

Surviving Our Crazy World

We live in an age of massive change on a global scale. My father remembers running down the lane of the family farm just to watch a car go by. Now we can see thousands of cars on the freeway going nowhere during rush hour. The invention of the computer chip has been revolutionary. Most of us now carry computers in our pockets with access to endless information. We can also use it as a phone. The problem is that things keep changing and people are not made for change. We adapt to the world in which we are born and when that world changes, we feel discomfort. Dealing with this discomfort is the challenge of our times. Failure to deal with the challenge of our crazy world is reflected in the growing suicide rates, mass shootings and hate crimes filling the news. There is a solution for us as individuals that has always been available.

Many years ago, in university, I experienced a traumatic event. After struggling to figure out what to do about it, I finally gave up. This surrender turned into a magic moment. I found myself on a wild, emotional/mental ride that lasted for over three months. My trauma became insignificant, as I became fascinated by what was happening to me. In my research I discovered Joseph Campbell. Campbell identified a pattern repeating itself in mythic tales from around the world and throughout the ages. This pattern was a mythic parallel to the psychological event I was experiencing. Campbell called the pattern, the "Monomythic Journey".

A story about Archimedes illustrates the basic pattern. In the ancient city of Syracuse, the tyrant Hiero received a crown purported to have been made of pure gold, but he suspected the jeweler of adulterating it with silver. He called upon Archimedes, his resident genius, to resolve the issue without destroying the crown. Archimedes knew that the volume of equal weights of gold and silver were different, but how could he test them and keep the crown intact? He pondered the question in vain for some time. One day, while lowering himself into his bath, Archimedes observed the water rise as his body was immersed. In this pattern, he saw a solution to his problem.

The story is that Archimedes leaped from his tub and raced naked through the streets of Syracuse shouting, "Eureka! Eureka!" [I found it! I found it!]. Archimedes realized that he could place the irregular shaped crown in water, measure the water displaced, and compare it to the displacement of water of an equal weight of pure gold. If the amount of water displaced was the same in both cases, then the crown was pure gold. If the amount was not equal, then the jeweler's duplicity would be revealed. In short, Archimedes, troubled by a problem, suddenly saw it in a new light and the solution popped into his mind. This is the "eureka phenomenon" of psychology. This is the basic pattern of a successful Monomythic Journey.

The psychological process underlying the Monomythic Journey starts when a problem arises that causes discomfort. This discomfort prods the brain to find out what's going on. The brain races off searching our existing knowledge and experience for an explanation. If all the answers the brain returns with do not feel right, the problem is passed on to our unconscious mind. In time the unconscious returns with a new perspective on the problem, which reveals new information previously filtered out as noise by our existing understanding. With the new information an answer is found and immediately the discomfort is replaced by the joy of understanding.

Our basic attitudes and key understandings are fixed by middle childhood, which is why teenagers know it all. Whenever we learn something, whether it is a complicated process or the simple naming of an object, we build an inner, mental concept that incorporates our understanding. Once this idea's reliability is proven and reinforced by successful use, it becomes habitual, without the need for our conscious attention. This is the learning process.

We learn, or discover, with strenuous effort, a new method of thinking; after a while, with practice, the novelty changes into a semi-automatized routine ... and is incorporated into our repertory of habits. (Koestler 639)

This habit-forming function of the human mind is critical because if we had to be consciously aware of everything we did, we couldn't function. Watch a child learning to walk. They struggle; they fall; they try again and again until they get it right. As adults we don't even think about walking; we just do it. In fact, if we do think about it, we can become self-conscious and trip over our own two feet.

These silent codes are the invisible myths of our minds. We are unaware of their existence or their impact on our lives. We determine the meaning of all the sensory data we receive based upon these existing myths of our minds.

We become what we behold, and
We behold what we've become.
(Marshall McLuhan)

These mental myths also filter out sensory data that appears irrelevant to the meaning they create. The problem is that this filtered sensory data may contain information key to a more accurate or more useful understanding of the situation. As creatures of habit, we remain unaware of this screened-out data. We are blinded by the existing myths of our minds. I call this mythlock. As long as the external world remains consistent with our understanding, stored in the myths of our minds, we are content. But when the world changes, we feel discomfort.

Campbell's book, *The hero with a thousand faces*, stresses the successful journeys of heroes and geniuses. But this pattern is not confined to geniuses. It is the basic human "creative act" or seen from a broader perspective, "adaptive response". What we call 'genius' is not some inherited trait bestowed upon some and denied others, but merely an acquired habit of mind and emotion. Genius is habitual familiarity with the emotional/mental pattern inherent in a Monomythic Journey.

Einstein is quoted as saying:

If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.
(Einstein)

All fairy tales follow a common basic pattern: a problem arises, the hero sets off to find a solution, all kinds of challenges are encountered and overcome until a solution is found, and then the hero returns home to "live happily ever after". This is the same basic pattern of any successful problem solving. The pattern's repetition in story after story provides an understanding absorbed by a child's mind exposed to fairy tales. The mental process of successful problem solving is burnt into the mind. Sadly, not

everyone is born in a warm, loving, and nurturing environments where fairy tales are a part of the regular mental diet.

Those who have not absorbed the problem-solving pattern can have trouble adapting to change. They struggle and get angry trying deal with their discomfort. Mental struggle and anger totally block the creative process, preventing the transfer of the problem to the unconscious mind. Driven by our feelings, our brains continue to seek a solution from the existing knowledge base in our minds that will dispel the angst and discomfort that is tearing us apart. If the brain gets tired of having our feelings reject, answer after answer, it comes up with one that can solve any problem. The brain suggests, "Ending it all"! Sadly, in these turbulent times suicide has becomes endemic. According to the CDC, between 2000-2021, suicide rates increased by nearly 40% and suicide was responsible for close to 50,000 deaths, which is about one death every 11 minutes.

Worse yet, if angst and worry are tearing us apart, the question to the brain is more like a scream for help. In response, the brain moves quickly to find an answer to our anguish. Any answer will do in a storm, so the brain identifies a source of the problem. It's those Jews, blacks, homos, or immigrants destroying our world. Finally, we understand, and righteous anger replaces helpless angst, because anger feels so much better than helplessness. This anger gives rise to antisemitism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism, all convenient scapegoats, we use to escape our discomfort. Mass shootings, domestic violence, are all the products of scapegoatism. According to GVA, so far this year there have been 531 mass shootings in the U.S. That's more than 1 a day.

Making people aware of the role of scapegoatism in the violence we are experiencing may help but it won't solve the problem because human beings are not rational creatures. You'll notice that it is our feelings, our emotions, that are involved in evaluating the answers served up by our brains. We are emotional creatures. Our brain turns out to be nothing more than a computer in our heads. It is our hearts, our emotions, that rule. Changing what we believe is an emotional process, an emotional restructuring of the myths of our minds.

Even if the problem is passed on to our unconscious minds and mythically, we receive a gift from the Goddess, a new perspective, success is far from guaranteed. If the solution developed by the new information revealed by the new perspective is radically different from what we believe, it can be rejected by our feelings, and our discomfort remains. Mythically this is described as a meeting with the Goddess as Hag. In our current world of turmoil, these are the people fighting against any new ideas offered to solve the problems and yearning for a return to what they believe were the good old days. Or the new information may be rejected because it conflicts with our current morality. Mythically, this is described as a meeting with the Goddess as Seductrice, destine to lead us into sin and depravity. This failure of the Monomythic Journey is reflected in the cultural mistreatment of women all around the world.

Do you see a Hag or a Seductrice in the picture below? As you flip back and forth between each perspective you can get a feel for the impact of perceptual change. If you didn't know that the other perspective existed, you would experience the blindness of mythlock.



The Monomythic Journey is how we can escape from the discomfort of our times. The first step of Monomythic Journey is the passing of the problem to the unconscious mind, or mythically stepping across the threshold into the magical realm of the mind, a dream-like world where anything is possible.

Arthur Koestler neatly summarizes the pattern inherent in the hero myths:

Under the effect of some overwhelming experience, the hero is made to realize the shallowness of his life, the futility and frivolity of the daily pursuits of man in the trivial routines of existence. This realization may come to him as a sudden shock caused by some catastrophic event, or as the cumulative effect of a slow inner development, or through the trigger action of some apparently banal experience which assumes an unexpected significance. The hero then suffers a crisis which involves the very foundations of his being; he embarks on the Night Journey, is suddenly transferred to the Tragic Plane -- from which he emerges purified, enriched by new insight, regenerated on a higher level of integration. (Koestler 358)

Reading mythic tales, you need to approach them empathetically, to feel as the character feels in order to understand as the character understands. Children feel the emotions of the heroes of fairy tales while as adults we tend to seek confirmation of what we already know. The standard scholarly interpretations of mythic stories usually arise from the belief that the humans are rational creatures and not ruled by emotions. Nowhere is the difference in interpretation arising from these diverse approaches more evident than in the familiar Narcissus myth.

The standard interpretation of the Narcissus myth is that Narcissus fell in love with himself. The dictionary defines "narcissism" as "a morbid condition characterized by excessive admiration of oneself, one's person, abilities, etc. (Universal Dictionary 761).

This modern, worldwide interpretation arises from the objective approach to the study of the Narcissus myth. This objective observer sees a character that becomes enamored with his image and ruins his life because of it.

What I saw through the emotional approach to the Narcissus myth was a description of an emotionally intense creative experience. The story starts with the prophecy of Tiresias that Narcissus will live a long life if only he does not "come to know himself". Narcissus is a young man who is rich, intelligent, and handsome and all the girls adore him. Sadly, there was no parallel in my life to this part of the story. The initiating event of the Narcissus experience was also quite different from mine. My youthful revelation was triggered by an "apparently banal experience", of young love, while Narcissus' appears to have been the result of "a slow inner development" or "disillusionment with life".

Narcissus has everything going for him, yet he is discontent. He has everything we could imagine that a person could want yet for Narcissus something is lacking. His discontent is the harbinger of the Adventure to come. Narcissus realizes the shallowness of his life of leisure, he suffers from the "Is that all there is?" syndrome. Narcissus looks around at all he has and asks himself, "Is that all there is? Is this all that life has to offer? There has to be more!" Narcissus is a young man searching for meaning. "What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here?" In his search, Narcissus wanders off into a strange and peaceful place.

This is no natural place. "A woodland setting undisturbed by birds or beasts or falling branches" is impossible. This is a symbolic realm. What do we do in moments of solitude? We think about things; we speculate; we daydream. We enter the magical realm of the mind where natural laws do not apply. This is a realm of all possibilities. This is a realm of an unfettered imagination.

In this state of reverie, Narcissus suddenly sees himself reflected in a "clear pool with shining silvery waters." He sees himself in a natural Looking Glass and the moment is an imagistic equivalent to the psychological event of mind/body separation. Narcissus steps outside of himself and sees himself. But the prophecy was not simply what would happen if Narcissus saw himself but if he "came to know himself." Coming to know ourselves is the essence of the event when our lives flash before our eyes, which is a frequent first step. Watching the seminal events in our lives and reliving them emotionally, we discover how we were molded by events and ideas into the person we've become. This is "coming to know ourselves."

Reflected in "shining silvery water" Narcissus comes to know himself. This is an imagistic or mythic description of the moment of revelation, the moment we break out of mythlock and acquire a new perspective. The emotions of this moment are wonderful. Even the word ecstasy can be an inadequate description. The emotions of the moment can be greater than the rush experienced by a drug addict, but alas the moment passes.

The feelings pass, and we come down from our high, but the desire to re-experience that moment does not diminish. Narcissus yearns to re-establish that feeling and his frustration is increased by the knowledge that only some trick of mind and emotion prevents it from happening.

Narcissus yearns for a repeat of this mind/body separation experience, but it is not to be. He goes on to beat himself black and blue, much like some individuals do during certain religious festivals, to provoke the mystical experience. Narcissus does not give up. He continues his futile efforts to revisit this emotional state. Herein lies the lesson of the creator of this mythic tale. If you experience the ecstasy of a dramatic revelatory event, enjoy it but get on with your life because the wildly fluid state of mind precipitated by a revelatory event is extremely difficult to reinitiate once lost and it will never again be as dramatic as it was the first time.

The Narcissus myth when approached emotionally is seen as a description of a revelatory experience. But the creator of the mythic tale also provided a lesson I had not yet learned. The fluidity of mind arising from a revelatory event cannot last. A creative frenzy is not a state compatible with sane and sober functioning. At the end of my three months of creative frenzy when I grounded out and came back down to earth, initially I didn't realize what I had lost. Initially, I didn't even know it was over. Once realized, unlike Narcissus, I did not beat myself black and blue to reinitiate the experience, but I did try meditation. I did try to re-establish that state but from the Narcissus myth, I learned the lesson of the author. I gave up any obsession with re-establishing that feeling of ecstasy and got on with my life.

The gift of the Goddess is a new perspective. The gift of the Goddess in all her splendor is multiple perspectives that create and recreate a new world around us all the time. In one instance a new perspective gives rise to a brilliant insight. A moment later another perspective on another problem produces another brilliant understanding. Also, occasionally, the new perspectives can lead to the conscious mind's creation of the stupidest ideas imaginable. In our current world, the rise of conspiracy theories on the internet is a reflection of this. A more disastrous example is the suicide of the members of cult leader Jim Jones in 1978. Thankfully, while in a fluid mental state, this foolish answer is easily recognized and usually unleashes enormous laughter. This experience also leads to a critical understanding. Truth is an illusion. All we ever know is merely our minds best guess going with the information at hand. With emotions free of negativity, this is a glorious state in a magical world. Mythically, this is what some mythologists describe as being possessed by god or filled with the divine elixir.

I am going to try the impossible. I am going to try to communicate a reality-based, psychological description of an ascent up the mythical Stairway to the Stars. Following are the thoughts and ideas that precipitated my own experience. Because it is an emotion experience, empathy is essential to feel the implications.

Imagine a beautiful day in early summer. Everything is green; the rich green of spring and flowers are blooming in the garden. The sky is crystal blue with white puffy clouds floating by. You are resting on a deck, luxuriating in the warmth of the sun, contemplating life. You think about all your friends and relatives who despite all their differences, minor maladaptations and idiosyncrasies, are at heart, warm, caring and compassionate individuals. How fortunate you are to have these people as friends. A warm feeling of love flows through your body. Suddenly you realize you are being too selective as the image of a stranger's child flashes through your mind. You see this child playing on the lawn, smiling in wide-eyed wonder. All children, you realize, are beautiful just like your friends. The joy embedded in these thoughts washes through your body, heightening your emotions and unknowingly you take a step up the Stairway to the Stars. Suddenly images of other people you know and even strangers,

flashes through your mind and their smiles warm your heart. You are still being too selective. Taking another step up the Stairway to the Stars, you realize that all people are beautiful. Then immediately, as if to correct a misconception, the image of a rough, tough, leather-jacketed biker flashes through your mind, as if to point out a fallacy. But you watch him become a hesitant, bashful little boy in the presence of a beautiful woman. You see him sitting awkwardly playing tentatively with a child in his lap, tenderness, and caring filling his eyes. You see through the veneer of the conscious constructs buffering his inner child from the outer world. Within every human being, just below the public veneer of conscious adaptation is a beautiful, fragile child. All people are beautiful.

Regardless of race, religion, or culture, beneath the veneer of differences, lies a beautiful fragile human being with all the same hopes, dreams and desires as yourself. The wonder and awe of this revelation fills your heart to bursting and you take yet another step up the Stairway to the Stars. Then a golden retriever, lying at your feet, turns and looks up at you with those big brown eyes. You are still being far too selective. Your golden retriever is beautiful. In fact, you see that all nature's animals are beautiful as you watch a hummingbird hover at the blossom of a foxglove. Everything alive is beautiful; life is beautiful. A shot of ecstasy fills your eyes with tears of joy as you take yet another step up the Stairway to the Stars.

You pause a moment and remember hearing somewhere that there is more similarity between the DNA structure of a tree and a human being than there are differences. It's not just animals, but everything that is alive is beautiful. You become absorbed in the beauty of the soft mauve petal of an iris blooming in the garden and you take yet another step up the Stairway to the Stars. Another thought pops into your fluid mind. You are still being too selective. You remember the words of Carl Sagan, "We are the stuff of stars." Everything we know, and out of which life has evolved, is created in the burning cauldron of a star and scattered across the universe when a star explodes. We are all, all animals, all plants, all living things and even the soil, water, air, and the very mountains, made of the stuff of stars. We are all of one. The wonder and awe of this emotional revelation cause every cell in your body to tingle. Tears of joy pour down your face. You feel tingling in your fingertips like lines of force extending outward and connecting to all around you. Every cell in your body tingles with their own lines of force connecting everything to everything. All is one! You are a part of everything and everything is a part of you. The ecstasy of this revelation burns your eyes with tears as your "soul is absorbed into, and united with, the divine infinity, and all personality is extinguished."

From the top of the Stairway to the Stars you can see forever. Our horizon is expanded to the limitless boundaries of eternity. We can observe the universe unfolding as it should according to the law and nature of its being. This is a perspective beyond boundaries. This is a god or goddess like perspective. This is life seen through the lens of eternity.

From the standpoint of the Olympians, eon after eon of earthly history rolls by, revealing ever the harmonious form of the total round, so that where men see only change and death, the blessed behold immutable form, world without end. (Campbell 223)

This is the meaning behind the words of Walt Whitman:

I laugh at what you call dissolution;
I know the amplitude of time.
(Walt Whitman 84-85)

From the perspective of eternity, failure, disaster and even the most crushing tragedies become merely bumps on the road of existence.

All religions are the product of a hero's successful adventure up the Stairway to the Stars. My research deviated into a study of the New Testament when I discovered that JC's message was all about the 'creative act'.

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted. (Luke 11:34-36)

This is a description of the blindness of mythlock. Again and again, in the story of Jesus, I discovered parallels to the mythic tales of the Monomythic Adventure.

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (Matt 5:29-30)

This is an encouragement to undertake an often difficult escape from mythlock.

Jesus's act of baptism is a classic symbol of rebirth, an escape from mythlock and the opening of our eyes to a new world. I was so excited with my discovery that I wrote a book: *The greatest hero: the genius behind the myth*. It is not dry research material but a retelling of his story in poetry. Essential, I rewrote the bible, at least the New Testament portion.

The problem with religion is that the mind opening revelation of its founder is soon replaced by mythlock barriers created by administrators attempting to counter heresy, causing the religion loses its flexibility to adapt to changing times.

A good portion of the disruption and turmoil in our world stems from the battle between the ideas of the past and those of the future. Misogyny, a paternalistic attitude, that has existed in every human culture in the world is now being exposed. Women traumatized by the abuse they received are using the new communication technologies to discuss their trauma. The 'Me-too' movement has given voice to the oppressed. Their success is noteworthy in that even the courts are now recognizing the abuse rather than sluffing it off as they have in the past as 'boys just being boys'. Now, the oppressors are going to jail, and other potential oppressors are seeing that the world has changed, and their habits must change also. More importantly, the young are recognizing the horror of this attitude and misogyny is not becoming an invisible myth of young minds.

The proliferation of the new electronic communication capabilities is giving voice to others who have suffered over the centuries from horrific inculcated cultural norms. We now celebrate "Pride Day", where differences are celebrated rather than being hidden away. In some cases, we still have far to go. Sixty-seven countries in the world still

criminalize homosexuality and a half a dozen maintain the death penalty as punishment (Human Rights Watch).

Our young are now adapting to the new Global Village we inhabit. Where in the past we only saw young, slim, white, beautiful, Anglo-Saxon males and females in commercials, we now see a more realistic reflection of the Global Village. This is the new world that our young are adapting to. Xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism are being exposed and denigrated for what they are, faulty myths of our minds and no longer tolerated.

Happiness may be hard to find in such turbulent times, but I am reminded of the words of my university history teacher when we were studying the Greek Golden Age. He said we would not have wanted to live in that age because there were wars going on and turmoil boiled everywhere as new and often wonderful ideas, like democracy, fought the old and dying ideas of the past. Democracy, in fact, was an answer devised in that era to prevent the terrible chaos of a changing world on human culture. The Greek world was in turmoil as old ideas past their prime battled against new ideas to deal with the new problems. The battles were disruptive and violent, much like they are today. Democracy, an idea from the geniuses of that era, was to put ruling power in the hands of the majority, so as new ideas arising to solve the problems of the present were absorbed by the young, a point would be reached, when the new ideas were accepted by the majority without the need for a violent and destructive revolution. Perhaps if our current political leaders got rid of the 'first past the post' voting system so that power in our parliaments reflected the majority, we might get rid of the partisan bickering that currently dominates politics.

Imagine a world where xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism were no longer among the invisible myths of the minds of the majority. Women would be able to walk alone at night without fear, rather than parading annually in large groups, carry flags declaring "Take Back the Night". Imagine a world where young people were taught that 'within the Garden of the Goddess lies all the human heart could ever desire'. Suicide could be greatly diminished. Now imagine that young people were taught that scapegoatism was a destructive misuse of their 'fight and flight response'. So much violence could be banished from our world. Imagine the mythic Phoenix, destroying herself and arising new from the ashes, as a myth from the past and no longer a valid description of cultural evolution. This would be paradise. Perhaps this world could lie at the end of the current cultural tunnel of torment. Perhaps, in a hundred years or so, people will look back at our age as the Golden Age of the World. This thought makes me happy.

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