

Commencement Address, St. Johnsbury Academy
By Michael Karlin

I would like to thank Sue and Jeff Dunn, Professor Lovett, and all of St. Johnsbury Academy for inviting me to speak today. It is a great honor and privilege to be here. My understanding is that there are approximately 250 graduating seniors here today, and my comments are addressed to you. The other 3,000 of you should feel free to listen in, but these comments are for the graduates who are about to head out onto the next chapter in their story. And it is stories that I have come here to speak with you about; my story, your story, stories that change the world, and if you remember nothing else from all that I say here today, remember this: every life is a story...*your* life is a story... and a story can change the world.

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about my story. I was born and grew up in a suburb of Washington, DC, and like most children, the whole world was my playground. I used my imagination to create dragons and knights, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, fairies and goblins. There was never a shortage of interesting playmates or enchanted worlds in which to live out my adventures. I was always in quest of some treasure or fleeing some bandits. As I grew, my daydreaming ways were not particularly in synch with the academic institutions that were charged with my education, and I must admit to you that I had a less than stellar academic career through high school. I won't share the specifics, lest I give you bad ideas, but suffice it to say that I was lucky to get into college...very lucky! The University of Georgia took pity on me.

But an interesting thing happened when I traveled down South. I crossed a threshold in my life, in my story. I suddenly realized an incredible thing: although I wouldn't have put it in these terms then, I realized that I could use the power of my imagination to do things in the world. But more on that later.

The first thing I did after my first semester was to transfer out of the business school to which I had been accepted and into the Liberal Arts school instead. I had only four years to soak up all that the academy could teach me about psychology, philosophy, religion, literature and art, and I decided not to use those years to focus solely on numbers. I knew one day I would have to make a living, but until that point came, I was going to learn as much as I could about the world and my place in it.

While I didn't realize it at the time I then started using my imagination to make me the hero of my own narrative, and try to fight the goblins that really exist in the world like intolerance and oppression, slay the dragons within myself like ego and selfishness.

I began to get involved in and create organizations to promote social justice. We fought for the rights of oppressed people in the world. I spent my Junior year traveling and studying through Europe, Israel, Palestine, and Russia. I still found time to attend lots of parties and meet the woman who is now my wife. Perhaps I left out sleep.

After four years, I graduated cum laude with a BA in Psychology, (quite a turnaround from high school) and was off on my next adventure. While my interests remained in liberal arts, I made the decision that I would venture into the business world to try and accumulate capital so I could build a family and return one day to pursue my real passions. I convinced myself that I would figure out a way within ten years to make enough money, so that I could focus on my spiritual and social path. Talk about using your imagination! Not the best advice to give or to follow, but it was my path, and I was going to stick with it.

After a short career in traditional banking, I founded a small commercial lending company with two friends and a corporate partner, and quickly began to be very successful. I thought I had found my treasure. I thought this revenue stream would go on in perpetuity. I thought my dream of finding financial security had been achieved. But I was wrong.

After a couple of very good years, the corporation that we were partnered with decided they wanted to change the deal on us. You see, we were doing too well, and they didn't think that was right. We were making too much money, so they decided to unilaterally change our deal. The very people I trusted and had done so much for, changed the deal and stole my dreams. It was unfathomable to me. I couldn't take it...I crashed. All of my dreams seemed to evaporate right there before my eyes. It had all seemed so perfect, and in an instant I found myself in my own personal Hell...in the abyss. It was the worst depression of my life. I was sad, confused, angry, and frustrated. I felt used and helpless. I thought I would never come out of it. It was a very dark time for me. I began looking for a way out. A new beginning. Something.

In the midst of all of this, a friend, mentor and partner of mine, asked me a magical question, "Have you ever heard of the Internet?" This was early 1992, and no one had heard of the Internet; not really. I told him that the word sounded familiar, but I was not really sure what it was. There was something in that question though that felt like a sign, a call. I told him that I would figure out what this Internet thing was and report back to him as to whether I thought there was anything to it. For some reason I felt driven by an intense passion. In one week, I read every article I could find about the Internet and all seven books that existed at the time about the subject (to put that in perspective, Amazon currently lists over 138,000 books about the Internet!). I came back to him after a week and told him that this thing was real, and that we should try and do something with banking over it.

Together our imaginations dreamed into existence Security First Network Bank, the first bank on the Internet, and S1 Corporation, a publicly traded company that provides Internet technology to financial institutions around the globe. And in 1999, the first stage of my dream was realized when I retired from S1, financially secure enough to pursue my long term dreams of helping to bring more creativity, passion, and empathy in the world. I left S1 in May of 1999...exactly 10 years after graduating from the University of Georgia.

I want to pause here and talk about stories; about seeing your life as a story. I want to focus on three elements of all stories that really matter: the call, the abyss, and threshold guardians. In his groundbreaking book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the wonderful mythologist Joseph Campbell explored the great stories of all time and from every culture. He identified the essential arc that all of these stories follow, the major steps that the hero or heroine takes through their adventure. His point was that these elements are not only consistent in the major stories that have shaped cultures from the dawn of time, but that these elements are also alive in each one of us. Every one of our lives is a story. And when I look back on my story that I just shared with you, I see these elements very clearly.

I will focus on just three in the short time we have together. First, the Call: every Hero has a call to adventure. These calls happen in many ways and at many times in every one of our lives. The key is being open to hearing them. Just as there is a standard motif in every story called the Call, there is also another, less common motif called the refusal of the Call. The refusal always leads to disaster.

Now, someone or something in the outside world initiates the call, but ultimately it comes from within. When I was asked if I had ever heard of the Internet, it was not the question that ignited my passion, but the deep feeling within me that welled up to accept this challenge. I saw it immediately as an opportunity to a new adventure. A way out of the abyss. This knowledge did not come from my head; it came from a deeper place within me. In fact, our heads are usually trying to convince us not to heed the call.

Next the Abyss: every hero must travel through the abyss in order to find his treasure or power, and remember, we are *all* heroes. Think about Jonah in the Whale, Jesus on the Cross, the wounded Grail King of the King Arthur legends, or Frodo heading into the fires of Mount Doom. While the travails of these great heroes were certainly greater than mine, I have gone down more than once in my life, and each time I have found that it is the deep ground of the abyss that had the power to launch me into the next great adventure of my life. Too often in our culture we are taught to avoid the low points at all costs. That everyone is happy, but me. That there is a formula for happiness, and if we haven't figured it out, we need to quickly "get with the program," and certainly not let on to anyone else that we are not happy, successful...perfect. This is why when you go on Amazon and search for "self help" you will find over 300,000 books in print to try and fix us. That is why we prescribe over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world's anti-depressants. We want everyone else to tell us the right answers, and if we can't figure it out, we want to numb the pain.

Well, when you study the stories, you see that every hero must go through the abyss, and in fact it is the abyss itself that unlocks our powers of creativity, love, and empathy. It takes courage to face the abyss, but it is the only way. Otherwise you will always stay on that side. The story will stall. There is a Native American saying :, as you go the way of life, you will come to a great chasm. Jump. It is not as far as you think.

You may never understand the abyss in your life but have courage. Know that there are no easy answers; there are only *your* answers.

In the Arthurian romance about the Holy Grail entitled, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, by an anonymous thirteenth century monk, there is a moment in the banquet hall where all of King Arthur's knights are assembled around the Roundtable before a great meal. In those days, King Arthur would not allow a banquet to commence unless a great adventure had occurred, so they were waiting for that day's

adventure, and all of a sudden the image of the Holy Grail appeared before them floating over the table. But, it did not appear to them in all of its glory. Instead, it was shrouded by a radiant cloth. The image disappeared as quickly as it had appeared and all of the knights were left completely and totally awestruck

Gawain, Arthur's nephew stood up and said, "I propose a vow to this company, that we should all go in quest of that Grail to behold it unveiled." So off they went in pursuit of this holiest of objects. And now comes the line that is the most remarkable. "They thought it would be a disgrace to go forth in a group. Each entered the Forest Adventurous at that point which he himself had chosen, where it was darkest and there was no way or path." What is the point of this line? This legend, and all great stories, is trying to teach us that there is no simple way to finding that which is holy within you. You cannot find your Grail by following someone else's path. Each human being is unique, and to follow someone else's path will only lead you to their bliss, not your own. That means, sooner or later you will face the abyss. If you know that, and go forward with courage and honesty, with your eyes open to correctly respond to the challenges before you, as with every hero adventure, you will emerge with the treasure that you needed the most.

The last element that I would like to share with you is that of the Threshold Guardian. As you go the way of life, you will constantly encounter threshold guardians. These are the hideous monsters and magicians that you think stand between you and success: your parents for example, or your siblings, your co-workers, your boss, and even your friends. But when you study stories and see yourself as the hero of your own story, you will see that with a little creativity, courage, and passion, these seemingly evil creatures are actually your teachers and guides. Instead of facing them in opposition, embrace them and stand up to their challenge. To illustrate this point, let me use a story that we all know, The Wizard of Oz. Towards the end, the wizard tells Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Lion that they have to travel into the castle of the Wicked Witch of the West and bring back her broomstick in order for him to grant them their wishes. Well this is classic mythology! The castle is the abyss; the source of all evil in the land. The witch is the threshold guardian, guarding the treasure that they have to retrieve to get their wishes fulfilled. These are classic images. Well, we all know that they successfully retrieve the broom, and kill the witch, but the remarkable thing is what happens when they arrive back at the Wizard. He tells them that that which they are seeking, they have already achieved! Through their

encounter with the Witch (the threshold guardian) the Scarecrow realized that he had a brain, the Tin Man a heart, the Lion courage, and Dorothy realized that there's no place like home. By traversing the abyss and encountering that which they thought was the source of all of their problems, they came to find that which they were hunting for all along. So, as you go about your adventure through life, and encounter people whom you think of as your enemy, please remember that story, and instead see them as your teachers, and ignite your creativity, courage, and passion to figure out what they are there to teach.

And to tie it back to my own story, there was a very significant threshold guardian in my life. I told you that a partner, mentor, and friend had asked me the magic question, "have you heard of the Internet?" Well that same person was the guy who unilaterally changed the deal on me that sent me into the abyss in the first place. So while I wanted to curse him and completely shut him out of my life, there was a grander plan in store. For if I had shut him out, instead of trying to see what he was there to teach me, I would not be standing in front of you today having successfully retired from business and founded the Mythic Imagination Institute, where I can now manifest so many of my original dreams, and I would not be able to be telling you through personal experience that Every Life is a Story, and that a Story Can Change the World.

And a story *can* change the world. When Abraham Lincoln met Harriett Beecher Stowe, the woman who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin, he said, "It is nice to finally meet the woman who wrote the book that started the Great War." Without her story, white America could not empathize with what it was like to be a slave, and it changed the world. Look at the stories of Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Francis Bacon, Buddha, Krishna, Durga, Mohammad, Jesus Christ, Abraham and Moses.

And I know you have. St. Johnsbury has equipped you with an incredible base of stories. Continue to study these stories, and incorporate them into your life. Joseph Campbell said it best in the introduction to a Hero With a Thousand Faces, "we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to

the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.”

I would like to end with a short poem. It is entitled, *When Death Comes*, by Mary Oliver. You may wonder why I am sharing a poem with you about death when you are just now embarking on your journey. I think it will be clear when you hear it.

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Every Life is a Story. *Your* life is a story, and a Story Can Change the World.

You've heard my story. Now...let the world hear yours. Thank you.

