

Return to Oz

a sermon by the Rev. Mark Worth, March 10, 2013

READINGS:

1. From Jean Houston, The Wizard of Us: Transformational Lessons From Oz, Atria Books, New York NY, 2012:

Compared to the hundreds of stories that Joseph Campbell studied in order to develop his structure for the Hero's Journey, the story of Dorothy and The Wizard of Oz is unique. ... Unlike tales of mighty men who began as reluctant heroes only to accept the call to adventure and then find themselves hacking through forests filled with Orcs and goblins to arrive atop a mountain of dead enemies, bloody swords drawn in triumph, Dorothy is a compassionate hero. While the male heroes who populate mythic tales from all times and lands take on the world and bend civilizations to do their bidding, Dorothy only wants to return home.

2. From L. Frank Baum, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, George M. Hill Co., Chicago, 1900:

"Who are you?"

"I am Oz, the Great and terrible," said the little man, in a trembling voice, "but please don't strike me – please don't – and I'll do anything you want me to."

Our friends looked at him in surprise and dismay. "I thought you were a great head," said Dorothy. "And I thought you were a lovely lady," said the Scarecrow. "And I thought Oz was a terrible beast," said the Tin Woodman. "And I thought Oz was a ball of fire," said the Lion.

"No, you are all wrong," said the little man, meekly. "I have been making believe."

"Making believe!" cried Dorothy. "Are you not a great Wizard?"

... "Not a bit of it, my dear; I'm just a common man."

"You're more than that," said the Scarecrow, in a grieved tone; "You're a humbug."

"Exactly so!" declared the little man, rubbing his hands together as if it pleased him, "I am a humbug."

... "I think you are a very bad man," said Dorothy.

"Oh, no, my dear; I'm really a very good man; but I'm a very bad Wizard, I must admit."

THE SERMON

A Walt Disney film, "Oz, The Great and Powerful," was set to go into North American release this weekend. It is an unofficial prequel to L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel. The new movie tells the story of how Oscar Diggs, a small-time circus magician, is swept up by a tornado in his hot-air balloon and lands in Oz. He thinks he has hit the jackpot, that fame and fortune are his for the taking, until he meets three witches, Theodora, Evanora, and Glinda. They are suspicious that he is not the great Wizard he claims to be, and he has to find out who is good and who is evil before it is too late.

L. Frank Baum's "Oz" books are now in the public domain, although the 1939 MGM film, "The Wizard of Oz," is still very much under copyright, and so Disney can't use certain elements from the film, such as the mole on the witch's face, the specific green shade of her makeup, or the "ruby slippers" that Dorothy wore in the movie. In the books she wore silver slippers, but silver didn't show up against the yellow brick road, so MGM changed them to ruby.

So let us return to the Land of Oz for a few minutes today. The 1939 movie, of course, is now the classic telling of the story. Although MGM had originally wanted 11-year-old Shirley Temple to play Dorothy, they were unable to get her – she was under contract to 20th Century Fox. When Deanna Durbin was also unavailable, MGM finally settled on the brilliant 16-year-old Judy Garland, who had originally been bypassed as being too old for the part.

Either Ed Winn or W.C. Fields was to be the Wizard, but Ed Wynn thought the part was too small, and W.C. Fields wanted too much money, so the part went to Frank Morgan, his most famous

role. Morgan didn't like the costume he was originally given, but found exactly the jacket he wanted in a pawn shop, and it turned out to have the name "L. Frank Baum" sewed inside – and so in the film, the Wizard is wearing the jacket of the author of the book!

Buddy Ebsen was cast as the Tin Woodman, but had a reaction to the aluminum powder in the makeup and had to be hospitalized. He was replaced by Jack Haley.

Burt Lahr was a wonderfully cowardly Lion, and Ray Bolger was perfect as the Scarecrow. Many years later Bolger was asked whether he got any residuals when the movie was shown on television, and he said, "No, just immortality, but I'll settle for that."

Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of the West, was badly burned during the filming of one of the scenes, and also had a reaction to her green makeup. But she was determined to not go the way of Buddy Ebsen, and she stuck it out. They went through seven directors – Victor Fleming got the credit, even though he left the project to do "Gone With the Wind."

The film gave us such lines as "Follow the yellow brick road," "I'll get you my pretty, and your little dog, too," "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" and "Toto, I have a feeling that we're not in Kansas anymore," phrases that don't appear in Baum's book. And "The Wizard of Oz," which is the most widely watched film of all time, also gave us wonderful songs like "We're Off to See the Wizard," "Ding, Dong, the Witch is Dead," "If I Only Had a Brain," and "Over the Rainbow." Because of the film's high cost and the lower ticket prices for children's films, "The Wizard of Oz" was not profitable until its re-release in the 1940's.

Dorothy and the Hero's Journey ~

But we love Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Munchkins, the Good Witch, and the whole land of Oz for more reasons than these. Muppet creator Jim Henson said that "The Wizard of Oz" was the very first film he ever saw, and it opened the way for him, and other film makers, to do entire movies set in a fantasy world.

Fantasy has a long and respected tradition. In the preface to one of his other books, The Magical Monarch of Mo, L. Frank Baum explained the world of fantasy. He wrote, "These stories are not true; they could not be true and be so marvelous."

Joseph Campbell, the great teacher of myths, helped us realize that while myths are not true in the literal sense, they can be true in other ways. A myth, he said, is not a lie. Rather, it is a classic story that tells us a truth about the human condition. Campbell described the classic myth as "the hero's journey." The hero's journey begins with a great summons that beckons the hero to leave old places and concepts behind, and journey forward into new ways of being. Most heroes, from Jonah, Moses and Odysseus, to Han Solo and Frodo Baggins, are reluctant

Once the hero accepts the call, he or she receives the special aid of magical allies who help the hero make important decisions along the path. Eventually the hero comes to the Guardian of the Threshold – think of your supervisor at work – the Guardian is often an unfriendly monster given to schedules, fixed habits, and attitudes cast in stone. The hero has to learn to think outside of the box, crossing into the world of adventure and leaving the known limits of his or her world behind.

Like these reluctant heroes, Dorothy is going about her normal life one day when she is thrust into a new and bewildering situation and is called on to face incredible challenges. Dorothy is unusual among these heroes because she is a girl. L. Frank Baum may have been influenced by his mother-in-law, Matilda Joselyn Gage, who was a prominent Suffragist. Baum himself was the secretary of a Women's Suffrage club in Aberdeen, South Dakota – and Susan B. Anthony stayed at Baum's house when she visited Aberdeen.

Compare Dorothy's journey to Jonah's journey. At the beginning of the biblical Book of Jonah, Jonah is running away from an unpleasant task assigned by God. In the Mediterranean Sea he is caught in a big storm, just as Dorothy is caught up in a tornado. It's just as strange to spend time in the belly of a fish as it is to visit the land of Oz. Eventually, Jonah continues his dangerous voyage to Ninevah,

and in the end, finds himself. This is the classic “hero’s journey.”

The hero’s journey is a journey that speaks to us because it is the kind of journey that we take as we live our lives. It is a journey both downward and inward, into the depths of the soul. The Wicked Witch and her flying monkey allies are our own inner fears and flaws. In the hero’s journey, we are searching for a way home – that place of security and centering.

Dorothy’s journey, the hero’s journey, is our journey, a gift of the unexpected. Jean Houston writes, “every step along the Yellow Brick Road is paved with Dorothy’s inner strength, spirit of love, and compassion for others. Unlike many male heroes who might chuckle in triumph ... Dorothy is horrified to discover that she has accidentally caused the witch’s demise [by dropping a house on her]. ... This idea of a heroine approaching the challenges of her journey in a different way from that of traditional male heroes is another reason why a closer examination of this particular story is so perfect for our present time and situation in history.”

Brains, hearts, courage ~

One of the lessons that Dorothy and her friends learn on their hero’s journey is that we already have the things that we seek. Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion travel to find the Wizard because they want, respectively, to find the way home, to receive a brain, to gain a heart, and to summon courage.

I could while away the hours
Conferrin’ with the flowers
Consultin’ with the rain.
And my head, I’d be scratchin’
While my thought were busy hatchin’
If I only had a brain.

Yet whenever a particularly difficult problem comes up, it is the Scarecrow who has the idea to solve it – and all through the journey the Lion is the valiant protector of the party. In the book, the Tin Woodsman weeps bitter tears when he accidentally steps on a beetle and kills it. His tears rust his jaw, and Dorothy has to oil his jaw so he can speak. Once he has a heart, he explains, he won’t have to be so careful, because his heart will tell him when he is doing wrong. The point is, of course, that all of them possess the very things they are searching for.

The Wizard, who admits to being a humbug, really understands the situation better than he seems to at first. Here I think the movie is superior to the book. In the book the Wizard sews bran and pins it in the Scarecrow’s head and tells him its brains. If any of the pins stick out he can be proud of how sharp he is.

But in the movie the Wizard says, “Anybody can have a brain. Back where I come from people go to the university and think deep thoughts. , and they haven’t got any more brains than you have. But they’ve got one thing you don’t have, a diploma.” So the Wizard issues the Scarecrow a diploma. The Scarecrow asks, “How can I ever thank you enough?” And the Wizard replies, “Well, you can’t.”

For the Cowardly Lion – who has actually shown courage throughout the story – the Wizard solves the problem by telling him, “Back where I come from we have men who are called heroes, and they have no more courage than you have. They have only one thing you haven’t got – a medal.” And he awards the Lion with an impressive looking medal.

For the Tin Woodman, “You want a heart. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable.” “But I still want one,” the Tin Man replied. “Back where I come from,” said the Wizard, “there are people who do nothing but good deeds. They are called phil-, fe-, phl-, good deed doers, and their hearts are no bigger than yours. But they have the one thing you haven’t, a testimonial. And remember my sentimental friend, that a heart is not judged by how much you love, but how much you are loved by others.”

The great Wizard is a common man, a humbug as we have said. And yet he demonstrates that he is not so common after all. He is a very good man, even if he is a very poor Wizard. In the end, when he stops trying to fool everyone, with a false front of bluster and disguise, he knows how to do the things that are necessary. We, too, can take down our defenses. Depak Chopra says that a Wizard exists in all of us. It is good to remember that each person possesses magic. Inside each of us there is a wizard and a humbug, yet at some point we learn that a common person can be a good enough person.

Even Dorothy knows how to get home – she has the power in her silver slippers (ruby slippers in the movie) to return any time she really wants to. She had been told that the slippers were magical, but didn't know what the power was. All she has to do is click her heels three times and say, "There's no place like home." The Good Witch tells her, "You always had the power to go back to Kansas, but you had to learn it for yourself."

As adults, we may have come to believe that we can never really go home again. Our parents have grown old or have died; the town has changed; the people who lived there are gone. But there is also a place where our memories remain and none of these things have changed. Home is a sense of belonging wherever you are, whoever you are with. Home is at the end of the hero's journey, the journey inward. When we feel connected to others, when we feel comfortable with ourselves, then we have found home.

When the Scarecrow asks, "What have you learned?" Dorothy says, "Well, that it wasn't enough just to want to go see Uncle Henry and Aunt Em; and that if I ever go looking for my heart's desire, I won't go further than home, because if it isn't there I haven't lost it to begin with."

Now, just click your heels three times and say, "There's no place like home."

Amen.