

The Hero's Journey

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*When the first Superman movie came out I was frequently asked,
"What is a hero?" My answer was that a hero is someone
who commits a courageous action without considering the consequences.*

*Now my definition is completely different.
I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength
to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.*
— Christopher Reeve (1952 — 2004)

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.
— F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 — 1940)

Call to Worship Dot Everhart

The cover art is of an ancient character, Gilgamesh — the hero of "The Epic of Gilgamesh." This poem was written by a scholar who lived about 4500 years ago in the land now known as Iraq — then called Uruk.

On 12 clay tablets, this "book" tells the story of the king who was partially human and partially divine. The poem shares many details of daily life at that time. In 2005, a German-led archeological expedition



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discovered what is believed to be the entire city of Uruk, including the tomb of Gilgamesh, who has become sort of an archetype of the hero — well, at least the male hero.

My feminist analysis is that until recently, the notion of having heroes was mostly “a guy thing.” I grew up in the 1950’s when all of the heroes in cartoons and books seemed to be men — or a male mouse, in the case of Mighty Mouse-who wore capes and tights and flew through the air on their way to rescue fair damsels in distress. This was not at all the subject matter that captured my imagination or attention. Wonder Woman and Zena, the Princess Warrior, were not yet figments of anyone’s imaginations!

In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, much was written and spoken about heroes. The stories of soldiers now fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq often refer to them as modern-day heroes. Perhaps, you had a hero or two during your growing up years. Perhaps, you did not. Perhaps, you can name heroes in your life today. Perhaps you might be even be identified by others as a hero in their lives. As we worship this morning, we’ll have a chance to think more deeply about heroes and, oh yes —

I have an announcement to pass along to you. Those not putting \$50.00 or more in the offering baskets this morning will have their hands turn blue as they pass the basket on to their neighbor. (Pause) April Fool! Yes, today is April Fool’s Day. And we’ll learn a bit more about the role of the Fool as a hero. So whether you are a hero, have heroes, are the fool, or know some fools-yes, everyone here, is invited to join in the experience of worship today ... enjoying some time to reflect and to share ... and hopefully, having some fun along the way.

Naming Personal Heroes Duane Fickeisen

Whenever I think of personal heroes the strong women in my family come quickly to mind. One of them is the woman I called Grandma, though she was actually the sister of my maternal grandmother.

Dora and Thea were born in Oslo, Norway, in the late 19th Century. Their father was the keeper of the King’s horses, and an alcoholic. He treated his family badly — the details of the abuse

are not recorded. But he spent his earnings on alcohol, leaving not enough to adequately feed and care for his family. I suspect that he may have been physically, and perhaps sexually, abusive.

Dora was an expert and very skilled seamstress and managed to get herself to New York as a youth. She worked in the garment industry, saving as much of her money as possible until she could return to Oslo and bring her younger sister back with her. By that time Thea already had tuberculosis, though apparently her case was not sufficiently advanced to preclude immigration.

Both sisters came to the Pacific Northwest, where there was a growing community of Norwegian immigrants. They married other Norwegians and started families. Thea's tuberculosis worsened and she died when my mother, her oldest daughter, was six. My grandfather, a lumberjack and tinsmith, was unable to care for his two daughters, who were raised by Dora and her husband.

Dora and Andy treated their nieces as their own children and raised them with their two sons in a family of four children. My mother and aunt referred to them as "Mom" and "Dad." To me they were Grandma and Grandpa.

To my mind Dora was a hero. She would not have likely thought of herself as having done any more than any caring sibling would have done. But by hard work and dedication, by scrimping and saving, and by her courageous journey back to Norway, she rescued my grandmother. And that is part of what has made my life possible. She's one of my personal heroes and a model of compassion, strength, generosity, and endurance.

Fellow UU minister, Kathleen McTigue has written about those who give us strength and the importance of remembering them. These are her words:

*"In the struggles we choose for ourselves,
in the ways we move forward in our lives
and bring our world forward with us,*

*"It is right to remember the names of those
who gave us strength in this choice of living.
It is right to name the power of hard lives well lived.*

*"We share a history with those lives.
We belong to the same motion.*

*“They too were strengthened by what had gone before.
They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.*

“Those who lived before us,
who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us,
have not melted into the dust, and have not disappeared.

*“They are with us still.
The lives they lived hold us steady.*

“Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.
Their courage and love evoke our own.
We, the living, carry them with us:
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

*“We take them with us,
and with them choose the deeper path of living.”*

Our lives have often been touched by mentors, teachers, and heroes — exemplars that we strive to emulate, sometimes by conscious choice and sometimes without even being aware that they are our guides.

Take a few moments to call to mind one or more personal heroes in your life. If you’re willing to share some reflections, turn to one or two other people sitting near you and name one of your heroes and in just a few words describe the principle qualities she or he brings to your life.

You can gather those heroes — the ones who are still alive and those who have died — as a council of exemplars at any time. You can invite them to offer wisdom that arises from their experience. They live within you as archetypes and models. Perhaps you’ll gather at the river.

The Hero’s Journey Duane Fickeisen

In some ways Dora’s story parallels the classic hero’s journey. She left home, traveled a long way, encountered challenges and met them creatively, and returned home with new wisdom.

The late Joseph Campbell was a student of mythology and described the hero’s journey from ancient myths. The typical pattern

starts with the innocent world of childhood and a call to adventure, which is resisted or refused, but cannot be put off indefinitely. So the protagonist sets off on a journey, leaving home — and parents, comfort, the familiar, support systems — behind. A separation takes place. The journey involves crossing a threshold, often a metaphoric entry into the underworld.

In the second phase the traveler undergoes an initiation passage. Often there are multiple challenges to be overcome. These may involve physical hardship, struggle, even battle. There are dragons to slay. The traveler reaches rock bottom, a nadir, the depths of despair and thus recognizes her or his vulnerability, inability to always be in control, and emerges with a sense of humility.

At the nadir the Goddess appears, a strong female energy that the initiate embraces as a part of the fullness of being a whole person, with both masculine and feminine psychological qualities. Then the father figure appears and reconciliation takes place with the father recognizing the son's power and presence. The initiation phase is completed by the receipt of a great gift — the "ultimate boon."

It's time to return, but the traveler resists crossing back over the threshold. His devotion to adventure holds him. But ultimately he does return, though now as the master of both worlds with new wisdom. While he has come home and is welcomed by those who have been awaiting him, he is a different person and in some ways that means he can't fully return — at least not to the pre-journey ways of being.

Think about Homer or Gilgamesh.

Now this story is perhaps more typical of a man's experience than a woman's, and it has certainly been adapted by some in the men's movement as a basis for initiation into manhood. There are parallels in tribal initiation rites and the vision quest by which adolescent boys are tested and welcomed into manhood.

Is there a parallel process by which women seek meaning and wisdom as they move from the shelter of home into the wider world? Their stories may be less familiar to us and certainly many of us have grown up with the expectation that men will become hunters and warriors, going forth on adventure, and returning as masters of the world while women will stay at home to care for

the hearth and for children. And yet women too must separate from home and parents and venture out into the world. Both women and men face challenges and must be creative problem solvers, both women and men become more fully actualized by embracing both their masculine and feminine psychological aspects, and both women and men are transformed by the experience of life.

Dora — Grandma — is an example of a homemaker whose life was transformed by a heroic journey. Surely we can think of other women and men who have experienced transformation as a journey.

I want to give you the opportunity to reflect on the hero's journey. Does the model of separation, journey, initiation, reconciliation, and return fit your experience? Is there another model that better describes your personal experience? Turn again to your nearest neighbors and form small groups — 3 or 4 — to talk about it for a few minutes.

A few comments were taken from the congregation.

The Fool as Hero
Duane Fickeisen

Well, it *is* April 1st, April Fools Day. It is the day when we celebrate the Fool, and for good cause, as the Fool has much to offer to us. I couldn't let it go by without talking about the Fool as a hero.

The archetypal Fool breaks the rules, points to absurdities, deflates the King's ego, and creates an outlet for the forbidden. While the function of the King is to create order, that necessarily excludes some powerful forces that would tend toward chaos. Without an outlet, the pressure builds and at some point explodes into disruption. The Fool, by providing a safe channel for the forces of chaos, helps maintain order and wholeness.

The part of ourselves that is the Fool is motivated by curiosity and the desire to experiment with life. It is outrageous, manifesting the Trickster. The Fool is bawdy, bizarre, and deliciously inappropriate, of course as it breaks the rules of social convention.

If the Fool is repressed and not allowed out to play, it goes underground and pops up in dysfunctional ways. Many of the seven deadly sins are the result of shadow Fool energy — sloth, gluttony, lust for example. Throw in lechery, drunkenness, and irresponsibility, and you have a fair picture of the Fool at his or her worst.

When the Fool encounters Eros and finds love, and when he or she makes commitments to relationships, to ideas and values, and to God — to a positive vision — the Fool is transformed into the Holy Fool, the Wise Fool, the heroic Fool, who fully experiences joy in life and an ecstatic union between the self and the cosmos.

Humor is difficult, of course. When it is degrading of others it reflects the shadow Fool, but when it points us toward “the common bond of our fallible humanity” as Carol Pearson writes, it invites us to enjoy life despite the struggles, to celebrate life and to pray ‘thanks’ for the fullness of experience.

One more opportunity for reflection. How is the Fool active in your life? Do you have a role model who manifests the Holy Fool?

Whenever I thumb through the hymnal and come across the next hymn I have to chuckle at the title line — O What a Piece of Work Are We! It was written in 1958, which I would guess is long before we started to refer to someone else as a ‘piece of work’ in a derogatory sense. The Holy Fool knows that each of us is a ‘piece of work’ with bizarre flaws and both annoying and endearing foibles.

Let’s sing it.