

The Lone Ranger Rides Again . . .

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A recent cover of Esquire magazine showed a powerful-looking man in two versions, standing next to himself. On the left, he was dressed in a white cowboy suit, with black boots, gun belt, eye-mask and ten-gallon hat: plainly that folk hero of my, and everybody else's childhood, the Lone Ranger. The incarnation on the right wore a white karate gi and a black belt. We were to see that the pop images of cowboy and martial arts expert derive from the same archetype, the same basic human possibility, manifested in two very different cultures. The comparison did not particularly impress me until I realized that the Lone Ranger is not just any horse-opera cowboy, but a figure with attributes so peculiar as to belong obviously to the realm of myth: a masked gunman, dressed all in black and white, riding a white horse and shooting only home-made silver bullets which disarm, but never kill; who fights always on the, side of justice yet conceals his identity and his face because of an incident in his youth; who has no home, no wife, no friend of his own kind, but wanders endlessly from place to place, getting in and out of trouble wherever he goes, accompanied only by his incorruptibly loyal Injun friend Tonto, (whose name means "stupid," as I learned much later when I took Spanish in high school).

Now, I'm not greatly edified by the proposition that the Kung Fu series on the TV screens of the seventies has the same role in mass culture that the Lone Ranger series had on the radio sets of the fifties. But I became fascinated by the idea that there is a deeper secret to the popularity of such programs than the power fantasies of the public. The highly specific and bizarre characteristics of the Lone Ranger suggest that we are dealing with an archetype – "the Wandering Warrior," as I will call it. As we review its characteristics and consider what they mean, we'll find a configuration that has kept significance for a long time, and through many incarnations.

The first noteworthy thing about the Wandering Warrior is his age. Distinguished from two better known archetypes, the Young Hero and the Old Wise Man, the Wandering Warrior is always portrayed in early middle age – in his late thirties or early forties, say. The Paladin TV series starring Richard Boone was a good example.

He typically carries a magic weapon, or has achieved almost supernatural skill with an ordinary weapon which is infallibly recalled along with his name. The Lone Ranger with his revolver and silver bullets echoes Robin Hood with his good English longbow, Sir Lancelot with his jousting spear, and even Odysseus with his goddess-inspired tongue.

Unlike the impulsive Young Hero who is also magically armed, the Wandering Warrior is surprisingly humane. Lancelot sends miscreant knights by the hundred back to Camelot on parole to beg mercy of the

king, but never kills anyone except by accident, and then he is bitterly sorry. I also don't remember that Robin Hood kills anything except the deer in Sherwood forest, after that first careless killing that made him an outlaw, though on one occasion he puts a broadcloth shaft into the bum of his arch-foe the Sheriff of Nottingham. Odysseus, the apparent exception, is an evenhanded killer who destroys his enemies without compunction or afterthought, though Homer stresses his gentleness as husband, father, commander, and friend. These warriors have human feelings.

Another attribute of the Wandering Warrior is a kind of wisdom. The connection of wisdom and war-like prowess in this character is especially interesting because these two virtues are not usually thought to go together – are mostly considered mutually exclusive. Warriors do not often live long enough to become wise, and sages are usually too preoccupied trying to see all sides of any given issue to collect sufficient energy or emotion to strike a blow on one side or the other. The Young Hero is an irrepressible man of action; the Old Wise Man is a far-seeing counsellor. They are often found in the same story – as in the legends of King Arthur (a young hero, at first), who has the magician Merlin around to provide job-training and give good advice at every turn, until a time comes when he really needs it. By contrast, Lancelot, the Wandering Warrior of the situation, is self-sufficient in this regard, combining prowess with considerable sensitivity and understanding. What he lacks is a reason for existence. He needs some other person to give him a cause to fight for.

Sometimes the Wandering Warrior's character traits are made explicit, as with Paladin, who managed to be endlessly amusing as the philosophical hired gun. More often, it is just obvious that this man has much more going for him than his qualities as a warrior. Perhaps the clearest example is the figure of Aragorn in Tolkien's epic trilogy: the dispossessed king, living off the land in a hostile, darkening world until his time comes. Or Odysseus, another dispossessed king, depicted as a lore-master second to none in his prowess, his humanity, his dedication, his grip on what is happening around him.

Yet Aragorn is still not the same kind of liberated spirit as Gandalf Grayhame the Old Wise Man, to whom he always gives way in council. The former has too much karma to live down, too much burden from the past to be a complete master. He has a kingdom to regain, while Gandalf, having nothing personal to win or lose, is only busying himself against the peril of others.

This brings us to the core of the myth. The Wandering Warrior is a man with a *dark past*, that forces him to travel and fight under a *secret identity*. These grizzled warriors were young once. There was a time when they had homes and families like everyone else. Then they did something or something happened to them to start them on their wanderings and cause them to become anonymous. Robin Hood kills a game warden in a burst of adolescent rage. Lancelot lets himself be

tricked into the bed of the Lady Elaine. Odysseus goes off to the wars, against his better judgement. In the usual pattern, the hero has committed a crime or a sin or at least a mistake, but American heroes in the days of the Lone Ranger had to be goody-goody, although now it is different. The Lone Ranger had no hidden flaw, only the misfortune of being the sole survivor of a treacherous ambush. That was Dark Past enough. It committed him to drop everything else, put on a mask, and set off on an endless manhunt.

Why the Secret Identity? Whether the Wandering Warrior actually wears a mask like the Lone Ranger, or assumes a false coat of arms as does Sir Lancelot, or goes by a false name like Athos in *The Three Musketeers*, or under a nickname - Robin Hood, Strider, or Odysseus' mocking "Noman," the meaning is always the same: this man has acquired his power at the price of suppressing his true self, and the shadow of his past and the grief of it that turned him away from the normal concerns of youth, caused him to abandon his original personal and social identity, and set his feet to the solitary quest on which has found his strength, his will, and his knowledge of the hearts of men. Normal men, strong as they may be, can never stand against his single-minded, devastating, clarity of purpose. As Lao Tzu said, "When two equally matched opponents meet on a battlefield, it is the man of sorrow who wins."

But the hidden suffering that made the Wandering Warrior great also diminished him: this hero is more, but also less, than human. In the myth, the mask or false name stand for that which has been lost – what ordinary men have that he has not to compensate them for their ordinariness. He has lost his roots, his ties to the society that bred him. Society enjoys the fruits of his heroism while he rides off into the sunset.

We can see now why the Wandering Warrior cannot be either young or old, but must be imagined in middle life – still in his prime, but already noticeably weather-beaten. Long fallen from the innocence of youth, he is not ready for the serene freedom which is the possible, though rare, compensation of old age. He is still searching, still working on his karma, still unready to leave it behind him. The Old Wise Man serves as the archetype of transcendence, the Young Hero is the archetype of recurring human promise and tragedy. But the Wandering Warrior is the archetype of existential struggle. His destiny, finally, is to Come Home. Unlike the Young Hero who must be tragically slain, the Wandering Warrior's myth has a happy ending. To return, to re-find the lost wife, the lost kingdom, the lost inner peace; to hang his weapons over the fireplace, till the land, sit by the hearth – that is how his story ends. Certainly, there is a last, greatest, battle to win before the sword goes up on the wall. The magical prowess the Warrior has spent his life to acquire is needed for the final reckoning. Nothing has been wasted. But the myth wants to tell us that the sword, which has become so much a part of him is finally only a tool, to be put aside when no longer needed. When his time of fulfilment

comes, the Wandering Warrior must be free enough to hang his weapon in the place of honour over the mantelpiece, and go unarmed on his own land.