

IV THE GIFT OF TRUE LONGING THE CALL TO ACTION

*Some are born great,
some achieve greatness,
and some have greatness thrust upon 'em.*

~ SHAKESPEARE, *Twelfth Night* (MALVOLIO)

What enables one person to see new possibilities in a situation where others see only bleakness? What is that impulse to forward motion, that deep internal drive to tell a bigger story, make a difference, seek greatness, create beauty or order or see a new world into being? What makes one person willing to stand up and say, “I will take responsibility for making X happen” when others don’t move? What “calls” one of us now, another not until much later and some of us never?

In Campbell’s story architecture, the call represents the starting point of every great story. The call is an ancient idea, one that exists in many spiritual and cultural traditions. It refers to the moment of awakening in which you recognize that you are being summoned to a particular path or role. In the hero’s journey, the call is the wake-up moment, when the hero begins to see what she or he must do next and begins to feel inexorably drawn to the journey.

Hearing the Call

The call can be a quiet moment of realization or a trumpet call to action. Moses got his call as a burning bush and Joan of Arc as voices in her father’s garden; most of us do not receive the call quite so vividly. Indeed, the call’s form is multiple and varied; it can be as literal as a phone call asking one to take on a new role at church or work, or as subtle as a recurring thought that “this situation really doesn’t need to be this way.” It can come as a request for help, a sense of desperation or as a challenge — “You think you could do



better?” The call can come as the nagging realization that no one else is going to do anything, and it can come as an internal impulse so profound you do not recognize it until after you have responded because you are too busy *doing*.

Campbell notes that calls are regularly resisted. Years ago, Bill Cosby did a wonderful routine about God calling Noah to build the Ark. Noah’s first response is to ignore Him several times. Eventually, Noah says “What? Whaddyawant?” in an annoyed voice. After listening to the command, he responds sarcastically, “Right ... what’s an Ark?” and finally, “Why me?” At that, God answers with a loud crack of thunder. Variations on all these responses are frequently recorded in myth and legend, and reported in our workplaces today.

Accepting the Call

Accepting the call is the starting point for every great story. In choosing (consciously or otherwise) to accept it or not, there are powerful possibilities for self-betrayal and self-fulfillment at play. Do we own our choices or hold others responsible for them? “Well, I would have responded, but this person or that situation wouldn’t let me.” Or, “It’s not my fault, it wasn’t clear that was a call to *me*.” True heroes may not be happy about it, but they accept the call. In Peter Jackson’s film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo says, “I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened,” to which Gandalf replies, “So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”⁵⁸

In the old stories, ignoring a call often resulted in a louder, harsher one, until the designee accepted his role. In our noisy, complex world, some may feel it’s just as hard to know which calls to not accept as it is to recognize a call at all. The reality is that a true call *cannot* be ignored. The more authoritative, visible and unmistakable a call is, the more transformative it will be.