

# *Is Humanity On A Heroic Journey?*

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[Note: The introduction is repeated in each of the study guides.]

## **The Perfect Storm of a World in Systems Crisis**

We have entered a unique moment in history when the stories that have been so successful in guiding human society and institutions in the past are no longer working. With an emphasis on materialism and short-term growth, we are putting our long-term future at profound risk as a civilized species. It is vital that we step back and look at the bigger picture of the human journey. Do we share a common journey and, if we do, what is the nature of that journey we are on? Can we look beneath the surface turbulence of everyday life and find deeper currents of humanity's story recognized by people around the world?

This is a pregnant time in human history and we are each called to help birth a larger vision of the human journey that can act as a beacon for our future. To respond successfully to climate disruption and the dwindling supply of cheap oil, we will need more than policies and programs for energy efficiency. More fundamentally, we will need a compelling story about the human journey that will enable us to look beyond the looming conflicts over scarce resources. By virtue of being a citizen of the Earth, every person has the right to contribute to the collective visioning of our journey.

The human community is in a dangerous time of global transition, moving from separation to communion. We are entering a world systems crisis and must choose whether we will to pull together in creative cooperation or to pull apart in profound conflict. The coming decades will reveal our species soul and provide the opportunity for a rite of passage from one great trajectory of learning and development to another.

The world confronts, not only a number of individual crises, but additionally a mega-crisis as individual trends mutually reinforce one another and create a larger,

world-systems emergency. Reviewing briefly, here are eight major emergencies now facing the human family:

1. *Climate emergency*—We are destabilizing the climate and this is producing crop failures, famine, food riots, and social breakdowns.
2. *Energy emergency*—The world is running out of cheap oil at the very time that energy demand is skyrocketing. Development of renewable sources of energy is lagging far behind and we have a difficult transition ahead.
3. *Water emergency*—Fresh water is in short supply in a number of parts of the world and, as aquifers are pumped dry and global warming melts snow and glacier ice, water shortages will soon reach crisis proportions.
4. *Sustainability emergency*—The demand for resources is growing rapidly and already exceeds the regenerative capacity of the Earth.
5. *Poverty emergency*—Three-quarters of the human family lives on a real income of \$4 per day or less at the same time that we live in an increasingly wired and transparent world where differences are glaringly obvious.
6. *Financial emergency*—The world financial system is not serving the well being of the people but instead the profits of powerful financial institutions and the result is global financial chaos and breakdowns.
7. *Extinction emergency*—Between one-quarter and one-third of all plant and animal species are currently threatened with extinction as the web of life on the Earth is being devastated by humanity's unthinking growth.
8. *Weapons of mass destruction emergency*—At the very time the world is becoming much more interdependent and vulnerable to disruption, we are experiencing the spread of terrifying weapons of mass destruction (biological, chemical, and nuclear).

Any one of these emergencies could bring the human enterprise to grief. When these eight converge at the same time, they constitute far more than an emergency—

they represent a world in “systems crisis.” In other words, all of the key systems that we rely upon—economic, ecological, political, social, and even religious—will find their relevancy and legitimacy challenged by the intertwined crises. In this generation we will either devastate or transform the human journey.

We have no place to escape from our global predicament. We are being called to rise above the divisions and differences of the past. Working together we can build a future for our children and grandchildren. Choosing sustainability will require billions of persons to come together with a level of social consciousness, consensus, and commitment that has never before existed in human history. Were it not for the push of the most urgent and unyielding necessity, few people would choose a path as bold, inclusive, and collaborative as is demanded by our times. Our choice is ruin or responsibility. If we are to take responsibility for our growing world systems crisis and build a workable and meaningful human civilization, then major changes are required, both outer and inner.

### Study Questions: A Perfect World Storm

How do you relate to the prospect of a “perfect world storm” where all of our major systems break down? Are you ready to make a breakthrough in: the work that you do, your mutually supportive connections in the local community, the range of skill-sets that you acquire, and more?

### **Images and Archetypes as Evolutionary Beacons**

The first step in building a promising future for humanity is to visualize it together. As the bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Although many people can visualize a future of catastrophe and ruin, far fewer can imagine a future of opportunity and renewal. This is understandable as daily we are fed news reports of global climate disruption, running out of cheap oil, species extinction, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and more. Not surprisingly, a future of

conflict and suffering is easy to imagine while a future of harmony and health is still a vague and unformed possibility in our collective imagination.

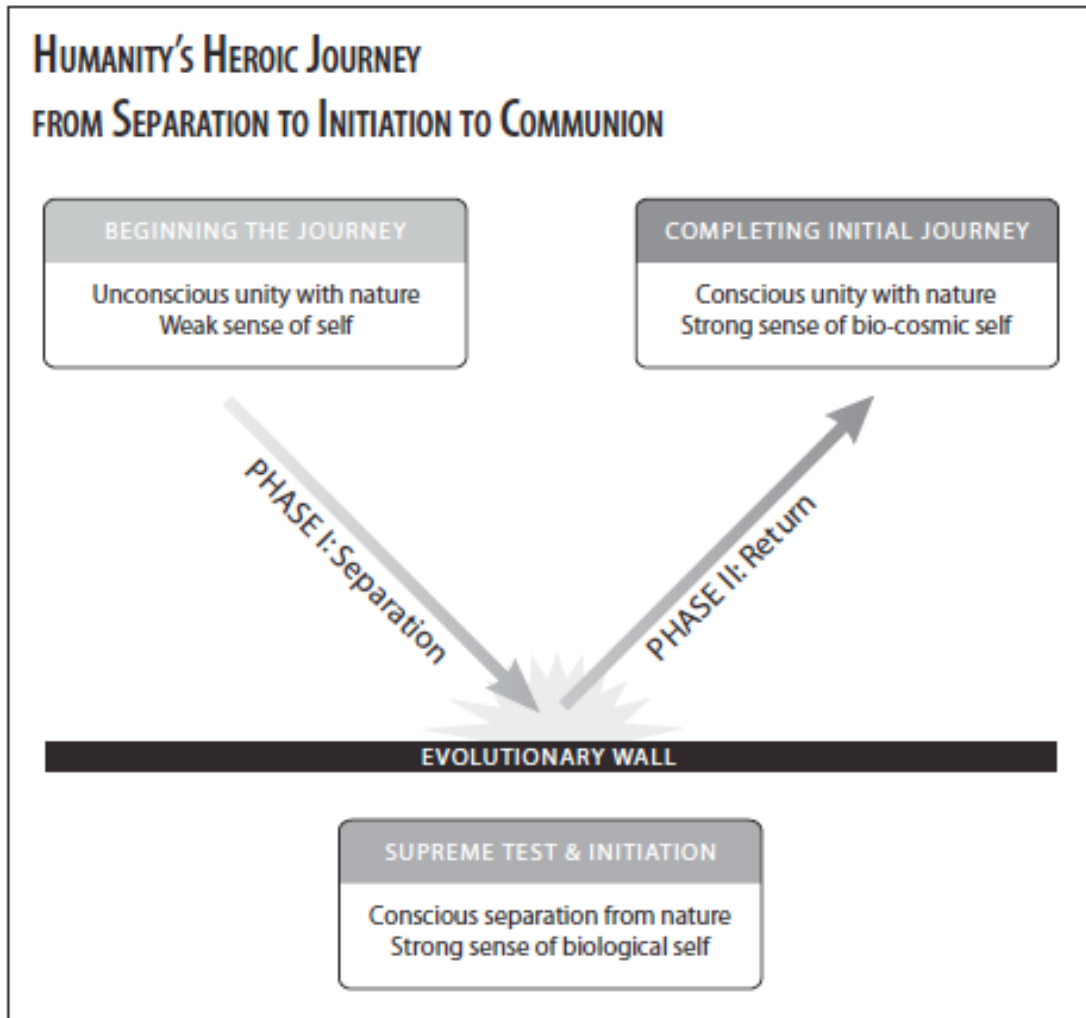
We face big challenges and it will take an equally big vision to transform conflict into cooperation and draw us into a promising future. To engage in the unprecedented task of envisioning a workable and meaningful future for humanity, we require tools of imagination that enable us to stand back from current crises and see the human journey in a larger perspective. I believe the most difficult challenge facing humanity is not devising solutions to the energy crisis or climate crisis or species extinction; rather, it is bringing images and archetypes of the human journey into our collective awareness that empower us to look beyond a future of great adversity and to see a future of great opportunity.

In a self-fulfilling prophecy, we actualize who we think we are. The images and archetypes that we hold of ourselves act as a magnet to draw us into the future.

## **Humanity Is On A Heroic Journey**

Another archetype that can assist humanity in envisioning a positive future is to see ourselves on a heroic journey of collective awakening and development. With this archetype, we can step back and, instead of seeing humanity as evolutionary villains, we can regard ourselves as evolutionary heroes who are now facing a supreme test of our capacities. We can see ourselves as a pioneering species that is blazing an evolutionary trail, moving through an unprecedented rite of passage, and confronting the supreme challenge of building a new relationship with the Earth, with one another, and with the living universe that is our home.

The archetype of the “heroes journey” is found throughout the world and through history so this tool for mobilizing our collective imagination that is widely understood. The renowned scholar Joseph Campbell popularized this archetype and summarized the hero’s journey with three major stages: separation, initiation, and return.



Campbell describes the journey this way: An adventurer hears a call and separates him or her self from the everyday world, setting out on a path of discovery. Along the way, he or she experiences many tests and trials, each rich with learning. Finally, he or she confronts a seemingly insurmountable challenge that cannot be overcome with the capacities of the ego. Our hero confronts a supreme test and, if met successfully, awakens to a new and more soulful relationship with the Earth, the rest of life, and with the universe. With this initiation, the hero or heroine then makes a journey of return, bringing these gifts of insight back to the larger community.

We can expand the hero's journey of separation, initiation, and return from the scale of an individual out to the scope of the entire Earth and human community. The previous picture of humanity's journey tells us several important things.

First, instead of a linear, one-way ascent of an evolutionary mountain, the figure portrays human evolution as pulling back from the universe in order to strengthen its sense of self. At a crucial point, the entire process begins to bend back and consciously reflect upon itself, which leads to our eventual return and communion with the universe at an entirely new level of understanding.

Second, when we look at the seemingly insurmountable problems facing humanity, we see the human species now entering a time of supreme testing. We are now in a pivotal transition zone; our challenge is to reorient ourselves toward communion with the cosmos and cooperation with one another.

Third, making the turn toward reunion with the living universe does not end our journey of learning and discovery. There will be as much to learn on our journey of return as there has been on our long journey of separation. This is humbling news. Instead of the modern era representing the culmination of human evolution, I believe that it represents only a mid-way point on the journey of realizing our potentials as doubly-knowing humans. We are halfway home.

A fourth important insight is also evident in this picture: From a big picture perspective, the path of separation is the only path that we have known as a species. Our history is a story of progressive separation from nature and one another coupled with the development of a strong sense of biological identity and ego-self. We have pulled ourselves out of our immersion within nature and grown into richly differentiated individuals and complex societies. As we make the pivot from separation to connection, it is important to regard the journey ahead with humility, and to recognize that we are all in new and unfamiliar territory.

When we regard ourselves in this way, it seems evident that for tens of thousands of years, humanity has been on a path of separation—pulling back from nature and growing our sense of differentiation and empowerment as a species. Now

our powers have become so great that they threaten the integrity of life on this planet and confront us with an unprecedented test of our species character. If we move through this time of initiation successfully, we can make our journey of return back into a harmonious relationship with the Earth and the universe that is our original home. The soul of the species is being challenged to come forth and shine into the world so that we might become an authentic human family, in feeling and experience as well as in name. The archetype of the hero's journey is very helpful because it recognizes our time of immense challenge as vital for our collective awakening.

### **Suggested Questions: A Heroic Species**

Where is the human species on the hero's journey (of separation, initiation, and return)? How have we separated ourselves from the Earth, from one another, and from the universe over the past thousands of years? If we are approaching our "supreme test" and time of great initiation as a human family, then how difficult or challenging do you think our passage will be? Do you expect a brief or extended period of labor in giving birth to a conscious species civilization? What systems will be tested and perhaps transformed: ecological, economic, social, political, spiritual? In what ways could initiation result in a new relationship to the Earth, the rest of life, and the universe? How important will the global communications systems be for enabling the species to work through this time of testing? What is story of the journey that lies on the other side of this time of profound initiation and supreme testing? If the universe is a place of learning, then what is our most important learning at this time?

### **Telling the Story of Our Personal Heroic Journey**

At this time of supreme testing, we are being challenged to give nothing less than our highest and best gifts to the world. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes how we each have what can be called "near gifts" and "true gifts." Near gifts, he says, are those things that we are pretty good at doing. Often we make our living

and have our lives absorbed in our near gifts. He also said that we each have true gifts. True gifts are those things in which we are soulfully gifted—activities in which we feel at ease, where we naturally excel, and that bring us happiness in our personal lives and the lives of others.

We face enormous challenges and will have to re-invent the world in which we live — including where and how we work, community life and structure, education, food systems, transportation, and more. Now is not the time for half-hearted contributions — the world needs our greatest talents. What are your greatest gifts that express your unique talents, interests, and abilities? In what ways could your true gifts be of satisfaction to yourself and of service to humanity?

I believe the times ahead will be so demanding that our near gifts will not be sufficient to get us through. At this rare moment in history when our human capacities are being tested to their utmost, we are each challenged to bring our true gifts into the world. The window of opportunity is brief. Don't hold back. Give your gifts to the world at this pivotal moment in the human journey.

### Suggested Questions: Telling the Story of Your Heroic Journey

If you were to view your body as a biodegradable vehicle for acquiring soul-growing experiences, then what have been the major “soul growing experiences” in your life? Instead of the chronology of events and people, what have been the soul-shaping occurrences in your life? A brush with death? Major responsibilities suddenly thrust upon you? A role model that inspired you? A bigger story or vision about the meaning of your life? Feedback from others or a hard look in the mirror? A place to experiment, like going off to college?

What were your life-shaping experiences? They may have been very brief! As the poet Rumi wrote, he saw the universe dancing for 15 seconds, and it made him a servant for life!

All of the world's wisdom traditions declare this world is infused with sacred meaning and knowledge. The direct experience of life carries its own meaning and



requires no explanation. Playwright and Jungian analyst Florida Scott-Maxwell offered this wisdom in her nineties when she wrote: "You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you possess all you have been and done, you are fierce with reality."