

Star Wars, Childhood and the Power of Myth

Jennifer K. Stuller

2005-05-19

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away (in this case, Brewer, Maine, 1977), a flaxen-haired young whelp of a boy gazed in utter terror at the looming frame of Darth Vader, some 20 feet tall on the cinema screen above.

Eyes wide and mouth agape, he shuddered as he watched the Sith Lord's impending victory over the sage Obi-Wan Kenobi: "The circle is now complete," said Vader. "When I left you, I was but a learner -- now I am the master."

Many critical thoughts were born in the 3 year-old boy's mind that day -- foremost that Darth Vader was a badass -- but also the idea that there are conceptual circles of progression, of time and being. The expression "to come full circle" would forever be linked in the boy's mind to Vader's fateful reunion with Kenobi.

Now, 28 years later, the boy is a man, and another circle is poised to be completed. It is with no small amount of anxiety that he prepares for George Lucas' epic six-part space opera to come to a close this week. Its quality is beside the point; and frankly, his hopes are not high. Rather, it's the fact that the story arc will find its missing link, and that Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith, released today, will bring about that elusive but essential idea of "closure" so many of us spend our lives in frustrating search of.

The young boy who once sat hypnotized in that dark Maine theater is now a man held in rapture each time the latest Star Wars trailer is televised. He is also my husband.

Whether the film rocks or sucks, for him the result will be the same -- an experience of absolute and unmitigated spiritual triumph. Now, he and millions like him will receive the signal to move on. It's over. No more to see here. Like so many nerdy spirits damned to seek resolution in the ghost land of our youth, we can at last find peace, as a prominent remnant of our childhood can now be laid to rest.

Melodramatic, you say? Perhaps. But understand the importance of this saga to our lives thus far.

For many, the 1977 screening is our first memory. We proudly wore Luke and/or Leia Underroos, and were among the 600,000 children to get IOU vouchers from Kenner on Christmas morning 1977, in lieu of actual action figures.

As we grew older, Yoda's zen-like messages of the Force influenced our approach to life. In short, we strived to use the Force for "knowledge and defense, never for attack." We were wary of the Dark Side, and quick to recognize its mark -- "anger ... fear ... aggression." If the lessons our family, school or religion taught us ever fell short, we need only fantasize about our life as a Jedi, and things became crystal clear.

Luke Skywalker's path as a Joseph Campbell-influenced heroic archetype resonated with us at a shockingly deep level, intertwining Lucas' imaginative tales with our own struggles towards adulthood. To say the Star Wars saga was merely a few movies greatly insults its importance for the generation it influenced, as well as its status as one of the great epic tales of all time.

It was with this foundation that we rejoiced upon hearing Lucas' plans for the prequels. As our lives continue to change and grow with endeavors such as college, career, family and so on, the wisdom of the Jedi would help shepherd us along. The hopes and expectations grew, only to be met with the likes of Jar Jar Binks -- a letdown, to say the least. The time capsules of our childhoods had been ripped open and seemed blemished beyond repair.

But were we bitter? Only for a bit. Clearly these new films weren't intended for us. As George Lucas pointed out at a recent Cannes Film Festival press conference, "We've discovered that we have two fan bases. One is over 25 and one is under 25." Duh. Guess which category my hubby and I fall into.

Regardless, continued derision of the prequels is futile. Refusing to hold onto our anger (for that is the path of the Dark Side), we are better off to look toward Episode III with renewed hope. By completing the movies once and for all, the circle will be complete -- and in that at least there is peace.

Ryan R. Wilkerson, Official Star Wars/Lucasfilm Fan Club Member #285 contributed to this column.