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'I have a journey, sir,  
shortly to go;  
My master calls me,  
I must not say no.'

These words of the Earl of Kent, uttered in the closing scene of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, are used as a chapter epigraph in Christopher Booker's remarkable volume called *The Seven Basic Plots*, in which the author claims to identify the mere handful of "basic stories" that provide the recurring motifs for all of our myths, folk tales, novels, movies and, incredibly, even our comic books and TV soap operas.

It should come as no surprise that two of the "plots" identified by Booker touch on the notion of "journey," for this metaphorical sense of our life as a kind of pilgrimage from birth to death is ubiquitous in story and song. One of Booker's "journey" plots is called "The Quest" and another "Voyage and Return." In his discussion of these two basic story lines, Booker treads again over some of the ground covered so memorably by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, where the journey of the hero is a central theme. This should be familiar territory for Christian believers as well, for it is quite remarkable how some of these ancient motifs (that pre-date the gospels by many, many centuries) are recapitulated in the story of the life and death of Jesus.

There may be a practical application to be derived from all of this as well. Although a human life can be viewed, in hindsight at least, as a more or less straight line from beginning to end — starting block to finish line — we know from experience that our earthly progress is more like a series of circles that nevertheless has some direction, perhaps analogous to the ascent of a spiral staircase or maybe even the experience of wending one's way successfully through a labyrinth. There are stops and starts, some "temporary destinations" (graduations, goals accomplished) as well as "new beginnings" (marriage, starting a family, career changes). Life is cyclical yet, one hopes, progressive.

## **The journey of Lent**

This truth seems to be acknowledged in the structure of the Church year, for as we move through our lives we are annually invited to enter once again the "little journey" that is the season of Lent. It has its own clearly defined beginning (Ash Wednesday) and an ending (some time on Holy Thursday afternoon) that actually launches us on yet another journey, the three-day adventure called the Triduum. But one journey at a time!

Let us see how the season of Lent is an invitation for us to imaginatively enter once again into the story of *our* "questing hero" Jesus, and to walk with him through the various stages of a journey that seem, in light of the long history and recurring motifs of such tales, surprisingly predictable.

### **Call and separation from the world**

In the stories of heroic quests, the main character always experiences what Booker labels "the call," in which he or she is given "supernatural or visionary direction." This sense of election propels the hero out of normal, ordinary life into a reality that is strange and unfamiliar. Campbell adds that "the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration — a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and rebirth" (Christians will be thinking "paschal mystery").

Our Lenten scriptures traditionally start with Jesus having been removed to just such a strange and unfamiliar place; he is alone in the desert wilderness. Yet we recall that preceding this "separation from the world" the scriptures recounted the baptism of Jesus by John. This event seems to have been a "call" that filled Jesus with a sense of mission (note also the supernatural element of the "voice from heaven" that singles Jesus out).

Most of us cannot, of course, remember the moment of our original call, but we are, by virtue of that baptism, elected — pulled — as Booker says of the hero, "towards some distant, all-important goal." We are, in the familiar liturgical phrase, "a people set apart."

The Church reminds us in a dramatic way that Lent should represent a separation from our everyday reality and routine. She starts the season with a day of fast and abstinence and marks us with a visible sign of our mortality, as if to emphasize that this Christian quest is serious, life-and-death business. This time is special, "set

aside" to remind us and to redirect us at the very beginning of the journey. To drive that point home, the Church makes it clear that we are, literally, no longer in "ordinary time."

## **Temptation**

Having been called, separated from the world, and launched on the journey/quest, the hero almost immediately confronts a series of temptations. This is a dangerous time, for, unlike the hero's run-ins with fierce monsters (which involve direct confrontation and are unambiguously deadly), temptation seeks, in Booker's words, to "lure him to his doom by guile and seduction."

The obvious temptations involve some physical gratification. We might remember Odysseus and his crew being lured by the beautiful Sirens and later imprisoned by the enchantress Circe who turns people into animals (an obvious reference to capitulation to the "lower" appetites). Odysseus himself falls under the spell of the beautiful Calypso and stays, lovestruck, for seven years in her cave.

Our Lenten scriptures (first Sunday) begin with Jesus being offered the physical gratification that food provides and the emotional gratification of power and status.

The gravest temptation, however, is more subtle, for it involves the hero simply being lulled and seduced into losing sight of the great quest — the hard and austere journey — and choosing instead a life of ease and pleasure. Applied to our own situation, this temptation would not result in something as blatant as renouncing our Christianity altogether, but it might involve the more subtle defection of choosing brute force to get our way rather than doing the hard work of reconciliation; it might involve creating rationalizations that allow us to justify and condone all the ridiculous demands of our consumer culture; it might involve simply losing our will to follow through on the hard work that our vocation entails (think of Jesus, agonizing in the garden, wondering if he might yet evade the self-sacrifice that his call demanded).

Finally, we have much to learn from the way Jesus responds in the temptation scene. He does not take the "inflated" approach of saying, "I can handle this myself" (which would, in effect, represent succumbing to the tempter). Rather, he quotes the scriptures; he reaches outside of himself for a kind of "transpersonal wisdom" to meet the Satanic challenge. At the very outset it becomes clear that we cannot complete this journey on our own. We must look around to see what has been

provided by way of assistance and sustenance for this arduous trek.

## **The 'Helpers'**

Besides the monsters and tempters that the hero encounters on the journey, there are certain figures (often supernatural) who give positive assistance by providing respite or by giving much needed advice—direction, so to speak, for the journey. These are the "helpers." Though Luke's gospel omits the little detail (provided by Matthew and Mark) about angels coming to "wait on" Jesus after he has endured the temptations, we do get (second Sunday of Lent) the figures of Moses and Elijah, who join Jesus and the disciples on the mountain of Transfiguration.

If these two unearthly visitors represent, as most commentators suggest, the law and the prophets, they could correspond to what Booker calls the "supernatural wisdom and prescience" provided by "helpers" who confirm the hero and indicate that the correct pathway has been chosen. These two ghostly aides validate that Jesus is doing the will of God by staying true to the law and the prophetic witness.

Part of any parish's preparation for the season of Lent is to decide on what "aids" will be offered during this special time. There is always the "sacramental" help of the Sunday liturgies throughout Lent and the reconciliation service that has become a Lenten fixture in most parishes. In addition, there are various "devotional" reminders such as the distribution of ashes and Stations of the Cross.

And it's quite likely that there will also be spiritual or theological resources put at our disposal as parishes offer adult education classes, retreats and parish missions. There is much help provided as we make our way toward the goal.

If we are meant to see ourselves in the image of the chronically unproductive fig tree (mentioned in Luke's Gospel on the Third Sunday of Lent), we might note that the tree is given a reprieve, so to speak, because the gardener (unlike the owner who wants to cut it down) is willing to help the tree along — to work on it, cultivate it, and feed it — so that it might eventually produce something. We would be wise, as we journey on, to avail ourselves of these various "helpers."

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## **Transformation**

One striking and persistent characteristic of the journey tales, especially the "Voyage and Return" variations, is that the pilgrim-hero often achieves some kind of spiritual illumination or undergoes a personal transformation. In these stories it becomes apparent that the main character has begun the journey/quest in a state of limited awareness. It is often revealed that the protagonist is being held back by selfishness, egocentricity, or pride.

Though the Christian tradition has, for obvious reasons, been reluctant to cast Jesus in the role of "flawed hero," it is certainly a part that we, as penitent pilgrims, can accept for ourselves. We realize that we are often far from "heroic" when it comes to living the virtuous life — closer, perhaps, to those dark, monstrous forces that line up against the hero than we are to the forces of light and goodness.

Having endured temptations and trials, and having battled the dark forces outside and within himself, the hero, if all goes well, "is saved," says Booker, "because his eyes have been opened and he has gone through a fundamental change of heart." This is the "complete happy ending," the fully resolved journey that has led to an inner transformation.

There *are* stories of voyage and return, however, in which nothing has really been accomplished by the encounter with the mysterious "other world" into which the traveler has ventured. When Alice wakes up from her visit to Wonderland, she remarks, "What a curious dream." But that's basically all it amounts to — a strange experience that produces little, if any, change in her character. The same could be said of Dorothy back from Oz or the Darling children once they've returned from Never Never Land in *Peter Pan*.

We might ask ourselves what good our Lenten journey will have accomplished if we return, six weeks from our setting out on Ash Wednesday, to the everyday world of our work, play, and family life with only a vague sense of having experienced something "curious," something slightly different from the norm. Once returned from the voyage, do we feel that it has left a lasting mark on us? Has our experience of Lent changed us?

### **Return to the world**

As mentioned above, when Lent ends on Holy Thursday, the Church invites us to undertake yet another journey, this one of much shorter duration, before we return to our ordinary routine. We are asked, starting on that Thursday evening, to walk

with Jesus through those last hours of his life on earth. It is a heartbreaking progression from the marvelous intimacy of that last meal with the disciples in the upper room, to the betrayal by Judas in the garden, to the agonizing climb up the hill called Golgatha, to the mournful procession (with the broken body of Jesus) that ends at the tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea.

If that were the true ending of the story, it would be tragic (or perhaps merely pathetic) but, arguably, pointless. We might even end up looking back on the journey with the dreamy and bemused detachment of Alice returned from Wonderland, concluding, as Booker suggests, that it was "no more than a memorably bizarre experience." Thankfully, we believe that our story has a much different ending.

If we have truly immersed ourselves in the journey through Lent and Triduum to Easter, how can we possibly emerge unchanged? A disciple once asked a Zen master how someone who had achieved enlightenment could return to the "ordinary" world. The master's cryptic reply was: "A broken mirror never reflects again; fallen flowers never go back to the old branches." If Monday, April 9, 2007, is "just another day at the office (school, home)" for us, what will have been the point and purpose of our journey?

## **Epilogue**

The notion of Lent as a journey is clearly metaphorical. That's why the bed-bound nursing home resident or the prison inmate can make it as easily as the able-bodied person who moves vigorously and freely through the world of work and school. We don't really have to *go* anywhere to have this experience. In fact, the path we need to embark on may be much closer than we think. Dag Hammarskjöld made this poetic observation in his 1964 book *Markings* that may be especially relevant to our understanding of Lent:

The longest journey

Is the journey inwards

Of him who has chosen his destiny,

Who has started upon his quest

For the source of his being.

It seems paradoxical that the quest should lead back to the "source," but, as T.S. Eliot another famous poetic soul, put it, the end of our journeying "will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." So here's to a Lenten experience that becomes for us a truly eye-opening, illuminating, transforming voyage of self-discovery that culminates in the "complete happy ending" that Christians call Easter.

**Editor's note:** *This reflection was originally published in the March 2007 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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