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The Hero of a Thousand Saeculums

The Etruscans—the people who inhabited the area of Rome prior to the Romans—believed all history would repeat itself. Society worked in a circular pattern lasting approximately one hundred years. During this period a pendulum will swing from a high period to a low period, and back again. The Etruscans called this the Saeculum (Strauss, Howe 26). In The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell discusses why the concept of a circle—the beginning is the end—is something universal in mythology (270). Throughout The Power of Myth, Campbell discusses the lack of heroes, spirituality and mythology in a modern society where "life today is so complex, and it changing so fast, that there is no time for anything to constellate itself before it's thrown over again" (163). Campbell discusses a lost generation, that is "doing the best they can," by creating its own mythology and ritual (9). It is possible, however, that this lost generation is the low point of the current Saeculum, and society is readying for a rebirth of ritual and myth through a new generation poised for a mythic hero's journey.

In 1997, Neil Howe and William Strauss, historians specializing in generational studies, published The Fourth Turning. In this book they cited several of Campbell's theories of universal myths and the hero's journey, and combined Campbell's discoveries with their studies on the personalities of generations. Strauss and Howe hypothesized that societies are in a constant cycle of four generation archetypes, and four periods which they refer to as seasons of the Saeculum. Campbell's theories on personalities involved in the hero's journey, and the literature that

supports the hero's journey, also support Strauss's and Howe's theories on the cycle of generations. Campbell's belief that we are losing myths and rituals in modern society may have been his reaction to the low point of the current Saeculum.

Strauss and Howe describe four generation archetypes that repeat, in the same order, over and over again in all societies. The first is the Hero archetype. The hero is coddled as a child, but goes through a major crisis when entering young adulthood. The Hero generations are the builders of society, and become powerful and competent leaders. The current living generations of this type are the GI Generation (1901-1924) and the Millennials (1982-2001) (Strauss, Howe 136-138).

The next archetype is the Artist. This generation is the beneficiary of the Hero's work, but never take on the Hero's role because they are too young. This generation, however, is earnest, hardworking and intelligent. They work behind the scenes to better society, and are the storytellers, and often are the catalyst for spiritual changes in society. They are followers who believe in fairness and justice. The current living generation of this archetype is the Silent Generation (1925-1942) (Strauss, Howe 136-138).

The third archetype is the Prophet. This generation is born into a peaceful world, where they become spiritual explorers, and take the role of a teacher and judge. They work to change society. The Boomer Generation (1943-1960) is this archetype (Strauss, Howe 136-138).

The final archetype is the Nomad generation. This generation is born into times of social and spiritual conflict. Neglected as children, they grow to become rogues and individualists—often referred to as a lost generation. Nomads reluctantly become leaders during crisis, but prove to be extremely competent in the role. In later life they take on the role of society's protectors. Generation X (1961-1981) is the current Nomad generation (Strauss, Howe 136-138).

In addition to generation archetypes, Strauss and Howe have identified four phases of the Saeculum that influence the generations. The first is the High. It is a period of peace and social conformity. The future seems promising, and social institutions are respected. The next phase is the Awakening. During this phase conformity is rejected, social institutions are questioned, and there is movement towards internal and spiritual exploration. The future seems infinitely wonderful. The next phase is the Unraveling. During this phase societal institutions, and beliefs are torn asunder. Institutions are seen as corrupt and out of touch. The culture becomes heterogonous, with a strong emphasis is on individual accomplishment. The future is believed to be bleak, and society is often referred to as crumbling and losing its focus. The final phase is the Crisis. This phase is almost universally marked by a total and complete war, and during this time the social institutions that crumbled during the Unraveling are rebuilt, and the culture becomes practical—doing what is needed to save itself. In the end society swings from individualism to community, and the cycle starts all over again (Strauss, Howe 105).

The four phases of Strauss's and Howe's Saeculum tie into the myths existant in each culture as the Hero's Journey, and how the generational archetypes each have a role in these myths. In The Power of Myth, Campbell discusses several Hero's Journey stories, the meaning of the hero, the leader, and the shaman. Major mythic stories of our times, including Star Wars, and The Lord of the Rings rely heavily on the roles of these generation archetypes to support the myth of the Hero's Journey during the Crisis phase of the Saeculum.

Campbell discusses the mythic roles of Star Wars, and the eternal roles that the characters play. There is Luke Skywalker, whom Bill Moyers refers to as "the young man, called to adventure, the hero going out facing the trials and ordeals, and coming back after his victory with a boon for the community" (179). This description not only matches Campbell's definition of a

hero, but also matches Strauss's and Howe's definition of the Hero archetype. The GI Generation

–on the front lines of World War II--suffered the most, but fought through the Crisis, and

emerged to enrich society. In <u>The Lord of the Rings</u>, the hobbits of the story: Frodo, Merry,

Pippin and Sam represent the Hero generation. While Frodo may be the main hero of the story,

the four hobbits all take a Hero's Journey, and without their bonds of friendship, and their

willingness to sacrifice themselves, the Middle Earth would not have been saved.

The second major character Campbell discusses from <u>Star Wars</u> is Obi Wan Kenobi—the

shaman or the "sword master" (179). The role of the shaman is to give the hero "not only a

physical instrument but a psychological commitment and psychological center" (180). The

shaman's power comes from "personal experience, not a societal ordination" (123). This is the

role of the Prophet generation during the Crisis. Strauss and Howe refer to this role as the "Gray

Champion" (139). Prophets teach the Hero generation inner strength, and bring them through the

Crisis. During World War II, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, were from a Prophet

generation. In <u>The Lord of the Rings</u>, Gandalf is the shaman, the elder who guides Frodo and his

friends through the Crisis, is also a role played to a lesser extent by Bilbo and the Elven leaders.

The final character Campbell discusses from <u>Star Wars</u> is Hans Solo, who Campbell

described as "a very practical guy, at least how he thought of himself, a materialist. But he was a

compassionate human being at the same time and didn't know it. The adventure evoked a quality

of his character that he didn't know he possessed" (159). The rogue belongs to the Nomad

generation. Nomads are often the generals. Typically, they reject their role early in the crisis, but

will eventually fill the shoes they have been assigned. During World War II, George Patton filled

the shoes of his Nomad archetype. Perhaps the best known Nomad leader is Queen Elizabeth I,

who steered England competently through the attack of the Spanish Armada, and the Protestant

Reformation. Interestingly, after the Crisis, Nomads typically take on the role of societal supporters—the same generation that once rejected society fully, ends up reinforcing its ideals. Walt Disney and Norman Rockwell are two Nomads who took on this role. In <u>The Lord of the Rings,</u> Aragorn fulfills the role of the Nomad. He begins the book as Strider, a Ranger who has rejected his role as heir to the throne, and wanders—literally—as a nomad. Through the Crisis, he becomes a leader, and finally assumes his role as King—the keeper of society.

The Artist generation is often overlooked in tales of the Hero's Journey, typically because the archetype is too young, or too old to factor into the story. Often the role of the Artist is as the person relating the story of this epic journey (Strauss Howe 136). During World War II, the Artists were the children of the home front, saving cans during the depression, and supporting the troops during the war. They became the storytellers of the Crisis. Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel are examples of Artists in World War II. A current example is Tom Brokaw and his work on books such as <u>The Greatest Generation</u>.

An entire section of <u>The Power of Myth</u> is dedicated to the hero's adventure, and the universality of these myths of heroic battles, transformations, and spiritual births in all societies. The hero undertakes the journey selflessly to better society. He or she journeys into oblivion and returns transformed. The journey can be through a Death Star, Mordor, or the battlefields of war, but in each case the hero returns transformed, and able to transform society. The Prophet, the role of the protector who is a shaman, magician, teacher, sword master, or wizened leadership, guides the Hero. The Nomad as the rogue, the survivalist, or the individual, sheds his or her selfishness to embrace the role as society's leader and protector, and guides society from destruction to strength. The Artist observes, and later is the one who tells the tale for future generations.

The universal appeal of the hero's adventure stems from the cyclical nature of society, and the generations that inhabit it. Each generation is shaped by the seasons of the Saeculum, and the pendulum swings from society to individual, from peace to crisis, over and over again. Campbell understood that we were entering a time of Crisis, he says:

> I don't know what's coming, any more than Yeats knew, but when you come to the end of one time and the beginning of a new one, it's a period of tremendous pain and turmoil. The threat we feel, and everybody feels—well, there is this notion of Armageddon coming, you know (21).

Strauss's and Howe's Saeculum is entering the Crisis—society has unraveled, cynicism, individualism, and a feeling that the world is darkening, pervades. It is time for new heroes, and new journeys. Stories such as <u>Star Wars</u> and <u>The Lord of the Rings</u> are enjoying a renaissance because these myths of the hero's journey provide society with a blueprint for how to survive the crisis phase of the Saeculum, and that is why they are universal, and timeless.

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