

FINDING THE JEWEL IN THE LOTUS

A Review of Joseph Campbell's
The Hero with a Thousand Faces

by Michael Ireland

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A book review for a client

“FINDING THE JEWEL IN THE LOTUS”



Some books are timeless; they speak to generation after generation of readers in a voice that transcends ideology and religiosity, politics, societal mores, nation and culture. The Hero with a Thousand Faces by mythologist Joseph Campbell is such a book.

Hero is experiencing a renaissance – and no wonder – this philosophical classic speaks as clearly and profoundly to awakened readers today as it did to truth seekers fortunate enough to read it when it was first published. This is the masterwork on myth of our time; it is Campbell’s magnum opus, and it is surely the greatest book on the subject of myth ever written.

In Hero, Campbell explains the deep meaning of world myths. He believes that myth resonates universally because collectively, humankind reads myth as “biography, history and cosmology.” (256) But, Campbell says, myth is also psychology framed in a language of

symbolism. For him, psychology translates myth and illuminates the deepest depths of human character; in a phrase, myth defines what it means to be human.

In Part I, *The Adventure of the Hero*, Campbell approaches this inspiring and compelling idea psychoanalytically, examining the metaphysics of myth to illustrate that in all cultures, across centuries and around the globe, in essence, myths are the same. Myths come from a cosmic place, he tells us; they are spontaneous emanations from the human psyche, the metaphysical counterpart of which is the *axis mundi*, or the World Soul.

Campbell compares archetypal images in myths, demonstrating that all myths tell a universal story. For him, the mythical hero's challenge is always *psychological healing* – the motifs are diverse and expressed in a myriad of colorful and provocative ways – but the form is the same.

There is a universal “blueprint,” Campbell says, from which myths are built. Myths are, for him, a kind of cosmic theatre, in which the eternal drama of the human story unfolds and is writ large. Rapture and despair, the extremes of human experience, are the two sides of the mask of Janus, the patron god of beginnings and endings. In the divine play, each one of us dons the two-faced mask and by playing out the role set for us in mythical tradition, we ignite a spark in our soul and awaken to our true self. Thus, in every human being burns the flame of a hero; every man and woman is a protagonist in a hero's story, on a quest across a shadowy landscape, replete with rugged mountains to be climbed, raging rivers to be crossed and tribulations to be endured. It is only through realizing the sorrows of the human condition that we can experience the joy of living, and it is only by becoming lost in the darkness that we can find the light.

Campbell says that the mother of all myths is the “monomyth,” the multi-phased, perpetual cycle of human drama in which the hero separates from society, is initiated into a new experience and returns home, transformed. Campbell declares that this so called “mono-myth” is the universal fabric into which all myths have been woven – from the threads of human experience our eternal stories are gathered and fashioned into our literature, our poetry, our

plays and our music. In other words, through myth, we communicate with one another and keep the human drama alive.

Campbell embraces a wide range of world myths ancient and modern to describe the classic mono-myth. The archetypal hero sets out on a journey, meets foes and helpers along the gloomy way, battles dark forces and triumphs over them, receives supernatural aid from benevolent beings and returns with divine knowledge. His adventures take him from his familiar world, across a dangerous threshold guarded by malevolent beings, into a world unknown, where strange beasts dwell and where peril faces him at every turn. This otherworldly place does not exist outside of our hero, however. It is the shadow of the hero's own inner nature, Campbell believes, and the act of descending into these "crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth" (101) which brings the seeker profound healing and superior wisdom. This wisdom transforms his life and also imbues him with the immeasurable power to transform his society and the world.

The metaphysical realm Campbell's hero visits is his own unconscious mind! When the journey is complete, the hero finds that the mundane world is in fact one with the divine world. His nether-worldly wanderings remind him of a truth that he, *everyman*, had once known but has long forgotten: he is unified with all things! By discovering that all is one through the grace of his hard-earned knowledge, the hero is able to "release...the flow of life into the...world." (40)

For Campbell, a hero is an average man, who ventures beyond his ordinary world, a place of common things, to a netherworld that is uncommon, magical, a place that is supra-natural, comprised of everything extraordinary. It is a fantastic journey, the most profound part of which is that the hero soon discovers the quest he has undertaken is not one to an outside reality hitherto unknown to him but is instead a journey inward, into the very depths of this own soul! He comes to realize his true nature and with his newfound insight he sees that he is – and ever has been – a hero.

Campbell expertly shapes for the reader a world inhabited by all manner of treacherous and terrible characters from myths of a myriad of cultures throughout history. Ancient and modern folk stories, American Native legends, Middle Eastern and Russian fairy tales, Greek and Roman myths, East African tribal lore, Hindu wisdom, Irish fables – all comprise a part of his romantic canvas and all represent for Campbell archetypal symbols which speak the mystical language of the ancients. They instruct the hero in each of us to search for the solitary thread of unity inside ourselves, the sameness of collective psychology that enfolds each of us seamlessly into the great tapestry which is the human experience. The weaver is the ageless and imperfect hero, who undergoes the tribulations of being human and overcomes them. In the process he is resurrected – as a perfect man.

Myths are the same throughout time, here and there – yesterday, today and tomorrow – transcending space and place, Campbell asserts, because the psychological makeup of all humanity is the same. Indeed, Campbell says in concluding Part I, through the power of myth, “the universal god-man who is...immanent...in all of us [is] somehow made known to consciousness.” (389)

Campbell plays the quintessential armchair folklorist-anthropologist with Hero. This is a feel-good book, filled with dreamy images with much aesthetic appeal, brimming with romantic speculation and fanciful conjecture. Campbell arouses a sense of universal camaraderie in the reader. He makes us believe that we truly are all fellow initiates in the wondrous unity of the cosmos, each of us moving ever inward, ever closer to our appointment with Destiny.

In myth, the hero, the *everyman*, seeks his own soul. His quest culminates in the realization of universal spirit that dwells within. Campbell wants us to know that it is through the unfolding hero’s story that we come to know ourselves and each other and it is through the common psychology of this mythic journey that we find our individuality. Campbell wants us all to answer the *cri de coeur*, to journey within our own subconscious minds, to the root of our own psyches, and find the mythical fount of Oneness. Indeed, we may discover that floating upon its still waters, the proverbial jewel in the lotus awaits us. We may encounter there a timeless and wise hero, who whispers to us the universal truth – WE ARE ONE!

REFERENCE: Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. MJF Books. New York. 1949.



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