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# The Hermeneutic Loop

## *The Existential Foundation of the Hero's Journey*

By Reg Harris

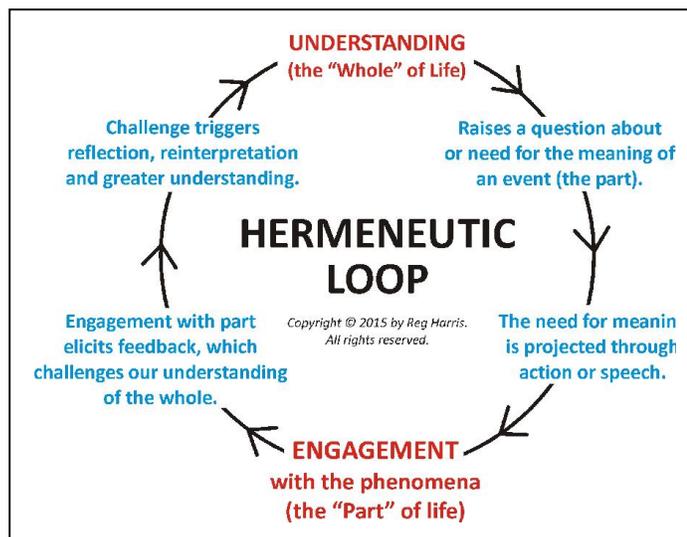
Hermeneutics is the art or theory of interpreting text and other communication. Its origins lie with the ancient Greeks for whom hermeneutics was not a systematic theory, but only a tool to aid with the interpretation of religious and mythological texts. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, hermeneutics developed into a formal discipline when scholars began to study ancient texts, including the Bible, with the intent of deriving the precise meaning of the original writer.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, hermeneutics had evolved into a philosophical discipline for exploring symbolic communication in general. Then, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the growing interest in human sciences, European philosophers expanded hermeneutic theory to explore the existential nature of human experience and existence itself. It's in this context, as an exploration of our experience of "being" in the world, that hermeneutics becomes important in our studies of the Hero's Journey.

### The Hermeneutic Loop

For insight into the Journey, the most interesting aspect of hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle or loop. The hermeneutic circle is the pattern that develops in the dialogue between us and our world: we can understand the whole of something only in terms of its parts and the parts only through their relationship to the whole. A change of understanding in one pole, the whole or parts, triggers a change in understanding at the other pole, forcing us into an interpretive (hermeneutic) loop.

For example, when we watch a good film we develop an understanding of the film based on our interpretation of its parts (plot, characters, conflict, etc.). Later, if we reflect on a specific part, we may realize that it has more meaning than we thought. This revised understanding of the part necessarily changes our under-



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standing of the whole film, which then throws into question our understanding of other parts. Suspecting greater meaning, we go back to the film to reinterpret those parts, which—of course—alters, yet again, our understanding of the whole.

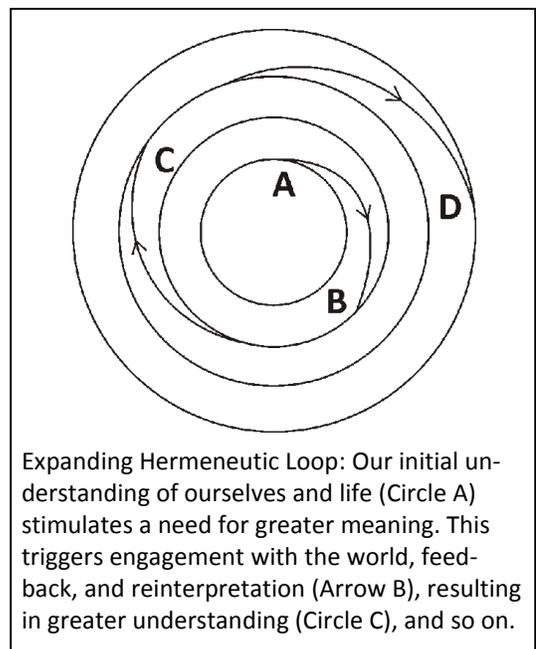
There is, however, a potential danger in this cycle. Because the meaning or interpretation we give to an experience—i.e., a text, a film or a life experience—is based on the presumptions we already have when we encounter the experience, those presumptions could restrict or even predetermine how we interpret or what we can discover from the new experience. Therein lies the danger: if we interpret new experience through the lens of old understandings, won't those old understandings simply shape our "new" interpretations to match what we already believe? Won't we be caught in a hermeneutic "loop," a closed circuit that prevents us from moving beyond our current horizons of understanding?

When I was teaching, our school required seniors to do a major "Senior Project" in which the students would explore some subject or question that was important in their lives. One student, a born-again Christian, decided that the guiding question for his project would be "Is Christianity the right religion for me?" To answer this question, he explored different aspects of his own church, consulted leaders from his own and other Christian churches, and read about Christian philosophy. Unsurprisingly, he concluded that Christianity was the right religion for him. His exploration of his subject had been based on and confined by his initial presumptions. As a result, those presumptions simply confirmed what he originally believed. He had trapped himself in a hermeneutic loop and, consequently, not answered his own question—he had not really grown.

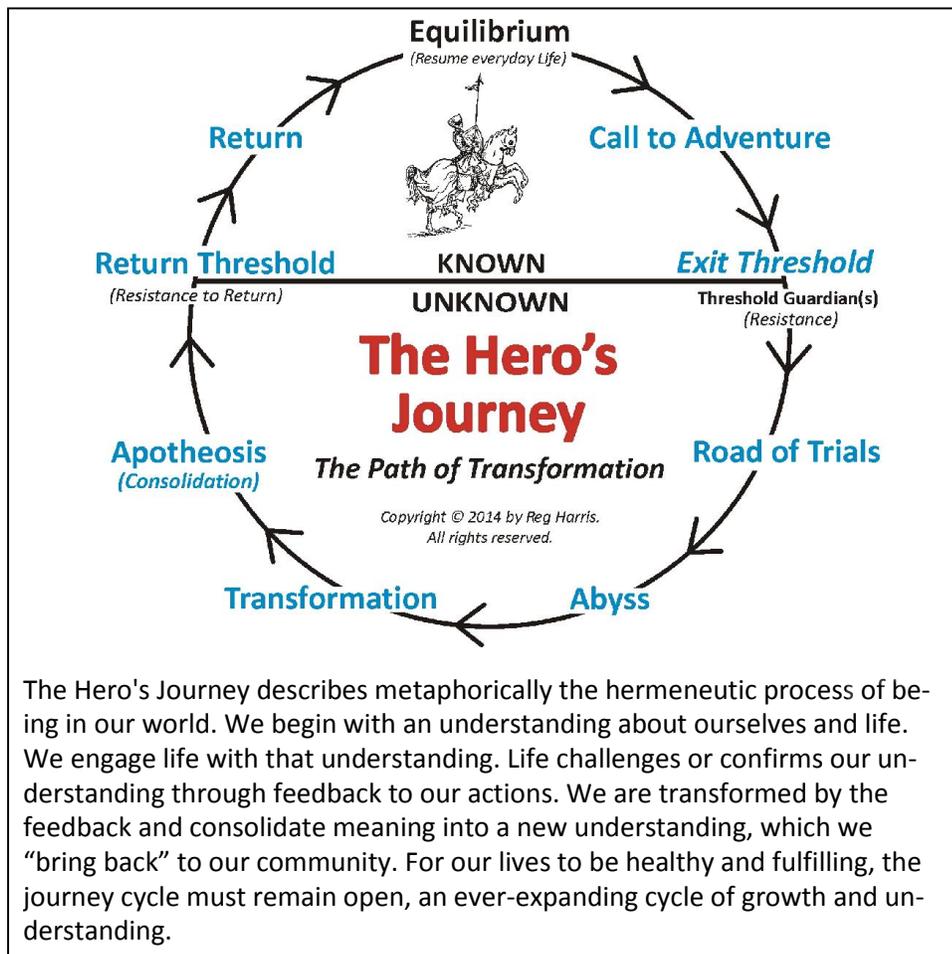
### Right understanding opens the loop

But we need not fall into this trap. German philosopher Martin Heidegger and others emphasized that the circle can remain open if we approach it with the right understanding. For Heidegger this understanding was based on how our search (for meaning) relates both to our past (specifically, the impact our history and our biases has on our present) and to our future, as we open ourselves to our potentials.

When we approach life and literature with the knowledge that we must make allowances for our past and our potentials in our interpretations, the hermeneutic "loop" becomes an outward spiraling of growth and adaptation. This spiral takes the shape of a dialogue between the parts and the whole that is the primary characteristic of the hermeneutic process: the parts shape the meaning of the whole and whole gives



Expanding Hermeneutic Loop: Our initial understanding of ourselves and life (Circle A) stimulates a need for greater meaning. This triggers engagement with the world, feedback, and reinterpretation (Arrow B), resulting in greater understanding (Circle C), and so on.



The Hero's Journey describes metaphorically the hermeneutic process of being in our world. We begin with an understanding about ourselves and life. We engage life with that understanding. Life challenges or confirms our understanding through feedback to our actions. We are transformed by the feedback and consolidate meaning into a new understanding, which we "bring back" to our community. For our lives to be healthy and fulfilling, the journey cycle must remain open, an ever-expanding cycle of growth and understanding.

meaning to the parts. As each element changes, pushing us to expand our conscious horizons, we grow as a person.

### Interpreting our lives: The Hero's Journey

In the same way, the story or narrative of our lives, if we interpret it openly and without fear, will lead us to both wider and deeper understandings of ourselves and our world. Each new cycle of understanding will broaden our horizons and disclose new potential ways of being in our lives.

The Hero's Journey describes, metaphorically, this growth cycle. Our initial understanding of life (the whole) is challenged and we are called to create new meaning. We engage in the journey where the ineffective elements of that understanding (the parts) are deconstructed. This leads to a revelation of new understanding, consolidation of meaning, and a return at a higher level of understanding or consciousness (a new whole).

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