

Using Myth in Education

Compiled by Mary Davis from Maren Tonder Hansen's *Teachers of Myth*

Editor's Note: The Mythic Imagination Institute's Education Committee is working diligently to prepare for Mythic Journeys 2006. Their report should be in the next issue of *Mythic Passages*.

We are also excited to announce that Nancy Cater, Publisher and Editor of Mythic Imagination Institute's Partner, Spring Publications (www.springjournalandbooks.com), has given us permission to quote both from issues of *Spring Journal* and from Spring Journal Books.

In this issue of *Mythic Passages*, we are quoting from interviews with three extraordinary teachers. Maren Tonder Hansen has written *Teachers of Myth: Interviews on Educational and Psychological Uses of Myth with Adolescents* which is published by Spring Journal, Inc. The book's cover states that it is "a treasure chest of specific teaching methods." While here we have only enough space to quote several excerpts, Hansen's book is packed with examples of creative teaching. *Teachers of Myth* is also an excellent resource for understanding mythology and its importance in all of our lives.

Hansen herself has taught "myth with a psychological emphasis to persons of all ages." She is a psychotherapist and an ordained minister, who is also a founding member of the Joseph Campbell Library and of Pacifica Graduate Institute. Her in-depth interviews are with Michael Meade, Betty Staley, and Kent Ferguson.

Michael Meade was a presenter at Mythic Journeys 2004. See April's issue of *Mythic Passages* which includes an article about him. Meade is a noted author and storyteller *par excellence* who teaches myth to persons from all educational and age levels with a special emphasis on teaching adolescents. He is the Founder/Director of MOSAIC Multicultural Foundation which encourages community healing. MOSAIC is also a Mythic Imagination Institute Partner and their website is www.mosaicvoices.org.

Our first excerpt is from Hansen's interview with Meade, beginning on Page 2:
"MAREN HANSEN: In teaching myth to adolescents, what do you hope to achieve?"

"MICHAEL MEADE: There are two things that I'm usually thinking of beforehand. First of all, I hope their imagination gets caught, and they have an experience of what I call mythological thinking or symbolic thinking, an opening of the psyche wherein they realize that an image has become a symbol for them. They suddenly see something symbolically; that's the 'aha,' the mythical awakening to the world of meaning, which I think most young people are seeking.

“Then the second part is that I hope they connect to something symbolic and meaningful in themselves. I hope they get a sense that they are part of a big story, and that if they live that story out, they will somehow be connected to the culture and to the cosmos. So, I’m looking for ‘Oh, wow, I get it!’, and then to have that become personal.

“HANSEN: So, in your work it’s important to you that adolescents not only understand the myth, but also bring it inside.

“MEADE: Yes. Usually I’m telling them stories, assuming that myth has two basic meanings: learning the symbolic aspects of the story and the actual telling of the story. I make every effort to make sure that the kids wind up *in* the story and find their own story through that.

“HANSEN: How do you help them find themselves in the story?

“MEADE: I tell stories usually while drumming, you know that. So really what’s going on is a light form of trance. I’m doing a very light induction through certain kinds of rhythm and speech. That pulls their consciousness into the story. Then I have the simplest technique I’ve ever found. I say, ‘What struck you in the story?’ I wait. I try to give everyone a chance to speak. Naturally, some are reluctant and some will go very quickly. I’ll try to get them all speaking, unless the group is really large. Then, I can show them that everybody has a slightly different view, even if it’s the same spot in the story, each is seeing it differently. Once we’re there, I can say, ‘the different way in which you see is your view of the world. If you pay attention to that, you start to realize where you are in the great drama of life.’ I find that’s the most valuable thing to communicate directly to young people...”

Our next excerpt from Hansen’s *Teachers of Myth* is from her interview with Betty Staley, who is an internationally noted author and a teacher for over thirty years in Steiner Waldorf schools. Staley has developed curriculum in myth, and she has taught myths extensively from the elementary school level through high school (nineteen years as a high school teacher) and for the last twelve years, at Rudolf Steiner College. Her books include *Soul Weaving; Hear the Voice of the Griot: A Celebration of African History, Geography and Culture; Between Form and Freedom: A Practical Guide to the Teenage Years*.

Beginning on Page 27:

“HANSEN: When you are teaching myth to adolescents, what do you hope to achieve?

“STALEY: First, the most obvious thing is to teach them myths so that they become aware that myths exist and that they exist all over the world. People have been making up myths since the beginning of time. Then, next is to evoke in the students a kind of curiosity as to why human beings make up myths. What is it about the human being that we not only have myths that have been passed down, but we make up myths all the time? What are some of the myths that you’ve grown up with? Or what are some of the myths that live in America? They always think about George Washington and the cherry tree and Santa Claus, and so on. And then we’ll use those later: ‘How is that myth touching you

at different life stages?’ Then, of course, I always ask, ‘What are the myths that you know?’ If they’re Waldorf students, there are lots of myths that they know. A question I have about the work you are doing with the myth curriculum is: How broadly are you defining myth? Are you including the fairy tale, for example? I mean, I would. Would you include the Old Testament and New Testament in a study of myths?

“HANSEN: You know Joseph Campbell’s statement – that myths are other people’s religions.

“STALEY: (*laughter*) I think there’s a lot of truth to that. So anyway, that would be a question when you design a curriculum. Then, another reason to teach myth to adolescents is to stimulate their sense that they can find patterns, that there’s orderliness in life. This is very much a Waldorf approach to phenomenology. Rather than giving them the answer, you evoke the question and let them come up with the answer. So, instead of saying, ‘Find the flood in these five myths,’ the teacher would say, ‘You read those myths last night, what did you find in common?’ Then, the answers come from them: ‘It was somebody who was wise,’ ‘somebody who had to go through many tests,’ and so on. Then, as the weeks evolve they say, ‘There are patterns in myths from all over the world.’ So they begin to pull out what these patterns are. And that, I think, is really important, because it’s a picture - just at this adolescent stage – that there is orderliness in chaos. I think that’s important to see. But not going so far that it becomes a formula. I think it has to be kept living.

“Another reason to teach myth is that there are different levels in the way that we understand things. Usually about the third day of the course, the students say, ‘Are these myths true?’ That is the perfect opportunity to talk about truth existing on many levels. I draw a diagram with seven curved lines. In each one, I write a level of truth. For example, the first level has to do with the level of a story. Other levels have to do with the truth in social interaction, in historical facts, in geography, truth in the soul, in symbols, archetype, and spirit. I introduce them to the word archetype, but in ninth grade, what they tend to come up with most are stereotypes. And so then you’d say, ‘What’s the difference between a stereotype and an archetype?’ We’re planting seeds. In tenth grade, when they hear about Plato, they meet the term archetype again. Then I’ve had the joy of being able to teach these same students in twelfth grade and come to some of these same issues, and they have a different consciousness.

“By studying myths, students begin to understand that stories have been told for generations because myths help people understand something about their own lives. That’s the beginning of the psychological level. High school students enjoy experiencing the imagination in myths, and relate the images to their own lives. They see that they can learn something from myths, no matter how old they are. You can hear the same myths over and over again, and each time the meaning is different and deeper.”

They go on to discuss an example, using the myth of Gilgamesh, which Staley teaches in the fifth grade, when she says, “They paint scenes, draw scenes, and act out the myths, and we leave it there. We don’t analyze it. In high school,

they read the myth, and then we look at the patterns and say, 'What are the big issues here?' The students might say, 'Gilgamesh is restless, and because he's restless he's keeping everybody working.' The idea of friendship is an important issue. Then there's the big one – you know, when Enkidu is humanized and leaves the forest, the animals no longer recognize him. Another issue is the facing of the monster, Humbaba. These are the big issues in this myth.

"I'll ask: 'Does any of this resonate with you in your life?' Then, the answers come: 'He was completely one with the animals, and they accepted him.' And then what started to happen, of course, is he started to have his hair combed, he started to drink and eat and become human. There is a time when the lion comes down and attacks the sheep, and Enkidu goes out to greet him because he knows the lion. He goes out and wrestles it, but the lion doesn't recognize him. Enkidu's response is to fall down onto the forest floor and weep and weep and weep. There you have this picture of the loss of innocence. When I was teaching fifth grade I told this story. I had a girl in the class who didn't want to grow up. She just wanted to play. We did this story, and she just drew that scene where Enkidu wept over and over again. At a certain point she was done. She was ready to let go. I still know her. She's now forty-four years old. I happened to see her a couple of weeks ago. I asked, 'Annie, do you remember this?' She said no. She remembered the story, but she has no memory that she drew this scene over and over again. She was fascinated as I told her what I had experienced. The power of myth is that it goes right into the unconscious.

"HANSEN: Is that why you don't analyze the myths with the younger grades?"

"STALEY: Exactly, we leave it free.

"HANSEN: When do you change that?"

"STALEY: Ninth grade.

"HANSEN: Oh, that doesn't change until ninth grade? I didn't realize that.

"STALEY: There wouldn't be a lot of analysis unless it comes up in conversation. The students feel very free to bring things up, but a teacher wouldn't push it in that direction. It's really with this change into adolescence that we become more conscious. In fact, what happened in this one block was the students said, 'We've had a lot of these myths in the elementary school.' I said, 'Yes, you did.' They would even criticize me if the words I used in ninth grade weren't the same as in an earlier grade, so then I talked about different versions. Their memories are so incredible. And then I asked them the questions, 'What would have happened if we were doing in the fifth grade what we're doing now?' which is interpreting the myths. They said, 'It would have killed it.' That was such an important statement. Telling the story for the story's sake is what you're doing with younger children. You respect that their unconscious is doing what it has to do with it. If you bring it out into analysis, you are killing it. Because, you're really killing the imagination..."

At one point, later in the interview, Staley states, "And myths are just good fun..."

Hansen's final interview in this book is with Kent Ferguson, co – founder and Headmaster of the International School Down Under in New Zealand. Ferguson formerly co –founded the private Santa Barbara Middle School and served as its

Headmaster from 1980 until 2000. His approach to education combines academics with mythology, outdoor learning experiences, international experiences, athletics and social service.

Our excerpts from this interview begin on Page 57:

“FERGUSON:...When you see that’s you in the story, then all of a sudden you can’t wait to see how the story ends. Or you think about how that person handled a situation you’re now facing in life. How did Psyche do it? Or, how did the people come back together as a community after they had spread out into various tribes and groups? When it relates to life, then I want to know because it’s real, it’s a road map, it’s a guideline to life realities. Later in my life, I came across teachers who were also reaching inside myth, such as Robert Johnson with his books *He*, *She*, and *We*. So were Robert Bly and others in the men’s movement. But for me, it was all fresh, all new, something was unfolding out of life. And that is the way I wanted it to be for my own students as well. I still want that.

“HANSEN: So one of the ways you did this was to put the names of your students into the story. That’s a pretty big insinuation that this story is about you. Were there other things that you did to help the kids forge that personal connection to myth?

“FERGUSON: Well, I tried to show that the story might be about you in some ways, but also you are much like the rest of humanity. Your life, your problems, and your challenges are not unique; others who began in your shoes – Cinderella, Arthur, Arjuna, Rama, Kokopelli – made something incredible out of being in those shoes.

“Another thing comes to mind. I’ll use myself as an example, and I’ll bet there are many others like me. Why did Joseph Campbell ignite me? Because he was ignited. His teaching wasn’t an academic dissertation. It was in a living room, and I sat on the floor at the feet of a teacher, and I could tell that Joseph Campbell felt that this is important stuff. This is a retired teacher – I don’t know how old he was then – he was in his seventies, I guess, his health wasn’t that great, he had to take a nap after lunch – and the myths were living in this man, they were coming through him. I could hear it in his voice. I could see it coming out of his heart. We were in another place. We were in another time. We weren’t even in this century. We were gathered at the Round Table. We were part of something ancient, noble, true, enduring, and fragile.

“So what I’m trying to say here is that the teacher has to live and feel the myth. I think that in living a myth and acting like you’re living it, (and not falsely, by the way), you enter into the story, and it’s who you are. If someone was trying to figure out who you are, they’d say, ‘Well, sometimes he lives in this land of myth.’ That magnetizes an environment. It puts something in your words, in your emotions.

“Another thing that worked for me with young people was to literally, physically, take them out of the classroom into a different landscape. Take them on an outer journey and an inner journey at the same time. Take them somewhere so that they can enter Camelot, enter ancient Athens, where they enter a magic

grove, or where the kachinas come from. Let them put round stones on a piece of ground only to think of them as a medicine wheel, or a round table. For me, the most successful example of that, although there have been many, would be the American Four Corners, which provided me with a geography, a landscape, the remnants of an archeology, or an architecture – just enough hints as to what might have been. On top of that, then, we were able to receive the myths and legends of the Pueblo people. I found that the young people, essentially the white-skinned Americans, who have been most of my students, were as starved as I was. They were starved for this sort of thing. They were sometimes almost in rapture – seriously, some were – to be given certain imagery, certain keys within these stories...”

They continue with specific stories of Ferguson’s students, but you’ll have to read the book for those! On Page 61, Hansen asks him about some of the basics: “HANSEN: I notice that in your approach to teaching myth, honoring is important. You honor the story. And you chose to honor the boy who felt something and created something out of that Pueblo myth. You affirmed his living experience of the myth. That affirmation seems to me like an important teaching move that you made.

“FERGUSON: When you want to do something with young people, you start with a few basics, and one of the most basic things is human respect. We all hope to receive it, and if you hope to receive it, try to give it. Just respect, just like human courtesy: listen to somebody, assume that they have a good heart. You don’t have much evidence to the contrary, certainly not with young people. And who are you to say that they don’t have powerful gifts? You would never want to say that they don’t. They’re here for a reason – if you are, they are. The whole goal of education, as I stated before, is to draw out. There is something in there. It’s not your job as a teacher to pump it in; it’s your job to allow it to come out. Then I think things almost fall into place. You set it up right, and you’ve increased the odds of success just with these few basic things...”

These excerpts provide only a taste of the “soul food” in Hansen’s small, seventy- two page volume. Written in a conversational tone, it is easy to read. While this book has been written specifically for teachers, it really is a book of treasures for everyone who is passionately interested in learning and personal growth.

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