

MYTH-ING

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
 Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)
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The story I told to the children this morning is not literally true, but I hope it was **meaningful** to them and perhaps to some of you. This story belongs to the broad category of narratives we call **myth**: stories that are fantastic yet meaningful, even though they may not be factually true. I think it is very unfortunate that the word “myth” has taken on such a negative connotation. The most common use of the word *myth* is to label something that is **contrary to fact**, in order to debunk it. For example, the current issue of *Time* magazine includes an article that lists five “myths” about grief that are contradicted by research in what the author refers to as the “science of loss.” **Science of loss?** Can the experience of grieving be reduced to a set of verifiable facts? The implication is that if a claim (in this case, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stage theory of grief) cannot be verified by the scientific method, it must therefore be **false**. [Ruth Davis Konigsberg, “Good News About Grief,” *Time*, 1/24/2011]

Another negative connotation of myths is to regard them as **fables**—silly old stories that are no longer relevant to modern people. For example, many Americans would consider the tradition of **potlatch** feasts among Northwest Indian tribes, in which influential families would accumulate and then give away enormous amounts of material possessions during ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals as a way of demonstrating their prestige in their community to be irrational, based on their tribal mythology. And yet a typical American wedding or funeral is much like that—spending thousands of dollars on a single occasion to demonstrate a family’s social status. Likewise, “To most Americans the Moslem notion of *jihad*—holy war—is a dangerous myth. But our struggle against ‘atheistic communism’ is a righteous duty. Ask a born-again Christian about the myth of the atonement, and you will be told it is no myth at all but a revealed truth. . . . It is differing **cultural myths** that make cows sacred objects for Hindus and hamburgers for Methodists, or turn dogs into pets for Americans and roasted delicacies for the Chinese.” [Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey*, p. xi-xii]

Perhaps we are not so far removed from mythical thinking and ritual as we would like to believe. If archeologists of the future were to study the physical remains of American culture, they would surely conclude that we worshipped sports as if it were a religion. Massive temples called stadiums testify to the importance we attach to sports, as does the tribal behavior of devoted fans who paint their bodies and purchase artifacts to demonstrate their team loyalty. Sports fans can recite stories about the triumphs and failures of their favorite heroes from years past. In just three weeks millions of Americans will gather to observe the annual ritual we call the Super Bowl, which is assigned a Roman numeral to emphasize its historic significance. I would say that our dominant popular mythology revolves around **competition**—not just in sports, but in virtually every aspect of contemporary life, from romantic relationships to musical talent to dancing to business prowess. **We worship winners**, and we actively support competition that separates winners from losers.

In their book titled *Your Mythic Journey*, Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox describe myth as the cultural “software” that governs the way we view reality and the way we behave. “The organizing myth of any culture functions in ways that may be either creative or destructive, healthful or pathological. By providing a world picture and a set of stories that explain why things are as they are, it creates consensus, sanctifies the social order, and gives the individual an authorized map of the path of life. A myth creates the plotline that organizes the diverse experiences of a person or community into a single story.” [pp. xii-xiii] Myths connect us to our human past and serve as a guide for our present behavior.

Let me talk first about how myths connect us to the human past. One of the very best sources I have seen is *A Short History of Myth* by Karen Armstrong, whom I consider the most gifted contemporary writer about religion. “In the ancient world,” she says, “the ‘gods’ were rarely regarded as supernatural beings with discrete personalities, living a totally separate . . . existence. Mythology was not about theology, in the modern sense, but about human experience. People thought that gods, humans, animals and nature were inextricably bound up together, subject to the same laws, and composed of the same divine substance. There was initially no . . . gulf between the world of the gods and the world of men and women. . . . The very existence of

the gods was inseparable from that of a storm, a sea, a river, or from those powerful human emotions—love, rage or sexual passion—that seem momentarily to lift men and women onto a different plane of existence so that they saw the world with new eyes.” [pp. 5-6] Myths from so-called “primitive” cultures like Native America are invaluable in describing a unified primordial world in which humans, animals and other forces of nature could communicate directly with one another, as in the story I told the children this morning. These myths provide a rich resource as we seek to restore a more balanced relationship with the natural world for ourselves and future generations.

Classical Greek mythology, on the other hand, offers dramatic stories about gods who embodied powerful human emotions: jealousy, deception, lust, and greed. As Karen Armstrong points out, ancient mythology “not only helped people to make sense of their lives but also revealed regions of the human mind that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. It was an early form of psychology. . . . When Freud and Jung began to chart the modern quest for the soul, they instinctively turned to classical mythology to explain their insights, and gave the old myths a new interpretation. [optional example: Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex] There was nothing new in this. There is never a single, orthodox version of a myth. As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth.” [Armstrong, pp. 10-11]

No one person has done more to connect a contemporary audience to the “timeless truth” of myth than the late **Joseph Campbell**, who devoted his entire career to the exploration and explication of myths for a wider audience, in numerous books and a series of interviews with Bill Moyers on PBS titled *The Power of Myth*. His knowledge, passion, and insights into the meaning of myths are evident in these interviews and also in a collection titled *A Joseph Campbell Collection*, which is based on his conversations with a group of his students at Esalen Institute, in which he applies the wisdom of ancient myths to such contemporary issues as marriage, money, and stages of the life journey. Campbell is often remembered for his famous advice, “Follow your bliss,” which has been widely misinterpreted as a prescription for self-indulgence. What he really meant was to pursue your **highest enthusiasm**, no matter where it may lead you. For him that meant spending five years in a cabin reading the great classics of

mythology before he launched his public career, as well as periodic retreats into solitude throughout his life. He and his wife deliberately chose not to have children so that he could pursue his “bliss” as an expert on mythology.

Like many other gurus, Joseph Campbell’s prescription for others was formed by—but also **limited** by—his own personal life experiences. The model that emerged from his personal experience was one that emphasized the mythic journey as a **solitary journey**. His most widely read book was titled *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. “Live from your own center,” he wrote. “Your real duty is to go away from the community to find your bliss. The society is the enemy when it imposes its structures on the individual. . . . Breaking out is following your bliss pattern, quitting the old place, starting your hero journey, following your bliss. You throw off yesterday as the snake sheds its skin.” [Diane K. Olson (ed.), *A Joseph Campbell Companion*, p. 21]

As appealing as Joseph Campbell’s advice to “follow your bliss” may be, I find it ultimately unsatisfying. If we are seeking to gain wisdom for our life’s journey, we need to be not just **storytellers** but also **story listeners**. For this reason I appreciate the book I mentioned earlier by Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox titled *Your Mythic Journey*. This book offers a very helpful bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary life. Sam Keen collaborated with Joseph Campbell in leading public seminars toward the latter part of his career. Campbell provided the scholarly background and Keen led the participants in exercises that would help them apply the mythological insights to their personal lives.

The purpose of this book is to enable its readers to develop an appreciation of their own life story as a **mythic journey**, with themes that correspond to the great mythic narratives of the past—stories of exile and return, transgression and forgiveness, love and loss, life and death. The personal life stories that are evoked in this book are meant to be **shared**. As Sam Keen says, “Now is the time to begin your mythic journey. Choose a confidant, a listener, an audience for your tales. You don’t have to wait until you are so mad, bad, sad, and hazardous to yourself and other that you have to hire a professional listener—a therapist. Ask your husband, your wife, your child, your lover, your best friend to share this quest. [It also occurs to me that the exercises in this book could be very useful to our Heart to Heart discussion groups.]

Keen says, “I can’t promise that your stories will give you certainty or objective truth any more than the ancient myths gave the Hebrews or Greeks accurate maps of the world. They will, however, fill you with the stuff from which romance, tragedy, and comedy are made, which alone can give you an entertaining and meaningful life. They will hollow you out so you can listen to the stories of others, as common and unique as your own. And that remains the best way we storytelling animals have found to overcome our loneliness, develop compassion, and create community.” [pp. xviii-xix] Let me close with an excerpt from T. S. Eliot:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
When the last of earth to discover is that which was the beginning
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall.

[quoted in Keen & Valley-Fox, p. 129]