

The HERO inside all of us

By Jen Waters
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Aslan, the majestic beast in C.S. Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," brings back spring from eternal winter. Frodo destroys the evil ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," and Sauron's devilish forces retreat. William Wallace fights for the freedom of Scotland in Mel Gibson's "Braveheart." In James Cameron's "Titanic," Jack rescues Rose by giving her a makeshift raft, while he perishes in the freezing water.

Everyone likes to hear stories about a hero, says John Eldredge, author of "Epic: The Story God Is Telling and the Role That Is Yours to Play." Mr. Eldredge is the founder of Ransomed Heart Ministries in Colorado Springs. He also has written popular books about spirituality, such as "Wild at Heart" and "Waking the Dead."

"There seem to be certain stories, fairy tales, myths or, in our culture, movies that have more power than others," Mr. Eldredge says. "You find these films that touch a chord. They touch a nerve and they are all epics. They all have the hero's journey in them."

The hero epic has been a recurring narrative in cultures throughout the centuries, says Mr. Eldredge. It's almost as if the popular archetype has a life of its own.

"God has set something in the heart of every person," Mr. Eldredge says. "I believe that what is set there is this epic story that the Bible unpacks for us and that all of the other stories that grip us, move us, or bring us to tears, or hope or joy, are borrowing from the idea of sacrificial love, that a hero will come to rescue his beloved or his people and that he must die so that they may be free."

In essence, as writers such as Mr. Lewis and Mr. Tolkien said, the story of Christ is the "one true myth," Mr. Eldredge says.

*Epic journeys
unleash the
virtues of
the soul*



In the modern era, however, with its three-point sermons and seven habits of highly effective people, yearning and passion often have been traded for practicality and proposition. Within religious circles, healthy longing and desire have been mistakenly labeled as sinful, Mr. Eldredge says.

"The human soul speaks a language, and it's not math and science — it's story," Mr. Eldredge says. "Story is our way of understanding life. If you want to understand another human being, you have to listen to their story."

Most people, however, experience their own life as though it's a movie to which they arrive about 40 minutes late, Mr. Eldredge says. In fact, one of the central themes in all great stories is that "there is more going on than meets the eye," such as when Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" says to her dog, Toto, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

"Something important seems to be going on, but we can't quite make heads or tails of it," he says. "The reason we are drawn to these hero epics is because the human heart says, 'But I was made for more. This can't be all there is, doing eight hours in my cubicle, and taking the Metro home and cooking my dinner in the microwave and feeding the cat, and getting up tomorrow to do it again. This is it?'"

The epic is a way to teach young people the classical idea of virtue, says Terrence O. Moore, principal of Ridgeview Classical Schools in Fort Collins, Colo.

Being an upstanding person, however, has become synonymous with being passive, Mr. Moore says. The hero's journey instructs students about ethics, survival and self-growth.

"Nowadays, what we tend to think of as virtues are being a nice person, showing respect, being tolerant, in general, being extremely peaceful," he says. "If you're only holding up the pacific and calm virtues as worthy, then you're missing half of humanity."

Many of the Greek and Roman epics that Mr. Moore's students study present courageous and awe-inspiring virtues, he says. For instance, "The Odyssey" by Homer illustrates that heroes need to be brave and clever.

"So many of these narratives present us with characters who aren't always nice but fill the screen, so to speak," he says. "They transcend our ordinary, mundane, predictable daily lives. What you hope, of course, for the sake of humanity, is that these great characters are also good."

The pervasiveness of heroic themes was most famously explored in "The Hero With a Thousand Faces," in which literary scholar Joseph Campbell wrote: "Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human manifestation."

Heroes have taken on many guises throughout the years, says Robert Walter, president and executive director of the Joseph Campbell Foundation in San Anselmo, Calif.

"There's a person existing in a certain world," Mr. Walter says. "They receive some kind of a call to adventure, something moves them out of the ordinary world, and they cross a threshold into another realm. In that other realm, they meet magical helpers and adversaries they must conquer. They undergo trials. Then, they generally seek a treasure that's typically needed back in their other world."

People essentially begin a hero's journey

from the moment they are born, Mr. Walter says.

"You can see that same kind of cycle of moving from one state through another and returning," he says. "You see the natural cycles of the moon getting consumed by the shadow of the Earth, disappearing to the eye and being born again, or the sun rising and then disappearing over the opposite horizon and coming back."

The difficulty of the hero's journey is that the character usually risks everything without knowing how the story will end, says Christopher Vogler, author of "The Writer's Journey," who lives in Marina Del Rey, Calif.

"You're asked to sign a contract with your destiny and say 'yes' to an adventure," Mr. Vogler says. "You say 'yes' even though you don't really know how it is going to turn out. You're pretty much guaranteed that you will have a taste of death. . . . The old idea of yourself will die every time you enter a new stage of life, so the new self has room to grow. You want to introduce those things into your life to shake up yourself."

Fear is what keeps people from being heroes, Mr. Vogler says. Low expectations for life and resigning to the status quo hold people back from fulfilling the journey for which they were intended.

Becoming a hero means rejecting a "go-along, get-along" attitude. Heroes risk their lives in the course of trying to make circumstances better for everyone else, he says.

"You have to deal with fear, and then do it anyway," Mr. Vogler says. "Being an adult means you have to get up in front of people and say things and do things, and you know you're gonna screw up, and it's not going to be perfect, and you do it anyway. You suck in your gut, and you be a human being."