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Teachers, Students, and the Hero's Journey

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Teachers, Students, and the Hero's Journey

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Jack Dylan

"The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek." -- Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist who studied myths from all over the world, created the famous [Hero's Journey](#), a monomyth that explains how each individual goes through continuous cycles of change and transformation. Nothing could be more accurate than when we apply this monomyth to educators, students, and schools, because the teaching and learning process and emotional connection are real-life cycles of continual challenges, births of new ideas, successes, and transformations.

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Steps Along the Path

As I reflect upon this past school year and the Hero Journeys that I observed within my own life and those teachers I've worked beside, I return to a strong teaching practice that also recognizes the hero's thousand faces: modeling. I'm learning that modeling our own Hero's Journey for our students provides a powerful teaching and life tool. It offers opportunities for reflection, problem solving, hindsight, foresight, and cognitive flexibility for sitting beside students whose struggles, celebrations, and identities change and develop unceasingly. By being aware and alive on our educational journey, we can begin to model empathy and understanding for one another. We can embrace all that we do, experiencing it as a heroic adventure with no predictable outcomes. Each moment, hour, day, week, and month, we enter into a cycle and travel toward change, challenges, and new beginnings.

Status Quo

We begin with an embrace of our ordinary existence. Life feels neutral here. As teachers, we return to a classroom with students who will be learning beside us for the next several months. We anticipate and encounter new student lists, schedules, back-to-school nights, upcoming assessments, grade-level and district meetings, and the list goes on. We're aware of our personal lives and the relationships and experiences that coexist with our professional responsibilities.

Call to Adventure

We meet our new students and begin to see novel behaviors, encounter unfamiliar and familiar words, and observe the mini-worlds that each student carries into our classrooms. We notice apathy, excitement, negativity, enthusiasm, and an array of cultures and belief systems. Questions ensue:

- How can I meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of so many students?
- Where do I begin?
- What were the most significant challenges in years past, and how will those help me now?

Assistance

We realize that we'll need the help of someone who is possibly more experienced, or who has shared similar challenges with this struggle before us. In this part of the journey, we begin to seek the resources we'll need to meet the challenges. Maybe we turn to the person and share our frustrations, hopes, and ideas. Maybe we reach out to parents in a way that emphasizes collaboration with a gentle underlying request: "I need your input!" We ask ourselves:

- What are the realistic goals for this child or adolescent?
- How can I begin to create a safe environment and a connection with this individual so that mistakes and struggles are embraced?
- How can I begin to share and model gathering my problem-solving resources so that my students feel and see my struggles and calls for assistance?

Departure

It's time to step outside of our comfort zone and try new ways of being with the situation or individual that has stimulated change and challenge. We cross the threshold of sameness by listening to learn rather than listening to respond. We have left the ordinary world.

Trials and Hard Work

We now begin to ask the difficult questions that might propel a few more deep dives into reflection and observation, while noticing how our own triggers can escalate the impending challenge or perceived crisis. These questions are for students and teachers:

- What do I need?
- What can my class do to assist me?
- What can my teachers do to assist me?
- How do I handle this negative situation?
- Who are my heroes? What character traits do I admire in these individuals?

- How will I know when I'm on the right track?
- What are three positive emotions that I often feel? What are three negative emotions?
- What are my strengths?
- What are two or three challenges or obstacles that prevent me from reaching these small or large goals?

Approach and Crisis

This is where we approach our worst fear. We intuit that a change in relationship, instruction, dialogue, or physical movement is necessary. We begin to understand that the status quo can no longer be sustained. We enter into a type of crisis and intense difficulty. We understand that crises induce movement and change. On the other side of the crisis coin is opportunity, which lets us learn and grow from our darkest hours. We face our vulnerabilities, triggers, worn-out belief systems, and long-held private logic. During times of high stress, it becomes critical for us to provide emotional first aid to one another. Once we demonstrate that we can be with one another at our worst, we begin to build trust.

Treasures

We claim our treasures by acquiring a new perspective and a personal power that redefines our experiences and relationships. Rather than becoming caught up in an escalating conflict or weighed down by guilt and shame, we learn the skills that help us drain off hostility and frustration, and we look at our situation through a new lens.

Resolution

We begin seeing difficult behaviors as opportunities to teach young people, others, and ourselves how to manage conflict and solve problems. We see our role as teacher expanding to include our ability to restore emotional equilibrium in our classrooms and schools.

Status Quo

We have upgraded to a new level. We have embraced a perspective of growth and have learned, connected, and reshaped who we are constantly becoming!

A Template for Growth

Below is Matthew Winkler's TED-Ed video that teaches students about the Hero's Journey and how our lives, as well as the movies and books that we enjoy, mirror and model the stages of growth, crisis, and opportunity.

"If kids come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our jobs easier. If they do not come to us from strong healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important." -- Barbara Colorose