

A New Hope

Reverend Jeanette McHugh

First Sunday after Christmas — 27 December 2015

It is not often that to prepare for a sermon on Sunday that I have had to buy the Daily Telegraph, the Canberra Times and the Australian, buy three soap containers five days before Christmas day, because for sure they would not still be there on Boxing Day, as well as buy a DVD of 3 films, and see a real film yesterday.

Why did I have to do all this?

Because while 10% of our population might be waiting to gather to celebrate the birth of the Christ child – for us, our God taking human form, the majority of the other 90% of our population were waiting for the next episode of Star Wars – The Force Awakens. The film opened around the world on 17 December. It has already broken several box office records in its opening weekend, making \$248 million in the US and \$529.00 million globally – the highest grossing worldwide opening for any film ever. It has opened to good reviews – see the headlines – “the fans will not be disappointed” – why? Because it has returned to the message and style of the first three Star Wars movies which began in 1977 nearly 40 years ago.

This was the DVD of the first 3 episodes which I watched this week. Here are my three Star Wars figures I bought from Woolworths last Monday.

Why the excitement about this film? Why the longing for it and the satisfaction from it?

Let me suggest the reason why. I dare to do this because for over 50 years my personal Yoda, the existential psychologist Dr Rollo May, has written about the need for the historical mythology of our western culture to be made known to our children, and to us, so that we can better understand why we behave the way we do.

I have read all his books except the last one published in 1991 when May was 82. Because May writes so well I cannot do other than to introduce you to my Yoda by letting him speak for himself in his forward to his book, *The Cry for Myth*. Then I will acquaint you with the reasons George Lucas has given for his creation of Star Wars. You will see the link between them.

In his forward Rollo May writes:

‘As a practicing psychoanalyst I find that contemporary therapy is almost entirely concerned, when all is surveyed, with the problems of the individual’s search for myths. The fact that Western society has all but lost its myths was the main reason for the birth and development of psychoanalysis in the first place. Freud and the divergent therapists made it clear that myths are the essential language in psychoanalysis.

The great interest in Joseph Campbell’s television talks on myth is the most obvious demonstration of the profound need throughout Western countries for myth. But whereas Campbell’s talks were almost exclusively about myths in India, Asia, China, and Asia Minor,

this book is about myths as they are immediately present in the consciousness and unconsciousness of contemporary living people in the West.

We are concerned here with narratives which come up continuously in contemporary psychotherapy. I speak of the *Cry* for myths because I believe there is an urgency in the need for myth in our day. Many of the problems of our society, including cults and drug addiction, can be traced to the lack of myths which will give us as individuals the inner security we need in order to live adequately in our day. The sharp increase in suicide among young people and the surprising increase in depression among people of all ages are due, as I show in this book, to the confusion and the unavailability of adequate myths in modern society. This book will appeal, I hope, to people in America and similar countries as part of our endeavour to bring the problem of myths into open consciousness and to show how myths can be rediscovered as tools for understanding ourselves.

This is especially urgent as we seek to give meaning to our lives – in our creativity, our loves, our challenges – since we stand on the threshold of a new century. The approach of a new period in history stimulates us to take stock of our past and to ask the question of the meaning we have made and are making in our lives. It is in that mood that I offer this book.'

Now to George Lucas, the creator of the first three Star Wars movies.

Perhaps his words will speak to all of us as we wonder and plan what we should do this coming year, 2016, as we continue on our journey in this world.

In an address to the National Arts Club in 1985, at which Joseph Campbell was awarded the Medal of Honour for Literature, George Lucas said:

'About ten years ago (when Lucas was about 30 years old) I set out to write a children's film, and I had an idea of doing a modern fairy tale. My friends all around said, "What are you doing? You're crazy. You have to do something important. You have to do something that is socially relevant. You have to do something that is art with a capital A. You have to do what we're doing." I had been working on a project about Vietnam (*Apocalypse Now*) and I had abandoned it – gave it to a friend of mine (Francis Coppola) and said I've got to do this children's film.

I didn't know what I was doing at the time. I started working, started doing research, started writing, and a year went by. I wrote many drafts of this work and then I stumbled across *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (written by Joseph Campbell) It was the first time that I really began to focus. Once I read that book I said to myself, "This is what I've been doing. This is it." I had been reading other doctors – Freudians, and also dealing with an ample supply of Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge, and all the other mythical heroes of our times, but *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* was the first time a book began to focus what I had already been doing intuitively. I began to see a a lot of parallels and began to become very fascinated with this whole process and as a result I picked up several other books, *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, *The Masks of God*, as I continued to write.

This whole process went on over a period of years. Then, as I say, I went around in circles for a long time trying to come up with stories, and the script rambled all over and ended up

with hundreds of pages. It was *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that just took what was about 500 pages and said, Here is the story. Here's the end; here's the focus; here's the way it's all laid out. It was all right there, and had been there for thousands and thousands of years, as Dr Campbell pointed out. And I said, "This is it." After reading more of Joe's books I began to understand how I could do this. When that happened to me I realised how important the contribution that Joe had made to me was. I had read these books and said, here is a lifetime of scholarship, a life of work that is distilled down into a few books that I can read in a few months that enable me to move forward with what I am trying to do and give me focus to my work. It was a great feat and very important. It's possible that if I had not run across him I would still be writing Star Wars today. I think you can say about some authors that their work is more important than them. But with Joe, as great as his works are, there is no doubt in my mind that the body of his work is not as great as the man. He is a really wonderful man and he has become my Yoda.'

And what does Joseph Campbell say of George Lucas in this book of dialogues?
(*The Hero's Journey – Joseph Campbell on his Life and Work*. Eds Phil Cousineau & Stuart L. Brown, 1990)

When speaking of our relationship with machines and linking it with Goethe's *Faust*, Campbell says:

'This statement of what the need and want is must come from you, not from the machine, and not from the government that's teaching you, or not even from the clergy. It has to come from one's own inside, and the minute you let that drop and take what the dictation of the time is instead of the dictation of your own eternity, you have capitulated to the devil. And you are in hell. That's what I think George Lucas brought forward. I admire what he's done immensely, immensely. That young man opened a vista and knew how to follow it and it was totally fresh. It seems to me that he carried that thing through very, very well.'

Now I can report that the new director of Star Wars VII has continued to carry 'that thing' through very, very well. There's lots of action, the sound is very loud, but there are also moments of deep quiet and caring. Now if that's what you are looking for, you will not be disappointed.

So what have the mainline Christian churches to learn from Star Wars? We will reflect on that next week. For now I would urge us all to not lose confidence in our own faith story which is about our hero, Jesus Christ, and his journey. Be assured that it is more grand and more wonderful, more full of heroic stories, more good and evil and the dark side, than anything we will see on the screen.

So for now, may the force, which is our God, be with you and me to empower us to live lives of meaning, adventure and love. Amen.