

## In the belly of the whale – Story structure for change

In recent years much has been written about the structure of myth. If you have studied Greek mythology, heard fairy tales from your grandmother, read the Bible, studied some Shakespeare at school, or just seen a few Hollywood films, you would recognize this structure right away. It is the dramatic structure underlying almost all stories and serves the purpose of taking the main character in the story on a journey of self discovery and personal growth. Through identification with the hero the reader or spectator himself can learn about life. And gains understanding into his own journey



“Sit back and listen to this timeless story of great adventure and inspiration. It is a story that has echoed down to us throughout the history of humankind, from every age and every civilization. This story is full of mystery and intrigue, passion and violence, wisdom and folly. It is the story of a young man or woman we will call the hero, someone much like you, and it takes place "long, long ago, when wishing still could lead to something". (Hartman and Zimmeroff, 2009)

The climax of such a story is the Ordeal, also called ‘the belly of the whale’ experience. The entire story builds up to this moment of change for the hero. All the characters and all the events are designed around this moment.

### I The Call to Adventure

Every story starts with someone in some way trapped in a life that goes nowhere. The hero is not always aware of the problem in her *Ordinary World* that keeps her stagnant, but the audience is usually let in on it before the hero is. We identify with this state since “Some part of us is dissatisfied with the status quo, aware that we have been living in a holding pattern, not yet fearlessly committed to reaching our full potential. That is the beginning of all great adventure” (Hartman and Zimmeroff, 2009) fictional or otherwise.

Then comes the *Call to Adventure* - the hero is shown a way to address the problem in her world. A person or event makes the hero aware of the problem threatening the security of his world. She reacts with interest, but is reluctant to get involved, since it would mean leaving old ways behind and entering unknown territory. This reluctance leads to a *Refusal of the Call*, a moment of hesitating on a threshold to weigh the risks carefully before making the difficult choice for change. All doubts and fears come to the fore as the hero weighs her options. Often the refusal itself takes the hero on a detour that highlights the hero’s fears, bringing her ever closer to the threshold between her familiar world and the unknown.

The story of Jonah kicks off with the clear calling of the prophet to Nineveh, but Jonah refuses and runs away on a ship. When the storm comes he hides below deck sleeping. Even after called up by the crew men, they have to cast lots to point him out as the trouble maker - the one who has offended the gods. Finally he accepts responsibility and this moment marks his acceptance of the call. Yet his running away had brought him right to the edge of the threshold between safety and uncertainty – literally between dry steady ground and stormy waters.

## **II Preparation for the journey: Debate**

On the threshold between the known and the unknown a battle is fought with the guardians of that threshold. They are fierce, dark and dangerous. They are the gatekeepers to insure that only the worthy embark on the journey. Often the hero *Meets a Mentor* during this time of uncertainty, a source of wisdom that exhorts her to action. She agrees to undertake the adventure armed with new confidence, often symbolised by a magic item or special power provided by the mentor.

For Jonah the fiercest of the guardians is the storm itself sent by his true mentor – the God who called him to Nineveh. Yet it is the ship's crew who brings him to the place of commitment through their challenge: Then they asked him, "Tell us, please, for whose cause this evil is on us. What is your occupation? (Jon 1:8). The ship in Jonah's story is a classic example of the kind of place where the preparation of the journey occurs: a space in between, a liminal space between dry land and sea, the certain and the unknown. Also the tempest is a classical guardian in the sense that it is a fierce force that in the end is Jonah's ally, an instrument in the hand of God. Do you have weaknesses, bad habits or addictions which have threatened your life earlier in your journey? What strengths have you gained from your struggles with those old demons?

## **III The Journey: Task and team**

The hero is exposed to a series of *Tests and Trials* designed to train her for the final ordeal. This tests the strength and resolve of the hero. She also meets other people, some of whom are friends and allies, others who are enemies. She experiments with the idea of change. Two elements therefore drive the action in this stage: the problem and the people or the task and the team. Some tasks are completed successfully, others are failed miserably. Some people on the team turn out to be friends and others enemies. Yet, all along the hero is prepared for the final climax.

Having passed the tests and trials, the hero and her team, if she has one, begin their *Approach to the Inmost Cave* also called 'Death's Lair' or 'the belly of the whale'. This is where the greatest test will take place. During the approach the hero has time to prepare herself, take reconnaissance and reorganise her group. Often she realises how strong the defences of the enemy are and sometimes the stakes are raised by introducing the risk of losing a life or missing the goal.

From the moment he committed to the call there was a short interval after his first request that they throw him in the sea, during which the ships crew attempted to row to shore one last time. Jonah had started his journey, but his team was working against him testing his commitment. Finally, he was able to overcome the first challenge and obey his call by splashing into the water...

Poor Jonah did not have much of an approach or time for preparation. As Jonah plunged across the threshold and into the deep where the fish swallowed him seemingly straight away. But we read in Jonah's prayer about his journey, his approach: "The flood was all around me. All your waves and your billows passed over me. The waters surrounded me, even to the soul. The deep was around me. The weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains. The earth barred me in forever."(2:3-6)

#### **4. Ordeal and Reward: a sacred marriage**

The hero now faces the *Ordeal*. This is the central dramatic moment, the moment of transformation. Here in the inmost cave she meets the fiercest of her enemies, her greatest fears and desires come to life and are brought to the light. In this liminal space the hero must die and be reborn - die to the negative possibilities of her own psyche and be reborn to its positive potential. No matter how alien the villain's values, in some way they are the dark reflection of the hero's own desires, magnified.

This is the moment when the hero comes face to face with the consequences of her own values and choices. She cannot step away from this moment without dying to an old belief system and being reborn to a deeper understanding of life. The entire story thus far leads up to this point and the rest will flow from it as logical consequence of the change that has occurred. One such consequence is the balancing of the two sides of the hero. She dies to a one-sided interpretation of life and is reborn to a new multidimensional perspective .

It is no surprise that across literature this moment have been referred to as 'the belly of the whale'. It is in the story of Jonah that the moment of transformation in the deepest darkness of the soul is most poignantly illustrated by the 3 days inside the big fish. This is where Jonah recommit to his calling and cries out to his God. Yet this moment locks within it the reward. The Ordeal and the Reward are two sides of the same coin.

After having faced death and sacrificed a piece of herself, the hero is recompensed by her seizing a *Reward* – a special treasure or secret, true love, the elixir of life. The purpose of the entire journey is locked up in this treasure, yet often its seizing brings about more than simple reward. It can bring healing to the hero's community. Like the fire Prometheus steals from the gods, it will bring healing to mankind. Often the reward is a new power, an insight, or a new understanding of herself and her quest.

They see who they are and how they fit into the scheme of things. ... The scales fall from their eyes and the illusion of their lives is replaced with clarity and truth. (Vogler, 1998: 188)

At the heart of this experience of growth is the built-in reflection upon values that occurs – an interrogation made possible by their (the values') concrete expression in the guise of the hero's nemesis. It is the moment of catharsis where the emotional experience is understood cognitively.

Jonah's reward is not dying in the deep ocean but being saved by the fish. In his own words: "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains. The earth barred me in forever: yet have you brought up my life from the pit, LORD my God" (2:6). From there he goes on to recommit

himself to the call of the lord. In this way his commitment to god becomes the elixir that saves the city of Nineveh. His repentance becomes the basis for the repentance of the entire community. But before that happened, Jonah had to return from the water to the dry land.

## 5. The Return: Transforming Your World

The liminal space or Inmost Cave of the Special World is a dangerous place. It is dangerous because of its instability and ambiguity. It is set up especially to create this ambiguity so that the visitor can question her ideologies and values, but at the same time it is denaturing to the visitor who must restructure and come to a new stable state to survive the liminal experience. The moment of insight therefore pre-empts a return to stability. Having undergone deep change, the hero must return to his own world and embarks on *The Road Back*.

Act Three starts with the hero's resolve to cross the threshold back to her own world, although sometimes she is chased across it. Often she experiences setbacks on his return which threaten to rekindle the flaw, addiction or desire that she had supposedly overcome in the ordeal. The lesson learned in the ordeal will be put to the final test as the hero faces death and *Resurrection*. The hero must provide external proof of the change in her character by her behaviour or appearance. It is one thing to learn something of oneself in the Special World; it is another to apply that knowledge back home in the ordinary world.

A difficult choice tests a hero's values: will he choose in accordance with his old, flawed ways, or will the choice reflect the new person he's become? (Vogler: 1998: 207)

The resurrection is characterised by the hero rising from the Special World as a new creation having sacrificed an old habit or belief.

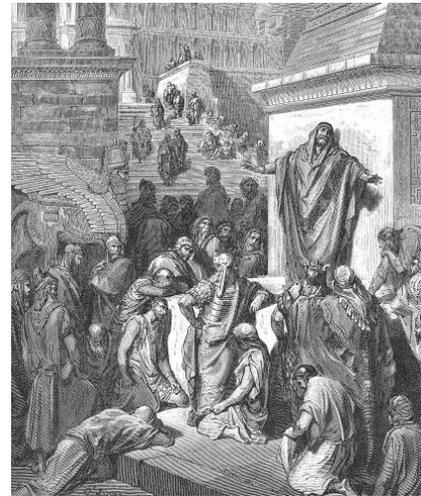
On returning and approaching the perimeter of the community, the hero encounters new Guardians at the threshold of return. These, too, are dragons of darkness. Here the hero finds fear of being different, fear of being rejected, the lure of complacency, and the self-sabotage of unworthiness.

Having provided proof of growth, the hero may now *Return with the Elixir*, the item or the wisdom that can heal her wound and perhaps that of her world. The story may end neatly with all loose ends tied or it may have an open ending. Either way the hero gives her world and/or the audience a new perspective. As Vogler puts it:

... a good story like a good journey, leaves us with an Elixir that changes us, makes us more aware, more alive, more human, more whole, more a part of everything that is. (1998: 235)

The elixir is the tangible proof that change has occurred. In some stories, as in tragedies, the hero does not change or only understands the necessity to change too late and the audience is left with the realisation that, if she had, things would have turned out differently. If the hero succeeds, "the breach is healed and the status quo, or something resembling it, is restored; if they do not, it is accepted as incapable of remedy and things fall apart into various sorts of unhappy endings: migrations, divorces, or murders in the cathedral" (Turner, 1990: 15).

Jonah's chance for proving his worth comes as God once again calls him to Nineveh. As the big fish spits him out, he rises seemingly from the dead resurrected as a new prophet. This time he heeds the call and obeys. He preaches to the city and the entire city turns to God and is saved.



Yet, after Jonah's triumph, we do not find him in a state of exuberant joy. Jonah turns out not to be a classical hero riding into the sunset with his pockets full of treasure and his arms full of damsel. Instead Jonah is an anti hero. He sits complaining to God, angry that God did not destroy Nineveh for their evil. It seems that the real reason for Jonah's initial refusal of the call of God was precisely his fear that God would not punish Nineveh like they deserved but have mercy on them. His fish experience was therefore not lasting and he is at the start of a whole new journey.

Still the elixir of the story carries beyond Jonah and Nineveh to all who is struck by the love of God for all people. This love is the elixir for the complaining prophet who does not really grow, for wicked sinners like the people of Nineveh and for "also much live stock" (Jon 4:11)....

<i>The Hero's Journey</i>	<i>Steps for the hero</i>	<i>Jonah</i>
<b>I The Call to Adventure</b>		
Ordinary World.	Limited awareness of a problem. Yet peace of social life is interrupted by a breach of a rule.	Jonah is a Hebrew, son of Ammittai(1: 1) and there is a great city whose " wickedness has come up before" God (1:2)
Call to Adventure.	Increased awareness. Leads to state of crisis, exposing conflict.	Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah... "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it" (1: 2)
<b>II Preparing for the journey: Debate</b>		
Refusal.	Reluctance to change. If the crisis is not addressed then it could pose a threat to the group's unity.	But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (1: 3)
Meeting with the Mentor.	Overcoming reluctance. The group's authority takes redressive action in the form of law, politics or religion to save the community.	But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty storm on the sea. (1: 4)
Crossing the Threshold.	Committing to change. Harmony is restored or the group regresses into crisis.	He said to them, "Take me up, and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will be calm for you; for I know that because of me this great storm is on you." (1: 12)
<b>III The journey: Task and team</b>		
Tests, Allies, Enemies.	Experimenting with first change. Alternative solutions are sought and drastic measures taken.	Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get them back to the land; but they could not, for the sea grew more and stormier against them. (1: 13)
Approach to Inmost Cave.	Preparing for difficult change. The group is restructured and an alternative redressive action taken. Sometimes stories are told.	So they took up Jonah, and threw him into the sea; (1: 15)

4. Ordeal and Reward		
Ordeal	Attempting difficult change. The ultimate liminal experience is formed. Values are re-evaluated and transformed	The waters surrounded me, even to the soul. The deep was around me. The weeds were wrapped around my head. (2: 5)
Reward (Seizing the Sword)	Consequences of the attempt. If they succeed, the crisis is resolved; if not then the damage is irreversible.	The LORD prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.(1:17) You brought up my life from the pit, LORD my God" (2:6). : "But I will sacrifice to you with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the LORD." (2:9-10
5. The Return: Transforming Your World		
The Road Back.	Rededication to change. Harmony can only be achieved by working through the underlying reason for the crisis	The LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land (2:9-10)
Resurrection	Final attempt at difficult change. Outmoded behaviour is released and new behaviour is internalized.	After God calls again: Jonah arose, and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD (3:3) The people of Nineveh believed God and God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster which he said he would do to them(3:10)
Return with the Elixir.	Final mastery of the problem. Communitas (sense of togetherness and unity) and new meaning is attained.	But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. (4:1) Yet God explained: "Shouldn't I be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who can't discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much livestock?" (4:10)

You too can be plagued by the guardians of the final threshold. Have you shied away from opportunities to teach or lead or write the book you know you are capable of, to quit your job and start a business, or to tell your spouse how much you love him/her? How will your story end? What about the story of your team? Your organisation? Your community? Your country? What kind of hero will you be? Will your story carry beyond the boundaries of your life to the lives of others?

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