

Understanding Myth

Here at the Mythic Imagination Institute, we continue to read and discuss many definitions of “myth” and to think about the role of myth and folklore both in our culture, in the world’s cultures, and in the past. We hope to present to you a variety of views about myth, its definition, and its importance, beginning in this issue and continuing in future issues of *Mythic Passages*.

We have permission from Robert Walter and the Joseph Campbell Foundation (www.jcf.org), a Mythic Imagination Institute Partner, to quote from their published works by Joseph Campbell. In this first “Understanding Myth,” we quote from Joseph Campbell’s *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal*, in which Campbell presented some of his views about myth and its functions. As we read this, we should remember that Joseph Campbell’s death occurred in 1987, eighteen years ago. Also, in these excerpts, Campbell is preparing the Western reader for his discussion of Eastern thought and mythology.

In his Introduction, “The Humbling of Indra,” page xvii, Campbell begins: “Myths do not belong, properly, to the rational mind. Rather, they bubble up from deep in the wells of what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious.

“I think what happens in our mythology here in the West is that the mythological archetypal symbols have come to be interpreted as facts. Jesus *was* born of a virgin. Jesus *was* resurrected from the dead. Jesus *went* to heaven by ascension. Unfortunately, in our age of scientific skepticism we know these things did not actually happen, and so the mythic forms are called falsehoods. The word *myth* now means falsehood, and so we have lost the symbols and that mysterious world of which they speak. But we need the symbols, and so they come up in disturbed dreams and nightmares that are then dealt with by psychiatrists. It was Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacob Adler who realized that the figures of dreams are really figures of personal mythologization. You create your own imagery related to the archetypes.

“At present, our world has rejected this world of symbology. It has gone into an economic and political phase, where spiritual principles are completely disregarded. You may have practical ethics and that kind of thing, but there is no spirituality in any aspect of our contemporary Western civilization. Our religious life is ethical, not mystical. The mystery has gone and society is disintegrating as a result.

“The question is whether or not there can ever be a recovery of the mythological, mystical realization of the miracle of life of which human beings are a manifestation.”

Then, Joseph Campbell continues to discuss the loss of our connection to nature, and our preoccupation with the news, with wars, murders, celebrities. He discusses the cosmos, space, and the fact that we humans are born from space.

On page xix, "Mythology is composed by poets out of their insights and realizations. Mythologies are not invented; they are found. You can no more tell us what your dream is going to be tonight than we can invent a myth. Myths come from the mystical region of essential experience."

After relating the ancient Indian story of the humbling of Indra (as Indra learns of the limitless numbers of Indras, the universes of Indras), Campbell ends his introduction on page xxiii,

"All of our problems about atom bombs blowing up the universe, so what? There have been universes and universes before, every one of them blown up by an atom bomb. So now you identify yourself with the eternal that is within you and within all things. It doesn't mean you want to see the atom bomb come, but you don't spend your time worrying about it.

"One of the great temptations of the Buddha was the temptation of lust. The other temptation was the temptation of the fear of death. This is a nice theme for meditation on the fear of death. Life throws up around us these temptations, these distractions, and the problem is to find the immovable center within. Then you can survive anything. Myth will help you do that. This doesn't mean you shouldn't go out on picket lines about atomic research. Go ahead, but do it playfully. The universe is God's play."

Then, in his first chapter, "The Birth of Brahman," on page 5, Campbell outlines his view of the functions of mythology in a culture:

"The mythology of a people presents a grandiose poetic image, and like all poetic images, it refers past itself to principles that are mysterious and ineffable. There are four basic functions of a traditional mythology of this sort. The first must be to open the mind of everybody in the society to that mystery dimension that cannot be analyzed, cannot be talked about, but can only be experienced as out there and in here at once.

"The second function of a mythology is to present an image of the universe that connects the transcendent to the world of everyday experience. This cosmic image must reflect that mystery so that all the stars and little animals and trees and mountains are seen to express this unfathomable dimension.

"The third function is to present a social order by which people will be coordinated to the mystery. The king, then, sits in the center as the coordinating principle of the city – state. He radiates solar light: his crown represents the light of the Sun (or of the Moon). His court moves about him in hieratic charade, as though they were planets, wearing the costumes of the cosmos and so forth. We still see this symbolism in courtly protocol.

“Finally the fourth function of the mythology is to carry the individual through the course of life. It must carry the individual from the attitudes of dependency of childhood to adult responsibility (responsibility as defined in the terms of that particular culture) and then out in the way of old age and passage beyond the Dark Gate.”

Editor’s note: We are grateful to the Joseph Campbell Foundation for their written permission to quote from their published works by Joseph Campbell. We also welcome suggestions from our readers for additional contributions to “Understanding Myth.” Send suggestions to the attention of Mary Davis, Editor.