

The Power Of Myth in Our Everyday Lives

When I took on the subject of Mythology as Story, I decided to concentrate on the power of myth, in symbols and metaphors relating to our own lives and times, even as we look back to ancient myths and incorporate them into these life lessons. I chose the renowned comparative mythology scholar, Joseph Campbell, in conversation with journalist and fellow seeker, Bill Moyers, in the PBS series “The Power of Myth” as my primary source.

“Greek and Latin and biblical literature used to be part of everyone’s education,” Joseph Campbell says in the first chapter of “The Power of Myth.” “Now, when these were dropped, a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. When the story is in your mind, you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you perspective on what’s happening to you. With the loss of that, we’ve really lost something because we don’t have comparable literature to take its place. These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don’t know what the guide-signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself.”

“So we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world?” asks Bill Moyers. “To harmonize our lives with reality?”

“I think so, yes,” Campbell agrees.

Campbell does not subscribe to what many espouse as the purpose of myths, in a seeking of meaning in our lives. What we are really seeking, he says, is an experience of being alive, not a meaning. In Buddhist teachings, for example, “What’s the meaning of the universe? What’s the meaning of a flea? It’s just there. That’s it. And your own meaning is that you’re there. We’re so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it’s all about.”

He recommends reading myths, other people’s myths rather than our own—which tend to be biased by our own interpretations based on fact—to help put your mind in touch with the experience of being alive. We have lost the rituals and symbols by which people participate in rites of passage—birth, puberty, marriage, old age, death—and the system of understood, unwritten rules, by which people lived. An “ethos” or an unstated mythology for living life no longer exists.

What we’re learning in our schools is not the wisdom of life, but technologies, information, and increasingly, our mechanized, digitalized (and I would add AI) world, prevents us from learning what he terms “life values.”

Campbell resists defining myth. “The dictionary definition would be stories about gods,” he says. But then you have to define a god. “A god is a personification of a motivating power or a value system

that functions in human life and in the universe—the powers of your own body and of nature. The myths are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and the same powers that animate our life animate the life of the world.”

There are two totally different orders of mythology, he says: one that relates you to your nature and the natural world and your place in it, and another that is sociological, linking you to a particular society or group. The biblical tradition is a socially oriented mythology, where nature tends to be condemned, whereas nature-based religions do not attempt to control nature but place the individual and the society in accord with it.

“But when nature is thought of as evil, you don’t put yourself in accord with it, you control it or try to, and hence the tension,” Campbell warns. “The anxiety, the cutting down of forests, the annihilation of native people.”

In our own creation myth of the Garden of Eden, after God puts Adam to sleep and pulls Eve out of his rib, that’s when the trouble began, what Campbell terms “the discovery of duality: male and female, life and death, good and evil—the problems of opposites.” That’s when we lost the notion of unity in all things.

“You can eat the fruit of any tree in the place but not of this or of that one,” declares God. Tree number one was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Tree number two was the tree of the knowledge of eternal life.

The serpent, “who represents lunar consciousness and life in the field of time,” Campbell says, entices Eve to try the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and she, in turn bids Adam to have a taste. God shows up for his evening walk and sees Adam and Eve wearing fig leaves and asks them what’s with the leaves? And we know the rest of the story: the man blames the woman, the woman blames the snake, and God curses them all and kicks them out of the garden. Man gets a life of labor and sweat, womankind the pain of child birth, and the serpent has to crawl on his belly for the rest of his life. “And that’s the explanation of why we’re out here in the cold and not in the Garden,” says Campbell.

People actually believed, and many still do, that these are the literal Truths, even though we know that there was no Garden of Eden, no prehistoric ‘Fall,’ no universal Flood, no Noah’s Ark. “The entire history on which our leading Occidental religions have been founded is an anthology of fictions, says Campbell. “But these are fictions of a type that have had—curiously enough—a universal vogue as the founding legends of other religions, too.”

No other religions are based on good and evil, guilt and fear the way the Occidental religions are. Campbell believed that priests and pontiffs, wielding enormous power over their supplicants, acted irresponsibly by perpetuating the fictions, rather than treating the myths as the metaphors they were.

Tribal myths, unlike our sociological, religious myths, concern themselves with the rhythms of nature and the cycles of life and death, including that life begets life—but not without death— and

that one must kill in order to live. Hunting cultures held great reverence for the animals they took to sustain the lives of their people, and they had a myth and a set of symbols for every occasion, every phase of life. Because native mythology was an oral tradition, depending on who was telling the story, the audience could expect a certain amount of embellishment and editorializing, making it more entertaining and more relevant to evolving circumstances.

Indigenous mythology also tended to include an element of irony, humor, and mischievousness, along with a lesson. The “trickster,” played by a coyote, spider or beaver, represented the counterforce of chaos in the normal functioning of society.

In the Hopi trickster tale “Coyote and the Boxes,” Coyote had run out of luck hunting, and decided to enlist the help of Eagle. With Eagle’s eyes in the sky and Coyote’s nose on the ground, he figured out they could catch enough prey to fill both their stomachs. Eagle was skeptical, but he agreed.

The hunt did not go well. Coyote complained that Eagle’s eyes must be growing old and weak. Eagle answered that there was a lack of good light—there was only so much that he could see in these very trying conditions.

They came upon a village of spirits gathered around two boxes. Eagle watched as they opened each box; one for more light and the other for less, and he told Coyote that the spirits were being careful not to open the boxes all the way, making sure the contents didn’t escape.

Coyote desperately wanted to know what was in those boxes, but they had to wait until nightfall before Eagle could go after them. When he returned, carrying a box in each of his two claws, Coyote offered to carry the boxes, saying that Eagle looked tired.

But Eagle was suspicious of Coyote and made him promise not to open them. Coyote agreed, but as soon as he had the boxes in his grasp he opened them up. In a flash the sun and moon escaped from the boxes and fled to the highest parts of the sky.

“You fool!” Eagle cried. “Now we shall be at the mercy of the sun and moon. We will only be able to hunt whenever they decide to give us light!”

But that was not all the trouble that Eagle and Coyote caused. For now that the sun and moon were free to give the world light and darkness whenever they wanted, they also decided to create the cold winter.

We once had a mythology for the power of nature, Campbell says, for the seeded earth—fertility, creation and the mother goddess—as well as for the heavens, represented by the celestial lights. But we have lost them in modern times. What’s more, he laments, “We can’t have a mythology for a long, long time to come. Things are changing too fast to be mythologized.”

How do we live without myths then?” asks Bill Moyers, and Campbell answers that we must find an aspect of myth that relates to our own lives. He lays out what he sees as the four functions of myth:

the mystical function, the wonder and mystery of the universe that underlies all forms; the cosmological dimension, the science, showing you the shape—and mystery—of the universe; the sociological function, a certain social order, depending on one's place—(this is the one that has taken over in our world and is out of date, he points out)—and a fourth function of myth, the pedagogical function, “of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. “We have today to learn to get back into accord with the wisdom of nature and realize again our brotherhood with the animals and with the water and the sea,” he says.

Perhaps Campbell's deep study of comparative mythology, laid out in his seminal work “The Hero with A thousand Faces,” published in 1949, can help get us to that place. In the book, he explores a universal motif he calls a “monomyth,” meaning that stories tend to have similar structure across cultures. “The human psyche is essentially the same all over the world,” he says. “The inward experience of the human body—the same impulses, conflicts, fears. Out of this common ground came what Jung called archetypes, the common ideas of myths.”

The hero's journey consists of twelve steps beginning with a call to adventure, which takes the individual into the realm of the supernatural and a series of tests and trials. If the individual succeeds there is a “prize” or a reward followed by a return from the symbolic darkness or Underworld “to life and light” with new-found knowledge and enlightenment that can be put to use in one's own life and community.

I think it's safe to say that Joseph Campbell spent his entire life on a hero's journey, after finding himself at odds with the academia of the time. From roughly 1929 to 1934, right in the middle of the Great Depression, he rejected the ordinary path followed by young men his age and embarked on his own journey of discovery. He spent time in Europe, where he discovered James Joyce, the artists Mondrian and Picasso in Paris, and Carl Jung in Germany. Returning to the U.S. he eventually escaped to a cabin in Woodstock, New York, and spent the next five years reading and taking notes. He discovered Carl Sandburg's “Leaves of Grass,” and he read everything he could of Thomas Mann and James Joyce—Stephen Daedalus was one of his heroes— followed by the philosophers: Spengler, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kant, and Goethe, all the while immersing himself in Jungian psychology.

“If you are on your own path,” he says, or you are “following your bliss”, “things are going to come to you and there's no precedent so everything that happens is a surprise and is timely.”

Here he's speaking of the “Call,” when “one way or another, a guide must come to say, ‘Look, you're in Sleepy Land. Wake. Come on a trip. There is a whole aspect of your consciousness, your being, that's not been touched. So you're at home here?’”

You're being offered a challenge. This is the departure when the hero feels something has been lost and is compelled to go find it and is poised to cross the threshold into a new life. “It's a dangerous adventure,” he warns, “because you are moving out of the sphere of knowledge of you and your community.”

Campbell believed we all have the capacity to be heroes if we're willing to put in the time—and cast off our fear of the unknown.

In the story of Sir Galahad, each knight enters the dark forest at the most mysterious point and follows his own intuition. They each choose a place where there is no way or path, where it is the thickest, because where there is already a path it is someone else's way. And what each knight brings back represents “the fulfillment of his unique potentialities, which are different from anybody else's.”

The ultimate hero's journey is Homer's “Odyssey” when Odysseus is returning from the Trojan Wars and has descended into Hades before re-entering the world.” He has become disoriented along the way and almost lost himself, but he eventually prevails and is rewarded by the gift of knowledge and transformation upon his homecoming.

I had a brother-in law, Dick Harrah, who taught in a small school in the Santa Cruz mountains in California. His students were adolescents that had somehow fallen through the cracks for one reason or another—it was during the sixties with loosely defined families, lots of drugs, and it was tough to get these kids to go to school at all, much less graduate from highschool.

Dick was a devotee of comparative mythology and very familiar with Joseph Campbell's writings. He was also himself a student of Jungian psychology. Every school year he taught the “Odyssey” to those kids, actually reading it to them and spending the rest of class time exploring how Odysseus's journey mirrored their own journeys through puberty (although he wouldn't have called it that), and life challenges and demons they encountered along the way, including descending into their own forms of darkness and often losing their orientation, then having to navigate through the maze of obstacles and find their way back from the “Underworld” and into the light.

He was very smart but completely accessible to his students, and he was funny and irreverent in a way the kids could relate to, and knowing him he probably swore in class a lot. (Oddly, in my perusal of Joseph Campbell's works I noted a similar irreverence and tendency toward profanity!) But what's important here is that most of Dick's students looked forward to his classes and stopped skipping school, and many graduated, and some went on to college.

Dick died a few years ago, and I went to his memorial, which was essentially a party and feast at his house, and many of his former students showed up and talked about the influence he'd had on their lives. I'd call that a success story. I've lost count of the times I've wished he were still around, including while I was putting together this talk.

During this time of distrust and division in this country, I find myself missing the sixties. It too was a time of tumult, with the Viet Nam war, racism, sexism and violence, but there was a collective conscience that grew out of these issues, with people talking about peace and marching for peace and working to further the efforts of civil rights; and the core value was LOVE. Our heroes included the Beatles, and Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell and John Prine—still one of my biggest heroes and now immortalized along with John Lennon and others.

This was also the beginning of the environmental movement and our recognition of the need to protect species and forests and mountains and plains and all living beings. Our heroes included Edward Abbey and Wendell Berry and Richard Braudigan and others.

But who are our heroes today? We need heroes for the 2020's and beyond. I read somewhere in Campbell's writings that in the Homeric era a poet might be spared while a priest was put to death. I believe that the poets and writers and artists and musicians are still who we look to for insights and inspiration.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book "Braiding Sweetgrass," speaks in one of the chapters about learning her indigenous language, Potawatomi, as a language of animism. "To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive," she says. "Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms."

"In Potawatomi 101," she says, "the rocks are animate as are mountains and water and fire and places. Beings that are imbued with spirit, our sacred medicines, our songs, our drums, and even stories, are all animate."

"Yawe" is the animate "to be," she explains, and one must use "yawe" to refer to anything—or anyone—possessed with life and spirit. She then asks, "By what linguistic confluence do 'Yahweh' of the Old Testament and 'yawe' of the New World both fall from the mouths of the reverent? Isn't this just what it means, to be, to have the breath of life within, to be the offspring of creation? The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world."

We just might be poised on the edge of a precipice that will determine whether we survive as a species or we join the multitude of species that have and continue to go extinct. (Perhaps in our case I should say "extinguish ourselves", because that's how it feels.) Our biggest challenge is to recognize that in spite of our ability to reason—or perhaps because of it—we are animals, and that our existence is tied to the existence of all other animals and organisms, even atoms and sub-atomic particles—my best effort at being inclusive — in the Universe.

Perhaps we are the heroes being called to action, and perhaps we are on the brink of a collective hero's journey to "save the planet" (knowing full well that the planet will go on just fine without us), and honor the Universe and all within it. I would like to think so.