

Recovery as a Heroic Journey

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In his classic work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell described a dominant myth pervading the world's cultures. Campbell noted that, in spite of their myriad variations, mythic stories of the heroic adventure shared a common structure: the hero's departure, the hero's transformation by great trials, and the hero's return. Campbell's portrayal of the heroic journey beautifully depicts the metamorphoses of addiction and recovery at the same time it poses provocative questions about the final stage of the recovery process.

The beginning of the hero's tale is the call to adventure. Here the yet-to-be hero, often a person of little note or a community outcast, responds to a call from beyond his or her parochial world. To answer this call requires leaving that which is familiar to enter regions of "both treasure and danger." The call to adventure marks a great separation from family and community and entry into an unknown world.

As the adventure unfolds, the hero encounters numerous trials and tribulations that test his or her character. Eventually, the hero experiences an ultimate test. It is here that the hero is "swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died." But the hero, often with the aid of a personal guide, finds a way to escape, whether from the labyrinth or the monster's belly. The death experienced by the hero turns out to be not a death of the body but a living death of the ego. It is in this transformation that the hero recognizes and embraces new sources of power and understanding and is reborn into a new consciousness and a new relationship with the world. The central part of the heroic tale involves the acquisition of new knowledge that turns out to be as much rediscovery as discovery. Campbell notes: "the powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time."

According to Campbell, the most difficult stage of the hero's journey is the return home. This is a stage of reentry into the community that was left behind, reconciliation between the hero and the family/community, and a stage of service through which the hero delivers the gift of his/her newfound knowledge to the community. To complete the heroic journey, the hero who left the community as a seeker must return as a servant and teacher. Campbell notes that the task of fully returning is so difficult that many heroes fail to complete this final step of their journey.

There are obviously parallels between the processes of addiction and recovery and the structure of the hero's tale. There are hundreds of thousands of people whose recovery stories bear striking similarities to Campbell's myth of the hero. My primary purpose for exploring this similarity is to explore one aspect of this comparison: what the hero's return to the community implies as a task of late stage recovery. Several questions arise from Campbell's discussion. Have recovering people returned to their communities to share the boon (gift of knowledge) of their adventure? How can this return be completed? What is the nature of this boon that can help the community work out its own salvation?

Returning to the community calls not just for a physical and social re-entry into the community, but also for acts of reconciliation (healing the wounds inflicted upon the community, forgiving the community for its own transgressions), and giving something of value back to the community. For the heroic journey to be completed, for the hero to reclaim his or her citizenship in the community, those debts and obligations must be paid. Left unpaid, the hero's final act of fulfillment remains unconsummated. Left unpaid, the community loses experience and knowledge that could enhance its own health and resiliency.

The boon of the heroic journey can be offered individually through acts of restitution, by carrying a message of hope to others (sharing one's story), and by modeling the lessons contained in the boon (practicing recovery principles in our daily lives). And yet the questions could be asked: Have recovering people as a group fully returned to their communities or are they hiding within those communities? Are recovering people as a group reaching out or have they settled into the comfort and security of their own sobriety?

The stigma of addiction – the price that even those in long-term recovery can pay in disclosing this aspect of their personal history – leads many recovering people to "pass" as a "normal," scrupulously hiding their recovery journey from members of the larger community. Some recovering people live a socially cloistered existence, interacting almost exclusively with others in recovery. Does such isolation constitute a failure at re-entry, a missed opportunity for reconciliation, and an abdication of the responsibility to teach and serve the community?

The answers to these questions are not easy to answer because recovering people and their styles of recovery and styles of living are extremely diverse. There are clearly recovering individuals who have achieved Campbell's stages of re-entry, reconciliation and service.

If recovering people have not fully returned to their communities, it is as much a cultural failure as a personal one. It is the cultural stigma – the very real price that can be exacted for disclosure of recovery status – that is a primary culprit here. It is time for a new recovery advocacy movement that, by removing the cultural stigma that continues to be attached to addiction/recovery, can open the doors for recovering people to return to their communities. It is time recovering people shared the boon of their recovery, not just with others seeking recovery, but with the whole community.

There is a new recovery advocacy MOVEMENT AFOOT IN America that promises greater contact between recovering people and the larger community. Recovering people around the country are again creating grassroots organizations aimed at supporting recovery through advocacy, community education, and recovery resource development. The participants in this New Recovery Advocacy Movement, while responding to critical community needs, are finding in this recovery activism a way to complete their own personal journeys. They are finding ways to return and serve their communities.

If you feel like it is time to complete your recovery journey and feel like it is time for you to fully return to the community, find out how you can be part of your local recovery advocacy organization. If there is no local recovery advocacy organization, begin talking with other in recovery about how you might start one. It is time recovering people came home – individually and collectively.

Many in recovery reach a stage in which their addiction is reframed from a curse to an experience that brought an immeasurable gift into their lives. Perhaps it is time that, in Campbell's terms, recovering people identified and communicated the exact nature of that gift to the world. Perhaps it is time the heroic journey of recovery was completed.

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2. the New Recovery Advocacy Movement is a new generation of grassroots advocacy organizations seeking to: A) remove barriers to recovery for those still suffering from alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems, and B) to improve the quality of life of those recovering from AOD problems. The movement focuses on recovery representation in AOD-related social policies, the rights of addicted and recovering people, the expansion of recovery resources, and the development of a recovery-focused research agenda.

Coming Next: What is the nature of this gift of knowledge that recovering people possess and that their communities need?