

The Hero's Journey with the Brain in Mind

"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 everyone goes through continuous cycles of change and transformation. Nothing could be more accurate than when we apply this monomyth to educators, parents, families, students, schools, and communities because the teaching and learning process and emotional connections are real-life cycles of continual challenges, births of new ideas, practiced thoughts, defeats, successes, and continual transformations.

Hero Journeys are passages and life movements through thousands of thresholds in all moments of our lives. These journeys provide contrast from our lived experiences of adversity, trauma, resiliency, and overall brain and body development. Our brains and bodies work collectively mitigating stressors and regulating body and brain systems through these journeys of exploration and transformation. We journey into and inside our fears, anxieties, restlessness, and ordinary moments in life. We are feeling and sensing creatures who navigate our worlds through the sensations and emotions that drive our thoughts, belief systems, and perceptions. Our brains and bodies are complex organs and systems that work to integrate and organize our experiences in all moments. We may have day long, weeklong, month long and years long hero journeys. They are a part of our evolution and provide the stories of our lived experiences.

Through this pandemic, each of us are moving through our hero journeys and they can feel painful, unfamiliar, unpredictable, and stressful! At the end of each journey we may also experience ease, relief, contentment, and a bit of joy. Our children and youth are also cycling through their hero journeys, navigating these moments of chronic unpredictability and possible isolation through body and brain activation as they observe the adults around them.

When we experience the activation of a rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, stinging tears, or a lump in our throats, these are not conscious activations, but through life experiences and journeys, our bodies and brains function to bring awareness and protect us in moments of heightened and acute periods of stress or dysregulation. The fight /flight pathways elevate our heart rates, respiration, and blood pressure so that we can run or fight off the impending or perceived dangers. The emotional centers of the brain are also activated, and the almond shaped clusters of neurons called the amygdala, sound the alarm becoming vigilant as they sense threat, and signal danger. Brains and bodies provide information through the sensory, emotional, and cognitive pathways that are in a constant state of communication allowing us to know how we are weathering these diverse experiences in all moments.

For many adults and youth, there is little to no awareness or understanding of how our bodies and brains develop to protect us. Our brains and bodies are prepared to meet the short term and acute dangers, but when these stress response systems are chronically activated, this can be damaging to our brain tissue distorting how we think and perceive our experiences while creating heightened emotional states and a rapid reactivity and sensitivity inside our bodies. The sound of a door slamming, dripping water, a dog barking, a gray sweatshirt, or shouting

customers, in the present moment, can initiate our fight/ flight or immobilization pathways to activate even when there is no eminent danger or threat in the present moment. Our buried shame, anxiety or perceived and past fears rise to the occasion and we begin to spiral into our survival brain states once again. Brains predict experiences based on past experiences as they are historical organs keeping records of lives.

For generations, we have seen depression or anxiety as an illness, an unnecessary deviation from normal functioning. It has become an idea that has stuck with millions of people and makes sense because depression causes suffering and even death. But what if we've got it all wrong? What if depression is not an abnormality at all, but an important part of our biological defense system? There is burgeoning research across the specialty sciences questioning our current definitions of depression. Biological anthropologists have argued that depression could be an adaptive response to adversity and not a mental disorder or emotional disturbance. When we think of depression or anxiety as senseless and unnecessary suffering, we stigmatize people and rob them of hope and resiliency. We disrespect their journey of human development. But when we begin to understand that mental and emotional challenges at least initially, happen for critical and important reasons, we begin to lessen and lift the perceived and embodied shame of persons experiencing chronic anxiety and depression. People carrying emotional pain are courageous survivors, not damaged people. When we understand how our neuroanatomy and body systems affect our emotional and mental states, we feel empowered and relieved. Our sensory and emotional journeys feel a bit more doable and promising.

In the following sections, I am going to describe "The Hero's Journey" through a brain aligned lens that correlates our emotional maps to the adaptive, mitigating, and multiple ways our complex brains and bodies act on information coming from our external environments and internal sensations from our bodies. Our brains are built from bottom to top (brainstem to cortex) and from the inside out. Healthy brain architecture requires an integration and organization of incoming stimuli so that we can manage the sights, sounds, and sensory information entering our brains and bodies. But, when there is early chronic unpredictability in the developing years that feels chaotic, originating from our external world, the sensory information systems can be overwhelmed. For example, when there are bright lights, shouting people and horns honking, and we are experiencing these stimuli all at once, our nervous systems are activated, and we prepare to protect and defend. This is an unconscious response that helps us to run from the perceived dangers or fight them off. If we are unable to fight or run from threatening experiences, our brains and bodies activate another nervous system response which is one of shut down and immobilization. In this response our brains and bodies conserve energy to simply stay alive as we dissociate and shut down. This ancient nervous system pathway is the oldest pathway and is found in reptiles and other mammals. Likened to a giant tortoise who retreats into his shell when experiencing a dangerous environment. There is no amount of yelling at the tortoise or shaking the shell that will bring the tortoise out to explore. The reptile is in a protective state readying for the danger. For many children, youth and adults, our nervous systems stay activated long after the noises, bright lights, and sensory overload has ended.

We begin the Hero's Journey in our ordinary worlds. In every experience, our brains and bodies adjust, change, and adapt to our environments. These changes are called neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is a superpower of the human being. Neuroplasticity is defined in this way; "Every experience we encounter, changes our brains functionally and structurally affecting our thoughts, feelings, and sensations." We can cultivate intentional neuroplasticity, where we create new routines or habits of thoughts or we observe and acquiesce to experiences around us, (default neuroplasticity) but nonetheless our brains are changing in all moments. The Hero's Journey offers a reframing of our experiences as we share the stories of challenges, hope, and renewal in all moments of our lives.

Hero's Journey

Status Quo-

We begin with the acknowledgement of our ordinary existence. Life feels neutral, and we may be functioning from blended brain and body states of calm cortical functioning and growing irritation or agitation from limbic/ amygdala brain regions where our emotions feel heightened; yet we are still processing information, experiences, and acting upon our present moments. In this state, our restlessness or discontent may be slightly felt, but we continue to move through life with automaticity and robotic like living. We are not questioning much about the experiences we are embracing in this initial part of the journey. We're aware of our personal lives and the relationships and experiences that coexist with our professional responsibilities. *For many of us, this was the space we embraced before the pandemic in the winter of 2020.*

Call to Adventure-

As we begin our Hero's Journey, it is in this initial stage that there is felt yearning, challenges, and unfamiliar territory with unpredictable outcomes that call out to us with velocity. Doors feel to be opening and we may feel unprepared to venture into the unknown, but we feel called to explore, to wonder, and be curious among the chaos that feels to be generating in our lives. There is a shift in body and brain states where our emotional and sensory brains are activated and we become hypervigilant or we may begin to feel stuck or frozen with anxiety-immobilized-as our nervous systems are switching pathways and we may be feeling a loss of control over our situations and experiences. We are noticing that the incoming information feels to be arriving too fast and too soon! It feels to be too much stimulation. There is an overwhelming felt sense in our bellies, chests and other body and brain areas that begins holding the stimuli pouring in from unprecedented change. Questions and doubts begin to arise with an accompanied intensity.

What is different?

What should I do?

What can I do?

Is this dangerous?

Is this safe?

What is wrong with me?

How can I get through this?

Where is this fear coming from?

Why am I shaking?

Where is all my energy? I feel cold, numb and cannot move.

I am confused and wearing out too soon.

What is going to happen?

How can I be sure of anything?

Who can I call?

Who is there for me?

Can I trust them?

When will this be over?

Assistance-

We realize that we'll need the help of someone or something who is possibly more experienced, or who has shared similar challenges with these struggles before us. In this part of the journey, we begin to seek the resources and supports that feel calming and protective as we meet the challenges before us. Who or what are the emotional buffers and supports in our lives that can co-regulate and help us to drain off some of the negative emotion that feels overwhelming as we meet the challenges? Co-regulation in our brains and bodies enables relational contagion. Relational contagion allows a calm nervous system to calm another nervous system. Repair and growth are unable to occur unless there is another to sit beside the pain, hurt and conflict. Co-regulation changes the relationship of power between two people. It is a mutual benefit when there are ruptures and the opportunities to repair circumstances and relationships. In this time of assistance, we may need the support of reframing an experience to tame that experience! Assistance from others during the journey allows us to be seen, felt, and heard as we traverse through the unknown thresholds.

Departure-

It's time to step outside of our comfort zone and try new ways of being with the situations or individuals that have stimulated change and challenge. We cross the thresholds of sameness by

paying attention to our neuroception which is our nervous system's response to felt internal and/or external stimuli. We have left the ordinary world. Our brains and bodies may be moving to fight /flight pathways where heart rate is amplified, our blood pressure rises along with our respiration. Our bodies and brains are preparing to protect and care for us through the innate biological mechanisms that are evolutionary in addressing short term stressors. We may be feeling anxious, angry, fearful, irritated, or we may be sensing a cold numb immobilized response where our words, thoughts, movements, and sensations feel stagnated, unattainable, and lost. It is in this shut down, or immobilized response that we may begin to disappear and retreat from ourselves and others.

Trials-

We now begin to feel and sense the intensity of the growing conflict and challenges as the old ways of being and doing begin to crumble away. Our brains are built for survival above everything else. When our survival feels threatened, we pay attention to everything that feels threatening, unsafe and dangerous. During this part of the journey we often resist and resent the changes and challenges unfolding as our negative emotions arise from the negative brain bias which is stimulated in survival state functioning during this part of the journey. We are now paying attention through our neuroception (our unique brain and body lens) to experiences, people, places, and things that feel unsafe, unfamiliar, or threatening to our very existence. We may 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 unintentionally escalate the impending challenge or perceived crisis.

Approach and Crisis –Our Darkest Hour

This is the hour where we approach our worst fear. We intuit that a change in relationship, environment, dialogue, circumstance, or physical movement is necessary. We begin to understand that the status quo can no longer be sustained. We enter 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 allows us to learn and grow from our darkest hours. We face our vulnerabilities, triggers, worn-out belief systems, and long-held practiced thoughts and 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 desire and explore a new kind of "trust." Our brains and bodies are emotionally over-reactive in this hour and our bodies and brains may have elevated to the sympathetic nervous system pathways where we are preparing for fight or to flee or we may have shifted to the immobilized pathways of shut down, conserving our energy just to stay alive. It is here where we unknowingly begin to die to our old self as we move into courageous intrapersonal self-preservation.

Treasures-

We claim our treasures by trying on new perspectives, challenge old thought systems, while integrating a sense of self (developing a personal power) that can *temporarily or permanently redefine* our experiences and relationships. We begin to see options and opportunities. We test those possibilities out with hesitancy and hopefulness. Rather than becoming caught up in an escalating conflict or weighed down by worn and thin blankets of guilt and shame, we begin to learn the skills that help us drain off hostility, self-deprecation, anxiety, angst and frustration, as we explore our situations through a new lens. We begin learning and understanding that feeling depressed, angry, anxious, irritated, or numb is not a human flaw, but our brain and body's reaction and protective system addressing "past" or ongoing chronic adversity and trauma that can produce life changes that serve us so very well.

Resolution and Return-

As we leave the special world and return to our ordinary worlds, we now begin to see how we can transform obstacles into doorways, which is good for us who have had a lot of obstacles; because we can now embrace lots of doorways. Those doorways can lead us home to ourselves. We begin to find a new emotional equilibrium as we die to our old self, exploring novel ways of addressing experiences and relationships while cultivating new pathways for connection. We begin to steady and lean into our core sense of self. We know that challenges, hardships, and moments of despair will always be a part of our lives, but we now begin to create a portal of "new visions," seeing beyond the challenge, conflict, and struggle as we navigate our maps of embodied experiences. We slowly begin to recognize the powerful and beneficial control of our own thoughts and perspectives, claiming intentional neuroplasticity. We begin to generate appreciation for the contrasting experiences and the journeys that have initiated the changes of emotional and mental growth in these stages of development.

Status Quo-

We have upgraded to a new level. We have embraced a perspective of growth through rupture and repair and have learned, connected, and reshaped who we are constantly becoming! Until next time...

Questions to Ponder for Educator Brain and Body State

How can we share our journeys with each other to create and strengthen relationships in our buildings and districts?

Stories help to reframe challenging experiences. "What we can reframe, we can tame."

How can we integrate the Hero's Journey into our discipline practices?

How would restorative circles change if they were story focused? (Our brains respond to patterns, analogies, and predictable experiences. We make sense of our experiences, perceptions, and worlds through stories.)

How can we share the section and hour of “assistance” in the interpersonal in-between space?

Are we able to tap into the love languages of our students and one another in this interpersonal in-between space?

How can we model the Hero’s Journey for our students through adult restorative circles sharing our hours of adventure, crisis, and resolution?

Can we begin to share the science beneath our behaviors, so we are intentionally discussing our neuroanatomy and not pathologizing anxiety, depression, emotional disturbances or behavior disorders?

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