

Thor and Loki

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About six months ago there was a very interesting article in the UU World, the magazine the UUA publishes a few times a year. The cover story had to do with superheroes. The author of the article Doug Muder, talks about how comic book superheroes have changed over the years. In his day heroes like Batman, Spiderman, and Superman were individualists who had been orphaned or broken with their past. With the advent of the X-Men in the late seventies, Muder notes, heroes began looking to mentors for help and assistance. He argues that a similar shift occurred between generations of Unitarian Universalists as well. While I am not particularly impressed with his arm-chair speculation on theological trends within our faith, I think he is on to something with his observations on superheroes.

Science fiction, ever since the early days of HG Wells, has always been a form of social commentary. Superheroes are stylized and symbolic representations of ourselves. In many cases this is merely wish fulfillment—who wouldn't want to fly like Superman, or get back

at criminals like Batman? But their stories also reveal something about who we are, a deeper layer of humanity. This is the function of myths—not to relate a literal story that occurred within history, but a “true” story that has an element of humanity, of struggle, of which of our values we hold the highest. While one might normally think of classic myths, such as the Greeks or the Norse gods, modern films can sometimes play this role as well. This is particularly the case when they are examining the hero’s journey.

Psychology has long understood that the stories we tell ourselves over and over are the stories we care about the most. The story goes that before his big breakthrough, Sigmund Freud attended a production of “Oedipus the King.” Ever the student of human behavior, Freud watched his fellow audience members. He saw how rapt and enthralled they were in the classic drama that was unfolding in front of them. And then it occurred to him, “They have been here before.” This was not unfamiliar territory. Something in that story of Oedipus touched a deep part of the soul that was moving people. Freud’s student Carl Jung would pioneer work in world myths and archetypes like the journey of the hero.

According to Joseph Campbell, there are many stages and phases of a hero’s journey. I will not relate all of them to you; he gets pretty elaborate with all of the steps in a hero cycle. Basically it starts off with the hero as a regular person living life like you or me. Then something

happens to disrupt that mundane reality, and this person is sent off to find something or confront someone in order to repair their broken world. Often there is a literal physical journey to undertake; a quest in classic Arthurian legend. The hero confronts many obstacles and makes friends along the way. He or she does battle with the final enemy or recaptures that which has been lost to them. Victorious, the hero begins to return to their original home. However when they get there, they discover that they themselves have been transformed. They are not the same as when they left; they may have some magical power to help others or they may just have some kind of insight into themselves. At any rate, the cycle of the hero's journey is complete.

Campbell was a student of world mythology, and he found this template to be applicable in many cultures throughout time. You see it in Moses and the Old Testament, Jesus in the New Testament, the Epic of Gilgamesh in Babylonian myth, Harry Potter in JK Rowling's books, Luke Skywalker in Star Wars, Muhammad's ascension into heaven, Bilbo and Frodo Baggins in the Lord of the Rings, Osiris in Egyptian mythology, the life of the Buddha, Jason and Argonauts, Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Odysseus in the Odyssey, Dante in the Divine Comedy, and Allie Sheedy in Adventures in Babysitting. The latter by the way is one of the most complete hero journeys with a female hero.

The power these stories have is still able to be felt. In the 1940s comics were thought to be corrupting of youth and lead to delinquency;

that is power. Superheroes are able to do what we cannot. In their hero's journey they have been exposed to gamma rays, were born with a mutation that manifests in adolescence, have had special and exotic training, use futuristic technology, or are simply aliens. However they come about it, they have powers that ordinary people do not possess. They choose to use these powers to fight evil, usually in the form of equally powerful villains. Heroes have freedom and power we wish, but use it in a manner we hope powerful people would. It is no wonder that the movies based on these stories are so popular that they have generated at least one sequel: X-Men, Fantastic Four, Batman, Iron Man, Spiderman, and coming soon to a theater near you in a couple of months: Captain America, Green Lantern, and another X-Men.

Today, though, I want to spend a bit of time talking about Thor—the most recent addition to this cavalcade of movies based on superheroes that we seem to get each summer. Of course the comic itself is based on exactly what we have been discussing: myths, specifically the myths of the Germans and Scandinavians. Thor, of course is the Norse God of Thunder, his father is Odin, the king of the Gods, and his brother is Loki. The Jungians have much to say about Loki. He is considered the paragon, the ultimate archetype, of the trickster—someone who is not evil exactly but uses their intelligence and power to manipulate others either for gain or amusement. The Dalai

Lama would say that Loki is wisdom, intelligence, and reason that are not balanced by compassion, love, and empathy.

In the story, Thor is strength and power personified. He is young and arrogant; assuming he can solve any and all problems with his hammer. So when some people start some trouble in another realm Thor sets out to beat them up; a very hotheaded and immature response. In the process he provokes a war, and his father is extremely upset with him. He strips Thor of his power and banishes him to Earth. Thor can regain his power and his hammer only when he is worthy to do so.

Interestingly instead of the hero being a normal person who ascends to the heavens or who meets God, here we have a God descending down to be among the humans. Either way it is equally transformative I suppose. I won't give everything away for you, but as one might guess, our hero Thor finds love during his journey—a very common element to the hero's quest. It is when he is willing to sacrifice himself for his friends and his love that he finally becomes worthy. His power and his hammer are restored, and he is triumphant. But when he returns to Asgard, the home of the Gods, Thor is humble, he is vulnerable, he is sorry and remorseful of his previous behavior. He even grieves.

This is an element that I see as a generational twist to the hero's journey among the comicbook myths—that heroes feel not necessarily

physical pain as much as they do emotional pain. You see this in the Spiderman and the X-Men trilogies too: that the so called super heroes can feel loss, grief, heartbreak, sacrifice their personal pleasure for the sake of others and not always face such realities with a stoic stiff upper lip. They are as emotionally vulnerable just as the rest of us are.

One of my favorite examples of that is the song Scott sang a while ago. Sung from the perspective of Superman, the most invulnerable hero of them all, he describes what it is like to be the only one of your kind on a planet by yourself. That he can never go home to a place he has never seen. That having these abilities is lonely and isolating—no one can ever understand what it is like to be like him. Indeed Superman is thought to be a metaphor for the Jewish diaspora in America. Both his creators, Siegal and Schuster, were high school Jewish kids in Cleveland Ohio when they first wrote and drew Superman. His planet is destroyed, just like the Temple in Israel, and so Superman blends in with middle America in Kansas to hide his true identity. It is a very inauthentic existence.

These days we like our superheroes to be emotionally vulnerable. In Spiderman 2 Peter Parker decides that life is too complicated being Spiderman, between his school, his job, his relationship, saving the city is just too much. So he gives it up for a while. One day he visits his Aunt Mae because she is moving out of her house. Peter sees the kid across the street helping her pack. Mae says that Henry wants to be

Spiderman when he grows up. Peter is shocked as asks why. Aunt Mae's response is the best monologue in all three movies:

“He knows a hero when he sees one. Too few characters out there, flying around like that, saving old girls like me. And Lord knows, kids like Henry need a hero. Courageous, self-sacrificing people. Setting examples for all of us. Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them how to hold on a second longer. I believe there's a hero in all of us, that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride, even though sometimes we have to be steady, and give up the thing we want the most. Even our dreams.”

Joseph Campbell, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung could not have said it better. Peter Parker returns to being Spiderman immediately after hearing his Aunt Mae's speech.

When one of his students asked him what one must do to be a true knight of the Way, which in Chinese would be the Tao, Confucius tells him that one must use his power with scruples and be loyal to his prince. He goes on to add that honesty, standing by one's word, is also a characteristic of such a knight of the Tao. In Confucianism, one looks for moral heroes in history or in one's current time, you study their actions, decisions, and principles. You learn to value what they value,

and then live your life based on their example. Thus you are ever searching for heroes to pattern yourself after. In case you think this is an exercise in history, almost all of the people the Confucians set up as definitive moral examples: Yao, Shun, the Duke of Chou, the Yellow Emperor, almost surely are myths—they were never actual historical people. The point was never did they exist or not. The point for the Confucian is do you live your life according to their moral example or not? Chinese religion tends to be very pragmatic and doesn't usually get into the speculative or metaphysical realms much. Confucians patterned themselves after fictional heroes not because they cared about history, but because those stories, their lives, their words and teachings transformed them. It gave them meaning and purpose to be inspired by the lives of others.

Confucius had a positive view of human nature. He believed that there was a hero in all of us that, given the proper cultivation, we could bring forth in our everyday lives. Perhaps it is possible to be moved so deeply by a myth that one might do well to emulate them. I don't suggest tying a towel around your neck and jumping off a roof in an attempt to fly or shoot webs. But one of the key characteristics of heroes is that they are willing to sacrifice their comfort, their power, and in some cases even their lives for another person if it makes the world a better place. Indeed on Memorial Day we need not even turn to comicbooks and world mythology for such inspiration. History itself

shows that there have been brave men and women, rightfully called heroes, who were willing to die so that their friends, the people they cared about, might live and thrive and enjoy a society and culture such as ours. Almost every other day of the year it seems like we complain about this or that going on in our country. The this or the that varies depending on which political party you have your affiliation. But on Memorial Day it is fitting and proper to remember those who, in the words of Lincoln, gave the last full measure of their devotion to our nation and our way of life. Let us remember them, be inspired by their self-less example, and most of all be grateful for the gift of life they gave up for our sake.

Let us also seek to be heroes ourselves; to allow that part of us that is strong, compassionate, and noble to come out. We know now that true heroes are vulnerable just as we are. They feel as we do, and hurt as we do. Therefore they are not all that different from us in the ways that truly matter. The greatest super powers of all are not the ability to fly, or shoot energy beams, or to have super strength or speed. They are the ability to love, to forgive when wronged, to live a life dedicated to helping others, to find meaning in the world, to live a life that matters not only to you but to all the people whose life yours touches.

All of that takes an inner strength that is difficult to match. For the more we try to be heroic the more likely it is that we will set out upon

our own hero's journey. While transformation is rarely fun and never easy, it can be the most important thing you ever do.

May we have the courage to set our feet upon the path of the hero's long journey. May we find that peace of heart, mind, and soul that we all are looking for. And may we come back to share our boon with all whom we meet. For in the end we are remembered not by our superpowers but by our ability to love. So may it be, Amen.