

Research Paper

Marianne DeMarco

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Myths are stories that individuals, past and present, use to explain life's mysteries and sacred truths. Mythology, according to an article by Bob Trubshaw "*What are Myths?*" "was adopted to characterize these living systems of tales and beliefs of 'primitive' people, and 'folklore' was reserved for the survival of these systems in civilized societies." Joseph Campbell has had a major influence and was a leader in his field, Comparative Mythology. While Mythology is the study of these so called "sacred stories," Comparative Mythology takes these stories and explores how they have developed and evolved over time with relation to different cultures and their religions. In his book, "The Power of Myth," Campbell starts with our first storytellers and shows how myths developed throughout time, as society changed so did myths. Campbell discusses heroes and how each of us are heroes in our own right each and everyday. He also tells tales of love throughout the ages and the differences between love and marriage. Myths have proven to be invaluable assets to our ancestors. As Jaan Puhvel is quoted as saying, "Myth operates by bringing a sacred...past to bear preemptively on the present and inferentially on the future" you have to wonder what impact will myths continue to have on our society today and that of our future.

"Mythology is no a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been said that mythology is the penultimate truth – penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words, beyond images." According to Joseph Campbell, myths are powerful guides to the life of the spirit. Where did these myths begin? And why? "The earliest evidence of anything like mythological thinking is associated with graves." In early times the hunt is a ritual. "The main theme in ritual is the linking of the individual to a larger morphological structure than that of his own physical body." Early

man had an enormous respect for the animal. However, “man lives by killing, and there is a sense of guilt connected with that.” Campbell states that “Guilt is wiped out by the myth.” This ritual of early man was an example of early worship and “expresses a spiritual reality.” Campbell feels that “these early myths help the psyche to participate without a sense of guilt or fright in the necessary act of life.” The goal of these myths is that some sort of “psychological compensation has to be achieved.”

Campbell discusses how today’s religious ceremonies have had a reduction in rituals and moved away from the old way of performing ceremonies and rituals. He states that people have “forgotten that the function of ritual is to pitch you out, not to wrap you back in where you have been all the time. It is this type of ritual that Campbell is so fond of that I disagree with. Especially with regard to religious ceremonies, I believe it is the person who should decide what way of worship is best for him or her. However, one of Campbell’s statements regarding God does ring true to me. “God is an intelligible sphere – a sphere known to the mind, not to the senses – whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” In Campbell’s opinions this “the mythological way of being an individual.” “How much of the beauty of our own lives is about the beauty of being alive.” This is something that I think all of us are guilty of on a daily basis. How often do we really stop and smell the roses or just take the time to sit back and be thankful just for being alive.

Is the lack of ritual responsible for the state of society today? According to Campbell, “So much of our ritual is dead.” The environment does not shape the story but is how people respond to it that matters. Campbell is worried about the quality of our

culture. He says that ‘myths must be kept alive.’ Campbell feels that today’s artists are the only people in today’s society that can do this. “The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and our world.” Narrator Bill Moyers states “Artists are the mythmakers of our day.” Just like the early shaman, artists are “drawn to the world of the gifted.” But who today can really be considered a true artist? Just because you have a song playing on the radio does not make you an artist. We must look with a critical eye and evaluate today’s so called artists. This is not only true of music, but movies as well. Campbell feels that today’s movies can be considered “our counterpart to mythological re-enactments.” However, “the people who write these stories do not have the sense of their responsibility.” Today’s movie makers are not filled with the same responsibility of our “First Storytellers.” For example, the message in the early caves was to convey the “relationship of time to eternal powers that is somehow to be experienced in that place.” The goal of today’s movies makers is the almighty dollar. And, for Campbell, that is one of the problems with today’s culture.

Moyers declares that “Geography has done a great deal to shape our culture and our idea of religion.” Moyers also stated that “landscapes connected primal human beings to the universe” and that “the sanctification of the local landscape is a function of mythology.” This is true of myths as well. Myths developed and changed throughout time. At some point, Campbell says that “mythical imagination as human beings turned from the hunting of animals to the planting of seeds.” Human being began to recognize that “out of rot comes life” and that “death is required from new life.” This death, or sacrifice, in planting cultures is quite different from that of the hunting culture. “When a figure is sacrificed in the planting cultures, that figure itself is the god. The person who

dies is buried and becomes the food.” This was a changed way of looking at life, as well as sacrifice. This, in turn, also changed the way the stories or myths were being told.

Campbell’s notion of how religion began – “bringing the inner experience into the out life of the people themselves.” He felt that the “god idea is always culturally conditioned, always.” Sacrifice is also looked at differently from culture to culture. Campbell tells a story of the Mayan Indians in which it is considered a gift to be worthy enough to be sacrificed to the gods. That is quite different than the way that our culture today looks at sacrifice. For today’s Catholics, Lent is considered a time of sacrifice where individuals “give up” something for 40 days in order to experience sacrifice. How could we compare going without chocolate for 40 days with the ultimate sacrifice of the Mayans. But as Campbell points out each of us makes our own small sacrifices everyday. “There are small acts of heroisms, too, that occur without regard to the notoriety that you attract for it.” Parents make sacrifices for their children, husband for their wives and so on.

Today’s society is so busy – people have so many demands on themselves. Campbell’s idea of a sacred place is so very much needed in today’s world. “This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation.” Think about our own lives. When was the last time you had any significant time alone just to reflect on life and its glories. In the early times, “the whole world was a sacred place.” In today’s society, “wherever you are – if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.” Campbell believes in trying to experience as much bliss here on earth as

possible. He states that “the religious people tell us we really won’t experience bliss until we die and go to heaven.” But in the here and now when you are actually following your bliss, the experience itself is, in Campbell’s words, miraculous. Those are the times your life when you truly feel that you have a purpose, that you are on the right track, that “the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living.”

Joseph Campbell states that the moral objective of heroism is that “the hero sacrifices himself for something – that that’s morality of it.” I guess this statement should say himself or herself because Campbell also discussed the image of the mother as a hero. Other than giving up your life for someone else, there is probably no other greater sacrifice. The book also states that “there are both kinds of heroes some that choose to undertake the journey and some that don’t.” This is one of the things in life that you figure out as you take the journey of life. Campbell says “our life evokes our character. You find out more about yourself as you go on.” In Campbell’s opinion, Moses, the Buddha, Christ and Mohammed are all examples of heroes in their own time. “The messages of the great teachers differ greatly. But their visionary journeys are much the same.” These religious figures each come with their own hero stories. Campbell declares, “Religion begins with the sense of wonder and awe and the attempt to tell stories that will connect us to God.” Just like these religious figures we all are on our own journey. But “the place to find is within yourself.” This is not easy for everyone because “the ultimate backing of life is chance.” Not everything always goes your way in life. In fact, according to Campbell “your life is the fruit of your own doing. You have no one to blame but yourself.” So the Hero’s Adventure in short is “the adventure of being alive.”

While I was never particularly interested in mythology, Joseph Campbell has opened my eyes to look at mythology in a different light. I now can look at something like the movie “Star Wars” and when Ben Kenobi says “May the force be with you” I see that he is “speaking of the power and energy of life, not of programmed political intentions.” I also never looked at “Star Wars” as a battle of Man vs. Machine. In Campbell’s words “Is the machine going to crush humanity or serve humanity?” Star Wars is about adventure. We all face our own adventure each and every day. Campbell’s desire to “follow your bliss; Find where it is, and don’t be afraid to follow it” is a great way to approach life. He calls it “the soul’s high adventure.” This should be each of our goals. Unfortunately in today’s world we find ourselves with many distractions. Bill Moyers refers to the question from Hamlet, “Are you up to your destiny?” This question should be one that we ask ourselves each and every day. But according to Campbell, “The adventure is its own reward.” That is so true. You have to be happy in what you do along the way. Campbell states that “When you choose your vocation, you have actually chosen a model, and it will fit you in a little while.” I think the goal for each of us is to find happiness (at least it is for me.) Campbell sums this up in the following statement, “The way to find out about your happiness is to keep your mind on those moments when you feel most happy, when you really are happy – not excited, not just thrilled, but deeply happy. This requires a bit of self-analysis. What is it that makes you happy? Stay with it no matter what people tell you. This is what I call “follow your bliss.” What a great way to live life!

Today’s culture is no different – “the public hero is sensitive to the needs of his time.” Campbell states that “stories of the hero vary from culture to culture” and that the

“hero evolves as the culture evolves.” Today’s society is obsessed with pop culture. Campbell sums up why “It’s quite possible to be so influenced by the ideals and commands of your neighborhood that you don’t know what you really want and could be.” It is possible that people today have lost touch with real truths. This could be due to the lack of myths. Bob Trubshaw’s article, “Folklore, mythology and Cultural Studies” discusses how mythologist Lance Bennett “has referred to myths as being like the lenses of spectacles – they determine how we see the world, but we almost always look through them rather than look at them.” It is quite possible that this is why today we see the world in a different light than that of people in the past. The article also states how cultural studies discusses how the popular culture creates a widespread mentality of ‘power’ and ‘dominance.’ This is quite different from that of folklore and mythology. Mythology and folklore can cross all sorts of cultural boundaries they have no political agenda. They are simply “blind to the ideological content.”

Just like how people today love movies about heroes. People love movies about love as well. The twelfth century, troubadours were different kinds of heroes. They were heroes where love was considered. Troubadours “were very much interested in the psychology of love.” These noble men were the first to think of “love the way we do now – as a person-to-person relationship.” Previous to the troubadours there impersonal kinds of love: eros and agape. According to Campbell, “Eros is a biological urge” and “Agape is love thy neighbor as thyself.” The troubadour kind of person-to-person love is called Amor and they “recognized Amor as the highest spiritual experience.” Campbell believes that the beginning of romantic love in the West was “libido over credo.” He believes that “the libido is the impulse to life. It comes from the heart. The

heart is the organ of opening up to somebody else. That's the human quality as opposed to the animal qualities, which have to do with self-interest." Amor is what separates us from animals. "Love is bigger even than death and pain, than anything."

Love and marriage is a big part of a person's life in today's society. Our society has moved past the days of arranged marriages, like the days of the Middle Ages where marriages were for "political or social" convenience. However, how far have we really come? According to Campbell, "I come into this society, so I've got to live in terms of this society because, unless I do, I'm not living. But I mustn't allow this society to dictate to me how I should live. One has to build up one's own system that may violate the expectations of the society, and sometime society doesn't accept that." Today there are still marriages of convenience. They might not be arranged like the days of the Middle Ages, but they are not truly about romance or about Amor. Campbell states that "the task of life is to live within the field provided by the society that is really supporting you." I think that this too is true to love. Don't let society dictate what love is right for you. Where love is concerned...you must also follow your bliss.

According to Campbell, myth is about romance. "Love is the burning point of life, and since all life is sorrowful, so is love. The stronger the love, the more the pain." And according to Moyers, the greatest pain that one can feel is the pain of being separated from the one that you love. We must not confuse love with marriage. Campbell declares that "marriage is not a love affair" and that "a marriage is a commitment to that which you are. That person is literally your other half. And you and the other are one." With the divorce rate today being what it is, you have to wonder if

this is because the marriage begins to outlast the love affair. Campbell brings up the troubadour tradition of loyalty with relation to marriage. This too is a major cause of many of today's divorces. "The real life of a marriage or of a true love affair is in the relations, which is where you are, too." In order to achieve bliss, one must sacrifice. This sacrifice is a sacrifice to the relationship. According to Campbell there are two completely different stages of marriage. The first stage is new and exciting. This is the stage in which "the wonderful impulse that nature has given us in the interplay of the sexes biologically in order to produce children." But there is also the second stage of marriage later on after the children have left the nest. A couple needs to again learn how to enjoy each other's company. Campbell's sums it up in his definition of marriage – "Marriage is the symbolic recognition of our identity – two aspects of the same being." Campbell calls this the "alchemical stage," the idea of two becoming one.

In his book, Campbell uses myths to explain everything from love and marriage or sacrifice and bliss. Bill Moyers stated that "we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality." This statement truly does describe the Power of Myth. According to the article "Folklore, Mythology and Cultural Studies," "modern day myths are mostly transmitted through the hegemonic mass media, folk groups and folkloric transmission processes – either face to face or, increasingly, through the Internet." Campbell felt the same way about movies and music. Today's modern day artists are the storytellers of our day. Modern myths are present in everything from film to song to literature and even present on our news stations. Wikipedia.com states that Campbell believed "that insights about one's inner life, gained from reading myths, can be beneficially applied to one's own life." Whether you are reading about myths, hearing

them told, or watching them in your favorite movie, myths are outlets for mediation and reflection. “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.”

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