

## **Teacher as trickster on the learner's journey**

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*Abstract: For tens of thousands of years, teachers have used stories to promote learning. Today's teachers can do the same. In particular, we can employ Joseph Campbell's "monomyth"—with its stages of separation, initiation, and return—as a model for structuring learning experiences. Within the monomyth, one tempting role for teachers is the sage, but we should resist this temptation. Instead we should acknowledge, and benefit from, our role as tricksters. To do so is to accept and illuminate the dual responsibility of the teacher as both supporter and challenger.*

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For tens of thousands of years, teachers have used stories to promote learning. We can imagine an early classroom, made up of would-be hunters gathered around a fire, listening to a tale of a successful or unsuccessful hunt. By hearing a story, the apprentice hunters learn what works and what doesn't. Storytelling comes naturally to us. As therapist and teacher Joseph Gold (2002) states in the title of a recent book, we humans are "The Story Species." Today's teachers are drawing on the power of story in a variety of ways. For example, in the health professions the field of "narrative pedagogy" is flourishing. Student doctors, nurses, and other health-care professionals are learning from stories how to see their patients, not as "presenting" conditions but as whole persons, with their own life stories. One especially powerful use of stories in teaching involves Joseph Campbell's "monomyth." We teachers can employ the monomyth—with its stages of separation, initiation, and return—as a model for structuring learning experiences.

However, we must be careful. We must resist the temptation to take on the role of sage, a frequent figure on the monomythic journey. Instead we should acknowledge, and benefit from, our role as tricksters. To do so is to accept and illuminate the dual responsibility of the teacher as both supporter and challenger.

### **I. The Monomyth**

Joseph Campbell (1949), in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, argues that many traditional stories are variations on a single story. Campbell, adopting a word coined by James Joyce, calls this story "monomyth." Campbell describes the monomyth as having three stages:

- Separation
- Initiation
- Return

He summarizes the monomyth this way: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive

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victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (30). Think of Jack (of Beanstalk fame), Snow White, Dorothy (of Kansas and Oz), Luke Skywalker.

Some critics have held that Campbell’s monomyth is too specific, too detailed, to describe a large number of stories. For example, Donald E. Polkinghorne (1988) writes, “Attempts to uncover a single deep plot in all the world’s stories are no longer held in esteem in narrative theory. In the end, there is no way to tell where these investigations are right or wrong, because finding similarities among the surface diversity seems to depend on the imaginative function of the person identifying them” (78). Others have found Campbell’s account of the monomyth too male-centered, not taking into account differences between the male and female life journeys—the male more outer, the female more inner. But even if we are uneasy with the specifics of Campbell’s monomyth as a descriptor of traditional tales, we can still find value in it—in general terms—as a model for structuring learning experiences. We can employ the three stages of the monomyth as a kind of map, guiding us and our students through a rich learning experience by showing us where we are, and what we have to do to get somewhere else.

Educational theorist Jerome Bruner (1986) makes a case for a generalized form of the monomyth:

Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intentions. And since there are myriad intentions and endless ways for them to run into trouble—or so it would seem—there should be endless kinds of stories. But, surprisingly, this seems not to be the case. One view has it that lifelike narratives start with a canonical or “legitimate” steady state, which is breached, resulting in a crisis, which is terminated by a redress, with recurrence of the cycle as an open possibility. (16)

Bruner’s “breach” is, of course roughly equivalent to Campbell’s “separation”; his “crisis,” Campbell’s “initiation”; and his “redress,” Campbell’s “return.”

Another educational theorist, Kieran Egan (1989), generalizes, and simplifies, even further. “There is, then,” he writes, “at the simplest level a rhythm in stories. They set up an expectation at the beginning, this is elaborated or complicated in the middle, and is satisfied at the end. Stories are tied beginning to end by their satisfying the expectation set up at the beginning” (24). What Egan may be seeing is the influence of our own tacit cultural knowledge of the monomyth. Beginning with the first stories we hear, we learn to expect that the wrongs at the beginning will be redressed at the end.

However specific the description of the monomythic pattern, what is important to us as teachers is that this pattern is *always* about learning. We repeat, *always* about learning. As screenwriter Christopher Vogler (1998) says, “In any good story the hero *grows and changes*, making a journey from one way of being to the next: from despair to hope, weakness to strength, folly to wisdom, love to hate, and back again” (13, emphasis ours). This characteristic of the monomyth makes it an ideal pattern for the design of learning experiences, whether lessons, units, or entire courses. The monomyth is a model of what happens in *all* learning. To learn, we must leave the comfort of the familiar, of what we think we know, and enter an unknown territory, a territory that can be frightening. There we are confronted with challenges, even dangers. If we overcome these challenges, we can return “home” with boons, in the form of new knowledge and skills, and apply them to our lives. To explore the monomyth as a model for teaching and learning, let us look at each of Campbell’s three stages in turn.

### A. Separation.

For Campbell, the monomyth begins with a “call,” a message that “destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (53). For the hero, “the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit” (47). Such a realization is necessary for learning to occur. To be truly motivated to learn, students must be somehow dissatisfied with their present knowledge or skills. As English teacher Dan Lindley (1993) writes, successful teaching begins when “a student is puzzled, even upset, by a discrepancy, a painful occurrence in a story, a concept not understood” (126). Maxine Greene (1995) concurs: “The difficult task for the teacher is to devise situations in which the young will move from the habitual and the ordinary and consciously undertake a search” (24).

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid (2002) express this principle by labeling learning as “demand driven.” They write, “People learn in response to need. When people cannot see the need for what’s being taught, they ignore it, reject it, or fail to assimilate it in any meaningful way. Conversely, when they have a need, then, if the resources for learning are available, people learn effectively and quickly” (136). One way of expressing the teacher’s role at this stage is helping learners move from “unconscious incompetence” to “conscious incompetence” (Haines, 1998, 95), though this may not be the original source for these terms).

One helpful model for understanding the separation stage of the monomyth comes from systems theory. Consider the activity of any natural system, from atom to Earth: The system is in a *status quo*, a steady state in which internal and external forces are balanced. When, from time to time, new external forces disrupt the system, it quickly “corrects” and settles back into the status quo. Sometimes, however, greater external forces—forces ultimately directed toward disorganization and death—threaten the very existence of the system. Facing this stronger threat, the system is unable to “correct” itself, and so, at first, succumbs to those forces. But, in doing so, it uses them as a means toward reorganization. If this reorganization is successful, the system emerges into a new steady state, one more organized and resistant.

And we’ve just heard Campbell’s monomyth.

If the monomyth is a Jungian archetype, a pattern inherited as part of one’s collective unconsciousness, it’s a small wonder. Humanity is the result (although, it is to be hoped, not the final result) of the precise process the monomyth recounts, over and over since the universe began. If any story is structured into our unconsciousness, it must surely be this one. The evolution story is truly the only story there is.

In these systems terms, learners begin their hero’s journey with a comfortably ordered psyche, in a state of relative equilibrium. To learn, that equilibrium must be disturbed, thrown into disorder. In that relatively disordered state, far from equilibrium, a new order, a new equilibrium, can emerge, with a higher degree of complexity. As Michael Roemer (1995) writes, “We think of heroes as eager to act but only a few, like Don Quixote or Emma Bovary, *seek* great deeds or adventure. Most of them do not go looking for trouble but do what they must to return life to equilibrium. Odysseus, like Hansel and Gretel, is simply trying to get home” (6). The ideal setting for learning occurs when the learner himself or herself realizes that old knowledge, old ways of thinking, no longer suffice. One of the joys the two of us find in teaching at a “commuter” campus is the opportunity to work with older, nontraditional students who have come to this realization by themselves, who have—on their own—heard the call to adventure, the call to further learning. But more often, we as teachers have to facilitate this

realization. Jacqueline Grennon Brooks and Martin G. Brooks (1999), in their discussion of “constructivist” teaching, claim that “students’ fundamental quest is discrepancy resolution” (28). They elaborate:

Cognitive growth occurs when an individual revisits and reformulates a current perspective. Therefore, constructivist teachers engage students in experiences that might engender contradictions to students’ current hypotheses. . . . Contradictions are constructed by learners. Teachers cannot know what will be perceived as a contradiction by students; this is an internal process. But teachers can and must challenge students’ present conceptions, knowing that the challenge only exists if the students *perceive* it as a contradiction. Teachers must, therefore, use information about the students’ present conceptions, or points of view, to help them understand which notions students may accept or reject as contradictory” (112-13).

A friend and colleague of ours, the late Tony Sherrill, sometimes wore a jacket and tie to the first meeting of his introductory religious studies course, and asked that his students dress similarly at future class meetings. At the second class meeting, when at least some students had complied with Tony’s request, Tony himself would arrive in T-shirt, shorts, and sandals. The subsequent discussion, of why some students had complied and some had not, led to a discussion of authority, and of how we accept or reject it. The stage was thus set for the rest of the course, a course in which students inevitably struggle with issues of religious authority, the decision to follow, or not, the religious paths of their family and friends.

But the call does not have to *emphasize* the inadequacy of present knowledge or skills. It does not, and should not, have to make students feel incapable or unworthy of the proposed adventure. Rather, the call can be a positive experience, growing out of built-in desire for the beyond. Jonathan Culler (2000) points out that “the pleasure of narrative is linked to desire. Plots tell of desire and what befalls it, but the movement of narrative itself is driven by desire in the form of ‘epistemophilia’, a desire to know: we want to discover secrets, to know the end, to find the truth” (91).

Ultimately, the separation stage requires, of both teacher and learner, trust and imagination—the ability to see beyond the present situation. As Maxine Greene (1995) writes, “To learn and to teach, one must have an awareness of leaving something behind while reaching toward something new, and this kind of awareness must be linked to imagination” (20).

### *B. Initiation.*

The second stage of the monomyth is the most difficult, for student and teacher. Leaving the safe and familiar can trigger fear and mourning. As Stephen G. Haines (1998) writes, “People experiencing change typically feel a deep sense of loss. They are heading toward new territory, with old, familiar ways—always so comfortable, and often valued—falling behind them” (175). Haines elaborates:

When we go through change, whether personal or professional, we don’t move on a straight line of productivity from *a* to *b*. Our thoughts, feelings, and experiences fluctuate between highs and lows; we feel as if we are on a rollercoaster. (175)

As much as anyone in the past century, Gandhi gave up everything safe and familiar in his quest for justice. He is widely reported to have said, providing us yet another instance of Campbell’s monomyth, “Every worthwhile accomplishment, big or little, has its stages of drudgery and triumph: a beginning, a struggle and a victory.” One of the most important actions

a teacher can take at this stage is simply *naming* it, defining the stage as an essential step in learning. Haines (1998) continues:

Often, just knowing about the Rollercoaster of Change helps people who are undergoing change. They see it is only natural to experience difficulties at such times. The key is ‘hanging in there,’ in developing persistence.” (174)

One of us—Ken—teaches an advanced copyediting course that asks students, usually for the first time in their college careers, to follow an exacting set of mechanical rules, as preparation for jobs in publishing. For many students, the moment of truth comes about a third of the way into the course, when the first exam is returned and some students learn that they have received their first-ever D or F. At this point, Ken explicitly invokes the monomyth, telling these students that they may have been jerked out of their comfort zones, that they are in unfamiliar territory, with dragons to slay, but that they have been given what they need to conquer these threatening forces and return to their familiar lives with new, and valuable, skills.

In some courses the teacher also needs to assure students that mistakes are an important part of the initiation stage. Scott takes students through this kind of process in his first-year composition classes, requiring students to develop a drafting and revising process, submit their papers for initial feedback from both peers and the instructor, and make productive decisions about their writing based on instruction and the feedback they are receiving. Inevitably, most students find the process of dealing with error unsettling because they have learned to see error as an indicator of the degree to which they have strayed from being right.

But as many theorists and researchers point out, mistakes are often signs that risks are being taken. Haines quotes management theorist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book *Men and Women in the Corporation*: “A basic truth of management—if not of life—is that nearly everything looks like a failure in the middle” (Haines [1998], 175).

Brooks and Brooks (1999), as well, emphasize the necessity of error:

On most tests and homework assignments, students aren’t asked to reveal and elaborate on their points of view. They are asked instead to be “right.” Being “right” often diverts energy away from the generation of new views. We must remember that the Ptolemaic view of the solar system was a conceptual stop on a path that led to the Copernican views presently held by most astronomers. We think today that Ptolemy was not “right,” but his point of view certainly counted. (68)

In this context, Brooks and Brooks point out that a key word for the hero’s journey is *errant*—as in “knight errant”—a word closely related to the word *error*. By making and correcting errors, the learner moves from “conscious incompetence” to “conscious competence.”

### C. Return.

A friend and colleague from the Boston area has given us a piece of urban folklore for the return stage of the monomyth. We report it here merely as a folklorist, with no wish to slander the good people of Lynn, Massachusetts:

Lynn, Lynn, city of sin,

You never come out the way you went in.

In traditional stories, heroes are changed, for the better, by their adventures; otherwise they’re not heroes. Campbell (1949) writes, “the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (28). The learner, as well, needs to move from the

initiation stage to a new integration, a new comfort, a new equilibrium. Dan Lindley (1993) writes that at this stage,

the student *owns* the new idea. At that moment it ceases to be new. In fact, if the new idea is inherently true to the student's nature, true to human nature in general, then the newness will disappear insensibly into familiarity. At this point the student may very well say, with a certain wonderment: "I knew that. I knew that, all along." (126-27)

Bobbi DePorter, Mark Reardon, and Sarah Singer-Nourie (1999) use the concept "Theirs to Ours, Ours to Theirs" in describing the necessary cycle for teaching and learning. They begin by asserting that the teachers must begin the cycle with their own the separation stage, by entering the learners' world:

Theirs to Ours, Ours to Theirs reminds us of the importance of entering the students' world first. In order for you to earn the right to teach, you must first build authentic bridges into your students' lives.

At the initiation stage, DePorter *et al* are a bit didactic for our tastes: "Once this link has been established," they continue, "then you can bring them into your world, and give them your understanding of the content." But we agree fully with their description of the return stage: "With this expanded understanding and greater mastery, the students can take what they've learned into their world and apply it to new situations" (6-7). At this return stage, the learner moves from "conscious competence" to "unconsciousness competence," as equilibrium is restored. But that equilibrium is, of course, never final. The hero's journey must be undertaken again and again.

Though Campbell represents the monomyth as a circle, the monomythic hero is inevitably changed by his or her journey. Therefore we might represent that change by having Campbell's circle gradually rise into a third dimension, like a thread of DNA. The hero returns to the place he or she left from, but "higher." indeed our life can be represented as a helix, as a climb up a circular staircase. As Alida Gersie and Nancy King (1990) write, using epic terms themselves:

Every return is born of hope and expectation. Repetition offers us a second chance, a new future. Through repetition we enhance our experience, knowledge and skills. We demonstrate our mastery and control, our ability to make the unpredictable predictable. Thus we extend the past and defeat the transitory quality of time. (262)

## II. The Teacher's Role.

Within the monomyth, one tempting role for teachers is the sage. Many embodiments of the monomyth include in their casts a wise elder woman or man, guiding and protecting the hero along the journey. The temptation for a teacher to play a sage's role is a strong one: many of us have been inspired to enter our profession by a sage, in literature or film, or in real life. Who wouldn't want to be a Mr. Chips, an Anne Sullivan, a Mr. Holland, a Barbara Jordan? But there's great danger, to one's students or oneself, in consciously taking on that role. To attempt to be a sage can lead a teacher into smugness and arrogance, trying to rely on unearned power. Allan Combs and Mark Holland (2001) write of the archetype of

...the Wise Old Man, the embodiment of deep and ancient wisdom personified in literary and film characters such as Merlin the magician, Gandalf the Gray, and Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars*. Each wields magic powers that derive from his mastery of ancient, all-but-lost knowledge. Other examples of less mysterious and more beneficent wise old men,

such as the wise men from the East, touch upon another archetype, that of the God-Man, or manna man to use Jung's term. This is the ideal of a human embodiment of the essence of the divine. Projecting this image onto someone else is to give that person great emotional power over yourself. Needless to say, this can be very dangerous unless that person is a remarkably worthy individual. To identify personally with this archetype is a major obstacle to inner growth, for it virtually guarantees an absence of humility. It is fine for others to refer to Mohandas Gandhi as Mahatma, "the great soul," but beware of those who confer such titles upon themselves. (70)

However tempting the role of sage is, teachers should resist the temptation. But the monomyth includes another role they can play: the role of trickster. To consciously adopt this role is to accept and illuminate the dual responsibility of the teacher as both supporter and challenger.

The difference between sage and trickster is illustrated by *The Wizard of Oz*. In the film, the wizard himself is first imagined by the hero, Dorothy, and her three friends as the wise sage, the magus who can solve all their problems, remedy all their deficiencies, if they can only get to the Emerald City. But in fact, their expectations are met only when the wizard abdicates his magus role and plays a trickster role, setting tasks or obstacles for the four. By overcoming these obstacles, Dorothy and her friends find within themselves what they desire: a heart, a brain, courage, and something all human beings may unconsciously desire: the means of going home.

The trickster is the figure, seen in myths and legends across the world, who acts as fool, but who also initiates wisdom and insight, if not for other characters in a story, then for the story's listeners or readers. In some stories, the hero himself can be a trickster. For example, the wandering Odysseus is a trickster figure, engineering the Trojan Horse and fooling the Cyclops, among other tricks. So also is Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods and brings it to the earth.

In his extensive study of the trickster, Lewis Hyde (1998) notes that in myths and legends, tricksters can be thieves who bring boons to humankind. However, and more importantly, tricksters also help to create culture. Two examples illustrate.

Ridie Wilson Ghezzi (1998) reminds us that among the Ojibwa of the upper Midwest and southern Ontario, the trickster Nanabush was said to have created the present world and taught people the cultural arts. And, as Julie Cruikshank and Angela Sidney (1998) comment, for the peoples of the Yukon, the trickster "Crow creates the world, brings, light and fire and fresh water. He creates human beings and teaches them the principles of culture" (140). Thus, tricksters can be said to promote culture and to see to it that it is carried on.

One way they do so, Hyde (1998) tells us, is by both creating and crossing boundaries and bringing previously hidden distinctions into view. Hyde writes:

We constantly distinguish—right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead—and in every case trickster will cross the line and confuse the distinction. Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox. (7)

And Nancy Hathaway (2001) notes:

On the one hand, tricksters are slippery, selfish, and occasionally evil. They lie, cheat, do stupid things, and cause trouble for one and all. On the other hand, they perform the essential task of bringing culture to humanity. They show us how to hunt, cook, and make musical instruments, they force us to work, and, like the African-American trickster Br'er Rabbit, they teach us to tell stories. (42-43)

It is in this role as initiator of culture that tricksters and teachers can be said to have similar roles. But the similarity can go even further. Tricksters are not only the creators of culture and its distinctive boundaries; they are also disrupters of culture. Julie Cruikshank and Angela Sidney (1998), for instance, tell us that not only does Crow bring culture to the Yukon peoples, but he also marries Fish Mother so that he can “eat without doing any work, and then he treats her with disrespect” (140). In other words, rather than taking part in the important activities that sustain people, Crow refuses to accept his part of the necessary work, and in the process, he insults an important figure. For their part, not only do the Ojibwa recognize the important contribution Nanabush has made to the world, they also recognize that he is “a fool, a witch, a manipulator, and an example of behavior to avoid” (Ghezzi, 1998, 444-45).

However, this boundary-crossing role also proves beneficial, for as Hyde (1998) remarks, the boundary crosser or even destroyer brings with it benefits. Tricksters, he asserts, help to cut the ties that bind us in social and spiritual life, leading to what anthropologist George Foster and even Plato refer to as a lucky find. A lucky find, Hyde explains, reveals a larger view and helps us to realize that our conceptions of things are in our mind rather than out there. This process of cutting ties is important, Hyde adds, because cultures have webs of signification built around opposites that members can take as both natural and immutable. Tricksters help members of a culture disturb these webs, revealing the fallibility of the immutable ideas.

One example of the trickster as boundary-crosser is the First Gravedigger in *Hamlet*. He works literally on the boundary between life and death, between above-ground and underground, and (as he asserts) between kings and commoners. His jokes, like those of a court jester, speak truth to power and provide Hamlet with a new perspective on his way home from his sea voyage. It is significant that the skull Hamlet discovers (and which unmistakably identifies him in a picture) is that of the late jester in the Danish court. Think about that: when Hamlet’s father occupied the throne, he employed a jester to mock him, and to tell him the truth when others would not. With his passing, the court of Denmark has no such professional fool. Hamlet’s usurping uncle has no one to challenge him, no one to tell him the truth about himself. The self-deception that pervades Claudius’s court ultimately leads to its destruction.

Note here the echo with Brooks and Brooks (1999): like good teachers, tricksters point out what is contradictory, and in this way they lead us to think about and even talk about what we assume to be true or known. When we quit talking about what we understand, and accept things as they are, we also quit thinking and live by convention. As Hyde (1998) reminds us, things become blocked and go stale when we accept convention without questioning it, accept what we have been told without scrutinizing it, or take truth to be a given. When our expectations are crossed, we often ask, “Really?” or we exclaim, “No, that can’t be true.” But each response is the opening for a discussion about what we know and what we find to be true.

Teachers know that in the classroom, discussion is an important source of learning, for discussion leads students to test both their ideas and their learning. Teachers who test their students’ ideas know at heart that they must do so to keep language active and evolving, for as Hyde (1998) remarks when thinking about the trickster, “language goes dead [when] cultural practice has hedged it in, and some shameless double-dealer is needed to get outside the rules and set tongues wagging . . .” (76). The trickster, says Hyde, creates “lively talk where there has been silence, or where speech has been prohibited. Trickster talks freshly where language has been blocked, gone dead, or lost its charm” (76).

Humor can be one effective catalyst to get discussion going. Allan Chinen (1993) provides an example of this point when he recounts that among the Hopi, tricksters work to keep

people from taking life too seriously. “They usually appear,” he comments, “by suddenly jumping down from high buildings, and then parody tribal priests and officials”; they also “poke fun at marriage and funerals and make light of love and death to prevent people from taking religious dogmas—or life itself—too seriously” (72). Echoing Chinen in this regard, Paul Radin (1972) tells us that while tricksters dupe others around them, they can also be duped. Thus, reactions to a trickster can be complex, marked by laughter on the one hand and awe on the other.

Here then is the significance of Tony Sherrill’s classroom move. When he told students he expected a certain prescribed dress, he counted on their unquestioning acceptance of his authority. When he arrived in clothing that contradicted his own authoritative proclamation, a conversation easily began about what it means to accept without questioning, setting up later critical exchanges in his classroom. In addition, his “tricky” behavior reminded them that the voice of authority is situated rather than immutable, conferred as much as it is imposed, and in learning the lesson, they found themselves in the company of a teacher who represented culture and its boundaries, but who also disrupted accepted cultural training.

For many, thinking of teachers as tricksters may seem unnatural. What happens in the classroom is a serious matter, for the development of our students is at stake. Some teachers may have trouble imagining that they themselves could stoop to duping their students or doing anything except to complete the serious business of training the next generation. For these teachers, it is important to consider that whether we acknowledge it or not, the classroom is a place where life adventures can, and do, both begin and continue. In the television series *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, interviewer Bill Moyers asks Campbell why there are so many stories about heroes in the cultures of the world. Campbell (1988) responds that the hero’s adventure is a fundamental part of being human. Any birth, and later any initiation, that helps to take us from one stage of life to another has the potential to affect us like a hero’s journey. As he remarks,

We are in childhood in a condition of dependency under someone’s protection and supervision for some fourteen to twenty-one years—and if you’re going on for your Ph.D., this may continue to perhaps thirty-five. You are in no way a self-responsible, free agent, but an obedient dependent, expecting and receiving punishments and rewards. To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the course of self-responsibility and assurance requires a death and resurrection. That’s the basic motif of the universal hero’s journey—leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition. (124)

In your reading of this article, you yourself are undergoing a hero’s journey. You began on familiar ground, with a discussion of storytelling. You’ve entered what may be unfamiliar territory, with our discussion of the monomyth in general and the trickster in particular. We’re about to help you come home to your classroom, bringing what we hope is a boon.

Every classroom holds the potential to begin a new adventure for the student, or to enhance the one already undertaken. By acting as a trickster, the teacher not only calls the student further upon the journey, but also does so in a way that would appear to reinforce convention. However, if the teacher is acting with insight, with wisdom—that is, craftily—then the teacher also calls convention into question in order to promote students’ growth. It seems to us that the best teachers are those who acknowledge their role as people who will challenge their students to move beyond what the students know and help facilitate their hero’s journey through

the classroom. Humor often accompanies these teachers, even if they are not the natural comics that we know among our friends and relatives.

Can playing the trickster have negative consequences? Yes, if the function of trickster-as-challenger comes to dominate over the function of trickster-as-supporter. If students perceive the teacher solely as trick-player, they may well just give up in frustration, believing that the educational deck will always be stacked against them. Trickster teachers have to remember that as Carl Jung (1969) argues, trickster figures can have a therapeutic effect, reminding people of the progress they have made as they gain insight about themselves and the world they live in. Jung even goes so far to say that in trickster stories the transforming presence of the savior is suggested, for the savior “brings liberation from the imprisonment in *αγνοια*, unconsciousness, and is therefore a bringer of light as well as healing” (272). Hyde (1998) builds upon the understanding of tricksters as transformers with his comment that tricksters can be thought of as “the spirit of the doorway leading out” to new insight (6). Thus, for scholars like these, tricksters help to transform what is thought meaningless into what is meaningful, and often in ways that echo what we expect of saints. We sometimes think of our own best teachers in this way, as figure who led us to insights we didn’t think possible, even when we thought of them as fools or even unknowledgeable. By playing this dual role—the fool to laugh at but the bringer of wisdom and boons—teachers can use the trickster role to help students reach new levels of understanding,

Finally, we want to claim that teachers do not really have the choice whether to be tricksters or not. It is hard to avoid being a trickster in the students’ eyes: we are boon givers to them, but we ask them to earn the boons in ways they may find frustrating. Thus, as they begin the journeys prompted by what they experience in our classes, our students may find us fools, first for challenging orthodoxy, and second for presenting new ideas so preposterous that they cannot possibly be right. As they descend into this realm of uncertainty, they may question whether we can truly be trusted. This, we think, is at the heart of the emotional response to teaching that challenges. By acknowledging our inevitable trickster role, we (1) accept that we cause frustration, we (2) take advantage of that frustration, and we (3) gain the awareness that we can accomplish what tricksters do in stories: changing the world, making it a better place for humankind. We bring about that change by recognizing that students’ time in our classes as a journey from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar. Like the heroes of myths, our students feel separation from what they know, an initiation into a new world of expertise, and—with our intentions, skills, and (yes) luck—a return with boons for themselves and even their worlds.

John G. Parks (1996), in his article "The Teacher as Bag Lady," discusses the trickster as one of three metaphors for the teacher. He writes:

The college years can be thought of as liminal space and time, to use Victor Turner’s concept. It is a space and time between or at the margins or boundaries of normal historical time. It is the opportunity to explore; experiment; test ideas, identities, and beliefs. Liminality offers freedom but also risks, obstacles, and tests, possibly involving pain and suffering. The teacher as Trickster can be a guide during this experience. Such a teacher is open to improvising, to risking disorder, to threatening boundaries. (135)

As we have seen, the role of wise sage is not one should consciously take on. We think instead that we can be like the trickster Coyote, who, in the words of Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (1998), “teaches humans how to live” (xiv).

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