



# the Heart of the Matter

828.258.9264  
Fax: 828.258.3144  
online: www.rmcs.org  
email: info@rmcs.org  
579 Haywood Road  
Asheville, NC 28806

Volume II: Issue 2

A publication by Renee Owen, Executive Director

May, 2009

## OUR CHILDREN'S JOURNEY THE HERO'S JOURNEY

In a few days our children will be stepping over the threshold to a new grade; this year's journey complete. It's an important time to reflect on the learning that has occurred over the past year and how it has transformed our children and ourselves.

Your child is a hero. She or he is a Dorothy, a Luke Skywalker, or a Harry Potter. Such stories of child-heroes, whether ancient or contemporary, ring true to children—to all of us. As Jung puts it, they are a part of our archetypal knowledge. Every religion and all cultures have archetypal heroes/gods, who experience the hero's journey. At the end of the journey, whether it is Krishna, Siddhartha, Jesus, Moses, or Jumping Mouse, the hero is transformed into a higher being and a symbol, or metaphor, for what each of us needs to embody and become in our own journey to higher ground. It's the universal journey toward self-realization.

Every year our children embark on a journey that has all the elements of the archetypal hero's journey. Borrowing and adapting from Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, Brown and Moffett in *The Hero's Journey* list simplified phases, or aspects, of the hero's journey:

- The New Call: The Journey Begins
- Innocence Lost
- Chaos and Complexity
- Gurus, Alliances, and Companions Along the Way
- Trials, Tests, and Initiations
- Staying the Course
- Insight and Transformation

**The hero's journey is a spiral of growth.** The phases are not sequential, as laid out above, but the journey always ends (and begins) in the same place—the heart. Each quest, every challenge, and every school year brings our children back to the center, yet on a higher plane. After enduring challenges and

Primary Resource for this article: Brown, J. and Moffett, C. (1999). *The Hero's Journey: How Educators Can Transform Schools and Improve Learning*. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Alexandria, VA.

venturing further from the protection of home, they end up smarter, wiser, and higher – more fully evolved than a year ago.

Think about some of the challenges your children faced and conquered this year. Children pass through phases and challenges that they will never again encounter, such as learning to tie their shoes or learning to read; while other issues may be reoccurring themes, especially if they are tied to their personal path or personality. Perhaps your child has difficulty making friends, focusing, speaking the truth, or managing anger. Every child has different challenges.

Once challenges are conquered we soon become wrapped up in the drama of the next quest, and the new trials always *seem* worse than the ones that came before. So it's important to stop and reflect on what has already been accomplished. Heroic achievements should be celebrated and remembered. Rainbow used to present children with a Heroic Achievement Award when they would conquer something that was personally challenging to them. Feats that deserve heroic recognition may be simple, such a crossing the monkey bars for the first time, but symbolic of growing up. I'd like to see this tradition revived.

**Life is complex.** The more layers we add to our life, the more chaotic and complex it becomes. Being a parent adds exponential layers of complexity as we experience both our children's journeys – sometimes hand-in-hand, sometimes vicariously, and always as a helper/companion – while simultaneously dealing with our own spiritual quest and personal challenges.

Within our own small Rainbow community, parents have encountered chaos and challenges on their individual journeys this year that seemed insurmountable at the time:

job loss, divorce, death, disease – *plus all the challenges of being a parent.* It's hard to feel we are giving enough focus to our children's issues while barely being able to keep up with our own. On top of it all, life seems to be going so fast that we feel like we are hanging on by our fingernails.

**The challenges we face are not in the way, they are the way.** (This simple advice was tacked to my bulletin board when I moved into my office at RMCS.) The more we try to resist change and challenge, the harder they are to face. The Zen approach to life is to feel it, experience it—completely—without any resistance, so that we may pass through it. Likewise, our job as parents is not to protect our children from the trials and tests of the childhood journey, but to love them through it all. “For the bird to fly, the egg must first crack.” Lord Alfred Tennyson.

Depending on the age of your child, he/she probably encountered a whole new set of challenges this year that were also new challenges to you as a parent. Facing such problems can be a loss of innocence, as we realize life for our child is not going to be as pain-free as we once hoped. Some examples may include learning that your child has a learning disability, sibling rivalry, or struggles he is having with another child. The onset of puberty, in particular, is as much a loss of innocence to the parent as to the child. Suddenly your child is doing things that contradict how she was raised, and she may be testing boundaries that you thought were clearly defined. He may have experienced an “adult” problem, such as depression, for the first time; but without the equanimity, wisdom, and capacity of an adult. What's worse, he may have ventured far from “home” – not confiding in you as he clung to “helpers” and companions of his own. Thankfully, the Hero's Journey brings him back home, but with more insight and compassion – more confidence in who he is. Teach your children well, they will return to what they know.

**The call to adventure creates a loss of innocence.** *Innocence* literally means “without knowledge of good and evil.” Coming out of denial and admitting there is a challenge is the first step. When we discover a problem, a common reaction is to blame others for our predicament. When we deny, justify, or blame others for our problems, learning comes to a halt. When children (and adults) accept the challenges they face, without blaming others for them, they are ready to proceed to a higher level of learning and transformation.

**To accept the call to adventure, means taking on risk.** Like deciding to skateboard the half pipe for the first time. All of a sudden your child is at the top, looking down, realizing this is much more dangerous than she was prepared for (loss of innocence). The curve is steep. Will she take the plunge?

As children advance through the grades at Rainbow Mountain, the challenges they face become broader. Children are asked to stretch beyond their comfort zone to the point of discomfort. Personal Interest Projects, (PIP), where students research and present a project of their own interest, are a good example of this process. Some children are reluctant to take on the challenge, and have to be prodded. Others optimistically choose their topic, and at some point realize they are in over their heads. The only way to successfully complete the PIP is to navigate all the remaining steps of the hero’s journey. There will be chaos and complexity, helpers along the way, and plenty of trials. Ultimately, the only way to succeed is to stay the course and not give up. This style of education is constructivism. Children construct their own learning by producing original work, just the way they will have to construct the pieces of their lives.

**Learning is at the edge of chaos.** Rainbow draws upon many best practices and learning models. Our philosophy is not the industrial model of linear

order, for this model fails children, because life in our contemporary, complex world is not linear. Constructivism gives children the opportunity to see multi-facets of learning and construct learning in a multitude of ways, in all domains and all intelligences. There is an underlying secure structure so kids know what the boundaries are; but there is room and flexibility for them to explore.

Jim Fay (Love and Logic) advises that helping our children develop an *internal locus of control* is the most important thing we can do for them. When they have an internal locus of control, they feel like whatever challenges come their way, they are, in part, responsible for them, and at the same time capable of resolving them. When an internal locus is not developed and the locus of control is external, the child feels like she is a victim of other people and events, and she has no self control. A child with an external locus of control is at risk for a lifetime of unhappiness. Unfortunately, many *adults* never developed an internal locus of control. When things go wrong, their first response is to blame others and/or expect someone else to solve the problem for them.

**Our first job as parents is to raise our children to become independent.** Therefore, we need to have the courage to allow them to struggle. When we sit on our hands and allow our children to work through their own challenges – whether it be to make their own lunch, finish their science project independently, or resolve a social conflict– the message we send them is, “You are powerful enough to solve this problem.” The hard part is watching them squirm, complain, suffer, make mistakes, and fail; but as Bob Dylan said, “There is no success like failure.” It is often through mistakes that the most authentic learning takes place. Sometimes we have no choice but to embrace the chaos. Then to our delight, out of chaos, arises beauty.

According to Brown and Moffet, the following are the three essential foundations for helping our children to be resilient in the face of obstacles and change:

1. **Good relationships.** The quality of the relationship and the love we have with our children is paramount, but it is also important that we model for them healthy relationships in our own lives with other loved ones, friends, and coworkers. The healthy communication and communal relationships that children see their parents engaged in at Rainbow is extremely beneficial.
2. **Connections to community.** It helps to provide our children with a social context, such as they have at Rainbow, where they can develop solid, positive, authentic relationships with peers and adults (yet just enough social challenge that they do have to problem solve and learn tolerance when their peers frustrate them.) They need to have an interconnected and diverse network so when a new loss of innocence arises they have “gurus” and “guides” they can seek out.
3. **A transcendent value system.** They also need to belong to a culture that is meaningful socially and spiritually. This is the heart of the problem with most large public schools – kids are afloat in a disconnected community that isn’t *allowed* to be spiritual, and therefore, feels shallow. When children have morals that are tied to spiritual beliefs (rather than just social customs), they have an anchor to hold onto in the worst of storms. At Rainbow, we believe in aligning the head and the heart.

This time of year, as parents make educational decisions, the most reoccurring question I get is “How do Rainbow graduates do in high school and later in life?” I remain in contact with recent Rainbow alumni and am excited to report that they are thriving in their high school programs. Not only are they ambitious and receiving excellent grades, but they report that they feel more mature and grounded than their peers.

I believe the success of Rainbow alumni is a direct result of the holistic program they experienced at Rainbow Mountain. Research from a variety of

sources, including the US Department of Labor, clearly show that individuals who are the most successful in life are creative thinkers who know how to collaborate with others to construct a vision. Experts agree that it is emotional intelligence, more than cognitive aptitude, that will propel children to success in the 21st Century.

**Personal mastery is the greatest gift of the hero’s journey.** When children struggle and arise heroic, they learn more about themselves — how far they can push themselves, how they can conquer their fears, how they can create order out of chaos, how to accept help and advice from others (and still think for themselves), and finally, how to work hard and persevere until the journey is complete. At Rainbow, we recognize that every accomplishment isn’t about competing with *others*, it’s about *self*-mastery and *self*-realization. It’s about lifelong learning.

Finally, as our children successfully complete another journey, let’s remember and appreciate our teachers, who are on a quest of their own. Rainbow teachers are some of the most dynamic, brilliant people we know. They could have chosen any number of lucrative careers, but they chose teaching, because their sacred quest in life is to teach and to learn. To the complexity of their own lives, they have added that of all their students and their students’ families. They are heroes.

A teacher’s ongoing quest is to see their students transformed by learning. I end with a quote from one of the world’s most famous teachers, Anne Sullivan, which embodies the transcendent joy of making a breakthrough with a student, and seeing the hero’s journey completed:

**“My heart is singing for joy this morning. A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my pupil’s mind, and behold, all things are changed!”**