

The Need for New Myths

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The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stands this afternoon on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change.

—Joseph Campbell

That statement, fanciful as it sounds, is simply a short-hand way of saying that everyone is a creature of myth, that the ancient legends and tales of the race are still the master keys to the human psyche. The science-minded Victorians who sneered at myths as superstitious twaddle were guilty of a kind of scientific superstition themselves: the belief that reason could explain all human motives. Aided by psychoanalysis, anthropology and three-quarters of a century of archaeological discovery modern scholarship has replaced the Victorians' sneers with respect and even awe. Mythology, its partisans are now claiming, tells as much about humanity—its deepest fears, sorrows, joys and hopes—as dreams tell about an individual. "Myths are public dreams," says Joseph Campbell, who is probably the world's leading expert on mythology. "Dreams are private myths. Myths are vehicles of communication between the conscious and the unconscious, just as dreams are."

The trouble is, Campbell asserts, that this communication has broken down in the modern Western world. The old myths are no longer operative, and effective new myths have not risen to replace them. As a result, he maintains, the West is going through an agony of reorientation matched only by a period during the 4th millennium B.C., when the Sumerians first conceived the concept of a mathematically ordered cosmos and thus changed utterly man's concept of the universe around him.

Campbell's words carry extraordinary weight, not only among scholars but among a wide range of other people who find his search down mythological pathways relevant to their lives today. A professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., Campbell

has written and edited some 20-odd books on mythology. They include a massive four-volume work entitled *The Masks of God; The Flight of the Wild Gander* and the book for which he is most famous, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, a brilliant examination, through ancient hero myths, of man's eternal struggle for identity. *Hero*, which has had sales of more than 110,000 copies, an impressive figure for a scholarly book, has become a bestseller on campus. After 37 years of teaching in relative obscurity, Campbell, at 67, has now become a well-known and respected figure in academe.

What is a myth? In Campbell's academic jargon, it is a dreamlike "symbol that evokes and directs psychological energy." A vivid story or legend, it is but one part of a larger fabric of myths that, taken together, form a mythology that expresses a culture's attitude toward life, death and the universe around it. The Greek myth of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from Olympus and gave it to man, thus symbolizes the race's aspirations, even when they conflict with the powers of nature. The almost contemporary Hebrew myth of the trials of Job, on the other hand, symbolizes man's submission to a power above nature, even when that power seems cruel and unjust. The two myths are, in effect, picture stories that tell the philosophies of two totally divergent cultures. The Greek stresses man's heroic striving for human values and civilization; the Hebrew emphasizes, rather, man's humble spiritual surrender to God's will. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is the supreme symbol of this attitude.

Though not true in a literal sense, a myth is not what it is considered to be in everyday speech—a fantasy or a misstatement. It is rather a veiled explanation of the truth. The transformation from fact to myth is endlessly fascinating. The battle of Achilles and Hector, for example, is symbolic, but there was a Trojan War in which great heroes fought. The psychological duel between Faust and the Devil is a philosophical and psychological metaphor, but Georg Faust, a German magician who was born about 1480, did live and did make claims to superhuman power, including the ability to restore the lost works of Plato and Aristotle and to repeat the miracles of Christ. Yet it was not until poets like Christopher Marlowe and Goethe took up the legend that Faust became famous—and mythic. The Faust story appealed to Marlowe and to Goethe because the times in which they lived, eras in which faith and reason were in basic conflict, called for such a symbolic struggle.

What should a mythology do? In Campbell's view, a "properly operating" mythology has four important functions:

- To begin with, through its rites and imagery it wakens and maintains in the individual a sense of awe, gratitude and even

rapture, rather than fear, in relation to the mystery both of the universe and of man's own existence within it.

- Secondly, a mythology offers man a comprehensive, understandable image of the world around him, roughly in accord with the best scientific knowledge of the time. In symbolic form, it tells him what his universe looks like and where he belongs in it.
- The third function of a living mythology is to support the social order through rites and rituals that will impress and mold the young. In India, for example, the basic myth is that of an impersonal power, Brahma, that embodies the universe. The laws of caste are regarded as inherent features of this universe and are accepted and obeyed from childhood. Cruel as this may seem to Westerners, the myth of caste does give Indian society a stability it might otherwise lack and does make life bearable to the impoverished low castes.
- The fourth and, in Campbell's view, the most important function of mythology, is to guide the individual, stage by stage, through the inevitable psychological crises of a useful life: from the childhood condition of dependency through the traumas of adolescence and the trials of adulthood to, finally, the deathbed.

The churches and synagogues still provide mythological guidance for many, Campbell argues; for many others, however, this guidance fails. The result is that, where once religion served, many have turned to psychoanalysis or encounter groups. "All ages before ours believed in gods in some form or other," wrote Carl Jung, whose theories of the collective unconscious have most profoundly influenced Campbell's thinking. "Heaven has become empty space to us, a fair memory of things that once were. But our heart glows, and secret unrest gnaws at the roots of our being." In search of something that they can hold on to, many people in the West, particularly the young, are either returning to Christian fundamentalism through the Jesus Revolution or turning to the religions of the East, chiefly Buddhism and Hinduism. "The swamis are coming from India, and they're taking away the flock," says Campbell. "They're speaking of religion as dealing with the interior life and not about dogmatic formulae and ritual requirements."

For the vast majority, Campbell believes, the West's general lack of spiritual authority has been a disaster. Forty years in the study of eternal symbols have made Campbell a conservative of a rather dark hue. Though he is optimistic about the long range, he finds the present

bleak indeed. "We have seen what has happened to primitive communities unsettled by the white man's civilization," he observes. "With their old taboos discredited, they immediately go to pieces, disintegrate, and become resorts of vice and disease. Today the same thing is happening to us."

Many Oriental and primitive societies even today have working mythologies, and Communist countries have at least the basis of a mythology in Marxism. The Marxist dream of the withering away of the state, after which each man will give according to his abilities and receive according to his needs, echoes numerous religious beliefs of a paradise on earth or a Second Coming. The Chinese Communists have, in addition, the myth of the "Long March" in the '30s and the subsequent sanctuary of Mao Tse-tung and his followers in the caves of Yen-an. The events were real enough, but for this generation of Chinese, and probably for generations to come, they will have much the same deep mythological significance that the Trojan War had for the Greeks.

In the West there have been desperate attempts to provide at least fragments of a modern mythology. Churchill brilliantly re-created the myth of St. George and the dragon during World War II: the picture of little Britain, a citadel of justice, besieged by the evil Nazi hordes. The situation, of course, was much as he painted it—Britain was besieged and Hitler was evil—but a Neville Chamberlain would not have been able, as Churchill was, to light up his people with the basic themes of their culture. Charles de Gaulle, both as wartime leader and President of the Fifth Republic, quite consciously resurrected the ghost of Joan of Arc. "To my mind," he wrote, "France cannot be France without greatness." The founders of Israel similarly evoked, and still evoke, mythic images of the Bible's chosen people to enable Israelis to survive in their hostile environment.

Often, such attempts add up merely to rhetoric or incantation. John Kennedy sought to revive the American myth that the U.S. was a country with a messianic mission. "Now the trumpet summons us again," he said in his Inaugural Address, "to a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself." A post-Viet Nam U.S. can no longer quite believe in such an American mission. And Martin Luther King Jr. worked to provide the nation's blacks with a myth of their own. "I've been to the mountaintop and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land," King said the night before he was killed, echoing the Bible's story of Moses on Mount Sinai.

For centuries Americans were emboldened by the myth of the endless frontier, the notion that a new life could always be started out West, whether the West was Ohio or California. That version outlasted the frontier itself, but no one believes in it today. Campbell hopes that

the landings on the moon will reinvigorate that mythic tradition. Only a handful of people can go to the moon, and no one would want to stake out his 160 acres there, but the excitement of the journey itself is infectious, a reenactment on the TV screen of Prometheus' stealing fire from the gods. Beyond that, Campbell believes, there is an even more durable myth: the "American Dream." That is the idea, grounded in fact, that a man is judged on his own ability rather than on his family or his place in society. "This pessimistic optimist thinks that that myth still works," he says. "The fact that Nixon was a poor boy and was yet elected President is a good example."

In the final analysis, however, it is wrong in Campbell's view to ask for one grand mythology that will guide people today. Instead there must be many different mythologies for many different kinds of people. "There is no general mythology today," Campbell says, "nor can there ever be again. Our lives are too greatly various in their backgrounds, aims and possibilities for any single order of symbols to work effectively on us all." The new myths must be internalized and individual, and each man must find them for himself. Some, in fact, are following mythological paths today, unconsciously and without design. The hippie who leaves society and goes off to a commune, for example, is being guided by a mythological map of withdrawal and adventure laid down by Christ in the desert, the Buddha at Bodh-Gaya, and Mohammed in his cave of meditation at Mount Hira.

The man in search of an ideal could at least begin, Campbell thinks, by searching through the myths of antiquity, religion and modern literature. For the elite who can read and understand them, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, among modern writers and poets, and Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, among modern artists, have updated the ancient mythological motifs. Campbell and the other mythologists are, in a sense, providing the workbooks for the poets—the modern Daedaluses in turtlenecks. "It doesn't matter to me whether my guiding angel is for a time named Vishnu, Shiva, Jesus, or the Buddha," Campbell says. "If you're not distracted by names or the color of hair, the same message is there, variously turned. In the multitude of myths and legends that have been preserved to us—both in our own Western arts and literatures, synagogues and churches, and in the rites and teachings of those Oriental and primitive heritages now becoming known to us—we may still find guidance."

The mythologists are not providing myths, but they are indicating that something is missing without them. They are telling modern man that he has not outgrown mythology and will never outgrow it so long as he has hopes and fears beyond the other animals.

For Discussion and Writing

1. According to Clarke, how does Campbell define mythology, and what is its place in the modern world?
2. What does Campbell say are the main functions of mythology? Without such mythological support, according to Campbell, what happens to society?
3. Our own day, Campbell says, calls for a new kind of mythology. What is this? Why do modern human beings still need myths to guide them?
4. To what extent do mythic ideas or stories guide your life? Some examples: the American Dream of individual achievement; the hero's quest for adventure, social value, self-understanding; the artist's or scientist's desire to discover and create; the individual's need to be a meaningful part of family, community, or cosmos. Write a reflective essay in which you define the guiding principles of your life, analyse their mythological qualities, and explain how they help you to live.