

# **The Hero With A Thousand Faces**

## *Joseph Campbell*

### **~ Epilogue ~ Myth and Society**

#### **The Hero Today**

The self-determining individual, the invention of the power-driven machine, and the development of the scientific method of research have so transformed human life that the long-inherited, timeless universe of symbols has collapsed.

Yet we all know the tale, and it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming to maturity.

The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, has been shattered with sure and mighty strokes. The dream-web of myth has fallen away; the mind can be opened to full waking consciousness; and modern human beings can emerge from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon, or like the sun at dawn from the womb of mother night.

It is not only that there is no hiding place for the gods from the searching telescope and microscope; there is no such society any more as the gods once supported. The social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization. Its ideals are not to make heaven visible on earth, but more of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources.

Isolated societies, dream-bounded within a mythologically-charged horizon, no longer exist except as areas to be exploited. And within the progressive societies themselves, every last vestige of the ancient human heritage of ritual, morality, and art is in full decay.

The problem of humankind today, therefore, is precisely the opposite to that of people in the comparatively stable periods of those great coordinating mythologies which now are known as lies. Then the meaning was in the group, in the great anonymous forms, not in the self-expressive individual; today no meaning is in the group – all is in the individual.

But there the meaning has been absolutely unconscious. One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two.

The hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the coordinated soul.

Obviously, this work cannot be wrought by turning back, or away, from what has been accomplished by the modern revolution; for the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant – or rather, that of making it possible for men and women to come to full maturity through the conditions of contemporary life.

Indeed, these conditions themselves are what have rendered the ancient formulae ineffective, misleading, and even pernicious.

The community today is the planet, not the bounded nation; hence the patterns of projected aggression which formerly served to coordinate the in-group, now can only break it into factions.

The national idea, with the flag as the totem, is today an aggrandizer of the nursery ego, not the annihilator of an infantile situation. Its parody rituals of the parade ground serve the ends of *Holdfast*, the tyrant dragon, not the God in whom self-interest is annihilate.

And the numerous saints of this anti-cult – namely the patriots whose ubiquitous photographs, draped with flags, serve as official icons – are precisely the local threshold guardians (our demon *Sticky-Hair*) whom it is the first problem of the hero to surpass.

Nor can the great world religions, as at present understood, meet the requirement. For they have become associated with the causes of the factions, as instruments of propaganda and self-congratulation.

The universal triumph of the secular state has thrown all religious organizations into such a definitely secondary, and finally ineffectual, position that religious pantomime is hardly more today than a sanctimonious exercise for Sunday morning, whereas business ethics and patriotism stand for the remainder of the week.

Such monkey-holiness is not what the functioning world requires; rather, a transmutation of the whole social order is necessary, so that through every detail and act of secular life the vitalizing image of the universal god-man who is actually immanent and effective in all of us may be somehow made known to consciousness.

And this is not the work that consciousness itself can achieve. Consciousness can no more invent, or even predict, an effective symbol than foretell or control tonight's dream.

The whole thing is being worked out at another level, through what is bound to be a long and very frightening process, not only in the depths of every living psyche in the modern world, but also on those titanic battlefields into which the whole planet has lately been converted.

We are watching the terrible clash of the *Symplegades*, through which the soul must pass – identified with neither side.

But there is one thing we may know, namely, that as the new symbols become visible, they will not be identical in the various parts of the globe; the circumstances of local life, race, and tradition must all be compounded in the effective forms.

Therefore, it is necessary for people to understand, and be able to see, that through various symbols the same redemption is revealed. “Truth is one”, we read in the Vedas; “the sages call it by many names.” A single song is being inflected through all the colorations of the human choir.

General propaganda for one or another of the local solutions, therefore, is superfluous – or much rather, a menace. The way to become human is to learn to recognize the lineaments of God in all of the wonderful modulations of the face of man.

With this we come to the final hint of what the specific orientation of the modern hero-task must be, and discover the real cause for the disintegration of all of our inherited religious formulae.

The center of gravity, that is to say, of the realm of mystery and danger has definitely shifted.

For the primitive hunting peoples of the remotest human millennia when the sabertooth tiger, the mammoth, and the lesser presences of the animal kingdom were the primary manifestations of what was alien – the source at once of danger, and of sustenance – the great human problem was to become linked psychologically to the task of sharing the wilderness with these beings.

An unconscious identification took place, and this was finally rendered conscious in the half-human, half-animal figures of the mythological totem-ancestors. The animals become the tutors of humanity.

Through acts of literal imitation – such as today appear only on the children’s playground (or in the madhouse) – an effective annihilation of the human ego was accomplished and society achieved a cohesive organization.

Similarly, the tribes supporting themselves on plant-food became cathected to the plant; the life-rituals of planting and reaping were identified with those of human

procreation, birth, and progress to maturity. Both the plant and the animal worlds, however, were in the end brought under social control.

Whereupon the great field of instructive wonder shifted – to the skies – and humankind enacted the great pantomime of the sacred moon-king, the sacred sun-king, the hieratic, planetary state, and the symbolic festivals of the world-regulating spheres.

Today all of these mysteries have lost their force; their symbols no longer interest our psyche. The notion of a cosmic law, which all existence serves and to which man himself must bend, has long since passed through the preliminary mystical stages represented in the old astrology, and is now simply accepted in mechanical terms as a matter of course.

The descent of the Occidental sciences from the heavens to the earth (From 17<sup>th</sup> century astronomy to 19<sup>th</sup> century biology), and their concentration today, at last, on man himself (in 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology and psychology), mark the path of a prodigious transfer of the focal point of human wonder.

Not the animal world, not the plant world, not the miracle of the spheres, but *humanity itself* is now the crucial mystery.

*Humanity* is now that alien presence with whom the forces of egoism must come to term, through which the ego is to be crucified and resurrected, and in whose image society is to be reformed.

*Humanity*, understood however not as “I” but “thou”: for the ideals and temporal institutions of no one tribe, race, continent, social class, or century can be the measure of the inexhaustible and multifariously wonderful divine existence that is the life in all of us.

The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence, with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his or her community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding.

“Live”, Nietzsche says, “as though the day were here”.

It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – carries the cross of the redeemer – not in the bright moments of his or her tribe’s great victories, but in the silences of his or her personal despair.

*{Taken and adapted by Michael Mervosh from “[The Hero of a Thousand Faces](#)”; third edition 2008; pages 333- 33; the original edition was published in 1949. Also see [jcf-myth.org](http://jcf-myth.org) for more reading options.}*

