



The Heroine's Journey and The Journey of Integrity: Illustrating Women's Truths in a Graphic Memoir on Health, Disability, and Childhood Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Women's narratives, particularly in areas like health, disability, and trauma, have long been underrepresented, hindering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences in storytelling. To address this gap, writers and scholars have developed frameworks that offer valuable approaches for exploring and articulating the unique challenges and transformations that define women's experiences. Notable examples of such frameworks are Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey and non-gender-specific Journey of Integrity developed by Nancer Ballard. In contrast to Joseph Campbell's well-known Hero's Journey paradigm, the Heroine's Journey focuses on the personal and psychological growth of the female protagonist, emphasizing the unique challenges that come with being a woman. The Journey of Integrity follows the protagonist's quest for authenticity, moral strength, and ethical alignment, emphasizing the importance of staying true to one's values in the face of challenges. Both models complement and enrich one another. While the Heroine's Journey traditionally explores themes of self-discovery, empowerment, and overcoming external obstacles, the Journey of *cont...*



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ABSTRACT *cont...*

Integrity adds a layer of internal exploration to create a more holistic and multifaceted storytelling experience, exploring moral dilemmas, ethical decisions, and the alignment of actions with core values. This paper explores how these two frameworks enhance the understanding of female perspectives and can effectively portray women's experiences while emphasizing their narratives. The analysis of both models is further expanded by their application to my graphic memoir in progress, which addresses themes of childhood trauma, health, and disability, as well as the resulting career in public health and interest in graphic medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Women's narratives, particularly those focusing on health, disability, and trauma, have long been underrepresented in literature, art, and academia. This underrepresentation often leaves women's stories marginalized or misunderstood, with male perspectives dominating the discourse. As a result, the complexities of women's lived experiences remain largely unexplored, creating a gap in how gendered experiences are understood across different forms of storytelling.

Frameworks such as the Heroine's Journey (Murdock, 2020) and the Journey of Integrity (Ballard, 2019) offer new approaches to understanding and articulating women's experiences. The Heroine's Journey expands on the traditional Hero's Journey archetype (Campbell, 2008) to include a female-centered approach to storytelling, while The Journey of Integrity provides a framework for personal development and empowerment.

In spaces like comics and graphic medicine, women have the freedom to depict their realities with both words and images, providing vivid, honest portrayals of their lives. These visual narratives allow readers to engage with stories about health, disability, trauma, and resilience in ways that traditional media may overlook or simplify. As Hillary Chute (2010), a comics-scholar, pointed out over a decade ago:

...there is a new aesthetic emerging around self-representation: contemporary authors, now more than ever, offer powerful nonfiction narratives in comics form. Many, if not most, of the authors are women. (...) The stories to which women's graphic narrative is today dedicated are often traumatic: the cross-discursive form of comics is apt for expressing that difficult register, which is central to its importance as an innovative genre of life writing. (p. 2)

By combining the Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity with the graphic narrative medium, this paper examines how these frameworks offer writers, particularly women, the tools to create complex, authentic stories. In embarking on my graphic memoir, I initially envisioned it as a narrative focused on how my disability shaped my career in public health, reflecting my personal growth and understanding. However, as I engaged more deeply with my story, I realized the memoir must address a broader spectrum of experiences: the trauma of growing up in a family impacted by alcohol addiction and intergenerational trauma, as well as the vital themes of home, belonging, integrity, and resilience. By interweaving these elements together, my project seeks to enrich the tapestry of women's narratives, highlighting how personal challenges can shape and empower women's journeys in a society that often marginalizes their voices.

METHODS

To explore how The Heroine's Journey and The Journey of Integrity provide insights into female perspectives and resonate with my personal narrative, a comparative analysis was conducted. This analysis allowed for distinguishing the unique as well as overlapping aspects of each framework and examining how each pathway can be applied to understand the unique experiences of women, including my own. Through this exploration, the study reveals how both models address themes of transformation, resilience, and authenticity, offering a richer understanding of both the universal and deeply personal aspects of the female experience.

It is impossible to discuss the Heroine's Journey without first addressing the foundational archetype from which it emerged. Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, developed in 1949, has become a cornerstone narrative structure for numerous stories and mythologies across cultures. In Campbell's model (Figure 1), the stages of the hero myth depict the journey of an individual - whether man or a woman - who overcomes personal and historical limitations to emerge transformed. The hero's journey begins with a response to the Call to Adventure, crossing the Threshold into unknown realms. Along the way, the hero encounters Allies who help him in his quest, while also facing Adversaries who attempt to hinder his progress. The hero undergoes an Initiation, often symbolized by the Belly of the Whale, and faces a series of Trials that put their talents and determination to the test, ultimately leading to the discovery of a treasured Boon. This journey may involve a significant partnership, frequently represented by a Goddess figure, and culminates in a Sacred Marriage. Finally, the hero embarks on the Return journey to bring the newly found treasure to their community in triumph (Campbell, 2008).

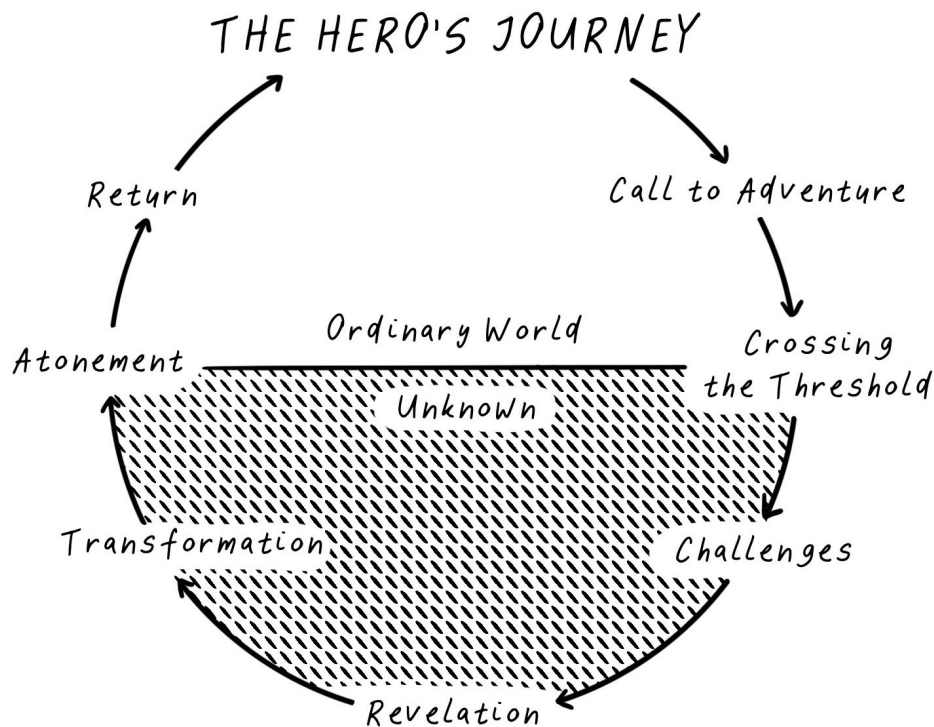


Figure 1: The Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell. Adapted from: Campbell, J. (2008). p. 210.

Despite its widespread application, Campbell's Hero's Journey framework does not fully encompass the unique experiences and challenges of women, particularly those centered on self-discovery. Campbell's model has faced criticism for its inability to represent women as heroes, reflecting both the constraints of historical mythic narratives and the prevailing gender norms of his era, and depicting women as lacking agency and the capacity to take on heroic roles (Nicholson, 2011). Feminist scholars further emphasized the secondary roles assigned to women in Campbell's framework, portraying them as figures like mothers and goddesses, while reserving heroic qualities exclusively for male characters (Pearson & Pope, 1981). In contrast, Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey, developed in 1990 (Figure 2), offers an alternative framework that seeks to address these overlooked aspects of women's journeys, presenting what she describes as "an alternative to the stereotypical ego-driven masculine hero's journey admired in mainstream culture" (2020: XV). Created during the third wave of feminism, which prioritized the importance of women's freedom to make decisions in all areas of life (Thwaites, 2016), this model emphasizes the pursuit of balance, the reclamation of feminine nature, and the capacity to heal and create. This journey centers on recognizing one's intrinsic value and understanding that the destination lies within oneself. The Heroine's Journey begins as the protagonist separates from her feminine roots in an effort to succeed in a male-dominated world. However, despite external success, she feels spiritually empty and disconnected from her authentic self. Through a period of grief and introspection, she reclaims her feminine soul and learns to integrate her feminine and masculine qualities. Ultimately, she achieves balance and returns to the world with a renewed sense of wholeness and purpose.

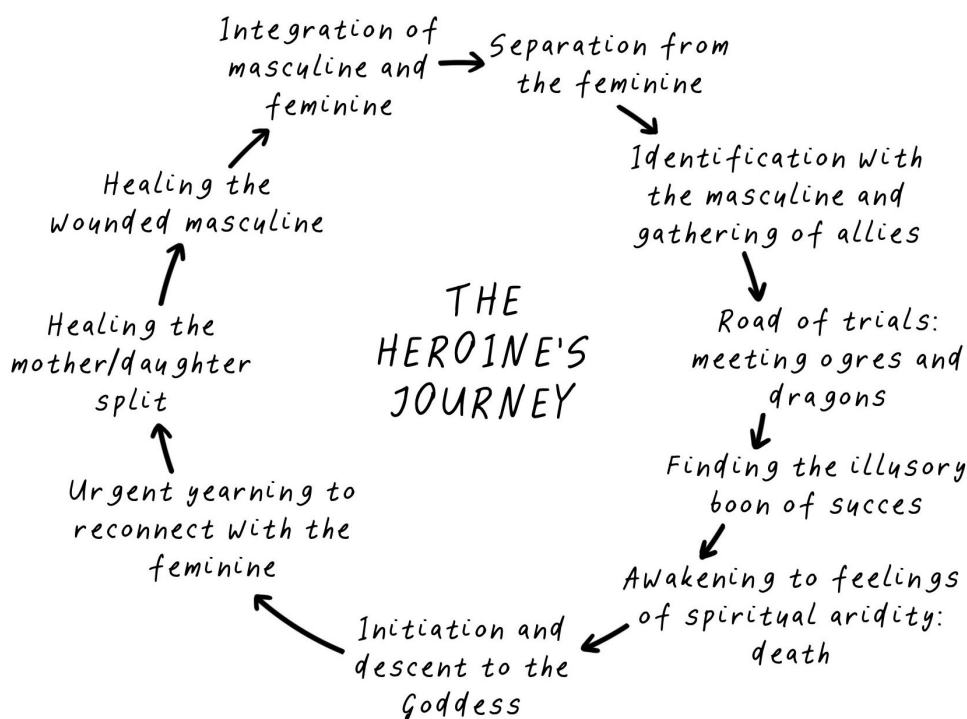


Figure 2: The Heroine's Journey by Maureen Murdock. Adapted from: Murdock, M. (2020). p. 5.

The concepts of wholeness and purpose are central to the Journey of Integrity, a framework introduced by Nancer Ballard in 2019 (Figure 3). In contrast to the Hero's and Heroine's Journeys, the

model highlights the protagonist's ordinary nature and recognizes the limitations of human control in a complex world. Instead of overcoming obstacles, the protagonist learns to navigate the intricacies and unpredictability of the universe, where achievement is measured by a strengthening of conviction rather than external change. Unlike traditional stories initiated by a call to adventure, the Journey of Integrity often interrupts the protagonist's life unexpectedly, focusing on the affirmation of human potential through action. Central to this framework is the protagonist's humanity, which, through their vulnerability and shared experiences with the audience, gives the story its significance. The protagonist's actions reflect core values and inspire a sense of possibility in others.

THE JOURNEY OF INTEGRITY

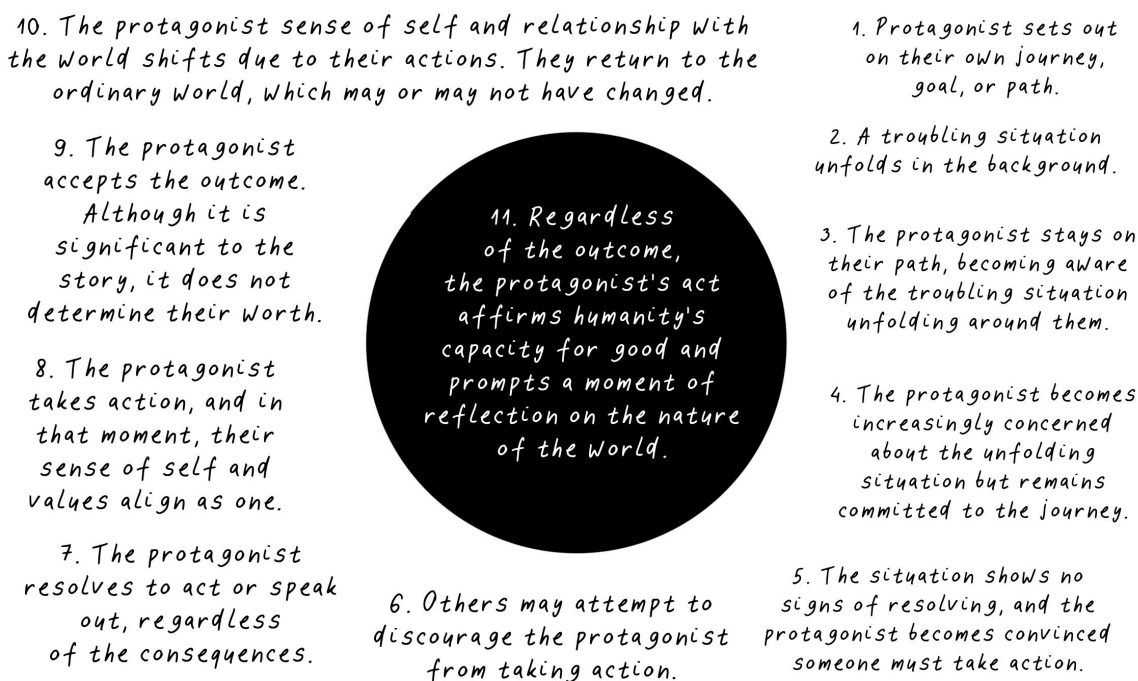


Figure 3: The Journey of Integrity by Nancer Ballard. Adapted from: Ballard, N. (2019).

Results

In analyzing my personal story through the frameworks of both the Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity, several thematic parallels emerge, particularly surrounding identity, transformation, and the assertion of personal values.

My narrative begins with a difficult birth and arm-lengthening surgeries in childhood due to a staph infection. Despite these early challenges, I dreamed of becoming a doctor. However, upon realizing this path was not feasible for me, I shifted my focus to public health - a decision that marked the start of my Heroine's Journey. At the age of nineteen, I left my home in Poland for college, driven by both personal ambition and the desire to distance myself from family challenges, particularly my father's alcohol addiction.

Determined to carve out a life distinct from my mother's, I distanced myself both physically and symbolically from the feminine influences in my life. While I succeeded academically and moved to the Netherlands to pursue graduate degrees in health policy and global health, I began grappling with internal struggles such as perfectionism and impostor syndrome. These struggles echo the Heroine's experience of emptiness despite external accomplishments.

After graduation, I secured an internship at a research organization in Washington, DC, which initially felt like reaching a personal "promised land". However, upon arrival in the United States, I quickly found myself feeling out of place and unhappy. Despite this inner turmoil, I continued to pursue my academic ambitions, applying to PhD programs at American universities. It was during this time that my Journey of Integrity began, as I confronted the growing disconnect between my long-held goal of becoming a PhD student and the realization that this path might not align with my deeper values and sense of purpose. After three years of applications and countless rejections, I finally began to re-evaluate my path.

My final attempt was to pursue a job opportunity at the World Health Organization, which had long been my dream position. Desperate for recognition, I made it through the selection process and was invited for an interview. Little did I know this would be a pivotal moment, testing my integrity. I was tasked with preparing a presentation that offered solutions for a specific topic in a specific country. Instead of conforming to their instructions, I chose to present what I believed was most crucial for that country at the time, fully aware that this could jeopardize my candidacy. In that moment, the Journey of Integrity became clear - not in achieving the external goal, but in staying true to my values, regardless of the consequences. My potential supervisors did not appreciate my unconventional approach: I was told I ignored their guidelines. Yet for the first time in a long time, I did what felt right to me. The rejection confirmed that I did not belong in an environment burdened by the same issues that had concerned me in academia: patriarchy, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and a lack of creative expression. After failing the interview, I finally admitted that I was burned out and needed a break.

The pandemic brought a period of isolation and grief for me, much like the descent we see in the Heroine's Journey. I was mourning the loss of my former identity. Yet, it was also a time of transformation, as I allowed myself to tap into my creativity and reflect deeply on what I truly wanted in life. Through this introspective journey, I began writing, drawing, and rediscovered comics, which led me to graphic medicine. MK Czerwiec's *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* inspired me to share my own story of professional struggles and shifting career paths. This creative reawakening gave me a renewed sense of purpose, mirroring the Heroine's return to the world with a newfound sense of wholeness.

Seeking community, a vital step in the Heroine's Journey, I began volunteering as a Polish medical interpreter and soon discovered a renewed sense of purpose in helping patients. Now, as a licensed interpreter, writing my memoir, and surrounded by a creative community that embraces vulnerability and authenticity, I finally feel like I have found my place in the world.

DISCUSSION

Both frameworks offer valuable insights into female perspectives, yet they approach the subject differently. Murdock's Heroine's Journey provides a narrative structure that highlights the challenges

and transformations specific to women's experiences, while Ballard's Journey of Integrity focuses on personal growth and authenticity. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of female experiences by addressing both external challenges and internal transformations. By applying these frameworks to my own narrative, I recognized how my journey encompasses themes of self-discovery, personal values, and transformation. The Heroine's Journey brings to light the emotional and spiritual dimensions of my experience, while the Journey of Integrity emphasizes my commitment to living more authentically and accepting life's unpredictability.

It is deeply reassuring to discover frameworks that reflect the patterns of my own life experiences. The Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity have provided me with a sense of validation, helping me make sense of the personal challenges and transformations I have undergone. These frameworks not only map out the emotional and psychological growth I've experienced but also highlight the internal struggles that have shaped my journey. Knowing that others have faced similar challenges and followed these paths offers a sense of comfort and clarity, reinforcing that my story has value and is part of a larger, shared narrative.

One notable limitation when applying narrative frameworks like the Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity is the risk of overgeneralizing or oversimplifying personal experiences by trying to fit them too rigidly into these structures. These frameworks are designed as archetypal patterns, which may not fully capture the complexity of an individual's unique journey. Life events often do not unfold in a linear or predictable manner, and attempting to force them into these models could distort or diminish important aspects of the story. Additionally, these frameworks are rooted in specific cultural and philosophical contexts, which may not resonate universally or reflect the diverse values and experiences of individuals from different backgrounds. Relying too heavily on such structures can also result in predictable writing, potentially hindering creativity and authenticity. Recognizing these limitations allows for more flexible use of these frameworks, enabling writers to adapt them as sources of inspiration rather than rigid blueprints for storytelling.

CONCLUSION

The Heroine's Journey and the Journey of Integrity offer valuable tools for writers seeking to deepen their understanding and representation of female experiences. These frameworks provide a way to move beyond traditional, male-centric narratives by addressing both the internal and external journeys of women, fostering more complex and authentic storytelling. Maureen Murdock's Heroine's Journey emphasizes the emotional and spiritual dimensions of women's lives, while Nancer Ballard's Journey of Integrity foregrounds the importance of authenticity and personal growth. Together, they offer a holistic approach that enhances the portrayal of female characters and their development. These models not only help writers create more layered and empowered characters but also serve as tools for personal reflection and growth. They can serve as both inspiration and structure, allowing for the creation of richer, more complex female characters and narratives that resonate across cultural and social contexts.

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