

Chapter 2

OUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure. The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for. The damned thing in the cave that was so dreaded has become the center.

—Joseph Campbell¹

The stories we tell ourselves, the narratives that describe the context of our lives, fundamentally affect the choices we make each day. For many of us, the narrative of the “hero” leader has been a foundational story that has impacted our life choices. We have been raised in a society that values competition, personally overcoming great obstacles, and finding ways to pick ourselves up when we fail so that we can ultimately overcome. This narrative ends up finding its way into many aspects of our lives,

from sports to academic pursuits to how we engage in friendships and romantic relationships to the style and tone of how we lead and influence others.

For most who lead in the business or political world, this notion of the hero leader who overcomes and wins has been the dominant narrative that has fueled our rise through the ranks. One way of summarizing this storyline is that we believe we are part of a world in which only a zero-sum game exists, where there is always a clear winner and a clear loser. This narrative often comes from a place of fear where there is a perceived lack of available resources to go around. Losing represents insecurity and suffering, so winning is the logical necessity.

Louise Chester is a former London City banker who, when appointed, was the youngest director at UBS Ltd. By her early thirties, she had become the head of research and global head of media and telecoms at Dresdner RCM. To an outside observer, her career was stellar, easeful, seamless. But below the surface, her ability to lead in such a high-stress environment was underpinned by a set of practices and beliefs that were hard earned.

From childhood, Louise had had a strong sense that “life is sacred and it’s an incredible privilege to be here.” She felt she could choose “a life of meaning” and that with “every experience came the opportunity for a greater understanding to enable [her] to be more of service to others.” But at the age of twenty, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma and given potentially three months to live. “I had a strong sense that I hadn’t really fulfilled what was important in my life, that I hadn’t really taken my mission seriously,” she explained to me. Then, the night before she was to start chemotherapy, her medical team called to say that they hadn’t seen any cancer in her latest biopsy. “I felt the sadness of the life I’d missed, and it really made me think, ‘I’ve been given another chance, and I’m not going to waste another day.’” Inspired by her grandmother and spurred on by her experience of cancer, Louise became a Buddhist.

Although she had founded and sold a small business during college, nothing else about her education or background had earmarked her for a senior role in financial services; she had middle-school math, high-school economics, and a degree in English literature. But she was determined to find her way in the City of London and, after a time spent answering calls and opening mail, she landed a job at a Japanese asset-management company managing a fund and doing exchange-rate and interest forecasts.

“I was this incredibly successful investment analyst in the City, and at the same time I was a practicing Buddhist, and it was my mission to show people that, if you take responsibility for your life, if you see your life as sacred and you try to really inspire people to be a beacon of hope for others, then you can live a life of meaning and of service,” Louise said.

It soon became apparent that Louise’s approach to work was quite different from that of other analysts. People started to ask her how she had developed her ability to zoom right in on the details of complex spreadsheets and then zoom out and see the bigger picture of global market trends. Her grandmother had taught her to meditate as a child, and it was during these early meditation experiences that Louise started to experience the capacity to “flex between deep, sharp focus and open awareness—to be able to hold both the micro to the macro at the same time in this kind of tension.”

To discover what exactly was working so well for her, Louise looked at some of the early research into the neuroscience of meditation. “There was a piece of research done in Boston showing that meditation started to change the structure and function of your brain,” she said. Looking at the conclusions, Louise grasped that practicing meditation made people less emotionally reactive to high-stress situations, increased their ability to focus on one task at a time, and more easily activated a part of the nervous system that brought with it a sense of curiosity and creativity, all of which resonated with Louise.

Based on her experience of meditation and this preliminary study on the effects it had on brain functioning, she designed a program so others could benefit from what was working so well for her. Louise knew she needed to develop something that was in no way religious but simply focused on demystifying the process of meditating:

I wanted to embed in hundreds of thousands of people the ability to . . . be more conscious about the decisions they make and to take that responsibility. For the whole financial industry to come to an acknowledgement that good business is good business. And that if you want to invest for your pension, you want to invest for the long term and you want to invest in an organization that is overall purposeful. There's no point getting a high return from a transport company that you've invested in [if] the fumes from their lorries are giving your child asthma. I wanted to give people the ability to be more conscious, [to] not just focus on the outer game and on the doing but also to be able to zoom out and see and experience the bigger picture, the context in which we operate. So that's why I set up Mindfulness at Work, to take this very simple thing—a trojan horse—into organizations so that you open the hearts of people, and they then want to do good. The Buddha used expedient means, and as a bodhisattva, I knew I had to offer it in a way [that] was pragmatic.

Her first program was with the CEO of JPMorgan Private Bank in Knightsbridge. The head of learning from Ashurst, a law firm, came to observe and decided to take it on. That year, Mindfulness at Work won the Legal and Education Training Group award, sponsored by Ashurst, for Best Personal Development Program. And the company grew from there, working with almost 250 companies across all different sectors ever since. Louise is well placed to work with leaders, as she is personally aware of the challenges of being distracted and emotionally reactive while leading a company.

“When I get extremely upset about things, when something ‘hijacks me,’ and I become aware of it, it’s very interesting for me. This is a gift of curiosity,” Louise said. These regular experiences give Louise “that little bit of space to be able to experience things . . . to be a little bit dispassionate. It’s sort of bringing that kind of beginner’s mind to this moment and seeing what the moment will teach you, but without holding it as some kind of outcome, because I’m not necessarily looking for a solution. I’m looking to learn from the situation itself. And to have the patience to see that I might never know—and that’s okay—I might never know why something is how it is. But it is a sort of surrendering to grace. If I try and control things, then I’ve closed off a possibility.

“The work I’m doing with other leaders is really around sitting in that muddy middle and choosing not to close down possibility by making things one thing or the other,” Louise continued. “It’s very easy to say other people are bad or they’re wrong. And there’s a sort of wanting to make things one way or the other, to create simplicity, but when you do, you close down possibility.”

Reflecting on the essence of contemplative leadership, the reason why it’s so crucially important for leaders to integrate it into their leadership practice, Louise asked:

How do we hone the skill of sitting down with people who we abhor and see their humanity? How do we notice our anger, our revulsion, our dismissal of them? Do we still sit there and see them as this human being who has a point of view, bring our curiosity, and truly listen . . . rather than just make assumptions? We need to learn to sit down together for the sake of humanity because, if not, we’re just going to the polarities. The invitation for us is to really hold that incredibly difficult middle ground. And we can’t hold it easily with our head because our head wants the binary. It wants

the certainty at once. The one way or the other—it's almost like we have to hold it with our heart and our body.

For the last number of decades, leadership consultants and coaches have presented alternative narratives for leaders to embrace. There is a movement away from zero-sum games to win-win scenarios where relationships can be developed and outcomes emerge over time. One such alternate narrative is “situational leadership,” which involves adapting our style to best fit the people we are working with and the context we are working within. This is just one way in which a leader does not have to be winning, all-knowing, or at the front to lead the charge. Instead, these narratives give permission for leaders to serve others, to share some responsibilities, and to adapt to scenarios based on the needs of those in front of them.

The hallmark of leading from a place of contemplation is that we are open to change, again and again, each time we look inside ourselves. One of the most challenging ways we change is by firstly becoming aware of the elements in our narrative that we need to let go of and then, in time, developing the courage to step into new narratives that more accurately match our leadership presence at this point in our lives. For this, we first need to become conscious of the stories we tell ourselves and the values that these stories engender in us. An overarching framework that helps with this process is Joseph Campbell's “monomyth” of the hero, or, as it's more commonly known today, the “Hero's Journey.” Despite the name, it tells a very different hero story than that of a zero-sum game.

THE MONOMYTH OF THE HERO

Joseph Campbell was a scholar and educator who dedicated himself to the study and teaching of comparative mythology. He published

many books throughout his life, but his 1949 classic, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, is his most famous. In it, Campbell outlines the fundamental importance of story, of the narratives that we each buy into. He compares and contrasts the stories, or mythologies, of various societies and cultures—from prehistory to modern times, stories ranging from Japan to India, Russia to Ireland, North America to the Pacific Islands. His central argument is all of these stories are variations on the same Hero's Journey.

Broadly summarized, there are three distinctive yet interconnected phases to the Hero's Journey: Departure, Descent, and Return. Reflecting on our experiences of these three phases of the Hero's Journey is really helpful for us to understand the narratives that we live by and how these narratives affect the ways in which we lead. As we learn to lead from a place of contemplation, of nonattachment, to control certain outcomes in our realm of influence, the Hero's Journey framework helps us to see our reality more clearly. It empowers us to reinterpret the narrative of our leadership, most especially if we feel like our world is falling apart. This helps us realize that it is *not* falling apart; it's simply being reordered. And our willingness to participate in this reordering—or our fight against it—will qualitatively affect our daily experiences of how we lead ourselves and how we show up for others.

Situating ourselves within an overarching narrative, locating which phase of the Hero's Journey most resonates for us now, can be a very powerful way of understanding the overall context of our leadership development.

As I outline the various elements within these three phases, I encourage you to think about a challenge that you are currently facing, or have recently faced, in your own leadership. Break this challenge down to as many of the steps of the Hero's Journey as possible, and notice what insights this exercise may bring.

1. DEPARTURE FROM OUR NORMAL WORLD

Before we make any changes to our leadership, it's important to first take stock and become aware of our version of "normal." What have we been socialized to expect to be a normal set of scenarios in which we lead? This goes far beyond the culture of our organization and our expectations for growth, promotion, or salary. This has more to do with the overarching narrative of our society and the factors that led us to leading and influencing in the first place.

What each of us expects to see happen in our career, in our life's work, can be very different. This is affected by two key concepts: ontology and epistemology.

Ontology is the study of the nature of being. Deriving from the Greek word *ont*, "being," and the Medieval Latin suffix *ology*, the study of a body of knowledge, this "study of being" asks some profound questions of us: Why are we here? Why are we alive? Different cultures and societies provide differing views on these questions. For some, it's to live a life of pleasure and ease. For others, it's to honor those who have gone before us with the life choices we make today. Still others point to living in harmony with our environment and making choices that will benefit seven generations into the future.

In the Western world, leaders often use the language of "finding meaning" and "discovering purpose" when describing their own interpretation of ontology, why they believe their leadership is important. But for us to understand why we believe we are here and what is our work to do, we must also examine our epistemology, the sources we trust to tell us that our ontology is true.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. *Episteme* comes from the Greek, meaning "knowledge" or "understanding." What bodies of knowledge, what sacred texts, legal texts, and other books and stories do we hold to be true? What institutions and authority figures, such as business leaders, teachers, family members, politicians, pop idols, authors, and other role models, do we trust to tell us that our

version of reality is justified? *Can* we trust these sources, or have we ever questioned them at all? When things are going our way, we usually don't consider questioning the sources of knowledge that back up the narratives we have for why we lead. But when things get challenging, when we face a global downturn or a pandemic, or when the implications of climate change directly affect our product or the viability of the services we provide, then we might start to question the underlying assumptions that we have.

I attended a school where the standard narrative from parents and teachers was that if we worked hard in school and across our career, ideally in a profession, then some of us would become very wealthy as a result. In my context, where society didn't have a clearly defined class system, being wealthy equated with being powerful. This was the first ontology that I adopted for myself, my first *raison d'être*, and one I pursued for several years. The affirming attitudes of the teachers in my school, the success-oriented behaviors of the parents of my classmates, and the wider societal support of this way of life provided the epistemological sources I needed to assure me that my focus was correct.

But, coming from a different kind of background, I was an outlier in this context, not coming from a family that recognized professions or wealth. So as a thirteen-year-old, with my classmates living in big homes, having multiple annual vacations, and talking about their parents' businesses, this version of "normal" was all new to me. My values were shaped during my time at school as I was exposed to this dominant culture that emphasized hard work and wealth as prerequisites to career success. Therefore, leadership was, originally to my understanding, a way of thinking and acting that could advance one's career and life to the point of bringing wealth and success. That was my starting point, and it took a lot of trial and error, failure, and loss for me to eventually question this original narrative that I had assumed was absolutely good and right.

In college, I met people with very different narratives. One friend had no interest in building his career or accumulating wealth and power. Instead, he wanted to develop his talents and apply his gifts so that he could best contribute to society as a social worker. Others I have encountered in my coaching work have had different narratives as well; one woman discussed how she had come from a wealthy family in India, where her father was a diplomat and, because of conversations with him and his colleagues, she had devoted herself to leading in the humanitarian sector. But she then transferred to the corporate sector so that she could reinvest the assets of her employer's company to deliver clean water to millions of people in developing countries. Her new leadership narrative straddled the for-profit and the not-for-profit sectors. Ask yourself these questions to uncover some elements of the narratives that influenced your expectations of leadership:

- What narratives most shaped your own leadership during your early life?
- What has always seemed like a normal narrative of how your life should go?

The Departure from our Normal World stage of the Hero's Journey takes place when something happens that leads us to question the narratives that we once held to be undeniably true. We lose our job, we don't get a promotion, our project goes wrong, we are criticized by a mentor. Or perhaps we achieve our goals or fulfill the objectives of the narratives we have for ourselves but are left feeling a little empty inside. We make our first million, we IPO, we sell our stake in the firm, we lead a team to achieve stellar success, we land a major client. *Now what? Surely there's more than this.*

Developmental psychologists from Erik Erikson to Clare Graves talk about the need to transcend one phase of life to enter into

another. We need a new narrative to continue forward. But sometimes we don't know what new paradigm, what new story, to step into. The way ahead can feel unclear; there may be no clean and crisp approach that seems to fit. We only know that we must step away and go somewhere else. This is the invitation to the Descent.

2. DESCENT

According to the Hero's Journey, to cross the threshold and enter into the unknown, many—if not all of us—need a little bit of support, or a little bit of a push from someone who has already gone ahead of us and experienced their own Hero's Journey. This person is known as a mentor and takes their name from Homer's *Odyssey*. According to this ancient story, before departing to fight in the Trojan War, King Odysseus instructed his trusted advisor, named Mentor, to raise his son, Telemachus. Mentor's task is to lead and guide, encourage, and admonish the young boy so he can mature into a man. In our own leadership-development story, our mentor is someone we respect, who has experienced far more than us, and who takes a personal interest in supporting us to learn and develop along the path ahead. They may provide advice, practical training, personal support, or an opportunity that allows us to take our first tentative steps in a new direction. Fundamental to any good mentor is that they know the territory ahead and are personally invested in seeing us learn to navigate it by ourselves.

In my experience of coaching and running mentoring programs within organizations, very few leaders get to experience helpful and healthy mentoring. Official mentors are often toeing the party line, preventing us from moving away from the narratives that no longer serve us. It takes a rare, courageous, and open person to truly mentor other leaders. In the absence of being mentored, reading books, watching videos, and listening to podcasts of other leaders we respect can be a good alternative.

When Louise was twenty, her cancer diagnosis precipitated her Departure from her Normal World into a Descent. She not only suffered physically; the emotional and psychological pain also led her to conclude that she “hadn’t really taken [her] mission” seriously. Memories of times spent with her grandmother inspired her, and, combined with encounters with her Buddhist neighbors, this led to the complete reevaluation of her narrative. It’s painful to Depart from our Normal World. We leave safety and security behind. We enter unknown territory, which, by its very nature, can be a fearful experience. But this is necessary, as—in the case of Louise and many others—this facing of fears is metamorphic, sowing the seeds of a new narrative and a new way of leading and contributing.

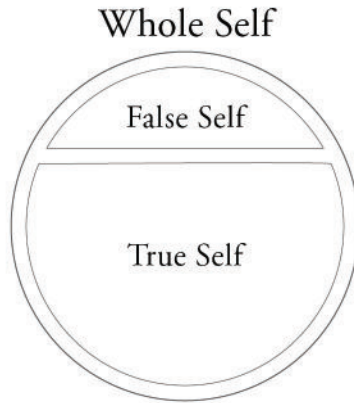
One of the key themes of the Hero’s Journey is that, in moving from Departure into Descent, we come face-to-face with our fears: loss of status, loss of monetary certainty, exposure of our flaws, or whatever they may be. Acknowledging our fears can be an unsettling experience. It requires vulnerability and courage. Vulnerability comes from the Latin *vulnus*, a wound. We are vulnerable when we acknowledge that there are chinks in our armor and that we carry wounds. In this context, admitting that we have fears is an act of vulnerability. Acknowledging this is a critical first step, as only then can we do something about those fears.

Courage comes from the Latin *cor*, “heart,” and *agere*, “to act.” I think of courage as choosing “to act with heart,” to do something in a way that brings the core of our being, our True Self, to the fore.

We need a lot of courage to both face our fears head-on and then act with heart and do something constructive with them. Campbell says that

*The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for.*²

Having the courage to face our fears bring our True Self to the fore.



When a mentor offers to guide and support us, it's important that they are not peddling some quick-fix solution. One of the hallmarks of a great mentor is that they help us focus on *why* we're stumbling with our old narratives and support us as we go “down into the abyss [to] recover the treasures of life.”³ It can be frightening to call our leadership narratives into question. It's difficult for our ego, too, as we will feel out of control—and we *will* be out of control. But once we have committed ourselves to this path of Descent, once we open ourselves up to seeing what emerges into our consciousness, we create the conditions that allow new narratives and new perspectives on leadership to develop.

It's not an easy path. Maintaining the status quo of our Normal World might be much easier, if less rewarding. This phase of Descent involves us coming face-to-face with our need for control and acknowledging that wanting to feel in control helps us deal with our fears. This is a great starting point for surviving daily life, but we're now being invited away from a reactive approach to leadership to something more considered, more responsive, more of an overflow of our inner presence into connection with our external world.

TWO KINDS OF SUFFERING

On a recent episode of *The High Performance Podcast*, former English rugby captain and World Cup winner Jonny Wilkinson talked about the “fragility of people that believe in themselves. Look at anyone that’s in the middle of self-belief; you’ll see someone who’s covering up fear.”⁴ As a world-renowned athlete, considered the very best of his generation, Wilkinson and his career revolved around a narrative whereby he always had to win, constantly grow, and believe that “leaving a legacy after [he was] gone is what [would] bring joy.”

“I mean, it’s ludicrous,” said Wilkinson. “And that’s kind of where I was. You know, my whole rugby career was like, ‘I’m going to suffer through this because I’m going to leave the greatest mark.’”

Broadly speaking, there are two types of suffering we can experience. The first is when we choose to make sacrifices and to suffer so that something better can happen as a result of our leadership. Our choosing to suffer produces a benefit for us and for others. Wilkinson put it very eloquently when he talked about how he had worked incredibly hard on and off the pitch and that his narrative, in his own words, had been one that said, “When I grow up, when I get my car, when I get my promotion, when I get my big house, when I get to retirement—that’s when my joy is going to hit me, when I’ve got enough money.”⁵ But even when he had achieved so much success in his career and personal life, he was “still suffering and stressing for the next thing.”⁶ It took him some time to realize that he had been deeply unhappy living within his old narrative of winning and compulsively improving to the next level of leadership and personal performance. “It’s like, well, what happens to just flourishing, enjoying and loving life?”

The second type of suffering is when things “go wrong,” when external factors outside of our control move us away from our current trajectory and lead us down a path we have never intended to tread. We develop a health issue, a family member dies unexpectedly,

our relationship breaks down irreconcilably, we lose our job, an important project falls apart, our company folds. The fleeting nature of life resounds all around and within us, and we have no choice but to sit with some stark realities of loss, to sit with an unexpected source of deep pain. Our world is thrown into disarray. We question the narratives we've held on to for so long. We wonder about the trustworthiness of the books, the role models, the institutions that seemed to be so sure of themselves, that had assured us of a secure and compelling source of truth.

Most of us face this second category of suffering several times in our lives. For some, it happens early; for others, it happens often. But not everyone learns from this kind of suffering. I have witnessed many leaders who did not learn from their experiences of suffering—they blocked it out, they refused to face it, they redoubled their efforts at work and made success at their role their most important narrative. They overworked to numb the pain of suffering in other areas of their lives. And, as a result, they got “stuck”; they became immovable in their convictions and approaches.

I recently worked with a business leader who kept on returning to the topic of his marriage falling apart. And whenever we explored this topic, he explained that it was a result of him not leading the business well enough and not earning enough money. Over several months, we returned to this same narrative again and again. When we'd talk about leading his business, he'd say he couldn't focus because his marriage was on the rocks; when we'd talk about his marriage, he'd say it was because he wasn't earning enough money since he wasn't leading the business well enough. He was really suffering, both professionally and personally. The story he told himself, the narrative he had, framed himself as not being a “good enough” earner, causing himself ongoing pain. It began to emerge that he wasn't listening well to his co-owner or to his people in the business and that he wasn't listening to his wife very well, either.

Richard Rohr talks about the futility of trying to control the suffering we experience during Descent as being like trying to control the flow of the Big River in which we're swimming.⁷ What we need, instead, is to tune in to the flow of the water and allow ourselves to go with it.

Floating down this river, we can easily focus on how much we are not in control and struggle to get back to where we first entered the water. We try swimming upstream, going against the flow, which frustrates and exhausts us. But then we reach a point where we finally accept the river's flow and shift our focus to the experience of floating downstream. Yes, we are leaving behind familiar vistas of places that we know like the back of our hand. But we're having a new, embodied experience of going with the Big River, of being caught up in something much more than just ourselves, which brings us to new places and new vistas at every turn. We're part of the flow. But whether we fight it—always swimming to the side to get onto the riverbank—or go with it will fundamentally affect what happens within us and where we end up.

It's the same for the processes of leadership coaching. What happens during the process and where we get to at the end are fundamentally affected by how we participate at each step. I've worked with people during a phase of Descent who fight me and fight the process, and our progress is very slow. They question the parameters of the process, question themselves, and undermine the work that they *say* they want to do. They look for ways to get back to what they know, to how they once lived. But by continually wanting something else, they're not fully present to what is here right now. As a result of trying to control the process, they miss out on what is emerging in this moment.

This Descent away from the normality of how we've lived and led before is disorienting and usually fills us with a sense of loss and pain. We've spent so much time and energy defining ourselves by

how well we're living the first narrative we learned that we feel like we'll lose a part of our very selves if we let it go. Professional athletes often struggle to know who they are after they retire from sports. Organizational leaders often have a hard time when they step away from their high-intensity corporate environment to start an equally high-intensity parental leave. Political leaders have been known to crumble when they lose their seats.

Our ego is made up of all the different identities, known as “personas,” that we have taken on as part of living out our primary narrative. Examples of a persona include a high-performing athlete, a driven corporate leader, and a service-oriented politician. There's nothing *wrong* with any of these personas; they can be very helpful. When we're growing up and maturing, these various personas give us something to aim for; they motivate us; they help us feel like we've arrived somewhere. There's nothing like seeing the pride of a first-year medical student, a newly appointed corporate leader, or a politician winning their seat for the first time—it's exhilarating. But if we grow too attached to these identities, these personas, then we cannot let go of them and be slightly less defined by them as we grow older and more mature. The stronger our attachment to these identities, the more difficult it will be for us to embrace this stage of the Descent, and the more we'll fight to cling to them, insisting on remaining in control rather than going with the flow of the Big River.

3. RETURN

Wilkinson talked about his experience of transition from the Descent into the Return stage of the Hero's Journey. He said that he has been on a fifteen-year journey, “with nowhere else to turn but inwards,” exploring the fears that once shaped his daily life. He is now “willing to be open to the future and say . . . Let's just see . . . Why not just live now all of the time?”⁸

In his own words, this exploration of the cave of fears that underpinned his original Normal World narrative has brought him to a place where there are “no boundaries. All I’ve found is opportunity, space, and deeper dimensions of experience.”

This is what happens when we embrace the phase of Descent and discover what it might teach us. Eventually, at a time and in a way that we cannot fully understand or plan, something emerges from within. We have sat with our pain, we have faced loss, and we have faced disappointment. We’ve experienced a kind of “death”—the loss of a career; a health issue; an injury; the definitive end of a relationship; the loss of our job, our status, our company, our role of perceived significance in life. It could even be the loss of face from an error of judgment that affected our reputation as a leader. But somewhere from within this death, something else emerges—slowly, and usually in surprising ways.

We have learned that there’s more to us and more to life than what we had previously realized. The old narrative of why we were living and the old sources of authority that told us, “This is the best way to live,” have been transcended. We don’t necessarily have to get rid of our old narratives entirely. But as we have developed, there is now a broader and deeper container within which our old narratives fit. We are more than our achievements, and we are more than our roles. We realize that we are only one small part of the Big River, and this fills us with a sense of freedom and ease.⁹

We cannot force this change to occur. It is “done unto us.” The Descent strips away everything that is unnecessary, reminding us of what’s most important about who we are and how we lead. Then, contemplative practices—from meditation to walks in nature to journaling, or anything that re-grounds us into who we are in this moment—help to keep us in shape. These practices are the equivalent of strength and conditioning workouts to athletes; they are the foundation upon which all other training and performance is based.

Finally, moving from the Descent into the Return is something that happens *to* us when we are ready. It slowly emerges from within, with a surprisingly calm energy that invites us to be more present to ourselves in this moment and more connected with others and with our environment. We move away from narrow narratives about how life *should* be to more expansive narratives that give us and others a spaciousness to live with a greater sense of freedom and possibility. As we Return, we notice our emotional state, how we feel interacting with others, how we feel within ourselves. We pay attention to our thoughts, including automatic negative thoughts or default thinking patterns that limit us and those we lead and influence.

When we remove preconceived narratives and ideas of how things have to be, we are able to listen to others from a place of presence and focus. This can be invaluable in our decision-making and in our leadership presence and direction. The Return marks an end to this cycle of inner change—for now—and is essentially a return to our Normal World, but now with even more to contribute to others in how we lead and influence. We draw from more expansive narratives in this phase of the Hero's Journey that free us from the need to push the river, to *force* changes to occur in our realm of influence. We become more comfortable with what *is* while also choosing how to bring our own gifts and influence to bear in our relationships, teams, organization, family, and community.

It's not easy, and it takes work. But the promise of the quest, of the Hero's Journey, is that as we go, we become more and more comfortable in our own skin. We get to be more of ourselves, *of who we truly are*. And we can bring more of our Whole Selves to how we lead. We become more contemplative leaders. If we currently feel dissatisfied with our leadership experiences, then perhaps we're approaching the point of a new Departure; if we feel lost or confused, then we might already be in a phase of Descent, where our whole world is becoming reordered; or, if we feel refreshed and

renewed, with a new perspective on what it is we have to offer and where it is we want to contribute, then we are likely in the Return phase of the Hero's Journey.

Moving through the three phases of the Hero's Journey isn't a one-off experience. It's something that happens again and again in big and small ways throughout our lives. It applies to the personal learnings that we take from hard times and how we bring these lessons back to the people we lead and influence. As such, the Hero's Journey is a framework for change that helps us *reframe* the narratives we have inherited so that we can choose to lead from a story that we have consciously selected, one that deepens, serves, and inspires us and others.

REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

- Take a few minutes to consider your answers to the questions under the headings of ontology and epistemology on page 55.
- Broadly speaking, which phase of the Hero's Journey do you sense you are in today: Departure, Descent, or Return?
- What is your *current* ontology and epistemology within this phase?

Ontology	Epistemology
<p>What narratives did you inherit from your family about what constituted “the good life,” and what was expected of you and your future?</p> <p>What narratives from the following contexts have influenced the kind of leader you have become?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your school experiences: e.g., “Learning is fun” or “Learning is not relevant for daily life” • Your local-community interactions: e.g., “Kind neighbors are crucial” or “Racism/sexism/ageism is permissible” • Society: e.g., “Service and sacrifice are a person’s highest calling” or “Power and money are of utmost importance” 	<p>For each of your answers to the ontology questions, reflect on the sources that have supported the validity of your narratives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role models: e.g., a parent, relative, coach, teacher, famous personality, local activist, or religious leader • Books: e.g., a sacred text such as the Bible/ Koran/Torah/Vedas/ Buddhist sutras or a meaningful text, such as the Constitution, that represents truth to you • Videos: e.g., a movie that taught you about reality that you have returned to over and over to remind you of what’s true or what’s worth pursuing in life • Institutions: e.g., a police force, the Supreme Court, educational institutions, or sports clubs

Ontology	Epistemology