

Eight Billion Amateurs

By Ty Morse

There are eight billion of us presently aboard a small blue-green vessel called Earth, though none of us remembers buying a ticket.

We are traveling around the sun at roughly sixty-seven thousand miles an hour while the whole solar contraption tears through the Milky Way, destination unknown. There are no seatbelts. No emergency exits. The captain has declined to make an announcement.

Given the situation, Bonnie Tyler was right. We need a hero.

We have been inventing them almost as long as we have been inventing anything.

Gilgamesh. Achilles. Odysseus. Hercules. Arjuna. Joan of Arc. Superman. Luke Skywalker. Gods become men. Men become gods. Some wear sandals. Some wear capes. Some wear masks. Hercules wore a lion, which must have made casual Fridays complicated. Eventually somebody strapped on a Fender Stratocaster and became a guitar hero.

We write heroic couplets. We eat hero sandwiches. We call athletes heroes for putting a ball through something. We call soldiers heroes for coming home and sometimes for not coming home. We have superheroes, antiheroes and unsung heroes—which is especially strange considering how many songs we have written about them.

Bowie told us we could be heroes, though only for one day, which is probably about as much immortality as the average person can fit into a Tuesday. Enrique Iglesias wants to know if he can be ours. Dave Grohl points one out as he goes.

By the late twentieth century, we had apparently become so desperate for heroes that we began singing instructions for summoning them.

Then we plugged the whole business into a PlayStation and awarded points.

But every myth eventually runs out of wardrobe.

Joseph Campbell noticed something peculiar beneath the sandals and spandex. Across oceans, centuries and civilizations, people who had never shared so much as a cup of coffee kept telling essentially the same story.

Someone hears a call.

Someone would rather not.

Someone leaves home anyway.

There is a threshold. Beyond it: forests, dragons, temptresses, teachers, tricksters, whales, underworlds, Death Stars and the bellies of whatever beasts happen to be eating Tuesday.

The hero gets lost. Gets wounded. Learns something the comfortable version of himself could never have learned.

Then, if the gods, weather and connecting flights cooperate, the hero returns carrying something home.

Campbell gave the whole recurring contraption a name, but naming things is one of our species' favorite ways of pretending we understand them. Hero's Journey. Gravity. Eternity. Death. Tuesday.

The universe remains unimpressed.

We arrive here naked and screaming, with no idea where we are, how long we have, or what precisely is expected of us. Someone hands us a name and from there things get increasingly complicated.

We grow. We wander. We laugh and lust and love and lose. We make things. We break things. We bury our dead. If we're lucky, somebody buries us.

An ordinary human life contains a thousand departures, dragons and returns. Most dragons, regrettably, do not have the courtesy to look like dragons.

We are all passengers aboard Space and Time. It left port long before we arrived and will continue long after we disembark. The accommodations are temporary. Everyone's return ticket appears to have been misplaced.

Which changes the meaning of courage.

An invulnerable creature cannot really be brave.

The interesting thing about Superman is not that bullets bounce off him.

The interesting thing about us is that they don't.

Courage requires vulnerability. Heroism requires something that can be lost.

Otherwise it is merely power.

And power has always been where our hero stories get sticky.

Achilles slaughtered. Odysseus deceived. Empires made heroes of conquerors. Nations made heroes of soldiers. One civilization's marble statue is another civilization's monster.

Eventually the clever ape who painted heroic hunters on cave walls learned to split the atom.

At Hiroshima, humanity crossed a threshold from which there was no uncrossing. The creature who had once been afraid of lightning had stolen a piece of the sun and dropped it from an airplane.

Our technology had become godlike before our wisdom had finished puberty.

And yet—

we are still here.

Still aboard.

Still spinning.

Still making music.

Still falling absurdly in love with one another.

Still lifting children onto our shoulders so they can see above the crowd. Still running toward burning buildings. Still sitting beside hospital beds. Still defending strangers. Still making apologies. Still planting trees whose shade belongs to people we will never meet.

Still telling stories about someone who reaches the edge of the known world, peers into the darkness and puts one ridiculous human foot in front of the other.

Maybe that is why we keep inventing heroes.

Not because someone is coming to save us.

Because every so often someone does.

And occasionally, terrifyingly, wonderfully, that someone is us.

So we carve heroes into marble and staple capes to their shoulders. We hand them swords and shields, guitars and spaceships, masks and impossible cheekbones. We sing for them, wait for them, pray for them and spend \$79.99 dressing like them at Halloween.

We keep mistaking the costume for the qualification.

A hero does not need to be stronger than death.

A hero needs to know death is in the room—and get up anyway.

That may be the secret Campbell found hiding in all those old stories. The threshold was never a doorway between the ordinary world and some enchanted one.

The enchanted world was this one.

This impossible blue ship.

This brief ticket.

This strange little interval between arriving naked and leaving empty-handed in which we are permitted to love something enough to risk losing it.

Bowie is still singing somewhere in the cargo hold. Bonnie Tyler is still waiting. Superman is looking nervously for a phone booth. Campbell has wandered off toward the stars.

And eight billion frightened, ridiculous, magnificent amateurs continue hurtling through the dark aboard Space and Time, with no captain, no seatbelts, no destination anyone can agree upon—

and, against all available evidence,
somebody keeps getting up to help.