In working on a book, almost always we come to a moment of crisis and doubt: This is the point where we wonder if we are ever going to complete the work we have started. We fear that the work is no good or that we lack the ability to finish the task. We’re uncertain about where to go next or how to fix a crucial problem. We meet various forms of rejection or criticism—both from others and from ourselves. We may even stop writing and feel the well has run dry.

When other writers come to me at such moments, I try to remind them of certain fundamental truths about the journeys we take with our writing. I offer them a simple premise: *We start writing a book to become the person who can finish the book.*

The person who starts the book is not the same person who completes it. We must grow and transform ourselves into that person. The process of writing is part of that growth and transformation. We don’t get to determine beforehand the length or difficulty of the process. This is such a crucial point I’ll repeat it: *We don’t get to determine the length or difficulty of the process. We can only refuse or assent to it.*

If the project is a worthy one, we will inevitably arrive at a moment where we must face the specter of failure. Otherwise the project is too easy; there is no discovery or growth involved. Discovery and growth can only come through struggle, from facing squarely our own limitations and failings and working through them and thus, changing who we are.

In dealing with the task of writing then—and indeed, in dealing with most problems in life—I’ve found that it’s useful to contemplate the figure of the hero as it plays itself out in myths and the three-act play. Thus, the process of completing a book can be understood as a mythic journey.

In the first act, the hero is surrounded by the familiar and may be expressing some doubts about staying with the familiar. She senses its limitations, its imperfections, and perhaps has become bored or dissatisfied with her existence there. Then comes some message and/or messenger calling her to another task, another land.

What’s interesting is that the hero will often balk at or refuse this call. She will tell the messenger, “Find someone else, I’m not the right person” or “I can’t take this on at this time”; she may even find herself saying, contrary to her previous grumblings, “I’m fine where I am, nothing needs to change.”

But then something happens: a change of circumstances, a new layer or form of the call or message is revealed—at the same time, something within the hero changes, and she accepts the call.

The psychic wave or upsurge that accommodates this acceptance are the energies of hope and optimism, the enthusiasm that comes from prospects of leaving the old and encountering the new. This is often accompanied by a sense of the justice or nobility, of the righteousness of the call.

And so, the hero leaves the familiar and enters a new country, a new kingdom. There she is called upon to help save that kingdom, to bring about a new vision, to defeat a great foe, to find and bring back the magic elixir. Events often progress favorably at this point, with perhaps
some early successes and discoveries of newfound abilities. The moribund ways of the old kingdom have been left behind for new opportunities for growth and discovery.

But then the tide begins to turn. Or seems to. Difficulties start to crop up, setbacks. As failure and defeat come to seem increasingly a very real possibility, the hero finds herself mired in the crisis of faith that is the second act. As David Mamet has observed, this is the crucial point of the journey, the turning point of the play: The hero may have started out, armed at the beginning with energy and a vision, determined to complete a tremendous journey, to accomplish a great act (in our case, to write a book). But in the second act, the real nature of the task asserts itself and unexpected roadblocks appear. Instead of making grand speeches about the founding of a great cause—say the founding of a political movement or a new arts organization—the hero is licking stamps and looking for a lower postal rate in order to send out requests for funds. The work is mind-numbing and boring, sheer drudgery; the hero’s original enthusiasm has waned; critics abound: “Where is the noble cause I originally set out on? This can’t possibly be it. I must have chosen wrong.” Or say, in another scenario, the hero has set out to defend someone whom she believes is innocent but now she finds instead evidence that that person may indeed be guilty. What’s more, she faces a corrupt judicial system, an antagonist who commands seemingly much more power and resources; everything appears to be rigged so there is no way she can win.

At this point the hero says, “I’m sorry, but I’m giving up. I know I set out with this great goal, I know I said I would answer the call, but I could not have possibly foreseen how difficult the task would be. No one could have foreseen this. You tell me I should persist, but you don’t understand and appreciate the difficulties I am up against. You don’t see how few resources I possess and how many resources they, my enemies, my nay-sayers, the forces arrayed against me, possess. There is simply no way I can win. No one is supporting me, I have no allies, I’m all alone.”

Here the hero may also say, “I know I said I would be up to this, that I would succeed. But here I find that my talents and resources are not enough. Perhaps I’m not the person for this job; indeed I doubt anybody might be, but it’s certainly not me. I don’t have the energy or enthusiasm I started out with. I don’t have the will to go on.”

But of course, in order to succeed, the hero doesn’t quit. It is this refusal to quit which makes the hero the hero. Instead, she says to herself what one of the protagonists in Waiting for Godot says, “I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”

One way of characterizing this crisis of the second act is that the hero misreads what is happening. She believes this crisis of faith, this apparent point of failure, is all there is. In her eyes, the crisis she faces marks the beginning of a third act in which the protagonist fails, and the forces arrayed against her will triumph.

Instead, this crisis contains a message, both from her psyche and from the world: In order to reach her goal in the future, the hero must change her view and understanding of the present; she must change the way she approaches the present. This requires both imagination and a new plan of action. In part, what this new vision must include is a way of seeing the present in light of the future goal. The hero must discover possibilities and potentials that did not seem there just a little while ago in the great moment of crisis.
This may sound easier than such work actually is. It is difficult to turn away from the old solutions or approaches, from the familiar strengths and paths, from what has worked for us before. It takes courage to admit evidence of failure, courage to admit mistakes or wrong turns.

So how does this turn happen? First the hero must see that she is capable of change. Part of this change involves the way she sees herself: she must find strengths inside herself, attributes or qualities, she has not perceived before; aspects of her psyche she has neglected. She must then work to develop those strengths.

In this process, she begins to open herself up to seeing the world around her in a new way. She is preparing herself for the shadow work that will be one of the final tasks on her way to reaching the third act. One of the ways this happens is she begins to see that where she has perceived only enemies there may actually be potential allies.

In his studies of mythology, Joseph Campbell talks about threshold guardians, forces which seem to bar entrance to the next place the hero needs to go. He explains that in Buddhist temples in Japan the entryway is often guarded by a figure with a fierce face, the face of a demon. Yet if one takes in the whole figure, one sees that the hand of the terrifying figure is held out slightly with the palm up, with an implied beckoning motion. The person who is scared off from entering sees the same figure as the one who sees the welcome, but their way of envisioning what is before them is different.

In seeing the threshold guardians in a new light and understanding that they might not necessarily be enemies, the hero may be able to turn them into allies or to avail herself of their qualities.

This altered vision of the world helps the hero reassess the enemy or blocking forces, and, in doing so, reassess herself. Part of this stems from a realization that the enemy or blocking forces are not as all powerful as she has previously perceived. In her previous sense of the situation, she found the enemy to be engaged in triumph after triumph, each triumph making the enemy stronger and more impossible to defeat. But now, in her altered vision, she may see that in each of those triumphs lay the seed for the enemy’s downfall, that the gathering of strength she has perceived is merely the surface of things: the enemy possesses a hidden underbelly, a previously overlooked weakness; or the enemy’s strength is built on a house of cards--the structure is real but it is nowhere as indestructible as it has seemed, and indeed the higher and mightier it towers, the more vulnerable it is.

But how does the hero reach such a vision? In part she must stop seeing the enemy from the outside; she must stop seeing the enemy as merely a mask of evil and all powerful. She must apprehend and understand the enemy; she must consider the enemy as human as herself. But in order to do this she must also see that those qualities which, up until now, have, in her mind, made the enemy the enemy, also reside in her. In other words she has to give up the notion of her own pure innocence, her absolute distinction from her enemy.*

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* This does not mean she is by any means the equivalent of the enemy or that they stand on equal moral footing. It does mean that she has to deepen and complicate her understanding of herself in order to understand the enemy and thus defeat him. Part of this deepening and complication may mean that she must somehow admit her own guilt and forgive herself. She may also somehow have to ingest some of the qualities of enemy that she has previously abhorred and shunned and see them in herself and allow herself to act from or out of those qualities.
Where before she saw the enemy as the embodiment of evil, she must now see the enemy within herself and know it as a portion of her own psyche.

But writing, you may say, is an internal task, not a journey. It involves internal demons rather than exterior enemies. There’s no villain to defeat; there’s only you and the blank page.

But of course the hero’s journey is a metaphor. Just because a writer faces mainly internal conflicts does not mean that the allegory of the hero’s journey cannot apply to the task of writing. The metaphor of the journey helps us illuminate the various transformations of the psyche.

If we look back, we can see that the call to writing in general as well as the call to write a specific book often comes from somewhere outside us--from a book or incident, a conversation or class, a friend or a teacher. We may have, at first, even rejected that call, and waited for a second or even a third call, before we took up the task.

At a certain point, early on in the project, we might have been filled with energy and enthusiasm, a belief that what our writing is moving towards success and publication. We found ourselves excited by new discoveries and connections, new sources for material, initial breakthroughs where a whole new dimension to the project is revealed.

But then the crisis appears. Sometimes it comes from outside--a critique by a fellow writer or fellow writing group members, a rejection by an agent or publisher. Sometimes it comes from inside--we lose faith in the book or our abilities; we stop writing or find ourselves letting other activities interfere with the writing; we stop sending the book out or trying to get feedback and lock it in a drawer.

The particulars of these crises are unique to the writer and her project. Conversely, there is no one magic solution. And yes, sometimes books are not finished or do not find a publisher. But before we abandon the book and give up our journey, we might try to see if there is a way to continue, to discover a way of proceeding that we did not consider before or did not see.

The process of revision can often only be achieved by a letting go, a decision not to cling to one’s former image of oneself and one’s writing. Only through this letting go can growth take place. One must realize, as I’ve said above, that the person who starts this task must be willing to undergo a transformation in order to complete the task. Doing things is the same old way will not get it done.

For the writer, these internal changes often involve shadow work, attempts to connect with areas of psyche the writer has avoided or neglected. Only by investigating these areas can the writer begin drawing out their powers.

This widening and deepening of the psyche helps the writer achieve the complexity and energy needed to move on with the writing or to revise the writing in a radical new way. In short, while there may be a technical problem which the writer faces, in order to address that problem fully, a psychological change must take place.

For example, the writer can’t plunge into the depths of a character if she is hiding from such depths within her own psyche. If the writer is protecting a protagonist with whom she identifies or is holding back because of a fear of familial restrictions or is afraid of breaking through a psychic restriction, that has to be challenged. Similarly, facing her own fear of losing control can help provide a writer with the freedom to unravel and loosen the narrative, to let the unexpected or untoward or upsetting enter the story, to allow for the happy accident that can lead to a new direction.
There may also be an external component to this crisis of faith. Sometimes at this point, we must look for and call on others for help, both for encouragement and criticism. We may face our version of an irreconcilable conflict: We writers are by nature individuals used to going it alone; we came to writing in part because of solitary natures. Seek help from others? That would be personal blasphemy. But blasphemy may be exactly what is needed.

Then too one may also be called to change one’s relationship to those whom one sees as thwarting forces. For instance, what if one looks at those who have criticized the work or who have refused it as threshold guardians?

Seen in this light, these people who have criticized or rejected one’s work may not be one’s enemies or figures bent on destroying one’s ambitions, but more neutral figures. Like the warrior guardians of Japanese temples, they may be both warding us off from an entrance and at the same time, beckoning us. Indeed, they may, if we look or listen more closely, be offering us a key to the next door or passage, a password which will help us cross the border, but we can only use what they are offering if we allow what they are saying to change us, if we entertain their views of how to proceed on the journey.

In Campbell’s description of threshold guardians, it’s obvious that teachers often function as such figures: We may at first see them as fiercely opposing, as criticizing our work and ambitions, only to realize later that they were trying to prepare us for the difficulties ahead, for the real nature of the journey. Those who were thwarted or scared off by these threshold guardians were never meant to complete the journey; those who persisted and learned from the teacher eventually moved on. And indeed, what we rejected at first in a teacher may be exactly what we needed to ingest; we see that what we rejected in our teacher was actually somewhere inside of us, and only through this self-recognition can we continue to grow.

What is required then is openness, flexibility, a willingness to entertain something new. For writers, the crisis of the second act means we must be willing to revise both ourselves and our writing, and perhaps even our relationship with the outside world. The crisis doesn’t mean that we can’t complete the journey; it instead is a signal telling us what the journey requires. We can only make a decision whether to pay attention to what that signal is telling us or to refuse to listen to it. In that decision we create our character; we determine our fate.

As with a single book, a writer’s career is also a journey. As one progresses as a writer, the books often don’t come any easier. Indeed, sometimes the opposite may be true. Early success, like the first stages of the hero’s journey, can give way to thorny difficulties and the specter of failure, the crises of mid-career and middle-age. Each book may present its own three-act play, but one’s career can also unfold in three acts.

Here the writer must struggle against a vision of the journey which entails a series of mounting successes as the true and natural progression—something which is rarely, if ever, the case. The transformations one undergoes in a lifetime of writing inevitably involve many highs and lows, moments of faith and doubt, successes, seeming failures and real true failures.

It’s important then to look at one’s immediate circumstances in terms of the long run and the strange vicissitudes of the psyche’s growth. You cannot change the present, but the present looks different through what future you see and imagine. Perhaps the timetable you are using needs to be expanded. Perhaps you may have to retreat now and lay low; you may have to go into exile and martial your forces; you may have to journey somewhere else and that is where you will find a way to move towards your goal.
This change in the temporal perspective is crucial here. Things look different when you know you are not in the third act of the villain’s or enemy’s triumph, but instead in the middle of your own second act. The third act is yet to begin.

Of course, getting through the crisis of the second act is a lot more difficult than my brief descriptions above imply. It’s easy to understand such things conceptually; it’s a lot more difficult to live through them, to undergo real change. Real--not cosmetic or facile--change. Deep change.

It is helpful to know that others have experienced what you are experiencing, that even the greatest of writers must suffer and persist through their doubts. It comes with the territory and the task; there’s no way of getting around it. All you can do is plow your way through.

Sometimes one mistake lies in thinking you must know exactly where you are going or exactly what the final destination is. The trick is to keep moving, as much inside yourself, as outside. Here’s the way the poet Rumi put it, recognizing that the greatest and most difficult distances we travel are generally internal:

Keep walking though there’s no place to get to.
Don’t try to see through the distances.
That’s not for human beings. Move within,
but don’t move the way fear makes you move.

(trans. Coleman Barks)

But of course faith is not always easy, especially when disaster seems all about you and defeat impending, when your mistakes echo in your ear along with a loud sense of your own limitations.

It is at that point that perhaps it’s useful to remember: This is where your journey has led you; you could be nowhere else but here. This is what you signed up for.

No hero’s journey, no great feat, can be accomplished without the crisis of the second act, without facing what seems at first utter failure or the seeming end. But eventually, the hero discovers that despite dwelling in a dark hour, this is not the time to give up. Yes, you may have made mistakes, but now you can learn from them. Yes, you may have misjudged the situation, but now you can reassess. Yes, you may feel alone, but now is the time when the people that can help you are at hand if you are able to readjust your vision. Yes, you may be tired or depressed, but perhaps that fatigue or depression is what you need to search for a new vision to gather inside you. It is preparation for the work to come.

As Rumi instructs: Don’t let fear stop or guide you. All you can do is continue to have faith, continue to change yourself. Ask yourself what the next step is and make that step. Keep walking.