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On My Mind

As I write this I am quite tired. This is because last night, although my body was worn out, my mind was off designing two sailboats and a pair of comfortable shoes. My mind takes every opportunity available to create new devices or design better mouse traps, often at the expense of the rest of my body. It is so keyed into what it is doing that I have tremendous difficulty multi tasking. For example if I were to be analyzing my walk in order to design a better shoe, I, in all likely hood, would not be able to chew gum at the same time. Thus, last night, the poor part of my brain that was trying to communicate to the rest of my brain that my body desperately needed sleep was blocked by two hydraulic rams that would be controlling the canting keel on my imaginary vessel.

So realistic are the designs and models I build in my head that I can control and manipulate them with incredible accuracy. In examining this skill I discovered that I could play entire games of chess in my mind, and with more skill than if I could see the board. I believe the reason for this is that when I play in my head I am distinctly aware of every piece and its relation to the rest of the game. When I can see the board, however, I filter out pieces that do not have an impact on the play at that moment, which can be good in a fast game, but leaves me susceptible to making silly mistakes. This is most likely due to a strategy I developed in overcoming my dyslexia. When I read I am only able to absorb about 20% of the words on the page. As a result I have learned to pick which words to absorb and how to form the rest of the information or story from only that 20%. This ability to form a whole picture from limited information has transferred over to almost all other areas of thinking for me. When searching on the web, for example, I can fly through pages to find what I want by only reading a couple of words and evaluating whether the page is useful or not.

Another strategy I developed for dealing with my dyslexia is to look inward at how I think and learn. That is the reason I am able to write this. This is necessary to analyze whether the techniques I am using to learn are working or not. One thing that is currently not working for me is finishing this paper. That is because I have just glanced over at a magazine which had a pair of snowshoes on the cover, and my brain is rapidly

designing a better pair. Moreover, it is competing for resources with the part of my brain that is trying to write this paper, and it is winning quite easily. Already I have built a parametric model and am trying to figure out the best way to mount the binding. So, with the last part of my brain that is devoted to this paper I think it is a good thing I will be able to go over this tomorrow.

“The Man Who Would Be King” in the context of “The Writer’s Journey”

I. Introduction

As I read Vogler’s “The Writer’s Journey” I kept thinking of one of my favorite films and stories, “The Man Who Would Be King” by Rudyard Kipling. For the most part, the story closely follows Vogler’s stages of a hero’s journey; however, there are several interesting differences. The journey of the two flawed heroes in this story is more complex than Vogler’s stages of a hero’s journey. This is partly because there is ultimately no reward, and their own hubris leads to their demise in the supreme ordeal. In this presentation I will provide a short plot summary for those who do not know the story, followed by a comparison of the stages of a hero’s journey with the journey of our heroes. Finally I will highlight some key points and differences between the two journeys.

II. Brief plot summery

The movie starts with two ex-army scoundrels, Daniel Dravot and Peachy Carnehan, seeking the advice of Rudyard Kipling about a plan they have to become kings in the distant and unknown land of Kafiristan, last known to be visited by Alexander the Great. To get there they cross mighty rivers, befriend and fight natives and climb over the giant mountains of the Himalayas. Upon their arrival they become generals of a small village, and during a battle with a nearby town, Daniel Dravot is mistaken for a god. They get taken to a holy city where they become supreme rulers and are given great riches. While Peachy wants to leave with the wealth they have gotten, Daniel, who starts to view himself as a god, wants to remain king and take a bride. This results in Daniel’s death, and Peachy’s crucifixion. Peachy somehow survives and makes his way back to Kipling in India and recites his story.

III. Comparison of the stages of a hero’s journey with “The Man Who Would Be King”

-Stages 1 and 2

In “The Man Who Would Be King” our two heroes closely follow the formula of the first two stages of a hero’s journey; 1) the ordinary world and 2) the call to adventure. It is evident that Peachy and Daniel have become restless in India and crave adventure. Shortly thereafter, their goal to become kings of Kafiristan, is clearly established. “The Man Who Would Be King”, however, starts to veer away from this formula in stages three and four.

-Stages 3 and 4

There really is no refusal of the call (stage 3) by our heroes, rather they are eager to set off on their journey. Likewise, they do not really have an actual mentor (stage 4), for they are going to uncharted territory to seek an unknown adventure. The elements of these stages, however, are not completely lost, and can be seen in Kipling's character. While the heroes themselves do not refuse the call, Kipling begs them not to go, and says that their journey is madness. Additionally, he tells them of Alexander the Great, the last westerner to visit Kafiristan. Alexander the Great becomes a recurring theme, and Daniel and Peachey seek to follow in his 2000 year old footsteps. Furthermore, Daniel, when assumed to be a god, is thought to be the son of Alexander the Great (hailed as a god). In this way the themes of a refusal of the call and the mentor are seen in the movie, although not directly played out by the main characters.

-Stages 5 and 6

In stages five and six, crossing the first threshold and test, allies and enemies, "The Man Who Would Be King" reconnects with the hero's journey. Crossing the first threshold for Daniel and Peachy is their journey to Kafiristan, across the rivers and over the mountains to reach their destination. This marks the turning point between their decision to become kings, and their actions to achieve this goal.

Once they reach Kafiristan, they meet friends like Billy Fish, the English speaking gorkha. They wage wars and test their resolve, leadership, and values. This gives the audience a closer look at our heroes. We see the cleverness and determination of Peachy, and the likeability, and pride of Daniel.

-Stage 7

The approach to the inmost cave, stage 7, is in many ways the crossing of the second threshold. It is here where Peachy and Daniel have been taken to the sacred and holy city and are forced to confront their claim that Daniel is a god. The city is very foreign to them, and they cannot rely on their army or guns to save them, as they have in the past. As in many stories this stage has a very spiritual element to it. The heroes must often look inward or to some mystical force for guidance. In "The Man Who Would Be King" it is Daniel's claim of being a deity that brings them to this place and it is the spirit of Alexander the Great that leads to their initial salvation.

-Stages 8 through 12

The story does not directly follow the last stages of the hero's journey, 8) the supreme ordeal, 9) reward, 10) the road back, 11) resurrections and 12) return with the elixir, but has all the elements of each of these stages. The supreme ordeal in this story has two parts, it starts with the priest of the holy city challenging Daniel's godliness. He survives, and the supreme ordeal goes into a period of limbo. In this limbo the reward of vast quantities of gold and jewels is given to our heroes. Here is where the story has an interesting twist. Instead of leaving with the reward, Daniel gets caught up in his own hubris of being a god, leading to his downfall and ultimately failing the second part of the supreme ordeal. There is no reward in the end.

In “The Man Who Would Be King” the resurrection of Peachy takes place before the road home. He is crucified for days, yet manages to survive. He then makes the journey home, back to Kipling, over the same route he came by. What is so powerful about these stages in the movie is that these stages are not shown, rather they are briefly told from what remains of an old, beaten man. Lastly Peachy gives Kipling the bag he has been carrying, which contains Daniel’s head with his crown. This “returning with the elixir” gives the ultimate verification of the story.

IV. Key points

One of the interesting elements of the “The Man Who Would Be King” is that the role of the mentor is played by the unseen spirit of Alexander the Great. It is the unseen hand of Alexander the Great that guides Daniel and Peachy’s journey. During the supreme ordeal it is ultimately Alexander’s legacy that saves Daniel. Likewise, when Daniel, corrupted by power, sees himself as the ancestor to the deified Alexander the Great, it is his undoing. This blurring view of Alexander between a great man and a god is the driving mystical force of the story. When viewed as a man, our heroes can follow his accomplishments, for they are men as well. When viewed as a god who they try to emulate, however, they fail for they are not gods.

Another interesting piece of the “The Man Who Would Be King” is that there is ultimately no reward. Our heroes are merely men, and although they accomplish incredible feats, it is their human flaws that defeat them. The hero’s journey often involves superhuman characters, while they can struggle, they always seem to come back with the reward. It is the human nature of Peachy and Daniel that inspires awe in us to think of what we, as humans, can accomplish, and chill us as to what faults it can lead to.

Lastly, what is fascinating about “The Man Who Would Be King” is that the resurrection and road home are only expressed in a few sentences. Although we do not see these stages, we can clearly imagine how horrific they were. The power comes from our knowledge of the difficulty of the initial journey to Kafiristan by two healthy men with supplies and donkeys, and from seeing the result in Peachy of his journey home. What is interesting is that the most difficult part of the journey is essentially unseen.