

# Life's Conflicts Are the Plot Points of Your Life's Story

What would life be like if you were aware of being in a story?

For some time now I've been fascinated by the idea of the monomyth popularized by thinkers like Joseph Campbell, C.S. Lewis, and (more recently) Jordan Peterson. One way of understanding a piece of what they have said is that all humans indeed occupy a story framework. We're all taking Campbell's "hero's journey" and passing through its phases, which may look different for each of us.

It can be a powerful thing to think of yourself as a hero on a hero's journey (and occasionally a dangerous thing\*). But this story plot mindset is particularly valuable when you hit the down parts of the hero's journey cycle. If you can embrace your life as a story, you will be prepared for many of the things that make stories both tragic and interesting (at the same time).

If thinkers like Campbell are right, every hero recapitulates most or all of the major themes that has ever happened in the stories of other heroes. And since the stories of heroes are the stories of each of us, in short, everything that has ever happened to others human can and will happen to you (consider that your Miranda warning for life).

You can expect to fail. How many protagonists know what they're doing when they begin their journeys?

You can expect to hit walls. What kind of story would it be if things always worked?

You can expect to be misunderstood as a matter of course. How many great heroes (in fiction or reality) have escaped that fate?

You can expect to be hated. How do you expect to do any great good if you are so normal as to not be disliked by anyone?

You can expect betrayal. How many stories have you read in which the protagonist has been betrayed? Plenty. Why do you think your story should be any different?

You can even expect to be not only a hero in the course of your life. You will be an antagonist from time to time, no matter how good you are (or think you are).

Of course, you shouldn't aim for bad things to happen to you, or for bad things to do. But you shouldn't be too surprised or upset when conflicts arise. How many of the stories you love were free of these things anyway? Conflict makes the plot and makes the hero's journey a journey.

As the Stoics, the Buddhists, and their later interpreters have explained in various forms\*\*, the greater part of our pain and angst as human beings comes from our attachment to illusions. One of the great illusions all of us probably hold when we're young is the belief that "this time it will be different." You probably think (I know I have) that you will be the lucky one to escape being hated, to escape failing, to escape your own shortcomings.

That illusion makes reality more difficult to handle. All of these things become easier and even acceptable when you realize that they're just tolls to pay and gates to pass through. You can exercise a great deal of control over life, but the odds are that you will have a choice not of \*whether\* to pass through suffering but instead of \*how\*, \*when\*, and \*where\* you want to pass through suffering. That's a lot of power, and your responsibility (your "ability to respond" as Nathaniel Branden might put it) can be a comfort in the face of conflict.

But don't forget that when you do pass through conflict and suffering, you may be experiencing exactly what you need to experience to live out your full story. You might be progressing, even in the things that feel like regress.

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\*A danger of this mindset can be grandiosity.

**\*\*Intellectual Credit:** Obviously Campbell and Lewis and Peterson, but also Stoics like Marcus Aurelius and Seneca (and modern Stoic interpreters like Tim Ferris and Ryan Holiday). Many more beside. Some credit to *The Courage To Be Disliked*, which has been filling my brain with Adlerian psychology recently. *Building a Story Brand* has been my latest exposure to the hero's journey.