

THE POWER OF MYTH with Bill Moyers by Joseph Campbell

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INTRODUCTION

Once, as we were discussing the subject of suffering, he mentioned in tandem Joyce and Igjugarjuk. "Who is Igjugarjuk?" I said, barely able to imitate the pronunciation. "Oh, replied Campbell, "he was the shaman of a Caribou Eskimo tribe in northern Canada, the one who told European visitors that the only true wisdom 'lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and can be reached only through suffering. Privation and suffering alone open the mind to all that is hidden to others.'"

"Of course," I said, "Igjugarjuk."

He said it was "the first and only thing of its kind in peacetime that has ever given me the sense of being a member of this whole national community, engaged as a unit in the observance of a deeply significant rite."

Consider the position of judges in our society, which Campbell saw in mythological, not sociological, terms. If this position were just a role, the judge could wear a gray suit to court instead of the magisterial black robe. For the law to hold authority beyond mere coercion, the power of the judge must be ritualized, mythologized. So much much of life today, Campbell said, from religion and war to love and death.

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On this particular visit, having again exulted over the perils of Luke Skywalker, Joe grew animated as he talked about how Lucas "has put the newest and most powerful spin" to the classic story of the hero.

"And what is that?" I asked.

"It's what Goethe said in Faust but which Lucas has dressed in modern idiom—the message that technology is not going to save us. Our computers, our tools, our machines are not enough. We have to rely on our intuition, our true being.

"Isn't that an affront to reason?" I said. And aren't we already beating a hasty retreat from reason, as it is?"

"That's not what the hero's journey is about. It's not to deny reason. To the contrary, by overcoming the dark passions, the hero symbolizes our ability to control the irrational savage within us." Campbell had lamented on other occasions our failure "to admit within ourselves the carnivorous, lecherous fever" that is endemic to human nature. Now he was describing the hero's journey not as a courageous act but as a life lived in self-discovery, "and

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Luke Skywalker was never more rational than when he found within himself the resources of character to meet his destiny."

One of the many distinctions between the celebrity and the hero, he said, is that one lives only for self while the other acts to redeem society.

A journalist, it is said, enjoys a license to be educated in public; we are the lucky ones, allowed to spend our days in a continuing course of adult education. No one has taught me more of late than Campbell, and when I told him he would have to bear the responsibility for whatever comes of having me as a pupil, he laughed and quoted an old Roman: "The fates lead him who will; him who won't they drag."

"You're talking about a search for the meaning of life?" I asked.

"No, no, no," he said. "For the experience of being alive."

Thus early societies learned that "the essence of life is that it lives by killing and eating; that's the great mystery that the myths have to deal with." The hunt became a ritual of sacrifice, and the hunters in turn performed acts of atonement to the departed spirits of the

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animals, hoping to coax them into returning to be sacrificed again. The beasts were seen as envoys from that other world, and Campbell surmised "a magical, wonderful accord" growing between the hunter and the hunted, as if they were locked in a "mystical, timeless" cycle of death, burial and resurrection. Their art –the paintings on cave walls – and oral literature gave form to the impulse we now call religion.

The unpardonable sin, in Campbell's book, was the sin of inadvertence, of not being alert, not quite awake.

Myth and the Modern World

And then he says, "The writer must be true to truth." And that's a killer, because the only way you can describe a human being truly is by describing his imperfections. The perfect human being is uninteresting –the Buddha who leaves the world, you know. It is the imperfections of life that are lovable. And when the writer sends a dart of the true word, it hurts. But it goes with love. This is what Mann called "erotic irony," the love for that which you are killing with your cruel, analytical word.

Because it's not regarded as a marriage. I would say that if the marriage isn't a first priority in your life, you're not married. The marriage means the two that are one, the two become

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one flesh. If the marriage lasts long enough, and if you are acquiescing constantly to it instead of to individual personal whim, you come to realize that that is true —the two really are one.

That's exactly it. That's the significance of the puberty rites. In primal societies, there are teeth knocked out, there are scarifications, there are circumcisions, there are all kinds of things done. So you don't have your little baby body anymore, you're something else entirely. When I was a kid, we wore trousers, you know, knee pants. And then there was a great moment when you put on long pants. Boys now don't get that. I see even five-year-olds walking around with long trousers. When are they going to know that they're now men and must put aside childish things?

They make them up themselves. This is why we have graffiti all over the city. These kids have their own gangs and their own initiations and their own morality, and they're doing the best they can. But they're dangerous because their own laws are not those of the city. They have not been initiated into our society.

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Rollo May says there is so much violence in American society today because there are no more great myths to help young men and women relate to the world or to understand that world beyond what it seen.

In American football, for example, the rules are very strict and complex. If you were to go to England, however, you would find that the rugby rules are not that strict. When I was a student back in the twenties, there were a couple of young men who constituted a marvelous forward-passing pair. They went to Oxford on scholarship and joined the rugby team and one day they introduced the forward pass. And the English players said, "Well, we have no rules for this, so please don't. We don't play that way." Now in a culture that has been homogeneous for some time, there are a number of understood, unwritten rules by which people live. There is an ethos, there is a mode, and understanding that "we don't do it that way."

Joining the army, putting on a uniform, is another. You're giving up your personal life and accepting a socially determined manner of life in the service of the society of which you are a member. This is why I think it is obscene to judge people in terms of civil law for performances that they rendered in time of war. They were acting not as individuals, they

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were acting as agents of something above them and to which they had by dedication given themselves. To judge them as though they were individual human beings is totally improper.

I understand the yearnings. In my youth I had fixed stars. They comforted me with their permanence. They gave me a known horizon. And they told me there was a loving, kind and just father out there looking down on me, ready to receive me, thinking of my concerns all the time. Now, Saul Bellow says that science has made a housecleaning of beliefs. But there was value in these things for me. I am today what I am because of those fixed stars, that know horizon – those myths?

Well, as I said, all you have to do is read the newspaper. It's a mess. On this immediate level of life and structure, myths offer life models. But the models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living, and our time has changed so fast that what was proper fifty years ago is not proper today. The virtues of the past are the vices of today. Any many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today. The moral order has to catch up with the moral necessities of actual life in time, here and now. And that is what we are not doing. The old-time religion belongs to another age, another people, another set of human values, another universe. By going back you throw yourself out of

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sync with history. Our kids lose their faith in the religions that were taught to them, and they go inside.

You can't believe it. It's a whole hierarchy of angels – all on slats. And those little tubes – those are miracles. I have had a revelation from my computer about mythology. You buy a certain software, and there is a whole set of signals that lead to the achievement of your aim. If you being fooling around with signals that belong to another system of software, they just don't work.

Similarly, in mythology – if you have a mythology in which the metaphor for the mystery is the father, you are going to have a different set of signals from what you would have if the metaphor for the wisdom and mystery of the world were the mother. And they are two perfectly good metaphors. Neither one is a fact. These are metaphors. It is as though the universe were my father. It is as though the universe were my mother. Jesus says, "No one gets to the father but by me." the father that he was talking about was the biblical father. It might be that you can get to the father only by way of Jesus. On the other hand, suppose you are going by way of the mother. There you might prefer Kali, and the hymns to the goddess, and so forth. That is simply another way to get to the mystery of life. You must

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understand that each religion is a kind of software that has its own set of signals and will work.

That is in fact what we had better do. But my notion of the real horror today is what you see in Beirut. There you have the three great Western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and because the three of them have three different names for the same biblical god, they can't get on together. They are stuck with their metaphor and don't realize its reference. They haven't allowed the circle that surrounds them to open. It is a closed circle. Each group says, 'We are the chosen group, and we have God.'

Look at Ireland. A group of Protestants was moved to Ireland in the seventeenth century by Cromwell, and it never has opened up to the Catholic majority there. The Catholics and Protestants represent two totally different social systems, two different ideals.

Each needs a new myth.

Each needs its own myth, all the way. Love thine enemy. Open up. Don't judge all things are Buddha things. It is there in the myth. It is already there.

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He asks his father to bring food for the bird, and the father doesn't want to feed a mere bird, so he kills it. And the legend says the man killed the bird, and with the bird he killed the song, and with the son, himself. He dropped dead, completely dead, and was dead forever.

Isn't a story about what happens when human beings destroy their environment? Destroy their world? Destroy nature and the revelation of nature?

They destroy their own nature, too. They kill the song.

And isn't mythology the story of the song?

Mythology is the song. It is the song of the imagination, inspired by the energies of the body. Once a Zen master stood up before his students and was about to deliver a sermon. And just as he was about to open his mouth, a bird sang. And he said, "The sermon has been delivered."

Yes, Now what is a myth? The dictionary definition of a myth would be stories about gods. So then you have to ask the next question: What is a god? A god is a personification of a motivating power or value system that functions in human life and in the universe – the

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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. But also there are myths and gods that have to do with specific societies or the partial deities of the society. In other words, there are two totally different orders of mythology. There is the mythology that relates you to your nature and to the natural world, of which you're a part. And there is the mythology that is strictly sociological, linking you to a particular society. You are not simply a natural man, you are a member of a particular group. In the history of European mythology, you can see the interaction of these two systems. Usually the socially oriented system is of a nomadic people who are moving around, so you lean that's where your center is, in that group. The nature-oriented mythology would be of an earth-cultivating people.

What kind of new myth do we need?

We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet. A model for that is the United States. Here were thirteen different little colony nations that decided to act in the mutual interest, without disregarding the individual interests of any one of them.

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The Journey Inward

The serpent bound to the earth, the eagle in spiritual flight – isn't that conflict something we all experience? And then when the two amalgamate, we get a wonderful dragon, a serpent with wings. All over the earth people recognize these images. Whether I'm reading Polynesian or Iroquois or Egyptian myths, the images are the same, and they are talking about the same problem.

Why is a myth different from a dream?

Oh, because a dream is a personal experience of that deep, dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives, and a myth is the society's dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth. If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn't, you've got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you.

So if my private dreams are in accord with the public mythology, I'm more likely to live healthily in that society. But if my private dreams are out of step with the public –

-you'll be in trouble. If you're forced to live in that system, you'll be a neurotic.

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The power of life causes the snake to shed its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The serpent sheds its skin to be born again, as the moon its shadow to be born again. They are equivalent symbols. Sometimes the serpent is represented as a circle eating its own tail. That's an image of life. Life sheds one generation after another, to be born again. The serpent represents immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again. There is something tremendously terrifying about life when you look at it that way. And so the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and the terror of life.

Now the snake in most cultures is given a positive interpretation. In India, even the most poisonous snake, the cobra, is a sacred animal, and the mythological Serpent King is the next thing to the Buddha. The serpent represents the power of life engaged in the field of time, and of death, yet eternally alive. The world is but its shadow – the falling skin.

That amounts to a refusal to affirm life. In the biblical tradition we have inherited, life is corrupt, and every natural impulse is sinful unless it has been circumcised or baptized. The serpent was the one who brought sin into the world. And the woman was the one who handed the apple to man. This identification of the woman with sin, of the serpent with sin,

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I think of a dream as something very private, while a myth is something very public.

On some levels a private dream runs into truly mythic themes and can't be interpreted except by an analogy with a myth. Jung speaks of two orders of dreams, the personal dream and the archetypal dream, or the dream of mythic dimension. You can interpret a personal dream by association, figuring out what it is talking about in your own life, or in relation to your own personal problem. But every now and then a dream comes up that is pure myth, that carries a mythic theme, or that is said, for example, to come from the Christ within.

What do you make of it –that in these two stories the principal actors point to someone else as the initiator of the Fall?

Yes, but it turns out to be the snake. In both of these stories the snake is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live.

Why?

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and thus of life with sin is the twist that has been given to the whole story in the biblical myth and doctrine of the Fall.

It does seem that this story has done women a great disservice by casting Eve as responsible for the Fall. Why are women the ones held responsible for the downfall?

They represent life. Man doesn't enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering.

Yes, but you don't understand if you think it is a he or a she. The he or a she is a springboard to spring you into the transcendent, and transcendent means to "transcend" to go past duality. Everything in the field of time and space is dual. The incarnation appears either as male or as female, and each of us is in the incarnation of God. You're born in only one aspect of your actual metaphysical duality, you might say. This is represented in the mystery religions where an individual goes through a series of initiations opening him out inside into a deeper and deeper depth of himself, and there comes a moment when he realizes that he is both mortal and immortal, both male and female.

Do you think there was such a place as the Garden of Eden?

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Of course not. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for that innocence that is innocent of time, innocent of opposites, and that is the prime center out of which consciousness then becomes aware of the changes.

They are elementary ideas, what could be called "ground" ideas. These ideas Jung spoke of as archetypes of the unconscious. "Archetype" is the better term because "elementary idea" suggests headwork. Archetype of the unconscious means it comes from below. The difference between the Jungian archetypes of the unconscious are manifestations of the organs of the body and their powers. Archetypes are biologically grounded, whereas the Freudian unconscious is a collection of repressed traumatic experience from the individual's lifetime. The Freudian unconscious is a personal unconscious, it is biological. The Jungian archetypes of the unconscious are biological. The biological is secondary to that.

When I read these myths, I am simply in awe of the mystery of it all. We can presume, but we cannot penetrate.

That is the point. The person who thinks he has found the ultimate truth is wrong. There is an often-quoted verse in Sanskrit, which appears in the Chinese Tao-te Ching as well: "He

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who thinks he knows, doesn't know. He who knows that he doesn't know, knows. For in this context, to know is not to know. And not to know is to know."

The person who has the experience has to project it in the best way he can with images. It seems to me that lost the art in our society of thinking in images.

Oh, we definitely have. Our thinking is largely discursive, verbal, linear. There is more reality in an image than in a word.

Do you really know what a thing is? What supports it? It is something in time and space. Think how mysterious it is that anything should be. The watch becomes the center for a mediation, the center of the intelligible mystery of being, which is everywhere. This watch is now the center of the universe. It is the still point in the turning world.

So each of us is, in a way, the Indra of his own life. You can make a choice, either to throw it all off and go into the forest to meditate, or to stay in the world, both in the life of your job, which is the kingly job of politics and achievement, and in the love life with your wife and family. Now, this is a very nice myth, it seems to me.

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Culture can also teach us to go past its concepts. That is what is known as initiation. A true initiation is when the guru tells you, "There is no Santa Claus." Santa Claus is metaphoric of a relationship between parents and children. The relationship does exist, and so it can be experienced, but there is no Santa Claus. Santa Claus was simply a way of clueing children into the appreciation of a relationship.

Life is, in its very essence and character, a terrible mystery – this whole business of living by killing and eating. But it is a childish attitude to say no to life with all its pain, to say that this is something that should not have been.

The First Storytellers

Do you think the poet Wordsworth was right when he wrote, "Our birth, is but a sleep and a forgetting:/ The soul that rises with us, our life's star,/ Hath had elsewhere its setting, / and cometh from afar"? Do you think that is so?

I do. Not in entire forgetfulness – that is to say, the nerves in our body carry the memories that shaped the organization of our nervous system to certain environmental circumstances and to the demands of an organism.

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Now there is a story from a totally different sphere of society, of the samurai, the Japanese warrior, who had the duty to avenge the murder of his overlord. When he cornered the man who had murdered his overlord, and he was about to deal with him with his samurai sword, the man in the corner, in the passion of terror, spat in the warrior's face. And the warrior sheathed the sword and walked away.

Why?

Because he was made angry, and if he had killed that man in anger, then it would have been a personal act. And he had come to do another kind of act, an impersonal act of vengeance.

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What do our souls owe to ancient myths?

The ancient myths were designed to harmonize the mind and the body. The mind can ramble off in strange ways and want things that the body does not want. The myths and rites were means of putting the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way that nature dictates.

And these myths tell me how others have made the passage, and how I can make the passage?

Well, that is no problem at all. The problem in middle life, when the body has reached its climax of power and begins to decline, is to identify yourself not with the body, which is falling away, but with the consciousness of which it is a vehicle. This is something I learned from myths. What am I? Am I the bulb that carries the light, or am I the light of which the bulb is a vehicle?

These early myths help the psyche to participate without a sense of guilt or fright in the necessary act of life.