The scientist’s attitude is basically similar in situations where he suddenly discovers the connection between a banal event and a general law of nature — Newton’s apple or the boiling kettle of James Watt’.<sup>164</sup> The hero of the monomyth could also be seen as moving from the trivial to tragic plane (resulting in an expansion of awareness) when he changes his focus from a trivial egotistical desire to a tragic unconscious need.

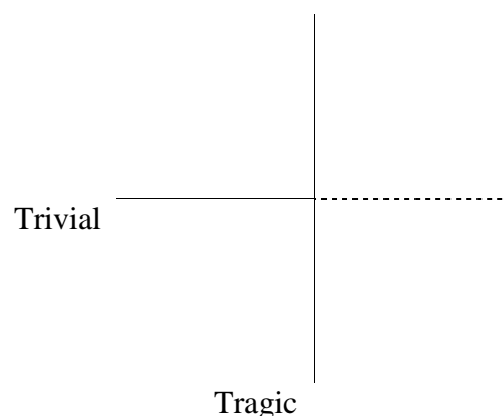


Fig. 5: Koestler’s trivial and tragic planes.

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<sup>162</sup> Koestler, p 109.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>164</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.

In fact, Koestler specifically relates the trivial and tragic planes of thought to storytelling, and claims that the motifs of *The Night Journey*, or *Death-and-Rebirth* are nothing more than metaphors for the meeting of the Tragic and Trivial Planes:

Under the effect of some overwhelming experience, the hero is made to realize the shallowness of his life, the futility and frivolity of the daily pursuits of man in the trivial routines of experience. [...] The hero then suffers a crisis which involves the very foundations of his being; he embarks on the *Night Journey*, is suddenly transferred to the Tragic Plane — from which he emerges purified, enriched by new insight, regenerated on a higher level of integration.<sup>165</sup>

In the mythic archetype, this leap from the trivial to the tragic plane would seem to be facilitated by a dialectic tension between what the protagonist knows, and what is as yet unknown; or between what the protagonist believes is true, and a larger truth; or between what the protagonist desires and needs. The protagonist is initially constrained by the limitations of his conditioned thinking, or his desire to cling to his mistaken beliefs. Only a momentary death of the egoic self (and of the beliefs to which he has been clinging) can allow new insight to occur. An analogy might be made here with the process of growth in a crustacean when, after a certain point, the pressure of expansion causes the containing shell to crack in order to accommodate the expansion of a new, larger body and thereby achieve a better ‘fit’. ‘All paradoxes and predicaments’, says Koestler, ‘arise from conflicts between incompatible frames of experience or scales of value, illuminated in consciousness by the bisociative act.’<sup>166</sup> This leap in consciousness from trivial concerns to an awareness of a greater truth marks the point at which insight is obtained by Campbell’s hero or the creative individual, and creative growth is achieved.

At the beginning of *A Writer’s Journey*, my persona’s ‘incompatible frames of experience’ might be my ‘trivial’ desire to finish the book I am writing, and my ‘tragic’ need to be free to realize my true creative potential. Throughout the narrative, I believe that completing the book will make me happy, creative and free. But my desire arises out of an internal flaw: a feeling of inadequacy. This flaw makes me anxious and controlling, which inhibits my creativity. Despite understanding these issues to some extent, and endeavouring to detach

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<sup>165</sup> *ibid.* p. 360.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.* p. 359.

from my ego in various ways, all my efforts are extrinsically motivated (with the goal of completing my book), so I am deluding herself.

It is not until Jill informs me that there is nothing to achieve that my trivial, egoic desire is truly extinguished. The ‘apotheosis’ I experience on the hilltop marks the point at which I relinquish this trivial desire (to finish the book) and transfer my awareness to the ‘tragic’ plane, realizing my need for creative freedom. Not until a horizontal, egoic desire has been relinquished can the vertical, unconscious need to be brought into conscious awareness. Now, finally, I understand that failure, not success, can liberate me. Koestler’s bisecting matrices of thought (Fig. 4) could usefully reflect the protagonist’s apotheosis at the climax of a story, where the transfer of attention moves from a trivial, horizontal plane represented by conscious desire, to a vertical, tragic plane, represented by unconscious need.

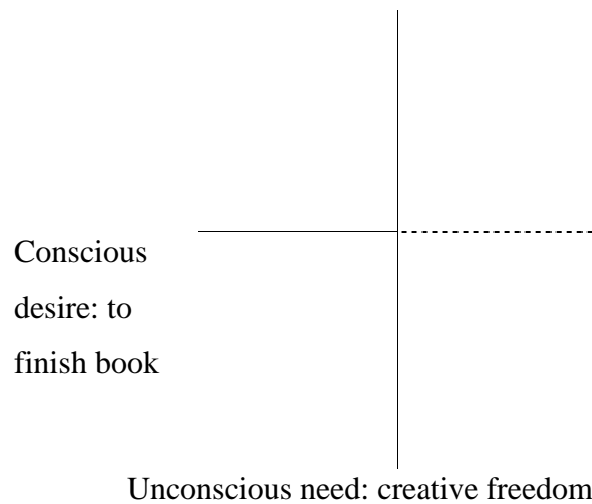


Fig. 6: The protagonist’s ‘need’ vs. ‘desire’.

In this sense, stories are problem-solving devices in a very real way: they bring together two matrices of thought that were previously unconnected – either in the mind of the hero or the mind of the reader, or both.

Creative insight is not simply a gradual expansion of awareness, then; it is a sudden leap between two concepts, propelled by the tension between opposites. As May describes, ‘it is rather a kind of battle. A dynamic struggle goes on within a person between what he or she consciously thinks on the one hand and, on the other, some insight, some perspective that is

struggling to be born.’<sup>167</sup> And the greater the dynamic struggle, the greater the subsequent relief: ‘[a] blocked situation increases the stress of the frustrated drive’, says Koestler, ‘so the impact of a sudden, bisociative surprise which makes reasoning perform a somersault will have a twofold effect; part of the tension will become detached from it and exploded while the remaining part will slowly ebb away’.<sup>168</sup> Koestler describes this process as an emotional catharsis: a rise, an expansion, and then an ebbing away of emotions.<sup>169</sup> This is surely the reward that artists and scientists seek – along with the satisfaction that results from recognizing ‘fit’. Koestler’s description sounds much like the catharsis (which literally translates as ‘emotional purging’) that Aristotle believed is the whole point of dramatic storytelling.<sup>170</sup>

So, the tension a novel generates builds, peaks and ebbs away like a storm, leaving the reader changed. The same pattern unfolds in the creative process. In *The Creative Storm*, Leski says that storms, like the creative process, ‘arise out of a disturbance, and act to displace and destabilize. They gather energy and material. [...] They have consequences, from saturated ground to rainbows and all manner of other effects. And they have no discernible beginning or end’.<sup>171</sup> The hero of the monomyth experiences this same ‘storm’ during the course of their adventures, and the reader experiences the storm vicariously. The writer endures the storm while creating the story.

In *A Writer’s Journey*, my own moment of apotheosis occurs on a hilltop when I let go of the idea that I am a writer. This allows me to experience the cathartic release that Koestler and Aristotle describe. As soon as I relinquish my ambition, ‘I feel as though a lid has been lifted, as though I’m not inside anything,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 162). Later, walking down the hill, ‘I am so buoyant, so *at one* with the world, that I would embrace anything, even the sword. I would go willingly into the blade and disappear into this evening, this world, this Life,’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 163). Campbell explains the moment of apotheosis as the ‘release of potential within us all, and which anyone can attain’. It is the moment when ‘all beings are without self’ and in which wisdom is regained.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> May, p. 59.

<sup>168</sup> Koestler, p. 89.

<sup>169</sup> Koestler, p. 386.

<sup>170</sup> Tierno, p. 4.

<sup>171</sup> Leski, p. 2.

<sup>172</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 127.



## The Ultimate Boon

The notion of sudden insight also plays a special role in Zen Buddhism. Kounios and Beeman note that the ultimate goal of Zen is ‘satori’, which Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki describes as ‘acquiring a new viewpoint for looking into the essence of things’.<sup>173</sup> D.T. Suzuki describes the process as follows:

Satori is the sudden flashing into consciousness of a new truth hitherto undreamed of. It is a sort of mental catastrophe taking place all at once, after much piling up of matters intellectual and demonstrative. The piling has reached a limit of stability and the whole edifice has come tumbling to the ground, when, behold, a new heaven is open to full survey.<sup>174</sup>

The process leading up to satori echoes the building of tension and sudden release of the creative process. According to Campbell:

Art, literature, myth and cult, philosophy, and ascetic disciplines are instruments to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realisation. [...] Finally, the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realisation transcending all experiences of form – all symbolisations, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void.<sup>175</sup>

So, at the climax of both paradigms, the hero of the monomyth and the creative individual endure the supreme ordeal: they surrender their egoic desire. It is at this point that the old self is annihilated, established thought matrices are dissolved, and the hero’s mind is fully open so that a new ‘truth’ can be realized.

In fact, it is possible to view the whole narrative arc up to the point of Apotheosis as being the pursuit of (and resistance to) an expansion of consciousness. This tension brings us to the point at which we are either forced off the narrow pathways of our conditioned thinking, or manage to break free of them, to make the creative leap necessary to expand our consciousness. An expansion of consciousness is the elixir that will heal the hero’s flaw and change the trajectory of the storyline, or provide the creative individual with new understanding. This is the moment at which we ‘awaken’ to the truth.

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<sup>173</sup> Suzuki, cited in Kounios and Beeman, p. 12.

<sup>174</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 95.

<sup>175</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 152.

Author and practicing Buddhist Tim Parkes claims that Buddhism considers the most important element of a story to be whether it promotes awakening.<sup>176</sup> Arguably, every story that adheres to the mythic archetype could be said to promote awakening, in the sense that awakening is the assimilation of new knowledge or experience, just as the creative process itself promotes a cognitive awakening or growth.

But there's an important caveat here: the circle of the Hero's Journey is completed only if the hero returns home to the known or real world with the gift, in order to benefit humanity. At this stage in the story the hero may not know how to handle their new knowledge correctly. The 'journey back' therefore relates how the hero reacts to possessing the elixir and whether they will learn to master it in a wise and useful way.

## **Return**

'The denouement of any story,' says Yorke, 'is where all is brought to light, feelings are finally expressed and 'rewards' for behaviour bestowed.'<sup>177</sup> In Campbell's monomyth, the denouement occurs in the Return stage. 'When the hero-quest has been accomplished,' says Campbell, '[...] the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy [...] where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.'<sup>178</sup> Similarly, the verification stage of the creative process requires that new insights are integrated into existing knowledge pathways and can be verified and applied in the real world. Once verified, this new knowledge may benefit humankind, and thereby expand the collective consciousness. So, in both the creative journey and the hero's journey a 'return to the world' is necessary in order to validate new insights and put them into practice.

## **Refusal of the Return**

It is possible at this stage that the hero or creative individual might refuse to return home, however, and remain detached, apart from the Ordinary World, without ever putting their new knowledge into practice or bringing their 'gift' back to the world. But if this remains the case, the mythic archetype will not come full circle, creative value will not be realized, and society will not benefit from the individual's growth. As Campbell describes, if the

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<sup>176</sup> Tim Parkes, *Where I'm Reading From: The Changing World of Books* (London: Random House, 2014), p. 16.

<sup>177</sup> Yorke, p. 18.

<sup>178</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 170.

monomyth is to fulfil its promise, it is ‘not human failure or superhuman success but human success [...] we shall have to be shown’.<sup>179</sup>

### **The Magic Flight**

In Chapter 23 of *A Writer’s Journey* I come down off the hill and return home (Campbell’s Magic Flight)<sup>180</sup> but it is still not clear whether or not I will realize the Ultimate Boon. That night, however, I dream of a man who has stopped running and is standing in the middle of a field, which I take to be confirmation that my unconscious has finally stopped striving. As soon as I wake up I start writing, but now I am writing poetry. I am no longer struggling to resolve the plot of my work in progress, so my attitude (and material) has changed.

I write a poem about the dream, then go and show it to my parents, who are nonplussed. This moment is the moment in which I step back across the threshold from the mystic region of supernatural wonder back to the ordinary world. Traditionally, the hero’s return to the known world is not without its challenges – just as new ideas are often met with resistance. And, like the misunderstood hero of the archetype, while reading my work to my parents I feel like someone who ‘has to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere’, and must ‘take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend’.<sup>181</sup>

I print off the poem and go downstairs and read it to my parents, who are sitting on the patio. When I’ve finished reading I see that they are both staring at me like they don’t know what they’re looking at (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 165)

*A Writer’s Journey* then describes how I continue writing. But because I have abandoned all hope of finishing the book I have been working on (or of writing another) and am not seeking publication of my poetry, I have lost the ego-driven desire that had previously motivated me. Now, I am writing with the playful curiosity characterized by an attitude of beginner’s mind. Failure has caused me to abandon my old ambition, relinquish my old ‘story’ and lose my old identity. Like the hero of the monomyth, I have returned home after a long journey, but found that, now that I have changed, everything else looks different. My poems during this time reflect a heightened awareness of nature, and a sense of being centred and having ‘stopped’. I

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<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

am writing, but without a goal. This is also the state of mind described by Jon Kabat-Zinn as ‘non-doing’, which is so essential to creativity:

It reeks of paradox. The only way you can do anything of value is to have the effort come out of non-doing and to let go of caring whether it will be of use or not.

Otherwise, self-involvement and greediness can sneak in and distort your relationship to the work, or the work itself, so that it is off in some way, biased, impure, and ultimately not completely satisfying, even if it is good. Good scientists know this mind state and guard against it because it inhibits the creative process and distorts one’s ability to see connections clearly.<sup>182</sup>

### **Master of the Two Worlds**

Having detached from his egoic self, tapped into the wisdom of his true nature and returned home, Campbell’s hero is now Master of the Two Worlds. Being Master of the Two Worlds means that the hero or creative individual has the ability to ‘pass back and forth across world division’.<sup>183</sup> The hero can now, says Campbell, ‘reconcile individual consciousness with universal will’.<sup>184</sup> He can effectively move between the conscious to the unconscious, from the rational to the intuitive, from ‘doing’ to ‘being’ – and back again.

### **Freedom to Live**

*A Writer’s Journey* concludes with a scene in which I demonstrate that I have (temporarily at least) become Master of the Two Worlds. I leave my desk to run along the beach. Here, I appreciate being alive and reflect that ‘all accomplishment is only this: to be awake, and realize it’ (*A Writer’s Journey*, p. 172). My intention in this scene is to show that writing is no longer an obsessive desire, and that I am able to stop, to step outside and simply experience the bliss of being in a more mindfully aware state. I can ‘do’ and ‘be’. I have also come to the realization that my own life is a creative product, and that the attitudes conducive to creativity should be applied to living as well as to my writing. Although the memoir ends here, the implication is that, with the ‘right attitude’ restored, I will continue to write – and live – creatively.

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<sup>182</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (London: Piatkus, 2004), p. 39.

<sup>183</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 197.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, p. 204.

## Conclusion

*A Writer's Journey* implicitly aligns my own creative process with the mythic archetype by 'storying' my journey through a creative block. In this chapter I have made these parallels explicit by demonstrating how each stage of the memoir conforms to paradigms of both the monomyth and the creative process.

As I have demonstrated in previous sections, in the initial stages of both the creative or mythic journey, the hero or creative individual must first experience a sort of dissatisfaction with the way things are. This can often be attributed to a desire to reconcile opposites within their own psyche. The desire to find balance is usually translated into a desire for something specific, which may or may not be what is really needed. This desire motivates the hero and the creative individual to leave the familiar behind, step off their familiar tracks, and venture into the vast region of supernatural wonder: the unknown.

After a series of challenges and trials during which the tensions between opposites increase and the hero or creative individual gathers information and experience, there follows a period of incubation, in which the hero or the creative person 'disappears to the world'. In order to emerge from this place with the boon of insight, the hero or creative individual must first defeat his own ego, since self-annihilation – or a *deconstruction* of the old self (or old ideas) – is necessary in order to assimilate new knowledge. Once the gift of insight has been received, the creative hero must then bring the story full circle by returning to the known world and applying the new insight to benefit themselves and the world at large.

### CHAPTER 3: WHAT DO STORIES DO?

‘The mind,’ says Koestler, in *The Act of Creation*, ‘is insatiable for meaning’.<sup>185</sup> We need to understand the relationships between things in order to predict consequences, and because we are unable to make sense of randomness, we try to impose some sort of order on new information. We log and file new data in relation to what we already know, assimilating new knowledge into our existing patterns of thought. In the process, our understanding grows. ‘In simplistic terms,’ says Yorke, ‘human beings order the world dialectically’.<sup>186</sup> We ‘story’ our experience. Yorke believes that it is only through storying our experience that we can align ourselves with the external world. ‘In that process,’ he says, ‘some kind of sense is made, and if we’re lucky, some kind of truth discovered’.<sup>187</sup> ‘It’s thesis, antithesis, synthesis’, says Yorke. ‘Students encounter something of which they’re unaware, explore and assimilate it, and by merging it with their pre-existing knowledge, grow’.<sup>188</sup>

It is no coincidence, Yorke argues, that Stephen Pinker’s definition of intelligence as ‘the ability to attain goals in the face of obstacles by means of decisions based on rational (truth-obeying) rules’ bears a striking resemblance to the function of a plot<sup>189</sup>. In literature, a fictitious world is established, the protagonist’s goal is identified, then he or she pursues it in the face of obstacles. A story requires there to be a problem, the solution to which is temporarily withheld. Eventually, the protagonist overcomes their problem. ‘Because characters in a fictitious world do what our intelligence allows us to do in the real world,’ says Yorke, ‘there can be no doubt that storytelling is at some level about learning; the protagonist discovers something and we do too’.<sup>190</sup> Drama therefore mimics the way the brain assimilates knowledge.<sup>191</sup>

But is learning dependent on knowledge alone? And how reliable is the knowledge we obtain from stories? How objective can any author be, hampered as they are by their own conditioned and subjective views? And what sort of truths might ancient myths, fairy tales and fantasy provide about our own reality if the characters, settings and events are understood

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<sup>185</sup> Koestler, p. 330.

<sup>186</sup> Yorke, p. 27.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>189</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (London: Random House, 2015), p. 62.

<sup>190</sup> Yorke, pp. 203-204.

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

to be not only untrue, but implausible? Anthropologists and intellectuals have long speculated on the role of myth in society. As Campbell reports in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church) <sup>192</sup>

Most of the roles identified above might suggest that, now that we are better able to explain the world around us, myths would no longer be valued as sources of information. Indeed, the word 'myth' today is commonly used to describe 'a widely held but false belief or idea'.<sup>193</sup> In that case, what might Tolkein have meant when he said, in conversation with C. S. Lewis, that myths weren't lies at all, and that, 'we come from God, and the myths created by us, although they inevitably include some error, reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God'?<sup>194</sup> Ursula le Guin also refers to the truthfulness of fantasy in the following passage:

Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living.<sup>195</sup>

If even myth and fantasy can teach us something true despite the content being understood to be not *literally* true, this truth must be absorbed by us at a level beneath the rational or intellectual. Myth, says Campbell, uses the 'totality of the senses' rather than just the intellect.<sup>196</sup> We feel and imagine a story, rather than just registering it intellectually. In fact, a myth, according to John Dewey, actively 'subdues and digests all that is merely

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<sup>192</sup> Campbell, p. 323.

<sup>193</sup> Oxford English Dictionaries, <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/myth>> [accessed 5 August 2016]

<sup>194</sup> J.R.R. Tolkein, cited in Yorke, p 14.

<sup>195</sup> Ursula le Guin, cited in *Stacy Whitman's Grimoire* (2010) <<http://www.stacywhitman.com/2010/09/21/ursula-k-le-guin-why-are-americans-afraid-of-dragons/>> [accessed June 2017]

<sup>196</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 28.

intellectual'.<sup>197</sup> Perhaps the key to the true function of myths, then, is revealed by their *form* rather than their content. While content adapts to historical and cultural context, one constant remains: the shape of the mythic archetype. I believe that this shape is not something we impose upon a narrative as a reflection cultural or societal conditioning, but is a pattern generated by the human psyche – a pattern that even goes beyond our own species to reflect the growth process itself, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Indeed, myths are generally believed by psychoanalytical thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung and Bruno Bettelheim to reflect the 'common, unconscious territory of the human mind'<sup>198</sup> and as such reflect something inherent in the human being rather than arising as a reflection of society or culture. The psychoanalyst Otto Rank agreed that 'it would be more probable to seek the reason for the general unanimity of these myths in the very general traits of the human psyche, rather than in primary community or migration.'<sup>199</sup> Campbell himself believed that, 'the symbols of mythology are not manufactured, they cannot be ordered, isolated or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche.'<sup>200</sup>

Jung's psychoanalytical theories influenced Campbell's creation of the monomyth in this respect. Jung used the term 'archetype' to describe the commonly found components or motifs of myths. He believed that these motifs corresponded to structural elements of the psyche, and that people responded to these archetypal motifs on hearing myths, thereby generating patterns of behaviour that could be referenced consciously or unconsciously, for future use.<sup>201</sup> From this perspective, the dramatic structure of myth can be viewed not a self-conscious, intellectual construct but an unconscious product of the human psyche. Myth, as Campbell argues, is therefore 'psychology that has been misread as biography, history, and cosmology'.<sup>202</sup>

Nevertheless, there are those who remain unconvinced that a 'universal story structure' is anything other than a social construct – and some, says Eagleton, remain sceptical of the

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<sup>197</sup> Richard Chase, 'Myth as Literature', in *Myth and Method*, ed. by James F. Muller, jr. (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), pp. 127-143.

<sup>198</sup> Ari Hiltunen, *Aristotle in Hollywood: The Anatomy of Successful Storytelling* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2002), p. 123.

<sup>199</sup> Otto Rank, 'The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology,' *Nervous and Mental Disease Monograph, Series 18* (New York: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1914), p. 18.

<sup>200</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 13.

<sup>201</sup> James, N. Frey, *The Key: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), p. 35.

<sup>202</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 221.



whole notion of narrative. In the real world, they might argue, events unfold as the product of countless random, unknown factors. There is no pattern in real life. ‘On this view,’ says Eagleton, ‘reality is less a logical development than a tangled web [...]. There is no centre to such a web, and no foundation on which it rests.’<sup>203</sup> In crafting narratives out of experience, some might claim, we are fabricating truth, creating patterns from a reality that contains no underlying pattern. Even writers often view the mythic archetype as a manufactured structure that is imposed on story from the outside. As Yorke acknowledges, ‘there’s an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it’s where mediocrities seek a substitute muse.’<sup>204</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their best attempts at originality, many writers demonstrate an ability to adopt this story shape unconsciously, for ‘it lies as much within their minds as it does in a nine-year-old’s’, says Yorke. ‘All stories are forged from the same template, writers simply don’t have any choice as to the structure they use and [...] the laws of physics, of logic and form dictate they must all follow the very same path.’<sup>205</sup> In fact, the writer themselves could be said to be under the influence of those same laws of physics, logic and form during the creative process itself, and it is these forces upon the writer’s psyche that I believe result in the design of the mythic archetype.

In fact, I would argue that the mythic archetype *can* be recognized in this tangled web of life *wherever creative growth occurs*. In fact, growth could be seen as the defining characteristic of the archetype; wherever growth occurs as the result of a series of linked events, the mythic archetype can be found. Like Vogler, I would argue that ‘The Hero’s Journey is not an invention, but an observation. It is a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world.’<sup>206</sup> I therefore take the view that the mythic archetype is not constructed by us, but is the product of an algorithm that plays out within the *artamovement* and drives creative evolution. When a writer crafts events into a mythic archetype it is because this shape reflects our intuitive understanding of a universal pattern of creative growth that is embedded in the ‘tangled web’ of life.

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<sup>203</sup> Eagleton, p. 110.

<sup>204</sup> Yorke, p. xv.

<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>206</sup> Vogler, p ix.

In the previous chapters I have made explicit the ways in which *A Writer's Journey* aligns the stages of the mythic archetype with the stages of the creative process. This demonstrates a mythic approach to creativity, suggesting that the mythic archetype models the *mechanism* by which we achieve creative insight, rather than simply imparting new information that we can assimilate into our existing 'story'. In this way, the mythic archetype functions like a machine which demonstrates the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self in order to achieve new insights, grow, and expand our story.

## Do We Need Stories At All?

Our reality is perceived within the context of a story because we want to make sense of things in order to protect and preserve the fragile 'self' that we perceive ourselves to be. 'We all have [a story] and we love to tell it,' says Larry Rosenberg in *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*. 'If we have no one else, we tell it to ourselves, all day long. Something new happens and we immediately fit it in, make it another example of the same old thing.'<sup>207</sup> It is the illusion of the self that allows us to create these stories; conversely, the illusion of the self is sustained by the narratives that we create. As Stephen Batchelor claims in *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, the self only appears coherent 'because of the monologue we keep repeating, editing, censoring, and embellishing in our heads.'<sup>208</sup>

What we need to be aware of, says David Loy in *The World is Made of Stories*, is that although we perceive our story-making as the world, our stories are not reality.'<sup>209</sup> Our stories cannot be anything other than subjective, because they are born out of (and limited by) our own experience. Our stories are *our* truth, but not the whole truth. After all, is it not the hero's original 'story' (or conditioned thinking) that limits him or her in the first place?

Parkes challenges what he calls one of the 'literary set's favourite orthodoxies' head on: that the world 'needs' stories at all, and implies that stories can even be divisive. 'Far from flowing together in a harmonious ecology,' he says, 'stories tend to be in constant competition with each other. Far from imposing silence, cults, religions and ideologies all have their own noisy stories to tell.'<sup>210</sup> In addition, Parkes criticizes the fact that stories focus

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<sup>207</sup> Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambala Classics, 2004), p. 141.

<sup>208</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998). p. 25.

<sup>209</sup> David R. Loy, *The World is Made of Stories* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>210</sup> Parkes, p. 10-11.

on aspects of the ‘self’ – a self that is supposedly individual and real yet actually composed of stories from the self’s own subjective experience. As a practicing Buddhist, Parkes would appear to seek to escape his egoic prison, and claims that the plots of the most ‘troublesome’ stories serve only to secure and aggrandize our ego-self.<sup>211</sup> This goal is counterproductive, Parkes explains, because, the self can be regarded as an illusion in the first place. In fact, the notion of a fixed self, says Batchelor, is ‘the primary obstruction to the realization of our unique potential as an individual being.’<sup>212</sup> Attachment to the illusion of the fixed self also blocks the creative process – and in her book, *Buddha*, Karen Armstrong even goes as far as to say that the illusion of the self is the source of all evil:

Not only does the idea of “self” lead to unskilful thoughts about “me and mine” and inspire our selfish cravings; egotism can arguably be described as the source of all evil: an excessive attachment to the self can lead to envy or hatred of rivals, conceit, megalomania, pride, cruelty, and, when the self feels threatened, to violence and the destruction of others.<sup>213</sup>

To liberate ourselves from the idea of the fixed self, then, seems essential if we want to be creative, to grow, to find peace, and to live in harmony. This is the aim of Eastern philosophy. As Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, authors of *The Path* explain, the aim of Eastern philosophy is to ‘break us from the confines of our narrative, as well as from the assumptions we hold about who we are and what kind of world we live in.’<sup>214</sup> Then, claims Rosenberg, ‘a different kind of intelligence is born, an organic intelligence that is prior to thinking. We don’t often tap into it, we’re so busy with our thoughts. But there is far more to human consciousness than we’ve been led to believe. Its real jewels are buried.’<sup>215</sup> This organic, intuitive intelligence is prior to the knowledge we acquire through dialectic reasoning, and requires our minds to be – even momentarily – open, free and unconditioned. So, how do we escape our self-imposed narrative and tap into this organic intelligence that is prior to thinking? We liberate ourselves from our stories and conditioning not by *denying*

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<sup>211</sup> Parkes, p. 34.

<sup>212</sup> Batchelor, p. 104.

<sup>213</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Buddha*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p 112.

<sup>214</sup> Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh, *The Path: A New Way to Think About Everything* (London: Viking, 2016), p 184

<sup>215</sup> Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation* (Boston: Shambala Classics, 2004), p. 141.

them, but by remaining mindfully aware of the impressions that our self is giving us.

Batchelor describes this process as follows:

As we become aware of all this we can begin to assume greater responsibility for the course of our lives. Instead of clinging to habitual behaviour and routines as a means to secure this sense of self, we realize the freedom to create who we are. Instead of being bewitched by impressions, we start to create them. Instead of taking ourselves so seriously, we discover the playful irony of a story that has never been told in quite this way before.

By becoming aware of our conditioning, we allow ourselves the opportunity to act responsively rather than reactively to things. We can learn to interact creatively with the world, and this allows us to live beyond the confines of our existing narrative. We would then be free to act from our ‘empty core’, which, says Loy, ‘reconstructs us into less self-ish, more compassionate beings devoted to the welfare and awakening of everyone.’<sup>216</sup> This ‘empty core’ is also the place from which creative insight arises.

Paradoxically, modelling an escape from our conditioned thinking and our existing narrative is the function of the mythic archetype. The archetype models the process whereby the egoic self is momentarily ‘lost’ in the Belly of the Whale, allowing new insights to occur. The paradox inherent in the monomyth, therefore, is that the hero momentarily *stops* storying and loses their fixed idea of themselves (in the Belly of the Whale), in order to receive insights that *expand* their story and allow growth. This same momentary loss of the egoic self also occurs in the act of writing stories – and indeed in any other creative endeavour.

‘One prerequisite for originality’ says Bohm, ‘is clearly that a person shall not be inclined to impose his preconceptions on the fact as he sees it. Rather, he must be able to learn something new, even if this means that the ideas and notions that are comfortable or dear to him may be overturned.’<sup>217</sup> This overturning of the hero’s old story is what happens at the climax of a story. The mythic archetype encourages us to leave behind what we know and brings us to the point where we momentarily lose ourselves and our ‘story’ altogether, in order to receive a new insight that allows us to return to the world with a bigger story. In other words, a story facilitates the deconstruction and reconstruction of ourselves.

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<sup>216</sup> David R. Loy, *Money, Sex, War, Karma* (Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2008), p 23.

<sup>217</sup> Bohm, p. 4.

Stories are dangerous, says Yorke, because ‘they threaten the fabric of the security into which we have built ourselves and our family.’<sup>218</sup> But in the destruction of our old, secure systems, we create a bigger, bolder system. By expanding our stories we expand our consciousness. As Campbell observes, ‘every failure to cope with a life situation must be laid, in the end, to a restriction of consciousness. Wars and temper tantrums are the makeshifts of ignorance; regrets are illuminations come too late.’<sup>219</sup> The Hero’s Journey, says Campbell, is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being.<sup>220</sup> For Buddhists, too, says Parkes, the most important element of a story is whether it promotes awakening.<sup>221</sup> For my own purposes, any story is a ‘good’ story if it constructs, deconstructs, then reconstructs the self, allowing the protagonist (and the reader, vicariously) to transcend the limitations of their conditioning, and grow.

### **Deconstructing the Self**

But is it really possible to permanently deconstruct the self and escape storying our world altogether? If, as May suggests, the definition of consciousness is ‘the awareness that emerges out of the dialectical tension between possibilities and limitations’,<sup>222</sup> where would we be without our stories? Perhaps we would perpetually exist in Campbell’s ‘bliss of being’, all dialectic tensions having been reconciled. Campbell claims that, ‘myth is but the penultimate; the ultimate is openness – that void, or being, beyond the categories – into which the mind must plunge alone and be dissolved.’<sup>223</sup>

But in this state of ‘no-story’ there would be no self, either. Self and story depend on one another. Without a self to expand on, there would be no creative process and no growth. If we were able to achieve a state of no-story, or a state in which we were open to every possible story, we would be infinitely expansive and our consciousness would be at one with the cosmos. The self would also cease to exist. As Alan Watts claims in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*:

Nothing is more creative than death, since it is the whole secret of life. It means that the past must be abandoned, the unknown cannot be avoided, that ‘I’ cannot continue, and

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<sup>218</sup> Yorke, p. 16.

<sup>219</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 107.

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>221</sup> Parkes, p. 16.

<sup>222</sup> May, p. 14.

<sup>223</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 223.

that nothing can be ultimately fixed. When a man knows this he lives for the first time in his life.’<sup>224</sup>

Perhaps having no story and no self is indeed nirvana, but, as Batchelor points out, ‘[i]f we value our participation in a shared reality in which it makes sense to make sense, then too much self-abnegation would deny a central element of our humanity: the need to speak and act, to share our experience with others.’<sup>225</sup> Rather than getting rid of the notion of the self entirely, Loy believes that ‘what we work toward is a more permeable, less dualistic sense of self, which is more aware of, and more comfortable with, its empty constructedness.’<sup>226</sup> A less dualistic self would be less dependent on dialectic reasoning, less inclined to cling to conditioned beliefs, and increasingly open to the organic intelligence that is prior to thinking. For most of us, however, the feeling of transcendence we experience at the moment of insight is necessarily brief. As Storr describes, ‘[t]he ecstatic sense of wholeness is bound to be transient because it has no part in the total pattern of “adaptation through maladaptation” which is characteristic of our species.’<sup>227</sup> Without a new story to escape *from* and build *upon*, there can be no incremental growth. Each time we let go of our old story we allow a new truth to enter, which changes and develops our existing story. As such, ‘story’ is both the problem and the solution.

The process never ends. Creativity is a cyclical process which, like Leski’s creative storm, begins again as soon as it is over. As soon as a new equilibrium is established and there is a ‘happy ever after’, the process must begin again. Otherwise, evolution itself will stop, like a spinning top that loses its momentum. With each new cycle we move forward.

It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite’, says Campbell, ‘to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forwards, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. The cyclical process of creativity is itself is a reconciliation of opposites – the tension between ego and no-ego.’<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Alan W. Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, 2nd edn. (New York: Random House, 2011), pp. 117-118.

<sup>225</sup> Batchelor, p. 102.

<sup>226</sup> Loy, *Money*, p. 22.

<sup>227</sup> Storr, p. 197.

<sup>228</sup> Campbell, *The Hero*, p. 19.

So, a choice confronts us, says May. We can either withdraw in anxiety and panic, and surrender our chance to influence our evolution through our own awareness. Or we can do something new, and ‘confront a no man’s land, to push into a forest where there are no well-worn paths and from which no one has returned to guide us’.<sup>229</sup> It is up to each one of us, then, to set out on the hero’s journey. And, in entreating us to realize our creative potential, Bohm would appear to agree:

In thus emphasising the need for each individual to realize the creative potentialities of the human mind, I do not wish to suggest that this is merely what I (or other people) happen to want, or what I think would be useful to society or to the individual himself. Rather, it seems to me that just as the health of the body demands that we breathe properly, so, whether we like it or not, the health of the mind requires that we be creative. [...] I feel that it is for each of us individually and for society as a whole the most important thing to be done in the circumstances in which humanity now finds itself’.<sup>230</sup>

Although I chose to end *A Writer’s Journey* with a final scene that shows me having left my story-writing to run along the beach, in reality my ‘story’ continues. At the time of writing this commentary, I am beginning work on a new children’s book. This time, it is a time travel adventure in which two children attempt to prevent the accident that killed their father. Although this book is similar in length, style and reading age to my previous fiction, the underlying themes are new. For the first time, embedded in the storyline are themes of living in the present moment, impermanence and non-attachment. My creativity has taken a new and different direction. Had I remained attached to my existing ‘story’ I would never have discovered these new themes. Paradoxically, rebirth requires the death of what has gone before – and this is the very essence of the creative process both for the individual and for society as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

The message implicit in *The Hero’s Journey* is more relevant today than ever. An increasing emphasis on the importance of the intellect, of logical, analytical thinking, and a greater focus on issues of self-esteem and celebrity can lead to an increasingly structured yet divisive

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<sup>229</sup> May, p 11-12.

<sup>230</sup> Bohm, pp. 29-30.

society. Kounios and Beeman report that results of recent calibrations in the Torrance Test<sup>231</sup> show that ‘Americans are apparently becoming less creative. Future research will show whether this drop in creativity scores is global and mirrors the worldwide increase in analytical intelligence.’<sup>232</sup>

According to Abraham Maslow, the creative process is crucial to our own personal development. In fact, he believed that creativity was the pinnacle of human achievement. ‘My feeling,’ he said, ‘is that the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing, fully human person seem to be coming closer and closer together and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing.’<sup>233</sup> This belief supports the idea that creativity is not a restless pursuit of ‘the new’, but an expansion into ‘wholeness’. As Rob Pope explains in *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*, the Latin verb *creare* is derived from the Greek root *krainein*, which means ‘to fulfil’. The difference between creativity as an expansion into wholeness rather than a pursuit of the new is also reflected in Eastern models of creative fulfilment through ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ rather than the more Western perspective of ‘doing’ or ‘making’.<sup>234</sup> In fact, says Pope, ‘one of the main benefits for Westerners in trying to get an ‘Eastern take’ on creativity is that it prompts a fresh look at obscured or ignored religious and philosophical traditions in the West itself; for many intellectual traditions and religious practices in the West also emphasise creativity through awareness of kinds of ‘wholeness’ and absolute ‘being, or of ‘non-being’ and ceaseless ‘becoming’.<sup>235</sup> Fulfilment in terms of personal growth *and* creativity both require the deconstruction of the fixed, conditioned self so that we can experience the state of ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’, in which creative insight occurs.

If we cannot achieve a transformation of our consciousness, warns Campbell, and are unable to perceive and align ourselves with this universal being, we are at risk of submitting to another system: the system that we impose on ourselves and each other.<sup>236</sup> This system is imposed by a selfish, fearful mindset, which clings to its identity. It leads to fearful behaviour

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<sup>231</sup> In 1966, psychologist E. Paul Torrance created the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, to measure creative thinking ability rather than the analytical thinking of measured by IQ tests.

<sup>232</sup> Kounios and Beeman, p. 16.

<sup>233</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, (Middlesex: Arkana, 1994), p. 55.

<sup>234</sup> Rob Pope, *Creativity, Theory, History, Practice* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>235</sup> Pope, p. 61.

<sup>236</sup> Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth: The Seminal PBS Series on World Mythology* (Apostrophe S Productions, and Public Affairs Television, 1988) [on DVD]



like consumerism, greed and aggression, which is designed to distract us from the ‘empty core’ that resides within us all.

Escaping the illusion of a fixed, egoic self and becoming receptive to our intuitive wisdom is necessary for the survival of the planet, too. According to Alan Watts, author of *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, ‘the disease of civilized man is the schism between his brain and his body’,<sup>237</sup> and is consequently the schism between man and nature. Estes also believes that it is no accident that the ‘pristine wild of our planet disappears as the understanding of our own inner wild natures fades.’<sup>238</sup> Our lack of understanding of our own ‘wild nature’ is directly related to our inability to draw upon the organic, intuitive wisdom of the body – and this dangerous schism not only facilitates the illusion that ‘we’ exist independently of our bodies and each other and the natural world – but are in opposition with them.

Whether our *homunculus* (or egoic self) wants to hear it or not, we are not structures separate from the world but are the temporary processes *belonging to* the world. If we could perceive ourselves as such, it might make the creative process less mysterious, and the question of what or who might be ‘inspiring’ us less perplexing. These concerns are bound up with the illusion that the self is discrete from the world. If we could perceive the self as part of the world, we might more easily accept the notion that inspiration draws from *everything that already is*, rather than the notion that we individually create something out of nothing. We might accept that whatever agency is driving evolution is also driving the expansion of our creative awareness, and consequently be better able to relinquish our self-control and remain open to receiving insights rather than trying to ‘make’ new ideas arise through intellectual effort. Recognizing that we – and our creativity – are part of a larger process can in turn help us escape the limitations of the fixed self.

This idea that we are a part of something greater is the premise upon which the mythic archetype rests. In fact, the purpose of myths, Campbell believed, is to connote something transcendent which enables one to feel ‘in accord’ with this universal being (as does our experience of creativity). Feeling and acting in accord with this, Campbell believes, allows us to realize our true path and experience the bliss of being.<sup>239</sup> It is only with this raised level of consciousness, says Campbell, that we can say ‘yes’ to the experience of life, whatever it

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<sup>237</sup> Watts, p. 57.

<sup>238</sup> Estes, p. 1.

<sup>239</sup> Campbell and Moyers, *The Seminal PBS Series on World Mythology*, 30:26

brings.<sup>240</sup> In the words of Shunryu Suzuki: '[t]his kind of attitude is the right attitude. If you understand yourself as a temporal embodiment of the truth, you will have no difficulty whatsoever. You will appreciate your surroundings, and you will appreciate yourself as a wonderful part of Buddha's great activity, even in the midst of difficulties. This is our way of life'.<sup>241</sup> He goes on to say that, 'when you realize that everything is just a flashing into the vast universe, you become very strong, and your existence becomes very meaningful'.<sup>242</sup>

If we can escape our egoic thinking and instead take direction from Dennett's concept of 'bottom-up' intelligence, which originates in the body, we will be following a creative process that is unfolding on a larger scale – a process that reflects the laws of nature and would appear to be in our own best interests, too. As Shaun McNiff says, 'I learn over and over again that the creative process is an intelligence that knows where it has to go. Somehow it always finds the way to the place where I need to be, and it is always a destination that never could have been known by me in advance.'<sup>243</sup> Sinnott has this to say about the role of creativity in evolution:

Just as the organism pulls together random, formless stuff into the patterned system of structure and function in the body, so the unconscious mind seems to select and arrange and correlate these ideas and images into a pattern. The resemblance between the two processes is close. The concept is worth considering that the organizing power of life, manifest in mind as well as in body – for the two are hardly separable – is the truly creative element. Creativity, this becomes an attribute of *life*.<sup>244</sup>

Creativity is the means by which we allow this 'organizing power of life' to manifest itself through our behaviour. It is the mechanism by which our minds and our culture can grow fractally, branching infinitely, just like everything else in the universe, creating ever-more-intricate and far-reaching tributaries.

So, the mythic archetype as metaphor for the creative process does not conflict with Campbell's description of The Hero's Journey as a means by which to transform our consciousness. Indeed, Campbell's 'transformed consciousness' and the state of mind essential for creativity are one and the same. This, then, must be the state of mind we must

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<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35:05.

<sup>241</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, p. 118.

<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>243</sup> Shaun McNiff, *Trust the Process*, (Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>244</sup> Sinnott, p. 107.

achieve if we are to escape the limitations we impose on our perceptions. Happily, however, each of us does not need to have our ‘story’ deconstructed through enduring near-death experiences, like the hero of the monomyth. Instead, we can choose to escape the narrative we impose upon ourselves simply through mindful awareness. When we are mindfully aware we remain open and, as Batchelor says, ‘[l]ife becomes less of a defensive stance to preserve an immutable self and more of an ongoing talk to complete an unfinished tale.’<sup>245</sup>

So, when we feel uncertain or lost, we must resist the temptation to make things fit our own established way of thinking, and instead reside with purposeless awareness within the dialectic tension of uncertainty. This quality of attention is alluded to by Zen master Shunryu Suzuki when he says, ‘I discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing’.<sup>246</sup> This allows us to venture into the unknown, like the hero of the monomyth, and access the intuitive wisdom of our unconscious.

My intention was that *A Writer’s Journey* would demonstrate the links between the attitudes required for creativity and the attitudes endorsed by mindfulness, with a view to helping myself and others understand how to enhance their creativity. But, like Vogler in his observations on Campbell’s monomyth, ‘I came looking for the design principles of storytelling, but on the road I found something more; a set of principles for living’.<sup>247</sup> Here, by identifying parallels between the stages of my own creative journey in *A Writer’s Journey* and the archetypal motifs of the monomyth, I hope to have demonstrated that the stages of The Hero’s Journey are analogous with the stages of the creative process itself – and that the ‘principles for living’ endorsed by Campbell’s monomyth are none other than the attitudes required for creativity.

As a quest narrative in which the goal is creativity itself, *A Writer’s Journey* therefore supports the mythic approach to creativity. I conclude that the mythic archetype is a metaphor for the creative process itself, and that the message implicit in all stories is: ‘live creatively’. Only by adopting a creative mindset can we become the creative heroes of our own lives and of the Ordinary World in its entirety – which has been the message implicit in the archetypal structure of our stories all along.

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<sup>245</sup> Batchelor, p. 104.

<sup>246</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, p. 116.

<sup>247</sup> Vogler, p ix.

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