

Chapter 2: Growth, Obstacles, and Grit

"The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."

This quotation comes from the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, in his "Meditations." In just a few short sentences, Aurelius perfectly captures the counterintuitive nature of real growth. Growth is impossible without obstacles; strength is impossible without resistance. While this reality may seem common enough, his final sentence gets to the heart of the contradiction at play: obstacles are doorways in disguise.

On the other hand, the presence of obstacles does not necessarily or reliably indicate the "right" path. We must understand Aurelius's conclusion correctly. He claims only that the obstacles on our path become the tools for our success. He does not claim that the presence or absence of obstacles ought to be part of the initial selection of the path. Indeed, to misunderstand his statement in this way equates to seeking or creating obstacles as a means to justify to ourselves the correctness of our choice.

This complicated reality appears in every humanistic genre from every time period. Humans have long understood that we must pass through challenges in order to achieve our full potential. This theme is omnipresent in the regular recurring typology of a hero's journey, from classical literature to popular movies. In fact, it is a major theme in the origin stories of humanity; it was only through transgression and turmoil that Adam and Eve gained the capacity to initiate humanity.

Let's begin by understanding the journey of a typical hero.



Video Transcript

What do Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen, and Frodo all have in common with the heroes of ancient myths? What if I told you they are all variants of the same hero? Do you believe that?

Joseph Campbell did. He studied myths from all over the world and published a book called, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," retelling dozens of stories and explaining how each represents the mono-myth or hero's journey.

So what is the hero's journey? Think of it as a cycle. The journey begins and ends in the hero's ordinary world, but the quest passes through an unfamiliar, special world. Along the way there are some key events. Think about your favorite book or movie. Does it follow this pattern?

Status quo—That's where we start.

One o'clock: Call to adventure. The hero receives a mysterious message, an invitation, a challenge.

Two o'clock: Assistance. The hero needs some help, probably from someone older, wiser.

Three o'clock: Departure. The hero crosses the threshold from his normal safe home and enters the special world and adventure. We're not in Kansas anymore.

Four o'clock: Trials. Being a hero is hard work; our hero solves a riddle, slays a monster, escapes from a trap.

Five o'clock: Approach. It's time to face the biggest ordeal, the hero's worst fear.

Six o'clock: Crisis. This is the hero's darkest hour. He faces death and possibly even dies, only to be reborn.

Seven o'clock: Treasure. As a result, the hero claims some treasure, a special recognition, or power.

Eight o'clock: Result. This can vary between stories—do the monsters bow down before the hero or chase him as he flees from the special world?

Nine o'clock: Return. After all that adventure, the hero returns to his ordinary world.

Ten o'clock: New Life. This quest has changed the hero. He has outgrown his old life.

Eleven o'clock: Resolution. All the tangled plot lines get straightened out.

Twelve o'clock: Status Quo but upgraded to a new level; nothing is quite the same once you're a hero.

Many popular books and movies follow this ancient formula pretty closely but let's see how well the Hunger Games fits the hero's journey template. When does Katniss Everdeen hear a call to adventure that gets the story moving? When her sister's name is called from the lottery. How about assistance? Is anyone going to help her on her adventure? Haymitch. What about departure? Does she leave her ordinary world? She gets on a train to the capital.

Okay, so you get the idea. What do you have in common with Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen and Frodo

Want to explore more?

There are mountains of resources that discuss how growth comes as a result of facing and overcoming obstacles. Here are a few.

- [Resilience: How to Emerge from your Tragedies Stronger | Sydney Cummings](#)
- [Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset](#)

Literature

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, [Ethics](#)
- Stephen Covey, [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)
- Donald Miller, [Hero on a Mission](#)
- Marla Popova and Claudia Bedrick (eds.), [The Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader](#)

Poetry

- David Whyte, [Just Beyond Yourself](#)

Visual Art

- Michelangelo Buonarroti, [The Creation of Adam](#)

Reflection Questions

1. Why does Joseph Campbell call his book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces"?
2. What are the stages of the hero's journey?
3. What stories, myths, books, or movies do you know that follow this same sequence of events?
4. When can you identify times, seasons, or people that coincide with your own hero's journey?

The Garden of Eden

"Paradise Lost" by John Milton

"Invictus" by William Ernest Henley

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

"Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee," Rembrandt van Rijn

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