

What *Finding Nemo* Has To Teach Us About the Belly of the Whale

Melissa Bradley-Ball, MS, NCC, BCETS, FAAETS
www.theomnibuscenter.org

The full-length animated movie *Finding Nemo* is on a powerful story about life's heroic journey and begins with a series of traumatic events in the lives of Marlin and Coral, expectant parents of 400 children (clown fish) about to be born. As the movie begins, Coral and 399 of their children-about-to-be-born are lost to a barracuda attack, leaving only one "child" to survive – Nemo. Marlin must deal with the profound losses, his guilt that he could not stop the attack and having a "special needs" child, Nemo, who was born with a defective fin. The loving and traumatized widower/father would probably be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in our Western Medical model.

Nemo, an adventurous and vibrant little fish, wishes to break out of his father's hypervigilance by getting outside the "perimeter wire" of the reef and see what life holds. Through a series of events, goes off on an accidental journey, leaving his father with the dilemma of choices: What will rule his life? Will it be love or will it be fear?

As actor Albert Brooks does so brilliantly, Marlin is anxious, pessimistic, terrified of what will happen because he knows that very bad things in life can happen, worries constantly, but becomes willing to change and heal. He chooses to face his fears for the love of his beloved son Nemo, and sets out on the journey to find and return him to the safety of their home.

Early in the journey, Marlin meets up with the seemingly dingy blue fish – Dory – who is played beautifully by Ellen DeGeneres. Dory appears ditsy, forgetful, goofy and seemingly not very smart, but this wonderful mentor/ally/trickster is going to play a pivotal role as the initiation guide and mentor during Marlin's transformation and help him find exactly what he needs to thrive in life...to truly live his life fully.

They begin to traverse the challenges of the initiation time (The Jellyfish Jungle), they come in contact with some challenges which are very dangerous. They meet a group of sharks – 12 Step-style – which are struggling to give up fish (Marlin and Dory are fish). Marlin reluctance and doubt to continue is met with Dory's persistence to keep him going. As Winston Churchill once said, "If you find yourself in hell, keep going." Dory's version of Churchill's statement is a catchy little ditty she repeatedly sings, "just keep swimming, just keep swimming..."

As they travel deeper and deeper into the dark and scary sea, into the metaphorical basement of Marlin's soul, he becomes more frightened that he will never see his son again and his life – as he knows it – will be over forever. In this journey, however, a part of Marlin is going to die and another part will be revealed...The Hero Within. The feeling of hopelessness washes over him. It is during this time of complete and utter emotional and physical exhaustion – which is not uncommon at this point in the journey that Marlin and Dory encounter with a whale when they are in the deepest part of the sea. Although it appears to be quite similar to a profound Major Depressive Episode, it is clinically and energetically different and is an extremely transformative part of the journey.

When they find themselves *in the mouth* of the whale, Dory has the discernment and wisdom to quit singing "just keep swimming" – for she knows better. With her companion and initiate exhausted, he is in the perfect state of being for the next step of the journey. This complete lack of energy, ego and stamina is actually Marlin's greatest gift. When we no longer have any emotional or physical energy left, we are much more likely to surrender to the very thing which transforms us. Surrendering is, ironically, the only thing which allows us to continue this journey because our ego or false self has been shattered. This is also the dangerous opportunity for transformation and why Joseph Campbell once stated,

"Madmen and saints, swim in the same waters, what drowns one, will transform another."

For people who their sheer will and intestinal fortitude have gotten them through, the belly of the whale time may feel like they have completely been broken in two, having failed completely. Yet, it is the greatest sign of wisdom about to spring forth. When we have reached a bottom of our understanding and we resign – to God, a Higher Power, a universal force or what is to be or to who we really are – we can be transformed. Illusions are shattered, the false self is gone, the authentic self and authentic life can be revealed.

Mentor Dory speaks very important words to Marlin. “Just keep swimming” is no longer appropriate at this place in the journey. She instead says, “Just let go.” Since Marlin doesn’t have the energy to argue with her, he seemingly has no other choice. Instead of clinging tenaciously to the tongue of the whale, Marlin and Dory let go for the ride of their life...first into the belly of the whale and then, and only then, do they get blown out the blow hole so they may continue their life journey (to find Nemo and other marvelous things). When we reach the end of our rope, life is usually calling us to let go and allow life to carry us for a while as we release control. In essence, transformation comes in the form of becoming a whale loogie.

I won’t spoil anymore of the movie for you, for this is only the first half! Many more adventures and transformative moments occur as Dory and Marlin are free to continue their journey, all while Nemo is having his own transformative journey. With the most difficult aspect of the journey over, they have the strength and hope to continue after they realize the importance of letting go so a new part can be reborn.

The belly of the whale time or dark night of the soul is an extraordinarily frightening and exhausting time. We tend to have tunnel vision, a sense that we are losing everything in our life which we hold dear, yet it is not until we surrender our will, that we find we are transformed. Theologians and philosophers – for centuries – have written about this very topic. One of my favorite authors, was Henri Nouwen, who wrote 40+ books before he died. Nouwen said of this time,

“I was forced into the basement of my soul, to look directly at what was hidden there, to choose in the face of it all, not death, but life.”

The heroic framework is a Universal Monomyth, found in every culture around the world, in every spiritual tradition. During the deepest and most transformative life journey’s such as trauma and loss, perhaps with a trusted “initiation guide” such as a therapist or clergy we can transform the pain into beautiful and transformative life gifts.

Journaling or discussion questions:

- Have you had a “jellyfish jungle time”? If so, what did you fear most? How did you come through that time?
- What or who helped you through it? How?
- What were your feelings and thoughts about yourself and life as you traveled that time in your life?
- Have you find yourself in the mouth of the whale, where you were completely physically and emotionally exhausted?
- What illusions were you being asked to let go of?
- What did you have to grieve?
- What positive realities began to come to you?
- What happened? How did move beyond that belly of the whale time?
- How were you transformed by the event?
- How did that transformation help others later?
- What would you tell others about that time in your life?
- How has the wisdom and lessons from those deep journey times been helpful to others?