



Referencing Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, the first part of this post discussed humanity's predisposition towards metaphors of journey and quest, and the possible application (as well as troubling) of these metaphors, against my own experience of chronic illness, academia, and comics.

The stage at which I left this post, The Supernatural Aid, is when a guide or magical helper appears before the hero once they have accepted the call to adventure. This guide often presents the hero with talisman that will help them later in their quest. In my own quest the Supernatural Aid came

in the rather unusual form of an American performance artist and poet by the name of Bob Flanagan.

Flanagan came to me exactly when I needed him. As previously discussed, I was at an ambiguous and liminal stage in my life with the chronic illness Cystic Fibrosis. Ambiguity and liminality are particularly important experiential concepts in journey and quest. Anthropologist Victor Turner, in his work on ritual structure and social drama, describes liminality as a state of being that is 'betwixt and between', neither here nor there, both dangerous and a source of power at the same time (75). This double status is not only akin to the zone beyond the first threshold in Campbell's journey, but draws parallels with disability as well. The disabled person is often seen as being abject, both a source of fascination and repulsion. A fear of the disabled often stems from a fear of contamination. This is because disability is a much more fluid and threatening identity than most, given that anyone can become disabled at any time (Thomson, 14). As well as this, Turner's description of ritual structure perfectly aligns with Campbell's journey, Frank's quest narrative, and with the experience of becoming ill, seeking treatment, and recovering from or assimilating illness: 'rituals *separated* specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returned them, changed in some way, to mundane life' (25). In my own life this separation came in the form of medically mandated isolation from other people with CF due to the risks of cross infection, as well as my own self-imposed isolation brought about by my fears of disability at the time.

Bob therefore represented my first meaningful encounter with someone with CF, although he had been dead for six years when I discovered him. Bob helped me confront my own Threshold Guardians and move through my Road Of Trials, although arguably using Campbell's terms here makes the events of my life seem much more dramatic than they actually were. The first death of someone I knew personally with CF, my first hospitalization due to coughing up blood, all had a part to play, but arguably my "quest" would be much more timid and would be more about learning to articulate my experience rather than overcome it.

The two somewhat unorthodox talismans that Bob would provide for my journey would be his sexuality and his humor. Bob was a key figure in the S+M scene, a self-confessed 'supermasochist' (Dick, 2012), who fused his sexual practices with his art, as well as linking them causally to his early experiences of hospitalization and treatment. This linkage between Bob's submissive sexuality and his disability is potentially problematic at first, given the ableist attribution of weakness, infantilization, and lack of agency to people with disabilities, but Bob's ability to find power in submission somewhat overcame these linkages. Bob fought back against the stereotypical view of 'the snivelling masochist' (ibid) by showing how the submissive had to be able to take on an extraordinary amount of pain, much as someone with a chronic illness or disability might also have to. By putting his sexuality at the forefront of his work he also inadvertently addressed the stereotype of the disabled as being asexual.

Bob's approach to his sexuality was also a humorous one, and he frequently applied this same approach to his illness. It was this humor that would help to transform my own humor from from

defence and distraction to critique and awareness. A particularly pertinent element of this for me was Bob's ability to cut through two of disabilities more mawkish master images, the Super Crip (who is considered brave, inspirational, even superhuman for simply getting on with everyday life) and The Poster Child (a figure that often perpetuated a pitying and infantilized view of disability). Bob even referred to himself as 'the poster child from Hell' (28). One particularly memorable performance saw Bob, semi-nude and cloaked in hospital attire, singing lines such as 'um diddle diddle I'm gonna' die' and 'the CF would have killed me if it weren't for S+M', to the tune of Supercalifragolistic from Mary Poppins. This song was punctuated with extreme coughing fits that confronted the audience with the taboo of disability and raised questions of where the performance ended and the illness began. It was through this humor that a more messy, absurd, and arguably more real image of chronic illness was painted.

Whilst all this paints a critical and uplifting picture, it does disguise potential limitations that can be applied to both Campbell and Frank's models as well. Both the attribution of strength to disability and the use of humor to address and overcome it can also be seen as extensions of the Super Crip trope for example. The application of The Hero's Journey to disability also runs the risk of, to Frank, 'romanticizing illness', and like the metaphor of the Phoenix rising from the ashes 'can present the burning process as too clean and the transformation as too complete' (135). This can paint an unrealistic point of comparison for people with disabilities, making it easier to stigmatize and blame them, instead of addressing the larger social and political structures that hold disability in place. Whilst at first I considered my own prophetic truth to be the critical power of humor against representations of disability, it would take several more missteps on my journey to critically rethink this belief. However, even though Flanagan's work, as well as Campbell and Frank's, has its limitations, they still provided me with the conceptual tools with which to apply this critique. The issues raised by Flanagan's work in particular would become thematic concerns in my own comics and my later academic work long before I would start to look at them through a more skeptical lens....

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Concluding part to be posted next month.

Image

Bob Flanagan December 26th 1952-January 4th 1996 © Andrew Godfrey 2017

References & further reading

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