

# A hero's journey – leadership, script and myth

Sari van Poelje

*The script concept is one of the most fascinating concepts in transactional analysis. A script is defined as an unconscious life plan learned in early childhood, reinforced by parents and reinforced by later events, resulting in a known pay-off (Berne, 1976). Within transactional analysis, script has often been depicted as a drama, sometimes winning, but mostly as non-winning or losing scripts.*

*Script is basically a story, an interpretation of events linked to an emotion, as remembered by our clients. And we are much more the sum of our stories than the sum of our experiences. In working with my coaching and consultancy clients I had a need to encapsulate the positive, developmental aspects of these stories. Yes, they had suffered setbacks and confirmed patterns in their lives through their interpretations of events. However, they were also very successful in their chosen areas of expertise, and their scripts had contributed to this success.*

*For me, script is as much our success story as our drama. In this chapter I will explore script as a heroic narrative. Leadership development is creating awareness of life and organizational events not only at the social or psychological, but also at the mythological level. Campbell's Hero with a thousand faces (1947) is my main source of inspiration. I also want to thank Manfred van Doorn, my mentor in the hero's journey, for his gift of storytelling.*

## Scripts are positive and co-creative

My starting point for this chapter goes back to Berne's initial writings in which he emphasizes that script can be both positive and negative. A negative script is decided upon as a compensation for perceived imperfection, based on "if... then" decisions about yourself and others. "A constructive script may lead to great happiness if the others in the cast are well chosen and play their parts satisfactorily" (Berne, 1976, p146, p.167).

At the mythological level script is a positive factor in development. Our scripts are a co-creative mythical narrative that provides us with meaning, survival strategies, ethics, permissions and direction. Script is also fundamentally a relational concept, not an individual one. It is co-created within a (family) system through stories, mottos and family myths, which convey expectations about how roles should be fulfilled. If one member fails to perform the role in an expected way another may be recruited to take up that role instead. Taking up a role is a choice

## Script, stories and myth

Both script and stories are based on a limited number of themes (Booker, 2004). The heart of most stories is the learning that takes place in the relationship with a hero, lover or villain. It is a confrontation with death, symbolically or in reality, and heroes transcend their script through the offer of their lives for others or an ideal. If you know the plot and the character, you know the outcome of any story.

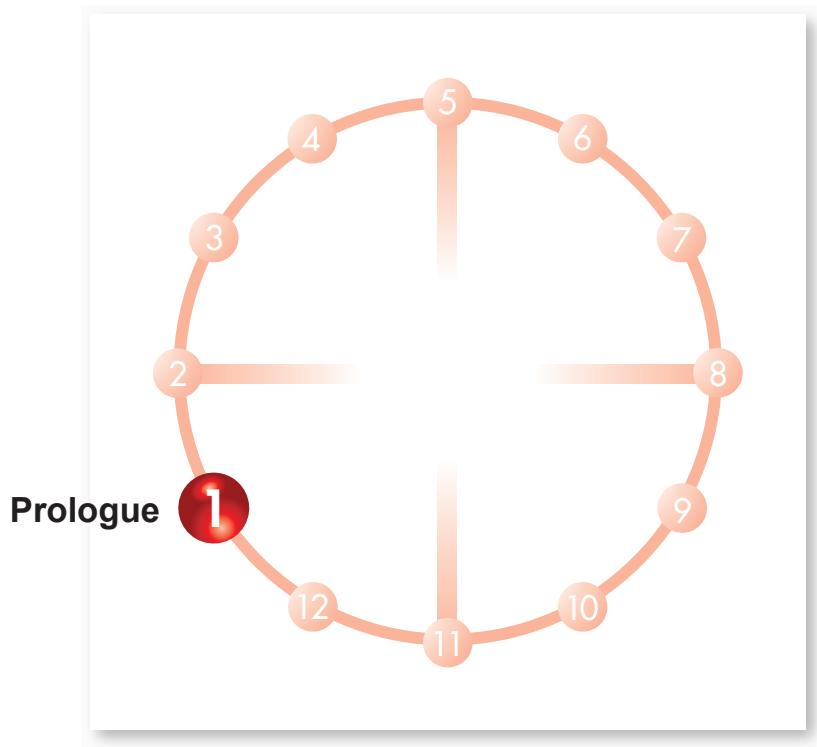
Within TA several people have written about the link between mythology and script. Berne himself was very interested in Greek mythology, which he described in his theories about process scripts. People such as Kahler (1978) and Caracushansky (1992), and many others, have later expanded on his ideas.

## The myth of the hero

Joseph Campbell describes the 12 steps of the hero's journey in his book, *The hero with a thousand faces* (1947). The word hero comes from the Greek *heros* meaning to serve and to protect. A hero is someone who is ultimately willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of the community (Webster dictionary). Campbell's ideas inspired Berne's ideas on script development (Berne, 1976).

Understanding and embracing the mythological aspects of your own hero's journey is the highest form of leadership development. Ultimately any organizational leader is there to bring life to the community he serves. Oddly enough this is also a universal definition of happiness (Veenhoven, 1995).

In describing the hero's journey I will focus on leadership. I believe, however, it can equally be applied to individual and group development.



## Step 1: The Prologue

*We are such stuff as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.*

William Shakespeare

The 'mono role' days are over. Most people have to juggle with simultaneous multiple roles. Every journey starts with a first step. In the hero's journey the first step is called the prologue. The prologue is a period of unconscious preparation for the journey ahead. It is a time to reflect on life as is and dream of life as it could be.

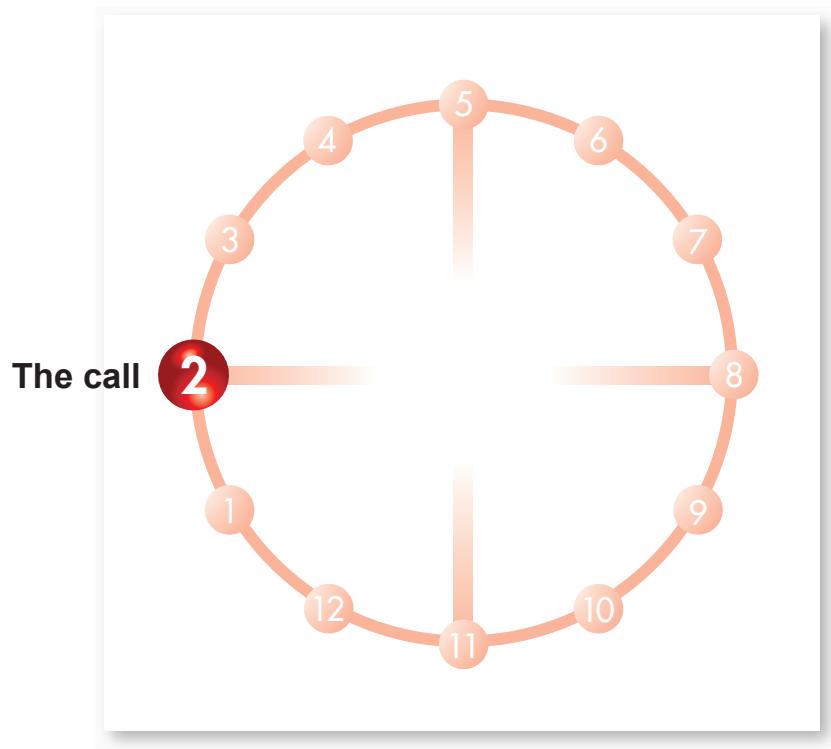
In our own development we exist in the minds of our parents before we physically manifest ourselves on earth. Some say our life's story starts prenatally, already being formed by the generational influences before us (Noriega, 2008).

Any movie also starts with a prologue, which prepares the hero and the viewers for the events to come. For example, the movie *American Beauty* (1999) famously starts with a series of shots with the narrator saying: "My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighbourhood. This is my street. This... is my life. I am 42 years old. In less than a year I will be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet. And in a way I am dead already."

Any leadership venture should commence with a time of dreaming. Before taking on a new project or organization we unconsciously construct an imago in our minds of what it will be like, based on previous experiences and implicit expectations (Berne, 1964). This imago influences all our subsequent behaviours and transactions.

In leadership development I teach clients to consciously take the time to dream beforehand. It is a precious time, one that is usually neglected in Western organizations. Covey (1989) reminds us to take the time to begin with the end in mind. It requires being able to be organizationally aware, and take in all the information available to create a road map beforehand. The competencies needed for this are basic trust and a feeling of belonging.

Questions you can ask yourself are: What were my parents' hopes and fears about me before I was born? What expectations did I create of my leadership role before I accepted it?



## Step 2: Call to adventure

*A = r + p (or Adventure equals risk plus purpose.)*

Robert McClure

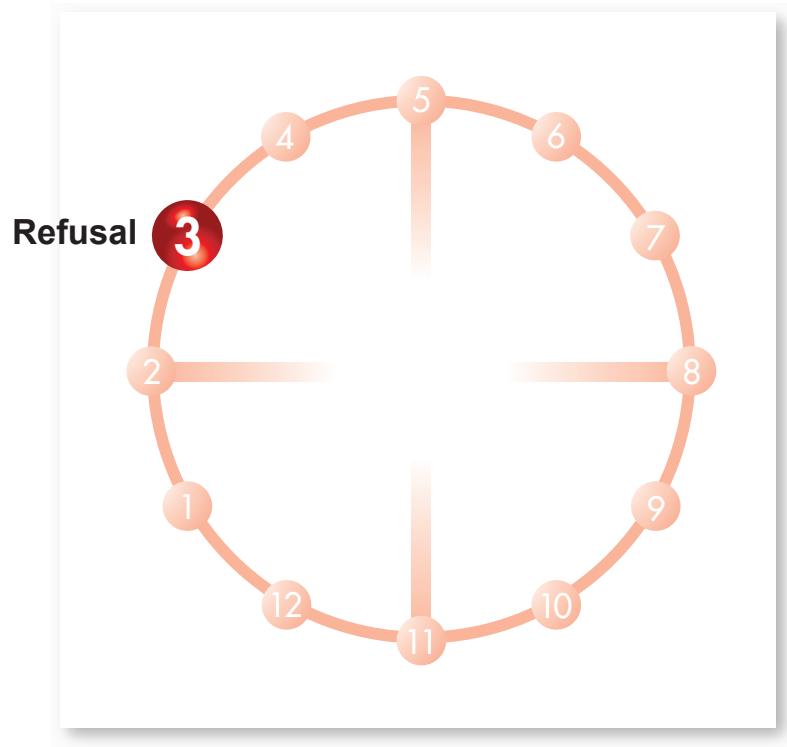
After being immersed in life as is, the hero gets a call to adventure. This call either comes from the outside, through an accident or a herald, or from the inside, because the hero realizes she is missing something in her life.

In our development being born is obviously a physical call to adventure. But any event which disrupts your life as is, and makes you realize there are other possibilities out there can be construed a call to adventure. You may remember the opening sequences of the first *Star Wars* (1977) movie with Luke Skywalker staring in the distance on his uncle's arid farm, clearly missing something in his life. In other movies a herald is sent, like in *A Fish called Wanda* (1988).

In leadership we get thousands of calls to adventure every day. The trick is to distinguish calls that are archaic, and confirm our old stories, from calls that may create an opportunity for transformation. I teach leaders to keep a note of calls that would fit in with their current imago as a leader and calls that would support their development in the areas they desire.

For instance, one of my executive coaching clients complained that he was very successful in terms of making money. He kept getting hired over and over again as a hard-core, interim change manager. In this role he could use his former competencies as a financial expert. With the birth of his first child however, he realized that developing a softer more compassionate approach in life actually made him happier, and he didn't want to answer this old call anymore. He decided to retrain as a coach to change managers and established his own practice.

Questions you can ask yourself are: How many times have you let an opportunity slip by and lived to regret it? Have you accepted calls that you wish you had refused?



### Step 3: Refusal of the call

*Who listens once will listen twice; Her heart be sure is not of ice,  
and one refusal no rebuff.*

Lord Byron

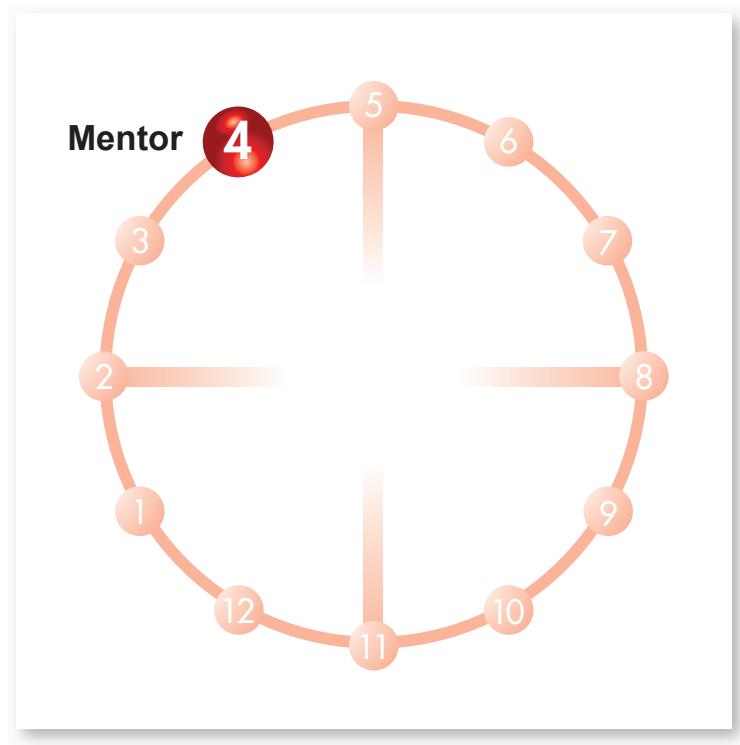
When the hero receives a call to adventure there is often a period of refusal, either by the hero himself or by the environment. A refusal is traditionally seen as resistance. However, refusal can also be seen as a period in which to build up will power and self-confidence.

In human development this period is typical of “the terrible twos”. In movie terms it indicates that the hero is not yet ready. If you think of the movie *The Matrix* (1999) you may remember a clear external call to adventure when someone knocked on the hero Neo’s door and said, “You are Neo”. He immediately responded “NO” and closed his door.

In leadership development, building in moments of consolidation before pushing ahead with a project is important. I often see my executive coaching clients teetering between hope and fear after they’ve stated something new. Hoping that this time things will be different, and fearing they will not. A period of ‘resistance’ literally helps them build up strength.

In leadership coaching I get worried when there is not a period of resistance to the change they contracted for. It means we either contracted much too conservatively to challenge my client or they haven’t fully realized the consequences of the change they are aiming for yet.

Questions you can ask yourself are: What do you do when you feel the tide is against you? How do you deal with resistance?



## Step 4: Meeting with the mentor

*You yourself must make the effort. The Buddha's are only teachers.*

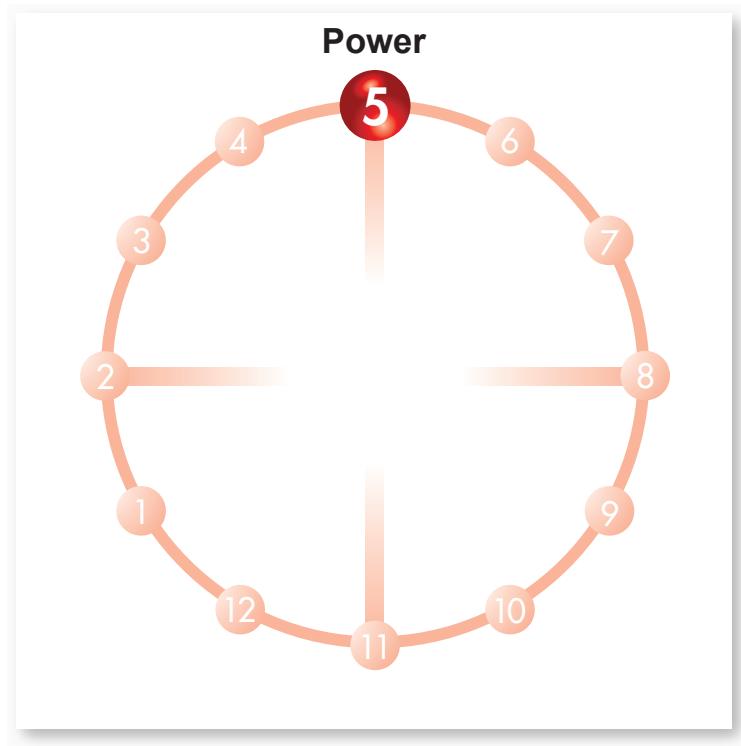
Buddhist proverb

The fourth step of the hero's journey is the meeting with the mentor. A mentor teaches you a trick or skill, and more importantly shows you who you really are. A mentor can be a guide or a fairy godmother, but can also be your opponent.

In human development, if we're lucky our parents are also our mentors, and hopefully you meet other people along the way who show you your (hidden) talents. In film there are many mentor scenes. One is Mr Miyagi in the *Karate Kid* (1984) who teaches the kid how to attack and defend while polishing his car and painting his fence for him: "Wax on, Wax off".

In leadership development finding mentors is essential. Mentors are usually heroes who've been around the block themselves; people who can teach you how to get things done within that context. In interviews (van Poelje, 1996) leaders testify that mentors come in different shapes and forms. A lucky few have had mentors who recognize their talent and take them under their wing supportively. Many say on the other hand, their mentor was a bad example of leadership, who showed them what they didn't want to become if they ever got a leadership position. Honouring your past mentors is an important step in development.

Questions you can ask yourself are: Who were my mentors? What skill did they teach me? For whom am I a mentor?



## Step 5: Getting into power

*It is not power that corrupts but fear. The fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it, and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.*

Aung San Suu Kyi

A hero can step into a position of power using the borrowed skill of a mentor. These skills are not completely integrated as part of their own self-image yet, but are enough to exercise power over others.

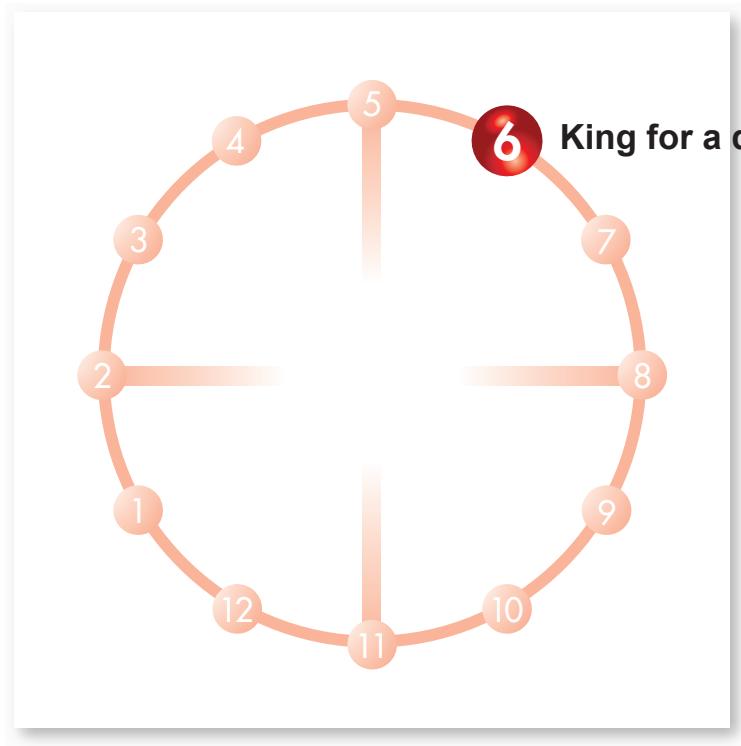
This step is a threshold for the hero, a first confrontation with the new world she has entered. It tests her determination. In human development this is visible when children start exploring the world around them, and leaving and coming back to the secure base of their parents.

There is a very beautiful scene in the film *Elizabeth* (1998) in which she has to speak to the church fathers about the segregation of the Church of England and the state. The power threshold is crossed quite literally when she enters the chamber to sit on her throne, and has to make her way through all the black dressed 'fathers'.

In leadership, the first time you are responsible for a group of people is an example of this step. Most leaders describe in interviews (van Poelje, 1996) the terror and triumph of their first people management experience as one of their key learning events. It is their first taste of power and how you can use or abuse it to get the results you want. Some never progress beyond that step.

In leadership development, learning how to wield power is an important step, especially for female leaders. If you don't step into your hierarchical position, you will not be able to use the legitimate power base at your disposal. This usually means you have to compensate through relational skills or charisma, which are less stable resources as a rule.

Questions you can ask yourself are: What are your deepest ambitions in terms of power? How do you deal with power that your position brings?



## Step 6: King for a day

*See the conquering hero comes! Sound the trumpets, beat the drums!*

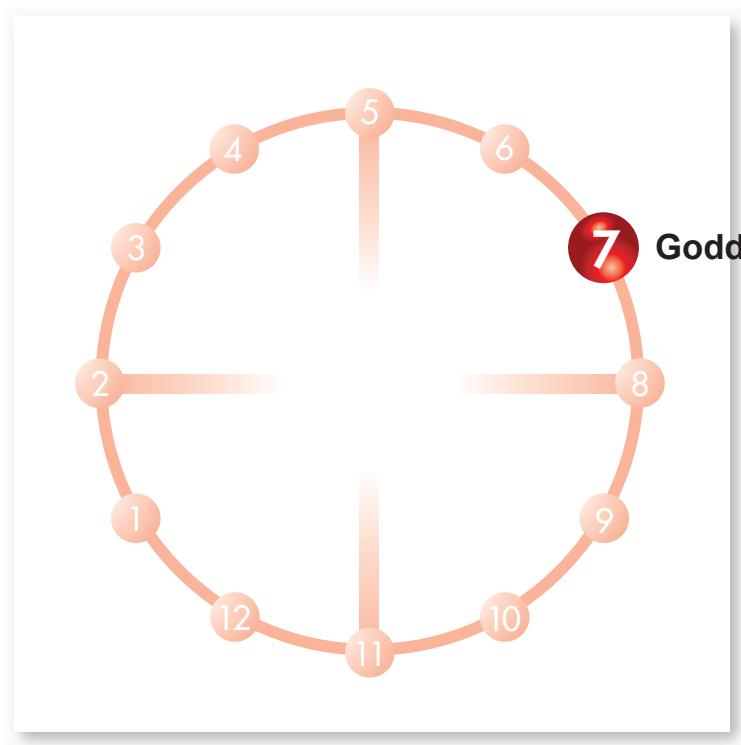
Thomas Morell

The hero feels triumphant and sometimes omnipotent after his first taste of power. Veni, vidi, vici! The term king for a day, however, is a double edged sword. It originates from the pagan origins of Easter, or Ishtar where Nimrod married his mother, became a powerful king but was later murdered and dismembered as a punishment.

In our own development this step is a period of self-expression and need for confirmation. In film the most poignant image of this step is when Leonardo DiCaprio stands at the bow of the *Titanic* (1997) and screams into the wind: "I'm the king of the world! I'm the king of the world!"

In leadership development celebrating and bragging about early success accelerates the process of integrating the 'borrowed' skill or talent. It is a time to build up the ego you surely need to be able to exercise hierarchical power.

Questions you can ask yourself are: Are you allowed to exaggerate and brag about your achievements? How do you charm people into followership?



## Step 7: The goddess

*Truth, that fair goddess who comes always with healing in her wings.*

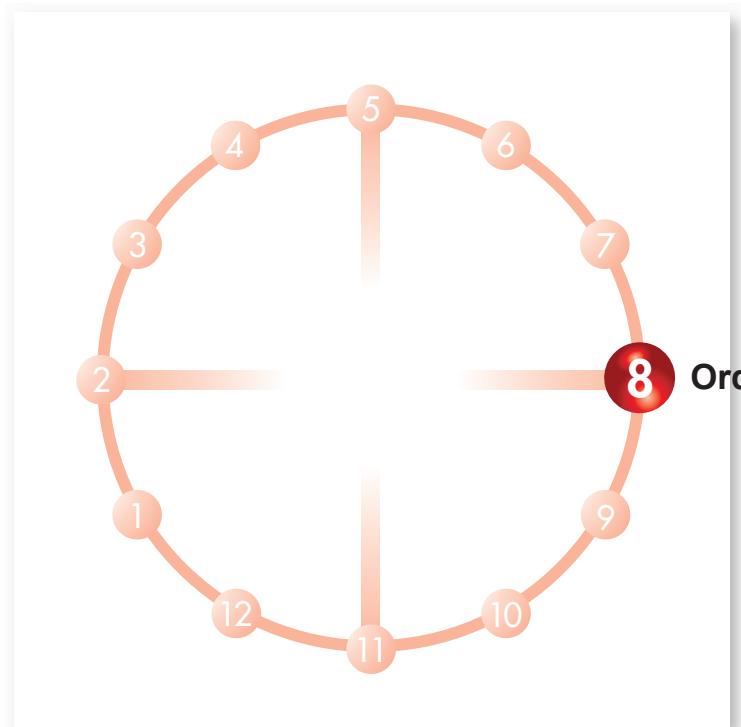
Anne Shannon Monroe

After the rush of adrenaline the steps of power and king for a day gave, it is a time for grounding. The goddess is the period of turning inward; to pay attention to your household.

In our own development this stage has to do with our inner household. Have we matured enough emotionally or psychologically to deal with the heady power of the previous steps? In stories the goddess is often depicted as the matriarch, both as the desired and the fearsome mother. In film there is a typical scene in *The Matrix* (1999) when Neo first meets the Oracle. She's sitting on a stool in the kitchen facing the oven, and then turns around to says to Neo: "Almost done" as if talking about the cookies in the oven, while she is actually commenting on his readiness.

In leadership this step is about setting up the infrastructure, logistics and back office of the organization. No matter how good the product, if the supporting processes are not in place you will not be successful. As a leader it's about knowing the big picture and the details of operation and also about gathering people around you who keep you grounded in reality. There is a very telling Dutch advertisement that says: "If you're lonely at the top you're doing something wrong."

Questions you can ask yourself are: Is my household in order? Who keeps me grounded?



## Step 8: The ordeal

*If you would not have affliction visit you twice, listen at once to what it teaches.*

James Burgh

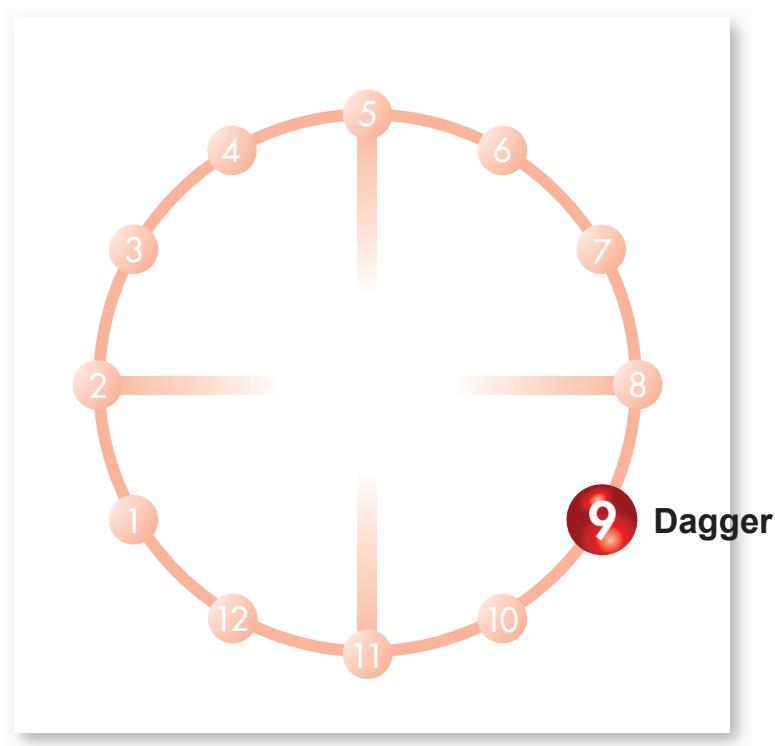
An ordeal has to do with facing your worst nightmares and the consequences of decisions you took earlier. If you don't listen to your goddess, your ordeal in this step will be stronger. For development, however, a period of ordeal is unavoidable.

In our own development this has to do with the key learning events that help us break through (or confirm) our script, for instance, leaving home, first loves, first disappointments. In movies this is when the hero has to face a dramatic change in circumstance. For instance, in the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) there is a moment when Batman has to face the consequences of his decision to back the up and coming attorney Harvey Dent, accepting the negative reactions of Gotham's population.

In leadership this is the time to sit tight, listen and take accountability of the commitments you made earlier. An English idiom says the bigger they are, the harder they fall. As a leader I often think you get paid to take the hits and not hit back. I remember accepting a tricky project in a large airline company, and actually saying in the prologue, "If you're not satisfied you can always fire me." Which they did, and I understood completely that it was the consequence of my live or die provocation.

In leadership development I teach leaders to analyze what actions have led to their ordeal, and to take conscious responsibility for their part in it. Leadership is a relational concept too. You will only have followers as a leader if you have been forged through the fire.

Questions you can ask yourself are: How do you deal with powerlessness?  
How vulnerable do you let yourself be in the organization?



## Step 9: The dagger

*"Before a diamond shows its brilliancy it has to stand a good deal of cutting".*

Anonymous

The ninth step in the hero's journey is called the dagger. This is a period of cutting out the non-essential parts of your life that you were faced with in the previous step. It is a time of loss of innocence, of getting your hands dirty.

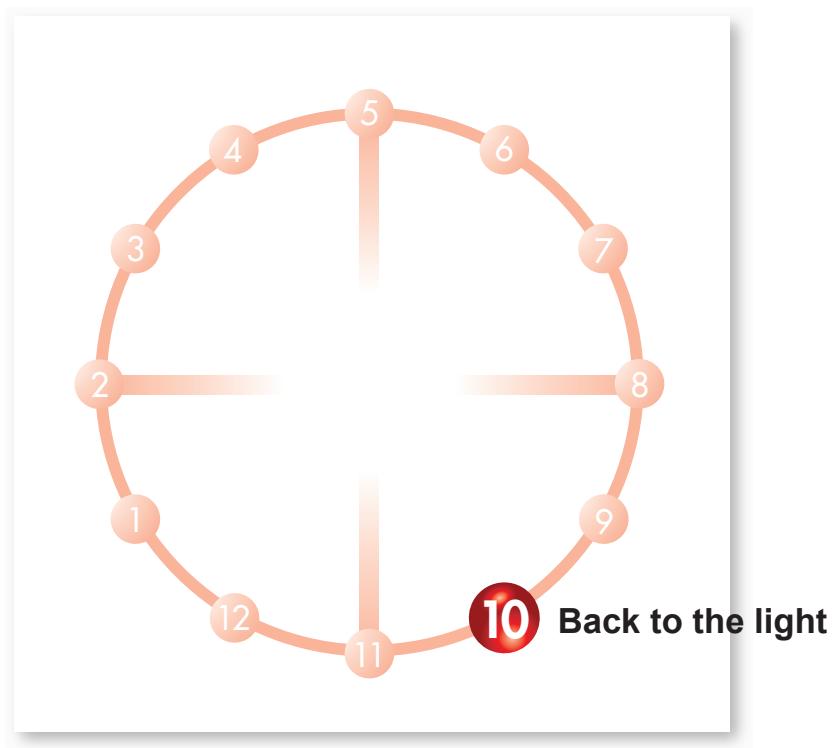
In your own life you may have gone through a break up, which might have felt like an ordeal. After a break up there is a period of choosing what you still want to be part of your life and also perhaps of friends choosing you or your ex-partner. Cut or be cut is the question.

In film this is usually the moment of decisive choice. In some movies this is at the beginning, like in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) where she has to choose which of her children to keep with her in the concentration camp. In some movies it's a choice between a rock and a hard place, like in the *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) when Frodo has to choose to believe his companion Sam or Golem, the ambivalent guide, when the food has run out.

In leadership you need the capacity to cut down the business to lean and mean proportions, when you know the survival of the company is at stake.

It is also the capacity to weed out talent in your team. I remember inheriting a team of professionals in one organization, with a second in command who'd been there a long time. Worse, he was actively undermining and played squash with the boss every week. I learned a lot in this period about the necessity to cut out an individual to maintain the sanctity of a team.

Questions you can ask yourself are: In a crisis am I willing to cut or do I get cut? Do I get more energy/adrenaline from creation or destruction?



## Step 10: Back to the light

*The moment of enlightenment is when a person's dreams of possibilities become images of probabilities.*

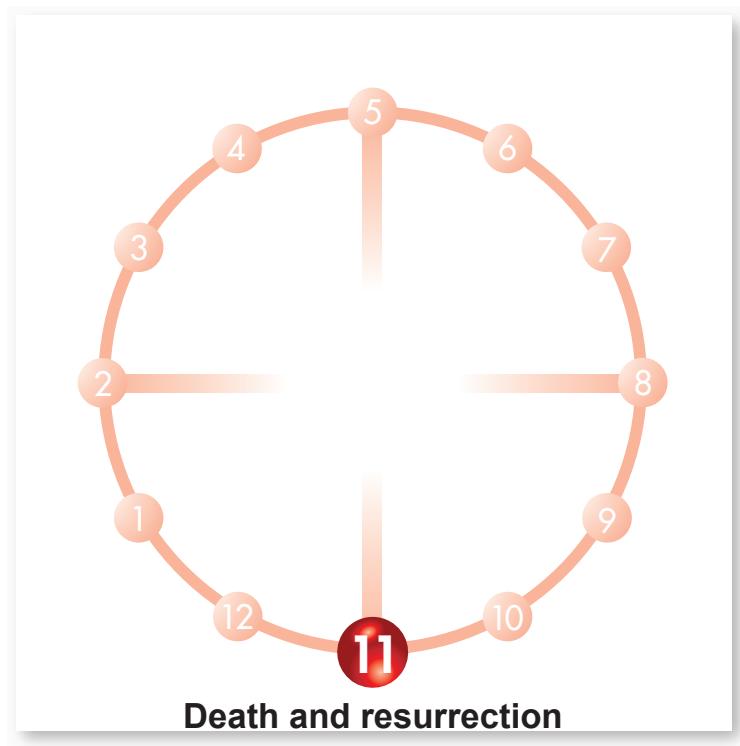
Vic Braden

After a period of cutting down the hero is 'saved' from darkness by refocusing on her ideals. The hero reformulates her mission in life, and creates light at the end of the tunnel.

In development these are periods in your life when you refocus your energy on your true purpose, or as Lammers (2009) calls it 'your Essence'. In film the hero evoking the old mentor's lessons again often symbolizes this. For instance, in *Star Wars* (1977) when Luke Skywalker is ready to shoot the last possible missile towards the Death Star, he hears Obi Wan Kenobi say: "Trust the Force Luke" and has the courage to put away his computer and refocus on his inner Jedi knowledge.

In leadership this is a period of convergence, of reformulating the mission in a brave new world. There is a story of a Japanese soap factory that had been in the family for generations. When the great grandson took over the nearly bankrupt old-fashioned premises he called all the employees together. In a rousing speech he said: "This is not a soap factory, we enhance the quality of beauty and life, not only in Japan but in the world." Today the company is one of the most successful personal cosmetic factories in the world.

Questions you can ask yourself are: What is the mission statement in your own life? Have you ever held a 'soap box speech' to motivate your team?



## Step 11: Death and resurrection

*If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

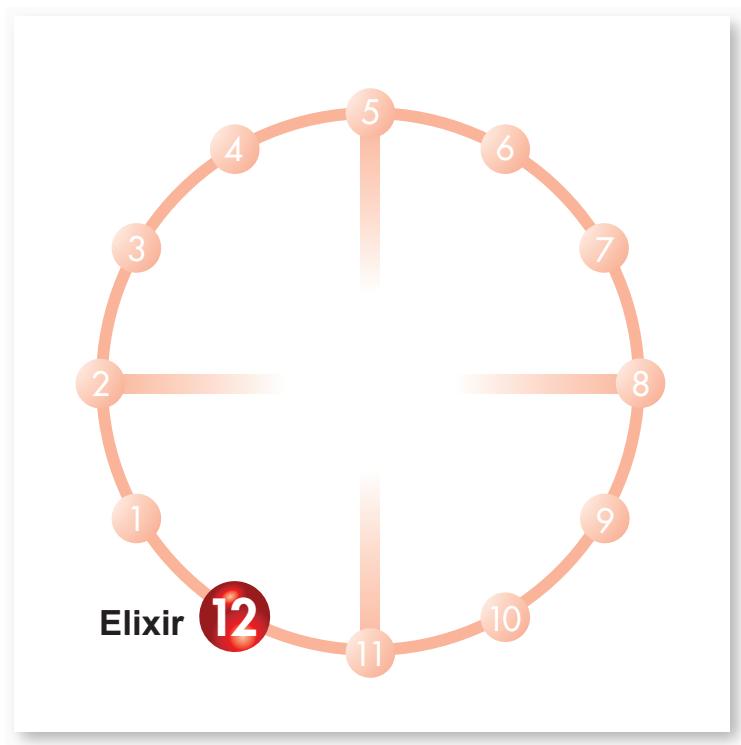
The threshold of death and resurrection is diametrically opposite of the threshold of power. Where in the threshold of power it was about exercising power over others, in the threshold of death and resurrection it is about exercising power over oneself.

In development this is a period of risk and testing one's own limits in standing for the new ideals. Who are you really? In film this is often the truth or dare moment, like in *Kill Bill* (2003) when the heroine (Uma Thurman) faces her opponent (Lucy Liu) in a final battle.

In leadership this is a time to stand up for your principles. These are the times where you face that there is nothing else you can do but stand for your ideals. The truly do or die moments in your career. There is a wonderful anecdote about Howard Schultz the CEO of Starbucks. Starbucks is a chain that has grown from about 1,000 stores ten years ago to more than 10,000 in the US and more than 5,000 in 42 other countries.

When he realized that the success of Starbucks was actually undermining its mission to create a third place between home and work, he wrote a memo to his leaders to actually stop the rapid growth and go back to the romance and theatre of real coffee making.

Questions you can ask yourself are: How much have you sacrificed to be where you are today? Is there a principle you would give your life for?



## Step 12: Return with the elixir

*If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain; If I can ease one life the aching, or cool one pain, or help one fainting robin unto his nest again, I shall not live in vain*

Emily Dickinson

In the last step of the hero's journey he returns with the elixir to the community. The elixir can be a symbol of life, love or a thing, but it can also be you in your transformed state, like Nelson Mandela after 28 years of imprisonment.

In your own development this is the time to build up compassion and express gratitude for the life you have led and the people you've met along the way. In film an example is the end of *Erin Brokovich* (2000) when she goes to the plaintiffs' houses to tell them how much they're getting from the class action suit they brought against the polluting chemical plant. In *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) Dorothy says goodbye to her allies and wishes herself home. Back in the ordinary world, her perceptions of the people around her have changed. She declares she will never leave home again. This is not to be taken literally. The house is the symbol for personality. Dorothy has found her own soul and has become a fully integrated person, in touch with both her positive qualities and her shadow. The elixir she brings back is her new idea of home, her new concept of her Self.

In leadership this is the time of servant leadership, where you can truly transform the company simply by being there and supporting your people. In the hero's journey, if you cannot bring back something from your journey for your community you are fated to repeat it.

Questions you can ask yourself are: What would I like to express my thankfulness for? How do you contribute to leaving the world a better place?

## **We are all hero's in our own lives**

Script is a story, an interpretation of historical events linked to a feeling. And so to understand how script works we need to understand how stories work. The hero's journey is the story of stories. And it is very helpful to my clients to understand that whatever they are going through, painful though it may be at the social and the psychological level, at the mythological story level all life's events have a deeper meaning, and prepare you for the next step in you journey.

I hope you use this story of stories to your benefit and your clients' benefit to choose the most empowering story to support their development.

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