

to life
ode

Just

like

in the movies

Heroes of Hollywood films follow the same patterns as our own real-life experiences. Use your favorite movies as keys to recognizing these phases in your own life—and discover the hero within you.

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PHOTOS: BRUNO PRESS

1

The prologue

During the opening scene of a new adventure movie, you are like a child in the womb, unconscious of what is to come. Anything is possible; nothing is certain. You are awaiting the wake-up call, the starting signal to move into action.

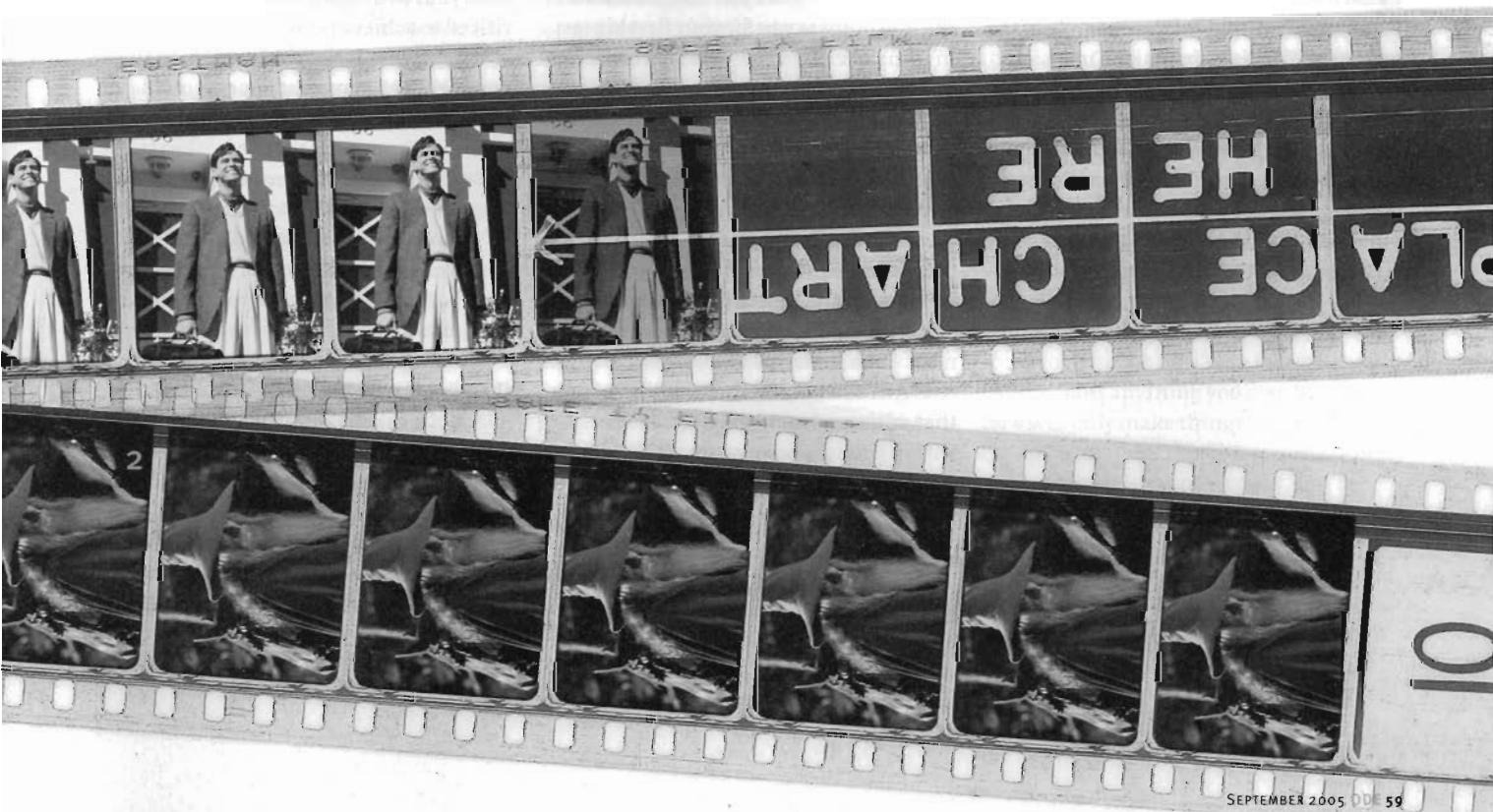
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The call

As *The Matrix* opens, the lead character Neo lies sleeping. He almost literally receives a wake-up call in the form of an e-mail from Morpheus. In *Lord of the Rings*, the call to action comes from Gandalf. He visits Frodo in the bucolic, innocent Shire and asks him to destroy the Ring. The call awakens you from the dream state, pulls you from your comfort zone. This is not always pleasant, just as the birth of a child is accompanied by severe pain. In this phase you must conquer the resistance all around you. This resistance is there to test you: Are you really ready for your big adventure?

The lesson you can learn here is that what “happens to you” is in fact initiated by your own deepest desires. A blow from outside is intimately connected to an inner wish for change. But which child remembers that the hormonal signal saying her birth could begin came, in fact, from within herself?

1 An unsuspecting Jim Carrey starts a new day in *The Truman Show*. **2** Gandalf disrupts Frodo's peaceful life with a call to destroy the Ring in *Lord of the Rings*.





3 In *Midnight Run*, Robert de Niro clearly isn't in the mood for a new adventure. **4** In *The Karate Kid*, the young hero's mentor makes him perform meaningless movements to teach him the fundamentals of karate. **5** Billy Elliot, in the eponymous film, must stand up to his strict father to pursue his study of ballet.

3

Refusal

The alarm rings, but you turn it off; you want to keep sleeping. This is the essence of phase 3. The call to adventure has sounded, but you are not yet ready. Hollywood has dreamt up countless variations on this theme. There even is a special name for the genre in which a criminal is lured out of retirement. An example of the *one-last-job* film is *Midnight Run*, in which Robert De Niro's unenthusiastic expression makes clear that he doesn't feel like an adventure: He wants to stay in bed.

The function of this phase of postponement is that it gives the hero time to build up strength and marshal courage. If you put it off too long, you lose your chance. If you jump too soon, you fail.

4

The mentor

Then you meet a mentor who will reveal to you your true identity. Your mentor shows you that you are unique and urges you to fulfill your mission. Your mentor—often someone who has made a similar journey himself and now is guiding a new generation of heroes—gives you instruments and skills to prepare you for your first big test. In films, the main character here receives a new name, appearance or identity, as in *Batman*, *Superman* and *The Mask*. Wearing this mask, he can reach out toward new achievements and join social circles that were previously closed.

In every hero's journey, however, there comes a moment when he is unmasked, and must undergo challenges one more time, this time without tricks or masks. She must rely solely on her strength and character. The lesson here is that, ultimately, you must live from within your deepest nature.

5

The selection threshold

You now are ready for your first big tests. In this phase you must get past the "guards at the threshold," the defenders of the powers that be and their institutions. This phase is characterized by a hardening. Self-preservation has a higher priority than your principles, which often are sacrificed to achieve power.

This also is the phase in which the opponent or antagonist appears on the scene. One of the most important archetypes for the powers that be is "the strict father," who demands respect and achievement from his children, while "the mother" represents unconditional love. The hero's mission is, in a sense, to settle scores with both in order to move ahead to the next phase.

This phase of the "selection threshold" requires drive, in moderation. A lack of it can mean you won't get past the guards. But an excess of drive means you might hang around too long in this hardening phase, only to discover at age 65 that while you have acquired plenty of power, influence and money, you have never gotten around to the other accomplishments you had coming to you.



6 Al Pacino as the powerful drug baron Tony Montana in the grip of his delusions of grandeur (*Scarface*). **7** Environmental lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening) gets the president in touch with his deeper values (*The American President*). **8** At the peak of his fame, fate strikes: Mohammed Ali (Will Smith) loses his boxing license and his world title (*Ali*).

6

The false king

When you have weathered the tests of the previous phase, the time comes to enjoy yourself. You feel as happy as a king, like Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic*, euphoric when he, a poor boy from a small town, manages to win the rich girl's heart. But your success is mainly a kind of beginner's luck, largely owed to the "magic power"—the help—received from your mentor. In this phase, you actually are a false king, because you have made only half the journey.

Yet it also is important to enjoy your success fully at some point in your life. Each of these phases, after all, ends only when it has been completely taken in and integrated. If you are not capable of being happy with your success, you will remain stuck in the same phase for too long, and thus end up time and time again in the same kinds of situations. If you get stuck for too long in the false-king phase, you risk becoming addicted to applause and success. You identify with them and lose sight of reality and your original mission. The longer this phase lasts, the harder the blow that will inevitably come.

7

The meeting with the goddess

The false king's inflated ego must be punctured. In this phase, a goddess appears on the scene and helps you make the descent into your own soul. This goddess—who also can be a man, like the biker in *Erin Brokovich*—brings you into contact with your feminine side. She is a second mentor, who does not teach you skills so much as help you to undergo a psychological initiation.

Besides the meeting with the goddess, another purpose of this phase is reconciliation with "the father." Often it concerns forgiveness. When "the father" is internalized, the hero makes peace with his or her own masculinity and is able to become an adult. This phase is about finding a new inner balance, which also prepares the hero for parenthood.

In Hollywood films, the hero in this phase often enters marriage or another contract. The commitment necessary for this goes hand in hand with the end of his ego to the benefit of the joint enterprise.

8

The change, or the gates of hell

Just when you think everything is going smoothly, life throws you a curve ball. You have experienced some exciting adventures and finally settled down. But just when you think "and they all lived happily ever after," all hell breaks loose. You lose your beloved, your fortune, or your health. In a film, the villain suddenly reappears, the one you'd thought was defeated for good. This phase is the change—or, more dramatically, "the gates of hell," because in myths it often is the beginning of a descent into the underworld. Thanks to the meeting with the goddess, you now can open yourself to love, but this makes you vulnerable.

The change does not always have to be dramatic or destructive, but at this stage you lose the initiative in the adventure. Almost anything you can do or say now will only make things worse. The change is an induction into powerlessness. You can do nothing except wait and be silent—silent amid the storm, until it has passed.

The disaster that strikes you often is connected to the overconfidence you displayed as a false king. This is a time when you must be prepared to navigate rough seas, and to distance yourself from your glory days and your orderly life.

9

The dagger

Then comes your betrayal or unmasking. This unmasking often involves the destruction of the magical weapon that has gotten you this far. Something that used to work loses its power. Friends who once supported you turn away. People around you begin to see through your tricks and weak sides. This is painful, and so you do anything you can—violently, if necessary—to rescue yourself from the insecurity. This is the phase in which you're likely to get your hands dirty, meaning themes like guilt, shame and regret come into play.

In some cases, such as in *Gladiator*, the hero literally is stabbed in the back. Often we see the hero betraying himself. When it matters most, he breaks promises, forgets agreements, abandons his principles. His beloved—symbol of the higher self—is deeply disappointed, injured or even killed as a consequence of these “sins.” Deepest darkness falls.

But it is not just darkness. This phase also is known as “retrieving the treasure,” because the deepest darkness often is the place where the greatest treasure is buried. The hero descends to the underworld, where he is affected by the deepest suffering, but leaves with the greatest treasure.

10

The goal

When Luke Skywalker's computer in *Star Wars* is unable to aim weapons well enough at the enemy's superior forces, he suddenly remembers the words of Obi-Wan Kenobi: “Use the force, Luke.” This simple advice gives him the courage to turn off the computer and do the steering and shooting himself. He puts his faith in his own power. This is the phase in which light breaks through the deepest darkness. Often, the reversal takes place when you remember your mentor's most important lesson.

This phase is characterized by the recovery of a goal. But the hero must be resolute and leave his doubts behind. In *Notting Hill*, we see Hugh Grant staring into space, depressed, because he has missed his chance to marry Julia Roberts. Then his roommate arrives and reminds him of his greatest goals and ideals. Grant gathers his courage, decides to make one last attempt, and thereby conquers his depression. In action films, this phase often plays out during a chase scene in which the hero is pursued by the villains and has only one goal: escaping from the labyrinth or the underworld.

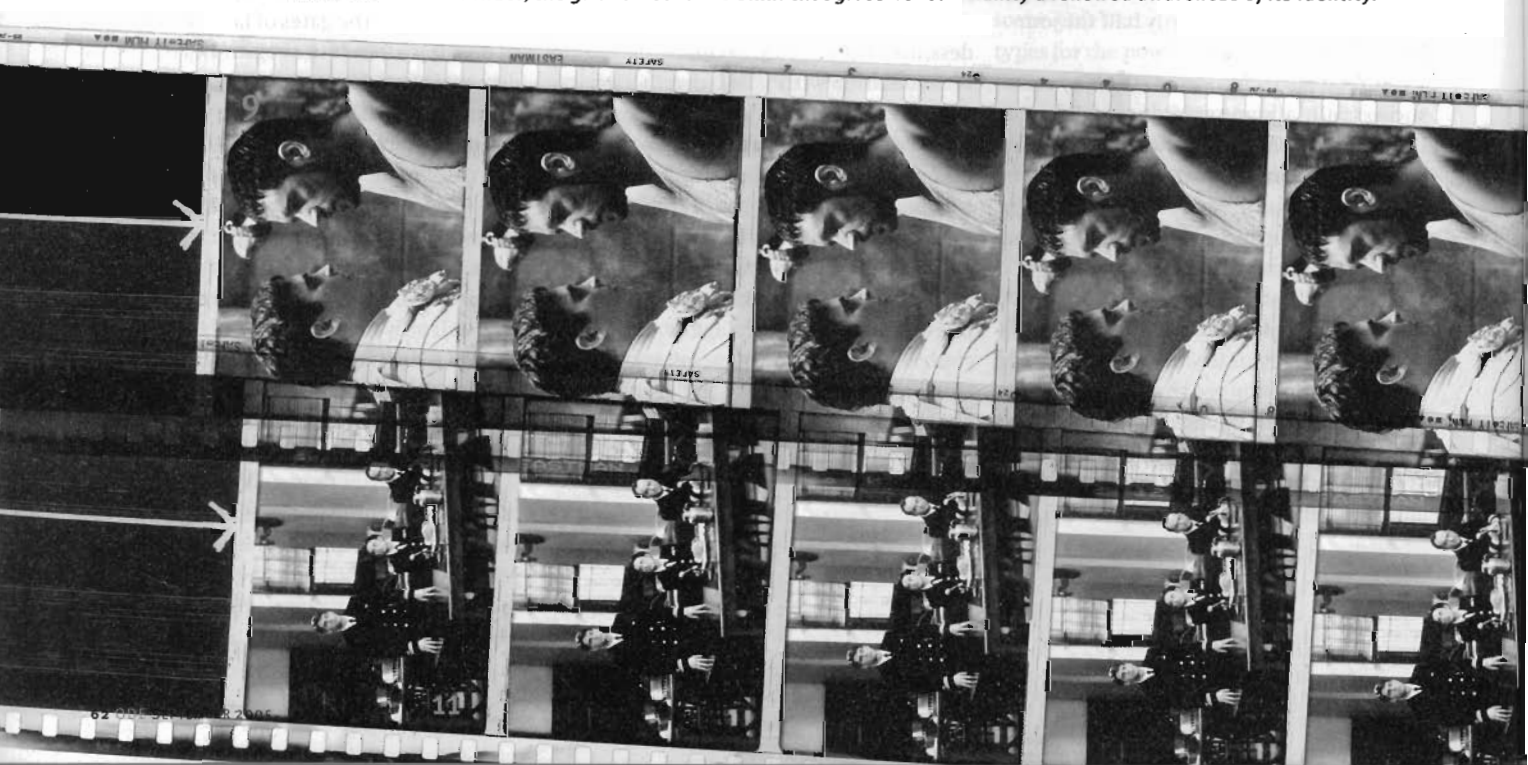
11

Death and resurrection

Your moment of truth has arrived. When previously the point was preservation of the body, now it is preservation of the soul. Are you able to conquer your fears and desires for the sake of a higher principle? Are you prepared to sacrifice yourself for the good of your mission, your beloved or the larger whole? In films, this higher principle often is symbolized by the acquisition of a medicine, the disabling of a bomb or the defense of freedom.

Hollywood calls this phase the cliff-hanger. The hero no longer can use tricks or the mentor. She must do everything herself. The phase of “death and resurrection” is deadly serious. Here, the hero must literally or figuratively die to experience a rebirth. In romantic comedies things are more pleasant: The hero sits crying in the departures lounge because his beloved has just boarded a plane. Their relationship is over; all is lost. But then we see his love walking toward him: She didn't get on the plane after all...

9 In *Gladiator*, the hero of the story (Russell Crowe) is stabbed in the back. **10** William Thacker (Hugh Grant) scrapes together his courage and moves into action to ask Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) to marry him (*Notting Hill*). **11** Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) finds himself in court and goes head to head against Colonel Jessop (Jack Nicholson) in *A Few Good Men*. **12** In *Whale Rider*, the girl Paikea is the elixir that gives her community a renewed awareness of its identity.



The elixir

Since the change (phase 8), you have been in the darkness of the underworld. Now that you have proved you have no fear of death and shown your willingness to die for a higher good, you may return to your community and a normal life. This often is a moment of glory. This phase calls to mind the false-king phase, but you now are rid of your inflated ego. You no longer let yourself be emotionally affected by all the accolades. You have come back to serve. In this phase of Hollywood films, the hero returns with a great love, a new medicine, or an evil spell broken. But in reality, it is the hero himself who is the most important elixir. After all, he is living proof that evil can be conquered and greatness achieved. In many films the elixir is represented by tears. Trinity's tears bring Neo back to life in *The Matrix*. In fairy tales, too, the hero often comes back to life when a pure soul cries over his death and a tear falls on his body.

In *Whale Rider*, the young girl Paikea returns to her community after nearly dying on the back of the whale whose life she has saved. The elixir she brings with her is a reborn belief in the community and a new awareness of her own identity.

The epilogue... and the new prologue

In many films, the epilogue is a reflection of the prologue. You are back where you started. Outwardly, it seems nothing has changed: Your home, family, neighborhood and environment all remain the same. But you yourself have changed. Think of Frodo at the end of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. You have become wiser, more powerful and more compassionate... and ready for a new adventure on a higher plane.

Mythologist at the movies

Dutch psychologist Manfred van Doorn has an extensive movie archive at home. In his work he frequently shows film clips to help inspire people to awaken the heroes in themselves. In his recently published book *Leiderschap, een reis in beeld* (*Leadership, a journey*, not published in English), van Doorn uses scenes from films to help people develop leadership qualities. "I see people becoming better leaders," he says, "when they watch good film scenes under guidance."

Van Doorn notes that filmmakers often are inspired by Joseph Campbell, the American expert on mythology who in 1949 published his masterpiece, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell discovered that nearly all classical hero myths share the same underlying structure, which he called "the hero's journey" or "the monomyth." His book is sometimes called "the Hollywood Bible" because so many filmmakers use it today.



When you recognize the mythological phases of the hero's journey in your own life, van Doorn says, you gain insight into your own adventure. You learn to see which phase you are in, what your next step can be, and which lessons you can learn. Films are often even more helpful than books in this process, he says, because they evoke such strong emotional experiences.

"The great mythical and symbolic powers, which films are so well suited to depicting, have a formative effect on our personalities. When you analyze good films and watch them repeatedly, you discover patterns you hadn't

consciously perceived before. Filmmakers consciously insert these archetypal phases and personages in their movies. Creating a good film scene requires extremely wise leadership, and good leaders can create the most wonderful scenes day after day."

