

“But Maybe a Wolf Can”:
Balto & The Hero’s Journey

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Introduction

For the past five years, I have enjoyed using tarot and oracle cards to aid my spiritual growth and to do my “shadow work”. I have accumulated several really great decks of cards over the years. This year, I added Kim Krans’ *The Wild Unknown: Archetypes* deck to my collection. I enjoy studying various archetypes and am generally a big fan of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. Since I got the deck, I have been drawing a single card every few weeks or so and doing a deep dive into the archetype, going on a scavenger hunt of sorts, looking for all the different ways the archetype has shown itself to me recently, and writing miniature essays on various topics related to the archetype of study.

One day in early December 2024, I was thinking about one of my favorite movies from childhood: the 1995 animated film *Balto*. This movie is definitely on my list of top-five favorite movies of *all* time, and it was the movie that sparked my obsession with wolves.

I was also thinking about the archetypal symbology contained in the movie. I decided to use the *Archetypes* deck to inquire about the specific archetypal themes that run through the film, and I pulled the card titled *The Pilgrim*.

This is what Kim Krans writes about this archetype:

“For The Pilgrim, an outward journey is always an inward journey. This archetypal wanderer seeks wisdom, experience, and meaning in the farthest reaches of the globe and the deepest regions of the spirit. Others will wonder when The Pilgrim will settle down and claim a more conventional life, but The Pilgrim knows that the heart belongs in motion. Where there is motion, there is freedom, expansion, and growth. Responsibilities, social conventions, and logistics lull us to sleep, and soon The Pilgrim becomes veiled in the slumber of the day-to-day. Yet when this archetype awakens, it rallies our sense of adventure and leads us out the door toward a new reality. With The Pilgrim at your side you will never lack courage. Nor do you need every amenity. Travel light, travel soon... your spirit needs it.”

And I immediately thought to myself, *Yes - this is talking about the Hero's Journey!* And I went down the rabbit-hole and started writing. (I also purchased Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, so that I could go through the Hero's Journey chapter-by-chapter as I drew the parallels to the events and elements in the movie.)

Before I present my essay, however, I must first address the *real* story of Balto.

The Real Events

One hundred years ago, in January 1925, there was a diphtheria outbreak in the small town of Nome, Alaska. The only way to stop the deadly epidemic was through an antitoxin, which could only be delivered by dogsled across a portion of the Iditarod Trail, as the harsh winter had grounded the planes and closed down the railroads.

"A heroic relay of dog teams transported the antitoxin across the 674 mile trail from Nenana to Nome braving gale force winds, -85 degree temperatures, and whiteout conditions across the remote Alaskan Interior. The life-saving serum was delivered to Nome in a record-breaking 127.5 hours, without a single broken vial. This came to be known as the 1925 Serum Run. Many aspects of this journey are commemorated annually in the Iditarod dog sled race." (Alaska State Archives)

According to Wikipedia, the relay race consisted of 20 mushers and about 150 sled dogs. It was musher Gunnar Kaasen, with the lead dog Balto, who traveled the last stretch of the race and delivered the antitoxin to the desperate town. (Balto was not a wolf-dog, he was a Siberian Husky owned by the Norwegian dogsled trainer, breeder, and musher Leonhard Seppala.)

"Kaasen traveled through the night, through drifts, and river overflow over the 600-foot (183 m) Topkok Mountain. Balto led the team through visibility so poor that Kaasen could not always see the dogs harnessed closest to the sled. He was two miles (3 km) past Solomon before he realized

it, and kept going. The winds after Solomon were so severe that his sled flipped over and he almost lost the cylinder containing the serum when it fell off and became buried in the snow. He also suffered frostbite when he had to use his bare hands to feel for the cylinder.

Kaasen reached Point Safety ahead of schedule on February 2, at 3 am. Ed Rohn [the next musher in the relay] believed that Kaasen and the relay had halted at Solomon, so he was sleeping. Since the weather was improving, it would take time to prepare Rohn's team, and Balto and the other dogs were moving well, so Kaasen pressed on with the remaining 25 miles (40 km) to Nome, reaching Front Street at 5:30 am. Not a single ampule was broken, and the antitoxin was thawed and ready by noon." (Wikipedia.com)



Gunnar Kaasen with Balto

Because Kaasen and Balto were the faces of the delivery, they became celebrities, and a statue of Balto was put up in New York City's Central Park a year later.

Thanks to the recent Disney movie *Togo*, however, most of us now know that it was Leonhard Seppala and his lead dog Togo that actually traveled the longest and most dangerous stretch of the relay race, running over 260 miles (by comparison, Kaasen and Balto's team only ran 54 miles).



Leonhard Seppala and his dogsled team after the Serum Run,
with Togo on the far left.

I think we can all agree that *all* the dogs involved in the Serum Run were certified Good Boys (and Girls), and they were *all* heroes.

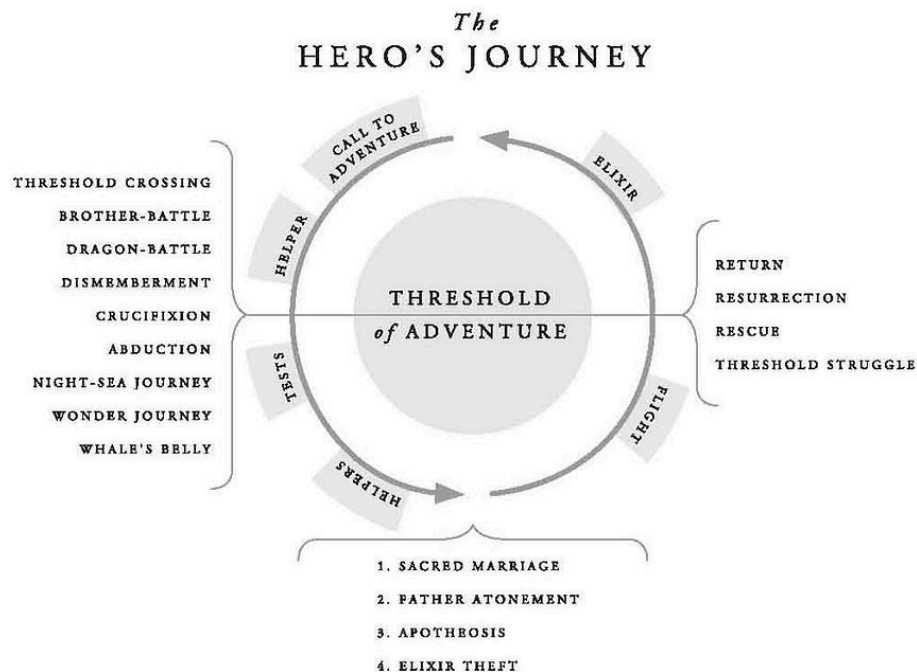
For this essay, however, I am not concerned about the actual historical characters and events. I am only analyzing the 1995 animated movie, treating it as a standalone story that contains archetypal themes and motifs all on its own. (It might help to think of it as a story that exists in a parallel universe to the real-life story.) As Campbell says in his book, the actual historical elements of great myths and stories are of only secondary importance:

"We do not particularly care whether Rip van Winkle, Kamar al-Zaman, or Jesus Christ ever actually lived. Their *stories* are what concern us: and these stories are so widely distributed over the world - attached to various heroes in various lands - that the questions of whether this or that local carrier of the universal theme may or may not have been a historical, living man can be of only secondary moment. The stressing of this historical element will lead to confusion; it will simply obfuscate the picture message." (p. 197-198)

Campbell tells us to look for the "tenor" *behind* the symbols, the characters, and the myths - the core meaning that runs through it all. He says that "wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history, or science, it is killed." (p. 213)

When approached in this way, one can easily see that this children's movie has become another "monomyth", a powerful archetypal story of the "universal theme" of the Hero's Journey.

According to Joseph Campbell, the Hero's Journey follows several key phases. Generally, it contains a Separation, an Initiation, and a Return phase, and within those three major phases are more specific phases.



At the end of his book, Campbell summarizes the journey:

"The mythological hero, setting forth from his common-day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again — if the powers have remained unfriendly to him — his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir)." (p. 211)

As Krans says, "for the Pilgrim, an outward journey is always an inward journey" - the Hero's Journey that is embedded in most great stories is often more about an *inward* journey, a journey of self-discovery and transformation, as one ventures from the "Ordinary World" of familiar routines and comfort zones (also referred to as the "Known" world) into the world of the Unknown, or the "Special World", where the hero must confront various challenges and trials and often experiences an ego-death, transformation, and resurrection. This "Special World" is where the hero has the spiritual awakening.

In the animated film, Balto undergoes both an outer and an inner hero's journey, and it is his internal journey in particular that is a powerful psychological story of embracing our Wild Nature. I will cover each phase of his journey in this essay, following the chapters as outlined in Campbell's book.

“And What’s Wrong With Being Half-and-Half?”

In the movie, Balto is an outcast, due to his being part wolf. He lives on the edge of town, on an abandoned boat, and sticks to the back alleys when he roams around town. He longs to be accepted, to find where he belongs. He loves to watch the annual sled dog races, and dreams of someday running with them. When he tries to fit in with the dogs and gain the approval of the humans, however, some of the sled dogs - mainly the narcissistic Malamute named Steele - jeer at him and ridicule him. They remind him that he is an outcast, he does not belong with them, and they frequently set Balto up to act in ways that only reinforces the humans' distrust of him. And so Balto sulks away, returning to his lonely makeshift den on the boat.



Balto's being half-dog and half-wolf is in itself a huge archetypal theme (and the main reason I am writing this essay) - because the "dog" side represents the domesticated part of our psyches, our Egos, and the side that Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés would say has suffered from "over-acculturation". It is the side that belongs in the Ordinary World, in the Matrix, where things have structure and are predictable and we have our masters to obey in exchange for a sense of safety and security.

The "wolf" side, on the other hand, represents the Wild Nature, or the Instinctual Nature, as Dr. Estés calls it. In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, she says that healthy wolves and healthy women (and healthy people of *all* genders, really) "share certain psychic characteristics," such as "keen sensing" and possession of "great endurance and strength". They are both "deeply intuitive," and are "experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave." (p. 4)

"Yet both have been hounded, harassed and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors" (p. 4). Balto's wolf-nature is feared and shunned, both by the humans of the town and by many of the dogs. Dr. Estés says that "it is not so coincidental that wolves and coyotes, bears and wildish [people] have similar reputations. They all share related instinctual archetypes, and as such, both are erroneously reputed to be ingracious, wholly and innately dangerous, and ravenous." (p. 3)

Being half-dog and half-wolf also represents another aspect of the Wild Nature - the *Medial* Nature. The Medial Nature, according to Dr. Estés, is the nature that allows us to travel back and forth between the "ordinary world" (the world of the dominant culture, the world that the dogs live in) and the "special world", the world of the mythic, the archetypal, the mysterious, the wild, the spiritual; the world of dreams, the world of the *soul*. In her *Mother Night* audio series, she says that people who contain the Medial Nature are often looked at (especially in Western culture) as "insubstantive", as people that "really don't belong", they are marginalized, cast out. Like Balto, who lives on the edge of society.

However, she also says that "people on the fringes are not really on the fringes - they're on the *frontiers*," and "the trees and the leaves and the flowers don't grow from the center, they grow from the *edges*."

As humans, we are, by nature, medial beings. We live most of our day-to-day lives in the Ordinary World, living in the Matrix doing Matrix-things - but we are also aware of the spiritual world, of the longings of our soul, the side of us that craves the deep and the wild and the mysterious, the side of us that wants to dive deep into the Unconscious and to dream and to create. Like dogs that still remember their wolf ancestors, deep in

our bones we remember where we came from, we remember a time when, as one of my oracle decks says, "we lived with the land, when we walked barefoot, when our lives were in alignment with the natural world" (*Threads of Fate Oracle*, p. 118).

A time when we *literally* ran with the wolves.

Throughout the movie, Balto follows the tracks that lead out into the wilderness, into the Unknown, and at the climactic point in the film, he steps into the tracks of the White Wolf, into his own Wild Nature. "The tracks which we all are following are those of the Wild [Soul] archetype, the innate instinctual Self." (Estés, p. 6)

The Separation/Departure

The Call to Adventure

"This first stage of the mythological journey - which we have designated the 'call to adventure' - signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown... The adventure may begin as a mere blunder,... or still again, one may be only casually strolling, when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths..." (Campbell, p. 48)

The Hero's Journey begins with a calling: something pulls us towards our destinies. In Balto's story, it is the "passing phenomenon" of the diphtheria outbreak in Nome that serves as his call to his outward journey. In my experience, it is often some problem or crisis in the outer world that serves as the catalyst for our journeys of self-discovery.

The call of Balto's *inner* adventure, however, comes more subtly.

After being shunned and ridiculed by Steele and the other sled dogs for his wolf genes, Balto sulks away to his lonely abode on the abandoned boat on the edge of town. On the way, he smells a familiar scent - a nearby pack of wolves on top of a snowy ridge. The leader of the pack howls to him, and then looks at him inquisitively. Here, Balto quite literally receives the "Call of the Wild."

Refusal of the Call

"Often in actual life, and not infrequently in the myths and popular tales, we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered; for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests..."

(Campbell, p. 49)

Balto does not return the howl, he does not answer the call, because he doubts his own identity and his inherent wolf-ness, and he doubts his place and purpose in life. He's been conditioned to believe that being part-wolf is something to be ashamed of. The Wolf is his Shadow, and in refusing the wolf pack's call, he refuses the part of himself he rejects. His companion, the goose Boris, laments for him: "Not a dog, not a wolf... All he knows he's what he's not. If only he could see what he is."



As we shall see later, however, "not all who hesitate are lost", and Balto will get a second chance to answer the "Call of the Wild".

Supernatural Aid

"For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure...who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass... What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny..."
(Campbell, p. 57 & 59)

Balto has several protectors and helpers, the main one being his goose friend Boris - although Boris is actually the one *discouraging* Balto from setting out on his journey at first, as he often acts as an overprotective parent. When Balto shows Boris the sick children, however, Boris then changes his mind and shifts more into his Mentor role.

Psychologically, Boris represents one's inner parental voice, the part of us that tells us we should be careful and not take too big of risks. In his most balanced role, he represents a "Wise Old Man" part, our inner wise parts that nudge us towards our callings. Campbell says that "protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart... One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear..." (p. 59)

As Campbell suggests, it is common for helpers and mentors to give the hero a "charm," or something that will protect them and give them strength on their journey. It is most often an object, such as an amulet or a weapon, but it can also be a psychological charm in the form of a riddle, or a proverb, or other wise words. Boris gives Balto a powerful charm when he says to him: "A dog cannot make this journey alone... But, maybe, a *wolf* can."

Balto's other helpers include the polar bear cubs Muk and Luk, and his love interest Jenna, who comes to his aid when he encounters the grizzly bear. Jenna also gives Balto a "charm" - her red bandana. She says to him "I'm afraid it won't keep you very warm," but Balto reassures her that it will, because it represents the love and warmth between them, and it is her love for him that helps him face the bitter cold of the journey before him.



The Crossing of the First Threshold (and "Threshold Guardians")

"With the personification of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the 'threshold guardian' at the entrance to the zone of magnified power... Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger..." (Campbell, p. 64)

"...The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades." (p. 67-68)

Balto's compassion for the sick children, for Jenna's little human Rosie, urges him to answer the call of the outward journey. When he learns that Steele's team became lost in the blizzard after picking up the medicine from Nenana, he realizes that he is the only one that can find them and bring them home safely. And so, with his mentor and companion Boris (and the polar bear cubs Muk and Luk), he crosses the threshold.

And here is where we meet a "threshold guardian," an archetypal character or force that acts as an obstacle that the hero must overcome in order to move forward on his journey. In classic myths, threshold guardians take the shape of ogres, giants, dragons, serpents, and other dreadful creatures. In this story, the threshold guardian is a massive, angry grizzly bear.



Threshold guardians represent the internal "gatekeepers" of the psyche - like fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and unworthiness. I believe the bear is a physical manifestation of Balto's inner critical voice. "YOU CAN'T DO THIS!" it growls and roars. "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!"

We often feel crushed and suffocated under the weight of this voice, as Balto is crushed and nearly suffocated to death under the weight of the bear's paw.

This is where Jenna comes to the rescue, she appears out of nowhere and attacks the bear by biting his other paw, releasing Balto. There is no greater force against our Inner Critic parts than the fierce love of those dear to our hearts.

Nevertheless, Balto is still chased by the bear, and soon they find themselves both standing on a frozen lake.

The Belly of the Whale

"The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died." (Campbell, p. 74)

The bear falls through the ice, taking Balto with him, and Balto nearly drowns. He is swallowed by the lake, which is an archetypal image of the Underworld, the place where we die and then are reborn. It is the "dark night of the soul" that precedes a spiritual awakening. It is during these times where we might feel utterly hopeless, drowning in our depression or despair, after being nearly crushed to death by the voices of our Inner Critics.

It is the bumbling polar bear siblings Muk and Luk who save Balto from drowning. As inner helper parts, they could represent one's inner child parts in the psyche. These parts, through their playfulness, creativity, spontaneity, and absurdity, bring us back to life after we have nearly drowned, or have been trapped under our emotional ice.

And so here, Balto goes through his first initiatory rebirth, and then sets out on the rest of his journey alone, where he will go through his primary Initiation.

The Initiation

The Road of Trials ("Brother-Battle")

"There can be no question: the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we today...must face alone, or, at best, with only tentative, impromptu, and not often very effective guidance." (Campbell, p. 87)

As Balto enters the Initiation phase of the Hero's Journey, his "amulets" of Jenna's red bandana and Boris's wise words to aid him, he continues to navigate through the harsh wilderness, alone.

Because this is a children's movie and only 74 minutes long, not a whole lot of things happen, so we actually don't really see too many trials, beyond his encounter with the grizzly bear and his fight with Steele, that come before the climactic point in the story.

We could say that his battle with Steele, what Campbell might call a "brother-battle," is the main trial, the "final showdown" or "supreme ordeal". Steele, the egotistical, narcissistic leader of the sled dog team, represents in the psyche one's "evil twin," our own Egos that care only for "fun, fame, and fortune." Steele refuses to hand over the medicine to Balto, only because his ego cannot fathom a *half-breed*, a mongrel wolf-dog, taking the credit for saving the town. He would rather let all those children die.



This motif is very common throughout many stories. In Campbell's book, he uses the mythological story of the sister goddesses Inanna and Ereshkigal to illustrate these "light and dark" aspects of our psyches, and "their confrontation epitomizes the whole sense of the difficult road of trials."

"The hero...discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or by being swallowed. One by one the resistances are broken. He must put aside his pride, his virtue, his beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not of different species, but one flesh. The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: Can the ego put itself to death?" (p. 89)

As Balto approaches the sled, Steele grabs on to Balto's red bandana, shaking it furiously. It comes loose, and Steele stumbles backwards, falling down a cliff.

After defeating his nemesis, Balto steps into his new role as the lead dog of the sled team and begins the homeward journey. His trials are not over yet, however, as he has one final initiation to go through.

Steele survives, and somehow gets ahead of the team and throws them off the trail by messing with Balto's scratch-markings on the trees. Balto becomes confused, as he has not yet learned to trust his deeper instincts. In a panic, he leads the team frantically down the wrong trail, which then sends them sliding down a steep snowfield toward the edge of a cliff. They manage to screech to a halt before going over, and Balto grabs the medicine before it falls over the cliff.

The Ego, ever in conflict with the Soul, often prevents us from fulfilling our destinies by throwing us down the wrong path. If we don't trust our true Selves, if we doubt our intuition, it's difficult to know exactly which path to take in life, which path will take us back home.

Everyone thinks they're safe for a moment. But then, the snow that Balto and the crate of medicine were standing on breaks away, and like Steele just a few minutes before, he falls down the cliff – down, down, down into the abyss.

The Meeting With the Goddess

"The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, at the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart." (Campbell, p. 91)

And now we come to the true climax of the story. Here, our hero Balto goes through another death and rebirth, as he enters another "belly of the whale" at the bottom of the cliff.

He breaks through the snow, then collapses in exhaustion. The blizzard swirls around him. He hides his face under his paw, and succumbs to despair. What is he to do now? How is he ever to climb back up that cliff? The children will die, *Rosie* will die, without that medicine. He begins to shed tears.

But then, his nose twitches. That familiar scent again... much closer this time. His ears perk up, and he uncovers his face, and opens his eyes wider.

He looks ahead and sees a large, white paw. He looks up, and towering above him is a large, snow-white wolf.



The White Wolf's actual identity has been debated among fans. Some say the wolf was merely a ghost, or a vision, or a hallucination, a projection of Balto's own wolf heritage that visited him. Some cite the script of the first movie referring to the wolf as a male. I

would guess that most of us, however, go off of the sequel that came out in 2002, *Balto II: Wolf Quest*, in which it was revealed that the white wolf is Balto's mother. Her name is Aniu (an Inuit word meaning "snow"), and she exists mostly in spirit-form. She has the ability to shape-shift, and in *Wolf Quest* she appears to Balto in his dreams as a raven, as well as other animals on his quest to find his daughter.

There was an interview with the screenwriter for *Wolf Quest*, Dev Ross, in which she was asked about Aniu. This was her reply:

"Aniu became the white wolf and is now the Great Mother of all wolves and serves as their guide — if they will listen. She represents the 'call of the wild' that exists in us all. Most of us ignore that call, repress it or can't even hear it. But some do... Aniu is part of the Great Spirit. She is the reminder that we all are part of nature and must honor nature as a powerful force. Aniu shows herself to those who will listen."

I personally like to go with this interpretation, and to expand it further by saying that the White Wolf also represents the Goddess archetype that Campbell speaks of. She has many names - Queen Goddess of the World, Divine Feminine, *Shakti*, Holy Mother, Wild Mother, Wild Woman, *La Loba*, *La Que Sabe*...

"...She is the paragon of all paragons of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride. Whatever in the world has lured, whatever has seemed to promise joy, has been premonitory of her existence - in the deep of sleep, if not in the cities and forests of the world. For she is the incarnation of the promise of perfection; the soul's assurance that, at the conclusion of its exile in a world of organized inadequacies, the bliss that once was known will be known again; the comforting, the nourishing, the 'good' mother - young and beautiful - who was known to us, and even tasted, in the remotest past. Time sealed her away, yet she is dwelling still, like one who sleeps in timelessness, at the bottom of the timeless era." (Campbell, p. 92)

"Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures,

she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world." (p. 97)

"The meeting with the goddess (who is incarnate in every woman) is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love (charity: *amor fati*), which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity." (p. 99)

And here, Balto is literally "at the feet of the goddess", beholding her in all her beauty and glorious wildness. He is mesmerized by her, perhaps even a little afraid of her, and he is enchanted by her howl. She calls to him, like the wolf on the ridgeline called to him earlier in the movie. And here Balto receives his second chance to answer the Call to Adventure - the adventure of the deeper Self, the adventure of sacred union with his own wild soul.

I must pause here and make a note about a major flaw in Campbell's conceptualization of the hero's journey - and that is his sexism. According to an article by the Colorado Community College System (2023),

"In Campbell's version, the hero is always male and he always meets a female goddess figure. The goddess figure is not necessarily a goddess—often she's perfectly human...but the female character has to be alluring to the hero. She has to inspire him to continue in the quest. Very often this female turns out to be the male hero's love interest, but the level of love interest varies.

That might be Campbell's version, but modern storytelling has often found ways to flip this on its head with alternate gender roles and/or sexualities. The key has to do with the inspirational and relational nature of the goddess character. She doesn't have to be female, or heterosexual, to serve this role—the goddess just has to be someone who inspires the hero to prove him or herself."

(“The Monomyth: Understanding the Seventeen Stages of the Hero’s Journey.”)

(On that note, we could say that Jenna also personifies the Goddess archetype to Balto, but she does not inspire Balto in the same way and with the same impact as the White Wolf does.)

Another interesting article I found says this:

"Looked at as a psychological process, Campbell's historically based metaphor can be reframed as describing that moment when a person embraces *amor fati*, the love of one's own fate - understood as their authentic selfhood. At that point, once separated from their past, a person kind of wakes up and says, 'Huh, this is who I might be? This is who I really am?' Everyone can experience this, regardless of gender."

(Mark C.E. Peterson, "De-Gendering the Hero's Journey?", 2024)

The union ("mystical marriage") with the goddess is the *internal* union with one's *anima*, or feminine aspect of the psyche. It can also be seen as the union between the Subconscious mind and the Conscious mind, the "Knower and the Known".

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés talks about this internal union in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*:

"Anyone close to a wildish woman is in fact in the presence of two women; an outer being and an interior *criatura*, one who lives in the topside world, one who lives in the world not so easily seeable. The outer being...is often pragmatic, acculturated, and very human. The *criatura*, however, often travels to the surface from far away, often appearing and then as quickly disappearing, yet always leaving behind a feeling: something surprising, original, and knowing." (p. 119)

"If a woman hides one side or favors one side too much, she lives a very lopsided life which does not give her access to her entire power... Likewise, a woman has tremendous powers when the individual dual aspects are consciously recognized and beheld as a unit; held together rather than kept apart. The power of Two is very strong and neither side of the duality should be neglected. They need be fed equally, for together they bring an uncanny power to the individual." (p. 119-120)

There is a poem that beautifully illustrates this inner union: “Heed the Call (The Wild Twin)” by Ange Woolfall:

Picture yourself in a life you've not led,
Collisions not made
Paths never trod
Walked instead by another
Your wild twin
The banished one
Who galloped through forests
Bareback and howling
Drunk on wildflowers
Lungs filled with green
Mudded soles
Washed clean by streams
Dried by the breeze

Open your window
Take her hand
Follow her back
To the road forgotten
Meet yourself there
Whole and unbroken
Know all at once
All paths lead to her
And love her
For she has always loved you.

(I do not believe Balto's story contains the "Woman as the Temptress" or "Atonement With the Father" elements, so I am skipping those two chapters.)

Apotheosis

"Like the Buddha himself, this godlike being is a pattern of the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance. 'When the envelopment of consciousness has been annihilated, then he becomes free of all fear, beyond the reach of change.' This is the release potential within us all, and which anyone can attain..." (Campbell, p. 127)

The apotheosis phase of the hero's journey can be thought of as a "remember who you are" motif. The hero awakens to their divine nature (*apotheosis* literally translates to "elevation to divine status"), or simply to one's *true* nature, one's true Self. In *The Lion King*, for example, it is when Simba's father Mufasa appears to him in the clouds and his voice thunders "REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE". For Balto, it is when this White Wolf, the spirit of his own mother Aniu and the incarnation of the Divine Mother and Queen Goddess, appears to him and howls to him. She appears as a spirit guide, an ancestral force that anchors him to his path and his purpose (much like Mufasa, after his death, becomes Simba's ancestor-spirit guide).

In another interview I found with Dev Ross, the writer for *Balto II: Wolf Quest*, she says that the white wolf symbolizes "being in touch with one's true self, one's true nature. She is an invitation to explore the deepest parts of yourself. She is the Great Mother, the one who loves you absolutely. The one who wants you to self-actualize."

Her role is to wake Balto up to his true Self, his powerful Wolf-nature, and this is the moment where he experiences the "expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom)" (Campbell, p. 211)

At first, Balto rejects the call once again, turning his head away in shame of the failure that he believes he is. The wolf lowers her head and gives him one last longing glance before she turns and walks away, to leave Balto to sulk by himself.



As Balto is looking away, he notices the crate of medicine lodged in the snowbank he just broke out of. His gaze is drawn upwards, at the height of the sheer cliff he just fell off of. The climb looks impossible... Boris's words begin to echo in his mind: "A dog cannot make this journey alone..."

He lowers his head again... but then he remembers the rest of that sentence, the charm: "But, maybe, a *wolf* can."

His face now filled with determination, he looks back in the direction the white wolf had disappeared, and sees her trail of paw prints in the snow. He stands up shakily, and then places his paw in one of the tracks.





Upon realizing that his feet perfectly match hers - signifying to him that he is indeed more wolf than dog - he howls after her triumphantly.

He finally answers the call - the *real* call.

The wolf comes back, and joins him in his howl, celebrating his union with his inner Wolf, his own divine Wild Nature.



According to that article from the Colorado Community College System, this is the point in the story where "the hero is fully actualized, and the hero's full potential has

been reached... A handy way to understand this stage is to see it as the point where the audience knows the hero will succeed in the hero's journey..."

The Ultimate Boon

And succeed he does. With the "boon" of his newfound strength and fortitude, the enlightenment of his Wild Nature, he makes the climb up the cliff, dragging the crate of medicine behind him with his teeth. And with his large wolf-feet to give him traction, he makes it look easy.

"The ease with which the adventure is here accomplished signifies that the hero is a superior man, a born king... Where the usual hero would face a test, the elect encounters no delaying obstacle and makes no mistake." (Campbell, p. 148)

The return journey is mostly a piece of cake, now that Balto has remembered who he really is and has received the "ultimate boon" of individuation. Though the climb back up that steep cliff must have been pure physical agony, "the agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth" (Campbell, p. 163), and the cliff could hardly be considered a "delaying obstacle". And where a dog's feet might stumble and falter, Balto's large wolf-feet help him avoid any mistakes or mis-steps as he climbs.



"Big Paws Kinda Run in My Family"

And it is here that I must mention an important archetypal motif I noticed throughout the movie, as I re-watched it in preparation for this essay. Attention is called to Balto's abnormally large feet more than once. When Jenna first notices Balto's big feet, Balto is self-conscious about them. He says apologetically to her, "big paws kinda run in my family... at least, uh, one side of my family".

Then later, when he is racing the sled dog team in town and gets thrown onto the ice in the harbor, he uses his large front paws to pull himself up to the top of a wooden post in the ice, and then he leaps across them, and then goes through an agility course of barrels and boats and ladders to get back in the race. It's made clear that his feet give him exceptional, almost cat-like agility, as well as speed.



Even when the White Wolf appears to Balto, the first part of her we see is her foot. No doubt Balto was taken aback by the size of this wolf's feet - and the size of the wolf herself as she towered over him. Balto then places his paw in her track, and sees that his own feet are the same size as hers.

When he is climbing back up the cliff dragging the medicine, one of the sled dogs remarks "hey, he's got the feet of a *wolf*, there!"



The fact that Balto has big feet from the wolf side of his family is zoologically accurate. Compared to other canids, wolves have long legs with disproportionately large feet, with long, well-arched toes and interdigital webbing. Their front paws, which are larger than their back feet, can measure up to 4 inches wide and over 5 inches long - nearly the size of a human hand. This is an evolutionary adaptation to the various types of terrain wolves have to traverse every day. Those big paws act like hiking boots over rocks, paddles in the water, and snowshoes over ice and snow.



(Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary, via Instagram)

A wolf's feet are incredibly important for its survival. So much so that there is an old Russian proverb: "The wolf is kept fed by his feet." Wolves travel up to 30 miles in one day in search of food. For the wolf, and for The Pilgrim, the ability to travel and rove is essential to life.

In Jungian psychology, when something is exaggerated (like Balto's large paws), it points to an amplified archetypal function that is demanding recognition. Feet, in the symbolic and archetypal language, are deeply tied to grounding, instinct, and the relationship between spirit and matter. Our feet connect our body to the earth. They represent contact with the ground – the material, instinctual, lived world. In Balto's case, his large feet are a *symbol of his deep connection to nature, instinct, and his primal roots* – his wolf heritage.

Other dogs mock him because they are domesticated beings, adapted to human society. His "too large" feet symbolize excess instinct, wildness, raw survival capability – things the society of sled dogs fears and suppresses.

When Balto places his paw into the wolf's print and realizes it fits, it is a moment of *self-recognition*. The footprint is an archetypal signature: it's not just *a match*, it's an *inheritance*. He sees that his instincts, which he thought made him an outcast, actually *connect him to a greater lineage* – the lineage of wildness, freedom, survival, the ancient and sacred bond to the earth. In Jungian terms, this moment could be seen as an encounter with the Self. The Self (capital-S) is the archetype of *wholeness*, the union of conscious and unconscious. Balto finding his print matching the white wolf's is a conscious integration of the wild, rejected, instinctual part of himself.

Spiritually, large feet can also symbolize:

- Preparation for a long journey (especially a soul journey, like a pilgrimage).

- Endurance—the ability to walk great distances and travel over difficult terrain (as Balto does when he navigates the obstacle course during the race, and later when he climbs the cliff, dragging the crate of medicine behind him.)
- Authority in the natural world—"where you stand" matters. In some Indigenous traditions, *walking lightly* or *heavily* on the earth has spiritual meaning about how a being belongs to the land.
- Belonging without permission—the wolf's tracks don't ask for human validation. They mark a path that is *theirs by right*.

In dreams and myth, an animal (or person) with large, powerful feet often points to someone who has an *untamed destiny*. Someone who is meant to walk their own road, even if it's through loneliness, exile, or wilderness. Someone who must trust instinct over social expectation.

In Balto's story, his oversized paws weren't a deformity – they were his proof of origin. He was never "lesser" because of his wildness; he was *greater*. But he had to *claim it consciously* – no one could do it for him.

Placing his paw in the wolf's track was a sacred act, almost like a ritual of initiation: *Now you know where you come from. Now you know who you are.*

Walk forward in it.

Something else I caught when re-watching the film was when Balto, Boris, and the two polar bear cubs are making their initial trek into the wilderness, and Balto senses the presence of the nearby grizzly bear and says to the others "I think we should keep moving," Boris says "Is that the answer to all your problems, motion?"

And I thought about what Kim Krans wrote for the archetype of The Pilgrim, how "The Pilgrim knows that the heart belongs in motion. Where there is motion, there is freedom, expansion, and growth."

At face value, Boris is mocking Balto – implying that *running* is an immature or fearful response.

But archetypally, Balto's instinct toward motion isn't about fear – it's about *listening* to his deeper knowing.

In many traditions, motion is sacred. It's life force. It's the refusal to stagnate. It's responding to the invisible currents of change, danger, or destiny. When Balto says "I think we should keep moving," it isn't cowardice – it's *tracking*. He's feeling the vibration of threat (the unseen bear) and moving *with* the truth of the moment.

Kim Krans' words – "*Where there is motion, there is freedom, expansion, and growth*" – matches Balto's whole journey: he leaves behind a place where he didn't belong, he enters wilderness (without a full map), and he trusts motion, even when he doesn't have certainty. And his motion isn't random – it's *purposeful wandering*. Like the Pilgrim who seeks without even knowing the final destination.

In the archetypal journey, staying still when change is required is a death sentence. Motion, on the other hand, (even uncertain motion), *is life*.

In Jungian terms, motion = *psychic movement*. When we grow, we have to move – across old belief systems, into shadowed territories, through fear. Balto, feeling the bear and moving onward, is enacting the instinctual survival of the Self. Not survival of the ego (who wants comfort), but the Self that demands evolution.

Boris' sarcasm ("Is motion the answer to all your problems?") is the voice of the *stagnant world* trying to shame the Wild Soul into compliance.

But Balto ignores him – and thus lives.

In short: motion is the answer – but not for its own sake. Motion aligned with instinct, with the unseen guidance, with the pull of the future Self calling one forward.

Balto is the Pilgrim. The white wolf is the Ancestor.

The path is made by walking.

Bringing Back the Medicine

According to Campbell, the "ultimate boon" in ancient myths is usually some kind of "elixir" given to the hero by the gods (or stolen from them, as in the case of Prometheus). It is typically some kind of object, potion, food, or drink that symbolizes the truth experienced during apotheosis. In Balto's story, the "elixir" is represented by the crate of medicine, the literal elixir that will bring healing and restoration.

Psychologically, the elixir or "medicine" is an archetypal symbol of one's unique wisdom and personal "magic" that can only be administered properly after one has reached a state of enlightenment, or individuation, or self-actualization (in parts-work, it would be when a person is completely "Self-led"). One's "medicine" is whatever spiritual or creative gifts they inherently possess. It is their own unique song, the highest vibration of their truest Self. It can have many different expressions. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés says in her *Mother Night* series, our medicine is contained not so much in a way of doing, but in a way of *be-ing*.

In the *Threads of Fate Oracle* deck, there is a card titled "Share Wisdom". The booklet says that "our most potent medicine is born from the trials we have endured," and that "we each have a unique perspective and offering to this world". The card calls us to remember that our medicine "is best exactly as it is", and that what is already within us is enough.

If we can remember that, then we too, like Balto, can "bring back the medicine" to those that need healing.

Trusting the Instinctual Nature

When Balto and the dog sled team get back on the main trail, and Balto encounters that same spot where Steele tried to scramble Balto's tree markings, Balto is no longer

confused about which way to go. He trusts his wolf instincts now - he trusts his higher Self and his Wild Nature - and he follows his nose.

The sense of smell, in stories, represents one's deeper instincts and intuition. One can not always trust what the eyes see, but the nose never lies. There are many optical illusions, but there is no such thing as an olfactory illusion (and if there is, then they're extremely rare).

Humans have around 10-20 million olfactory receptors. A German Shepherd dog has around 225 million, and a wolf has about 280 million. And bears? Bears have *billions* of olfactory receptors - that's a sense of smell that is 2000 times more sensitive than a human's. I can't even imagine what that would be like. It's like having an entirely different way of "seeing" what is invisible to the eyes. It makes perfect sense that humans would equate animals' sense of smell with intuition and psychic powers.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Gandalf and the Fellowship enter into the mines of Moria, they come upon a crossroads of three tunnel entrances that Gandalf does not remember. He takes several minutes to sit down and contemplate which way to go. After an iconic conversation with Frodo, he suddenly gets up and says "Ah, it's this way!" But it wasn't that he had suddenly remembered, it was because he noticed that "the air doesn't smell so foul down here," and then he says to the hobbits "when in doubt, always follow your nose." When in doubt, always trust your instincts.

I recently saw *Mufasa: The Lion King*, a beautiful film about the origin story of Mufasa and Scar. Something I really liked about the story is that when Mufasa is adopted by Scar/Taka's tribe, Taka's mother, Eshe, teaches Mufasa the secrets of the hunter, the secrets of the lionesses. She teaches him how to use and trust his finer senses and his instincts. She says to him, "Close your eyes, and tell me what you hear, what you *feel*." She teaches him to use those keen senses of hearing and smell, to *feel* the vibrations in the ground and in the wind, which she tells Mufasa are skills that no other male has. And throughout the movie, Mufasa demonstrates that his sense of smell is superior to the other male lions. He smells the Outsiders coming after Obasi's pride, (to which Obasi exclaimed "that's impossible!"), and then later in the story, he is able to smell the

unique flowers of Sarabi's homelands on her fur. It is these keen senses and his trust in his intuition and instincts that make him a great leader, worthy of the title of King.

The Return

The Magic Flight

"If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian, or if the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion." (Campbell, p. 170)

"The powers of the abyss are not to be challenged lightly..." (p. 175)

The journey home seems fairly easy at first, but as Campbell says, "the final work is the return". As Balto leads the team back through the mountain pass, they encounter a few more challenges, and it seems like the frozen world starts to literally fall apart. There is a narrow ice bridge that crumbles apart as they cross it, and the team barely makes it across.

Then, right after that, they are pursued by something far larger and faster than any living creature.

An avalanche.

After taking a short breather after crossing the ice bridge, Balto's tail brushes Star's nose, causing him to sneeze loudly, which then triggers an avalanche that thunders rapidly down the mountain and chases the team down a narrow, icy corridor. It nearly

catches up to them and engulfs them, but Balto's quick thinking (his keen senses and sharp instincts that come from his Wolf Nature) saves them as he notices a tunnel in the side of the mountain. He leaps in the direction of the tunnel entrance and guides the team to safety mere seconds before the avalanche can devour them.

What could this avalanche represent in the psyche?

In Campbell's book, he states that "the powers of the abyss are not to be challenged lightly."

"In the Orient, a great point is made of the danger of undertaking the psychologically disturbing practices of yoga without competent supervision. The meditations of the postulant have to be adjusted to his progress, so that the imagination may be defended at every step...until the moment comes for the prepared spirit to step alone beyond." (p. 175)

Campbell then quotes Dr. Carl Jung:

"The incomparably useful function of the dogmatic symbol [is that] it protects a person from a direct experience of God as long as he does not mischievously expose himself. But if...he leaves home and family, lives too long alone, and gazes too deeply into the dark mirror, then the awful event of the meeting may befall him..." (p. 175)

If I am interpreting this correctly, I believe what Jung is saying is basically that after one has experienced apotheosis, their spiritual awakening, and received their "boons" of spiritual gifts (and the boons of self-actualization), one can be tempted to stay too long in that state of heightened awareness and spiritual ascension. If one "lives too long alone," or "gazes too deeply into the dark mirror", they will experience a level of awareness of the Divine that would be too much for them to handle.

I've heard that when taking psychedelics for the first time, one must be cautious not to take too much, and you must prepare yourself mentally and emotionally, to prevent a "bad trip" - a trip in which the veil is completely torn away and God - in either Light or

Shadow form - is shown to you up close and personal. The experience can be extremely overwhelming, and potentially even traumatizing.

In the Bible, in the book of Exodus, there is a verse in which God tells Moses "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Biblical scholars have interpreted this to mean that seeing God's full glory is too overwhelming for any mortal.

There is a scene in a movie that hilariously and brilliantly illustrates this phenomenon. Jeff Daniel's 2001 comedy *Escanaba in da Moonlight* is a hidden gem of a film. It is quite comical, and yet a profoundly deep story, especially when you look deeper into the archetypes of the characters. It is also another great example of the Hero's Journey.

Jeff Daniels plays Reuben Soady, who goes on a hunting trip with his father Albert Soady (Harve Presnell), brother Remnar (Joey Albright), and a maniacal family-friend named "The Jimmer" (Wayne David Parker). They stay at the Soady Deer Camp, a cabin that's been used by several generations of Soady's, and as Reuben begins to break several family traditions, they experience a series of paranormal phenomena.

There is a point in the movie where a DNR officer, Tom T. Treado (Randall Godwin), shows up at the cabin. After breaking out into singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" ("the *whole, damned* song", according to the narrator Albert Soady), he turns around and says to the hunters: "I just saw God up on your ridge."

After they all stare at him in confusion for a few seconds, Reuben says "Oh, well, it's a beautiful ridge."

"NO —" Ranger Tom begins to correct him — "I saw *God* up on your ridge."

"*God-God?*" they question him, "the one with the angels?"

Annoyed with their skepticism, Ranger Tom confirms "yes, the one with heaven and the angels and the manger - that's right."

The Soady's (and the Jimmer) continue to question him, suggesting that perhaps he saw a spaceship. After all, the Jimmer *was* abducted by aliens.

Ranger Tom then begins to tell his story: "There was a light—"

"Oh, you saw a light? We seen the light too, right Pop? Yeah, yeah, we seen a light! Was it hovering? Cuz mine was hovering right above me, right before they sucked me up in a chute!"

"NO! This was *THE* light, the light you see right before you see... *GOD*."

The ranger turns away from the men, now looking up into the rafters of the cabin.

"I was out combing the area for irregularities, you know? We got a lot of orange comin' up over that ridge tonight. Gotta go out there, establish a presence... At first, I thought it was the moon coming out from behind a cloud. But then, words started falling out of my mouth. words I'd never said before, words I didn't know the meaning of."



"I lost all sense of time, and place... and my place *in* time. I began questioning the futility of my existence, my mind racing with a never-ending stream of ceaseless, incessant contemplation... examining... *re*-examining the relevance of my sad excuse for a life, clinging to a deeply seated faith, versus modern society's insistence that if mankind cannot explain it, it can't possibly exist."

(He takes a loooong pause.)

".....Or...,"

Ranger Tom slowly stands up from his chair. The Soady's and the Jimmer are now seated on the floor, staring up at him wide-eyed, like Kindergarteners during story-time.

Then Ranger Tom slowly begins to undress himself as he continues having his existential crisis— "is that simply a reflection of the world we live in, or *I* live in, or the

way I choose to live in the world, if I even live in a world... is this the world? And if it is...am I in it? And if I am... why?"

He continues undressing, as the men keep their silent attention fixed on him. Ranger Tom continues philosophizing as he pulls his shirt over his head.

"For what possible reason is my being, *being*? There's no method behind whatever madness was orchestrated on my behalf. They'd spent the time, energy, and spiritual wherewithal to make sure that, damn it, at least this mass of flesh, blood, and bones, this carcass with a pulse gets to breathe the air, drink the water, and eat the food, like I'd never eat again..."

Now down to his skivvies, he shuffles away from the men to continue his existential monologue to himself, while the men whisper to each other, wondering if they should just hop in their trucks and get out of there while the ranger was distracted by his own "ceaseless, incessant contemplation."

Later that night, while everyone else is asleep, Reuben himself has his own encounter with this mysterious Light, a direct encounter with *God-God*, and it puts him into a catatonic state. His brother and his father try everything they can think of to make him come to, but the only thing that finally works is putting his face directly in the path of one of the Jimmer's atomic blasts of flatulence.

Fortunately, there are things one can do to avoid this fracturing of the mind if one happens to see *God*. Carl Jung says "the traditional symbol, come to full flower through the centuries, may operate like a healing draught and divert the fatal incursion of the living godhead into the hallowed spaces of the church" (Campbell, p. 175).

And then Campbell summarizes: "The magic objects tossed behind by the panic-ridden hero—protective interpretations, principles, symbols, rationalizations, anything—delay and absorb the power of the started Hound of Heaven, permitting the adventurer to come back into his fold safe and with perhaps a boon." (p. 176)

These "protective interpretations, principles, symbols, and rationalizations" are things like religious dogma. We humans, we simple, inferior creatures, have to find ways to scale God down to something comprehensible, something tangible, something easier

for us to relate to. Otherwise it would break our brains, and we'd end up like Ranger Tom.

Or in Balto's case, buried in an avalanche of overwhelming awareness, which would keep us frozen and stuck in our own minds, unable to ever go home, unable to return to the Ordinary World.

Though they managed to evade the avalanche, Balto and the team are not completely out of danger yet. The tunnel leads into an icy cave, with long, spear-like icicles hanging from the ceiling. Balto treads slowly and carefully, aware that one decibel too loud, and they will break off and come crashing down on top of them.

Balto's tail brushes the end of Star's nose again, but before he can sneeze, Nikki holds his finger under Star's nose to stop it.

But then, the sled slips across an icy ledge, and it comes down with a loud thud. A large icicle breaks off of the ceiling and slices through the handle bar of the sled, barely missing the unconscious musher's head. Balto and the team then make a mad dash for the exit of the cave as other icicles start to break off and crash all around them. The sled slips and slides across the icy floor, careening and crashing into the icy walls, and the crate of medicine starts to fall apart. One of the bottles of antitoxin falls through the loose boards of the crate and shatters on the ground. Balto is good at thinking on his feet, however (quite literally), and he once again uses the boon of his large wolf-feet to propel himself off of an icicle and send his body sliding back towards the crate, where he uses those big paws to slam the wooden boards back in place, saving the rest of the medicine. (I highly doubt any ordinary dog could have pulled off *that* trick.)

Balto and the team barely make it out of the cave as a row of icicles on the arch of the cave's exit all break off at once, just barely missing them.

The "magic flight" is finally over. After this final ordeal, there are only 12 minutes left in the movie, as Balto comes home triumphantly with the medicine intact, and he is celebrated as a hero.

I see the icicles in the cave being similar to the avalanche in their archetypal representation. Whether the sudden awareness of the divine realms and higher

dimensions—the direct experience of God—overwhelms us like an avalanche, or pierces our minds like those icy stalactites, they both can have the same effect of trapping us in a schizophrenic-like state of mind where we are unable to return "home", unable to fully integrate back into the Ordinary World of every-day existence. The bridge, the avalanche, and the icicles represent our minds slipping, breaking, falling apart, as we struggle to make sense of everything we just experienced in those higher realms (remember Ranger Tom). It requires a lot of mental and emotional agility to evade the psychological traps of our imagination and to move fluidly between states of consciousness.

Standing Between the Worlds (The Medial Nature)

The rest of Campbell's sections in The Return chapter ("Rescue from Without," "The Crossing of the Return Threshold," "Master of the Two Worlds," and "Freedom to Live") are a little too advanced for a children's animated movie, so they are not really represented in Balto's story. After evading the avalanche and getting out of the ice-cave, Balto does not seem to have any difficulty crossing the return threshold and integrating back into the Ordinary World, the dog-world. He is praised by the townspeople and the sled dogs, thanked by Rosie, and fully welcomed home by Jenna. It's a pretty happy ending.

Nevertheless, we can speculate on the challenges he might have faced after the initial celebration. In the sequel, we see that Balto still lives primarily on the edge of town, on the abandoned boat, even after he has pups with Jenna. And he makes a comment to Boris that some of the dogs still tease him for being part-wolf.

I imagine that as much as Balto tried to live as a dog, there was still a big part of him that secretly wished he could return to the wolf-world. He still heard the howls of the pack calling to him from the deep wild, beckoning him to return to them.

Maybe he found a way to live in both worlds.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Balto's being half-dog and half-wolf is an archetypal representation of the Medial Nature, the ability to pass back and forth

between the two worlds, the "Ordinary World" (the "dog world") and the "Special World" (the wild, "wolf-world"). After Balto's initiation, this ability to go back and forth is strengthened, as we see in the sequel when he once again has to set out into the wilderness to find his rogue daughter.

"Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back - not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other - is the talent of the master. The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another. It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest." (Campbell, p. 196)

The true gift of the Medial Nature, however, is that it allows us to see that the two worlds are really one. There is no separation, really. This is the great secret, according to Campbell, the "great key to the understanding of myth and symbol":

"The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And the exploration of that dimension...is the whole sense of the deed of the hero. The values and distinctions that in normal life seem important disappear with the terrifying assimilation of the self into what formerly was only otherness." (p. 188)

The return to normal life may indeed be the most difficult part of the journey for some of us, because we fear losing that state of transcendental bliss. But we don't have to worry about ever losing contact with "the realm of the gods," because it is always just as much a part of our reality as our physical existence. Even though we may doubt it at times, even though it is much harder to access, it is still *right there*, and we must remember that "the reality of the deep is not belied by that of common day" (Campbell, p. 196).

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, in *Mother Night*, has this to say about standing in both worlds:

"Water...has all qualities imaginable. It flows, it's still, it eddies and pools, it rises up and crashes down, it's muscular, it's sweet, it's bitter, evocative - everything one can imagine, qualities of the human being, and of the soul, is you might say, in the *agua vida*...the essence of life. The Medial recognizes all of these qualities, that they all belong to the whole, that they are not separate from one another. But in the mundane world...often those qualities are either brought forward, or repressed. So the 'medial' means 'standing between', being the agent who carries messages back and forth from one world to the other, the world of the Overculture (which is often starved of some of the most important things that belong to the soul), and the invisible world..., which is palpably felt, but needs often poetry, metaphor, stories, to describe its essence and what is contained in it, in terms of visions, dreams, ideas, gifts, and so on.

The word *mediator* is a word that comes from *interpres*, meaning 'messenger'. Mediator - standing between two, delivering between two worlds, and also interestingly the word *medicine*, *medicinal*, they have a quality of the word *mediate*. So, to bring the *remedio*, the remedy, from one place and apply it to another place. So that is by a word called *premedicos*, *premeditados*, *premedicatos* - all of those words mean *to protect*, via the medial or the medicinal. So the idea of mediation is repair, is even curative, adds to, and is a message at the same time. And in order to be in the medial, one stands between or atop of something, so one can see both... In depth psychology you could say that the Medial stands atop the dam, opens the causeways between two different worlds, so the water can flow in both directions, so that many things can be seen in both directions.

Now, my personal understanding of the Medial is that it is filled with hope. To be in the Medial position in the psyche - to be able to see the Overculture that we live in, the mundane culture, but also to see the hidden culture, you might say, that contains so much of the soul, and all of our charisms and gifts that we're given at birth - means that we will be filled always with hope. For when you see both worlds, you see that yes, death can rule in wrong ways, and that in some ways it's inevitable somehow - but also you see in the other world that new life is ever-possible, and can be carried into the world of the dead, be carried into the world in need, can be carried into the world where cure, protection, *remedios*, are needed and applied there, as poultice, as healing, as bandages, as medicine, all the things that are needed.

...The word in Sanskrit, for this place of being medial, is *svastha*, which means to be *standing in*, and literally returning to one's own place, or *seat*, even the *throne*, if you would, of your highest knowledge. Your greatest perception. And to *live* from that place, right there. As much of the time as one can. And not allowing oneself to be caged by the Overculture, squished down into a little teeny tiny piece of what one really is (which is a cosmos in itself), and instead throwing off all the foolish parts of the Overculture, overacculturation that says 'you should be

this way, but not this way'... and *being*, instead, *svastha* - standing in, returning to one's own home-place, the seat of the highest knowledge, inside intuition, that you have...

So, on one hand not to be caged by the Overculture, not to be hyper-fascinated by the dark and dreams and visions and be trapped there as a result, ogling all of that, marveling over it - no, it has to be brought down to earth, to grow the soul, and to water the soul, and the soulful things at work, at home, in one's love life..., in one's creative life, and so on and so forth."

She says that the secret to living courageously in both worlds is to simply *be*. Be "like water, flowing over and around, or like darkness, flowing over and around... Night and water never ask anyone's permission to come. They just gather, and flow. They come back, and they come forth, and they go forward."

Other Archetypal Motifs

Reach For the Light - Let All the Broken Pieces Shine

Earlier in the movie, before Balto sets out on his journey, he shares with Jenna a secret passage to the crawlspace of the building that serves as the hospital, where they can listen to the humans through the vents and learn more about what is ailing Jenna's human, Rosie. He has an ulterior motive, however, because this dark, gloomy crawl space contains a hidden treasure. Balto shows Jenna a pile of broken bottles of various colors, which Balto says are the polar ice caps. He then points his nose up at the light coming from a lantern in the room above them - "the sun".

Jenna is skeptical, but Balto persists. He uses his front paws to position the broken shards just right - "Aaaand to the north..." - and suddenly the light from the lantern hits the pieces of glass at just the right angle, creating shimmering, dancing, multi-colored lights on the wall in front of them, resembling the Northern Lights.

Later, as the town begins to lose hope, Jenna uses this trick to create a guiding beacon for Balto to light his way home. She drags the bottle shards and a lantern out to a snow-covered hill overlooking the town. She positions the lantern behind the glass

shards so that they cast their light on the side of the snow-covered mountain behind the town, large enough that it can be seen from miles away.

"Sun... Ice caps... Balto."



When Balto finally makes his way back home with the medicine, he is overjoyed to see the lights shimmering behind the town. "Jenna!" He knows that she is waiting for him. The thought of her causes another howl to erupt from his soul as he soars through the air for a moment, all four feet off the ground.

At the end of the movie, the lights morph into the shape of a wolf, and then the aurora-wolf howls, a beautiful final illustration of Balto's Wolf Spirit that now shines brightly within him.



Those broken bottle pieces of various colors represent the often fragmented and "broken" parts of ourselves. Many of them are parts that we don't really see the value in. We cast them away as trash, and we try to protect ourselves and others from their pointy, sharp edges.

The light, however - the Sun - represents the light of the authentic Self. And when all of our parts are integrated and pointed "to the North", so that our "Suns" can fully illuminate them, they cast off a brilliance that lights the way for others.

It makes me think of a song by Evanescence: "Broken Pieces Shine", from their latest album *The Bitter Truth*.

Give in to all that we are
And let all the broken pieces shine

...

Give in to all that we are
And let all the broken pieces come alive

...

Shamelessly be who we are
And let all the broken pieces shine

The Northern Lights represent the full expressions of oneself, shining all the colors of the multi-layered personhood. And as long as the Sun shines, they can never be extinguished.

Carl Jung has written about the Sun being the astrological archetype of the fully actualized, fully individuated Self. In *Hero*, Campbell quotes the Bhagavad Gita: "This Self cannot be cut nor burnt nor wetted nor withered. Eternal, all-pervading, unchanging, immovable, the Self is the same forever." (p. 206)

Personal Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this essay. I really enjoyed reading through *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and learning about the complexities of the Hero's Journey as I revisited one of my all-time favorite movies from childhood.

Balto is indeed a very special movie to me, especially that scene where Balto meets the White Wolf. Through the process of writing this essay, I had my own encounter—or re-encounter—with the Goddess as I remembered just how special that White Wolf has been to me throughout the years.

I remember how I felt when I first saw this animated character. I was absolutely *in love* with her. It's no wonder I became obsessed with wolves afterwards.

I still feel that same level of awe, deep adoration, and inspiration every time I watch that scene. It is a scene that stands alone in my memory as a timeless symbol of my own personal spiritual awakening and meeting Wild Woman.

The day after I read Campbell's chapter on meeting the Goddess and writing about the White Wolf in this essay, I had a dream in which I heard the phrase "at the foot of the goddess". I woke up with a start, those words ringing loud and clear in my mind.

I immediately thought about the scene where Balto smells the White Wolf in front of him, and he removes his paw from his face and he sees the wolf's feet.

Later that evening, I had a huge epiphany about the significance of this dream. I was thinking about how much I love the White Wolf, Aniu, and all that she represents to me,

and I was reading what Dev Ross (the screenwriter for *Balto II: Wolf Quest*) says about the character and what her archetype represents. And I started to remember a few key things about White Wolf's significance in my life.

Several years ago, I booked a session with a shamanic practitioner in Bend (who, incidentally, shares my first name). It was the first time I had ever sought spiritual guidance outside of the Christian religion I was raised in, and it was only a few months after the initial phases of my spiritual awakening. After the session, I asked her if she saw any specific spirit animals in the Otherworld. She said something about a panther, and then she said that White Wolf "really wants to work with you".

I was mesmerized, but also very skeptical. My gut seemed to be telling me that she was only saying what I wanted to hear, because when we were talking before the session I had expressed interest in wolves.

I had journaled about it a few days after the whole experience.

White Wolf... When she said that, I immediately thought of that scene in Balto where the white wolf appears to the wolf-dog to remind him of his true heritage. That scene always inspired me, cut to the core of me... Perhaps my heart is much like Balto's, in that movie. Tired, weary, discouraged. Doubtful. Unwilling to believe that there's something much greater in him... lying there in the snow, lost and forlorn, crying...

And then, the great White Wolf appears to him, howls a single note, calling him... "Come," it says. "Rise. Rise up! Follow the call of your wild heart."

But he turns his head, ashamed of his failure, and still doubtful.

The White Wolf turns to disappear again into the snow, taking one last glance at Balto. She called, he didn't answer. She wasn't going to beg him or wait for him. She had to move on.

Then Balto's eyes land on the medicine - the very reason he braved the wilderness in the first place.

To help the children.

His gaze follows the sheer canyon all the way up to its massive height. There's no way he could make it all the way up there.

Or.... Could he?

The words of his feathered friend Boris echo in his mind - "A dog cannot make this journey alone..."

Yeah, you're just a dog. You're nothing. You can't do this.

"But, maybe, a WOLF can."

No, I am not just a dog. I am a WOLF.

A new sense of resolve courses through his veins. He turns back to where the white wolf disappeared into the blizzard. He looks down, sees her paw prints. He puts his paw over it.

A perfect fit. Proof, right there.

He belts out a howl - a howl full of passion and resolve and strength.

The White Wolf returns and howls with him - their voices filling the valley with a song of courage and strength and awakening.

Yes, I do feel like Balto. I have heard the metaphorical White Wolf's call - but I doubt myself too much. I doubt everything too much.

When will I realize that I have the wildness of the wolf too? When will I let myself howl with the wolves?

I guess the White Wolf has shown up many times throughout my life, and I never really noticed.

The first fictional story I ever wrote was about a white wolf named Blizzard.

I bought a little white wolf toy/figurine that now sits on my altar as a totem.

When I was in Alaska, I visited the fur trading place in Anchorage, and they had a huge full-body stuffed white wolf, in a leaping position. I remember being amazed at how huge it was. I have some pictures of it.

And not just white wolves, but wolves in general have always been my obsession. I have more drawings, pictures, books, figurines, blankets, magnets, and images of wolves than any other animal.

Why, though? Why wolves?

Wildness. Beauty. Strength. Intelligence. Instinct. Perseverance.

Wolves survive. Wolves find a way. Wolves answer to no one but themselves.

Spirit of the Wolf, spirit of the White Wolf... If you're real, if you're really there, and if it's true that you have been sent to help me... Please, come to me. Please, walk by my side. Comfort me, encourage me. Fill me with your wild passion and instinct. Remind

me of my own powers and abilities, to trust in myself and my own instincts and intuition. Help me reconnect with nature and all things wild. Help me remember my own wild nature, in the time when humans and nature were one and in harmony.

Now, I think to myself, so what if that shaman-lady was only telling me what she thought I wanted to hear? The important thing is that it *resonated* with me *for a reason*, and that it led me somewhere. There has always been something about the Wolf for me, but *especially* the White Wolf.

Because *my* white wolf is the White Wolf in *Balto*, she is Aniu, and everything she represents.

I was in denial of it for so long. I was afraid of basically worshipping a cartoon animal, and I was also afraid that the white wolf was too cliché or too common of a spirit animal, or that I was appropriating it. I wrote it all off as just me making it all up in my head because I *wanted* it to be the white wolf.

But now I understand. It's not so much that she's my "spirit animal," it's that she's a *representation* of a certain *energy* that was drawing me in and calling to me, the energy of The Goddess archetype that I was slowly beginning to wake up to. Archetypes speak to us through what we're drawn to, and I am always telling my clients to *pay attention* to what you feel drawn to.

As Campbell says, "symbols are only the *vehicles* of communication," it's not so much the symbol itself that's important—it's the "tenor" of that symbol, the *energy* behind it, the *meaning* that runs through it, that we should be paying attention to. It doesn't really matter if it's a statue of the Buddha, an image of Mary, or a cartoon animal from a children's movie - if the figure is something that helps me connect with its tenor, with the energy of the Queen Goddess, the Wild Mother, Holy Mother, Wild Woman—then let it be so.

"[Wild Woman]...is the female soul. Yet she is more; she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is of instinct, of the worlds both seen and hidden - she is the basis.

...She is the Life/Death/Life force, she is the incubator. She is intuition, she is far-seer, she is deep listener, she is loyal heart.

...She is ideas, feelings, urges, and memory... She is the source, the light, the night, the dark, and daybreak.... She is the voice that says, 'This way, this way'.

She is the one who thunders after injustice. She is the one who turns like a great wheel. She is the maker of cycles... She is the mucky root of all women." (Estés, p. 13)

"To try to diagram her, to draw boxes around her psychic life, would be contrary to her spirit. To know her is an ongoing process, a lifelong process, and that is why this work is an ongoing work, a lifelong work." (p. 20)

"*La Loba*, the old one, The One Who Knows, is within us. She thrives in the deepest soul-psyche of women, the ancient and vital Wild Woman. The *La Loba* story describes her home as that place in time where the spirit of women and the spirit of wolf meet - the place where her mind and her instincts mingle, where a woman's deep life funds her mundane life. It is the point where the I and the Thou kiss, the place where women run with the wolves." (p. 29-30)

All of these descriptions are what the White Wolf represents to me.

White Wolf has appeared to me in dreams several times over the years. A few years ago I had a dream about a tiger and a white wolf. They were both huge. The white wolf felt like a mother figure, like Aniu herself, actually. She was licking me on the forehead, right at the spot of the "third eye".

She's been following me all along. She's been right there with me, whispering to me, guiding me, inspiring me.

Like Balto, I found myself at her feet years ago, when I started down the path of my spiritual awakening. I was introduced to her in the pages of *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, and in other incarnations of the Divine Feminine.

And then, as I healed, I started to see her within myself.

And now, I come to her again, at her feet, praying for her help. Her guidance. Her wisdom. Her strength. I pray for her to wake up the wildness within me.

A couple of days after I had that dream and heard those words "at the foot of the goddess"—on the Winter Solstice—White Wolf showed herself to me once again. I had gone into town to do some grocery shopping, and on my way back home I stopped at a travel center to gas up. While I was there, I was thinking about this time a few years ago

when I had stopped at a Pilot travel center and I had seen this white wolf head figurine in the gift section of the store. I had really wanted to buy it, but I told myself no, because I already had enough wolf figurines. I wondered if perhaps *this* travel center might have something similar. So I went inside, and in the center of the store there was this large display shelf with owls and wolves - *white* wolves. And they were *huge*. There was a wolf head bust a lot like the one I had seen at that Pilot years ago, except this one was *life-size*. It was absolutely gorgeous, and I wanted it. Even though I still hesitated, it felt wrong *not* to buy it. It was pretty loud and clear that it was a synchronicity, a confirmation of my revived relationship with White Wolf.

I bought her, took her home, and placed her in the center of my altar. (And let me tell you, she looks *amazing* there. She was *made* for my altar.)

I also believe that the size of it is a symbol of how *big* this archetypal imagery is in my life right now, how it is *supposed* to be a central focus for me. "At the foot of the goddess": I am *supposed* to be re-dedicating my life to "the Goddess", re-centering her in my life.

(And a sidenote: I've also been thinking about how the voice in my dream said "at the *foot* of the goddess", rather than "at the *feet*," and I think I know why this is. When I start to say the phrase "at the foot of...", my brain immediately thinks "at the foot of the cross". But that's no longer the case for me, because I am no longer a Christian. No longer do I prostrate myself at the foot of the cross, but at the foot of the wild, holy, mother goddess, of Wild Woman.)

A few months ago, I saw a psychic and tarot reader who calls herself Ruby Wolf (hah, *Wolf*...) She suggested that I find a goddess to whom I can "take on a *bhav*" towards. One that I feel a deep connection with, one that I can make my new "mother", in a sense, and practice devotion and admiration towards. (A "*bhav*" is a feeling-tone of adoration and absorption, it is an emotional and spiritual intensity towards someone or something.)

I think I found her. When I think about the white wolf from *Balto*, that scene, and everything she has come to represent - Wild Woman, Wild Mother, *La Loba*, THE Goddess - I feel that deep love and admiration that I suppose would indeed be considered a *bhav*.

I, like Balto, am at the feet of the Goddess once again, devoting myself to her, and re-centering her in my life.

"Follow her back to the road forgotten,
Meet yourself there, whole and unbroken
Know all at once, all paths lead to her
And love her,
For she has *always* loved you."

