

The Hero's Journey - a map for birth & the childbearing year

My news feed is brimming with parenting advice, birth preparation courses and videos of the royal family. I'm puzzled why my algorithm thinks I need the latter but having children and working in the birth world I can understand the others.

I imagined being pregnant for the first time again - I'd be overwhelmed with the amount on offer in the way of birth preparation. Offers like delivering an "empowered birth", an "informed birth", a birth I "deserve", oh and "how to birth like a badass".

It made me wonder how women whose birth outcomes were unexpected feel about any expectations they prepared for? I know I felt far from a badass that first time.

Imagine seeing a post on "how to have a mythical birth", what would that look like? Where's the mystery in the birth preparation world? Instead of answers and strategies, would you consider another way to prepare for and view birth that is thousands of years old? A way that embraces the unknown and therefore holds any experience at the same time. To prepare for the outcome of inner growth.

I want to propose that when a woman stops preparing for certain birth outcomes and starts preparing for a transformational journey, there is little to no room for shame or blame. Instead, they are replaced with something far more powerful. This is the Hero's journey.

The Hero's journey

In his book 'The Hero With A Thousand Faces' (1949), Joseph Campbell shares his theory of 'The hero's journey', an ancient mythological structure about the quest of the archetypal hero. The focus of this journey is on the protagonist's difficult inescapable quest and the resulting personal transformation.

There are 3 main stages of the journey.

- Preparation - the hero leaves their normal life to embark on an unknown adventure.
- The Ordeal - the hero faces their greatest challenge often having to face their deepest fears.
- The Return - the hero begins their journey home, with a reward and is transformed by new wisdom.

When Campbell was asked during a workshop in 1983 how the hero's journey can be adapted for women, he acknowledged it was not up to him. He said,

"Women will have to tell us the way a woman experiences the journey, if it is the same journey."

Someone who responded to this was one of Campbell's students Maureen Murdock in her book 'The Heroine's Journey: Women's Quest for Wholeness in 1990. She explains,

“The feminine journey is about going down deep into the soul, healing and reclaiming, while the masculine journey is up and out, to spirit.”

Murdock's heroine's journey has several more stages and explores a woman's psycho-spiritual growth.

A more focussed answer for this article is a woman's journey of her childbearing year being analogous to the classic hero's journey. Pam England, founder and author of 'Birthing from Within - an extraordinary guide to childbirth' (1998) has been sharing this idea for years. Her book 'Ancient Map for Modern Birth' (2017) delves into this inner journey during motherhood through the myth of Queen Innana's Descent, one of the oldest myths recorded in the world.

Viewing birth and the childbearing year as a hero's journey

We can place the childbearing year into the 3 phases of the journey:

- Preparation -during pregnancy.
- The Ordeal – it could be labour or another unexpected challenge.
- The Return - in postpartum.

When looking at the childbearing year through this lens, several experiences can be mapped onto a heroic journey: hears a call, faces an obstacle, overcomes the obstacle and eventually returns transformed.

Viewing pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period through a heroic journey can offer a universal language that gives every experience and outcome new meaning. This structure acts like scaffolding to help a woman trust that any struggle is part of her journey *home*.

But hang on, how can I be a Hero?

Let's look at the archetype of the Hero. An archetype is a universal pattern that represents a typical example of something so that people easily recognise the pattern across different contexts. There are many kinds of Heroes within this one archetype.

I'm not talking about superheros here, nor am I holding in mind an ancient mythical character like Odysseus. Those heroes are revered for, amongst other traits, their physical strength, courage and combat skills. The Hero that I'm referring to isn't proud, they don't think or know they're a hero, they are humble. It can be helpful to think about the Hero archetype more as "heroic energy" rather than an actual human.

We might have felt this energy in the day-to-day slog of parenthood. It's that push that drives you out of bed when you've had no sleep. That dutiful part that continues to serve our children (or community) and do what needs to be done. The part that's often unseen and rarely thanked.

The mother's heroic journey

Preparation

There are thousands of factors that can influence childbirth. Part of the modern trend seems to lean a lot into the intellectual realm of birth preparation. What if first, our task in pregnancy was to look deeper into our values and beliefs around our birth wishes and why we are hoping for a particular outcome? There's nothing wrong with hopes and wishes but if we see these as expectations then mothers (and first time mothers in particular) can often feel disappointed in birth or themselves.

Trying to consider an endless list of eventualities can be overwhelming, so spending energy on this can be stressful - particularly at a time when many women would be better served by rest. Suppose you expected at least one unexpected moment, would this not liberate you from a whole lot of planning and worry? If you expected to be surprised by one unexpected thing in labour, when it happened, you might be less shocked or disappointed - and had a narrative to support you through that tough part of the journey.

This preparation is an inner heroic journey that can lead to emotional and spiritual maturity. So although we may have to slay our proverbial 'dragons' in some way, the challenges we face are unique to each woman.

On a personal note, part of the preparation for my second birth was to have an honest conversation about the possibility of a cesarean birth. I set my expectation for a homebirth aside temporarily so my husband and I could discuss how we would manage the unexpected. I was surprised how much more relaxed I was to have accepted this possibility just from a simple conversation and imagining. I examined a negative self-belief I had about being physically "weak" and replaced it with a knowing that I'd draw upon my resilience if a cesarean birth was to happen.

The Ordeal

This can be labour or another challenging experience on your journey in motherhood.

During the Ordeal, there is always at least one moment we must do the one thing we think we cannot do, or the thing we hoped we would never have to do. As Joseph Campbell says you will have to do the "one forbidden thing" on your hero's journey. This could be a woman asking for pain relief during birth when asking for help is not easy for her. This can challenge a belief about being (physically) "strong" for example. For another woman it may be that she is separated from her baby after birth - challenging the belief about being a "good mother" which wouldn't *allow* that.

Supposing this asking for help or the painful separation was seen as part of the woman's Ordeal - it could shine a light onto that part of the heroic energy that had to come forward in those moments... And ultimately, what beliefs had to die or be sacrificed in a split second.

Instead of judgment defining her as "weak" or a "bad mother", if a woman can recognise that she was in her Ordeal and so drew upon her resilience in that demanding moment, would that

not be more true? It could point her inner compass to evolve from this experience rather than fall further back down into the darkness of blame.

When you're going through the Ordeal, you just are and you survive it. The Ordeal doesn't necessarily have to be labour. It could be a challenging part of pregnancy or postpartum and looking wider in our lives, it could be a great loss you experienced, an illness you went through or a traumatic event you survived.

How did you survive the Ordeal?

Quite simply, you have survived any ordeals because you are here reading this. But what is it that allows us to persist or to impulsively take action and do what needs to be done? This junction can awaken the heroic energy. From our genes, this adaptability carries us over the abyss, over the dark moments so that eventually we can be responsible for our own lives. It's a resilient energy that will activate in the smallest of steps where we can tolerate the change we need to make. This can be a change of a value, ideal or belief that does not serve the moment. It can feel like failure - or at the very least - a super hard decision when we feel scared. The heroic energy is a call to action where the goal is not pride but the treasure of inner guidance and wisdom to come.

The Return

This is usually postpartum and although I have mentioned the childbearing "year", your Return is timeless. It could take months, years, a lifetime even. It depends what you are returning to and it takes time to process a life change. In the Hero's journey the Return symbolises the Hero returning to the ordinary world where they started. This Returning may include integration that leads to renewal - a transformation. A message from my wise mum yesterday read,

"...thankfully there is life after birth and riches to gain!! Xx"

A key to this returning path is how you reintegrate your experiences and beliefs into a more whole self. What does that mean? Integration is the process of gathering up your beliefs about what happened and tuning into what you are telling yourself about what happened. This can be examined on your own or with a deep listener and the process from Pam England's "Birth Story Medicine" is centred on this.

Self compassion is the Return's guiding light. It can develop a spiritual maturity because of how you moved through your Ordeal despite what happened. What sets the Hero aside is the ability to not just weather the storm but to transform by accepting the disturbance was part of the journey.

The challenge in this stage is to do this inner exploration while caring for our new baby which we know consumes most of our responsiveness.

However, if we make some room to model how we respond to ourselves with love as we do with our children, is that not part of the magical elixir?

Personally, my Return was a time to grieve my losses and accept that I did the best that I could under the circumstances. I learned something so simple yet potent: that I could accept some tender parts and also feel sad about them. I thought I had to choose one or the other. Ultimately, preparing for the unexpected saved me from a traumatic experience being traumatising - that's the power of this myth's map.

References: (1) 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' - Joseph Campbell. Pantheon Books. 1949. (2) Joseph Campbell. Archive audio L1184, Big Sur, CA, 11/8/83. (3) 'The Heroine's Journey' - Maureen Murdock. 1990. (4) 'Birthing from Within' - Pam England, Rob Horowitz PhD. Partera Press. 1998. (5) Whatsapp messages accessed in Sept 2025 - Sherida Humberstone.

BIO:

Rosie Humberstone has worked as an Art & Embodied Relational Psychotherapist for 15 years. She offers one to one sessions online for women who have had difficulties during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. Rosie was trained by Pam England's 'Birth Story Medicine School'.

Having lived experience of a shocking birth, Rosie is raising awareness to shift the personal meanings we assign to difficulties in childbirth.

Rosie lives in Yorkshire with her husband and 2 sons where she enjoys being a perfect-imperfect mother.

She is dedicated to helping women and therefore their children discover that the inner map of birth initiation is something that belongs to them and no one else.

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