

“To live only for some future goal is shallow. It’s the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top.” — Robert M. Pirsig,
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Essay by Mariia Lyamar

Among all the arts I know, love, and practice, storytelling stands alone — an essential force that shapes lives. Long before language emerged, people understood life through stories. From markings on cave walls to dancing around fires, they made sense of this vast, chaotic mystery — surviving, daring to explore. Stories became our way of grasping the world around us, our way of weaving meaning into the unknowable.

“Moral and political philosophy is a story, and this story is about you,” echoes Michael Sandel on repeat in my YouTube app. His lectures on *Justice* have been my steady companions since February 22, 2024.

By understanding and sharing stories, we don’t just describe the world; we create it. Some stories are so fundamental that they shape entire civilizations, embedding morals and frameworks that last for centuries. The *Bible* is one of these: written by unknown authors thousands of years ago, it has profoundly influenced global culture, law, and morality. Its stories explore fundamental human experiences — envy, sacrifice, forgiveness, redemption — forming a deep psychological map that continues to shape our understanding of right and wrong, justice and mercy.

The Bible inherited something far older — the monomyth, or the Hero’s Journey, as Joseph Campbell describes it. It’s a narrative pattern that transcends specific cultures and times, appearing in Greek tragedies, Mesopotamian epics, and countless other traditions. The arc is universal: a hero, answering a call to adventure, leaves behind the known and steps into unfamiliar realms, where they meet the deep and often difficult truths waiting there. The journey changes them; they return not simply to tell of what happened but carrying back something essential, a piece of hard-won wisdom meant for their community.

The ancient stories of *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* embody this journey. They explore questions that echo across generations — questions of purpose, fear, and self-discovery. These aren’t just tales of adventure; they are roadmaps for understanding resilience and transformation, showing us that the journey, like life itself, is as much about becoming as it is about arriving.

In many ways, Ukraine stands in the midst of its own hero’s journey — a national odyssey shaped by challenges that test the very foundations of its identity. The journey began long before this war, but the recent escalation has forced us to cross a threshold, one that few nations choose but many are thrust into.

Like the heroes of ancient myths, Ukraine finds itself in a realm that demands bravery, endurance, and a vision for the future, even as the path forward remains uncertain. The trials are relentless,

the sacrifices profound. Yet, through this shared struggle, we are uncovering new dimensions of ourselves and our nation — a deepening sense of unity, a redefined cultural identity, and a commitment to values we may not have fully realized before.

Yet, in every hero's journey, there lies a shadow — the risk of becoming what we set out to defeat. In the myths, this is the moment of greatest peril: when the hero, in confronting the dragon, feels the pull of the dragon's own darkness. For Ukraine, the fight for survival demands resilience, but it also carries the danger of internalizing the very forces we resist. The struggle to defend freedom, to protect one's land, can sometimes blur the boundaries, tempting us toward actions or attitudes that mirror the aggression we oppose.

As we face this threat, there's a danger that the pursuit of strength and resilience might harden into something more ruthless, a state of being where survival comes at the cost of compassion, where victory overshadows empathy. When a nation is forged in the fires of conflict, the lines between resilience and rigidity, between resolve and ruthlessness, can become painfully thin.

This dark side of the journey is one less spoken of, yet it may be the most crucial to confront. How do we fight without losing ourselves? How do we defend without allowing the dragon's fire to burn away our own humanity? And in the pursuit of strength, how do we keep from hardening into what we once resisted?

Walking through the streets of Kyiv, I notice fewer men; some have left to become heroes, while others leave their quiet stories on the walls: *"I avoided wandering the streets to keep from being drafted."* I hear politicians telling stories of liberal democratic values while barring men from leaving the country unless they are willing to become soldiers. I see stories of soldiers' bravery alongside the glaring incompetence and cruelty of certain commanders, extraordinary resilience in people yet an overwhelming reliance on international support, strength in individuals set against the state's shortcomings, cultural pride twisted with xenophobia, unity fractured by division — *some animals are more equal than others.*

It's strange how contradictions hold everything together, how the courage and chaos, the strength and weakness, all weave into something bigger than any single truth. For every act of heroism, there's an equal measure of loss; every moment of unity seems to carry its own cracks. But maybe this is how the journey has to be — unraveling in its own time, revealing pieces of meaning as we go.

Unlike the heroes of ancient stories, Ukraine's journey is still unfolding. There is no clear map, no guaranteed return to a "home" that remains untouched by the trials we face. And perhaps we don't need it untouched; perhaps that's what makes this moment so powerful. In the face of overwhelming adversity, we are defining what this journey will mean for generations to come. The hero's journey, after all, is not about victory — it's about transformation