

## **Narratives of Agency:**

### **The hero's journey as a construct for personal development through outdoor adventure.**

#### ***Abstract***

Outdoor education uses the 'outdoor' space in various ways. This chapter explores some aspects of the outdoors as a fantasy space. I will compare this way of using spaces with concepts of play and storytelling and suggest that, whilst drawing on these traditions, what has developed has unique elements that suit it to the modern western world. I will describe the way in which the meta-narratives of the hero's journey are used to create a structure in which people can explore their autonomy, power and creativity that is their agency. In particular I will discuss how the hero's journey offers a rite of passage from youth to adult at a time when this transition has become increasingly problematic. As outdoor education has provided this opportunity largely unintentionally and unsystematically, this interpretation will help identify some weaknesses in normative provision. I will conclude by identifying ways in which the hero meta-narrative might improve practice.

#### ***Introduction***

I will start with a story. It is an account of a two-day personal development course for a group of work colleagues that took place on the Pembrokeshire coast several years ago. I was one of the facilitators and I am the storyteller. It has been written so as to highlight the interpretation of the event as a heroic journey.

As the group approached the cliff top the familiar world behind them was forgotten as the drama of the sea and the coastline came into view. They dropped down into a deep valley leaving the world of fields and villages behind. After a short distance they rounded a bend to see the waves crashing on a beach backed by high cliffs. The liminal world of weather, water and tides became their world and in that world they were strangers, unaware of its dangers, unsure what to trust, not knowing which way to turn.

It's just as well they were not alone. Their company knew this world well and they knew what this world could offer. To help them take the first step the facilitators indicated a natural arch at the base of the cliff. By passing through it the group could move round to the next bay safe from the sea. They suggested that, as they passed through the arch, each person held in mind what they had come here seeking. They knew this journey had the magic to provide what each person needed to learn. They also knew that, although what each one sought might not be what each one needed, holding this in mind would offer resolve and direction. It would help each member of the company remain open to the meanings to be found in the experiences they were going to have.

As each bay opened up below the cliffs the company gained knowledge of the tides, skills in moving over the rough rocky terrain and developed ways of supporting each other as

they explored new possibilities and confronted fears. At one point the turning tide cut them off from their shelter for the night. The facilitators let them find the way which required using their new skills in earnest. Round the driftwood fire that night the mood was upbeat as, through tales of the day, they explored their new knowledge of themselves and this world. They explored their strengths, defined their weaknesses and revealed the friends and enemies in the land and sea scapes they moved between. A code of conduct and a collective purpose emerged in their story telling and their planning for the next day.

It was a while after sunrise before the tide had receded enough to allow them to continue their journey. The weather was darkening, the wind was up and carrying spray and light rain into their faces. But the biggest difference was the strength and height of the swell as it pounded into the base of the rocks they were scrambling over. They were seeking a cave. It had been set for them as a physical destination for their journey but each one knew that somehow, at this cave, the insight they sought would either be revealed to them or not. Although the good humour of the previous night was gone the mood was determined and purposeful. The group set off using their practised skills until they encountered challenges they did not know how to manage. Each time the facilitators rose to the occasion providing what might have seemed magical solutions to impassable barriers along the way; solutions, however, that could only work with the help and courage of all; a Tyrolean traverse over a gap with waves crashing only feet below each person as they passed along the rope; an abseil down a steep cliff; a traverse along a narrow ledge washed by the bigger waves and in which timing and a secure safety line were all that prevented them from being washed away. Each time they passed a barrier the rope was retrieved cutting off any retreat and giving a growing sense of commitment.

At last, after the third challenge, when they were beginning to wonder what else they could cope with, the cave mouth opened up in front of them. Waves rushed into its hidden entrance and the sound of them breaking on a distant beach echoed back from deep in the cave. One more task lay ahead of them before they could reach their destination, to find a way in. When all seemed hopeless one of the company, who had been disappearing down narrow clefts in the base of the cliff, gave a shout. One by one the company disappeared into the rock to emerge, after a tight and twisting crawl, inside the cave on a ledge just above the beach. The sensations were totally absorbing. With each wave the cave went dark as it blocked out the light from the entrance. The wind rushed passed them as, pushed by the wave, it sought out every crevice to escape from the rising pressure. The noise of the wave rushing towards them in the semi-dark convinced everyone that it would swamp the ledge. Then, just as it seemed inevitable that they would be swept into the water, an aquamarine light suffused them as the daylight from the entrance returned shining through the body of the wave itself. Each time the wave passed harmlessly below them and broke on the beach in a shower of spray and a roar of rushing pebbles.

And there on the beach, as promised but unrevealed until now, was the ‘treasure’ the cave concealed. Calling gently with a note that travelled throughout the cave despite all the other noises, were a small group of seal pups. The company were able to scramble down to the beach from the end of the ledge. Sitting amongst the pups they remained absorbed in the rhythm of the waves flooding into the cave and breaking at their feet. Eventually they dragged themselves one by one away from the beach, along the ledge and out through the crevice, each one holding in the hearts and minds something that would stay with them; an insight, a memory? Who could tell as each one held on to what they needed and cherished it quietly to him or her self. Outside the dark clouds had cleared to bright

sunshine and the menace of the swell was somehow lessened by the sparkling light and spray. Finding the way along the rocks, searching for the hidden cleft and helping each one up the cliff to the world above did not seem so difficult now even though everything they did was as challenging as before. Somehow it felt like they were a little at home here. It was the world of villages and fields that now seemed new. For some it seemed mundane after the adventures behind them. For others it was a welcome relief to be back.

Later, gradually, some talked about their ‘treasure’. One man described how the seal pups had reminded him of his children; how he considered himself a bad father as he had found domestic life boring. In the cave he had realised he wasn’t bored, he was scared. Overcoming his fear would, he believed, help him to see fatherhood as heroic and help him to become a better father. Another, talked of trust, of not trusting his colleagues but now that he had been forced to depend on them it was transforming his understanding of his role and behaviour as a leader. Yet another talked of his fear of moving water despite being a strong swimmer. He talked of facing his fear and controlling it as he traversed on thin ledges with the waves at his feet. He spoke especially of the waves rushing up to him in the cave and of how hard it was to keep still and yet how good it felt now when he thought of the challenge of retirement just ahead of him.

The facilitators wished them all well, packed their rope and departed leaving the magical world of the shore to another day.

The facilitators in this account, including myself, were also practitioner researchers. We had become interested in similarities that we saw between the hero’s journey and outdoor adventure. The stages, plots and roles appeared to us to share much in common and we had decided to research this. We had debated for some while whether to reveal or conceal the underlying construct of the hero’s journey to the participants. In the end we chose to enlist them as collaborators in our enquiry. In this way everyone became involved in researching the experience and both parties stood to benefit from the outcomes in their own ways. The degree of commitment to this exploration became apparent at the start when we passed through the arch. The day before it had been floored with soft sand but overnight the tide had removed this leaving a metre deep rock pool in its place. Every participant waded through the pool unhesitatingly as though it were only natural to be faced with such a hurdle at the threshold to the adventure. It became a literal as well as metaphorical immersion!

I have told the story in a vivid style so as to give the reader a feel for the understanding offered by the many voices of the facilitators and the participants. It provides a starting point from which to explore the ways in which the outdoor adventure constructed in this way was thought to have contributed to the personal development of the participants. Before I discuss this further, I would like to explore where this approach to outdoor adventure sits within the various possibilities for being outdoors with groups.

### ***Categories of outdoor learning spaces***

Outdoor adventure has been a medium for personal development since the last years of the nineteenth century. At that time it was introduced and developed by social reformers to, for example ‘develop the moral fibre and leadership capacity of the social elite’,

‘toughen up young men for war’, ‘reverse a moral decline’, ‘liberate working class boys and girls from oppression’ and ‘extend the horizons of the working classes’. After the Second World War, despite the legacy of all the earlier intentions, it was the extension of horizons that became the dominant justification for outdoor learning.

During the latter half of the twentieth century this original motive diversified yet again. The outdoors became a learning space constructed in many ways. One metaphor described this diversity by calling the outdoors variously a ‘classroom, laboratory, gymnasium, church or playing field’.

Outdoor adventure as a learning environment is frequently allied with experiential education. Below I have described several categories of outdoor adventure learning that I think are common today. The categories are based on the nature of the experience that is valued by the designers and leaders of the experiences, that is those that intentionally construct the space for an educational outcome on behalf of others.

- **An experiential space:** in this approach it is the sensual experience that is valued. The aesthetics and athletics of stillness and movement, the journey and the destination, the view and the elements are emphasised. Meaning is understood as intrinsic and interpretation insignificant or self-evident. The space is understood as a blank map ready for exploration. The nature of the experience is owned by the participant and considered sacred by others.
- **A fantasy space:** This approach emphasises the inner journey. The outer world correlates with the inner world and the journey is understood as a spiritual or mental exploration of the self often at an unconscious level. This time the space is constructed as a wild uncultured landscape to be explored for the meanings that can be created through ones own imaginative encounter; a space ready for projection. Both facilitator and participant have power as the skills and knowledge of one are shared, enabling the vision of the other.
- **A physical space:** This space is understood as a real landscape rich in natural and cultural history. Gaining knowledge about this storied landscape is the primary aim. Knowledge of this story is understood as giving power to the knower.
- **A collective space:** The social dynamics of these experiences is emphasised. The journey is a vehicle and the behaviour of others acts as a mirror on self-knowledge and a window on relationships. The space is understood as a novel and dramatic backdrop requiring both independent and interdependent responses. As with fantasy space both facilitator and participant have power as one learns through the guidance of the other. Crucially in this category it is the interpretation of the participant that has the higher value.
- **A moral and social space:** This category is distinguished from the collective space by the fact that a higher value is placed on the interpretation of the facilitator acting on behalf of society. This journey is one in which lessons of identity, purpose and

relationship are understood as embedded in the experiences. The space is constructed as a landscape rich in meaning discovered through the codes of conduct for the activities and facilitators involved. The outcome is an emerging citizen entrained into the normative worldview.

Outdoor adventure programmes can be categorised by these terms. Of course several may be present in the intentions of any one programme. It is also important to acknowledge that the programme intentions of the facilitator may differ from the emphasis the participant places on the experience. In this chapter my interest lies in some aspects of the outdoors as a fantasy space.

### *The outdoors as fantasy space*

Outdoor adventure is often described as escapist. The word ‘escape’ is derived from the French word for cloak in the sense that ‘to cloak something is to hide it’. The same root appears in ‘landscape’, but in this case the land is cloaked in meaning. Participants are often described in terms of what it is they are escaping, hiding, cloaking themselves from. However, less has been written about what they are escaping to, the landscape and its cloak of meaning. Who cloaks it in what meanings and for what purpose is largely considered axiomatic or unproblematic. The categories above were constructed by me to help reveal some of these ‘cloaks’. The collaborative enquiry into outdoor adventure and the hero was intended to explore the category in which both escape and landscape were active elements.

Some authors have explored the similarities between this kind of outdoor adventure and play. Play is described as a space in which the rules of the world of the imagination are those by which the world is understood. It is an escape from the conventions and interpretations of the everyday world and the player enters a landscape of the imagination in which all manner of things are possible. It provides creative freedom in which participants can explore anything they wish. Indeed, outdoor adventure can offer the same kind of space although there are some crucial differences which I shall mention later.

However, the freedom to be found in a facilitated outdoor adventure is more limited than play. The presence of a facilitator introduces a power into the game that true play does not have. There are also rules of engagement held to by the facilitator that apply to the place itself and the activity with which it will be explored. This led me to consider what storytelling might have to offer as a way of understanding this space. Like a facilitated outdoor adventure there is a storyteller. The story also has rules of engagement in its landscapes, plots and characters. Yet, like play, storytelling is understood as a window on the imagination creating an inner space in which the listener can enter the story.

Bettelheim writes about the story form known as fairy tale. He describes the role of the storyteller in choosing and recounting the tale. Storytellers should be responsive to the mood and level of engagement of the listener, they use ritual language to help the listener feel safe enough to identify closely with aspects of the story, they use their voices in a

way that entrances the listener. All these devices help the story work with the imagination of the listener to create a window on the unconscious. There, unknown to the conscious mind of the listener and the storyteller, the young person can address the issues of growing up that are too distressing or too difficult to acknowledge in the conscious world. Bettelheim claims these stories have a common structure visible in the landscapes, plots and characters and common to all times and cultures where the tradition has been or is practised. He bemoans the loss of storytelling in our culture, one in which he sees the aural story re-presented visually as cartoons in which most of the magic and sensitivity he believes has been unintentionally removed.

The parallel between good storytelling and a well led outdoor adventure as fantasy is compelling. Some adventure educators are working in this way with children of an age for whom this approach was intended (see Gunnar-Furmark). The purpose of this chapter is to explore outdoor adventure as fantasy in the context of the transition from youth to adult. For this I turned to Campbell and Pinkola-Estes who explored the significance of myth in much the same way as Bettelheim explored fairy tale. Like Bettelheim both authors understand myths as having a meta-narrative common to all its varied forms of expression. Again, they include landscapes, plots and characters as the structure. Again, they understand the process of telling the myth as a way of engaging the imagination in order to explore aspects of the listener's inner world.

Pinkola-Estes concentrated on the meta-narrative she calls the creative cycle. The structure of these stories follows a cycle of death and rebirth. It is rich in natural metaphors from the cycles of birth and death, day and night and the seasons. Estes believes it also describes an inner cycle of creative development following a path of ascendancy and decline followed by renewal, rebirth and transformation into another cycle of creativity. I believe this pattern of re-creation is commonly present in outdoor adventure programmes. Its essentially feminine nature associates it with healing. As such I think it can often be found as an underlying structure to programmes with a therapeutic intention. These programmes are offered to support the process of decline, dormancy or renewal in both people and organisations. However, unless the person is experiencing considerable degrees of harm, it is not the structure that I think underlies the transition from youth to adult. This is better understood from Campbell's perspective.

### ***The Hero's Journey***

Campbell focussed on the mythic meta-narrative he called the hero's journey. The central characters respond to the call to adventure by passing from the ordinary world for which they are no longer suited or are unable to stay. They cross a threshold facing up to the challenge of the guardians of this world, often with the help of a mentor. Once they have entered the extraordinary world beyond they find they are out of their depth, unable to work the magic others seem to use, unable to know who to trust and who to fear. Slowly their early encounters teach them who are friends and who are foes, they learn how to survive acquiring totems of their growing skill and knowledge as they go. Despite these growing abilities the new world seems overwhelming and mostly hostile. The company is driven apart until each one faces the worst challenge often alone. Only when tested in this

way does each one dig deep for the hidden inner resources that are their particular strength in this place. Only then does the tide begin to turn. The company become aware of a task or quest that will resolve all the dangers they face. They set out, and, against the odds, win through to the treasure, the dragon, the princess, and all ends happily ever after. Finally, the return across the threshold and back into the ordinary world is celebrated by all. The real treasure, symbolised by the quest, is the only other thing to cross back with them and allows the heroes to mature into their adult roles in the world they left as children.

The meta-narrative of the hero's journey has been used to interpret everything from ancient myths from many times and places to Hollywood movies such as Star Wars. In our own time it has been criticised for being egotistic and masculine in form. Some commentators point out that, in certain cultures, the male bias has not been so evident. Others suggest that, if read at a symbolic level, the gender of the characters can be understood ideologically. It is appropriate for the hero characters to celebrate the power of the self as they emerge into adulthood and that, in our culture, this is associated ideologically with the masculine whether the hero is male or female. It has also been commented that the damsel in distress represents cultural values (often represented ideologically by the feminine) that the masculine power and passion ignore at their peril if they do not wrest them from the events of the story and make them their own. Whilst acknowledging the male bias in many current stories and recognising that hero tales often end up celebrating the power and passion without completing the tale, I have found the ideological interpretation helpful for unravelling similarities between the hero and the outdoor adventurer.

The reader may already have made links between outdoor adventure and the hero's journey meta-narrative. Table 1 compares the story I told at the beginning with the stages Campbell identifies in the hero's journey. However, there are significant differences between a myth and an outdoor adventure. However much the landscape of the adventure is constructed as a wild and dramatic place free of its cultural and natural history, the consequences of actions in within it can hurt physically at times and failure is an option. 'They' do not necessarily 'all live happily ever after'. The company is led by one or two characters who might struggle to represent all the facets of the characters in the story. Nature can play a part to help; the clouds, wind and waves can become aspects of the dark; sheltering caves, seal pups and sunshine can become aspects of the light. Nevertheless the company cannot always be assured that they will reach their goal and it may be a struggle even when they do, to reveal the hidden treasure of the events. Lastly the return may go largely uncelebrated and the treasure unutilised by the ordinary world.

However, other aspects of the outdoor adventure suit the modern person as hero. The aural tale can be adjusted to its time and place to suit the listeners. Nevertheless, the story contains its moral and cultural meanings embedded in the tale. To some extent this is true of the outdoor adventure but the degree to which the individuals in the company choose the direction the story takes, the roles they play, the standards they travel by and the treasures they find, is significantly increased. Perhaps in a modern world in which each individual constructs to a greater degree than ever their own worldview, the outdoor

adventure allows for personal stories to unfold. It may not be simply that storytellers have been overtaken by technology, it may also be that they have been abandoned by an audience eager to become more of an actor in and even author of their story.

The meta-narrative of the hero's journey and the format of an outdoor adventure can both be overlaid on the stages of agency (diagram 1). The individual begins as a person defined by the social world around them. They struggle to form and express their own identity but the way they are known to all around them constrains or even oppresses this development. In order to move forward the individual enters an extraordinary world where these constraints are removed. Indeed many new possibilities present themselves. In this state the person has shifted from a 'someone' defined by the world they are in to a 'no one' invisible at first in this strange new world. This world might be formed in the imagination inspired by a good storyteller or offered by a computer game. It might also be a physical space offered by the nightclub, youth music and street culture, the gap year travelling or outdoor adventure. As an identity emerges in this world the individual gains the power to contemplate returning to the known world. When they do they again become 'someone' but this time defined, to a greater degree than before, by themselves and not constrained by the world around them. They become 'actors' able to influence the world around them, the 'authors' of their own lives.

### ***Opportunities and Concerns***

This interpretation offers a number of opportunities for outdoor adventure:

- Outdoor adventure may be able to help with the different stages of this passage; escaping from the constraining world and entering the unknown world in early teens, exploring this world in mid teens, returning to the known world in late teens or early twenties as an actor. Diagnosing the needs of each adventurer in this regard will have a significant effect on the programme and its facilitation.
- Outdoor adventure can, and sometimes does intentionally and unintentionally, rescue people lost in the unknown.
- Outdoor adventure can help with transition. Times of transition and not only experienced by adolescents. Becoming married, becoming a parent, taking on a new work role, organisational change at work, children leaving home, retirement; all present the challenge and opportunity of change. Sometimes the contexts in which people find themselves do not support the change and the unknown has a role again. This may be especially so in hierarchical organisations in which relationships can be readily understood as parent to child and easily experienced as constraining or oppressive.
- Outdoor adventure can be seen as one of many means by which young people support their own transitions and outdoor adventure learning sensitive to this function can offer a way to accompany young people on their journey with appropriate levels of support and guidance.

At the same time a number of concerns arise:

- Many outdoor programmes are designed with aims other than youth transition in mind and offering a landscape constructed in very different ways. Others may intend to support transition but in practice continue to constrain the participant. Both may be at odds with the needs of the hero/adventurer.
- It is dangerous to leave the ‘hero’ unsupported at critical stages in the journey and yet outdoor adventures can often be detached from the contexts and relationships of the individual. The programme can end abruptly leaving the hero/adventurer in difficulty and with no ‘hand rail’ to continue the journey.
- The return is a critical aspect of the hero’s journey. Without being recognised by the community and without the new talents being accepted and harnessed, the journey does not finish.
- Issues of the masculine and feminine as ideological constructs for personal development can hamper the construction of effective symbols when they have to compete with established and possibly degenerate interpretations or, even worse, are based on these degenerate ideas of the hero.

The critical reader will spot quickly further opportunities and concerns. My purpose here is to illustrate how this interpretation of one category of outdoor adventure can enhance our understanding of a process and thereby facilitate more appropriate and effective experiences for participants. The participants on the Pembrokeshire coast, once given a context for their experience that was congruent with their needs, were able to translate a two-day event into, in some instances, a vehicle for life changing decisions. Other possible benefits remain forever hidden in the unconscious. Nevertheless, the evidence highlights the importance that is attached by participants to opportunities to engage the imagination in novel and dramatic situations. It also demonstrates the ability of outdoor adventure with a mythic meta-narrative, carefully facilitated, to offer these.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the links between play, storytelling, myths and adventure. All encourage the world of the imagination to operate and so help the formation of identity and the resolution of internal conflicts. Myths and adventures help create an imaginal world and support the process of transition from youth to adult or, indeed, other transitions in which the individual is constrained or oppressed by their world. In this form outdoor adventure landscapes are constructed as extraordinary and unknown territories where novel and dramatic events occur. With the help of mentors and allies the individual takes on the mantle of the hero and, in so doing, explores new possibilities, power and passion. They feel alive. In this world extraordinary feats are accomplished, foes defeated and lifelong lessons learned. This way of acquiring agency can be thought of as one of several ways that young people in a modern world, a world in which the task of

constructing the self is so much more the responsibility of the self, become actors in and authors of their worlds.

Outdoor adventure of this kind is therefore a potent and valuable process. However, it can be in danger of losing its potency as it competes with other landscapes of adventure. This interpretation also offers a critique of many current outdoor adventure programmes that do not complete the journey or manage the transition to another agency that might undertake this work. It also offers a critique of some feminist attitudes to the hero. Whilst acknowledging some of the sexist and aggressive representations of the hero, the ideological interpretation of men and women in hero stories may have something to offer the growing up and transition of both girls and boys to women and men. It would be interesting to carry out a similar enquiry in which the creative cycle provides the meta-narrative for outdoor adventure. Such a study would further broaden our understanding and our ability to provide sensitive facilitation of outdoor adventures.