

The Hero's Journey Initiation:

Starting Down the Road to Find a New Self

Section One: Introduction to the Journey

Welcome! I'm glad you've chosen to explore new modes of expression. We all come to times when we feel confused, stuck, or just plain bored with how we express ourselves. Something makes us realize we're not sure who we are anymore. This distress happens when life calls us to reinvent ourselves, and we can't visualize the leap. Perhaps we are simply coming to a developmental shift, moving, for example, from adolescence into young adulthood or trying to navigate menopause. The call for a change of identity could also result from a life-altering illness, a significant change in lifestyle factors, or a personal loss. Or, we're done with an old expression but need to know who else we might be underneath. While this is a natural, healthy part of life, it can be daunting.

If any of those conditions sound familiar, you're in luck! This adventure has been created just for you! *The Hero's Journey: The On-Going Quest of Self-Discovery* is an imaginative solution to the age-old identity crises. It's a dynamic set of challenges designed to help you explore different aspects of yourself, learn more about who you are, and help you project that knowing with more authenticity and satisfaction. The only thing that this expedition will ask of you is to be open, be curious, and be willing to let yourself set out on the expedition.

What is a Hero's Journey? It is a literary construct that describes an ordinary person's experience of being swept into an unbelievable quest. It's a call to adventure that can't be

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ignored. Through the Journey, not only does the individual come to appreciate the ordinary within themselves, they also find some extraordinary gifts. We encounter endless tales of this pilgrimage in books, movies, and songs. Some examples from popular media are Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, Neo from The Matrix, Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Mulan, and Judy Hopps from Zootopia.

The Path Unfolds

The Hero lives in the everyday world and is thoroughly convinced that nothing about them is noteworthy. Not only do they feel their character is humdrum, but their expression reflects the same. At some point in their mundane existence, a mentor or guide comes along to wake them up—to alert them to the possibility of a whole new aspect just waiting to be discovered!

The champion struggles at first, disbelieving. Eventually, they resign themselves to start the undertaking (even if they don't believe or know how to make it through the quest). They face many challenges along the way. The encounters they endure seem insurmountable, but they become reconciled to the task as they begin to understand that they are the only ones available to complete it.

Finally, the Hero comes face to face with their most extensive trial. It requires that they release some previously imagined version of themselves. In the more dramatic tales, the Hero faces their actual death. As often as not, the "death" scene is a dissolution of a previous perception or belief that was limiting broader expression. The mere act of moving through the challenges yields new understanding: wisdom is acquired simply by saying yes to the Journey and accepting all of the parts of themselves that they've found along the way. The Hero can now

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take this wisdom back into the world and live it or save the day. They return to the reality they previously knew, changed and transformed.

The Hero, Initiated

This book is the call. It is the guide that initiates you to set off down the road of self-discovery. We'll start the trek by considering your current self-identity. Then, we'll throw in some challenges. The Journey requires you to meet your shadow and your light aspects. The most significant trial will be facing vulnerability and understanding how, by having the courage to stand in its presence, it can transform you. Clearing this hurdle will open the way for you to discover one of your greatest gifts – the capacity for self-acceptance and self-love. And finally, you'll be invited to bring this newfound wisdom to the world... or at least a group of other heroes who have undertaken a similar journey.

To bring even more profound change to this Journey, consider memorializing your accomplishments in photography sessions after each milestone. Combining expressive modalities can create a powerful catalyst for analytical and intuitive minds to work together. Not only will this allow you to experience more epiphanies, but the material also becomes embodied in you in a way that doesn't require you to "figure things out." Plus, the heroes who take this step will get to live the Journey and have their stories told in beautiful images.

So, consider yourself initiated! You are ready for this. I am confident you can find the Hero within. Let's get started!

Questions for Reflection:

1. Why is it time for you to embark on this Journey (what is currently going on in your life)?

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2. What mental or physical obstacles might stand in the way of accepting that you are ready to start this Hero's Journey?
3. How well do you think you know yourself?
4. What aspect(s) of your identity or expression need expansion? Why?
5. How do you currently express yourself?
6. Who are Your Favorite Heroes? And why do you Identify With Them?
7. Would you like to be more like them? Or in what ways do you feel like you could never be like them? Why?

Section Two: What is Identity and Self Expression?

On this mission's first leg, we will familiarize ourselves with the elements of identity. We'll examine a little background on how identity develops. We'll also look into who you are and how you express yourself currently. If you feel like that is already a big step, no worries! We'll take it all slow and break things down as we go.

Self-expression conveys our identity. Expression and identity work together in an endless loop to help us create and refine who we are. You can't find which comes first, nor can you separate the two. But when we feel confused about who we are, we can play with expression to find clues to locate missing or underdeveloped pieces of identity.

Identity and expression are not stagnant things; they are constantly moving and changing as our lives change. They also are not easily definable, bound concepts. Sometimes I'm this; sometimes that. There's a song from the 90's by Meredith Brooks called

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"*Bitch*". This line sets up the first chorus: "*I'm a little bit of everything, all rolled into one.*" Then the song starts listing them:

I'm a bitch

I'm a lover

I'm a child

I'm a mother

I'm a sinner

I'm a saint

I do not feel ashamed

I'm your hell

I'm your dream

I'm nothing in between...

This song gets a lot of traction with many of us because we can identify with this phenomenon. We are rarely the same from one moment to the next. Even though we are under so much pressure to know who we are and be that without deviation. People want us to be predictable, to be always the same. The reason for this push isn't necessarily to pigeonhole us; it's that, for the most part, it's easiest to deal with someone when you know what to expect. But that's not how the world works or how we work.

A Little Bit of Everything . . .

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The best we can do when learning about our identities and expressions is to get to know ***all the possibilities***. Not only do we have the potential to experience every characteristic, trait, behavior, or feeling in the entire human range, but it's crucial that we realize that identity is a mash-up of many different aspects. It's a mixture of our thoughts, actions, and emotions. It's our impulses and instinct. It's our interests and fascinations, desires and obsessions. It's our creativity. It's our hobbies and habits. It's the roles we get handed and the roles we elect to play. It's our gifts and our darkness. It's our appearance and our bodies. It's our preference. It's our stillness. And it's our choice.

Each of these aspects influences our expression. More often than not, we move through these parts and pieces of our lives on auto-pilot without realizing that we are expressing our true identity. Eventually, if remain stuck in expressing ourselves without thinking about who we are and who we want to be, we lose touch with the natural satisfaction and respect that come from purposefully projecting our unique, authentic selves. When this happens, we start to feel discomfort that ranges from disillusionment to depression. Getting sidelined in these intense feelings can make us feel lost from ourselves or at least off track. But even in those times, we're still expressing – we're expressing what's missing or what we are yearning to find.

Where to Start Looking for New Aspects?

Our feeling states give us excellent clues about where to look for new aspects of ourselves. You can tell by your general emotional landscape whether you are actively expressing the core elements of your identity or giving yourself signals about what's absent. Often, we bump through life waiting for the inevitable cycles of boredom or pain, followed by

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periods of unpredictability and dissolution as the means to birth new aspects of ourselves. For the most part, we expect this to be an uncontrollable, agonizing process. Yet, it doesn't always have to be that way. We can wade into the current of uncertainty, watching the tide of our feelings and the shape of our expressions to help guide us as we seek to purposefully form expanded versions of who we are. Then, we can use the information from our observations to uncover new parts of our identities in creative, uplifting ways.

Identity is easily seen in the reflection of our feelings – especially our feelings of delight, pleasure, joy, and even simple satisfaction. These yummy feelings reveal that we are content with sharing or projecting ourselves outwardly. Hate, revulsion, fear, and dislike are also instructive – but these show us something ***lacking*** about who we want to be. Hate politics? That's likely because your identity includes strong values of peacefulness, cooperation, honesty, or something you observe as non-existent in the political arena.

Without a conscious choice to dig deeper or try new things, we trudge through each day doing the same old thing, bored and under-stimulated, or hating life. We don't realize that we are clearly expressing who we are. When we feel stymied as we reach for an evolution of ourselves, we think that a lack of courage, interest, and inspiration reveals that we are lost. But we have to learn to read between the lines.

When we demonstrate that we've lost courage, this means we have the potential for courageousness; when we've lost interest, it shows we're capable of being engaged and fascinated; when we lose inspiration, translated: we have vast wells of creativity waiting to be tapped. When we get lost in these “opposite” expressions, we feel stuck. We think the absence of clarity reveals we're somehow off track. But all these demonstrate that it's time to

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discover what's lurking under the lack. The feelings of discontent tell us we want to show ourselves. All that is necessary here is to meet the feelings of deficiency with curiosity.

Curiosity is the most necessary ingredient for finding a new configuration of who we are. We must meet the parts of ourselves that are uncomfortable or messy with open minds and eyes. Not only is this important for seeing through the expressions of lack to see what lies beneath, but it's also the essential tool for plumbing the depth required to find new aspects. Curiosity is the flashlight you'll need to peer directly into the unknown.

Exploring the Unknown

To find new aspects, we have to trust our curious natures. But, the trickiest part of becoming more aware of who we are is mustering the courage to face the unknown. Much of who we are lurks in the shadows. The other parts can be in constant flux, moving and shifting based on the context of our lives at each moment. Both phenomena are unsettling, causing us to routinely reach for a sense of sameness to maintain a facade of control. We sink into predictable identities as a misguided attempt at safety, forgoing adventure and exploration to keep from rocking our psychological boats.

Unfortunately, the opposite happens when we try to stay safe. We settle ourselves into a comfortable pattern, but the comfort eventually leads to psychological unrest. The things we think we want most – comfort, security, predictability, safety, and control – are the elements that stifle our growth. When these qualities are the foundation on which we have built ourselves, we cannot experience spontaneity or see ourselves in a new light or in varied expressions.

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Repeatedly, I have come to sets of standards and beliefs upon which I resolve to create a life. The most dominant one for me has been a standard of service to my children and a belief that through being the best parent I can be, I will evolve and support the creation of independent, well-adjusted adults who can navigate their lives according to their interests and values. I have devoted most of my adult life to this pursuit. It has defined me in myriad ways. And, it seemed unthinkable that anything could ever be more valuable than that.

I still believe that, but, I also have come to see that by getting sucked into tunnel vision based on this role, these values and standards, I backed myself into a corner. I could no longer grow and evolve or express myself in different ways if an activity or idea conflicted with my definitions of what it takes to be a good mom.

Taking the Journey to redefine what being a "good mom" meant to me, or at least widening my perceptions of myself, let me start seeing new possibilities. It was pretty scary at first. I had to work through what other people might think of me, how my children would react and feel, and ultimately, if I could respect myself if I tried new things. I could no longer stay in the safe haven of schedules and tasks and cozy home life. I had to shake up the status quo to see if anyone else was in there besides Mom.

We find new versions of ourselves when we release a little of the fixation with security and resolve to visit the unknown. Uncharted territory can be a tough place to go – especially at this point in history when the prevailing sentiment is to "stay safe." We're entrenched in cultural expectations to remain cocooned in situations that don't invite unknown elements into our lives. But, it is precisely within the unknown that we surprise ourselves and find fulfillment and expansion in ways we would have never dreamed possible, never even had a chance to

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see, had we stuck to the status quo. Therefore, we must be courageous enough to embark on the unfamiliar when we want to find a fresh expression.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are your interests, fascinations, or desires?
2. What makes you feel uplifted, affectionate, warm, tender, adoring, kind?
3. What do you hate? What are your pet peeves? What annoys you?
4. What do you think these angry or irritable sides of you might say about what is important to you?
5. Are you most driven to explore your identity from a place of interest? Or is boredom or confusion the driving force right now? If it's boredom and confusion, can you determine what feels lacking in your experience?
6. Do you feel capable of finding the curiosity and the courage to explore the areas that may not feel so good or are fraught with uncertainty?
7. Does the idea of forgoing the safety of the "same-old" to explore the unknown frighten or excite you? Why?

Exploratory Exercises:

1. Write the Chorus of YOUR song. The chorus from the song above describes a lot of seeming contradictions. Sometimes, we don't consider all the opposing aspects of who we are all at once. Take a few minutes and scribble down some of your paradoxes.

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2. Map out your Adventure: Gather some supplies. Find colored pencils, crayons, markers, or paints and the biggest drawing paper available. If you don't have giant pieces of paper, split a box open and lay it flat, tape four to six (or more!) blank pages together, or take some chalk outside to draw on the sidewalk. Consider the reflective questions above and the content from this section. Think about aspects of yourself where you could look for new information about yourself. Have you ever changed your appearance drastically? Have you gone to a counselor to explore thoughts and feelings? Have you tried meditation or yoga? Dabbled in a new hobby? Do any repetitive or intense thoughts or feelings seem to have something to tell you? Start creating a treasure map or the guide to your Hero's Journey that shows all of these different areas that you could investigate for clues regarding new information about yourself.

3. Visualize your Tools: Find a quiet place to sit for a few minutes. Bring along with you things to journal with and a heat source. If you have a heating pad or an electric blanket, grab that. If you can sit somewhere where the sun will warm your body, try that. Or, consider doing this exercise in a warm tub. If you have a heating pad, warm it up and place it right beneath your ribs, where the bony part meets the soft part of your abdomen. Once you get settled into a warm environment, close your eyes, take several deep breaths, and allow your body to become very relaxed. Continue taking deep breaths. Now, focus on the heat penetrating your body, especially at this hollow area under your ribs, your solar plexus. Breathe deep and feel the heat radiating outward from a central point. As the heat increases and moves outward, picture it as having two distinct color swatches: Bright, sparkling gold and a continuously shifting multitude of colors. Recognize that the gold is courage and the shifting colors are curiosity. Continue breathing and allowing these color patterns and their heat to swell and move outward until they encapsulate every cell of your body. Once you're entirely bathed in

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heat and light, sit with it for a few minutes longer: breathing, acknowledging these tools within you and their power, and simply watching how they interact with your body. When you are ready to release the visualization, use your journal to capture any significant revelations you had while experiencing this imagery.

Section Three: Healthy Development of Identity

I will risk boring you for a moment with some professorial lecturing on a theory of healthy identity development. Bear with me, it's relevant. James Marcia observed that people undergo four stages of identity status: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Identity diffusion is when we can't or won't face the idea of exploring our current identity and the need to expand it. For people in diffusion, there has yet to be an identity crisis. Without this, there is usually no impetus to go exploring. There is no clear commitment to any values, ideals, or expression. Think of a child not yet facing adolescence. Or a woman who's given her life to raising her kids, but they are quickly approaching time to leave the nest. Neither of these people has had a reason to consider their identities in a new light – but they will. Soon.

Foreclosure is another status in which we aren't ready for exploration. In this case, a person has a solid identity, but it has been taken on or adopted from others. Thoughts, ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors come from direct or indirect learning. Still, through time, we typically examine these and decide which we want to keep and which we want to change. The person in foreclosure remains stuck, mimicking their influencers, without considering whether this is how they want to be. There have been no identity crises; in this phase, we obviously amble along through life doing what others expect, regurgitating their beliefs and values, and using comparisons and the desire to please others to guide our behaviors. Children and

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adolescents often fall into this category when they passionately echo their parent's religious or political views without having any original thoughts, opinions, or education on these issues for themselves.

Identity Crisis!!!

Then, the crisis comes. This stage is called moratorium. When we find ourselves here, frequently, there is boredom, confusion, or anxiety. Often, we feel lost. Disillusionment is truly the turning point, an exceedingly healthy part of this process. However, it is rare for a person to sit in the uncertainty of moratorium and conclude that all is well and that this is precisely where they need to be. There are few to no guideposts here. There's no telling which way to go or how things will end. But, while this may seem like the void in a black hole, it's also the most fertile space and holds the most potential. Moratorium happens when we lose a career or significant other or have a life-changing event that causes us to reinvent ourselves. It is a true hero that can exist in this space, eager to be in the adventure and curious to see where it will lead.

Once we explore the crisis, have worked through it, and gain a clearer view of our preferences, values, and ideals, we move into identity achievement. Realization is an undoubtedly exciting place to be. It feels like a hard-earned reward. We take a deep breath, recognize how far we've come, and take pride in the stamina and perseverance it took to get to this triumph. Plus, it can be exhilarating to try on a new version of ourselves. Graduates get to experience this heady achievement. They have gone through years of the quest to complete a degree and find themselves with new skills, a new title, and new opportunities

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spreading out before them. It's great to feel we've reached the pinnacle, but we rarely get to stay still here long.

Marcia based his theories on observations of individuals moving from adolescence to adulthood. But the fact is, we continually go through these cycles throughout our lives. It is part of natural, healthy development. By continuously initiating fresh Hero's Journeys and repeatedly moving through these stages at different points in our lives, we maintain vitality and a desire to be part of the flow of life.

Expression and Identity – Linked in Exploration

Our abilities to express ourselves also follow a four-stage path. In diffusion, our expression is same-old, same-old. It could be muted or stagnant. We may have a hard time projecting anything bold or definitive. We might feel blah or bland; we might feel we have nothing to show or give.

In foreclosure, we look, act, and express like everyone else. Or we create appearances according to the rules for the roles passed down to us by our parents, peers, mates, religious or political affiliations, social standing, or society at large. Emulating others can be satisfying for a while. Still, it can feel like a stagnant or inauthentic show in time.

Then comes moratorium! Our expression is often messy here, wild. Maybe we express a breakdown (or two or ten). Perhaps we're emotional or flighty. But, another side of moratorium is when our expression reflects us sampling new things, new clothes and hair, piercings, or tattoos. We do this to see what feels like a good fit and what doesn't. Sampling random elements is the time of true adventure, of having no idea, so just trying it all on for size to see what feels like "me." It can be scary, but it can also be exhilarating and fun.

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Finally, we express our identity achievement. We know who we are and how we want to be in the world. We exude confidence and contentment. We're eager for more and can't wait to see how this version of ourselves unfolds. We know what we like to wear, how we like to move, what we like to create, and we do it.

And then. Eventually. If we're invested in life and learning more about ourselves. A catalyst will come along, and we will do it all over again. The drive to embody a new identity will inspire a new mode of expression and vice versa. Think of how often we get a drastically different haircut or make-over after a breakup. Or how we endeavor to get a whole new wardrobe to look the part when we embark on a new career. Frequently, when we experience an internal compulsion to change, it is reflected in our external expressions. And when we feel it's time for a fresh expression, it's time to claim a new aspect of our identity.

Where are You?

I ran you through all of that with the express purpose of letting you determine where you happen to be in these stages – (not ready to look at identity changes; adopting someone else's ideas so you don't have to look at your own; lost, confused, exploring; or firmly centered in a sense of identity) – and then reassuring you that smack dab in the middle of any of these is an excellent place to be.

The important things to remember here are that it's not a straight line from diffusion to achievement, and it's not somewhere we stay forever. We often move in and out of the stages, moving forward and back and around until we find a place that feels like "us." It's perfectly natural to feel a strong sense of identity, only to realize there's more to learn—and to do so, we often go through the phases in whatever way is most compelling.

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Maybe you became a spouse and parent, which felt exactly right at the time (achievement). But now, it's feeling like not enough. At first, you might jump in and do what everyone else does, buying houses or going to the gym (foreclosure). And that might feel good for a minute, too. You might want to stay in those experiences without exploring more (diffusion). However, the time will come when you feel like you need to try all kinds of new things to find something that inspires you (moratorium). Keep in mind how we move through these stages is not an issue. The issue simply is that we move.

All stages in any order will give you a great position to springboard into a Hero's Journey. But it's also ok to sit in any of these phases for a while. Remember, you can always watch, develop curiosity and courage, and wait until you know it's time to move forward. That, too, can be part of the quest.

Questions for Reflection

1. What stage of identity formation do you think you're in right now? (diffusion = not ready to look at change; foreclosure = adopted someone else's ideas; moratorium = lost/confused/crises/exploring; achievement = well settled and know who you are (currently))
2. How does your self-expression reflect the phase that you are in currently?
3. Do any of these stages trigger a reaction in you? Dislike? Disgust? Fear? Interest? Excitement? Why do you think that is?
4. What's scary or uncomfortable about where you are? And what's scary or uncomfortable about what could be next?

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5. What's encouraging or comfortable about where you are currently? Do these things make it hard to want to move into the unknown to try something different?

6. Wherever you are currently, are you willing to move into another phase, even if it does not seem agreeable? Why?

Exploratory Exercises

1. Mapping your Life. Create a timeline of all of the significant events of your life. Now, go back through them and determine what stage of identity development you were experiencing. For example, have a rocky and rebellious adolescence? You were likely experiencing a moratorium. Did you go straight to college when you left home because that's what was expected of you? Foreclosure. Count the different labels after you've noted each event or period of your life. Determine which type of identity development you tend toward. Consider if you're ready consciously to try a different method.

2. Inside Out. If you've seen the movie *Inside Out*, recall what it looked like when Joy, Bing Bong, and Sadness went into Abstract Thinking. If you haven't seen it, what you're going to do is imagine yourself breaking down into your base elements and then getting reconfigured. Find a place where you can comfortably sit undisturbed for about 20 minutes. Bring your favorite drawing or coloring implements. Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths and relax your body. Bring to mind a clear picture of yourself. Watch as the 3-dimensional you fall flat, becoming a 2D sketch of yourself. Watch as this picture breaks into shapes: A circle head, a rectangular trunk, and straight lines for arms and legs. The shapes will then dissolve into pixels. Now, inhale deeply, and as you exhale, scatter the pixels with your breath. Sit for a moment and watch this in your mind's eye. One by one, the pixels will start to fuse again. They will begin forming new shapes, then a different picture, until a new 3D image emerges.

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Observe this new version of yourself. When ready, open your eyes and draw, color, or paint what you saw.

Section Four: Know Thyself

The wisdom of the ages tells us that the primary goal of the human experience is to Know Thyself. This is good advice, but it falls short in its implication that this is a possible feat. To *Know Thyself* is an ongoing process, a practice. The Self that there is to know is always changing and constantly evolving. Something that was once true of us, our character, behaviors, likes and dislikes, etc., will change over time and in different circumstances. So, to *Know Thyself* means continually seeking to understand our motives and makeup for each new moment. To be more precise, the directive to *Know Thyself* is not an instruction to attempt to create a definitive compendium of the traits, characteristics, temperaments, and behaviors that are "you" and will remain stable through time; it is only a call to see yourself clearly at this moment, right now.

Labels and What to Do With Them

Throughout our lives, part of learning about ourselves includes adding labels to our concepts of ourselves. We tend to believe that finding and declaring a label is the same as knowing ourselves. We say: *I am ____ age, I am a woman/man/non-binary, I am a friend, I am shy, I am tired, I am ambitious, I am a parent, I am a spouse, I am good at math, I am not creative, I am clumsy, I am emotional, I am an athlete, I am lonely, I am fat, I am...* The possibilities are endless and can be contradictory, as we discovered earlier as we sought to define the "everything" included in "us."

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Labels can be both functional and destructive. We pick up the labels, often in childhood, because someone else tells us who we are and what we can and can't do. Labels, when applied and ingested as the one-and-only "truth" of who we are, are destructive. At the very least, they are stifling. Labels can keep us stuck in detrimental versions and keep us from exploring new aspects of ourselves.

The good thing about labels is that they can be changed. And, we are capable of donning as many and as varied of labels as we'd like. However, to try on vastly different criteria, it is critically important to understand that ***we are not our labels***. Or, if it is easier to take, we are not *only* our labels. Labels are simply tools to get a glimpse of the mystery of ourselves. They show us aspects; they show us snapshots in time. Using labels in this way, as a way to see ***all*** of our aspects, is highly beneficial.

The goal in applying and playing with our labels is not to take them too seriously. When we grab a label and say something like, "This is who I am," we stall our development. There is no possibility of change or growth when we declare that a label is a stable piece of identity through time. Now, don't get me wrong, it's great to be aware of our biases and to have a degree of acceptance of ourselves related to our preferences and skills, but it's vitally important to recognize that no matter how entrenched a labeled aspect seems to be, it can be changed, or softened, or developed into something new. When we take on a label like, *I'm old*, *I'm sick*, or *I'm broken* and allow the label to dictate who we are by its definition, we become hopelessly bound or stuck in an incomplete identity.

What to do when you're Stalled or Stuck?

Becoming stalled or stuck in an identity isn't a bad thing. Remember, it's a step on the road to development. But it can be uncomfortable, and it may even provoke a fair amount of anxiety. When we find ourselves stalled or stuck, it can feel like a pervasive state or a dead-end that we've come to, which is the conclusion to our tale. In other words, it can feel like our life has boxed us into a new version of ourselves, and we can't see any way out of the box. When this happens, there are a few things we can do to help us through this bind.

Don't panic. When you feel trapped in an old expression, the first rule of thumb is to try not to panic or condemn yourself as having "gone wrong." Remember that when you feel stalled, stuck, confused, or lost, you are experiencing natural parts of life. We go through it repeatedly with every developmental stage we move through. You can fight it or relax and lean into it as best you can, soothing yourself when the going gets intense. So, when you find yourself at this point, try not to panic.

I'd add to that, don't get discouraged. However, some discouragement and even some panic are part and parcel of the Journey. The key is to avoid getting bogged down by it for too long. As soon as you can, recognize this is just a normal part of the unfolding. You may have yet to learn where you're going or how to get there, but feeling lost or confused is an integral part of the tale. You can't skip this part. And you wouldn't want to. You will find valuable things about yourself in this space, making the whole story much richer and more profound.

Imagine watching Mulan, and from the beginning, she says: *Oh! I got this. I'm a rebel and a fighter. I'm going to kick ass and do things my way. I have the strength and resolve to buck thousands of years of tradition. No problem.*

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First, it would be a very short tale. Second, it would be boring. You wouldn't get to see Mulan's character develop. And though she might authentically know she's a badass, you would likely be left wondering if this was superficial or fake. Without taking the time to submerge ourselves in all of the steps of the Journey, our knowing is flat, artificial, and unsupported by the wisdom that develops through experience.

The period of being lost is a necessary part of identity development. So, as soon as possible, throw off the judgment of something going wrong and get as comfortable as possible. Because, next, it's time to start poking around in our negative thoughts and feelings.

Look at negative mental states and emotions. Sometimes, when we're stalled or not yet ready to face a transformation, we still get an inkling that change is a-comin'. That period of knowing that a transition is imminent but not knowing how it can happen may lead to helplessness, anxiety, anger, or sadness. You might be asking yourself, *"How would I even begin?"* An excellent place to start is to observe negative thoughts and emotions. Notice repetitive thinking like, *"This is just how it is." "I hate this, but it's all I've got." "I can't do anything different; I'm stuck." "I never get things I want. I'm a born loser. I don't deserve anything different."*

At first, these thoughts need to be clarified. You might experience general malaise or dissatisfaction and possibly depression. But keep watching to see if you can notice **WHEN** you feel this way. When you start to get the theme of the emotions and thoughts, do your best not to react. If possible, allow the thoughts to happen with little to no judgment, no internal commentary, no trying to talk yourself out of it or fix whatever is happening. You're just there to watch right now.

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It's especially powerful to get to where you are amid the negative talk and feelings and focus entirely on this. Stop what you're doing to observe. After a while, you will see patterns emerge, and you can begin a dialogue with yourself. If you're feeling bored or trapped because you believe you can't do anything different, take a moment to look at this objectively. Wonder: Why not? And then, listen to see what response bubbles up. Afterward, look at this objectively, too. Is there validity to the reason that surfaced, or is it based on fear? If it's based on fear, question yourself. Ask: What would it take for this feeling to move, even a little bit?

During a poignant stuck spot in my life, I was angry and depressed about not having the time to focus on the creative aspects of my career. I started watching when it became evident that these states were becoming chronic. I noticed that I felt powerless to change the flow of my life – mostly because I had a young child at home who needed almost 100% of my attention. As I said earlier, up to this point in my life, I had developed and firmly rooted myself in my identity in the role of "being a good, attentive mother." Finding outside help so I could focus more on creative work threatened that identity. I thought other modes of creativity beyond parenting shouldn't matter – I should be totally satisfied throwing myself into the mothering role. But the pervasive feelings of upset wouldn't keep covering for me. I knew it was time for a change.

When I was able to observe my feelings objectively, I could see that anger and depression flared up most when I wasn't making significant headway on my work creations. I watched this for a while and noticed that not only did this happen because I wasn't creating enough – it happened concerning a belief that I COULDN'T create. When I wondered why I couldn't, the almost immediate answer was that I couldn't create inspiring works because my parenting duties would always trump and interrupt the creative flow. When I got curious about

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that, I could see that my belief that being a good, attentive mother equated to doing it all without outside help – and that meant I couldn't find outside resources for my child so that I could focus. Looking at this with more curiosity and attention, I could see that the belief was based entirely on fear. I was afraid I wouldn't be good enough or that I would lose the only identity I knew if I changed how we did things. When I questioned myself, "*What would it take to change this,*" I knew it was time to check out options for my kiddo. In the end, we both developed. He was ready to interact with a broader range of people, and I got to grow into more creative aspects of my work.

Narrow your focus to one thing (thoughts, actions, hobbies, etc.). Earlier, I mentioned many aspects that contribute to identity: thoughts, feelings, hobbies, actions, roles, appearances, etc. Don't try to change all of them at once. Pick one aspect and focus on allowing that part of you to morph into something new. And don't try to wrestle the most brutal beast to the ground first. The cool thing about finding or reinventing yourself is that, often, one slight shift encourages another. So, if you're currently in a place of hating your body, don't focus on weight loss and figuring out what you need to change and why you and your body can't get along. It's too big. Go somewhere else first. Think about trying a new hobby. Or a new role in your community. Investigate if you start getting resistance here, experiencing feelings, thoughts, and actions that throw up roadblocks to trying something new. It will be easier to face and easier to get fresh ideas as you try new things in one area. And these will have an impact on the "big" issue.

In the previous example of needing a change in my life, I first focused on my creative expressions. But, the "*BIG*" problem was that I couldn't get over a relationship issue that I felt powerless to change or heal. Focusing on creative career outlets helped me ease off my

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nearly obsessive focus on problems that seemed to have no answer. I chose to work on creative aspects instead. While I did that, it became apparent that the underlying issue was that I didn't have a strong sense of my value as a unique, creative being outside of motherhood and relationships. Working through the creative expression/mothering part of the equation helped me ease off the relationship issues that felt so hopelessly stuck. While I paid attention to how I was feeling about making the necessary changes to allow my creativity to flow, I had epiphanies about my sense of Self, which led to movement on the relationship front.

This organic process is how work on identity and expression proceeds. Because while there are many aspects to our identities, they're all interconnected. Developing one part of ourselves will lead to shifts across the board. That's why it's important to step away from the unwinnable battles and play with the things that seem entertaining or uplifting. You will still experience challenges, but they will be softer and more subtle – but no less potent in priming you for powerful insights. Once those start to flow, there's no stopping you as you seek to shift in all the ways that previously held you back.

Try it out – All of it. Broadly, sampling many new things may seem to contradict the previous step, but this is not about changing every aspect of yourself. What I mean here is that when you pick an area of focus, try everything. If you're going to play with your outer image, try it all. Retro, chic, masculine, feminine, androgenous, grunge, professional, muted, colorful. Check everything out. Ultimately, the only way to discover different aspects of yourself is to experiment and see how different things feel.

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For me, when I was shifting my parenting identity and trying out my creative wings, we tried everything. We tried babysitters and classes, workshops, and sports teams. We found what made sense for our lives and my parenting style amid much trial and error. While that was going on, I shifted my work focus from strictly academic to trying video and audio media and writing. I dipped into my training arsenal on therapeutic modalities and tried them all. Eventually, I found the expressions that felt the best to me and for my family.

Remember, if you're feeling stuck, there is no shame in not knowing, and there is certainly no shame in trying new things. A powerful way to inspire movement can be to throw yourself into as many things as possible (in a given area) to see what feels good and what doesn't. It may take you into realms you would never venture into on your own. And you might hate it. But, every trial gives you essential information about yourself. I'm not advocating that you go out and try destructive or dangerous things, but keep in mind that even destructive behaviors can show you something about yourself and can be fundamentally beneficial. The important thing is that if you find yourself exploring your dark side a little more than is comfortable or maybe even safe, to remember to forgive yourself quickly and don't hang out there too long. Remind yourself that these are experiments, not lifestyle changes. And, of course, if you get lost in the wild – remember, heroes need help sometimes. Find it.

Questions for Reflection

1. Can you list the labels that define you most? Which ones have you had with you since you were a child? Which ones are particularly hard to see around or through?
2. Are you experiencing any unease or panic about where you are currently in your expressions or identity? If so, do you know why?

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3. Can you identify chronic negative thought patterns or emotions? If so, do you know what the states are trying to reveal to you?
4. Is there one specific aspect of yourself that seems like it's calling for change?
5. Is there one specific aspect of yourself for which a focus on change could be fun or light-hearted?

Exploratory Exercises

1. Collage a New Identity. Grab a stack of magazines, scissors, glue, and a big piece of paper or cardboard. Cut from magazines all things you like that grab your attention or that you'd like to experience. Don't think about it too much... just cut. When you've got a nice stack of cut-outs, assemble them on paper or cardboard (I like doing it on an empty side of my refrigerator). When you've done this, step back and see what you'd like to experience next.

2. Tell the Story of a New You. Once you've completed the collage exercise, grab a piece of paper and a pencil (or a trusted friend or pet) and tell the story of what you see. Tell the story in first person and present tense. For example, on my refrigerator, there is a story about me. I am out in the world, using my years of experience and education to uplift others. I travel a lot. I play with my family. I have a mate with whom I build and create things, etc. Tell your story based on the pictures you have selected.

3. Brainstorm! Select an aspect to focus on to try some changes. Write it in capital letters in the middle of a blank page and then circle it. (And if you weren't able to, pick one now. If you're having trouble, remember, make it the easiest.) Now, grab a timer and set it for at least

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one minute (if you feel like challenging yourself, go for three!). Once your timer is going, list as many things about this aspect that could be experimented with.

4. Do It! Pick at least one item from your brainstorm and try it. Extra hero points for trying one every day for at least a week.

Continuing Down the Road

You've begun! You're off on the Journey. Your guide has initiated you, and you've already done some real exploring! Exciting!

If you're up for the Hero's Journey 2.0, consider that soon, you may be stepping in front of a camera to reveal the mild-mannered alter ego. If you choose this challenge, review your answers to the questions from the chapter to get you thinking about who you want to bring to a photo shoot party! Let the exercises you completed stimulate you to ideas about what you'd most like to explore in your life and in front of the camera. Talk to friends or loved ones if that will help you along your path. Find more structured support as necessary. And remember:

We can't know where we're going,

until we recognize where we are.

Schedule your session with a photographer.

The theme of this whole experience is the Hero's Journey. So, schedule a session with a photographer to document, explore, and more dynamically begin your Journey. Endeavor to experience this by modeling the expression of who you are at this moment. Before you go to a photography session, make lists: What are your preferences? What do you love? What do you hate? What are your labels? Are you in a place where you're not feeling much of anything right now? Is feeling lost your defining feature?

Consider what props, coverings, or backgrounds might reflect the things in these lists. If you get stuck, look to your favorite Hero for inspiration. What did Dorothy love and hold as her highest values before she set off on her Journey? What did Judy Hopps hate? What was causing Neo to feel apathetic? Take cues from their beginning expression, and mimic them if you are still feeling at a loss for where to start with yourself. Let this inspire you to take outfits and accessories to your shoot that will help you express who you are.

On the other hand, if you're stuck or lost, embrace it! Model yourself stuck, or lost, or bewildered! You can shoot in the dark, stuck in the mud or a cave, or at a crossroads! Another fun method is to create label placards or inscribe them directly on your skin. Also, discuss where you are with your photographer. They can help you develop ideas to express who you are right now.

If you need help identifying a photographer who specializes in this type of journey, fill out a contact form at DrJennyCahill.com for suggestions.

Reflections for after the shoot

- What was it like exploring your identity in the shoot?
- Did you experience uncertainty? Surprise? Doubt? Excitement while shooting?
- Were you able to have fun portraying different parts part of yourself?
- Were you surprised by how you felt? What surprised you?
- Are you able to express yourself easily? Is there more you found you wanted to learn

Reflections for after reviewing the images:

- What do you think?!
- Which pictures are you most drawn to? Why?
- Which images do you have a hard time loving? Why?
- Is there consistently a part of your body or attribute you find hard to accept or appreciate? Why?

Reflections from a Hero:

While the ideas of Identity Formation weren't new to me, I had never gone this deep into them before. I feel very stuck and unsure of where to go and how to move forward in my life. And I am having a difficult time dealing with the emotional aspects of my life right now. So, this was hard at first, but it became more enjoyable the more in depth that I got. It was interesting to learn in different ways and look at my like at different points and see which part of my identity was taking over at that stage. The exercises gave me great insights to where I might be headed.

Doing a photo shoot of where I am now was actually very fun and enjoyable. I am in a stagnant phase and the photos were shot in a somber setting with a red light. And though, I do not like where am I at emotionally, I did not feel uncomfortable modeling this during the

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photo shoot. I did not have a problem acting somber, due to not feeling like I have much to smile about right now.

I feel nervous and even a little scared about finishing this chapter and taking off on the rest of the Hero's Journey. I am definitely anxious and nervous to figure out where I am in life and where I have been. It will be interesting to see the photos. I have never purposefully taken photos where I didn't smile. I am hopeful that through the progression of this journey and as I heal, I will see my smile will come back.

~ B

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