

Book Review

Rachel Rigolino

Charting A Hero's Journey

Linda A. Chisholm
New York: The International Partnership
for Service Learning, 2000

"The hero...is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations. His solemn task and deed...is to return...to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed."
- Joseph Campbell

This quote from Joseph Campbell appears before the preface in *Charting A Hero's Journey* and encapsulates the central metaphor of the book: the student's experience in the field as a heroic journey. Using Campbell's well-known *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as her blueprint, Linda Chisholm organizes the chapters of her book around the stages of the archetypal hero's journey. This is an innovative and compelling strategy for organizing the reading selections. What student or instructor wouldn't be drawn to viewing the sometimes mundane process of overcoming daily obstacles as "Battling the Beasts"? The very fact that Chisholm sees student service as exemplifying Campbell's monomyth of the hero demonstrates her essential optimism about the value of student service both here and abroad.

Chisholm is a pioneer in cross-cultural service-learning programs for both high school and college students. The infrastructure for these programs initially was provided by the educational institutions set up by the Anglican Church in countries that were formerly part of the British Empire. As the director of the Association of Episcopal Colleges, Chisholm founded, in 1993, a similar network on an international basis: colleges and universities taking advantage of computer/modern telecommunications to facilitate interactions among the students and faculty in Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the USA. In addition to her work with the Association of Episcopal Colleges, of which she is President, Chisholm is one of the

founders of The International Partnership for Service-Learning. She currently serves that organization as its Executive Vice President.

The most useful sections of *Charting a Hero's Journey* are the excerpts from a broad cross-section of journal keepers who tell of their experiences working with various groups of people, both here in the United States and abroad. Some of these writers are well known: James Boswell and Samuel Johnson; Jane Addams, the founder of the settlement house movement; Octavio Paz, the Nobel prize-winning author; and Langston Hughes, the African-American poet. Others are not household names, but are typical of the 19th and 20th century men and women who, as naturalists, mission workers, or members of the Peace Corps, chose to give service both at home and outside of their countries. The questions posed by Chisholm after each excerpt are also very good and should stimulate student reflection as well as journal writing.

Chisholm conceives of *Charting A Hero's Journey* as a text to be used not only by students in study and/or service abroad programs, but also by students enrolled in service-learning courses. She notes that like students who travel abroad, students enrolled in campus-based service initiatives "encounter different social classes, ages, levels of education, and living conditions." The metaphor of the journey, therefore, can be applied to the student's experiences whether she is trekking across the Sahara or across the street.

Indeed, as long as the instructor shares

Chisholm's basic premise that all journeys, whether actual or metaphorical, share similar stages and/or moments of self-discovery, the book can be tailored to suit the needs of most service-learning courses. From the visions of poverty that haunted Jane Addam's childhood and shaped her adult philosophy of service, to Langston Hughes' impulsive decision to journey to Africa, the reading selections reveal the underlying reasons people have for venturing across social, economic, and cultural boundaries. Certainly, the type of self-reflection modeled in the excerpts Chisholm has selected could be used as a basis for journal writing in a wide variety of circumstances.

My only reservation about *Charting A Hero's Journey* is Chisholm's embrace of Joseph Campbell, whose work, which was posthumously popularized in a Public Broadcasting Service series in the 1980s, now seems dated. Much of Campbell's research and writing has been effectively criticized by scholars ranging from theologians to psychiatrists. Perhaps his most well-known critic was Brendan Gill who accused Campbell (after his death admittedly) of being, among other things, anti-Semitic.

In light of recent events (actually, one might even go so far as to argue in light of World War II), Campbell's monomyth seems remarkably naïve, a relic of nineteenth-century academic cleverness. The implication of Campbell's work is that the distinctions made among various cultural and religious traditions are, in the end, superficial ones, for if we part the shroud of time, we will discover that all religions share a common, mythological origin. Raised in the Roman Catholic Church, Campbell fairly soon ditched his catechism in favor of an amorphous blending of Buddhist-Hindu-Judeo-Christian thoughts. That these theologies might be mutually exclusive did not seem relevant to Campbell as he had discovered the monomyth that tied them all together.

Of course, most people outside of Western academia (and later outside of the PBS viewing area) did not know about the monomyth and clung to their parochial beliefs and traditions. In an excerpt from Octavio Paz's 1995 book about India that Chisholm uses as a reading selection in *Charting A Hero's Journey*, Paz notes:

The return of religious passion and nationalistic fervor hides an ambiguous meaning: Is it the return of ghosts and demons that reason had exorcised, or

is it the revelation of profound truths and realities that had been ignored by our own proud constructs? It is not easy to answer this question.

Indeed, it is not. But Paz continues:

What can be said is that the revival of nationalism and fundamentalism—why don't they call it by its true name, fanaticism?—has become a great threat to international peace and the integrity of nations...I have said that the solution is double: secularism and democracy.

While Campbell can be said to have celebrated world cultures, traditions, and religions, he did not take their differences especially seriously. Paz, on the other hand, is appreciative of the "threat" that exists in these differences, and, indeed, it must be pointed out, so is Chisholm. Throughout *Charting A Hero's Journey*, Chisholm anticipates the obstacles a student may face while working in a non-Western culture. She does not downplay these differences with a kindly "let's all learn to get along" aside to her reader. Instead, Chisholm asks students to reflect on the meaning of the differences and their impact on the service the student may be trying to provide. Chisholm even encourages students to question the goals of the agency for which they are working if these goals seem to be in opposition to the cultural norms.

Chisholm urges students to ask themselves, among other things, "Are you imposing your sense of progress on a people for whom this is an alien notion of life?"

Chisholm's questions, and Paz's reflections on fundamentalism, are especially timely in light of the events of September 11th. Can we answer the "threat" of "fanaticism" with a healthy dose of "secularism and democracy"? It would seem not. Most of the terrorists involved in the hijackings and destruction of the World Trade

Center were well-educated men who had lived for years in the West wearing blue jeans and eating McDonalds. Recently I saw a photograph of Osama bin Laden as a fourteen year old in a

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fashionable part of London—Belgravia or Kensington, perhaps. Clearly, bin Laden had been exposed to the Western brands of secularism and democracy throughout his childhood and young adult life. And are not these two ideas—secularism and democracy—the very ones that have driven so many like bin Laden to rage against America?

In the end, however, what troubles me the most about Chilsholm's celebration of Campbell has nothing to do with any kind of profound philosophical insights about the nature of humanity. Rather, I what I found most exasperating is Campbell's highly romantic concept of the hero: a robustly masculine figure who is a self-sufficient man of valor, possessing the ability to overcome all obstacles and save society from ruin. Even when discussing personal, spiritual growth, Campbell's oft-quoted call to "follow your bliss," seems at odds with the notion that

selflessness is at the heart of true service to others. In the recent weeks since Sept. 11th, we have, as a nation, celebrated those who risked and ultimately lost their lives in a futile attempt to save strangers. How would Campbell fit into his monomyth these very flesh-and-blood men and women, not super-human figures from the mists of mythology, who seemingly failed in their ultimate purpose?

Rachel Rigolino is an instructor at the State University of New York, New Paltz and serves as coordinator of the SWW Composition Program for developmental writers. She has developed various service-learning composition courses, including an online version that is offered each spring and summer.

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