



Dena's 'word-bites'

Leadership: The call to adventure

Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but ... life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez: Love in the Time of Cholera

In this piece, I'm going to suggest that the call to leadership is also 'the call to adventure' as defined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero's Journey*¹. Whether male or female, carrying the soubriquet 'leader' does not guarantee the consistent expression of what may be deemed leadership behaviours. Indeed, those that have been designated leaders have probably succeeded and 'failed' in their leadership challenges in equal proportion over the course of their careers.

Like the heroes in myths, legends and fairytales, leaders are called moment-by-moment to journey into terrain that they have not encountered before. And, like their more fanciful counterparts, they are constantly being challenged to draw talent and capability from the soles of their feet in order to respond to situations and events they hadn't conceived could occur.

This is where the similarity ends, however. Being a leader is not the permanent state it is for the heroes who have been written into the pages of books or recounted in childhood stories. Nor is it something that we become and remain by virtue of having had a peak leadership experience. Indeed, there have been many accounts of leaders who have fallen from grace and disappointed those who have vested them with heroic qualities. How then, should we think of a modern leader?

¹ Joseph Campbell. (1993) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Fontana Press

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones², authors of the book 'Why should anyone be led by you?' define a leader as someone who has the ability to 'inspire people to achieve extraordinary results'. Warren Bennis³ in his book 'On becoming a leader' says: 'All leaders have the capacity to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place, and then translate that vision into a reality.' These definitions suggest that a leader is both called, and calls others, to action and achievement and, on both counts; it is an act of service. However the term is bestowed, the point is that its significance lasts only as long as the act or aspiration it serves. In this way, it is ephemeral and, in its coming and going, a leader must repeatedly earn the title.

In the almost infinitely complex world that they inhabit, leaders ricochet from the possibility of extraordinary success to the possibility of spectacular failure, honing their personal armoury of skills and building experience and wisdom as they go. A 'good' leader is likely to have made all sorts of mistakes in their proving years, yet each time, they will build a higher level of self-awareness and become more familiar with the art of leadership. This will enable them to tread the path with more elegance and eloquence each time they are called to do so. Indeed, we might say that they embark on 'The Hero's Journey' repeatedly and we might also say that leaders have perfected the dynamic art of hero-hood; an ongoing and on-growing *process*.

Nevertheless, how do we reconcile this need to 'give birth to ourselves' (in the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez) as heroes or leaders when there are scant opportunities for us to practice finding our unique and enduring attributes as we mature? Is it not true that these have been almost entirely factored out of our professional experience in highly controlled organisations where experimentation and 'failure' are not tolerated? More broadly, might we not argue that these opportunities have been virtually eliminated from today's 'safe' society with the result that taking responsibility is discouraged and the attendant character forming experiences prevented? Perhaps we must look to the organisational context for this proving ground; to the economic cycles, competitive forces and environmental challenges. As the tectonic plates of commerce and industry bump up and scrape against each other, perhaps we have unwittingly created a natural nursery for birthing ourselves as leaders; a place where we can tap into our hidden strengths, talents and capabilities and access those parts of

² Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. (2006) Why Should Anyone be Led by You? Harvard Business School Press

³ Warren Bennis. (1989, 2003) On Becoming a Leader. Perseus Books, US

ourselves that were previously unknown to us. Perhaps too, in this place, we can get to 'know' ourselves better and bring our gifts to the world. In Joseph Campbell's own words:

'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons [gifts or benefits] on his fellow man.'

Warren Bennis in his Harvard Business Review article, *Crucibles of leadership*⁴, suggests that fine leaders emerge from 'crucible experiences'; named after the vessels medieval alchemists used in their attempts to turn base metals into gold.

'Some crucible experiences may be violent and life-threatening; others may be as a result of self-doubt. Whatever the trigger, they are transformative experiences through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity.' He goes on to say that 'an individual's ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances is one of the most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership.' This has remarkable resonances with Joseph Campbell's description of *The Hero's Journey*.

It is clear that neither Joseph Campbell nor Warren Bennis balk at the notion of dramatic character formation in the teeth of adversity. Their message is, if you want to be a leader, you have to test yourself, and be tested, in extremis!

The Hero's Journey has been, and is still being lived out explicitly in some cultures. Most notable are the tribal cultures where, at a certain age, boys are sent off into the outback, the rain forest or the desert to be challenged by nature's own harsh teacher. When they have been through the trials and tests that these environments offer them, they are acknowledged to have become men and their return is celebrated. They are no longer boys; they have severed the umbilical chord with their mothers and have stepped across the threshold of manhood; they are adults. These rituals are physical, psychological and spiritual. Although their respective emphasis may change according to the tradition that is being followed, these boys are taking *The Hero's Journey*; they are finding their hero within.

⁴ Warren Bennis. (September, 2002) *Crucibles of Leadership*. Harvard Business Review

The Hero's Journey also represents the various transformations from babyhood to infancy; from infancy to adolescence; from adolescence to adulthood; from adulthood to wise man or woman and onward to our dotage. It is the process of realising (literally, bringing to reality) *who we are* and it is through meeting ourselves in this way that we bring our fullness to, and find our connection with, the world. What's more, it is through this connection that we are able to return, along with all our gifts and inspirations, to be of service. We literally *become* our own offering. If this is not a description of leadership, what is?

Girls are not exempt from this process, nor are they immune from the challenges that their male counterparts face. However, their rites of passage have necessarily differed and the folklore that surrounds the transition from girlhood to womanhood is of a different nature. However, in the modern world, in the leadership arena at least, let's for a moment assume that The Hero's Journey is also the Heroine's Journey and remove the gender difference – albeit with intricate and soft-shoe reservations.

The Hero's Journey is generally considered to comprise three main stages: *Separation* – the 'call to adventure' or departure from the ordinary world; *Initiation* – the tests, trials and learning that must be undergone, integrated and internalised; and *The Return* – re-entry to the ordinary world carrying a prize or gift.

By recognising the stages of The Hero's Journey, we can develop an understanding of the energy flows and undercurrents that drive the challenges we encounter. With this understanding we can recognise the importance of 'going with the flow' and trusting the wisdom of the process; not as a mindless passenger but as someone who is prepared to provide the spark that jumps the synapse between the known and the unknown. Perhaps this understanding will enable us to identify the recurrent themes and susceptibilities expressed through our habitual behaviours so that we can learn to manage these consciously, instead of being managed by them unconsciously.

If we place The Hero's Journey in the context of an organisation, *the call to adventure* may be a competitive or financial crisis which demands ingenuity, focus and action. It may be a values-dilemma, spurred by the action of a colleague, or it may be a matter of honour; a matter of personal integrity. Whatever the trigger, this is the moment of choice; we either rise to the challenge or we 'refuse the call'. Refusal may be exposed by an excuse, passing the blame or

denial – or it may be betrayed by the urgent search for a rescue. However, if we have the courage to accept the challenge, we are likely to receive some unforeseen assistance - the old crone with a withered finger parting with an unexpected and apparently useless gift in exchange for bread and water. Whatever form it takes, someone unexpected will contribute an idea, a piece of valuable information or an introduction to just the right person - and then we are ready to adventure – or nearly. As we step into the unknown, we are offered the chance to rescind our commitment. This may be through an explicit question - 'Are you sure you want to do this?!' - or a metaphorical (or not!) seduction into passivity. However it comes, it will tempt us to turn away from the possibility of failure and humiliation (as well as the possibility of success and triumph). The direction of our choice at this moment is made in the gut and the distance between 'go' and 'no-go' is cigarette-paper-thin. This is the precise moment to which we return when we feel reflective. "If only I had." "If only I hadn't....!"

Once on The Hero's Journey, we will experience *initiation* through a whole host of trials and tests that will lead us to deeper self-awareness and magnified capability. What was formerly unexpressed potential will be brought to the light of day in the form of tangible personal assets. In a sense, we meet our larger self whilst at the same time intuitively 'knowing' this expanded being that we are becoming. During this period, we are branded and burnished by experience and we have to dig deep within to find strength enough to broaden and deepen our ability to serve the 'cause' that we are fighting or the 'corner' that we are defending. It is what is often termed 'a character forming experience' or a 'crucible experience'! But it sets us apart from others as the course and direction of our life takes us on a new trajectory. We have been propelled towards what might be called our 'higher cause'; one upon which others depend for their livelihoods and sense of wellbeing.

The return is that moment when we come back to the world we left having pitted ourselves against the forces of our adventure and succeeded well enough to present the prized fruit of our labours. Yet some heroes choose not to return; they refuse to come back to the world with their gift preferring instead to hoard it to themselves. This is a most un-heroic and egoistical act. Indeed, it is the antithesis of heroism! The price, when the ego in its selfishness supersedes the impetus to serve mankind, is subtle yet pernicious and may trigger another challenge reflecting the question at the outset of the journey 'Are you sure you want to do this?!' So, there may follow a struggle of

conscience before the prize is given up in service to those who have not participated in the adventure.

In myth and legend, 'the return' brings the elixir of life, a battle won, a timely rescue, the Holy Grail or enlightenment. Examples might include Odysseus's return to Ithaca, Frodo's mission to destroy the ring in the fire of its making in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings or Dante's journey through hell, purgatory and heaven in the Divine Comedy. The endings in these tales represent the hero's arrival at a place of universal connectedness which is laced by wisdom and tempered by a sense of selflessness, offering and service. These endings are not all self-sacrificial however; they also bring the personal qualities of dignity and humility, confidence and purpose.

Needless to say, at the end of our journey, we do not feel to be the same person that we were at the beginning, nor are we perceived to be the same person. In recognition of our extraordinary achievements, people tend to project supernatural qualities upon us – and expect bigger, better and brighter things from us in the future. However, it is perhaps important to retain our own perspective; to recognise that we have not changed, nor has the world changed; it is our *perception* of the world that has changed and the *perception* that the world has of us. As a result of our journey, we have merely discovered and revealed more of ourselves.

We hear leaders talk about loneliness, and this perhaps explains it. The common ground, from which the hero came, is no longer shared. The hero has a foot in another camp, the hero's camp, where the experiences and the language have no meaning to those left behind. So, the hero lives with a foot in each camp, neither belonging to one world nor the other. Yet many have trodden the path before us. They may be mythical adventurers or modern corporate legends, but they have all left clues, insights and gifts to assist their successors. Together, these provide the resources for those of us who otherwise might feel lost and abandoned.

The Hero's Journey, then, is one of deepening self-awareness and resourcefulness; of bringing together the implicit and explicit worlds of talent and capability. As we step along the path of self- and universal-discovery, we are letting go of old worn out perceptions, integrating new experiences and making new meaning. At the return, we have expanded our consciousness; we have a new sense of self and a sufficiently large perspective on life to hold two personal truths at one time. We are vulnerable and capable, empathic and clear-sighted,

wise and instinctive, a pacifier and a fighter. We are also able to hold the dialects of gender expression; male and female, animus and anima, potent and dormant.

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. We no longer have a common understanding and a shared experience nor do we have a common language. Many people; remote acquaintances, close friends and intimate lovers, will try to encourage us back into the expression of our old Self. This was the 'you' they knew and understood and the 'you' they mourn. If the changes in us don't encourage them to question themselves, it encourages them to question us, so we get the brunt of their confusion. Sadly, this can mean that we have to leave old relationships behind. They just can't hold the complexity of us now. We are unfamiliar and uncomfortable to them.

Finally, but not without experiencing the plural emotions of pain and pleasure, we detach ourselves and enjoy the freedom to live our lives fully. Now we have transcended our former limitations and are able to orchestrate our own behaviours rather than allow the effects of past unhappiness to pull our strings.

I believe passionately that this process of transformation is not only a gift to commerce and industry but also to humankind and society. It is generative, expansive, optimistic and joyous and, it carries with it, superior achievement and extraordinary progress. Strangely, and at the same time, it is unremarkable; unremarkable because it feels so natural to be plugged in to your own authenticity. However it strikes, you will probably have begun to enjoy the process of self-discovery and be hungry to go on another journey and, each time you do so, you will know the rhythm, the challenges and the victories and be able to resource yourself more astutely. You have answered 'the call', and call again it will.

So it is that you go, a leader, treading an ever enlightening and never ending path, earning the title in perpetual motion; the hero in the modern world.