

Episode One - The Phantom Menace



Star Wars as Personal Mythology

by Jonathan Young

Once again, an installment of the *Star Wars* series has become a movie event of galactic proportions. The spiritual underpinnings of the story have been widely recognized as a clear part of its enormous appeal.

There has been much discussion on the mythic dimensions of the film. Now that the commotion has settled down, perhaps it is a good time to reflect on the implications of the tale for those interested in the life of the soul.

Early in the film, an imposing spacecraft is speeding through the darkness between planets. There is a crisis, and two Jedi Knights are on their way to help. The call to adventure is similar in all these movies because it matches experiences that are known to the audience. The events that cause us to develop strengths often begin as bad news. Something calls us to solve a problem, or survive an ordeal, and through this difficult process, we find that we are capable of more than we thought.

Like other fans, I have been eagerly looking forward to another visit to the amazing universe of the Star Wars adventures. As a writer on archetypal themes, I was recently invited to Harvard to lecture on the mythic elements in Star Wars. It is not difficult to read the episodes as wisdom tales. The key insights into the meaning of human experience are clearly present. The mythic imagination is essentially a template that can be endlessly re-worked. If we look at the films through a symbolic lens, the life-lessons are abundant.

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Given the advantage of advance access to *The Phantom Menace*, I have had some time to think about the psychological themes of the story. Even in the starting points of the film, there are universal questions. What is the long-term effect of slavery - be it literal or figurative? What is the long-term effect of fear on one's character and choices?

The key characters this time out include young Anakin Skywalker, who we know will eventually become Darth Vader (as well as Luke Skywalker's father). Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, played by Liam Neeson is the commanding presence of the film. His youthful apprentice is Obi-Won Kenobi, not yet a full Jedi Knight. Queen Amidala is the teenage ruler of a planet under siege by the Trade Federation. One of the gratifying aspects of Episode One is the important role played by strong female characters.

As before, the force is a central element in the adventure. In a recent issue of *Time Magazine*, Bill Moyers and George Lucas discussed my ideas about the meaning of the force. Beyond the honor of being quoted in such a conversation, I am reminded that the idea of the force is what makes the *Star Wars* films more than well-done science fiction. This mysterious energy is the key to the transcendent magic of the stories.

The Jedi describe the force as an energy field that sustains all living things. An individual may sense the force as intuition, or something spiritual. It is something beyond individual skill or wisdom. Whether I say I trust my inner voice or use more traditional language, like trusting the Holy Spirit, somehow I am listening for something beyond my own calculations. I'm trying to tune into a larger field of energy and knowledge. When a Jedi advises the hero to trust the force, he is saying that we must not put all our trust in what we can know clearly. There are mysteries and powers that are larger than our knowing and seeing.

The Jedi are the high priests of the force as well as the noble knights of the time. The Jedi began in still earlier times as a theological and philosophical study group. Only after long consideration of the force did they take up the idea of fighting for high principles and causes.

When we become attuned to values and energies beyond our immediate practical concerns, the effect on our lives may be enormous. Listening to the voices from deep

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within can change everything. Quiet pursuits like poetry and meditation can lead to daring action once you find a calling, or become aware of the needs of others. You might not think teaching is much of a life, until you see the face of a child excited about learning something marvelous. Allowing ourselves to be led by emotion and our deepest values can take us into surprising directions.

In *The Phantom Menace*, the threat of war has grown out of economic issues. This seems like an eternal motivation for conflict. In the present era, many standing armies are poised to go to battle over economic matters. The U.S. seems particularly willing to mobilize in regions that hold global oil reserves. Throughout history, trade issues with enormous financial implications can grow into deadly conflict.

The heroic man or woman in an initiatory adventure is a regular person. The story begins as a mundane situation. A boy is trying to win a race. Starting in familiar circumstances lets the audience know that extraordinary things can happen in ordinary lives. Tragedy often sets the larger story in motion. This is the summons, the call to the quest. In *The Phantom Menace*, it is a threat to the Queen's planet.

The event that sets a fictional quest in motion is similar to what might happen to us. It is something that draws us into the engagement. In our life stories it might be the death of a parent, a divorce, a devastating illness, or a financial disaster. From there we can either collapse and give up on life, or we can rise to the occasion.

In the mythic moment, the individual's issues become enmeshed with larger problems. The Jedi get involved as Ambassadors. Along the way, Qui-Gon discovers the gifted boy Anakin. The boy meets Queen Amidala and learns he is not the only one with challenges, society is in trouble -- there are problems larger than his own. His personal circumstances and larger causes become intertwined as he goes to the threshold of adventure. His connection with Jedi teachers Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi represents contact with the higher self or inner master. The hero meets these key allies at the threshold moment. It is the jumping off point beyond which there is no return.

The hero might come to the adventure with many motivations. These might include trying to resolve some family difficulty. Anakin and his mother are slaves. Universal issues of personal freedom and dignity are represented in this detail. We can take the family angle literally in terms of personal drama, or see it symbolically. The image of the family can represent how our lives intertwine with others in all sorts of situations.

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Family dramas in dreams can reveal how various aspects of our inner lives get along with each other. Notions about family can be about how the past still influences us. Freud showed how the lives of people that came before us ripple down through our present-day emotional reactions to others.

The traveler may be seeking a transcendent experience. Usually the initiate is also looking for some undiscovered aspect of himself or herself. There is some wound that requires healing. Anakin Skywalker is moving toward several goals simultaneously. At some point, allies appear. This will include someone like Qui-Gon with extraordinary life experience. The guide has skills, secret lore, and wisdom necessary for the success of the journey.

There is a strong team effort in *The Phantom Menace*. A solitary warrior does not accomplish the solution. The initiatory quest is never a solo journey. The adventure is always collective effort, contrary to some immature fantasies of personal glory. Part of the lesson is to remember we are not alone. It isn't an individual's skill or strength by itself, that will resolve the situation. It is guides, allies, and animals that provide help at every turn. Even the comic Jar Jar Binks makes a crucial contribution. The seeker discovers that no single person can do the quest. Others provide assistance all the way through and back. There is much in these stories about humbling our arrogance.

This story shows how the call to service is not always welcomed. Not everyone on the team is eager for the adventure. The reluctant hero is an old theme. Some part of each of us is not pleased to face danger. It is not the presence of fear that is the problem, but how we handle it. Denial of fear is the worst, because then it lurks beyond our attention, often getting projected onto others.

The mentors can take many forms; an old teacher, a wise enchantress, a mysterious old magician, such as the strange creature Yoda. The wise one gives the hero something that is necessary for the quest. In *The Phantom Menace* we meet the council of the Jedi Masters. The high lodge of keepers of the wisdom is an ancient mythological motif. They may play some role in the possibility of initiation in the mysteries.

Gaining power is a challenging process involving proving good character. The rashness of youth must be tempered. The parallels in ordinary life may be as mundane

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as gaining the approval of a driving examiner to get a driver's license. It could be completing arduous training to become a Marine. It might be as grand as completing extensive education to become ordained into a priesthood, certified as a teacher, or licensed as a professional. It could be gaining high office. If the position is in public life, the initiation may even involve an inauguration ceremony.

In this story, Anakin Skywalker comes through when things get tough. In the model of the heroic adventure, not all of the allies turn out to be loyal. There are betrayals and disappointments. Allies sometimes die early in the story. The quest is a long voyage with many lessons before the hero reaches the goal.

Queen Amidala and the Jedi Knights are the central aristocratic figures in a tale with many royal characters. The fascination with the realm of lords and ladies is a staple in science fiction and fantasy. It does not necessarily mean that the audience longs to live under the rule of Kings or Queens. The symbolism may be deeper still. It could be a yearning for the larger meanings of all those grand roles. Such titles included devotion to great causes. These were lives with meaning and dedication to service. The psychological significance might be that we long for our inner nobility. The qualities of character and purpose associated with such positions may be what is missing in an overly egalitarian and endlessly practical age. Seeking one's truly noble qualities is a worthy endeavor.

At some point in our quests, we all reach bottom. This is the dark night of the soul when all seems lost. It may last years. It is the crisis of faith in the seeker's life. This is like a baptism from hell. If we survive this ultimate ordeal, we will likely be able to face anything else fate throws in our faces. We can gain a depth of character by having seen the worst. It may involve personal failure or painful losses. It is tempting to wish the horrible things had not happened. That would miss the lesson. This is the most valuable part of the journey.

We can see in a well-told story such as this, how important it is to forge alliances with others. We can also look at the characters in a story as the various energies within ourselves. After all, we each have many personalities, and these various aspects of ourselves have to learn to get along if we are to accomplish anything. These competing interests tug and pull us in different directions. To be brave, or afraid, or loving, are all features of a single individual's psychology. The story shows how to accomplish a working integration of an inner life. The tasks of learning to relate well

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with others and developing a well-balanced inner world are two sides of the same coin.

Initiatory adventures often include a great confrontation between good and evil. The task that is larger than we are, the fears greater than we have ever experienced. We each discover that we can survive ordeals we did not think we could endure. If we remember the lessons up to this point, we have discovered how to work with our allies. We have learned how to master the many conflicting elements within ourselves. Most important, we know we must trust the force. We have found how to stay in the flow of some wisdom larger than ourselves.

At some point, the individual's actions must become synchronized with universal forces. This shift eases life's basic loneliness. You are enmeshed in a larger purpose. You are meant to be in a certain place and fill a particular role. You are being yourself, truly and entirely for the first time. You have energies that you never knew about before.

Joseph Campbell described what happens if you followed your bliss, accepted your calling. Doors will open where you did not know there were doors. Help would come when you did not even know you needed help. Things are possible that would not have been possible for anyone else or would have been impossible for you in the past.

Because the Star Wars stories are set in another time, on fictional planets, we are able to get beyond the naturalism of most movies. Joseph Campbell felt that naturalism was the death of art. If the stories and characters are too realistic, it is more difficult to see the metaphors that carry the deeper messages of the story. When a story takes place in outer space, the audience knows that they are watching a work of the imagination. That is a key reason that the Star Wars series has been taken as conveying wisdom to a degree that is unusual for a Hollywood movie.

Campbell felt that Lucas had clearly understood his books and had rendered the key metaphors in contemporary terms. The central modern issue is whether we are going to let the machine control us. Campbell's notion of the machine includes the corporate state. Once can gain a measure of power by becoming machine-like. This is the great temptation that is so hard to resist. To be fully human, we must not spend all of our

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energies becoming part of the larger machine. The alternative is to listen to the still small voice within.

Our core choices and values have to come from inside. Then, ultimately, it all turns around, and one must find a place in the world. A mythic story shows how we must find our own footing as individuals, and also how we can return from separation to make a contribution. If the story only showed how to rebel against conventionality, it would leave us as hermits or lost souls. The greater challenge is to rejoin the community, but on our own terms.

In *Phantom Menace*, we are aware that the boy, Anakin Skywalker, will someday become the evil Darth Vader. This explores another universal theme. The seeker will have to face the dark side within. Some part of the hero is in the villain. The initiate is fighting some aspect of family heritage within himself or herself. This shows us the limits of dualistic thinking. We learn to get past imagining the hero is good and the other is evil. Resolution will require warring factions within the individual to pull together.

Some have noticed that the *Star Wars* episodes are similar to each other. Yet, George Lucas is not making the same movie over and over again. He is aware that one must go through many initiatory cycles to claim the many lessons. Each time out, the initiate is able to accomplish something new that seemed impossible. Each effort is successful because it is in the service of a calling. When one is motivated by higher causes, you can sometimes do amazing things.

After each lesson, the seeker then returns with significant new psychological integration. To accomplish the many stages of claiming our gifts, several elements are required -- we must gain access to the attributes of both genders, find a way to be aligned with the forces of nature, and develop connections with the best of allies. The companions are seekers themselves, in later cycles of the life-long quest. In a grand story such as this one, we see several generations in their various stages of enlightenment.

The releases of this series of films also now spans generations. Many who saw the first *Star Wars* movie as a teenager will now be bringing their own children to see *Episode One*. Each member of the audience faces challenges and lessons appropriate

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to his or her age group. There is a character on the screen at the right stage in the long unfolding story for each person to follow.

At the end of each initiatory adventure, there is a big celebration. The many different characters present symbolize different stages of life. At the same time they can represent the various aspects of an individual who is growing more fully aware of the many energies within. Part of what Lucas does so well is to tell a story that operates on many levels simultaneously.

The traveler comes back home with something to show for all the effort. This prize is sometimes called the boon, elixir, or blessing. It can be new wisdom, or a skill. Often it is an insight of great value to the historical moment. The challenge then is to pass it around. The boon does not belong to the adventurer alone. It is for everyone.

The seeker returns to an honored place in the community. Ultimately, being true to oneself includes being useful to others. The sense of fulfillment is extraordinary at that point. There is a clear sense of identity and role. Such a life moves with amazing energy. The force is then truly with us.

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