

Excerpt from Flying Lessons

Chapter 2 The Most Important Journey of Your Life

By Pamela Hale

No matter what your current relationship to flying is, you are on a journey. We all are. Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero's Journey* was a life-changer for me. In it he talks about the journey each of us makes on a soul level, and how it is the same journey told in myths. He outlines the curve of the plot that runs through these classic journeys: a departure from "normal life"; an initiation; and a return. The plot line often looks something like this:

The Pattern of Your Soul's Flight

Departure

The hero (or heroine) hears a *call* that signals what kind of journey is ahead.

The call makes the hero feel "different," and in some way announces that he will have to depart from the "normal" life around him.

Initiation

- The *challenge* occurs when a character in the story assigns the hero a mission or venture.
- A mentor or *guide* often appears to initiate the hero into some new body of wisdom.
- The *road of trials* appears in the form of endless obstacles and seemingly impossible tasks the hero must complete . . . or else. It appears to be a life-or-death matter. Some of the obstacles are from outside the hero and some are the hero's inner fears and doubts.

Return

- The hero completes the challenge and obtains the *gift or reward*.
- The hero now returns to the world and *shares the gift* with others.

Your Journey

You are the hero or heroine on your own epic journey. Your life is a weaving of the outer and inner worlds. Outer events seem to come along that either lift you or bring you down. Inside, you respond either by falling out of balance or by continuing to be lifted by the Great Winds—by love, by your own respect for yourself and others, and by your love of your life. The way in which you respond causes other events, and so you co-create a story line, a set of adventures. Each adventure contains a departure, an initiation, and a return. Each completion arms you with new kinds of wisdom to apply to your life and to share with those around you.

As you think about your own journey, consider what metaphors or themes have persisted in your life. Flight has been a major one for me. You may have always had certain animals in your life, or been attracted to certain landscapes, stories, characters, or activities. You may be able to identify archetypal aspects of your journey that will help you map where you've been.

All the great journeys seem to have to do with the heart. Even the dragon-slaying stories are about “couer-age,” the French root of “courage” that refers to a quality of heart. What journeys have opened your heart? What adventures have tested and strengthened it?

The best part of adventures for me is the excitement, the discovery. Adventures—whether they consist of morning walks, making an exciting business decision, or stretching my physical or mental abilities—fire my imagination. And when that happens, beauty occurs everywhere. The landscape lights up, as if just for me. I've opened my eyes to the beauty and splendor of life, and the way I see it has made all the difference.

Whatever elements inspire you—beauty, excitement, freedom, power—we'll explore them through the metaphor of flight. You're about to have a chance to see how to find them right here on the ground, right in your life.

My Journey

I'm using stories from my own journey because I believe in the personal becoming universal. That's an old principle of storytelling—that when we tell a story of something truly personal, it taps into something universal that we have all experienced in some form. I trust that principle because I've tested it out with people and seen them respond.

This is not because my story is anything special; it's the opposite. It's because these stories are so ordinary that they have power. True, they are about flying a small plane, but they are really about not knowing, about struggling, about being ordinary, about fears and about discoveries. And so you will recognize yourself in them whether you are a fighter pilot or one who flies with white knuckles.

In my own bumbling way, I went through the heroine's journey during my flying lessons—and in other ventures as well. As I tell you how I came to take flying lessons in the first place, you might think about when you have made the hero's journey, and how that journey has changed you. Campbell might say that journey is the most important journey of your life—and I would agree with him!

My Departure

When I look back at some of my early experiences, it's easy to trace the power of the flight metaphor in my being. Two childhood memories remind me of the light and shadow sides that my journey into flight would bring forth.

When I was six, I believed that flying under my own power was just a matter of practice. To prove that, I gave myself my first flying lessons from the ladder of my swing set. I climbed up to the first step, turned around and faced the yard, gathered the image of me flying and felt it in my body, and then jumped onto the grass below. Feeling the success of that literal first step, I'd climb up to the second one. For a split second, I'd imagine that I had already done it; I could

feel a rush, a lifting within, somewhere around the heart, and my breath would almost leave me as I glided imperceptibly—just before hitting ground and making a juicy body print in the tall grass around the swing set.

Perusing a photo of myself looking self-assured in my overalls, I know I remained unruffled. After all, it was just a matter of practice. Soon I would simply take off and glide up over the rooftops. My mother and my grandmother, Dotsee, would undoubtedly be calling me: “Pam, you come down here right now, dear. Be pleasant about it, now, just come down.” But I would keep gliding as long as I liked, playing on the air waves, practicing turns and dips until I decided to amaze them yet again with a graceful landing right next to the swing set.

I regard that memory now as a call to flight, an announcement from the gods that flight would be my metaphor for empowerment, for healing, for liberation from the inevitable trials of life and from the darker, denser energies within me that would bring me down. The second memory, also from age six, is a perfect mirror of the darker side I would have to encounter.

I remember having trouble falling asleep one summer night after my mother married my stepfather and we had moved to our new house and I had a new last name. My stepfather, Jim Lochhead, had adopted me. He would be a true father to me and bring me up with a love, generosity, and steadiness that I would sorely need. Along with being delighted at having a new daddy, I retained some curiosity about my birth father, Robert Hale, a bomber pilot who was shot down and killed over Germany when I was twenty-one months old. So on that summer evening, when daylight savings meant I could still see a bit of light through the window shade, I had a twilight dream or fantasy about Bob Hale’s death. As I tried to settle into the four-poster bed that had belonged to my grandparents, I thought about the word “died.” What did that mean, he “died”? How did dying feel to him?

I tried imagining it. Maybe he was in his plane and he got shot and just fell over in his seat like a felled tree. I tried that, letting myself crash onto the sheets. No, I didn't think it was like that. I thought it would have happened more slowly, and maybe it hurt as well. I tried writhing around in pain, pretending I was bleeding, and imagined looking out the window of the plane at the other men who got out, floating down in their parachutes like a bunch of dandelions. I wondered if he felt like the hero they said he was, riding the plane down when he couldn't get out in time. I wondered if he thought of me. Maybe he pictured his little baby and wished he could hold her in his arms one more time.

Clearly, flight had its dark side for me. In fact, later I considered it somewhat remarkable that I was attracted to flying at all. I'm sure I've tried to integrate my father archetype by becoming him. At the very least, flying helped me to know him better, and to understand some of his life experience. But on another level, flying represented loss, pain, risk, sadness, and death.

My two memories paint the very conflict I would encounter many years later in my flying lessons, and the conflict I continue to face every day: How can I still be the innocent child full of confidence and joy and power who believes she can fly? And how especially can I be that child in a world where there is war, where fathers die, where there is blood and horror and loss and personal weakness and fear and death? How can I make peace between those light and dark forces within me, and use them both to be fully myself? And how can I use my own healing to contribute to the healing of the world in ways I never imagined?

A good metaphor—one that calls us to our life mission—must contain the light and the dark, the reward and the risk. It calls us to stretch, to span a chasm within us that we wouldn't dare try to cross were it not for being challenged by a powerful character (or a powerful part of ourselves) who believes we can do it.

My journey has at times made me feel “different,” in that no one around me seemed to be concentrating on such matters. Yet as I’ve grown older, I’ve found plenty of company—plenty of like-minded friends who find the inner journey exciting, joyous, and full of delightful surprises. If you are reading this book, you must be one of them.

My Initiation

When I turned forty, I made a list of things I wanted to do before I died (since at that advanced age I probably felt death was imminent). “Get pilot’s license by age fifty” was on the list, even though at the time I had been in a small plane only once, did not know anyone who had one, and had no plans to even take lessons. Flying then was a symbol at best; it meant freedom and power and excitement and beauty—and it still does.

When I was forty-five, I met Jon, who would become my second husband. A pilot his whole life, Jon owned the same Cessna 182 we fly now, only then he shared it with his father. The son of a U.S. Marine pilot, Jon went through Navy flight training and flew more than 230 missions in Viet Nam—mostly in an F-4. For him, flying around in our single engine four-seater 182 was like driving a Volkswagen bug after a racecar. But to me, flying with him was a great adventure and undoubtedly part of the mystique that made up our attraction.

We were married in 1989 and I moved to Tucson (dragging my teenage children kicking and screaming). For the next eight years I flew with Jon, and learned more and more about flying by timidly putting my hands on my set of controls in the right seat and following his instructions. I loved flying and found our adventures in Arizona and the West beautiful and thrilling. I didn’t know then how easy it is to make someone look good when she’s “flying” from the right seat. It’s sort of like taking a toddler on your lap in a car, letting her put her hands on the steering wheel, and telling her she’s driving.

I kept telling Jon and myself that any day now, I'd begin flying lessons and earn my pilot's license. I even took a "pinch-hitter" course, a one-day quickie in which you help land an airplane, making the odds a bit better that you could get one on the ground if the pilot were suddenly incapacitated. That was only partially convincing, but I kept giving myself pep talks about how much I had learned from Jon. He said I was a "natural," so I figured whenever I got around to the training, it would be a snap.

My Challenge

The Challenge occurred on an otherwise normal Saturday morning when Jon asked me a simple question in a kind enough tone. "So I was just wondering," he mused, "is all your talk about getting your pilot's license just talk, or are you going to do it?"

The air went out of me quite suddenly, as if I had been punched in the gut. It wasn't until that very moment that I knew I was terrified. It came as quite a shock, and my first reaction was to issue a counterattack, since clearly I had been nailed. I tried to make a sound come out, but Jon spoke first.

"I was thinking that since we don't have any plans this morning, we could go out to La Cholla [the small airport where we keep the plane] and I could change the oil on the plane. Maybe Clio is home—she's the female flight instructor I've told you about. I think she would be perfect for you, but you could meet her and decide for yourself."

No way out. All I could do was nod. Breathe and nod some more. Maybe I would hate Clio, and that would help me postpone lessons a bit longer.

My Guide

Right away, I could tell Clio was a "big" person, even though she stands about five foot two and probably weighs 120 pounds dripping wet. Her short-cropped hair was beginning to

show some gray, but I could tell she'd never bother to dye it. She wore no makeup and emitted a no-nonsense air. The scariest thing about her was that her kitchen countertops had absolutely nothing on them. (To me, complete lack of clutter was the sign of a sick mind.) To make matters worse, her dogs minded perfectly.

Despite the fact that Clio would clearly not accept my excuses, something in me said she was the One. Maybe it was her easy, down-to-earth tone of authority. I could see she'd never lie to me. That could have its disadvantages, but just the same, I trusted her. Without a whimper, I signed up for my first flying lesson a week later.

In Campbell's map of the heroine's journey, Clio could represent the Goddess, or in fairy tales she would be the fairy godmother. I had no idea at that time how transformational my time with her would be—or how difficult. She would become my “aviation therapist,” the one who would guide me through the minefield of fears I was about to encounter.

My Road of Trials

My Road of Trials would be long and convoluted. I would long to quit on numerous occasions, and would construct lengthy arguments about how sensible an idea quitting was. I would lose the sense of humor, fun, and joy that had been part of flying. I would succumb to a deflating sense of failure when my mistakes seemed to prove the very unworthiness I was trying to overcome. Flying lessons would become a perfect weaving of outer and inner trials. The outer maneuvers to master seemed endless, and each one put me face to face with my own lack of confidence. I would be forced to observe myself taking challenges that would try most students and make them part of my own personal story of failure. I would be completely dependent upon Clio, my guide and the representative of the part of me that really did believe I could do it, that thought I was worthy in spite of mistakes, that had a sense of humor and balance, and that was

determined not to quit. And then I would have to break free of that dependence and become my own Clio—become the pilot of my own life.

My Return

It took me eighteen months to reach for the grail, that little piece of paper that proclaimed me a pilot. It took me longer than that to believe what Clio told me that day—that I was now a pilot for life. Even if I didn't stay current, even if I stopped flying forever, I would still be a pilot and no one could ever take that away from me. By now, that was my grail, a reward worthy of a true heroine. And yet, like any graduation, it would only be the beginning.

Life handed me unexpected challenges back on the ground, and the lessons I learned with Clio became applicable to the next initiation and to the next Road of Trials. There were more journeys ahead, and they all required navigating through fears and self-doubts, overcoming obstacles, and seizing the freedom to live fully, to “fly.”

I didn't know then that out of a challenging journey through cancer, I would find my passion, my true life's work. It would involve becoming a sort of “Clio” for others, someone who could serve as an ally, a coach, a teacher of maneuvers to help others break free and soar.

I didn't know how fulfilled and fortunate I would feel to continue flying around the West, photographing the ground from above, and continuing to be a student and teacher of flight. My shamanic training led me to the medicine of the eagle, and so in more than one way I learned what it's like when we can open our hearts, see the story of our lives from above, and soar to new levels where we are open to finding out about the beings we are called to become.