

An Unsuspected Metaphor for Ministry

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Sermon

There has been much critique of Campbell's mono-myth theory. For instance, the hero is pretty much always male. And it is general enough that some have asked if it is so grossly universal as to be meaningless. Like the drops of water in our story of all ages, we each have the capacity to be heroes in our own lives.

Regardless, there is something in the Hero's Journey that appeals to me. When I think about my favorite stories – my favorite books, movies or TV shows, I can see that there is more than a passing connection between the the hero's quest and how deeply I identify with the tale.

For instance – when I was in seminary, I was addicted to watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The seminary that I went to was heavy on the prophetic aspect of ministry – we learned about systemic violence and about how minority voices are often shut down by those in power. I don't think I was ever directly told this, but I definitely emerged from seminary with a feeling that it was my responsibility to save the world.

And so, as I watched Buffy slay demon after demon, as I watched her struggle with a Watcher system that did not respect her unique gifts, I felt a kinship with her. Buffy, too, felt the weight of the world was on her shoulders. I resonated with her struggle to try to save the world *and* have her own life as she tried, and failed, to be normal. Over and over again. Indeed, at the time many of my dreams at night had some version of me saving the world – either from vampires, or from evil corporations, or from any demon my imagination could dream up.

Similarly, though not quite to the extent as with Buffy, I found myself immersed in the early seasons of the show *Medium*. But here, it wasn't the lead characters struggle to *save the world* that appealed so much. I was drawn, instead, to how she struggled to balance her calling

with her family. I was recently *out* of seminary, working full time for the first time since the kids were born, and struggling to balance my professional life in ministry with my spouse and young children – a situation echoed in the show. And, much like in *Medium*, my work often intruded on my family time – though, thankfully, not in the form of dead people trying to talk to me. As with *Buffy*, I resonated with the struggle of the lead character.

But it had been a while since a television show resonated with me as much as either *Buffy* or *Medium* did. So I was very surprised, when, on my January study leave earlier this year, I ended up utterly and totally addicted to another show.

Our TiVO device has this neat quality where, based on the shows I have told it to record, it will, on its own, record other shows it thinks I might like. I had grown weary of the shows we were watching and clicked through the onscreen menus to see if TiVO might have found something worth checking out. I read the following description for a show called *Legend of the Seeker*:

In this live-action fantasy series based on the *Sword of Truth* novels by Terry Goodkind, Craig Horner stars as Richard Cypher, a young woodsman whose world has been shattered by the murder of his father. When a mysterious woman, Khalan Amnell, wanders into his forest hamlet, Cypher ends up joining forces with her and the wizard Zeddicus Zu'l Zorander to defeat the evil wizard Darken Rahl and his minions.

Okay, I thought, this sounds interesting. Corny, perhaps, but not like anything else I can get. Did I mention we don't have cable? So what we watch is limited to what's available on broadcast or on Netflix. I love the Science Fiction & Fantasy genre, particularly the fantasy side, so I decided to give it a try.

As I watched the introduction, I noticed that the producer was Sam Raimi and was even more intrigued. For those of you for whom that name does *not* ring a bell, think: Hercules, Zena

Warrior Princess, and The Evil Dead. If that still doesn't ring a bell, lets just say that he is a highly inventive writer/producer/director who has gifts for sarcasm, for high camp, and for being highly enjoyable.

So I watched the show. And I really, really liked it. And I saw that it was available on Netflix, and so I watched another, and another, and another. Pretty soon, John and I were putting the kids to bed as early as we could so that we could watch 2, 3 or 4 episodes a night. Thank goodness this was on leave!!!!

I couldn't get enough. I loved it – on some level it appealed to me the same way both Buffy and Medium had, only this show was a lot *prettier* to watch. The cast is, well, quite attractive, and it is filmed in New Zealand. With sweeping landscapes and a fabulous score, the production feels almost movie quality.

We quickly made it through the first season, and then started the second season. Each week Raimi releases the new episode to broadcast network *and* on Netflix simultaneously, so we were able to watch any variety of ways, even if we were out of town.

So, here is the story of that first season. Richard is a young man, gamely going about his business. He works on his family's farm. Meanwhile, Darken Rahl is an evil overlord who rules the next empire over. There is a prophecy that the Seeker will kill Darken Rahl and restore peace to the empire, but no one knows who the Seeker is.

Unsurprisingly, it turns out that Richard is the Seeker. In fact, he is officially named “the one true seeker” by Zeddicus, the highest level wizard in the land. And as part of Richard's quest, he is given the Sword of Truth. Accompanying Zed and Richard on their quest is Khalan. Khalan is what they call a “Confessor.” By gazing deeply into a person's eyes, she can compel them to tell the truth. For better or for worse, however, those who have been “confessed” by her lose their own free will and become her devoted slaves. She tries not to confess people because she does not want to abuse her powers, but it sure comes in handy in battle.

Though more characters are added in the second season, it is Zed, Richard, and Khalan that seek to find Darken Rahl and then find a way to kill to him, thus freeing the empire and fulfilling the prophecy. Along the way, they have many and varied adventures, because Richard is a sweet guy who can't say no when someone asks him for help.

Also along the way, Richard and Khalan fall in love. Apparently this is quite common – whenever a Seeker is named there is a Confessor as well, and they always fall in love. And yes, this story falls into gender-stereotypes – the women are always the Confessors and the men are always Seekers.

Anyway! Richard and Khalan fall in love. But, to add an attractive complexity to their love story, they can not consummate their love. In the heat of passion, Khalan would unintentionally confess Richard, and then he would not be able to use his own judgment or complete his quest because all he would ever think about is pleasing her. Besides, what fun would the story be if they could just run off and live happily ever after?

So that is a very brief summary. Now that we are only watching one episode a week, I find the show does not have *quite* the addictive quality to it as it did in those early days. In part, this may be because I figured out *why* I loved it so much. It may also be because I totally overanalyzed it. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that it is the job of a preacher to deliver “life passed through the fire of thought.” Forgive me if this may seem a little charred :)

Richard, the Seeker, does not have an impatience with the weight of the world, though it is riding on his shoulders. He actually handles it quite well. But it's not Richard that I resonant with so much. This time, it is a supporting character that pulls me in week after week. Khalan's main job is to support the Seeker in his quest. And she does it with flair, with style, with strength and passion. She kicks some major butt – literally!

As I thought about what it was that so draws me to Khalan, I realized that here, of all

places, in a fantasy TV show, was a really fun, if not perfect, metaphor for ministry.

In this metaphor, Richard is the church. Just as the Seeker is on a quest to save the world, so too do I believe that it is the role of the church to transform the world. Sometimes this means taking unpopular stands, sometimes it means conflict, often it means challenging the status quo.

The weapon that the Seeker wields is the Sword of Truth. A tool for our quest as a religious community, similarly, is the search for truth and meaning.

Khalan, in this metaphor, is the minister. The quest does not belong to Khalan, it belongs to Richard. But it is Khalan's job to encourage Richard, to support him, to help him be the best Seeker he can be. Likewise, part of a minister's job is to help the church to be the best that it can be – to support the church on its quest to transform those in the church as well as the larger world.

I think you can even extend the metaphor to the big bad guy – Darken Rahl symbolizes a sort of Pax Romana – Peace through Intimidation, through domination. It is not true peace, it is not a just peace. And so it is the quest of the Seeker, therefore, to defeat this false peace and to bring true peace to the land. Similar, I believe, is the quest of the church.

I believe the quest of our liberal religious community is to change the world – to transform it into a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. This is a pretty important quest, one that has deep impact now and for generations to come. And it starts by bringing peace & transformation into our own lives.

But there are other insights I gained from this hero's journey as well. Bear with me as I push the metaphor a bit further.

Khalan loves Richard, very deeply. And vice versa. But boundaries between them are very, very important. They can't just allow themselves to be absorbed by the other. Richard would not be able to continue with his quest if Khalan became his first priority. And Khalan

would not be able to support Richard if her love for him turned into the kind of strangling love instead of the kind of supportive love.

So it is between a minister and her church. It is your quest, and the ministers role to support you in it. If the relationship shifts to the point where the minister is unable to speak the truth out of fear that she may lose the love of the church, or if the church becomes more enamored of the minister than of the quest, then the urgency of the quest gets lost. Remember, Khalan doesn't want mindless devotion – neither does a minister. We would much prefer to inspire you!!!

With good boundaries, Richard and Khalan grow as people as they journey together. So too, can a church and its minister grow and enjoy a long, healthy relationship together. They make mistakes in trying to save the world, sometimes, mistakes as they try to fulfill the quest. But they never let the mistake dissuade them from the quest. They regroup, refocus, and stay committed. And they realize that sometimes, what looks like a detour, is really just where they need to be.

An over-cooked metaphor? Perhaps. But in my last week of study leave, when I was feeling exhausted and desperate because I really hadn't had any time to study, I became addicted to *Legend of the Seeker* because of these metaphors for ministry. The show helped me to come back rejuvenated because I intuited this metaphor – it fed me before I consciously understood all these connections.

Tonight, I will be installed as your minister. I am very excited, and hope you are too. It is going to be a grand celebration.

Last week, I received in the mail an official document with the seal of Mayor Jerry Abramson. He sends his regrets that he will be unable to attend tonight, but in honor of the occasion he has declared today, April 25, 2010, as “The Reverend Dawn Cooley day,” and he encourages all citizens of Louisville to celebrate. I'm sure those of you who don't live in town

are welcome to join the celebration!! :)

As fun as it may be to have a day dedicated to me, I am also saddened, because it really misses the point. The quest is not mine. The quest is yours. I am joyfully here to journey with you, to support you, to encourage you, to help you to be the best you can be as individuals and as a faith community. But the quest is yours. And the installation tonight is not about *me*, it is about our relationship together.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: battles ensue and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow [humankind].

A church ventures forth from the world of the status quo (with a supportive minister who may or may not be able to kick butt) into a region of mystery and wonder. Battles ensue: banners are hung on their church as a ward against bigotry, initiatives started to help the church and its members become healthy, questions asked about what religious education program would best prepare our children – and a victory is won. Okay, maybe its not decisive, but we are still here, still on the quest. Will we find a boon and bring it into the world? Will we ever build that land where sisters and brothers create peace?

Well now, that's the quest we are on, isn't it? I look forward to all the adventures we will have on our journey, together.