



Dena's 'word-bites'

Leadership: Stepping through the Hero's journey

Like the process of transformation, the first stage in the Hero's journey is the waking stage; the trigger or 'call to adventure'. This is a call to experience unimaginable challenges and to take action for which there has been no preparation or prior experience. The call to adventure is a summons that is instinctively feared for, although great rewards are promised, it is inevitable that your vulnerabilities and fears will be raised, examined and tested. At this stage of the journey you are called to cross the threshold from what is known to what is unknown. It is sometimes described as entering the void or falling into the abyss. To add insult to injury, as you set off, all the talents and skills that you have accumulated will be useless to you and you will be thrown onto your inner, as yet unknown, resources.

The call to adventure may be heard in different ways. It may be an accident or chance happening, it may bubble up from the well of your being or it may be disguised as an innocent pleasure or experience. Sometimes, it may not feel so much like a call but a nudge resulting from feelings of discontent, a vague notion that your life is out of balance or a sense that things are 'not quite right'.

Of course, you can ignore 'the call', but if you do, you are likely to be left with a gnawing feeling of disquiet. Even if you did not *consciously* ignore the call, the subconscious mind *knows* that an opportunity for growth has been missed so it creates underlying feelings of unease and unhappiness. What is more, from now on, you aren't really left alone and increasingly obvious calls are issued. So, although a choice is given, it would seem that there is no choice *really* because the consequence of *not choosing* is itself a kind of deterioration, equalled only by the deterioration you may feel when the journey begins in earnest and the first chaotic stage is reached.

The initial boundary over which the Hero steps is often characterised by darkness and powerful forces. It is uncharted and dangerous territory where the protective rules of the known world are absent. Relationships are untrustworthy, demanding beasts unleash their

devious forces upon you and the topography of the landscape is hazardous. The passage over the threshold into the dark unknown symbolises self-annihilation. It demands that you let go of your attachment to the idea of rescue and launch yourself into the unknown, for this is the threshold where everything that was known is lost. Nothing is certain but uncertainty and illusion. Your assumptions and beliefs must be dissolved, remixed and restructured in the face of your new experience. Crossing the first threshold leads to chaos, fragmentation, self-doubt and often, despair.

If you obey the call however, you are given a wise guide or helper to assist you. More often than not, this is an unexpected meeting with someone who has just the right piece of knowledge to help you. Otherwise, you might recognise that someone you already know has held this valuable knowledge all along but you just didn't recognise it. There is an old saying: 'If the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear'. How reassuring this is when your needs are great! However, this teacher won't take the heat out of the situation for you. It is you that is journeying, not them. Their role is to drive you hard, throw you on your inner reserves and draw previously unmet talent from the soles of your boots. Although they will drive you hard, they will also act as a guide or mentor - and they do come with a tacit promise that the future will be brighter.

One of the most famous Hero's journeys, and one that I have alluded to several times in this book, is Dante's journey through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. Dante¹ wrote *The Divine Comedy* in the fourteenth century. It describes his own journey from what we might call a mid-life crisis, to wholeness. At the outset of his poem, Dante is lost in a dark forest where his exit is barred by three beasts; a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf which, we gradually learn, represent his love of pleasure, his fierce pride and the greed and avarice of his ego. As he deliberates his escape, his guide and mentor, Virgil, appears and offers him the promise of freedom, albeit along a long and arduous path. However, it is this path that will equip him with self-knowledge and wisdom, and it will do so by introducing him to his shadow side.

Dante's call was triggered by the stage in life that he had reached; his mid-life. It manifested as a natural but increasingly determined sense of unease until it reached a point where he felt that he *had* to take the journey. His companion, Virgil, was characterised as a wise man and a friend yet in truth, Virgil was Dante's inner voice or his higher self.

¹ Dante Alighieri (1998) *The Divine Comedy*. Oxford World's Classics paperback

In this life, and as Dante recognises, we often need to hear our thoughts in order to recognise what they are. Trying to work things out in our head is really difficult. It is generally much easier if we are able to speak them out and have them reflected back to us. Then we can see how we feel about them and whether or not they really do represent what we think. The role of the counsellor, therefore, is a crucial one in helping us do this. She will help us speak out what's in our minds by asking us some good questions. In responding to her, we will hear our thoughts, be able to judge them and then integrate them. In reality, we may need more than one person to perform this function for us as sometimes, we discover new territory which needs a different pair of ears. In Dante's case, Virgil performs this service as he accompanies him to the gates of Paradise. It is here that he is replaced by Dante's former earthly love, Beatrice, who takes over the task of bringing him into enlightenment.

Having crossed the threshold into the unknown, we move into a place of fluidity where there is 'no form'. Strangely, it is in this place of 'no form' that we encounter 'form' in the way of blocks, barriers and obstacles, the successful negotiation of which allows you to progress to the next stage. It's perhaps a bit like encountering rocks and boulders as we are carried down a river by its flow. Both ironically and inevitably, the particular obstacles that we face are certain to test us in those areas where we have the least skill or knowledge and where we are at our most vulnerable. However, it seems that profound learning comes from moments like these and it is, perhaps, precisely because we are forced to face our fears and weaknesses, that we are able to integrate our experience and create new meaning. The revelations that we have as a result of being buffeted about in the water, therefore, help us to move closer and closer to who we are, *really*.

Vivid dreams are often a feature of this stage of the process. Perhaps it is because we are trying to sort out so much that is new to us, that we need the assistance of the subconscious mind. Through images and symbols, dreams bring to mind the processing that is being done out of consciousness. This enables us to access and understand more of what is going on and bring it to the concrete world where it can be dealt with more objectively.

Dreams of passing down endless narrowing corridors or of squeezing oneself into tiny rooms were commonplace amongst the women in the study who could remember their dreams. Perhaps they signify the

metamorphosis – or transformation - that defines this part of the adventure. Symbolically, these dreams may represent the neck of the womb through which the first metamorphosis of life takes place. At this stage in the Hero's journey, it is said that we die to the old ego in order to birth the new.

We have seen that one of the many coping strategies used by the women in the study was intellectualisation; an activity that kept them 'safely' in the head and protected them from identifying with their feelings. Unfortunately, not only did this strategy prevent them from recalling their feelings, but also from having any feelings at all! There is a real issue, therefore, with staying in the head and, as a result of society promoting reason and intellect over instinct and intuition, we often go there thinking that it will serve our purposes. However, all it does is create a kind of sterility that rids us of the richness of feeling. As women, we can match anyone intellectually, but we can only add our uniqueness if we are also docked with our feelings.

The next stage in the Hero's journey is named 'meeting with the Goddess'. Not only does the Goddess have all the virtues of a 'good' woman; the comforter, the healer, the friend, the lover, the nurturer, but she also has the qualities of a 'bad' woman; the forbidding, the punishing, the remote and the dangerous. The Goddess unites both the 'good' and the 'bad' of woman, therefore, and elevates these beyond the personal to the universal level. She is the universal mother, wholehearted and authentic in all she *is*. She is free from others' projections and expectations and transmits only her truth into the world. She is the totality of what can be known and, in our case, perhaps, she is the one who comes to *know herself*. So, this stage, for the Heroine's amongst us, might be termed 'finding the Goddess within'.

If the Hero has a meeting with the Goddess who exemplifies the best mix of female attributes, then we might also consider the Heroine meeting with the God who exemplifies the best mix of male attributes. In the past thirty or forty years, women have switched from playing men at their own game to integrating some of the male qualities that enable them to more fully express themselves. Although largely considered to be the male preserve in the past, self-determination, autonomy, power and strength are amongst the virtues that are now found in women. We have a long way to go though. The dominance of male values throughout the centuries has had a devastating effect on women.

Whether you subscribe to meeting the opposite qualities in your encounter or not, this stage of the journey is designed to bring forth and integrate the animus with the anima. So, whatever gender you are, or whatever sexual persuasion you have, you will be exploring those aspects of yourself that are complementary to your dominant expression.

Atonement (at-one-ment) requires that attachment to the ego is abandoned so that we are free to feel at one. It is the ego that is affronted when we are hurt and this often leads us to want an apology, revenge or punishment. By placing attention on this 'unfinished business', we are focusing on the other and this means we can only be less of ourselves. This focus must be withdrawn if we are to be fully revealed.

At-one-ment is clearly an important stage on the Hero's journey and one that is often confused with forgiveness. But we must be clear what it actually means here. This is not so much about forgiveness in its common form; it is much more about bringing oneself into wholeness by detaching from other people's past thoughts and actions. If you imagine a bucket with tiny holes in it trying to contain water, you will perhaps get a sense of what it means to allow your energy to be drained by attachment to another person. At-one-ment is like plugging all the holes so that you can feel whole, complete or contained – or at one.

In Eric Fromm's book, *The Art of Loving*, he recognises at-onement as the deepest need of man (or woman). As he explores this in greater depth, he suggests that the ability to attain at-onement depends on the level of individuation reached. Clearly an infant cannot attain at-onement when she is dependent upon her mother's breasts for sustenance. However, as an adult, it can be (mimicked) through orgasmic states; whether they be trance induced or sexually induced. In such heightened (but transitory) states, 'the world outside disappears, and with it, the feeling of separateness from it.' (pp 11) Conformity and community also bring with them a *sense* of oneness, although it may be argued that they don't have the same intense allure as an orgasm! For this reason, conformity and community may not have the same persistent attraction as a sexual encounter. However, the urge for at-onement may explain why people seek others to make them feel whole, in spite of the fact that the emphasis on this part of the Hero's journey is not to look outside oneself for wholeness, but to experience it within.

The penultimate stage of the Hero's Journey is named 'Apotheosis', which means 'deification' or the elevation of a person to the rank of God or Goddess. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell defines the term apotheosis as 'the divine state which the human Hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance.' He qualifies this by saying: 'When the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he becomes free of all fear, beyond the reach of change.' This stage can be further described as non-dualistic. No longer do the polar opposites of male and female, good and bad, dark and light hold us in the world of duality. Instead, an integrated perspective is reached where such contradictions are held in balance.

Incidentally, Joseph Campbell told of the second ceremony of manhood which was conducted by the Murngin tribe in Australia; a tale which I think epitomises this stage of the journey. To mark the point at which dualistic thinking was transcended, a ceremony was conducted. It was designed to symbolise a state of uniformity, in the sense of 'one form', from the two gender expressions of human beings. This is how it happened. After a boy had passed through the ordeal of circumcision, he underwent a second ritual which signified the full integration of male and female. During this ritual, the underside of his penis was slit open to form a permanent cleft in the urethra. This formed the 'penis womb' or a male vagina, symbolising that he was now 'more than man'; fully integrated, male and female. Thankfully, the transformative healing journey holds no such trial for us, literally speaking, but figuratively, the essential step of integration does exist and is necessary if the transformative journey is to be completed.

Integrative thought and a sense of connection to a greater perspective naturally evaporates self-delusion and illusory thinking. Indeed, in the absence of our old thought constructs, we experience a sense of emptiness. When empty, our light can shine without us getting in our own way. Rumi, a Sufi poet and mystic born in 1207, had something to say on the subject of Being Empty:

A Song of Being Empty

A certain Sufi tore his robe in grief,
and the tearing brought such relief,

He gave the robe the name faraji,
which means ripped open, or happiness,
or one who brings the joy of being opened.

It comes from the stem faraj, which also
refers to the genitals, male and female.

His teacher understood the purity
of the action, while others
just saw the ragged appearance.

If you want peace and purity,
tear away your coverings.

This is the purpose of emotion, to let
a streaming beauty flow through you.

Call it spirit, elixir, or the original
agreement between yourself and God.

Opening into that gives peace,
a song of being empty,
pure silence.

When we return from our Hero's journey, it is almost impossible to arrive back at the same place that we started from and carry on as we once did. Nothing feels the same anymore because we have left, and changed, and there is a limit to the language we share.

Many people, remote acquaintances, close friends and intimate lovers, will try to encourage you back into the expression of your old Self. This was the 'you' they knew and understood and they don't have the same understanding of who you are now. If this doesn't force them to question themselves, it forces them to question you, so you get the brunt of their confusion. This can sometimes mean that you have to leave old relationships behind. They just can't hold the complexity of you now. You are unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them.

Finally you enjoy the freedom to live fully. No longer are you attached to your personal limitations nor are your behaviours orchestrated by your past experiences. Perhaps you have begun to enjoy self-discovery

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and are keen to go on another journey. You are free to live spontaneously; to live the creative bliss of your becoming. You *are*.

Below, you will see the Hero's journey expressed from the female perspective. It is now The Heroine's Journey. I have superimposed the stages from the transformative process on to the Hero's journey and rendered them relevant to the female traveller. I think you'll see a remarkable similarity between the two. However, there may be some differences in the detail of the overlap, most likely in respect of the need to find voice, be heard and be validated.

