

Dante and the Hero's Quest for Healing

I want to talk about a very old kind of story. Or rather, I should say, the only kind of story – the hero's quest. Tonight we will discuss the hero's quest in ancient and modern literature using examples from mythology, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, and finally my own novel, *The End of Healing*. My lecture will consider how each of these stories—and for that matter every good story—involves a process of healing, both for the broken world in which the hero finds himself and for the hero personally. These stories all resonate for us because we all identify with the hero and we are all on a quest for healing.

By way of apology, first let me first make clear that throughout this lecture, despite my use of mostly masculine examples of heroes, I use the word hero without reference to gender. Although some hero archetypes are most commonly associated with male gender and some with female gender—the Oedipus complex has its corollary in the Electra complex—all of the hero archetypes we will discuss tonight can manifest in either gender.

Second, let me acknowledge that my observations today are derivative. I give thanks to my tutors of ancient and modern times who have authored me and my work. Among my authors I particularly give thanks to the departed St. John's College tutors Chaninah Maschler who gave me her love of biology and the old testament, Michael Littleton whose *Purgatorio* preceptorial I attended over 30 years ago, and Jacob Klein; to the very present Joe Sachs, whose *Don Quixote* preceptorial was one of the best of all time; to all my great tutors at St. John's College, especially Jon Tuck, Marilyn Higuera, John White, Peter Kalkavage, Elliott Zuckerman, Jon Lenkowski, Eva Brann, Ed Sparrow, and Winfree Smith; and to all the authors of the great books we will discuss tonight that still serve as some of our greatest guides through the world's darkness. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you about some of my favorite stories.

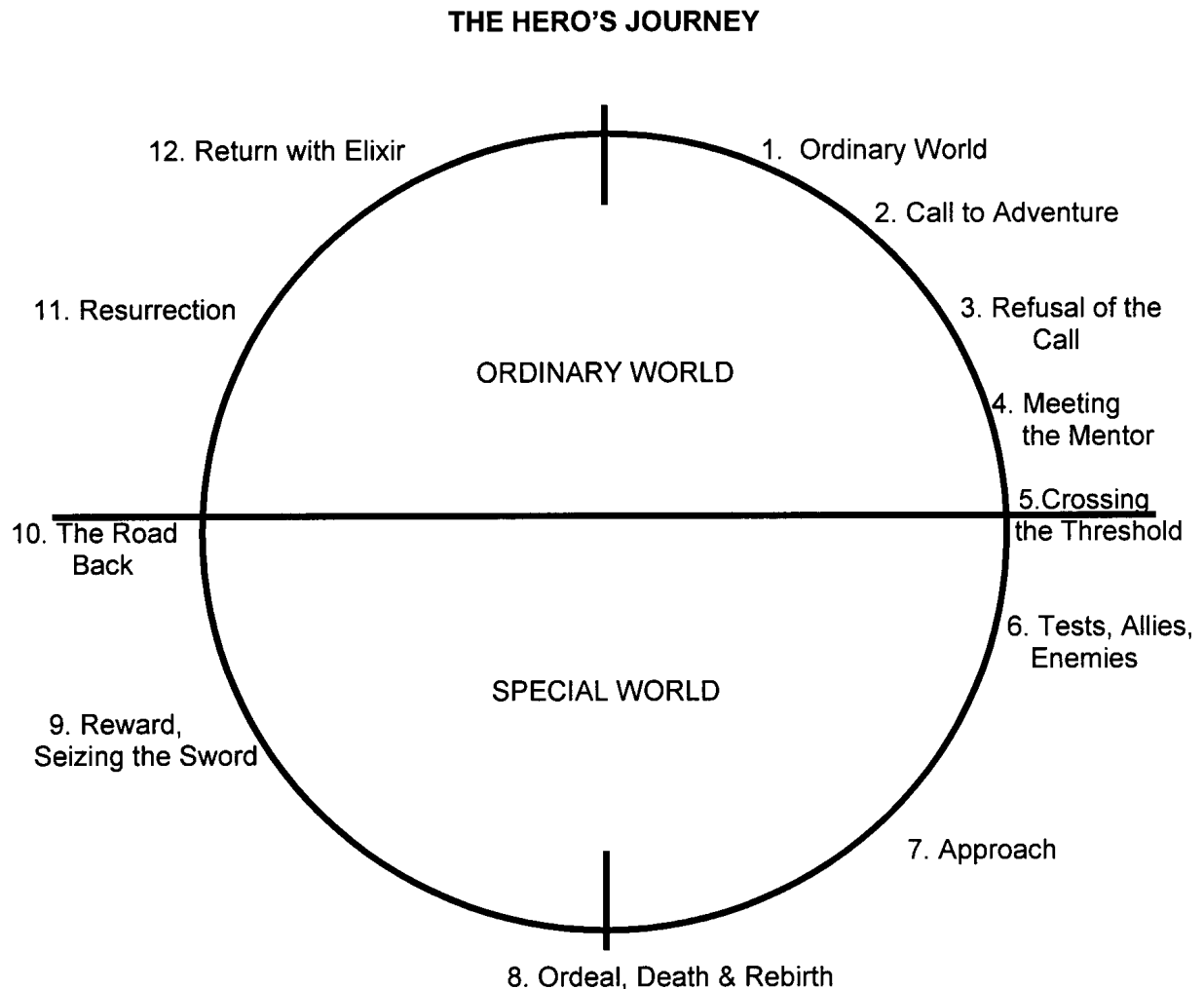
This lecture will have 4 main parts. First, I will give an overview of the framework for the archetypal hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and others. Second, I will apply that framework to Dante's *Commedia* to help us understand how the hero's journey involves a process of healing. Third, we will delve deeper into the past to examine some of the earlier hero myths that influenced Dante's work, focusing especially on the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, to see what these works tell us about the hero's healing journey. Lastly, we will move to the future to examine what all this has to do with health care and the quest for healing in today's world.

Part 1: The Hero's Journey

The ancient pattern of the hero's quest was well described by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1949.¹ He revealed that this ancient story pattern resonates because it draws on ancient unconscious archetypes described by Carl Jung and others. Campbell and Jung described how the outward journey of the hero reflects a parallel inner journey. In great stories, both the outward and inward journeys occur simultaneously and complement and reinforce one another. The diagram below

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Pantheon Books, 1949

provides an overview of the typical components and order of a hero's journey story. In a famous memo to executives at Walt Disney Pictures in 1985, Christopher Vogler described how this classical hero myth lies behind all great stories, screenplays and movies.



Christopher Vogler, http://www.thewritersjourney.com/hero's_journey.htm

By way of example, let's briefly consider one of my favorite woman-child heroes, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy begins her story in the ordinary world. She is called to adventure when Miss Gulch attempts to kidnap her beloved Toto. But when she meets Professor Marvel she begins to realize that the ordinary world may not be exactly as it appears. Even though Professor Marvel serves as a good mentor to Dorothy, in the beginning we are left to wonder whether he is a true healer, or is he, as she later claims, just "...a very bad man!" She attempts to refuse the call and run back to her Auntie Em's house in Kansas but ends up crossing the threshold into another world where she encounters difficult tests, discovers three wonderful allies, and faces dangerous enemies. Then Dorothy faces the seemingly impossible task of killing the Wicked Witch of the West. She and her friends approach the Witch's castle, the place they most dread, and she undergoes an agonizing ordeal in which she is captured and condemned to death, only to be saved in the very last instant before the hourglass runs out. She then seizes the sword,

or in this case a bucket of water, kills the witch and then begins on the road back to Kansas. When she finally reawakens there she has a new perspective and power that allows her to truly see and understand the ordinary world in a way she never could have imagined before.

That in a nutshell is a description of the hero's journey and it has been well described. What has been less well described is how this classic hero's myth always involves a process of healing or movement toward wholeness for both the hero and the broken world he inhabits. This is what we are going to talk about today, and we will use as our primary guide, Dante Alighieri, and his divine hero myth, *La Commedia*.

Part 2: *La Divina Commedia*

If hero journey stories are the stories that resonate most with humans, it goes to follow that these stories portray the most important spiritual steps for humans in their path to wholeness, in their work to grow. These stories teach us that the greatest growth for humans comes from discovering a healing path through agony and despair.

So it is fitting that Dante's comedy begins in a dark wood.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Inferno, I, 1-3

"In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost."

In the *Commedia*, we are not told how Dante became lost, yet every one of his readers in his time knew his story. Dante's early dream was to play a major role in the government of his city-state of Florence, at that time, perhaps the greatest republic in world. In fact, strong lines of evidence suggest that he became a physician and member of the "Arte dei medici e speziali" (The Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries) in Florence in 1296 because of Florentine law requiring enrollment in one of the guilds as a prerequisite for election to local government office. From Dante's early writings we know that he dreamed of helping to create in Florence a new Jerusalem. And in 1301, 700 years ago, his dream appeared to be realized. He was elected as one of the six magistrates, the highest office, of his beloved city of Florence. He had already served his fair city for some five years as a devoted statesman, and had finally reached what he thought was the pinnacle of his career. As a city magistrate he had the opportunity to make a real difference for good, to foster peace and justice, and support a Renaissance in Florence such as the world had never known. But he became embroiled in unforeseen political intrigue. After only a year as magistrate, he was exiled from his home, never to return again. At age 37, he suddenly found himself despised and homeless, notwithstanding his devotion to the city of Florence and his non-partisan efforts on its behalf. And that is where the *Divine Comedy* begins—in his unfathomable despair. His dark wood is the ordinary world and the entire *Commedia* is devoted to his finding his way out.

For that he requires a mentor and guide and everyone knows that Dante is led by Virgil, just as Virgil was guided by Homer; as Aeneas was guided by Venus the goddess of love; as Homer's Odysseus was guided by Pallas Athena. When Virgil first introduces himself to Dante he immediately challenges him with a call to adventure.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quell giusto
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.
Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?

Inferno, I, 73-76

He says: "Poet I was, and I sang of the just son of Anchises that came from Troy, after proud Ilium was burnt to the ground. But why are you turning back to all that misery [or boredom]?" Virgil appears, as all mentors do, in just the right moment to guide Dante not back into the misery, the "dark wood," of the ordinary world, but rather to guide him into an extraordinary world of forms and meaning that undergird and ultimately can help restore the ordinary world. Dante is overwhelmed by this meeting, and responds:

O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
Vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
Che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,

Inferno, I, 82-85

"O of the other poets our honor and light, value my long study and the great love that has made me search your volume. You are my teacher and my author." Regarding the meeting of Dante with the author of *The Aeneid* let me state the obvious. The reason that Virgil is able to serve as Dante's guide is because he has been there before. Virgil has seen and understands every type of sin or misstep that Dante will encounter in the *Inferno*. For he has taken his Aeneas there before and provides the description of the underworld that is the foundation of Dante the author's description. Furthermore, Dante recognizes Virgil as his author—that Virgil made him what he is. Dante recognizes that his love of Virgil's work has also made him an author and has prepared him to tell his own story. And Dante's protagonist must be guided by Virgil because Virgil's *Aeneid* was Dante's guide to the underworld. What Dante has come to understand about the underworld, has largely come through Virgil's instruction.

Still, Dante must screw up his courage when it is his turn to crossing the threshold into hell. This most famous of all cantos begins with the famous words:

"Per me si va ne la città dolente,
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.
Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;
fecemi la divina podestate,
la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
se non etterne, e io eterno duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate."

THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE, THROUGH ME THE WAY TO EVERLASTING PAIN, THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST. JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH. DIVINE POWER MADE ME, WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE. BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL, AND ETERNAL I ENDURE. ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

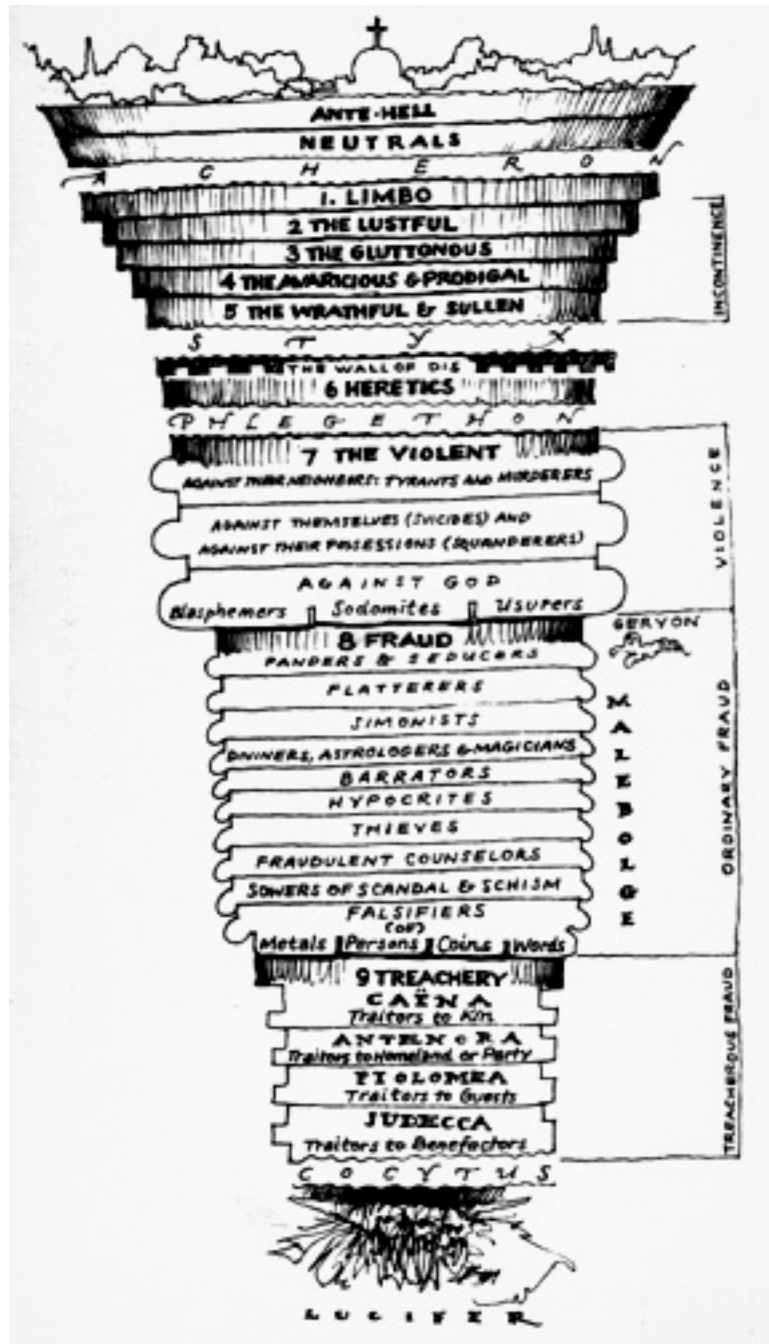
Inferno, 3, 1-9

These are the horrifying words Dante sees inscribed over the entrance to hell. Of note, he is one of the few, including Jesus of Nazareth whose hero myth is well known to all, who is able to pass through this gate without abandoning all hope.

After passing through the gates of hell, Dante's instruction begins in earnest. He explores every inch of the nine levels of hell that Virgil describes only in passing in his *Aeneid*. In Dante's hell, just as in Virgil's Tartarus, every punishment is perfectly suited to the crime. For Dante, exploring the levels of hell involves a process of diagnosis. He is able to fully understand the reasons for the brokenness of the world by uncovering the sources of human suffering and understanding the nature and types of human missteps, or sins, that have led to this brokenness.

As shown in the schematic of Dante's hell by Mandelbaum below, he places mistakes of over-indulgence at the highest levels, errors of violence in the middle, and fraud in the bottom. Dante saw the misuse of the intellect or the mind to deceive others as the very worst kind of human error. At the bottom of his hell he places treachery—first treason against family, then country, and last of all treason against our natural lord and master, against God.

In Dante's *Inferno* all the types of human missteps are catalogued—every single one. His catalogue of sin is comprehensive. Every type of mistake or temptation is considered, so at some level, there is no completely new story that can be told after the *Commedia*. Every story deals with one or another of these human mistakes or near mistakes. For Dante, encountering each type of mistake and seeing its consequence is a harsh and bitter reminder of his own missteps and the consequences of those missteps for others. So, his descent is an ever worsening trial of pain and suffering as Dante discovers the consequences of misguided action in the afterlife. Like much of the first half of the *Odyssey* and of the *Aeneid*, much of the *Inferno* is filled with the protagonist's tears and internal suffering. For Dante, this process is one of diagnosis (understanding the condition) that is his first step toward healing. Let me also note, that after his exile from his beloved homeland, it does his heart good to see many of his worst enemies in life, finally paying for their crimes. For him, seeing justice done in the afterlife begins the process of healing.



Mandelbaum Diagram of the *Inferno*²

Dante's rebirth occurs when he passes through the very bottom of hell, the poles of the world are reversed, and Dante thinks "they are heading back to hell" (*Inferno* 34, 81). It is only then that he and his beloved guide Virgil are able to "ascend...to see again the stars" (*Inferno* 34, 136-139).

² From THE DIVINE COMEDY OF DANTE ALIGHIERI: INFERNO by Allen Mandelbaum, , Illustration by Barry Moser, copyright © 1980 by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

So you notice that Dante in the *Inferno* has not yet “seized the sword.” Indeed, he has only barely passed through his own rebirth when the first story ends. Of course the story does not end here. Dante’s healing is just begun. When *Purgatorio* begins diagnosis is no longer the focus, but rather purification.

Once hell is abandoned, the *Purgatorio* lays out the disciplined path that Dante suggests that our souls require for healing. As Dante and Virgil climb the mountain of purgatory, Dante learns how practice of good habits can lead to virtue and health. On each level of purgatory the same errors encountered in hell are met one by one. The only difference is that the people in purgatory work to overcome them. In purgatory, Dante is to undergo a stepwise process of purification and rebirth when he arrives at the top of mount purgatory in the earthly paradise or Eden. Near the bottom of purgatory, seven “P”s are traced on Dante’s forehead, standing for the deadly peccata [sins] that weigh him down and keep him from paradise. As Dante struggles up the mountain, the marks are cleansed from his forehead one by one. The following texts from the *Purgatorio* describe this cleansing process as a kind of healing.

“Seek only that the five wounds healed
by being painful soon may be closed up,
as the other two already are.” (XV, 79-81)

“But, to soothe you and to grant your wish,
here is Statius. I call on him, I beg him,
to be the healer of your wounds.” (XXV, 28-30)

“With such treatment and with just such diet
must the last of all the wounds be healed.” (XXV, 138-139)

“Keep your munificence alive in me, so that
my soul, which you have healed,
may please you when it leaves its mortal frame.” (XXXI, 88-90)

As a result of this process of being freed from the burden of these wounds, Dante “feels so light as to be able to soar into the heavens.” In his last words of the *Purgatorio* he exclaims:

“I came forth...renovated,
even as new trees renewed with new foliage,
pure and ready to rise to the stars.” (XXXIII, 143-145)

Dante’s conclusion to the *Purgatorio* reminds us that the ancient Greek word “phusis”, from which the word physician is derived, means growth. The true physician is the one who stimulates growth. And in purgatory growth is stimulated through the practice of healthy habits, confronting and overcoming the temptations and errors of our lives. It seems natural to ask at this point whether Dante’s poetry doesn’t stimulate growth in precisely the way of a good physician. Surely this is Dante’s aim.

Part 3: Resonance of the *Inferno* with earlier hero stories

Let me now turn to the earlier hero myths that influenced Dante's work, focusing especially on the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, to see what these works tell us about the hero's healing journey. These hero stories particularly resonate with Dante and show some of the many ways to tell the story of the hero's quest. *The Aeneid* is an homage to the *Odyssey* as *La Commedia* is an homage to *The Aeneid*. Both stories feature a journey to the underworld in their centers and each hero has a sibyl guide, and in the underworld each hero seeks to come to terms with their past and gain vision of their path into the future. As it is for Dante in the *Commedia*, rebirth and enlightenment occur for both Odysseus and Aeneas in the underworld, in the most desperate place of all. Healing occurs through their contact with the hidden Cthonic underworld, and both involve a seer, Sibyl, oracle helper, who serves as a guide to the navel of the world, the place of their rebirth. For both Odysseus and Aeneas, like Dante, the ordinary world is a broken world from which they would prefer to hide and escape.

Both Odysseus and Aeneas seek to escape their broken world, Odysseus with the divine Kalypso, and Aeneas with his beloved Dido, but both find themselves unable to forget their past and fated future. Like the Athenians in the time of Theseus who didn't want to admit that it was wrong for their children to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, none of our heroes want to face the horror embedded in the ordinary world, but they are compelled to do so. All of three of these hero myths involve reluctant heroes who are forced to confront the pain in their ordinary world. Dante is accused of graft and exiled from his beloved world of Florence forever. Odysseus, the wounded warrior, must confront and recover from the horrors of war and his guilt over abandoning his family and losing all of his crew one by one. Aeneas' ordinary world is burnt to the ground and destroyed forever. So we can rightly wonder on this day of 9–11 as we ponder the place where the twin towers once stood. How can such wastelands provide grounds for healing and lead to rebirth?

Dante clearly has more regard for pious Aeneas, led by the goddess of love Venus who serves as his mentor, than he has for Odysseus, whom he punishes as a smooth-tongued false counselor or rhetorician in the realm of fraud. Yet even though Virgil's *Aeneid* is more directly related to Dante's story, please give me leave to reverse courses and turn to the older story of Odysseus first, as it will help us better interpret *The Aeneid*.

Odysseus' homecoming story begins not with Odysseus—we are only told that he is stranded on Kalypso's isle, despondent, unfit, and without hope of ever returning home again. The *Odyssey* begins with Athena's plan to save him, and the call to adventure of his son Telemachus. Athena recognizes Odysseus' critical need for his family to help him achieve his homecoming. And it is Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom who serves as Odysseus' mentor. For the first four books of the *Odyssey* Odysseus himself is strangely absent. Instead we are occupied with Athena disguising herself as Odysseus' wise old friend Mentor and the early books primarily deal with her serving as a guide and mentor to his son, not to Odysseus himself. Meanwhile Odysseus' ordinary world is living with the immortal Kalypso in indolence and pleasure. And yet we learn that he spends most of his days in mourning, homesickness, and grief. His world on a fantasy island with Kalypso is a perfect world, but it is a world he cannot accept.

Finally in Book V, Odysseus leaves the island of Kalypso where he has lived 8 years in the company of the immortal goddess. After 18 days at sea on his raft he is finally within sight of Phaiákian land. But Poseidon conjurs a storm that completely destroys his raft. The storm strips him of his clothes and for two days and nights he is cast about the sea holding on to the single beam remaining from his raft. On the dawn of the third day the sea calms and he swims for the shore. With the help of the gods avoids the crashing breakers of the rocky coast of the island of Skeria and finds a river inlet where he can make his way ashore. He drags himself between twin bushes of olive from one stem—one wild and one cultivated—where he falls into an exhausted sleep. As Kathryn Davis notes,³ the twin olive bush has two meanings. First, it serves as a sign of Athena, evoking the myth that she brought the cultivated olive to Greece but that it had to be grafted onto wild stock to thrive. Second, the olive prefigures Odysseus' homecoming (for both him and us) and it allows him the opportunity to remake his olive tree bed as part of his work of recovery.

The next day, the naked Odysseus is discovered by the king's daughter Nausikaa who has gone to the river with her handmaids to wash clothes. There on the shore, Odysseus appears reborn like a naked babe and he is clothed and fed and brought back to the Phaiákian king and queen. Thus, within the first story of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus experiences his rebirth on the shores of the land of the Phaiákians. But closer reading suggests that his death and rebirth begin, are centered on, and derive from his experience in the underworld.

Odysseus' journey to the underworld is told as a story within a story, in his Homeric telling of his own story to the Phaiákian people. He tells the story of his death soon after his rebirth on the beach, after he has barely survived another near death experience, his near drowning on his desperate attempt to return home. With the Phaiákian's he becomes a storyteller and his healing, recovery, growth (Gr. *Phusis*) rapidly progresses. The middle half of the *Odyssey* consists not of an impartial story of Odysseus' return, but rather of Odysseus' telling of his own story. Odysseus –must tell his story to heal. This is reminiscent of the primary healing modality employed by the wounded warrior's project for American soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) returning from the Middle East. For those who can heal, sharing their story is a key part of healing for those returning home from the horrors of war. Odysseus is able to return to the ordinary world by helping to change it, by sharing his accumulated wisdom, by telling his story. The reader has to wonder, along with the king and queen, whether or not he is a reliable historian, or whether he is simply pitching the story for his own gain. Regardless, there can be no doubt that it is in telling his story that Odysseus begins to regain his health.

Within this story within the story of the *Odyssey*, in the very center and crux of the poem, his death and the beginning of his rebirth is revealed. His journey to the underworld occurs some 10 years after Odysseus has left home, when he is most desperate to return. The witch-healer or goddess φαρμακεία (Gr.) Kirke finally gives him leave, but informs him that

³ Kathryn Davis, The Olive Tree and "the idea of order" in the *Odyssey*, Accessed July 8, 2015 at <http://www.udallas.edu/documents/pdf/braniff/kathryndavis.pdf>.

he first must perform one more task. Here is their conversation, as related by Odysseus, when he begs to leave and receives the darkest news imaginable:

“Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
you shall not stay here longer in my house against your will;
but home you may not go
unless you take a strange way round and come
to the cold bones of Death and pale Persephone.
You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade
of blind Teiresias of Thebes, forever
charged with reason even among the dead...”

At this I felt a weight like a stone within me,
and moaning, pressed my length against the bed,
with no desire to see the daylight more.
But when I had wept and tossed and had my fill
of despair, at last I answered her:
“Kirke, who pilots me on this journey?
No man has ever sailed to the land of Death.”

Odyssey, Book X

Her answer is that the spirit of Teiresias will be his guide. And thus, following Kirke's instructions he is met by Teiresias in Hades who gives him a dark prophecy regarding his most difficult return. Odysseus is told that “anguish lies ahead” and that he can only hope for a rapid return through “denial of yourself, restraint of shipmates.” And of course in this latter goal we know that Odysseus fails and as prophesied all his shipmates are then lost.

Then in the depths of Hades Odysseus sees his mother who has died in his absence. She asks him painful questions about his absence and all that he has left behind, and then finally she tells him the cause of her own death while he was gone:

“So I too pined away, so doom befell me,...
not that illness overtook me—no true illness
wasting the body to undo the spirit;
only my loneliness for you, Odysseus,
for your kind heart and counsel, gentle Odysseus,
took my life away.”

This is when he seeks to embrace her, three times, and is unable, her shadow sifting through his hands. Not only is he responsible for her death, she evokes a past that he can never recover. And at this point he doubts that he can ever recover his past kindness and gentleness that only his mother seems to remember. This recognition of the depth of his loss is both his greatest point of pain and the true beginning of his rebirth and his process of healing.

Let me now turn briefly to Aeneas. As we discussed, Aeneas' mentor is Venus, the goddess of love, and he also has a very similar excursion into the underworld in the very center of *The Aeneid*. Similarly, this journey to the underworld serves as perhaps the most moving part of his story. Like Odysseus, he is similarly guided by a seer, the Cumaean Sibyl.

In Hades Aeneas also seeks to embrace his ancestor three times, but in this case it is his father, Anchises that he seeks to embrace. As Jacob Klein notes, the story runs both reverse and inverse—father, not mother, guided by love, not wisdom—yet still it is at heart a hero's quest, and follows the basic pattern we previously described. Here Virgil describes their emotional meeting:

“And have you come at last, and has the pious
love that your father waited for defeated
the difficulty of the journey? Son,
can I look at your face, hear, and return
familiar accents?...”

Then he: “My father, it was your sad image,
so often come, that urged me to these thresholds.
My ships are moored on the Tyrrhenian.
O father, let me hold your right hand fast,
do not withdraw from my embrace.” His face
was wet with weeping as he spoke. Three times
he tried to throw his arms around Anchises’
neck; and three times the Shade escaped from that
vain clasp—like light winds, or most like swift dreams.

The Aeneid, Book VI, 908-927

He similarly has to let go of his past, and toward that end, his father shows him not the heroes of the past in Hades, but rather his hero warrior descendants of the future who will found the city of Rome. With this bright but difficult future in mind, Aeneas leaves Hades with a new hope for a path to a better future. And many of you will remember, after seeing this vision of the future, he and the Sibyl pass through the polished ivory gate of Sleep which Virgil calls the “way the Spirits send false dreams”—the same gate of “dreams of glimmering illusion, [and] fantasies” (Odyssey, Book 19, 532-533) from which Penelope suspected her dream of Odysseus’ return most likely came. Virgil leaves all to wonder whether Aeneas’ hope for a great and just Rome is a false hope that will never come to pass.

As Jacob Klein the late Annapolis tutor and Dean so elegantly has shown in his essay “The Myth of Virgil’s *Aeneid*,⁴ Virgil’s story of Aeneas is a retelling of *The Odyssey*, written as the reverse and inverse of Homer’s story of Odysseus. *The Aeneid* mirrors *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* together, told in reverse. Like *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid* is a homecoming/recovery story, but it ends with the wrath of Aeneas just as *The Iliad* begins with the wrath of Achilles. As Jacob Klein points out, *The Aeneid* ends with a Trojan war raging in reverse

⁴ Jacob Klein, *The Myth of Virgil’s Aeneid*, from Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays, Ed. R Williamson and E. Zuckerman, St. John’s College Press, Annapolis, MD: 1985

order and “This time it will end with the victory of Aeneas, the new Hector, over Turnus, the new Achilles.” And after this victory there will be a final reconciliation between the Trojans and Latins and all the warring gods that represent them. Thus, *The Aeneid* ends with the dawn of a new golden age in which Rome is born and through war brings the dream of new golden age of peace. Aeneas story is a story of the recovery of Aeneas and the restoration of his world, of a better and just world, of Troy reborn as Rome.

Part 4: 9–11 and “The Waste Land” of modern healthcare

So what does all this have to do with healthcare and our modern quest for healing? Through these stories we have seen that the hero's quest always begins with the discovery by the hero that the world is upside down and needs to be restored.

So my novel, *The End of Healing*, begins with its protagonist, the young Dr. Don Newman, discovering himself in a very dark place. In the first part of our new millennium, precisely 700 years after Dante Alighieri painful awakening, Dr. Newman finds himself in a broken world. *The End of Healing* begins when Dr. Newman is awoken in the middle of a night on call to put an intravenous line in the neck of a dying woman who can't talk because a recent massive stroke from which she will never recover. He knows his patient doesn't want an intravenous line and that it won't really help her get better. Here is a bit of their encounter after Dr. Newman has prepped and draped Mrs. Bellamy before putting in the unwanted IV:

For a quiet moment she was just a neck. He numbed the skin with a bee sting of lidocaine, studied the anatomical landmarks to find the right spot, and stabbed her neck with the three-inch needle. She screamed beneath the drape. Dark blood shot from the hub of the hypodermic. He passed a long stiff wire through the needle into the jugular vein and deep into her body.

The pager started screeching again but he couldn't reach under his gown to turn it off. A voice in his head whispered the oath he had taken at the beginning and again at the end of medical school: *and at least I will do no harm*. Bullshit! Harm is my business. How could any good ever come out of what I'm doing here to Sibyl Bellamy?

His bloody gloved fingers worked to thread the Silastic tubing over the wire, through her soft skin, and down to the first chamber of her heart. Sibyl Bellamy began to whimper.

Out of nowhere, water filled his eyes and blurred his vision. What was this? It wasn't like him to become emotional while dealing with a patient, and he bristled with irritation at the sudden unprofessional display. He blinked hard, hoping the nurse didn't notice the single drop that spilled from the corner of his eye and trailed across his cheek and around his mouth to balance on the tip of his chin.

Mrs. Bellamy had once been a beautiful woman. Something about her reminded him of his own mother. Momma was gone now, and he had done nothing to help her, either. As he struggled to suture the line into place, the tear dropped off his chin. It landed on the sterile blue drape and spread into a dark circle over Sibyl Bellamy's heart.

The End of Healing, Chapter 1, *The Dark Ward*

A patient helps him to see to his horror that far from following his oath to “at least do no harm” that “harm has become his business.” This is a near universal experience among young would-be healers, that at some point early in their career they realize that they have entered a powerful industry that does not always place the interest of the patient first, and that they themselves have participated in the business of harm.

Then he meets his mentor, Dr. Gil Sampson, who encourages him to cross a threshold, to forsake plans for a lucrative career in cardiology, and instead embark on a dubious quest to “Follow the money” to better understand the true ends of the healthcare industry today. Dr. Sampson and Dr. Newman’s fellow students in his Oxford style graduate program in Health System change assist him in this quest and force him to see things he finds horrifying and which challenge his cherished identity as a healer. Soon after beginning his Ivy League graduate program he is sorely tested. On September 11, 2001 Don and his fellow students are sitting in their college’s coffee shop, a place that looks a lot like the St. John’s College coffee shop beneath McDowell Hall, when the planes hit:

Don had been drinking coffee in The Down Under, one eye on the morning news and the other on his seminar reading, when the television showed the first plane slamming into the side of the South Tower. He assumed the pilot had veered off course or had mechanical problems—a terrible freak accident—and went back to his reading.

Just after nine o’clock, a student in the coffee shop screamed, “Oh, my God!” The panic in her voice caused Don to look at the screen just as a second jet slammed into the North Tower. Boiling orange flames exploded from all four sides of several floors. Glittering glass and metal showered the streets below, and billowing black smoke poured out of the jagged, gaping holes in the gleaming towers.

Everything changed in that moment. The concern in the room turned to palpable fear and everyone was now riveted to the news. Some were crying; others were desperately dialing their cell phones....The South Tower crumbled first, just before ten o’clock. The giant building collapsed in slow motion. It started with a barely noticeable shudder and a slight sagging that warped the skyscraper’s straight lines. The people up on the roof hoping in vain for a helicopter rescue must have felt the steel beams give up beneath them as the floors began to collapse, accelerating to a machine gun staccato. Puffs of smoke shot out from between the floors with each percussion, and gray-brown clouds of dust began to rise and swell. The interminable fall ended with a huge belch as the floors slammed to the ground. The building exhaled its last breath—a thick, rolling cloud of dust and debris that advanced from the heap and engulfed everything in its path.

The fall of the North Tower thirty minutes later was predictable and right on time. In spite of that, a steady stream of fearless firemen filed into the building right up to the very end.

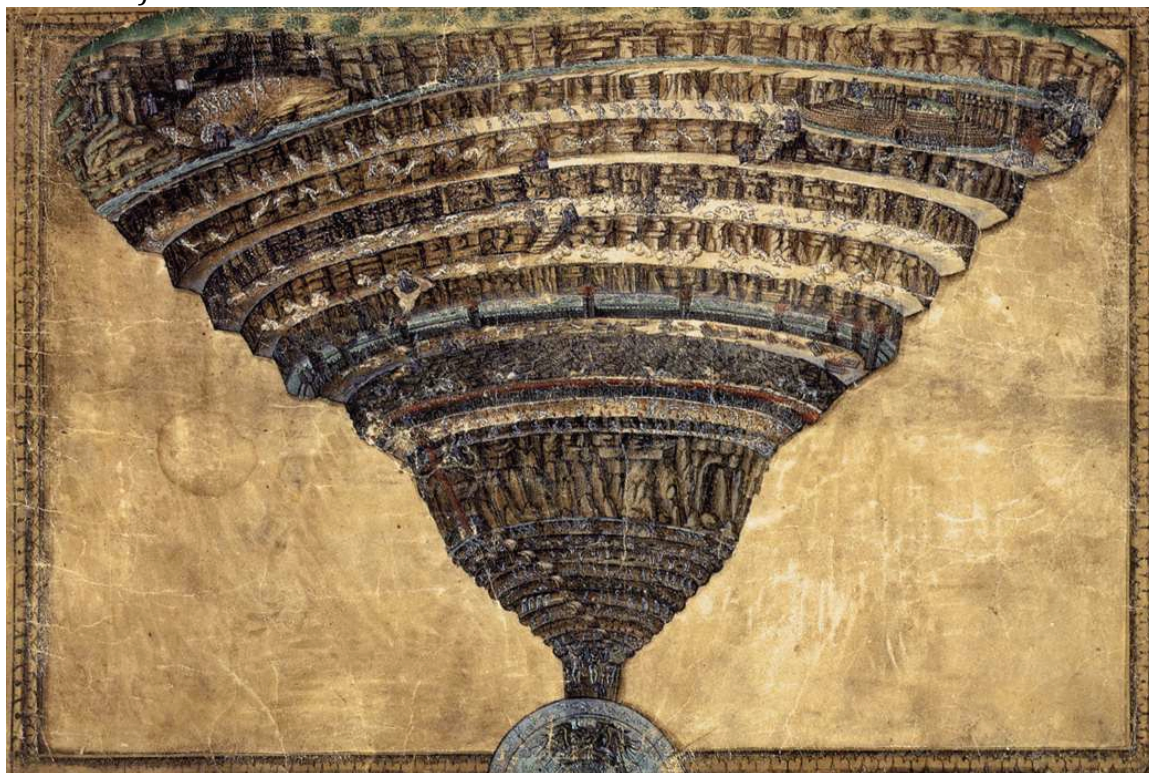
The End of Healing, Chapter 7, The Waste Land

He quickly discovers what anyone who has eyes to see, can see—that as horrible as the attack on the Twin Towers was—the world of modern healthcare is far worse. To his dismay he learns that over 100,000 Americans are killed by medical mistakes in hospitals every year— the equivalent of a jumbo jet crashing every day! That makes healthcare far

and away the number one cause of accidental death in the U.S. And he discovers that healthcare providers generally get paid more when they make mistakes. That some 100 million people worldwide are killed, maimed, or seriously injured by medical mistakes every 10 years, more than have ever been killed in any war in the history of time in a similar period.

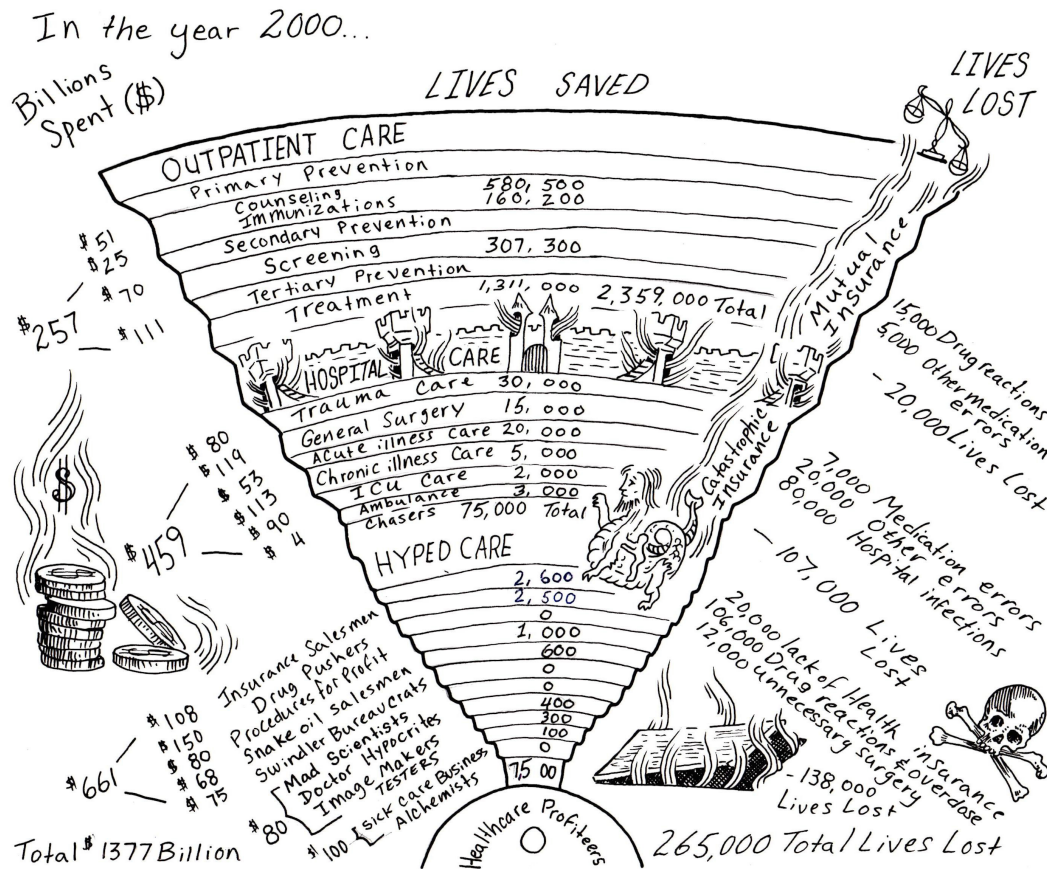
And as he “follows the money” with his professor’s guidance, he realizes that the costs of the American high-tech, hospital-focused healthcare approach are unsupportable. He sees that healthcare is already consuming 20% of the American economy and it is hungry for more. Even when the novel is set, in 2001, he sees that the average family of four is spending (or is having spent on their behalf) over \$20,000 per year and the average Medicare age family of two is spending over \$40,000 per year, amounts that most American families can ill afford. As he searches to understand how and why this untenable situation—this broken world—has developed, he discovers, beneath the surface of his ordinary medical world, a powerful healthcare industrial complex seemingly bent on trading people’s health for profit. Don and his fellow students begin a comprehensive investigation of each of the major healthcare industries and the organizations and individuals that collude with them in the quest for profit.

As young Dr. Newman struggles to find a framework to help him understand the broken world of modern healthcare he turns to Dante. As Virgil look to Homer and Dante looked to Virgil, so Dr. Newman looks to Dante for guidance. His Italian mother had introduced him to *La Divina Commedia* as a boy and he inherited her treasured antique copy. He turns to that book as a graduate student in his search for answers. And his inherited facsimile edition of the *Commedia* contains the earliest known illustrations of the Comedy drawn by the famous Renaissance artist Botticelli. Here is Botticelli’s depiction of the levels of Dante’s *Inferno*.



In *The End of Healing*, Dr. Newman discovers that Dante's representation of the moral organization of the universe is a perfect ethical framework for understanding modern medicine. In a flash of inspiration, Don realizes that the levels of healthcare hell he has been exploring with Dr. Sampson in their seminar correspond perfectly with the levels in Dante's *Inferno*. He discovers that for every ethical misstep, mistake, or error that Dante catalogued there is a corresponding mistake in modern healthcare. He discovers that the way humans can go wrong really have not changed that much in the last 700 years.

So like Dante, he begins to catalog the errors in modern healthcare and to use Botticelli's drawing as his guide. He realizes that these errors in health system organization have consequences in terms of money spent, lives saved, and lives lost and he begins to record these consequences in his own version of Botticelli's diagram in his journal. He works night after night reviewing the literature, calculating and filling in the money spent, lives saved and lives lost in every sector of the healthcare industry. And here is what he discovers.



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Diagram of Healthcare Hell⁵

⁵ From *The End of Healing* by Jim Bailey, Illustration by Joel Hilgenberg, copyright © 2014 by The Healthy City.

In his journey into the hell of the ordinary medical world Don discovers that the priorities of our healthcare system are completely upside down—and that this has horrible consequences for the people who depend on and need good health care for themselves and their families. In *The End of Healing*, Don and his colleagues see the victims of disorganized healthcare up close, they share the stories of the unnecessary suffering they have witnessed, and they understand the reasons for the diseases and premature deaths of these innocent people.

What Don discovers through his journey is that where Americans spend the most—on hyped care, procedures, and hospital care—they get the least, the fewest lives are saved, and the most lives are lost from medical errors, adverse events, and complications. And where Americans spend the least is where the true high-value care lies, care that has the potential to not only save far more lives but also to help bring abundant life to the people of America. This is the reality of modern medicine in the United States, where it is currently estimated that \$800 billion or one-third of the total \$2.4 trillion U.S. healthcare budget is wasted on potentially harmful activities activities that do little or nothing to promote health.^{6,7}

So tonight I have shared the beginning of the story of a new hero who perhaps can help us confront one of the greatest social ills of our time, the unconscionable waste of lives and resources on a broken healthcare system. Perhaps Dr. Don Newman's search, like Dante's, Aeneas', and Odysseus' before him can guide us to the nature of true healing and help us discover true healing for ourselves and our families.

His work and our work is simple—to reclaim and restore our upside-down healthcare system. All we have to do is to turn the system right-side up—right-side health care and reclaim the well. All that is required is to move the money from wasteful sectors and industries where it does harm to where it can do good through primary care and prevention. This task would be easy if only every bit of that waste were not someone's profit. So this process of transformation will require heroes.

Through Dr. Newman's story we learn that high-value health care starts with each of us and our values. Before we can hope to demand high-value health care we have to know what high-value health care is and how we can find it. We must ask ourselves what health care is truly most valuable and discern the answer. Through *The End of Healing* the reader can accompany Dr. Don Newman and participate in that process of painful discernment. That is the healing journey that young Dr. Don Newman bids us to join in—a quest to seek the path through our broken healthcare system to reclaim the well and the narrow path to true healing.

⁶ Orzag PR, Statement to the Committee on the Budget, U.S. House of Representatives, *Increasing the Value of Federal Spending on Health Care*, July 16, 2008. Available at: <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/41717>; Accessed 9/10/15.

⁷ Kelly R, Where can \$700 billion in waste be cut annually from the U.S. healthcare system? Thomson Reuters, October 2009, Available at: http://www.ncrponline.org/PDFs/2009/Thomson_Reuters_White_Paper_on_Healthcare_Waste.pdf; Accessed 9/10/15.

This call to adventure issued by *The End of Healing* is not unlike the call issued by Dante through his *Divine Comedy* to examine our ordinary world and reclaim it, or the call of Virgil through his *Aeneid* to look for and help build a true and just Pax Romana. Nor is it far from Homer's call to Odysseus to remember what is truly important and to strive for a new homecoming and restore his broken household. Let us look for Odysseus's reclaimed homeland, Aeneas' reborn Trojan empire, Dante's hoped for new Jerusalem, and accept the call to adventure to go with young Dr. Newman and find the path to the healthy city of our dreams. And perhaps in the process, like Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante before us, we can pass through the darkness and be reborn, reclaim the well, and resurrect our better selves.