

Some of you will remember the name of Joseph Campbell. Campbell taught in relative obscurity for many years until Bill Moyers discovered him, did a series on public television about Campbell's ideas about mythology and comparative religions, and thus elevated him into celebrity -- most of it posthumously since Campbell died shortly after that television series.

The book that caught Moyer's attention was a book entitled, The Hero With a Thousand Faces. Incidentally, it also caught George Lucas's attention and was the inspiration for his film, Star Wars. The thesis of that book is that the same story appears over and over again in all the world's literature, including the Bible. He called that story, The Hero's Quest. He said that the plot is always the same. A hero must make a solitary journey, sometimes to climb a mountain to get the prize, sometimes to go to the cave to slay the dragon, sometimes to journey to the gates of the forbidden city.

Whatever the symbol for that stronghold of the powers that threaten to undo us, the powers of evil, the powers that threaten to take away meaning and goodness in life, the powers that seem too strong for us and threaten to overwhelm us, the hero is the person who faces those powers, enters the struggle to give his or her life, and then comes out of it a new person, with a new life.

He said those stories are everywhere. They are a part of every culture. In Greece, you see it as the Golden Fleece. In Britain, it is the Arthurian legends and the Holy Grail. And in the Bible, it's the story of Abraham leaving Ur of the Chaldees, the most civilized part of the world in those days, and journeying through many "dangers, toils, and snares" to a promised land. Or it is Moses, leaving the comfort and security of shepherding in Midian to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. Or it is David, leaving the simple life of a shepherd boy and going out to meet the giant Goliath. Or it is Jesus, leaving the safety of Galilee, and heading for Jerusalem.

That is the story of Palm Sunday. And he didn't want to go there. If you read the story in all the gospels, you'll see that. According to Matthew, in fact, he spent his whole ministry in Galilee. He never went to Jerusalem during his lifetime, which was quite extraordinary. It would have been natural and easy to journey to Jerusalem from Galilee. In fact, it would have been expected that a good Jew would go to Jerusalem several times in his life to the Temple for the high holy days.

Jesus never went there until one day at Caesarea Philippi he announced that the time had come for him to go to Jerusalem. His disciples immediately protest, especially Peter, who says, “You’re crazy to go there! Don’t go there!” Peter knows what Jerusalem means. Jerusalem is the center of power that has been trying to do Jesus in. As long as Jesus stays in Galilee, in his own country, among his own people, then he’s relatively safe. But for him to go to Jerusalem, it would be like Moses, going to Egypt to challenge the Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Or it would be like Abraham, leaving his ancestral home in Ur of the Chaldees, and venturing out simply on the trust in God. Or it is like David, stripping himself of the armor of Saul, going to meet the giant Goliath alone. It is like The Hero’s Quest.

Now get this. When he announces that he must go to Jerusalem, he also says that you and I must go there. I think that is really why Peter objected. When Jesus announced what he was going to do, Peter said, “God forbid that you should ever do this!” But Peter knows that if Jesus goes to Jerusalem, then he must go there too. Peter had just told Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go. Others may not follow you, but I will follow you.” Now he wishes he had qualified that a little bit, “I’ll follow you, maybe, under certain conditions.” But he can’t do that. If Jesus goes to Jerusalem, then he must follow him there and so must we.

Jesus rebukes Peter. Then immediately he begins using the language of The Hero’s Quest. “If anyone would come after me, he must take up his cross and follow me.” Then this: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” That is the path of the hero, to lose your life in order to find it. The old spiritual put it: “Jesus walked this lonesome valley/ He had to walk it by himself/ Oh nobody else could walk it for him/ He had to walk it by himself./ You must go and stand your trial/ You have to stand it by yourself/ Oh nobody else can stand it for you/ You have to stand it by yourself.” At some point in everybody’s life you are called on The Hero’s Quest.

I remind you of the famous first words in Scott Peck’s book The Road Less Traveled. His first words are, “Life is difficult.” Then he goes on to say, “This is a great truth, but most of us can’t see it. Instead we moan more or less incessantly, noisily, or subtly, about the enormity of our problem. As if life is supposed to be easy for us, and therefore what has happened to us has never happened to anybody else before, at least not in this excruciatingly painful or insoluble way that it has burdened us.

Peck says that he wrote that not because as a therapist he hears his patients say that, but because he has been tempted to say that himself. You could call it the “Law of Exceptionalism,” the idea that this has never happened before, at least not to the degree that it has happened to me. “Exceptionalism.”

I like that cartoon I saw a long time ago in the New Yorker, showing a huge desk, a huge CEO sitting behind the desk, in a huge leather chair. Standing meekly in front of the desk is a man in work clothes, obviously a lowly employee in that corporation. The worker says to the boss, "If it's any comfort, it's lonely at the bottom too."

Life is difficult for everyone. Someone explained to me once why they don't like Lent. They said, "I'm not into suffering." I like that. Like it's optional. Like it's an adopted lifestyle.

Bishop Kenneth Carder of the United Methodist Church in Tennessee wrote recently: "The church of today has become an institution in which even belief in God is optional or peripheral. Marketing techniques for a multiple option institution have replaced response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the means of membership enlistment. The basic appeal is to self-defined needs rather than a call to radical discipleship. The church's mission all too often is to meet its members perceived needs rather than to serve God's need for a redeemed, reconciled, and healed world."

Well, Jesus wasn't into suffering either. You remember he prayed, "Let this cup pass from me." But when the time came for him to go on "The Hero's Quest," the text says, "He set his face steadfastly for Jerusalem."

The truth is, he didn't have to go there. He could have avoided it. He went there to fulfill his mission. He went there because God called him there. His mission was to show us what life is all about. He couldn't show us what life is all about simply by teaching us in a comfortable setting in Galilee. To teach us what life is all about he had to go where someday you and I have to go, and demonstrate that when you do that, when you give up your life, at least put your life in God's hands, you will receive it back.

A man named Jourard wrote a book called Transcendent Self. In that book he said that each one of us has both deep needs and shallow needs inside of us. The problem he said with most of us is that we elevate the shallow needs to ultimacy, and make them the top priority in our life. The shallow needs are the desire for pleasure, comfort, and security. What's wrong with our life, he said, is that we think those are the most important things in life. In fact, our whole culture conspires to preach that to us day after day, especially through advertising. We get the same message over and over again, that the shallow needs are the most important needs -- the need for pleasure, comfort, and security.

But Jourard says that there are more important needs. He calls those the "transcendent needs." The need to get beyond yourself. The need to get outside of yourself. The need to become a better person than you are now.

He said that there are four ways that we reach this transcendent level in our life. The first is through creativity. Somebody asked Bob Feller what he thought about it. Feller said something very wise. He said, “Give him a chance to mess up his life, and then see how good he is.”

That was an older man talking. He’s been there. Feller, the most celebrated pitcher of his generation, knew that life is not about being on top with no problems. Life is about being knocked down, and getting back up again. “Give him a chance to mess up his life, and then see what happens.”

The heroes, the heroines, are those who, when that happens, do not crawl away in bitterness and fear, but they set their face steadfastly to face whatever Jerusalem they have to face, and expect that new life is going to come out of it.

I learned from a Twelve-Step recovery that spirituality should be conceived of as on a continuum. Not all spirituality is positive, the literature of recovery suggests. On the negative, self-defeating end of the spirituality continuum are characteristics of rigidity and self-destruction such as fear, self-pity, resentment, dishonesty – the unhealthy channels through which we try to force life to be what we prescribe it to be. These are precisely the kinds of ways we attempt to stop the flow of life, and in so doing, lose it. But we can’t do that and live. The old song by Amanda McBroom says it well. “It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance. It’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance. It’s the one who won’t be taken who cannot seem to give, and the soul afraid of dying that never seems to live.”

We can’t stop inevitable change by attempting to live as if life is the same year in and year out. We can’t eliminate the risk of error or else we’d end up doing exactly nothing. We can’t rule out the possibility of some kind of relational pain; if we try it, we end up with no meaningful relationships at all. We can’t correct our grief by being continually angry either at life or at God. “Those who want to save life will lose it, and those who lose life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

The Hero quest. “He set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem.” What might you risk in your life so that others might taste at least a bit of what you’ve celebrated?

That’s why women risk childbirth. That’s why living folks donate organs and bone marrow for their loved ones. That’s why – well before the methods of AIDS transmission were clear -- some people took chances helping those who were dying with this modern-day leprosy. You can’t do this kind of thing when you’re fixated on the latest place you stubbed your toe or the most recent example of someone not doing things just the way you want them done.

That heroic ability to focus on a cause greater than ourselves gives us the kind of perspective we need to go along with life's flow. The lawyer is doing much more than just trying to win a case; he 's helping to make some contribution to justice. The businesswoman, in addition to making a fair profit, is selling a product or service that's making a contribution to someone or some institution. The parent is doing more than changing diapers and reading bedtime stories; he's helping to create positive self-esteem in a human being who will be equipped to deal with the complexities of adulthood. The doctor is doing more than finding the right combination of medications; she's making a contribution to the patient's wholeness. The educator is doing more than finding out the simplest way to assess student abilities; he's imparting knowledge that students may use to think through life.

As we enter Holy Week we are once again reminded of Jesus' journey into Jerusalem on that lowly beast of burden. What does Jerusalem mean in your life? What is your "Hero Quest?" Whatever it is, I hope that new life can come out of it.