The Hero’s Journey

C. Uhl

*Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself and yourself alone one question. Does this path have a heart? … If it does, then the path is good. If it doesn’t, it is of no use… You can only be real on YOUR path. The hardest thing in the world is to be something you are not.* - Leo Buscaglia, 1972, pg. 28

Time and again in your BiSci readings I have pointed to the role that social conditioning plays in placing us at odds with ourselves, with each other, and with nature and cosmos. It is no different with matters of the soul. To illustrate: Imagine that you are back in first grade and your teacher smiles at you and asks, “What do you want to be when you get big?” You respond, dreamily, “I want to live in the sea with the whales.” Hearing your response, your teacher says dismissively, “That’s silly; you can’t do that!” Taken aback, sheepishly, you try again with, “I want to live in the forest, high up in trees, with the wind blowing.” Now the expression on your teacher’s face becomes stern and she says, “You will have to get a real job so you can take care of your family.”

Fast forward: You are graduating from high school. By this time you have received thousands of messages, both verbal and non-verbal, from parents, teachers, and others in roles of authority restricting and corralling your sense of what is possible. The aggregate message is that you must listen to and heed the voice of those in authority if you are to survive and flourish. This is a message that engenders fear, coaxing you to separate from your soul’s deepest yearnings.

The Power of Fear: Emily’s Dilemma

In a class discussion Emily says that she has been thinking a lot about dropping out of school but each time she gets close to taking action, she is overwhelmed with fear.

“What’s the worst of this fear?” I ask her.

“The worst,” she replies with a shy laugh, “is that I will be left homeless on the street.”

Emily has a belief, and accompanying fear, that without a college education her life will be a shambles. The tragedy in Emily’s case, and there are millions of young people like Emily, is that she is sacrificing her life—her fulfillment in the present moment—her freedom—because of her fear. Indeed, through the process of her schooling, Emily has been conditioned to ignore the present, conditioned to sacrifice the present for the future. This is a way of being which is anti-life because it ignores the very place where life occurs—right now! Unless, Emily breaks free of her conditioning, she will, likely, live her entire life in fear, oblivious to the present—always preparing for a future which never arrives because the “future,” in reality doesn’t exist, it is a concept that lives only in the mind.

Indeed, Emily, no different from the rest of us, has been socially conditioned to accept as true a set of beliefs that are profoundly life-denying. Here is a sampling:

--Humans are greedy and competitive by nature. *Underlying message: Look out for Number One!*
Only things that can be measured are real. Underlying message: Be realistic; there is no room in this world for your soul/sprit/heart

When you encounter problems in life, go to an expert. Underlying message: You are not competent.

Things are the way they are and you need to accept this. Underlying message: You are powerless to affect change.

If you are upset or depressed, the problem’s with you! Hidden message: Hide your feelings; keep on a smiley face; lie and join everyone else in the game of “let’s pretend.”

These beliefs (and others like them) are not inherently true; they are simply cultural constructs that engender fear, while at the same time stifling creativity and crippling the imagination.

But, consider: What if Emily were to live in a less fearful culture—one that encouraged her to believe that her desire to leave school was, quite possibly, her soul guiding her toward a unique calling? And what if her teachers in this more enlightened culture, rather than feeding her fear, were to invite her shy soul-voice into the open, helping her take a step toward discerning her life path.

When young people, like Emily, are seduced by the siren songs of limiting beliefs, they lose the awareness, attention and courage necessary to find their unique soul print. The result is that they risk becoming “nice dead people” leading shallow lives that are not their own.

This situation is reflected in the story about the man who found an egg of a wild bird and placed it in the nest of a barnyard hen. Eventually the egg hatched and out came an eagle. The eaglet, reared in the barnyard with a brood of chicks, followed their example scratching the earth for worms and insects; he clucked and cackled like they did, and, like them, he would thrash his wings and lift himself a few feet off the ground before plopping back to the ground. Then, one day when the eagle was several years old, he was awestruck by a magnificent golden-winged bird he saw flying high in the sky and he asked a nearby chicken “Who is that?” The chicken responded, “That’s the eagle, the king of birds; he is different from us; he belongs to the sky. We, on the other hand, are chickens; we belong to the ground. The barnyard eagle continued to live as a chicken until the day he died. Why? Because that is what he believed he was!

Might it be that it is no different for us—that our culture, including our education system, has conditioned us to see ourselves as economic animals, meant to spend our lives as producers with our heads to the grindstone; when, in fact, we are eagles—i.e., magnificent beings capable of things beyond our wildest imaginings?

Because of social conditioning many people who attend college end up majoring in “upward mobility”—a sure path to a life as “chicken.” Sadly, they have been brainwashed into believing that a “successful” life is one benchmarked by a good salary, ample material possessions and a good retirement plan. David Orr challenges this narrow view of success, positing that what really matters in life is not a good paying job but the capacity to discover and then follow one’s calling: “The plain fact is that the planet does not need more ‘successful’ people,” writes Orr, “but it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with ‘success’ as our culture has defined it” (1994; pg. 12).
Leave Your Parents at the Door

Storyteller Ron Jones relates a story about his father, who was a musician at heart but who worked for 35 years selling televisions, refrigerators, and glassware in a department store in San Francisco. One day Ray’s father was told that the store was closing. In those days there were no golden parachutes or retirement benefits, and when they asked if there was anything they could do for him, his only request was to have the chair he’d been sitting in all those years. They sold it to him.

“He brought that chair to my house on his back one day,” says Ron, “and placed it in my living room and told me about all the years he had sat in it, and then he made me promise that I would never sit down in that chair, ever. It’s in my living room to this day, and I never sit in it. I just tell the story, and the lesson my father passed on to me through it: Don’t sit down in life. All through your life you’re going to be asked to sit down, to conform, comply, and compromise, and it can be very deadly if you get in the habit of doing that. Be leery of the price of conformity, my father told me. Stand up, create things, do things” (Levoy, 1997, pg. 206).

The search for one’s genuine and unique calling is arduous for today’s young people, especially since many parents (unlike Ron’s Father) fail to fully honor and support this search. With this in mind, I often tell my students: “Please leave your parents at the door.” In effect, I am saying, “Chances are you have been told what to do—told how to live—for the last 18 years. Now you are here in college, on your own for the first time and this is your life—not your parent’s life that is unfolding before you. Your parent’s primary job is to live their life; your job is to live your life.”

Your Parents Job is to Live THEIR Life: In his book, It’s a Meaningful Life, Bo Lozoff uses a Hasidic story retold by Rabbi Abraham Twerski to examine the consequences when parents sacrifice their lives for their children. The story begins with a Rabbi asking a man, who is engaged day-after-day in his business ventures, when he might have time to devote to prayer and the study of the Torah. The man responds that his life is simple and his needs are few and that he sincerely wants to devote time to prayer but he is not able to because he is obligated to provide and save money for his child’s future.

Well, years go by and that child becomes a grown man and he, too, becomes fully engrossed in business. The Rabbi, now in middle age, asks the young man when he might have time to pray and study the Torah? But, like his father before him, the son responds that, though his needs are few, he has to work long hours to provide for his family and his child’s future. In time the son’s child grows up and the story is the same…. And, so it comes to pass that this same excuse is repeated generation after generation—no man having time to live life according to his beliefs because each in turn feels he must provide for ‘his’ child.…

“Somewhere then,” the Rabbi exclaims, “perhaps at the end of time, we will find that ultimate child for whose welfare countless generations have so toiled that they’ve neglected their own values in the process. Where, where is that ultimate child? Is he not but a fiction. A non-existent end-point? An illusion that has driven the entire world into an insane striving toward futility?” (2000, pgs. 144-5).

The moral of this story, as I see it, is that our children have the very same needs as we do and those needs have to do with living lives of meaning and joy and, as is all too obvious,
affluence in no way correlates to genuine happiness, much less success. “The way for a parent to give his child the maximum chance for a joyful and meaningful life is to be living such a life him/herself in their very presence, not sacrificing their life for their child” (2000, pg. 145). If it is our calling to work with the poor, or to farm or to compose music, or to build furniture (even if this means that we live below the “poverty line”), this way of being is our gift to our children and the world. Note: This is not to say that the parent does not care for her child, nurture her child—of course she does!—but not at the expense of failing to live her unique calling in life.

**Your Job is to Live YOUR Life:** One of the hardest things for young people to learn is that it is their job to live their very own unique life. Indeed, when a young person takes a stand for his/her life, he/she is helping her parents do the same! For example, imagine a case where a Dad doesn’t think his son is going to be successful in life because his son hasn’t chosen a major that he approves of. The Dad is upset—he is suffering—because his son actions are not conforming to his desires. The son isn’t making his Dad suffer—he is not causing the Dad’s suffering. Indeed, the Dad could end his suffering by simply choosing to believe that the perfect major for his son is the one that his son is most passionate about.

Tragically, the Dad’s fear that “My son will not be successful” plays out in such a way that the father is not successful in maintaining a close loving relationship with his son. In other words, “My son will not be successful” translates in life to “I am not successful right now at loving my son.” (Note: This is a “turnaround” ala Byron Katie.)

If the Dad could muster the courage to look deeply into this, he is likely to discover that at the core of his suffering is his need to have his son emulate him—i.e., part of the Dad’s identity is wrapped up in needing his son’s approval—and when his son takes another path this is upsetting for the Dad. Rather than having his son’s approval, this Dad needs his own approval…. Which is to say that the Dad needs to love his own life, irrespective of his son’s actions, thereby giving his son the freedom to live and love his particular life.

The son for his part has the same challenge—i.e., to love his own life, irrespective of the disapproval, real or imagined, he may sense from his Dad. The work for the son is to not get caught up in his Dad’s fear that he is not going to be successful by simply recognizing the ways in which he is successful—this means defining success on his terms, not his Dad’s terms.

Whether it is a parent or a child, what keeps a person from living their lives authentically is fear. In this vein, Martha Beck (2001) makes a useful distinction between what she calls the “social self” and the “essential self.” The “social self” is your surface self that seeks to keep you in line by ensuring that you conform to societal norms; whereas your “essential self” is akin to your soul—that sense of “isness” that resides at the core of your being. These two “selves” are often in opposition to one another. So, when a desire for bold action arises from one’s essential self, it is likely to be shouted down by the social self for fear of what others will think. For example, you think to yourself: If I quit my job to become an artist, or if I leave my church because I am seeking a different form of spiritual nurturance, or if I take a strong stand on a controversial issue, “everybody” will either lose respect for me or think I’m nuts. A funny thing happens, though, when one takes the time to consider who their “everybody” is? Invariable each of our “everybodies” is composed of just a handful of people, though we act as if it is the world at large. What’s more your “everybody” is different from the “everybody” of the person next to you and so on down the line. As it turns out, whenever an action is inspired by a calling from the “essential self,” however bold it might be, there will be
many who will applaud it and many others who will take no note, and just a tiny handful (your “everybody”) who might be upset.

**Tom’s Story**

To illustrate what it might mean to fearlessly live one’s own life, consider the story of Tom, a college student, who was severely depressed, a situation common among college students these days. As Tom gradually lost interest in his studies, he reached a point when he could barely get himself up in the morning to go to classes.

Tom: I decided I really did not care if I lived or died. As far as I could tell, it was simply the momentum and inertia of my family’s expectations that had brought me this far. Being a student was not my life. It was a wish or demand that others had for me. I felt trapped.

Then, one summer day Tom took a potentially lethal amount of drugs and alcohol. He teetered on the edge of death, knowing that he could simply let go and die, but Tom chose to live.

Tom: What astonished me then was that there was something to actually hold on to, a something that was almost tangible. I realized in that moment that there was an essence of me beyond the compilation of my nerves and tissue. There was a me I could hold on to. I could feel my will, my self, my soul. It was as if I was experiencing the essential force at the center of life itself. I knew holding on would be tough—I had taken a lot of drugs and could feel how badly I had abused my body. But I knew I had to hold on.

No sooner had Tom come to when he received a phone call informing him that a close childhood friend had been killed in a terrible accident. Tom was first devastated and, then, appalled when he acknowledged that, just hours before, he had tried to end his own precious life. When classes began a few weeks later, Tom returned to school, but one September morning when he left his apartment, rather than turning right toward school, he turned left, making his way to a lake. There he sat and sat gazing out over the water to the mountains off to the west.

Tom: I fell into a trance. I became keenly aware of the beauty—the reflection of the mountains in the calm, glassy water; the birds circling and calling; the dramatic gray clouds. I noticed that in one spot the sun was shining through a blue hole. Rays of splintered sunlight struck the high peaks across the lake. I had a sense of being beckoned by that hole. I knew without a doubt I was being called to go through that hole and over the mountains.

So it was that a few days later Tom headed West first to Colorado, then roaming with the Grateful Dead for a time, then journeying to Africa.... Eventually he returned to college but this time with clarity of purpose and vision for his life. Tom had, in effect, left his cultural conditioning behind and made the descent into the soul, the seat of purpose, meaning, and passion.

This is a life and death journey. When we fail to make it we die to ourselves. When we choose to make the journey, we also have to face our death—the death that occurs as we leave our old ways of being—i.e., our old social roles; our old ways of relating to ourselves and others; our old fears that crimped us; our old ways of loving bounded by conditions—behind.
Initially Tom “stuck it out” in school in deference to his parents. This created feelings of tension and division—feelings that arise when one is at war with himself. Tom’s every day self or state of consciousness (i.e., his ego) was at war with his essential self. Tom’s ego wanted to preserve the status quo; it wanted to avoid things that might lead to social censorship. As such the ego is distinct from soul and spirit. Indeed, the ego emerges, not from nature, but from the matrix of culture. In Tom’s case, it was the act of coming into relationship with his soul—his essence—that enabled his “adolescent ego”—conditioned to depend on social acceptance—to die, making way for his healthy “adult ego” which acts in concert with soul to create a life grounded in one’s unique calling (Plotkin, 2003; quotes from pages 62-63).

From Vision to Action: Living One’s Calling at PSU

Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us.

-Oliver Wendell Holmes

One of the things I love about teaching is that I sometimes get to witness those first moments of awakening when students begin to take their life into their own hands. Here are four stories gleaned from my experiences.

**Sue’s Story:** Sue was a second semester senior when she came into my office for the first time. She was taking my Environmental Science course and this was raising grave doubts about her major. She told me, in effect: “I don’t know what to do? I have this degree in advertising but now I have come to see that advertising simply encourages people to consume more and more stuff and all this consumption is destroying everything—our water, our soil, our air.” I like my major but I want to make a positive difference in the world, not contribute to more problems. I am so lost….

As I listened, it occurred to me that Sue was suffering from the disabling belief that there was only one way she could apply her advertising/marketing skills. As we talked, I saw that what she really wanted was to be a part of an organization that was protecting the environment, like The Sierra Club or Greenpeace. I asked her if these organizations might benefit by having someone with her skills—e.g., someone who could help them deliver their “messages” with more cogency and power or someone who could help them mount more effective fund-raising campaigns? Suddenly a way opened for her.

**Ronak’s Story:** Ronak was a Hotel and Restaurant Management major. Like Sue, he had taken my environmental science course and thought that I might extend a sympathetic ear to him. As I listened, I learned that Ronak had selected his major on pragmatic grounds—e.g., lots of job opportunities. Now, on the eve of his graduation from Penn State he had discovered that his heart’s deepest yearning was to be part of a spiritual community. And, suddenly, the idea of working as a Junior Manager for big hotel in Miami Beach no longer inspired him. I watched as his demeanor shifted from despair to acute curiosity when I informed him that there are hundreds upon hundreds of spiritual retreat centers located throughout the U.S. and that these centers are continually hosting guests who come for workshops and retreats. “How is it that these centers manage to host (house
and feed) all their visitors?” I asked. Ronak got it, of course. They need people with exactly the set of skills he had acquired in his major.

Dennis’ Story: Dennis received his degree in Golf Course Management. In the course of his studies, he, too, took my environmental science course and learned to his surprise that heavy fertilizer, pesticide and water use, associated with golf courses, can pollute groundwater and deplete aquifers. Though Dennis was excited about managing a golf course, he was troubled that, through his work, he might be causing harm to the environment. Hearing his concern, I told him about the efforts that some progressive golf course managers were making to eliminate the use of pesticides and to landscape their courses in ways that dramatically reduce the need for watering while creating habitat beneficial to wildlife. Suddenly, Dennis saw how, through his work, he might be part of a solution, rather than part of a problem.

Jean’s Story: Then there is Jean, a Biology major, who I met during the second semester of her senior year when she took my Field Ecology course. During the semester I watched as Jean became more and more open to expressing her doubts about the rightness of her major. But then, as graduation time approached, Jean decided to go to graduate school in Biology, reasoning that this would be the most prudent thing to do since she had already spent four years majoring in Biology.

Jean’s grades were good and her GRE scores were solid so I assumed that she would be accepted to graduate school. However, she was rejected by all seven of the graduate programs she applied to. Though Jean was temporarily stunned by this set back, I encouraged her to see it as an invitation to find her true calling. In an email she sent me shortly after graduation she wrote: “I had my future planned out and now I’m being forced to rethink, well, everything. I won’t lie though, it is probably for the better seeing how my interests have been evolving... But I’m pretty overwhelmed about what to do in the immediate future and really don’t even know where to start. I’m just treading water until I find some clarity.”

A year later I received a handwritten letter from her wherein she informed me that she had moved to Maine. Among other things she wrote: “I have fallen in love with this place.” And of her job at Maine’s Ferry Beach Ecology School: “The days are 14 hours long and I make little money but I have a room overlooking the ocean and when the waves crash my bed sometimes shakes. I have met amazing people who work for the love of it and spend all their time in the moment with little regard for any long-term plan. And it freaks me out but slowly all the pressure I have been putting on myself to figure out my future is melting away and for once I am totally happy.” She concludes: “What happens after this is uncertain but the current moment is a wonderful gift. I am having so much fun....”

Not all young folks are as courageous as Sue, Ronak, Dennis, and Jean. I see these four as soul heroes. In this vein, Parker Palmer (1998) believes that the act of committing to one’s soul’s calling is, in effect, deciding to “live divided no more.” In other words, the soul hero refuses to live on the outside in ways that contradict the truths that are part of his/her essence. In so doing soul heroes serve as beacons for others, manifesting lives of integrity. Palmer calls the decision “to live divided no more” the “Rosa Parks Decision” for it was Rosa Parks, a black woman living in Alabama, who decided that she would not
pretend to accept on the outside what she knew, in her heart, to be fundamentally wrong. So by taking a seat in the front of the bus (instead of in the designated zone in the back) Parks stood up with her whole undivided being. We, just as Parks, become fearless when we realize that there is no punishment—not public criticism, not jail, not physical beating—that could come close to equaling the punishment we do to ourselves when we collude in our own diminishment by separating from our soul’s deep calling.

**Bringing Your Calling Fully to Life**

The biggest obstacle deterring young people from following their calling is “social conditioning.” For example, imagine that you are 17 and you know in the depths of your being that your calling is to be a musician. You have no doubt: It is music more than anything else that makes your heart sing! But still you hesitate, immobilized by all those voices in your head saying things like: “You can’t be a musician.” “Who do you think you are?” “You are not good enough.” “Be practical.” Do you want to end up on the street playing the harmonica with a tin cup in front of you? These are not the voices emanating from your fearless soul. Rather, they are voices implanted into your psyche by a culture that fails to honor and nurture your soul’s deepest yearnings. As such, these voices are designed to engender fear and thereby keep you in line so that you don’t rock the proverbial boat. Tragically, the young person who succumbs to these voices remains asleep to the magnificence of what it means to be born human.

It is possible to break free of the constraints, both imagined and real, imposed by culture. And, fortunately, now at the rise of the third millennium, there are new cultural voices arising, voices that offer a profoundly empowering understanding of human purpose and potential. These new voices are grounded: not in separation but in relationship; not in limitation but in possibility; not in control but in freedom; not in fear but in love. As such, these new voices are designed to engender fear and thereby keep you in line so that you don’t rock the proverbial boat. Tragically, the young person who succumbs to these voices remains asleep to the magnificence of what it means to be born human.

Central to these new more empowering voices is the understanding that we human beings are not separate, but intimately connected to each other and to everything else in the Universe. Indeed, modern physics reveals that each of us is, most essentially, a packet of pulsating energy situated in a vast sea of potentiality. Yes, we are constantly interacting, energetically, with everything in the Universe, both near and far, whether we know it or not. This means, in effect, that things have no meaning in isolation; they are only understandable in the context of a web of dynamic interrelationships. As McTaggart (2007; pg. xix, xx)) puts it, “The universe [is] not a storehouse of static, separate objects, but a single organism of interconnected energy fields in a continuous state of becoming. At its infinitesimal level, our world resembles a vast network of quantum information, with all its component parts constantly on the phone.”

**We Are an Energy Field Within an Energy Field**

Most people define themselves [as a finite physical] body, but you’re not a finite body. Even under a microscope you’re an energy field. What we know about energy is this: You go to quantum physicist and you say, “What creates the world?” And he or she will say, “Energy.” Well, describe energy... “OK, it can never be created or
destroyed; it always was, and always has been; everything that ever existed always exist; it’s moving into form, though form and out of form.” You go to a theologian and ask the question, “What created the Universe?” And she will say, “God.” OK describe God. “Always was and always has been; never can be created or destroyed; all that ever was, always will be; always moving into form, though form and out of form.” You see, it’s the same description, just differently terminology. So if you think you’re this “meat suit” running around, think again. You’re a spiritual being! You’re an energy field, operating in a larger energy field (James Ray in Byrne, 2007; pgs 158-159).

Einstein in his prescience expressed it this way: “A human being is part of the whole, called by us “universe”... He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.”

Since each of us is, most essentially, energy, it should not surprise you to learn that your thoughts are energy. Indeed, your thought “energy” takes the form of light—not the kind of “light” that is detectable by the human eye, but bona fide light that can be measured as photons by sensitive equipment. Metaphorically speaking, we are each like stars—balls of energy generating, by virtue of our thoughts, a steady stream of glowing photons that pass from us out into the universe, affecting everything in their path.

The implications of these findings have great relevance for the young person setting out to pursue his/her unique calling. Why? Because they reveal that each of us has the potential to determine our destiny with our thoughts and intentions. Indeed, it appears the Buddha had it right 2500 years ago when he said, “All that we are is a result of what we have thought.” In other words, to a significant extent, you have the life you have now because of your past thoughts. It is those largely those thoughts that have “materialized” your life.

Think of it this way. Your thoughts are energy and all energy vibrates at a frequency. This means that the frequency of energy you broadcast out to the universe differs depending on what you are thinking. Meanwhile, the constellation of elements that comprise your calling also vibrates at a frequency. Enter The Law of Attraction—the basic law of the Universe which says that like attracts like. Energetically speaking this means that the frequency of your thought energy has a way of attracting and bringing back to you things which are energetically compatible or so the theory goes. To the extent that this is true it means that each of us, in effect, thinks and speaks our life into existence (Byrne, 2006).

CONCLUSION

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don’t go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don’t go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don’t go back to sleep.

-Jelaluddin Rumi
Never before in the history of humankind has a culture said to its young (as we now do): “It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Study hard so that you can get ahead of those around you. The goal of life is to accumulate money and the things money can buy; this will bring you happiness.” This is a alienating and soulless message for we all know, deep down, that life is not primarily about greedily taking care of one’s self. There is no genuine fulfillment, no life, in that.

We are not here on Earth, primarily, to make money. Rather each of us is a unique part of the human family. Now it is our turn to ensure that the human story continues and deepens. In this context the question for all of us is not how are we going to make a killing in the money market, but how are we going create the conditions wherein our grandchildren and their children, and “all our relations”—i.e., the winged ones and the four-leggeds—can flourish on this planet we have been graced to visit for a short time? This is a question that calls forth our bigness and fullness of being. It is a question that we can only by answered by “hushing” and listening to our souls.

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