

THOMAS MERTON & JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Conversion and the Hero's Departure

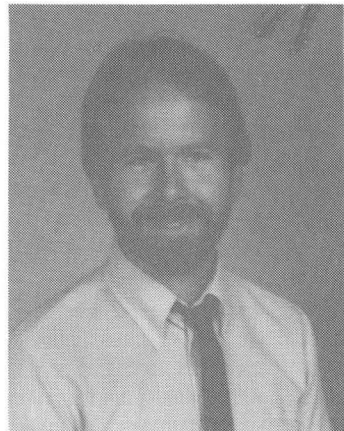
by **Devin Brown**

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, published in 1949, Joseph Campbell describes what he believes to be a common hero who appears in the myths of all the world's cultures down through time. According to Campbell, these universal heroes, found in many different guises and under many different names, share certain characteristics, regardless of the particular incarnations. More importantly, in the stories told about him, Campbell's hero with a thousand faces will pass through the same three major stages: first, the Departure; next, the Trials and Victories of Initiation; and finally, the Return and Reintegration.

If we can say that in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton appears not only as a person but also as a literary character, then it is not surprising that he has been compared to various other characters — both from fiction and from real life. In the Spring 1989 *Merton Seasonal*, Anne Page Brooks compared the experiences of Thomas Merton to those of Job. Michael Mott, in the preface to *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, draws a parallel between Merton and T. E. Lawrence. Anthony T. Padovano notes the many similarities between Merton and St. Augustine in *The Human Journey*. In his book *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, Raymond Bailey points out how Merton's conversion fits E. T. Starbuck's portrayal of spiritual awakening. Another fruitful comparison might be to compare the first stages of Campbell's hero, the Departure stage, and the account given in *The Seven Storey Mountain* of Merton's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

While Campbell's hero may accomplish mighty physical tasks, his quest, like Merton's, is primarily a spiritual one. After winning his battle, the hero's second "solemn" task is "to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed" (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp. 19-20). Prometheus returns with fire from the gods. Jason brings home the Golden Fleece. Aeneas comes back from the underworld. Theseus escapes from the labyrinth, and Jonah from the belly of the whale.

The first great stage of the hero, the Departure, Campbell breaks down into five substages: 1) the call to adventure; 2) refusal of the call; 3) supernatural aid; 4) the crossing of the first threshold; and 5) the belly of the whale (*Hero*, p. 36). Thomas Merton descends into the cool darkness of the little brick



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Church of Corpus Christi on 121st Street in New York and emerges as a Christian. It was the completion of the first step in Merton's spiritual odyssey, his Departure, and the beginning of the next. If we look at Thomas Merton's conversion to Christianity as his Departure stage, we can find that it contains Campbell's five substages.

It should not surprise us that for Thomas Merton, a developing artist himself and the son of artists, the first substage, the call to adventure, comes originally through aesthetic experience. The year is 1933, and the eighteen year old Merton is in Italy after passing his scholarship exams at Cambridge. After about a week in Rome, Merton finds himself mysteriously drawn to the Byzantine mosaics and begins to haunt the churches where they were to be found. "And thus without knowing anything about it," he writes, "I became a pilgrim" (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 108). The relics and holy things which the churches housed did not speak to the young traveller, but "the churches that enshrined them did, and so did the art of their walls" (*SSM*, p. 109).

Campbell notes that the call to adventure marks the dawn of religious illumination, the awakening of self. "The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (*Hero*, p. 51). Before Merton leaves Rome, the call to adventure is repeated more clearly in a vision in which his father, who had been dead for a year, appears to him. This paternal apparition, much like the ghost which visits young Hamlet, instills within the loving son a conviction that something is out of joint; but while the Prince of Denmark is called upon to set right the rotten state, the garden which Merton is called to weed is the "misery and corruption" of his own soul (*SSM*, p. 111). Campbell observes that "there is an atmosphere of irresistible fascination about the figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage in the biography" (*Hero*, p. 55). The vision of Owen Merton is in some ways like that of Jacob Marley who appears in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. The purpose of both ghosts is one of illumination. However, after the ghost's visit, Merton, like Scrooge, loses the conviction of this first call to adventure, does not heed the herald's summons, and moves into Campbell's second substage: the refusal of the call.

"It is always possible to turn the ear to other interests," says Campbell in describing the refusal of the call. When the call is ignored, the hero's flowering world becomes "a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless" even though, like King Minos, he may succeed in building a vast empire. Whatever he builds, "it will be a house of death" (*Hero*, p. 59). Merton, in writing about his refusal to follow the call, laments: "If I had only followed it through, my life might have been very different and much less miserable for the years that were to come" (*SSM*, p. 112). Merton does not submit to the prompting within him, and although for two months after he arrives back in New York he surreptitiously reads the Bible and takes a brief interest in the Quakers and the Mormons, his religious fever soon cools down and disappears. The echoes of the call die out while Merton works "fleecing suckers" as a barker at a sideshow at the World's Fair in Chicago. He soon leaves for Cambridge where the "last remains of spiritual vitality" are stamped out. Like the mythical Daphne, who was pursued by Apollo, Merton flies as far as he can from God's love. But, "not all who hesitate are lost," writes Campbell, and sometimes "an obstinate refusal of the call proves to be the occasion of a providential revelation of some unsuspected principle of release" (*Hero*, p. 64). After a period of drinking and debauchery at Cambridge, Merton begins a climb back to the light, and in this climb he moves into Campbell's third substage and receives the supernatural aid awarded to the hero who is once again following the proper path.

"The first encounter of the hero-journey," states Campbell, "is with a protective figure who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (*Hero*, p. 69).

Adriane, the daughter of King Minos, gives Theseus a skein of thread, the toll he will need to escape from the labyrinth. Mark Van Doren, Merton's English teacher at Columbia becomes Providence's instrument, giving Merton the tools needed to receive the "good seed of scholastic philosophy" which will be the first step of his conversion to Christianity.

Other influences and aid follow, including the works of Etienne Gilson and Aldous Huxley. The former provides Merton's first exposure to medieval philosophy and the latter his introduction to mysticism. In searching for a topic for his Master of Arts thesis, Merton discovers Blake who brings him to the awareness "that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God" (*SSM*, p. 191). Years later, on his application forms for admission to Gethsemani, Merton was to list two authors who marked a turning point in his thinking: Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. "Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold," writes Campbell, "the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side" (*Hero*, p. 72). One of the more unlikely forces which Merton now suddenly finds at his side is the Hindu monk, Mahanambra Brahmachari, who convinces Merton to read St. Augustines's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*.

The fourth substage of the Departure, the crossing of the first threshold, "is the first step into the sacred area of the universal source," Campbell writes (*Hero*, p. 81). "The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown" (*Hero*, p. 82). Merton crosses the threshold when he decides to go to Mass for the first time. "I was really still a little afraid to go to a Catholic church," Merton tells us, "and lay myself open to the mysterious perils of that strange and powerful thing they called their 'Mass'" (*SSM*, pp. 206-207). Merton pauses before the little brick church of Corpus Christi and observes the people "going in the wide open door, into the cool darkness." To pass through what Campbell refers to as "the clashing rocks" which can "crush the traveller" the hero must leave his ego behind. Only then can he, like Jason in the Argo, pass beyond what Campbell terms "the walls of the world" (*Hero*, p. 89). Merton describes this relinquishing of his ego as an obedience to an inner voice which urges him to go to Mass. "And when I gave into to it," he writes, "it did not exult over me, and trample me down in its raging haste to land on its prey, but carried me forward serenely and with purposeful direction" (*SSM*, p. 206).

Of course a more important threshold is crossed when Merton actually decides to go beyond merely attending Mass and become a Catholic. This threshold is crossed in much the same way as the earlier one. Merton had been reading about Hopkins's conversion when once again a voice stirs within him, pushing and prompting him. "What are you waiting for?" it asks.

At first he reasons with himself that Father Ford, whom he would need to see, would not be in at that time of day. But then, once again, Merton submits to the urging within him. He throws on his raincoat and goes down the steps and beyond the threshold of his old dwelling. He crosses the street, and everything within him begins to sing — "to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction" (*SSM*, p. 216). After a short delay, Merton meets Father Ford on the walk outside the church and together they cross into the parlor where Merton announces: "I want to become a Catholic." He is now ready for the fifth and final substage of the Departure: the hero-dive into the belly of the whale.

"The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide image of the belly of the whale," Campbell states. "The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died" (*Hero*, p. 90). On November 16, 1938, after a long and perilous night of pre-baptismal doubts and fasting, the twenty-three year old Merton tells us: "I went downstairs and out into the street to go to my happy execution and rebirth" (*SSM*, p. 222).

In the waters of baptism, Merton buries his old life of sin and is born again and, like a newborn, even named again. Campbell notes that “the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilator.” According to Campbell, this passage into a sphere of rebirth, this move into the belly of a whale corresponds to the passing of a worshipper into a temple, where the devotee at the moment of entry undergoes a metamorphosis. “His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise” (*Hero*, pp. 91, 92). Consider these “heroes”:

Hiawatha is swallowed by the king of fishes, Mishe-Nahma.

Joseph is put into a pit by his brothers.

Jesus is buried in the tomb.

Red Riding Hood is swallowed by the wolf.

Jonah is swallowed by the whale.

Like them, Merton finds “life” by losing it. The ensuing resurrection, the paradox of life in death, will remain a pivotal point in Merton’s life and will provide the title for *The Sign of Jonas*, published in 1953 fifteen years after his baptism.

Following the completion of the five substages of the Departure, Campbell’s hero goes on to the second major stage, the Initiation, the first part of which is “The Road of Trials.” Certainly Merton went on to face his own road of trials immediately following his baptism. Although it was mentioned near the beginning of this essay that Merton may be said to be a character in his own autobiography, his story is about a real person with a real life. From this point on, this real story does not neatly match that of the fictional hero Campbell analyzes. After concluding his Departure stage with his conversion to Christianity, Merton goes through another much more radical separation from the world. In the steps that lead him to the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton again clearly goes through the five substages of the hero’s Departure: the call to adventure, the refusal of the call, supernatural aid, the crossing of the first threshold, and the belly of the whale.

Baptism completed one quest for Merton. His journey to Gethsemani marked another beginning, another departure, as did his experience in Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, his later move to the hermitage, his awakening to social and political issues, and even his mental and spiritual turn towards the East. The steps of Merton’s conversion neatly fit the substages of the hero’s Departure, but, unlike the lives of the fictional pilgrims, Merton’s life, like those of all real-life seekers of truth, seems to have many points at which the traveler will feel: “Now this, this is the real beginning!”