

Joe Banks, Joseph Campbell and Joseph Smith

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Meaning

I am writing this to document for my posterity (and for others who may be interested) about the meaning of the cult classic movie, *Joe vs the Volcano*, starring Meg Ryan, Lloyd Bridges and Tom Hanks (1990). Once I am dead, I fear these insights will be lost forever. You may be saying to yourself, “What is so important about some silly movie?” To you I say, “He who has ears, let him hear.”

Many important principles are taught in parables. Math and science are not the only paths to understanding; some have said that even math and science are only metaphors. One purpose of this exposition is to point out the connections between *Joe vs the Volcano* and three strange Egyptian pictures included in the Pearl of Great Price. Hopefully, this will illustrate connections between Abraham and Joe Banks. Hugh Nibley said that Abraham is everyman as everyman should be. The story of Joe Banks is also the story of everyman. It would therefore follow that the meaning of *Joe vs the Volcano* is connected in some way to the meaning of life. The notes to Facsimile #2, of the Book of Abraham say that the facsimile “contains writings that cannot be revealed unto the world; but is to be had in the Holy Temple of God.” If there are connections between *Joe vs the Volcano* and the Book of Abraham, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear may notice other connections: connections to the meaning of life. Patricia, a character in the movie played by Meg Ryan, quotes her father as saying, “Almost the whole world is asleep. Everybody you know. Everybody you see. Everybody you talk to. He says that only a few people are awake, and they live in a state of constant, total amazement.”

Joseph Campbell

Before we look at the story of Joe Banks, we need to review something about the writings of Joseph Campbell. Joseph Campbell was a professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College. He made a study of the world’s mythologies and religions. He came to the conclusion that all these cultures and even many of the world’s fairy tales tell essentially the same story, which he

designated “the hero’s journey.” Campbell even draws from the writings of the psychologist, Karl Jung which contend that human dreams share elements of this same archetype. In 1949, Campbell wrote a definitive book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* in which he outlines and illustrates the elements of the hero’s journey. The hero, who is minding his own business, receives a strange call to adventure. If he refuses the call, he stays as he is. If he accepts the call, he experiences strange and perilous trials which he survives only with the help of mysterious strangers. After his trials, the hero returns to his home, a conquering hero, much changed and much better; some say enlightened. This archetype has many other common elements, but this summary will suffice for now. The archetype focuses on a heroic character who saves the entire race by his sacrifice. But Campbell concludes the book by emphasizing the elements of the hero’s journey that characterize each human life.

The “monomyth” that Campbell documents contains element of the plan of salvation: a pre-existence where participants choose to descend into the mortal bucket at the peril of their immortal souls and, if successful, return to live with heavenly parents clothed in robes of glory; a savior who sacrifices his own life to rescue the human family; spiritual helpers who guide the way. That this story should be present in broken forms and pieces throughout the world should not be a surprise. The writers of the Book of Mormon repeatedly state that Christ has been spoken of by all the holy prophets since the world began. One illustration from Campbell’s book that is particularly striking to me is the Hindu story of Vishnu, who volunteers to drink up the poisonous cloud that has arisen from the lake of immortality juice after one thousand years of stirring. Drinking this cloud turned Vishnu’s neck blue but made it possible for the other beings to partake of immortality. Only Vishnu had the power to do it. I think of this story when I read of the Savior saying, “O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.” (Matthew 26:42) The hero, Christ, drank up all the poison generated by human failings throughout the world’s existence.

Joseph Banks

We are now ready to talk about *Joe vs the Volcano*. The hero of this movie is Joe Banks, played by Tom Hanks. Meg Ryan plays three different characters: Dede, Angelica, and Patricia. The movie begins by stating that it is a fairy tale, but the opening credits are accompanied by a

phrase from a song, “I owe my soul to the company store.” On his way to work, Joe ruins his shoe and tells his co-worker, Dede, that he is losing his soul. This is not your typical romantic comedy.

Joe walks to work down a jagged path that looks like a lightning bolt and goes through a gate that looks like an open mouth. I see the jagged path as an allusion to labyrinth that the Greek hero, Jason, had to navigate to meet and conquer the Minotaur. The mouth-gate through which Joe walks is clearly a Uroboros, a mythological creature that consumes itself, like the moon which disappears a little every night until it is completely gone. Uroboros is a metaphor for mortal life which is consumed a little each day until it is gone.

The circumstances of Joe’s job are despicable, and his duties are totally meaningless. He is sick, so he goes to the doctor. The doctor has a carved goose on the mantel symbolizing the goose that laid the cosmic egg, or the goose that laid the golden egg, in the fairy tale. The doctor tells Joe he is a hypochondriac. He informs Joe that he has a brain cloud, which has no symptoms but is terminal. Joe’s hypochondria is his fear and faithlessness, and I see the brain cloud as the veil that separates us all from the spiritual world and its truth. On a date Joe tells Dede that he is terminal which causes her to withdraw. Dede is an example of the character who refuses the call to adventure and stays as she is.

Joe is visited by Harvey Graynamore, played wonderfully by Lloyd Bridges, who lights his pipe and demands a libation before he will reveal his purpose. His cane repeats the goose theme. He tells Joe that he wants to hire him to jump into a volcano so Harvey can get a substance that will allow him to corner the market of superconductors. In light of his terminal status and Harvey’s bribe, Joe agrees. Harvey’s last name implies that he is the provider of the bread of life. He is the moving force behind the events of the movie, not only because he calls Joe to the adventure, but because he is the father of both Angelica and Patricia who accompany Joe along the way. He is hiring Joe to promote his power and glory. Harvey can be seen as God in disguise and not only because he has a daughter named Angelica. Another example of a god in disguise is the frog in the frog prince fairy tale, who restores the soul (golden ball) to the princess, after she has lost it at the bottom of the pond. Joe has lost his soul. Harvey calls Joe to adventure to rescue him from his meaningless life. Incidentally, you may note that Joe will end up marrying Harvey’s daughter, Patricia.

Joe goes shopping with the aid of his driver, Marshall, who escorts Joe through his initiation and transformation. As the barber says to Joe after cutting his hair, “You look like a prince in a fairy tale.” Marshall says that “clothes makes the man” and helps endow Joe with, among other things, the tuxedo he will be married in. During this transformation, Joe enters a shop whose doorway is flanked by two dogs. This is a clear allusion to the line of sphinxes that flank the entry to Egyptian temples or the lions that guard the Masonic ones. Then comes the ceremony that gives Joe the lifesaving gift that is central to the movie. The ceremonial nature of the event is made obvious: The salesman says in serious tones “luggage is the central preoccupation of my life,” then opens church-style doors with stained-glass windows to the sounds of organ music. On the marble floor is a compass pointing to the four cardinal directions. The salesman reveals with a flourish a large steamer trunk which he says is hand-made and tight as a drum. When Joe orders four of them, the salesman gives him a blessing, saying, “May you live for a thousand years, sir.” Finally, Marshall parts with Joe at his hotel saying, “There are some doors you have to go through on your own.” The initiation theme is undeniable.

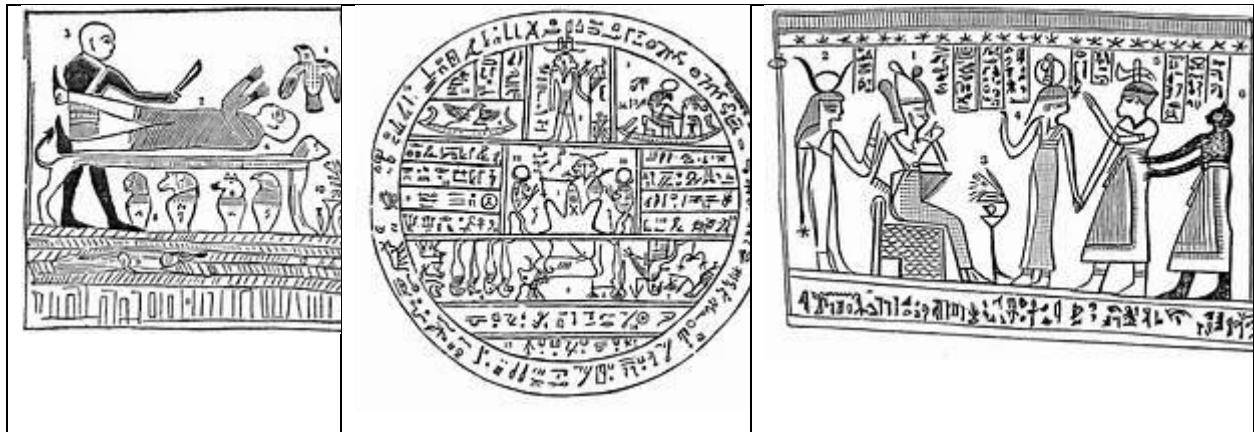
Joe takes a plane to Los Angeles. The stewardess on the flight says, “We are descending into Los Angeles.” Joe is descending into the underworld, or the mortal world. Joe is met by Angelica, who calls herself “a flibbertigibbet.” She orders Dungeness crab for dinner. Angelica explains her artworks by saying that art comes from someplace, implying that art is revelation from another realm. Joe passes another test by turning down sex, then watches the sun rise between trees which begins to illuminate this dark world. This is an allusion to light shining into the darkness through the pillars of the temple, or, perhaps, to Stonehenge at equinox.

Joe is met by Patricia, and sets sail for the island of Waponi Wu, where the volcano is located. The sailboat is called *Tweedledee*, one of Harvey Graynamore’s two sailboats—the *Tweedledee* and the *Tweedledum*. During a dinner decorated by a large sunflower, Joe and Patricia discuss that the people Joe is traveling to the island to meet are descendants of a variety of the earth’s cultures. Joe and Patricia later discuss belief in God and the value of courage. Suddenly lightning destroys the *Tweedledee*. Joe and Patricia survive by Joe constructing a raft out of the four steamer trunks which bubble magically to the surface of the water. These trunks contain the all provisions necessary to keep Joe and Patricia alive. Joe sacrifices by giving all the water to

Patricia who is lying unconscious on the raft. After many days and nights on the raft, Joe has a vision of the moon and the zodiac and thanks God for his life.

Eventually, Joe and Patricia are discovered by the Waponis, who welcome Joe as the savior who will sacrifice himself to the volcano and save them from its wrath. They wash, anoint, and clothe Joe in his tuxedo and set him on a throne in preparation for his sacrifice. On the way to the volcano Joe and Patricia are married and then go through another open mouth doorway (Uroboros) and jump into the volcano. They are ejected by the volcano and land in the ocean to again discover the four steamer trucks on which they sail away to live happily ever after.

Joseph Smith



Now it is time to connect the details of the movie to the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham is Joseph Smith's revelation/translation of certain Egyptian artifacts acquired by the Church in 1835. The narrative in the Book of Abraham contains three facsimiles or vignettes which illustrate some of its content. The first connection I would mention is the parallel between the arc of the story these three facsimiles tell and the plot of the movie. Facsimile #1 illustrates the sacrifice of Abraham. Facsimile #2 illustrates Abraham's description of astronomy. Facsimile #3 shows Abraham on Pharaoh's throne dressed in glory. Joe goes from losing his soul and facing death on the steamer-trunk raft to having the magnificence of the moon and stars revealed to him

and finally being placed on the throne by the Waponis. Sacrifice, courage, journey and divine intervention are major themes in both.

The most compelling connection between the two are the steamer trunks. Look at Facsimile #1. Abraham is stretched out on the altar, about to be sacrificed. Under the altar are the four canopic jars, each with the head of a different animal. The notes under the vignette calls these idolatrous gods and gives them names. These were the gods of the four quarters of the earth for the Egyptians. (Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City; Deseret Book, 2009, pp. 296-302). When an Egyptian was mummified, his vital organs were removed from the body and placed in these jars. The function of these jars may be hinted at in Ezekiel 37:9 which says regarding the reconstitution of the slain multitudes, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon the slain, that they may live.” Just so, Joe’s steamer trunks represent the four cardinal directions and contain the supplies necessary to sustain life during his journey across the sea. Patricia is stretched out on the trunks as it floats on the sea. Abraham is stretched out on the sacrificial altar over the four jars and a sea in Facsimile#1

These images with the animal heads are also in Facsimile #2, where they are identified in the notes as representing “this earth in its four quarters.” You will remember the ceremony where Joe received the trunks. The floor tile represented the four cardinal directions. (You might also think about the baptismal font in the temple.) In the font the priest is burying and then bringing up again the person being baptized. Under the font are twelve oxen, three of each facing in each of the cardinal directions. This is a prophetic illustration of the event recorded in Matthew 28:19 where the Savior told the Apostles, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” The twelve apostles are the oxen, baptism is the burden and the destination is the four corners of the compass.

A somewhat less significant detail in Facsimile #2 is the presence of the two boats, perhaps the *Tweedledee* and the *Tweedledum*. Facsimile #2 is used by Abraham to illustrate his understanding of astronomy. Joe also got a dramatic view of the moon and the zodiac. And then there is the lotus blossom in Facsimiles #1 and #3 which represent Abraham in Egypt according to the notes. The sunflower presiding over Joe and Patricia at dinner may show that the sun is beginning to shine in Joe’s previously dark life in contrast to the broken little flower that Joe tried to rescue on his way in to work at the beginning of the movie.

And finally, Facsimile #3 shows Abraham on the throne of Pharaoh. In the movie, the Waponis prepare Joe by washing, anointing, and clothing him in his tuxedo and set him on a throne next to Patricia who he will soon marry. Hugh Nibley pointed out that at length the circumstances where a commoner could be placed on the throne of pharaoh. (Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, Deseret Book, 2000, Chapter 9.)

You may ask how John Patrick Shanley, the writer and producer of *Joe vs. the Volcano*, came to know all this stuff. I can't answer that question, though I wrote to him years ago. But judging from the work of Joseph Campbell, I would say that some knowledge of these things is widely spread among the children of God and that many from all cultures are inspired in how to fulfill their missions in life. The meaning of the movie is that those who have the courage to accept the call to adventure and obey the helping inspiration of the Spirit may find enlightenment and be given a hero's welcome when they return.