

## Lesson Nine

*Memorizing these ideas is easy. Living them takes a lifetime of practice. Fortunately the heroes of all time have walked before us. They show us the path.*

## OPENING UP TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD

In New Guinea I discovered what it was like to live without religion. Not that they did not have viewpoints that we would consider "religious." There were spirits everywhere, and keeping yourself right with them was a matter of life or death. We occasionally brought an offering of pig to different spirits – the spirit of the mountain to our east, or the spirit of that grove down the hill – and invited them to feast. But these spirits were not supernatural to them. They were just part of nature. They were not something you believed in, because they were not something you would ever question. They just were.

So faith and belief were irrelevant to them. I would soon discover that many of the most basic questions we have about religion are culturally bounded and ethnocentric. For example, most of us would think that the proper question to ask when

understanding other religions would be something like, "What god or gods do they believe in?"

But this question only makes sense coming from a religious background of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). These faiths all focus intensively on faith or belief in a single omnipotent god. But what about all of the other religions – which number in the thousands – that are not based on a single god, or any god, or even on the notion of faith and belief?

Questions based on what people believe are ethnocentric because they end up defining other people's religions in our terms. Hinduism, a richly textured religion full of rituals, practices, contemplation, meditation, and stories aimed toward helping people live a balanced fulfilling and meaningful life is diminished to become nothing more than "polytheism" - belief in more than one god. The rich world of spirits my friends in new guinea experience and the complex rituals and practices they engage in to relate to them becomes nothing more than "animism" - belief in spirits.

Another problem with focusing on "belief" is that in many languages there may not be a concept that conveys exactly what is meant by the English word, "believe." Anthropologist Rodney Needham documented several examples of this, and notes that early linguists like Max Muller found it difficult to find the concept in several languages when they started documenting indigenous languages in the late 1800s.

This problem with the word "belief" strikes at the heart of just how differently cultures may view the world. As Dorothy Lee notes so powerfully, "the world view of a particular society includes the society's conception of man's own relation to the universe, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, secular and divine, to use our own dualisms."

The key phrase here is, “*to use our own dualisms.*” Remarkably, Lee is recognizing that our most basic assumptions are culturally bounded. Other people do not make the same distinctions between the human and non-human or secular and divine that we do. They may not make those distinctions at all. She points out that the very notion of the “supernatural” is not present in some cultures. “Religion is an everpresent dimension of experience” for these people, she notes, and “religion” is not given a name because it permeates their existence. Clyde Kluckohn notes that the Navaho had no word for religion. Lee points out that the Tikopia of the Pacific Islands “appear to live in a continuum which includes nature and the divine without defining bounds; where communion is present, not achieved, where merging is a matter of being, not of becoming.”

Furthermore, the division of the world into economics, politics, family and religion is a Western construction. As Lee notes, for many indigenous peoples “all economic activities, such as hunting, gathering fuel, cultivating the land, storing food, assume a relatedness to the encompassing universe, and with many cultures, this is a religious relationship.”

Our focus on “belief” as the core of religion leads us to emphasize belief over practice, and mind over body. In Christianity you have to believe to be saved. We tend to see other religions as different versions on this theme, so we wonder what they believe in. The Christian emphasis on “belief” is itself a modern invention. A careful textual analysis of writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by Wilfred Cantwell Smith found that the word “believe” was only used to refer to a commitment of loyalty and trust. It was the notion of “believing in” something, not believing whether or not a statement was true. In other words, according to Smith, faith

in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century was a matter of believing *in* God (putting trust and loyalty in him) not believing *that* God exists. He turns to the Hindu term for faith, *sraddha*, to clarify what he means. “It means, almost without equivocation, to set one’s heart on.” Similarly, the latin “credo” is formed from the Latin roots “cor” (heart) and “do” (to put, place, or give). The emphasis on belief as a matter of truth only became an issue as the belief of God’s existence became more fragile and open to question with the rise of science. As a result, most of us are used to wrestling with big ideas about the big everything and the big question of what to believe looms large in our consciousness.

As we encounter different faiths and practices in this lesson you may find yourself asking even more questions that you have never asked before. You might find the ideas of other traditions intriguing or inspiring. They may draw you in with wisdom and insights that you have never encountered before. They might make you question or lead you to wonder ... How is it that of all thousands of possible religions that I have the capital T “True” one? Or they might even make you question whether or not capital T “Truth” exists. But capital T Truth and being right are largely the concerns of the Abrahamic faiths like Christianity and Islam, not of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism or many of the thousands of other religions in the world, which often have no trouble accepting the ideas of another religion into their own.

In order to open ourselves up to the wisdom of other traditions we have to move past our own preconceptions and labels that so neatly package faiths as “monotheism” “polytheism” or “animism.” Such labels are not just wrong. They are dangerous. They only show who others are in how they are other from us. Anthropology demands more. Our primary method is participant observation. We don't just

observe, staying trapped in our own categories and labels. We participate. And as we participate we start to see and understand the world differently, through different eyes, with different categories and labels. We start to see the stories they see in the world, feel the joys they feel, feel their values tingling our sensibilities, find a little meaning in the gentlest breeze. We may not come to *believe* in their Gods and spirits, but we feel their presence in the songs and rituals we participate in and observe.

These experiences can be extraordinarily enlightening, and we may find that while we may have a hard time changing our own deeply held religious beliefs, that there is great wisdom in other traditions that can teach us some powerful lessons about the art of being human.

#### WHERE BELIEF DOES NOT MATTER

To examine a religion that does not focus on belief in more detail we can look to the philosophical Hinduism that emerged about 2500 years ago in India. The fourth Brahmana of the Upanishads, a sacred text of Hinduism dated to this time period, describes the beginning of time as beginning with nothing but “the Great Self” or the “Brahman.” The Self was all that there was. Seeing that he was alone, the Self felt afraid, but then he thought, ‘there is nothing but myself, why should I fear?’ But then he felt lonely and he longed for a companion. So he split himself in two, man and woman, and embraced the woman. From that union all humans were born.

The woman hid herself as a cow, so the man turned into a bull and embraced her, and all cattle were born. She turned herself into a mare, and he into a goat, and all goats were born,

and so on until all the creatures of the world were created. “And thus he created everything, down to the ants.” In contrast to the story of Genesis in which God stands outside of creation and creates the world, the Hindu Self (Brahman) is everything everywhere. The Brahman is the ultimate reality that permeates all of reality. It is beyond all dualities and cannot be properly named, because to name is to make distinctions between this and that. As the Upanishads say, “He who worships him as one or the other, does not know him.”

As a result, the core problem in Hinduism is not to believe in God, have faith in God, or to form a relationship with God as an external being. It is instead to recognize one’s own divine nature within. The world of separate things is an illusion, called Maya, and as long as we are trapped in this illusion we are trapped in Samsara, the endless cycle of death, rebirth, and reincarnation.

Since the divine oneness was fractured by the original fear and desire, this means overcoming fear and desire to recognize one’s oneness with all of creation. The core problem is not salvation, as it is in Christianity. The core problem is how to achieve enlightenment by transcending the illusory dualities of the world.

One cannot achieve enlightenment by knowledge or belief alone. One must actually experience the unity of all things. In one of the most famous stories of the Upanishads a young man comes home after studying for many years. He is very proud of his knowledge until his father asks, “Svetaketu, my child, you are so full of your learning and so censorious, have you asked for that knowledge by which we hear the unheard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived and know what cannot be known?”

The boy was humbled and asked to learn more. The father told him to put some salt in a glass of water and come back tomorrow. When he returned the father asked him for the salt. Svetaketu noted that the salt had dissolved and no longer existed. His father asked him to taste the water. “How does it taste?” he asked. “Salty,” he replied. “Now taste from the bottom,” his father asked. “Salty,” he replied again. “It is everywhere though we do not see it. So it is with the Self. It is everywhere though we do not perceive it. And thou art that.” That line “thou art that” translated by Alan Watts emphatically as “You’re it!” is the key idea of Hinduism and Buddhism. It means that all is one and all is divine, but it is not a doctrine to believe in dogmatically. It is an experience that one must constantly work to achieve through practice.

## WHAT RITUALS REVEAL ABOUT THE ART OF BEING HUMAN

Traditionally, Australian Aborigines spent much of their time roaming wide areas of land, hunting and gathering their food. They lived in small family groups and rarely encountered other people. The landscape itself was sacred. Every rock formation, valley, and river were the footprints and marks left behind by the culture heroes of the Dreamtime, the time before time when all was created. People find their way by singing ancient songs which sing the stories of these culture heroes. The songs are like maps showing the way. “If you know the song, you can always find your way across the country” wrote Bruce Chatwin in his book, *Songlines*.



But sometimes Aborigines came together in larger groups for a large ritual. We all know the feeling of gathering in large groups of people for a special event like a big game or concert. As Emile Durkheim famously described these gatherings of Aborigines, “a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them into an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates ... echoing the others ... like an avalanche that grows as it goes along.” He uses the term “collective effervescence” to describe this feeling, which is one that can lift a person so high as to feel a brief moment of something akin to enlightenment – a true lightness of being – or ecstasy – a feeling of being outside of one’s self. This collective effervescence is a key element of ritual, and something all humans continue to seek out, even if they are not religious.

That humans everywhere can experience this kind of “collective effervescence” is a sign of our shared humanity, a product of our social nature. Such experiences help us build or repair social bonds and communities, overcome conflicts, and work together to survive, thrive, and find joy in our lives.

All over the world we find similar types of rituals and beliefs formed out of a shared human experience. All humans are born incomplete and dependent on others. All humans must form social relationships to survive. All humans must learn to deal with death and suffering. All humans must deal with envy, jealousy, and change. All humans encounter a world much bigger and more powerful than themselves and must deal with forces – physical, social, economic, and political – that are out of their control. And all humans must grow physically, emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

In response to our need to transition from a state of dependence to state of independent adulthood, many cultures have initiation rituals, and these rituals show remarkable similarities across cultures, capturing some deep wisdom about what it takes to be a successful adult.

Though initiation rituals vary greatly, they all flow through three primary stages which Arnold Von Gennep identified as separation, liminality, and incorporation. The stages represent the movement of the initiate from one stage of life to another. In the separation phase, they are removed from their childhood. This often involves a dramatic removal from the mother and is accompanied by symbols of death, representing that the child is dying to be reborn as something new. The initiate is then placed in a secluded place with other initiates as it enters the stage of liminality, a stage marked by ambiguity and disorientation. Initiates are meant to feel as if they have lost their place in society and now stand apart, not knowing who they are or how they should act. They are no longer classified as child and not yet classified as adult, so there are no clear roles or rules to follow. "Dead" to society, they are sometimes treated as a corpse would be treated, indicating the death to their former selves. They might be buried or required to lay motionless. But at the same time they are about to be reborn, so they may be treated as embryos or seedlings. Among the Min groups of New Guinea, initiates have their hair made into a bun that resembles a taro tuber, representing a seed that will grow. With symbols of both death and birth the secluded space itself is often thought of as both tomb and womb.

Before they can be reborn they have to endure trials and tests to see if they are ready. The Satere-Mawe of Brazil put on gloves filled with stinging bullet ants and have to dance with

the gloves on, enduring the pain until they pass out. The Kaningara of New Guinea must lie still while their elders cut hundreds of deep cuts into their bodies, covering them in their own blood, and then endure stinging nettles that make the gashes swell into lasting scars. By the time they heal their skin looks like the scaly flesh of the crocodiles they revere. Some form of painful body modification is common, a test that allows them to demonstrate their ability to overcome fear, quell their desires for comfort, and show that they are ready for adulthood.

In the final phase of incorporation, the initiates are revealed to the society and announced as full adults. There are often images of rebirth. For example, in New Guinea initiates crawl through the spread legs of the elder men as if to be reborn into society. They emerge from the womb of the initiation as a new man.

These rituals can have a profound effect. For example, among the Kalenjin of Kenya the male initiates are required to endure a painful circumcision without anesthesia. Their bodies are covered with dried mud so that if they flinch even the slightest bit the mud will crack to reveal their weakness. If this happens the initiation is considered a failure. They are not real men and they are not allowed to marry. Some have suggested that it is this ritual that is the reason why Kalenjin are so strong and able to endure pain. The Kalenjin are world-renowned long distance runners. Consider that only 17 Americans have ever run a marathon in under 2 hours and 10 minutes. There were 32 Kalenjin that did it in just one month in October 2011. The Kalenjin make up only .06% of the world population, yet they consistently dominate long distance running events worldwide.

If initiates are able to overcome fear and quell their desires the secrets of adulthood are revealed. Sometimes the revelations are profound and overturn everything they thought they knew. For example, the Keraki of New Guinea grow up hearing terrifying monstrous sounds emanating from the forbidden regions of the forest. They are told that these are the sounds of the great crocodile spirit. During the initiation their eyes are covered by senior men as they wait for the spirit to come. They hear the terrifying sound come closer and closer until it is right upon them and about to swallow them up. Then the men uncover their eyes to reveal that it is the men themselves spinning bull-roarers that makes the sound. They are then appointed keepers of the secret and protectors of the bull-roarers, which are not viewed as “tricks” but as sacred divinities in their own right, worthy of food offerings.

As horrific as some of these rituals may sound, they serve a few powerful functions. Joseph Campbell, a renowned mythologist who dedicated his life to the study of all religions and mythologies of the world, has identified four key functions that a ritual like this can serve. First, they serve a sociological function by bringing people together and making them feel like a full member of society. The process itself is a strong bonding experience for initiates. The end of the process gives them a firm understanding of themselves as adults, while also announcing to the rest of society to treat them like adults. The ritual lays out the rules and expectations of adulthood and how to treat others. Second, they serve a pedagogical function, teaching the initiates important lessons about how to overcome fear, quell desire, and live up to their full potential. Third, they serve a cosmological function, presenting the initiates with explanations for why the world is the way it is. These rituals enact and display a full world view that can

inform their lives and bring meaning to it. And finally, there is the mystical function. The ritual provides a time to sit with and contemplate the mysteries of being and the awe of existence itself. It forces them to directly encounter forces larger than themselves and come to terms with them.

## THE HERO

Just as rituals like initiations can serve these four functions, so can the stories of a religious tradition. During the Great Depression, Joseph Campbell spent five years in a small shack in the woods of New York reading texts and stories from religious traditions all over the world. As he did so, he started to see a common underlying pattern to many of the stories, and a common body of wisdom. One pattern he found was that of the hero's journey. All over the world he found stories of heroes who are called to adventure, step over the threshold, face a series of trials to achieve their ultimate boon and then return to the ordinary world to help others. He mapped out the hero's journey in a book appropriately titled, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" in 1949. The book would ultimately transform the way many people think about religion and have a strong influence on popular culture, providing a framework that can be found in popular movies like Star Wars, the Matrix, Harry Potter, and the Lion King. The book was listed by Time magazine as one of the 100 best and most influential books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Campbell refers listeners to the similarities in the heroic journeys of Jesus and Buddha as examples:

Jesus receives his call to adventure while being baptized. The heavens opened up and he heard a voice calling him the son of God. He sets off on a journey and crosses the threshold into another world, the desert, where he will find his road of trials, the three temptations. First Satan asks him to turn stones into bread. Jesus, who has been fasting and must be very hungry, replies, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Satan takes him to the top of the temple and asks him to jump so that the angels may catch him, and Jesus says, "You shall not put the lord, your God, to the test." Then Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world can be seen. He promised Jesus he could have all of it "if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus says, "Away, Satan! For it is written; "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." The devil left him, and angels appeared to minister to him. He had conquered fear and desire and received his ultimate boon: wisdom and knowledge that he would spread to others.

The Buddhist hero is Siddhartha. He was born a prince and lived a luxurious life behind palace walls, protected from the pain and suffering of the world. But one day at age 29 he saw an old man. Soon after that he encountered disease and death. This was his call to adventure. He set off across the threshold, beyond the palace walls, to find peace and understand how one is to live with the everpresent reality of human suffering. He found many teachers and patiently learned their beliefs, practices and meditations but he still felt unsatisfied. He set off alone and came to rest under a tree. There it was that Mara, the evil demon, sent his three daughters to seduce him. But Siddhartha was still and without desire. Mara sent armies of monsters to attack Siddhartha. But Siddhartha was still and without fear. Then Mara claimed that

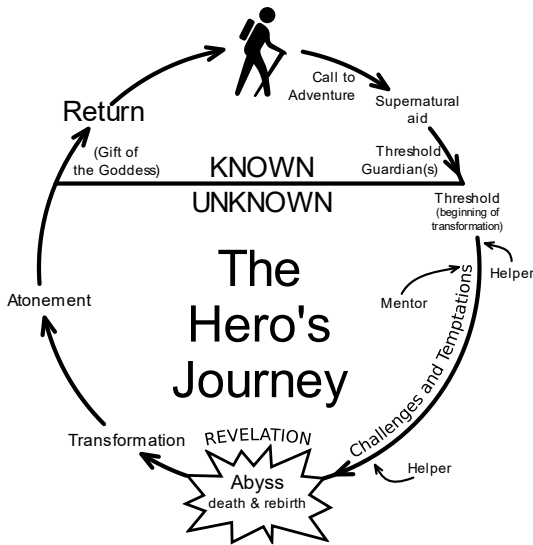
Siddhartha had no right to sit in the seat of enlightenment. Siddhartha was still and calmly touched the earth with his hand and the earth itself bore witness to his right. He had conquered fear and desire and received his ultimate boon: wisdom and knowledge that he would spread to others.

The stages of the hero's journey are remarkably similar to those of the initiation. First, the hero must be separated from the ordinary world, the world he has always known, and be thrust into a liminal state – the unknown – the land of adventure. There the hero faces many trials and temptations, forcing the hero to overcome fear and desire. The self, or ego, is made of our fears and desires, so as the hero moves past them he is transformed. This transformation is often marked in stories by a death and rebirth. The transformation grants the hero wisdom, which may be the goal of the quest, or it may give him the wisdom or power to complete the quest. The hero can then return home, transformed, ready to share his boon with others.

In his book, Campbell had identified 17 themes that are common throughout hero stories around the world. They are not all always present, but they are common. Five of them are especially prominent and essential:

1. The Call to Adventure. The hero often lives a quintessentially mundane life but longs for something more. Something happens that calls the hero forth into the adventure. The hero often hesitates but eventually accepts the call.
2. The Mentor. There is usually someone who helps the hero as he crosses the threshold into the land of adventure.

3. The Trials. The hero must face many tests and trials, each one offers a lesson and helps the hero overcome fear.
4. The Temptations. There are usually some temptations trying to pull the hero away from the path. These test the hero's resolve and ability to quell their desires.
5. Ultimate Boon. If the hero can move past fear and desire he is granted a revelation and transforms into a new being that can complete the adventure.



That the same basic structure can be found all over the world in both story and ritual illuminates that there are remarkable similarities in the human condition wherever it may be found. Initiations and hero stories both speak to the need for humans to change and transform throughout their lives. By virtue of being born unfinished, we are born into a state of dependency. Our childhood fears and desires are appropriate



as children, but we must at some point die to our childhood self and be reborn into an adult self. In the modern world, we may find ourselves continuously changing roles as we change jobs, raise children, send our kids off to college, retire, and so on. Each transformation requires a transformation of the self, and hero stories help us with these transformations by giving us guidance (the pedagogical function), helping us find our place in society and feel connected to one another (the sociological function), giving us a vision for how the world works and how we might relate to it (the cosmological function) and putting us back in touch with the awe of the universe (the mystical function).

## HOW RELIGIONS FAIL US

But as Campbell studied the stories and traditions of the world he became more and more concerned that the traditional functions of religion were no longer being served by religion and ritual, especially in the West.

We do not have initiation rituals that can firmly establish our movement into adulthood. Instead, we have years and years of schooling without any clear demarcations of when adulthood begins. High School graduation could serve this function, but few Americans are truly independent and self-sufficient adults after graduation. As the world has grown more complex so have the demands of our education. It is difficult to be a productive member of society and feel fully adult without a job. We end up stuck in the awkward liminal phase of extended adolescence.

But the problems did not stop here for Campbell. He worried that our stories were also failing us. He worried that

the literal Christianity of most Americans could not serve the sociological, pedagogical, or cosmological functions because its core stories, rules, and explanations are based on the society and science of the Middle East 2,000 years ago.

Slavery was commonplace. Women were not equals. And it was common to assume, as described in Genesis, that the world is relatively young, perhaps just a few thousand years old, and is shaped like a flat disc with a dome above it – the firmament of heaven – that holds the stars. The stories reflect this view. For example, when Jesus ascended to heaven he did not have far to go. He is imagined to have gone into the sky and into Heaven above. But now we have been to the place where Jesus was supposed to have gone, beyond the clouds and blue sky, and we now know that there is nothing there – just space. We know that the earth is over 4 billion years old and sits on the outer edge of a vast galaxy which is itself just a small piece of a larger universe that is about 15 billion years old. We know that 2 billion years ago there were only very simple living organisms on our planet. We know that 200 million years ago dinosaurs walked the earth. We know that they became extinct. We know that 20 million years ago there were no humans walking the earth. We know that 2 million years ago humans were walking the earth. And none of this is accounted for in the Bible.

As new scientific knowledge was revealed in the late 1800s and our values became more tolerant and egalitarian it caused a crisis of faith for many that continues to this day. How do we square the cosmos as we know it from science with how it is portrayed to us in our religious traditions? How do we square our values of tolerance and openness with Biblical passages that seem to speak against those values? As Christian theologian James Fowler notes, “faith struggles to be formed

and maintained in many persons today who feel they have no usable access to any viable cumulative religious tradition.”

As a result, Campbell lamented, both Christians and atheists do not receive the potential wisdom of religion and ritual because they are overly focused on whether or not the stories are true. Rather than taking religion literally and assessing its veracity, Campbell argues that we need to understand that many of the stories and rituals of a religious tradition speak to the human condition in ways that transcend or stand outside of whether or not they are true or false. Like good music, the stories and rituals are to be experienced not just analyzed. The point of music or dancing is the music or dancing itself. Campbell recommends thinking of religious traditions – one’s own as well as those of others – as a rich body of poetry that can teach, inspire, and transform. When asked for a definition of religion he once joked that a religion is “a popular misunderstanding of poetry.”

But our religions today rarely serve in this capacity, and thereby fail to help us live with the complexities of our world. Campbell called on artists to develop new stories that could speak to the challenges of our times – stories that could teach us how to live a good life in today’s world (the pedagogical function), stories that could help us get along and feel connected to one another (the sociological function), stories that could give us a better picture and understanding of how things work today (the cosmological function), stories that could allow us to feel hopeful and stand in awe of the universe (the mystical function).

George Lucas was one of the first to hear the call.

## REBIRTH OF THE HERO

Lucas came across Campbell's work while he was working on Star Wars. "It was a great gift," Lucas said, "a very important moment. It's possible that if I had not come across that I would still be writing Star Wars today." And in this way, the stories of Jesus, Buddha, and other religious hero stories from all over the world came to influence characters like Luke Skywalker. George Lucas would refer to Campbell as "my Yoda" and the influence of the great teacher is evident in the work. Star Wars was just the first of many Hollywood movies that would use the hero cycle as a formula. In the mid-1980s Christopher Vogler, then a story consultant for Disney, wrote up a 7 page memo summarizing Campbell's work. "Copies of the memo were like little robots, moving out from the studio and into the jetsream of Hollywood thinking," Vogler notes. "Fax machines had just been invented ... copies of The Memo [were] flying all over town."

Movies have become the new modern myths, taking the elements of hero stories in the world's wisdom traditions and placing them in modern day situations that allow us to think through and contemplate contemporary problems and challenges. In this way, elements of the great stories of Jesus and Buddha find their way into our consciousness in new ways.

Movies like the Matrix present a picture of the cosmos that includes our troubled relationships to technology. The hero, Neo, starts off as Mr. Anderson, a very ordinary name for a very ordinary guy working in a completely non-descript and mundane cubicle farm. His call to adventure comes from his soon-to-be mentor, Morpheus, who offers him the red pill. Mr. Anderson suddenly "wakes up" literally and figuratively, and recognizes that he has been living in a dream world,

feeding the machines with his life energy. Morpheus trains him and prepares him for battle. Morpheus reveals the prophecy to Neo, who Morpheus calls “The One” – the savior who is to free people from the Matrix and save humankind. In this way, Neo’s story is very much like the story of Jesus. At the end of the movie he dies and is resurrected, just like Jesus, but here the story takes a turn toward the East as upon re-awakening Neo is enlightened and sees through the illusion of the Matrix just as Hindus or Buddhist attempt to see through the illusion of Maya.

The religious themes continue in the second movie, as Neo meets “the architect” who created the Matrix. The architect looks is a bearded white man, invoking common images of God in the West. But swinging back to Eastern traditions, the architect informs Neo that he is the sixth incarnation of “The One” and is nothing more than a necessary and planned anomaly designed to reboot the system and keep it under control. He is trapped in Samsara, the ongoing cycles of death, rebirth, and reincarnation.

In order to break the cycle, Neo ultimately has to give up everything and give entirely of himself – the ultimate symbol of having transcended desire. In a finale that seems to tie multiple religious traditions together, Neo lies down in front of Deus Ex Machina (God of the Machines) with his arms spread like Jesus on the cross, ready to sacrifice himself and die for all our sins. But this is not just a Christian ending. Invoking Eastern traditions, he ends the war by merging the many dualities that were causing so much suffering in the world. Man and machine are united as he is plugged into the machine main frame. And even good and evil are united as he allows the evil Smith to enter into him and become him. In merging the dualities all becomes one and the light of enlightenment

shines out through the Matrix, destroying everything, and a new world is born.

The Matrix is an especially explicit example of bringing religious themes into the modern myths of movies, but even seemingly mundane movies build from the hero cycle and bring the wisdom of the ages to bare on contemporary problems. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* explores how to find meaning in the mundane world of corporate cubicles and how to thrive in a cold and crass corporate system that doesn't seem to care about you. *The Hunger Games* explores how to fight back against a seemingly immense and unstoppable system of structural power where the core exploits the periphery, and how to live an authentic life in a Reality TV world that favors superficiality over the complexities of real feelings and real life. And *Rango*, which appears to be a children's movie about a pet lizard who suddenly finds himself alone in the desert, is a deep exploration of how to find one's true self.

Indeed, a conversation toward the end of *Rango* seems to capture thousands of years of ancient wisdom about religion, practice, and how to live your way into being a hero. Rango has crossed the road to "the other side." He collapses – a symbolic death – and is carried like Jesus on the cross into a heaven-like landscape where he meets the "spirit of the West" (Clint Eastwood).

Rango: They used to call you the man with no name.

Spirit of the West: It doesn't matter what they call you. It's the deeds that make the man.

Rango: Yeah but my deeds just made things worse. I'm a fraud. I'm a phony. My friends believed in me. They need some kind of a hero.

Spirit of the West: Then be a hero.

Rango: No no. You don't understand. I'm not even supposed to be here.

Spirit of the West: That's right. You came a long way to find something that isn't out here. Don't you see, it's not about you. It's about them.

Rango: But I can't go back.

Spirit of the West: Don't know that you gotta choice son. No man can walk out on his own story.

(Spirit of the West drives off in a golf cart. Roadkill, the armadillo and his spiritual mentor, appears.)

Roadkill: You made it. That's right, amigo. The other side of the road.

Rango: Did you see ... ?

Roadkill: We each see what we need to see.

Beautiful, isn't it?

# Challenge 9: Seeing yourself as a Hero

Your challenge is to see yourself as a hero and write your life story as a hero story. The final product can be a fable or a metaphorical story in which you star as the princess or knight – or it can be more true to life and realistic. Be as fanciful and creative as you like.

## HOW TO FIND YOUR INNER HERO

Step One: If your life were a book, what would the chapter headings be? Use these to identify the key turning points and phases of your life.

Step Two:

1. The Call to Adventure. The hero often lives a quintessentially mundane life but longs for something more. Something happens that calls the hero forth into the adventure. What do you feel called to do?
2. The Mentor. There is usually someone who helps the hero. Who have been the key influencers of your life? Who has been there for you at critical moments?
3. The Trials. The hero must face many tests and trials, each one offers a lesson and helps the hero overcome fear. What challenges have you faced in life and what did you learn from them?



4. The Temptations. There are usually some temptations trying to pull the hero away from the path. These test the hero's resolve and ability to move past their attachments and live for something greater than themselves. Some of these might seem obvious: vices or distractions that take up precious time and allow for easy escapism. But look deeper as well. What are your core temptations? Many people are tempted to take a safe route toward financial security. Others might seek fame, but only for fame's sake. Or some might be tempted to just make their parents proud, thereby failing to live from their own true center. What is your true center? Joseph Campbell implores us to "Follow your bliss and doors will open where you thought there ought not be a door." What is your bliss?
5. Ultimate Boon. If the hero can move past fear and desire he is granted a revelation and transforms into a new being that can complete the adventure. You may not feel like you are here yet, but if not, try to write the ending of the story like you think it must end. Look carefully at the trials and temptations you face and think about how you might overcome them.

Step Three: This is the most important step. Accept yourself wherever you are. You do not have to be a hero in the traditional sense of the word. The goal of this assignment is to see yourself as a hero no matter where you are. Maybe you are grinding away in the trials of life, or maybe you just feel lost like you have not even heard the call to adventure. The goal is for you to be able to see yourself with compassion in

the same way that you might see a hero in the midst of a book or movie that is not over yet.

Step Four: Take or find a picture of yourself that captures your inner hero and post it along with your story at ANTH101.com. Or, if it is too personal and something you would rather not post online, send the story to your professor for credit.