



**Myths-Dreams-Symbols**  
*The Mythic World of Joseph Campbell*

Topic

The Function of Myth  
 In the Individual Life



Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world

....Joseph Campbell

List of Topics: Metaphor and Transcendence	The Function of Myth God and Metaphor	Myth and Dreams The Importance of Myth	The Hero's Adventure in Myth Gaia-Nature as Divinity
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From The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

Bill Moyers: I came to understand from reading your books - The Masks of God or The Hero With A Thousand Faces, for example - that what human beings have in common is revealed in myths. Myths are the stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.

Joseph Campbell: People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life-experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues help us to find within ourselves.

Bill Moyers: Myths are clues?

Joseph Campbell: Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.

Bill Moyers: What we are capable of knowing and experiencing within?

Joseph Campbell: Yes.

Bill Moyers: You changed the definition of a myth from the *search* for meaning to the *experience* of meaning.

Joseph Campbell: Experience of *life*. The mind has to do with meaning. What's the meaning of a flower. There's the Zen story about a sermon of the Buddha in which he simply lifted a flower. There was only one man who gave him a sign with his eyes that he understood what was said. Now, the Buddha himself is called "the one thus come". There's no meaning. What's the meaning of the universe? What's the meaning of a flea? It's just there. We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about. Bill Moyers: How do you get that experience?

Joseph Campbell: Read the myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts - but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what it is. It's the reunion of the separated duad {A unit of two objects; a pair}. Originally you were one. You are now two in the world {duality}, but the recognition of the spiritual identity is what marriage is. It's different from a love affair. It has nothing to do with that. It is another mythological plane of experience. When people get married because they think it's a long-time love affair, they'll be divorced very soon, because all love affairs end in disappointment. But marriage is a recognition of a spiritual identity. If we live a proper life, if our minds are on the right qualities in regarding the person of the opposite sex, we will find our proper male or female counterpart. But if we are distracted by certain sensuous interests we marry the wrong person. By marrying the right person, we reconstruct the image of the incarnate God, and that's what marriage is {physically and spiritually} .

Bill Moyers: You taught mythology for thirty-eight years at Sarah Lawrence. How did you get these young women, coming to college from their middle-class backgrounds, from their orthodoxed religions - how did you get interested in myths?

Joseph Campbell: Young people just grab this stuff. Mythology teaches you what's behind the literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life. It's a great, exciting, life-nourishing subject. Mythology has a great deal to do with the stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state. All of those rituals are mythological rites. They have to do with your recognition of the new role that you're in, the process of throwing off the old one and coming out in the new, and entering into a responsible profession.

When a judge walks into a room, and everybody stands up, you're not standing up to that guy, you're standing up to the robe that he's wearing and the role he's going to play. What makes him worthy of that role is his integrity, as a representative of the principles of that role, and not some group of principles of his own. So what you're standing up to is a mythological character. I imagine some kings and queens are the most stupid, absurd, banal people you could run into, probably interested only in horses and women, you know. But you are not responding to them as personalities, you're responding to them in their mythological roles. When someone becomes a judge, or the President of the United States, the man is no longer that man, he's the representative of an eternal office; he has to sacrifice his personal desires and even life possibilities to the role that he now signifies.

Bill Moyers: You've seen what happens when primitive societies are unsettled by white man's civilization. They go to pieces, they disintegrate, they become diseased. Hasn't the same thing been happening to us since myths began to disappear?

Joseph Campbell: Absolutely, it has.

Bill Moyers: Isn't that why conservative religions today are calling for the old-time religion?

Joseph Campbell: Yes, and they're making a terrible mistake. They are going back to something that is vestigial {something that has passed}, that doesn't serve life.

Bill Moyers: But didn't it serve us?

Joseph Campbell: Sure it did.

Bill Moyers: I understand the yearning. 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 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 beliefs. I wonder what happens to children who don't have those fixed stars, that known horizon - those myths?

Joseph Campbell: Well, as I said, all you have to do is read the newspapers. 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. And 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 sync with history. Our kids lose their faith in the religions that were taught to them, and they go inside.

Bill Moyers: Don't you think Americans have rejected the ancient idea of nature as a divinity because it would have kept us from achieving dominance over nature? How can you cut down a tree and uproot the land and turn the rivers into real estate without killing God?

Joseph Campbell: Yes, but that's not simply a characteristic of modern Americans, that is the biblical condemnation of nature which they inherited from their own religion, and brought with them, mainly from England. God is separate from nature, and nature is condemned of God. It's right there in Genesis: we {man} are to be the masters of the world. But if you think of ourselves coming out of the earth, rather than having been thrown in here from somewhere else, you see that we are the earth, we are the consciousness of the earth. These are the eyes of the earth. And this is the voice of the earth.

Bill Moyers: Scientists are beginning to talk quite openly about the [Gaia](#) principle.

Joseph Campbell: There you are, the whole planet as an organism.

Bill Moyers: Mother Earth. Will new myths come from this image?

Joseph Campbell: Well, something might. You can't predict what a myth is going to be any more than you can predict what you're going to dream tonight. Myths and dreams come from the same place. They come from the realizations of some kind that have then to find expression in symbolic form. And the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it. And what it will have to deal with will be exactly what all myths have dealt with - the maturation of the individual, from dependency through adulthood, through maturity, and then to the exit; and then how to relate to this society and how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos. That's what the myths have all talked about, and what this one's got to talk about. But the society that it's got to talk about is the society of the planet. And until that gets going, you don't have anything.

Bill Moyers: So you suggest that from this begins the new myth of our time?

Joseph Campbell: Yes, this is the ground of what the myth is to be. It's already here: the eye of reason, not one of nationality; the eye of reason, not of my religious community; the eye of reason, not of my linguistic community. Do you see? And this would be the philosophy for the planet, not for this group, that group, or the other group.

When you see the earth from the moon, you don't see any divisions there of nations or states. This might be the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come. That is the country that we are going to be celebrating. And those are the people that we are one with.

Bill Moyers: No one embodies that ethic to me more clearly in the works you have collected than Chief Seattle.

Joseph Campbell: Chief Seattle was one of the last spokesmen of the Paleolithic moral order. In about 1852, the United States Government inquired about buying the tribal lands for the arriving people of the United States, and Chief Seattle wrote a marvelous letter in reply. His letter expresses the moral, really, of our whole discussion.

"The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

"Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

"We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are a part of the earth and it is a part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crest, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family.

"The shining waters that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each ghostly reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

"The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.

"If we sell our land, remember the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sight. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

"Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

"This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

"One thing we know: our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

"Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival.

"When the last Red Man has vanished with his wilderness and his memory is only a shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, will these shores and forests still be here? Will there be any of the spirit of my people left?

"We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So, if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you received it. Preserve the land for all children and love it, as God loves us all.

"As we are a part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: there is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We are brothers after all."

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