

The Temple Threshold

by Albatross, Bluebird & Finch, March 2018



Gate of a Himalayan Mountain Pass, Tibet, Laura B. Greig 2008

Introduction

“Prince Five-weapons answered without fear, but with great confidence in the arts and crafts that he had learned. ‘Ogre,’ said he, ‘I knew what I was about when I entered this forest. You would do well to be careful about attacking me.’”

- Joseph Campbell, *Hero of 1000 Faces* (1949)

American Cyborg spent the past year crossing The Threshold between being an artist collective and being a company. It's been a challenging journey that is just the start of a much larger and more challenging journey; many of the battles we fought will serve as lessons we can apply to new battles as the stakes get higher. Thankfully, Albatross has been reading Joseph Campbell's *Hero of 1000 Faces*, and finding frameworks through which we can understand this journey and its challenges. And in the American Cyborg tradition, we've reapplied Campbell's ideas to how we think about and use the technology that comprises our arsenal.

Hero of 1000 Faces describes the story cycle of a Hero's Journey as seen in cultures around the world, emphasizing the many shared themes. The Threshold is where The Hero crosses from the known to the unknown, which can only happen when she is ready. There are five aspects to The Threshold: The Wilderness, The Gate, The Guardian, The Abyss, and The Temple.

The Wilderness

"The experience of entering a building influences the way you feel inside the building. If the transition is too abrupt, there is no feeling of arrival, and the inside of the building fails to be an inner sanctum."

- Christopher Alexander, *A Pattern Language* (1977)

Adventures start in the wild: a dark forest, a rocky mountain, a deep ocean. The Hero has left home on a quest for a special knowledge or ability that will make her uniquely valuable in the world. Everything learned in childhood is important for surviving The Wilderness. The Hero must find food and shelter alone for the first time, without a family or community to help or protect her.

In The Wilderness, The Hero must face the universal fears of childhood — of darkness and the unknown — but her personal childhood fear is embodied by The Guardian.

The Guardian

“The heights of the spirit can only be climbed by passing through the portals of humility.”

- Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (1904)

Dragons and whales are common Guardians, and their belly is often The Temple itself. (This is why beasties make such beautiful door knockers.) These are familiar but other-worldly creatures, uniquely suited to the harsh environs of their particular Wilderness. Their bellies often hold treasures, signifying the good inside scary things.

The Guardian wards off intruders, and those that choose to engage with it must pass a special test. That test is a key — entering The Temple without passing The Guardian and The Gate is pointless, because their treasure will remain encoded.

A successful confrontation with The Guardian will give The Hero special information she can use to unlock The Gate, and decode the logic of The Temple.

The Gate

“Even if you live in an apartment and your front door is labeled 3-C, you can still make it talk your language. I have painted apartment doors to suit myself and the landlords have not minded too much. And you can still use a big, decorative knocker, or hang an ornament on the outside of the door.”

- Dorothy Draper, *Decorating is Fun!* (1939)

The Temple is surrounded by a protective wall, and The Gate is the break in that wall — an inviting light in the darkness of The Wilderness. It is secure and steadfast when locked, warm and welcoming when open.

The construction of The Gate and its wall establish the pattern language of The Temple, providing the second clue to decoding its interior logic. Its form and materiality work like a frame for a painting — not the art itself, but also not the wall. Deep understanding requires full attention, so The Hero has to make room for this new logic and language. She has to put childhood knowledge in the back of her mind.

Memory is bicameral. Human brains and our computers both use two kinds of memory: brains have a hippocampus (short-term storage) and cortex (long-term storage); computers have RAM (Random Access Memory) and ROM (Read-Only Memory). We use the former to store information we need immediate access to, and the latter for information we might need in the future. Moving memories from the front to the back is a kind of forgetting.

Unlocking The Gate, forgetting childhood knowledge, is an annihilation of the self. A profound change requires making this new space; The Abyss must be entered wholly.

The Abyss

“In bonsai you often plant the tree off center in the pot to make space for the divine.”

- Maggie Nelson, *Argonauts* (2015)

Have you ever walked through a doorway, and forgot where you were going? This is a byproduct of having a physical, embodied brain. The environment is not just a space for thinking, but tool for thinking. Sociologists call this distributed cognition: that humans think not just *with* but *through* the spaces they're in. Crossing a boundary, entering into

a new space, is passing into a new mind. A new mind puts new demands on the brain, so the brain throws out what it's already carrying. It forgets.

The Abyss is not a scary darkness like The Wilderness, it's just a nothingness. It's the River Lethe that dead souls drink of to forget their mortal life. This forgetting is not a permanent erasure, but a relocation from conscious to subconscious understanding. The Abyss is the space between *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

Once she has cleared The Abyss, The Hero can enter The Temple.

The Temple

“Walls and fences are used to enclose a garden, thereby ensuring privacy and keeping out unwanted intruders. They also are frames that allow a garden to be viewed as a work of art, somewhat detached from its surroundings. The importance of paths is that they guide visitors through a garden in such a way that the composition unfolds as intended by the designer.”

- David and Michiko Young, *The Japanese Garden* (2005)

The pattern language established at The Gate extends to pathmaking inside The Temple. If the wall is the frame, The Temple is the painting. As a painting guides your eye across its composition to reveal its story, The Temple's forking paths are a guide to attaining its secret knowledge.

The Temple's forking paths allow The Hero to wander at her own pace, and explore the walled garden and its logic. She can enter a nested set of precincts through a series of rituals, and in the innermost sanctum find the treasure — that new knowledge or ability that she can carry forward on her journey, and back to her community.

Once she has experienced The Temple, The Hero has crossed The Threshold.

Conclusion

A passage into a new mind constitutes a rebirth. The childhood self is destroyed and the adult self emerges. The Hero must be brave enough to face her fears, but humble enough to be dismantled by them as well.

American Cyborg acknowledges our position at The Gate. We made the decision to brave the journey, and we've crossed The Wilderness of former workplaces to get here. We are now in the process of collectively constructing a Temple for ourselves — finding our aesthetic and pattern language, and securing our perimeter. Within this sanctuary, we can construct our tools and strategies for rebirth, and face the world anew.

So thank you to Joseph Campbell for his anti-colonial work, and to my legendary high school English teacher Greg Baker to introducing me to him. Campbell is hard to pull short quotes from, so we chose this long passage to include these ideas in his own words:

“This [belly of the whale] motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. Its resemblance to the adventure of the Symplegades [from Greek mythology: a pair of rocks that crushes ships passing between them] is obvious. But here, instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshipper into the temple — where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes unless immortal. The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond, above, and below the confines of the world, are one and the same. That is why the approaches and the entrances to temples are flanked and defended by colossal gargoyles: dragons, lions, devil-slayers with drawn swords, resentful dwarves, winged bulls. These are the threshold guardians to ward away all incapable of encountering the higher silence within. They are preliminary embodiments of the dangerous aspect of the presence, corresponding to the mythological ogres that bound the conventional world, or to the

two rows of teeth of the whale. They illustrate the fact that the devotee at the moment of the entry into the temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it as a snake to its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. The mere fact that anyone can physically walk past the temple guardians does not invalidate their significance; for if the intruder is incapable of encompassing the sanctuary, he has effectually remained without. Anyone unable to understand a god sees it as a devil and is defended from the approach. Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting, in the picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act.”

- Joseph Campbell, *Hero of 1000 Faces* (1949)