

**"The Memo That Started It All" by Christopher Vogler**  
([link to original site here](#))

From time to time people ask me for a copy of the original seven-page memo that was the foundation of THE WRITER'S JOURNEY. For many years I lost track of the original version and could only offer to send people the longer versions that evolved later, or point them to my book, where the memo was embedded in the first chapter, but they weren't satisfied with these solutions, apparently believing there was something almost magical about that original terse, blunt statement of my beliefs. They had to have the "legendary seven-pager" which I had called "A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES", but I was never able to lay hands on the original short version. Until now, that is.

After upheavals of home and office, and sifting through many files and boxes, I have finally come across the raw, original text of The Memo, and I offer it here to you, with the hopes it will have some of the magical effect on you that people attribute to it. But first, I'd like to share some of the context around the creation of this little document.

It was written in the mid-1980s when I was working as a story consultant for Walt Disney Pictures, but I had discovered the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell a few years earlier while studying cinema at the University of Southern California. I was sure I saw Campbell's ideas being put to work in the first of the Star Wars movies and wrote a term paper for a class in which I attempted to identify the mythic patterns that made that film such a huge success. The research and writing for that paper inflamed my imagination and later, when I started working as a story analyst at Fox and other Hollywood studios, I showed the paper to a few colleagues, writers and executives to stimulate some discussion of Campbell's ideas which I found to be of unlimited value for creating mass entertainment. I was certainly making profitable use of them, applying them to every script and novel I considered in my job.

Eventually I arrived at Disney where a strong corporate culture and a string of hits were being created by executives Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg. Memos were a big part of that corporate identity, a means of persuasively communicating concepts and attitudes, and all of us who worked at Disney at that time had to learn the memo art form, following the example of Katzenberg, an absolute master.

I suppose the discipline of writing succinct development notes, story coverage and research memos kindled in me a desire to express the exciting ideas I had found in Campbell in a clear, concise way. I wanted to once and for all get them down as creative principles, a set of reliable building blocks for constructing stories, a set of tools for troubleshooting story problems.

So I took time off from my story analyst job and spent a week in New York City with David McKenna, a good friend I'd met years ago while doing theatre in San Antonio in my Air Force days. We'd followed parallel paths in film and theatre, and eventually converged as story analysts and consultants. He is a great film buff and a good guy to bounce ideas off of, and together we shook out the details of the Hero's Journey as it seemed to apply to movies. We worked out terminology and discussed scenes from films in every genre to demonstrate the variations of the Hero's Journey pattern. We wore out his VCR looking at old movie clips. At the end of this intense phase I went back to L.A. and pounded out the seven-page memo, sending the first copy to McKenna.

I gave copies of The Memo to my story analyst friends and to key Disney executives including Ricardo Mestres of Hollywood Pictures and David Hoberman of Touchstone, both divisions of Disney. "Interesting," was all that most people said, at first. But I knew, I sensed somehow, I

was on to something. I had the vision that copies of The Memo were like little robots, moving out from the studio and into the jetstream of Hollywood thinking all on their own. Fax machines had just been invented and I envisioned copies of The Memo flying all over town, and that's exactly what happened.

Feedback started coming in that suggested I had hit a nerve. I heard young executives buzzing about it, telling their friends about it. It became the "I have to have it" document of the season at talent agencies and in studio executive suites like that of Dawn Steel at Paramount. And in the sincerest form of compliment, it was promptly plagiarized. One instance was right under my nose in the studio. A junior executive had taken off my title page and substituted his own name as author, and then submitted it to Jeffrey Katzenberg, who read it and pronounced it a very important document at a meeting of his development execs, making it required reading for the entire staff.

Fortunately someone at that table had already read The Memo and knew I was the true author. I heard about it on the studio grapevine within minutes and immediately sent off a letter to Mr. Katzenberg, asserting myself as the author of The Memo and requesting deeper involvement in story development. He called me right away and put me to work with Disney's Feature Animation division, where I began doing research and development work on THE LION KING and many other projects. When I arrived I found The Memo had preceded me, and the animators were already outlining their story boards with Hero's Journey stages.

The Memo served as a handout when I began teaching story analysis at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. And that's when it began to grow, as I developed the ideas more fully and added more examples. Eventually I included material about the archetypes and soon there was enough material to contemplate a book, and thus THE WRITER'S JOURNEY was born from a humble seven-page acorn.

But people continue to attribute special importance or powers to the original seven-pager, especially those who had been around when its impact was first felt. At one point, a museum dedicated to screenwriting requested a copy for a display of what they considered the milestone documents and books in the history of the craft. And so I give you The Memo, thus releasing many more little robots to distribute these ideas far and wide, to influence movies, computer game design, or whatever field where they may be useful.

"A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces"  
by Christopher Vogler © 1985

"There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."

Willa Cather

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the long run, one of the most influential books of the 20th century may turn out to be Joseph Campbell's THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES.

The book and the ideas in it are having a major impact on writing and story-telling, but above all on movie-making. Filmmakers like John Boorman, George Miller, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Francis Coppola owe their successes in part to the ageless patterns that Joseph Campbell identifies in the book.

The ideas Campbell presents in this and other books are an excellent set of analytical tools.

With them you can almost always determine what's wrong with a story that's floundering; and you can find a better solution almost any story problem by examining the pattern laid out in the book.

There's nothing new in the book. The ideas in it are older than the Pyramids, older than Stonehenge, older than the earliest cave painting.

Campbell's contribution was to gather the ideas together, recognize them, articulate them, and name them. He exposes the pattern for the first time, the pattern that lies behind every story ever told.

Campbell, now 82, is a vigorous lover of mythology and the author of many books on the subject. For many years he has taught, written, and lectured about the myths of all cultures in all times. THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES is the clearest statement of his observations on the most persistent theme in all of oral traditions and recorded literature – the myth of the hero.

In his study of world hero myths Campbell discovered that they are all basically the same story – retold endlessly in infinite variations. He found that all story-telling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth, and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the hero myth; the "monomyth" whose principles he lays out in the book.

The theme of the hero myth is universal, occurring in every culture, in every time; it is as infinitely varied as the human race itself; and yet its basic form remains the same, an incredibly tenacious set of elements that spring in endless repetition from the deepest reaches of the mind of man.

Campbell's thinking runs parallel to that of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, who wrote of the "archetypes: -- constantly repeating characters who occur in the dreams of all people and the myths of all cultures.

Jung suggested that these archetypes are reflection of aspects of the human mind – that our personalities divide themselves into these characters to play out the drama of our lives.

He noticed a strong correspondence between his patients' dream or fantasy figures and the common archetypes of mythology, and he suggested that both were coming from a deeper source, in the "collective unconscious" of the human race.

The repeating characters of the hero myth such as the young hero, the wise old man or woman, the shape-shifting woman or man, and the shadowy antagonist are identical with the archetypes of the human mind, as revealed in dreams. That's why myths, and stories constructed on the mythological model, strike us as psychologically true.

Such stories are true models of the workings of the human mind, true maps of the psyche. They are psychologically valid and realistic even when they portray fantastic, impossible, unreal events.

This accounts for the universal power of such stories. Stories built on the model of the hero myth have an appeal that can be felt by everyone, because they spring from a universal source in the collective unconscious, and because they reflect universal concerns. They deal with the child-like but universal questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where will I go when I die? What is good and what is evil? What must I do about it? What will tomorrow be like? Where did yesterday go? Is there anybody else out there?

The idea imbedded in mythology and identified by Campbell in *THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES* can be applied to understanding any human problem. They are a great key to life as well as being a major tool for dealing more effectively with a mass audience.

If you want to understand the ideas behind the hero myth, there's no substitute for actually reading Campbell's book. It's an experience that has a way of changing people. It's also a good idea to read a lot of myths, but it amounts to the same thing since Campbell is a master story-teller who delights in illustrating his points with examples from the rich storehouse of mythology.

Campbell gives a condensed version of the basic hero myth in chapter IV, "The Keys", of *THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES*. I've taken the liberty of amending the outline slightly, trying to reflect some of the common themes in movies, illustrated with examples from contemporary films. I'm re-telling the hero myth in my own way, and you should feel free to do the same. Every story-teller bends the myth to his or her own purpose. That's why the hero has a thousand faces.

#### THE STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

##### **1.) The hero is introduced in his/her ORDINARY WORLD.**

Most stories ultimately take us to a special world, a world that is new and alien to its hero. If you're going to tell a story about a fish out of his customary element, you first have to create a contrast by showing him in his mundane, ordinary world. In *WITNESS* you see both the Amish boy and the policeman in their ordinary worlds before they are thrust into alien worlds – the farm boy into the city, and the city cop into the unfamiliar countryside. In *STAR WARS* you see Luke Skywalker being bored to death as a farm boy before he tackles the universe.

##### **2.) The CALL TO ADVENTURE.**

The hero is presented with a problem, challenge or adventure. Maybe the land is dying, as in the King Arthur stories about the search for the Grail. In *STAR WARS*, it's Princess Leia's holographic message to Obi Wan Kenobi, who then asks Luke to join the quest. In detective stories, it's the

hero being offered a new case. In romantic comedies it could be the first sight of that special but annoying someone the hero or heroine will be pursuing/sparring with.

### **3.) The hero is reluctant at first. (REFUSAL OF THE CALL.)**

Often at this point the hero balks at the threshold of adventure. After all, he or she is facing the greatest of all fears – fear of the unknown. At this point Luke refuses Obi Wan's call to adventure, and returns to his aunt and uncle's farmhouse, only to find they have been barbecued by the Emperor's stormtroopers. Suddenly Luke is no longer reluctant, and is eager to undertake the adventure. He is motivated.

### **4.) The hero is encouraged by the Wise Old Man or Woman. (MEETING WITH THE MENTOR.)**

By this time many stories will have introduced a Merlin-like character who is the hero's mentor. In JAWS it's the crusty Robert Shaw character who knows all about sharks; in the mythology of the Mary Tyler Moore Show, it's Lou Grant. The mentor gives advice and sometimes magical weapons. This is Obi Wan giving Luke his father's light saber.

The mentor can go so far with the hero. Eventually the hero must face the unknown by himself. Sometimes the Wise Old Man/Woman is required to give the hero a swift kick in the pants to get the adventure going.

### **5.) The hero passes the first threshold. (CROSSING THE THRESHOLD.)**

The hero fully enters the special world of the story for the first time. This is the moment at which the story takes off and the adventure gets going. The balloon goes up, the romance begins, the spaceship blasts off, the wagon train gets rolling. Dorothy sets out on the Yellow Brick Road. The hero is now committed to his/her journey and there's no turning back.

### **6.) The hero encounters tests and helpers. (TESTS, ALLIES, ENEMIES.)**

The hero is forced to make allies and enemies in the special world, and to pass certain tests and challenges that are part of his/her training. In STAR WARS the cantina is the setting for the forging of an important alliance with Han Solo and the start of an important enmity with Jabba the Hutt. In CASABLANCA Rick's Café is the setting for the "alliances and enmities" phase and in many Westerns it's the saloon where these relationships are tested.

### **7.) The hero reaches the innermost cave. (APPROACH TO THE INMOST CAVE.)**

The hero comes at last to a dangerous place, often deep underground, where the object of the quest is hidden. In the Arthurian stories the Chapel Perilous is the dangerous chamber where the seeker finds the Grail. In many myths the hero has to descend into hell to retrieve a loved one, or into a cave to fight a dragon and gain a treasure. It's Theseus going to the Labyrinth to face the Minotaur. In STAR WARS it's Luke and company being sucked into the Death Star where they will rescue Princess Leia. Sometimes it's just the hero going into his/her own dream world to confront fears and overcome them.

### **8.) The hero endures the supreme ORDEAL.**

This is the moment at which the hero touches bottom. He/she faces the possibility of death, brought to the brink in a fight with a mythical beast. For us, the audience standing outside the cave waiting for the victor to emerge, it's a black moment. In STAR WARS, it's the harrowing moment in the bowels of the Death Star, where Luke, Leia and company are trapped in the giant trash-masher. Luke is pulled under by the tentacled monster that lives in the sewage and is held down so long that the audience begins to wonder if he's dead. IN E.T., THE EXTRATERRESTRIAL, E. T. momentarily appears to die on the operating table.

This is a critical moment in any story, an ordeal in which the hero appears to die and be born again. It's a major source of the magic of the hero myth. What happens is that the audience has been led to identify with the hero. We are encouraged to experience the brink-of-death feeling with the hero. We are temporarily depressed, and then we are revived by the hero's return from death.

This is the magic of any well-designed amusement park thrill ride. Space Mountain or the Great Whiteknuckler make the passengers feel like they're going to die, and there's a great thrill that comes with surviving a moment like that. This is also the trick of rites of passage and rites of initiation into fraternities and secret societies. The initiate is forced to taste death and experience resurrection. You're never more alive than when you think you're going to die.

### **9.) The hero seizes the sword. (SEIZING THE SWORD, REWARD)**

Having survived death, beaten the dragon, slain the Minotaur, her hero now takes possession of the treasure he's come seeking. Sometimes it's a special weapon like a magic sword or it may be a token like the Grail or some elixir which can heal the wounded land.

The hero may settle a conflict with his father or with his shadowy nemesis. In RETURN OF THE JEDI, Luke is reconciled with both, as he discovers that the dying Darth Vader is his father, and not such a bad guy after all.

The hero may also be reconciled with a woman. Often she is the treasure he's come to win or rescue, and there is often a love scene or sacred marriage at this point. Women in these stories (or men if the hero is female) tend to be shape-shifters. They appear to change in form or age, reflecting the confusing and constantly changing aspects of the opposite sex as seen from the hero's point of view. The hero's supreme ordeal may grant him a better understanding of women, leading to a reconciliation with the opposite sex.

### **10.) THE ROAD BACK.**

The hero's not out of the woods yet. Some of the best chase scenes come at this point, as the hero is pursued by the vengeful forces from whom he has stolen the elixir or the treasure.. This is the chase as Luke and friends are escaping from the Death Star, with Princess Leia and the plans that will bring down Darth Vader.

If the hero has not yet managed to reconcile with his father or the gods, they may come raging after him at this point. This is the moonlight bicycle flight of Elliott and E. T. as they escape from "Keys" (Peter Coyote), a force representing governmental authority. By the end of the movie Keys and Elliott have been reconciled and it even looks like Keys will end up as Elliott's step-father.

### **11.) RESURRECTION.**

The hero emerges from the special world, transformed by his/her experience. There is often a replay here of the mock death-and-rebirth of Stage 8, as the hero once again faces death and survives. The Star Wars movies play with this theme constantly – all three of the films to date feature a final battle scene in which Luke is almost killed, appears to be dead for a moment, and then miraculously survives. He is transformed into a new being by his experience.

### **12.) RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR**

The hero comes back to the ordinary world, but the adventure would be meaningless unless he/she brought back the elixir, treasure, or some lesson from the special world. Sometimes it's just knowledge or experience, but unless he comes back with the elixir or some boon to mankind, he's doomed to repeat the adventure until he does. Many comedies use this ending, as

a foolish character refuses to learn his lesson and embarks on the same folly that got him in trouble in the first place.

Sometimes the boon is treasure won on the quest, or love, or just the knowledge that the special world exists and can be survived. Sometimes it's just coming home with a good story to tell.

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The hero's journey, once more: The hero is introduced in his ORDINARY WORLD where he receives the CALL TO ADVENTURE. He is RELUCTANT at first to CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD where he eventually encounters TESTS, ALLIES and ENEMIES. He reaches the INNERMOST CAVE where he endures the SUPREME ORDEAL. He SEIZES THE SWORD or the treasure and is pursued on the ROAD BACK to his world. He is RESURRECTED and transformed by his experience. He RETURNS to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or ELIXIR to benefit his world.

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As with any formula, there are pitfalls to be avoided. Following the guidelines of myth too rigidly can lead to a stiff, unnatural structure, and there is the danger of being too obvious. The hero myth is a skeleton that should be masked with the details of the individual story, and the structure should not call attention to itself. The order of the hero's stages as given here is only one of many variations – the stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically re-shuffled without losing any of their power.

The values of the myth are what's important. The images of the basic version – young heroes seeking magic swords from old wizards, fighting evil dragons in deep caves, etc. – are just symbols and can be changed infinitely to suit the story at hand.

The myth is easily translated to contemporary dramas, comedies, romances, or action-adventures by substituting modern equivalents for the symbolic figures and props of the hero story. The Wise Old Man may be a real shaman or wizard, but he can also be any kind of mentor or teacher, doctor or therapist, crusty but benign boss, tough but fair top sergeant, parent, grandfather, etc. Modern heroes may not be going into caves and labyrinths to fight their mythical beasts, but they do enter and innermost cave by going into space, to the bottom of the sea, into their own minds, or into the depths of a modern city.

The myth can be used to tell the simplest comic book story or the most sophisticated drama. It grows and matures as new experiments are tried within its basic framework. Changing the sex and ages of the basic characters only makes it more interesting and allows for ever more complex webs of understanding to be spun among them. The essential characters can be combined or divided into several figures to show different aspects of the same idea. The myth is infinitely flexible, capable of endless variation without sacrificing any of its magic, and it will outlive us all.