

Healing processes are works of art: the process of Paul Rebillot's Hero's Journey

Abstract

There is a strong social trend of functionalizing and standardizing individuals for economic interests on one side and of their manipulative “feeding with commodities“ on the other. This generates dependencies, addiction, psychic diseases. Social and cultural change is necessary. Therapists and counselors, mentors and social workers are requested to be of support for people concerned. But how is that possible without generating new dependencies? What might support this professional groups, without getting trapped in the dead end of fear of diversity and without becoming “standardizers“ themselves?

The hero's journey as intercultural basic pattern of transformation or archetype of change may give some answers and methodic supports for that. In the Hero's journey training as developed by Paul Rebillot a crisis is enacted, which is experienced, presented and reflected by its participants using art, ritual and consciousness work thus strengthening confidence in the forces of self-regulation. In the article the five main elements of hero's journey structure are described followed by evidence and recommendations for its practical use in processes of transformation and healing.



*Virgin of Mercy in
Ravensburg, Germany*

A phase of relative peace and reliability of science and other identity-establishing systems came to its end with the beginning of 21st century. This is made visible by the climate change, a growing gap between rich and poor, increasing instability and not least Edgar Snowdon's revelations. In a world, in which the pressure of standardization is increasing on one side and uncontrollable human and social phenomena like fundamentalism, terrorism and regional wars are threatening on the other, the wish for organized personal protection, care and security is growing - the hope to find a leader, guru or virgin of mercy and to follow them blindly or to slip under her coat. The economic “greed for more of the same” and the political “greed for control” are striving to offer such leaders, gurus or virgins and unite as addiction, one of the core diseases of all industrial nations. On this social background personal

dramas, hero's journeys and comedies are taking place daily.

It is on this social and cultural background as well that therapists, counselors, physicians and members of other professions try to initiate processes of healing, in order to be of support for individuals, social groups and organizations being in great distress, to become either more “functional” or “more com-

plete”, “more independent” and “more alive”, so that they may master their lives and their social duties in ways making sense to them. Being exposed to some central contradictions this is a very difficult task for members of these professions: if they reinforce the desire for leaders and protecting structures too much, they generate new dependencies and addiction. What may serve as a meaningful cultural guideline resp. structure for members of these professions supporting them in their important duties?

Joseph Campbell discovered in his research about myths and fairy-tales of the hero - based on the groundwork of James Joyce - that they have a base structure in common in all cultures of the world. In his book “The Hero with a thousand faces“ (CAMPBELL 1949) he describes this structure as “monomyth“. Paul Rebillot, actor, director and Gestalt therapist, developed on basis of this research and based on personal experiences in a schizophrenic episode a very salutary training, naming it “Call to adventure – Hero's journey“ (REBILLOT 1993). He takes over the main elements of the structure found by Campbell and brings together methods from theatre, meditation, body work, dance, imagination, painting, music, indigenous ritual and ancient and modern healing knowledge to a wholesome artistic synthesis (Gesamtkunstwerk). This training may support everybody working with people in crisis, to build up confidence to let oneself in unknown processes for their clients and groups thus escaping the trap of dependency of a leader, guru or “virgin of mercy”.

We describe at first the main elements of the hero's journey structure and then add hints for its meaning and use in processes of change and healing. Thereby we rely on the experiences of Paul Rebillot - our teacher in this field - and on our own experience of 10 years national and international hero's journey trainings involving people of all ages with helping and healing professions within the context of Adventure Life, which is a network of youth mentors around the Hero's Journey.

Main elements of Hero's journey structure

1. The call of the hero and his helpers

There are many words for the call of the hero: desire, motivation, vision, life purpose, intention and as many forms in which it may show itself: as inner voice, Leitbild, important encounter resp. impulse, irritation of a habit, sickness, loss of job and many more. All have one thing in common: that is the basic emotion of hunger in its physical, psychic and spiritual dimension. It needs an inner space of emptiness, silence and being unintentional, in order to enable us, to come in contact with this feeling, to hear, sense, realize and see it at all.

We live in a culture exposing us daily, even hourly to a variety of persuading offers by the intercon-

nection of its media, thus disabling us to perceive hunger more and more and making us follow “pseudo calls“ instead: successful career, beautiful car, beautiful partner, wealth, power, control and much more.

Our culture is working with manipulation of our emotions focussing the purchase of commodities.

But the call of the hero comes from a deep layer of the individual and collective unconscious. Some myths like Plato's myth of Er in his “Politeia” (PLATO 1965) tell a story, that we ourselves choose the image of our life and forget about it before birth. We are reminded of it by “spiritual helpers”, by so called coincidences or by our daimones, who are accompanying us. They help us to find our path in the unknown and to come to good decisions when life demands a course correction. Modern therapists like James Hillman (“The soul's code“) use this approach as well.

The hero knows, what he wants, knows, that she is not alone and is ready to risk something in order to achieve his target, even ready to take on big dangers. In the myths the hero mostly is ready to risk his or her life for this target - that's what we call life purpose. (Life purpose is in German “Lebensaufgabe“. “Aufgabe“ has a double sense of “task“ and of “surrender“ (of life)). That does not mean of course, that the hero has no fear. It only shows, that the hero is ready to confront his or her fear and gathers confidence into supportive powers inside and around.

In the beginning of the Hero's Journey training we invite the participants by cognitive, meditative and artistic methods, to become aware of their used every day life, to become silent and to imagine, to visualize and act out dramatically an idea of the call of the hero into the unknown. With the help of old symbol cards the hero recognizes his or her spiritual helper/s.

2. The demon of resistance and his power

The demon of resistance has only one target: to resist the path of the hero. He is the power of NO or is in Mephisto's words in Goethe's Faust “... part of that power, which would the evil ever do, and ever does the good“ (GOETHE 1962, lines 1337-1338). It is the power directing all its energy always AGAINST something, wanting power and control. In our culture maybe fundamentalism and terrorism are one of those pathological manifestations in which the positive power of our unredeemed desire, locked up in everyday life, may show, to say a clear No against manipulation by media as common in our culture.

The demon of resistance has an incredible variety of faces and manifestations: its bandwidth reaches from terrorism to rigid taboos, from a dragon monster to a gorgeous witch, from loud rabble-rousing speeches to silent refusal, from enforced control to unlimited chaos and sabotage. Its remarkable ability to transform is fed by two sources: at first by the power, the magical statements and words of the “controller”: this is the power structuring our reality with its ”Do's!“ und “Don'ts!“.

At second from the lust for discovery and life of the “spontaneous child”, which is the power expressing confidence in all what lives, having come across with rules and prohibitions of the social environment at first.

These powers are contradictory, unite themselves within our spirited body and show themselves as restrained movements, organic functions, cramps, tensions, pains and mental script statements, with which we “hold together“ our reality. The discovery, acting out and living up of these contradictory powers is in the same time aggressive and painful as well as libidinous and healing.

By playful body exercises the participants of the Hero's journey training can get on to the track of these two powers and their interplay. In ritual contexts it is possible, to experience the powers within and to reflect their aspects which make sense or are senseless. This phase of the training is nearly always bursting with energy, uncontrollable and exciting, so that redundant safety needs may be left behind and confidence in new powers may be built up. But it is by the confrontation with the powers of the demon of resistance, that confidence may even rise.

3. Confrontation and agreement

Births mostly are powerful, lust- and painful events which may not be reversed any more: once born, we cannot go back. Everything new has to pass the narrow birth channel of contradicting powers. The confrontation between the focussing power of the hero and the resisting power of the demon is very similar to a birth.

Struggles between inner voices, parts of personality, contradictory realities we know in general, especially before and during situations of decision making. Very often they are topics of counselings, crisis interventions, therapies, in which affected people are supported to communicate these inner contradictions to the outer world. As soon as these contradictory voices may become “loud” and are brought on the “stage of life” by dramatic methods - theatre, myths, stories, symbols, art - they may show their inherent power and their secret sense and thus induce change by that. Unintentionally this happens in schizophrenic episodes, intentionally this takes place in old shamanic healing rituals, often in systemic and in Gestalt therapy sessions, in many creative processes and in the hero's journey training.

The process of confrontation of the hero's and the demon's voices always happens in the borderland of dream world and reality and builds a bridge between old and new, which is necessary to continue the path into the unknown. The agreement shows often, how loadable and durable the bridge is - it shows the quality of relationship and the confidence into the unknown, where future is living.

In this important part of the Hero's journey training participants mostly take over the functions of facilitators themselves and accompany each other (in triads), when both powers are striving tenaciously

for their mutual acknowledgement. Only the agreements are published in a following sharing of the training group. The process guides of hero's journey thereby release participants into the autonomy and self responsibility of their own processes and thus are strengthening their own confidence into their relationship to the unknown, unconscious and the diversity of self-regulating forces lying dormant inside of themselves.

4. Exploration of the unknown and tests

As soon as the threshold of the gateway into the unknown is free and the decision is made to pass it, the exploration of the unknown starts. As in the world of dreams or in wonderland everything is possible there, what we find possible - an unlimited spectrum, which we may use for our realities. It is the exploration of the own phantasy, imagination and creativity. Smaller irritations on this path are tests, how to continue the own path and they culminate in the confrontation with the biggest fear limiting us - with our own borderline, what is possible for us.

This section of hero's journey takes place in dreamworld, world of magic, wonderland. We are there every night and experience dreams, lucid dreams, nightmares, clear dreams. They show us impulses, informations, problems or problem solutions, which we could use in our everyday life - if we would like to do so. This world of dreams is devaluated by our culture as “useful for the regeneration of the body only” and “unreal”. C.G.Jung as well as younger dream researchers can show us, how to learn to understand the language of images and symbols in our dreamworld and how to use them for the enrichment of our lives. (C.G.JUNG 1961, THOLEY 1989, CASTANEDA 1993).

In the hero's journey training the exploration of dreamworld as creative journey of imagination is accompanied by manifold music. The confrontation with our biggest fear takes place using our breathing, which connects us with our emotions, but as well with the interior and exterior, with dream and reality, with the physical and immaterial world and with birth and death. Do we face our fear on the path, we change ourselves and discover behind this fear mostly a wider spectrum of capabilities and possibilities in life.

5. Return into the known and the integration of new

Now begins the way back into reality of life and one's own known life environment. Did I discover new capabilities behind my fear of the path, this is like a gift, donated to me surprisingly. Sometimes donations may cause joy, sometimes amazement (why to me?), sometimes curiousness (what is possible to do with it?). And gifts want to be used in many different ways; in my everyday life, in my pro-

fessional life, in my family and with friends, for the world and especially for the realization of the call of the hero, for one's own life purpose.

As soon as I am back from dreamworld with new capabilities and possibilities in my practical everyday world, the transfer begins from the training into the own environment. To make use of new realized gifts in practical life, means to integrate them. Is the integration successful, I am able to share my new capabilities with others, I am able to share myself, what will cause change in my environment. This concrete hero's journey has come to its end and when we realize and celebrate it we are ready for our next hero's journey, waiting for us already to begin.

The use of Hero's journey structure in processes of change and healing

We find a lot of applications of the hero's journey structure: movies, stories, story telling, dance choreographies and theatre plays follow often its pattern. It is good to know these more playful versions of its application as well, because that sharpens the view on the basic pattern.

But it is also known, that Paul Rebillot developed the Hero's journey training on request of doctors and nurses of a psychiatric institution. Unlike other psychiatric institutions the patients there were able to work themselves through their schizophrenic resp. psychotic episode and to find a new integration of their self. That caused admiration, even envy among the staff of the institution and made them wish, to experience and to understand these episodes by themselves on a personal level. This became possible for them in Paul Rebillot's Hero's journey process and made him argue, taking part in the “small schizophrenic episode” - the participation in his hero's journey process - could help to avoid the “big schizophrenic resp. psychotic episode” or, if not, to enter it with previous experiences and to live through it with less fear.

That brings us to the question, why such schizophrenic or psychotic episodes occur at all and are characterized by Stanislav and Christina Grof as “spiritual emergency“ like a “normal“ event of spiritual transition or transformation. (GROF 2000)

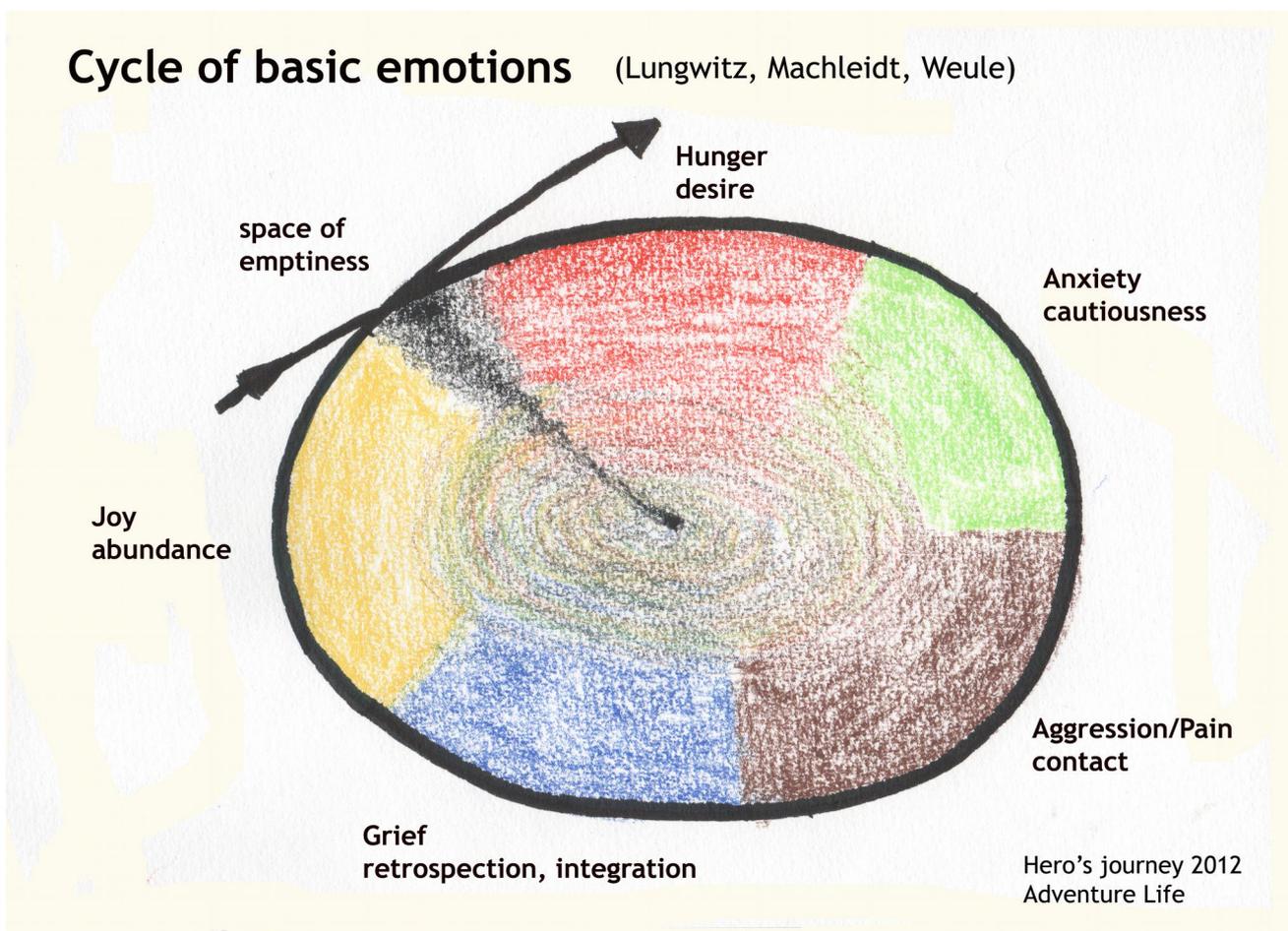
A possible explanation could be, that during situations of transition in life all that is showing up with power loudly or visibly, what we have cut ourselves off from by our rationalist and materialist construction of reality: from emotions, dreams and magic, from wild nature, immaterial forces, relationships to landscape, all other species, unknown layers of individual and collective consciousness. They can give us important hints of navigation and do that the stronger, the more they are excluded. It is one of the most important discoveries or rediscoveries of the 20th century, that there exists such a collec-

tive unconscious layer of consciousness, offering evidence of navigation for the path from the I to the self. (JUNG 1957)

Due to this circumstance it suggests itself, that counselors, therapists and youth mentors will be good facilitators of people in spiritual emergencies resp. crises and situations of transition, when they experience, realize and reflect these processes within themselves as well. Now some theoretical backgrounds of relevance for the guidance resp. accompaniment of this training.

1. Becoming acquainted with the own fear - navigation instead of control

Any hero's journey is unique and is a small or big artwork, a creative process, generating something new, a step of maturation and development of persons, groups, communities. The hero's journey training offers the space for the creation of such artworks: it is a ritual of transformation, allowing its participants to come in contact with their personal archetype of change. That is exciting, libidinous, frightening, painful, sad and full of joy. These emotions are not controllable; in order to be able to sense and to express them, to avoid putting them under taboo and pushing them away, it needs a protecting space of the training, the protecting space of ritual.



In the process itself we use the “cycle of basic emotions“ (WEULE 1998) as road map of orientation and hand it out as practical tool of orientation to the participants. It proved and proves itself as instrument of navigation in all kinds of creative processes, giving the cognitive permission, that all emo-

tions are welcome and offering a course and that it is good, not to get stuck within just one emotion.

Creative processes of individuals and groups follow the sequence of process phases of the cycle of basic emotions: of hunger (curiousness), anxiety (fear), aggression/pain (threshold of action), grief and joy: see graphic.

Emotions are the “fuel“ of rituals as well as of science, especially those questions asked by hunger and grief. Emotions are the motor of our self-controlled learning. Emotions create contact. “Emotions are sacred”, many indigenous traditions say. (SOMÉ 1998)

As soon as we as children feel forced to adopt views and attitudes of the adults, in order to avoid the loss of affection, we start to betray own emotions and perceptions. (GRUEN 2014) Dead ends like addiction, paralysis, violence/manias and depressions show personal imprints on the background of social and cultural trends of tabooed emotions.

2. The use of manifold possibilities

In the training the entire group including staff is working on six different levels, which are impregnating each other and may be realized differently, put into the foreground and used for the process.

The ritual level

Rituals establish integrity and become necessary as soon as we stand in front of tasks exceeding our own forces. Then it makes sense to call bigger immaterial forces as support and to take over their impulses. This makes a ritual a ritual in the indigenous view. (WEULE 2003) Rituals need symbols and symbolic actions. We use a candle, which is “passed on” to a keeper in a daily ceremony as essential symbol and symbolic action for the ritual space of the hero's journey training. Supplementally we may use further peripheral rituals in the process.

The mythological level

Here the story of the personal hero's journey unfolds itself as colorful image telling more than 1 000 analytical descriptions. The mythological level connects us as a tale with the basic pattern of the hero's journey.

The dramatic level

invites to bring everything “on stage” which is relevant for the story. It makes possible the presentation of the personal story on the background of the bigger story and makes both visible and audible for others.

The biographical level

is telling the entire personal quest, the participants are up to. Starting with the current situation one finds here all experiences and visions of the person, interwoven and mixed with all other levels.

The cognitive level

On this level staff and participants are working on explanations, reality constructions and mental mo-

dels, underlying our being and our actions. It is an important level, which we like to call “food for the brain”.

The practical level

is the here and now of the training and includes everything necessary for the flow of the hero's journey process: setting, structure of space and time, matter, impulses, crisis interventions, staff meetings etc.

3. Balancing contradictions

The central contradiction throughout the entire hero's journey training is the contradiction between old and new, i.e. the meaningfulness of habits and the meaningfulness of something new instead. A further contradiction is the contradiction of authority (=self empowerment) and dependency (=empowerment by others). These contradictions manifest themselves in the process in many ways: as mood, loudness, intensity. Is e.g. the intensity too big and too heavy, it is necessary to bring in humor and lightness.

4. Clear definition of responsibilities - release of authority

Framework conditions like structure of time and space, process structure and design (impulses) are in the authority and responsibility of the guides. How to handle contents, intensity and solutions is in the responsibility of the participants, as agreed upon in a contract by the entire group in the beginning. Facilitators of hero's journey trainings must be able as well to release authority to the living process in the training. They must have the courage to give up control of the process: this is put in words easily, but practically it is a work of art causing anxiety. Art is helpful in itself, having much to offer out of its rich repertoire in the right point of time (ritual, music, myths, tales, painting, dancing, meditating, theatre, ...) helping facilitators to learn to observe, what and how the training group resp. the individuals in it take over and make use of.

5. Confidence in the self-regulating forces of the living entirety

Consciousness is as well an individual as a collective phenomenon. To concentrate consciousness as it is practiced in ancient traditions of a lot of different meditations, is a mighty power with an impact on ourselves and on our environment, able to change not only our mind but our body as well as the material reality around us. In the hero's journey training a form of meditation is practiced daily.

This holistic view of the world is a central theoretical and practical basis of our work and of the hero's journey training program. This basis helps us to observe the lively processes, we are accompanying and into which we as guiding team are involved all the time, in an even-tempered way and to keep learning something new, thus meeting the interplay of self-regulating forces with more and more admiration and confidence. This basis helps us to keep going on together and respectfully into the unknown: into new hero's journeys.

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