

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

The Power of Myth

with Bill Moyers



A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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JOSEPH CAMPBELL: THE MAN BEHIND THE MYTHS



On March 26, 1904, Joseph John Campbell was born in White Plains, New York. Nicknamed Joe, he was the first child of a middle-class, Roman Catholic couple. After earning a BA (1925) and an MA (1927) from Columbia University for his work in English and medieval literature, Campbell was awarded a Proudfit Fellowship to continue his studies at the University of Paris (1927-28). In 1934, he accepted a position in the literature department at Sarah Lawrence College, where he remained for the next 38 years.

In 1938, he married one of his students, Jean Erdman, who became a major presence in the emerging field of modern dance, first as a star dancer in Martha Graham's fledgling troupe, and later as dancer and choreographer in her own company.

After editing four books of the German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer's work, Campbell published a solo authorial endeavor, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), to great acclaim. In this study of the hero myth, Campbell posits the existence of a "monomyth" (a word he borrowed from James Joyce): a universal pattern that is the essence of, and common to, heroic tales in every culture. This work won him the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Contributions to Creative Literature, the first of numerous honors.

Subsequent works included *The Masks of God* (1959-68), an examination of world mythology in four volumes; *The Mythic Image* (1974); and the *Historical Atlas of World Mythology* (1983-87), left incomplete at his death. In 1985, Campbell received the National Arts Club Gold Medal of Honor in Literature. At the award ceremony, psychologist James Hillman said of Campbell, "No one in our century—not Freud, not Thomas Mann, not Levi-Strauss—has so brought the mythical sense of the world and its eternal figures back into our everyday consciousness."

Joseph Campbell died in 1987 after a brief struggle with cancer.

AVENUES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Companion Book for the Series

The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers. Betty Sue Flowers, ed. New York: Doubleday, 1988.

Selected Works by Joseph Campbell

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 3rd ed., with revisions (Novato, CA: New World Library/Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2008). This 1949 classic (Bollingen Series XVII), a favorite in college curricula, is a cross-cultural elaboration of “The Hero’s Journey.”

Historical Atlas of World Mythology, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Perennial Library [Harper & Row Publishers], 1988). Volume I in two parts and Volume II in three parts explore the mythologies of hunting cultures and early agrarians.

The Masks of God, 4 vols. (New York, NY: Arkana [Viking Penguin], 1991). Originally published between 1959 and 1968, the volumes in this magnum opus examine Primitive, Oriental, Occidental, and Creative mythologies.

The Mythic Image (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974). This elaborately illustrated, over-sized volume (Bollingen Series C) presents an array of thematically ordered mythological motifs that Campbell insightfully interprets.

Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation (Novato, CA: New World Library/Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2004). A collection compiled posthumously from the best of Campbell’s lectures and seminars.

CREATIVE MYTHMAKERS

Artists and academics inspired by Joseph Campbell’s work

Richard Adams

Novelist (*Watership Down*)

On several occasions, both publicly and privately, British author Richard Adams thanked Campbell for inspiring his fiction. In *Watership Down*, for instance, the rabbits’ mythic journey and the trickster El-ahrairah seem to have hopped straight out of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. “A kind of chain reaction comes from his discoveries that have reverberated out into writing novels, into psychiatry, into anthropology . . .” said Adams in 1985. “It’s hard to believe that Shakespeare didn’t read Joseph Campbell.”



Robert Bly

Poet (*The Light Around the Body*)

Winner of the National Book Award for Poetry, Robert Bly counted Campbell not only as an inspiration, but also as a colleague and personal friend. In interviews, Bly

has cited Campbell’s distinction between “improper” and “proper” art as an important touchstone in his poetry. The former evokes repulsion or desire, like pornography, advertising, or polemic. The latter has “a thread of silence going down the middle of it,” Bly has said. “When you are finished, you’re at the center of yourself and you do not move either way.”

David Byrne

Musician (“Once in a Lifetime,” *Stop Making Sense*)

Perhaps best known as a cofounder of the 1980s art-rock band Talking Heads, David Byrne playfully includes imagery drawn from myths and the unconscious in his lyrics and music videos. “As with myths and fairy tales, we marvel and get sucked into minor but infinite variations of the same limited set of tales—the Joseph Campbell ‘hero with a thousand faces,’” wrote Byrne in a 2007 posting on his blog. “How those narratives resonate in our own hearts and minds seems almost genetically predetermined. It’s that strong.”



Northrop Frye

Literary critic (*Fearful Symmetry*, *Anatomy of Criticism*)

A contemporary of Campbell, the influential Canadian academic Northrop Frye theorized that all great literature relies on common structures drawn from myth: comedy (the mythos of spring), romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), and irony and satire (winter). To identify and explain these structures, he drew not only from Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but also from the same thinkers who had independently inspired Campbell—Jung, Frazer, and Spengler.



The Grateful Dead

Rock band (“Casey Jones,” “Truckin”)

The Dead’s late lead guitarist, Jerry Garcia, often acknowledged his debt to Campbell, and his bandmates Bob Weir and Mickey Hart became friends with Campbell

late in his life. They composed and performed “The African Queen Meets the Holy Ghost” as a tribute to the mythologist. In his own scholarly way, Campbell was something of a Deadhead himself; he saw the band’s concerts as modern versions of ancient, ecstatic Dionysian rituals.

George Miller

Screenwriter, producer, and director (*Mad Max*, *The Witches of Eastwick*)

A passionate acolyte of Joseph Campbell, Australian filmmaker George Miller likes to tell the story of location scouting for one of his *Mad Max* movies at Kata Tjuta, a rock formation sacred to native peoples deep in the Outback. According to Miller, after hearing about Max—a hero who sacrifices his self-interest to gain redemption and renewal—the Aboriginal tribe granted permission for filming because they recognized the story as one of their own.



Isamu Noguchi

Sculptor and landscape architect (UNESCO garden, Paris; *Black Sun*, Seattle)

The Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi met Campbell when both men were in their twenties, forging a friendship that would last more than five decades. Like Campbell, Noguchi drew ideas from many fields, and the sculptor shared a similar approach to aesthetics—particularly abstract expressionism—with his mythologist friend. “It became self-evident to me that in so-called abstraction lay the expression of the age,” Noguchi stated.

LIVING YOUR MYTH

What does mythology have to do with everyday life?

Joseph Campbell was no therapist—not by a long shot. Although he inspired and motivated millions from all walks of life, he embraced his role as a scholar and teacher in the classical sense, devoting his time to reading, writing, and lecturing. Once, Campbell’s friend Alan Watts asked him what type of meditation he practiced. “I underline sentences,” Campbell said.

Nevertheless, later in his life, Campbell became increasingly interested in myths as a kind of compass for self-actualization. At the Esalen Institute, a center for nontraditional education in California, he often lectured on the power of myths to shape and inform an individual’s life. Many of these lectures—rich tapestries woven from literature, psychology, and philosophy in Campbell’s signature erudite style—offered guidance that went well beyond his famous dictum, “Follow your bliss.” Here are a few of his suggestions culled from *Pathways to Bliss*, a compilation of his Esalen lectures and seminars edited and published posthumously under the auspices of the Joseph Campbell Foundation.

“**Realize your shadow.**” Drawing from Jungian psychology, Campbell thought of the “shadow” as the center of the unconscious, the part of the self that harbors repressed ideas, desires, and potentials that society doesn’t allow you to express. It’s your personal dragon—one that other people recognize instinctively, but that you don’t ordinarily recognize. You don’t have to act on the shadow, says Campbell, but you do have to accept and embrace it. Otherwise, you experience what Jung called *enantiodynamia* (Greek for “running in the opposite direction”)—a neurotic attempt to restore balance between the conscious and the unconscious. The typical midlife crisis or disillusionment of a young idealist can be *enantiodynamia* in action.

“Have compassion for the world and those in it.” You might expect perfection from the world and from the people in it, but you’ll never find it. In fact, imperfection becomes the very quality that evokes love in human beings; compassion embraces imperfection. As St. Paul wrote, “Love beareth all things.” Campbell acknowledged that you might not be able to bear all things—but you can at least try.

Find your personal myth. “Mythological images are the images by which the consciousness is put in touch with the unconscious,” said Campbell. For some people, the world’s great religions provide a mythic structure by which to live. But for others, the fragmentation of contemporary society forces them to seek out a personal mythos within their own psyche. That means finding the symbols that put you in touch with the deepest part of yourself. Jung, for example, kept a dream journal to record the images that recurred again and again. Those images became the basis for art, stories, or meditation. They might defy simple rational analysis, but they can yield a multitude of meanings upon repeated consideration.

“Don’t try to live your life too soon.” Finding your personal myth, said Campbell, is a matter not only of following your bliss but also of knowing what stage of life you’re in. He liked to tell an anecdote about a lecture he gave on Yeats’s and Dante’s lunar and solar metaphors for the transit of life from infancy, through maturity, to old age. A woman came up to him afterward and said, “Mr. Campbell, you just don’t know about the modern generation. We go directly from infancy to wisdom.” Campbell replied, “That is great. All you’ve missed is life.”

Too often, our demand for instant answers leads us to people who deliver wisdom in pithy aphorisms. For Campbell, however, true personal fulfillment has no shortcut—and perhaps that’s why he resisted playing the role of guru. Life entails a rigorous journey beset with trials, like

that of Christ, the Buddha, or Arthurian knights. You’ll find teachers and helpers along the way. But passing those trials, overcoming temptation, and finding your own path require living every moment fully according to your own personal myth.

ANIMAL SYMBOLISM IN MYTHS



Buffalo/bison A major mythological figure on three continents—Asia, Africa, and North America—the buffalo carries vastly different meanings for each culture. For the Yoruba of West Africa, the water buffalo is associated with Oya, the goddess of strong winds and the Niger River. In India, Yama, the god of death, rides on the creature’s back as he lassoes souls from the bodies of the recently deceased. Meanwhile, the Lakota tribe of North America regards the White Buffalo Woman as a compassionate figure, representing the origins of the Plains Indians’ way of life.



Pig/boar Widely domesticated and a staple of diets the world over, pigs make appearances in the myths of several far-flung cultures. For the ancient Celts, the boar was a symbol of courage in battle, emblazoned upon banners and shields; its domesticated counterpart, represented by the sow goddess Cerridwen, was associated with fertility. The Viking god Freyr—also connected with fertility—was believed to ride atop a golden boar during the winter solstice, bringing light to his followers. In China, the pig is regarded as an auspicious creature, symbolizing wealth, good fortune, and sincerity.



Deer/antelope With 71 species of antelope roaming the continent, it's no wonder that many African peoples associate these abundant creatures with the gods. According to the tradition of Africa's Kalahari Bushmen, the antelope was the favorite animal of the creator god Mantis. In the Arabian Peninsula,

antelopes symbolize Attar, the god of rain. And although they hunted deer as a primary food source, the Celts had many legends about people transforming into deer, and they regarded them as intermediaries between humans and the divine. Elsewhere, deer signify peace and compassion to Tibetans and longevity to the Chinese.



Raven With an almost universal reputation for cunning, mythical ravens appear in societies from Rome to Siberia. The traditional history of the Alaskan Tlingit tribe depicts the raven as the driving force behind the world's creation; in contrast, Celtic lore associates the birds with destruction and war. In ancient Greece

and China, the raven was portrayed as a messenger between gods and men. Perhaps the most famous ravens are Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory), the constant companions of the chief Norse god, Odin.



Lion/tiger/jaguar Big cats, with their powerful jaws and predatory grace, have fired the imaginations of mythmakers for thousands of years. As part of his legendary 12 labors, the Greek hero Heracles slew the Nemean lion and thereafter wore its impenetrable pelt for protection; a Chinese myth relates the similar

story of Wu Song, who killed a man-eating tiger with his bare hands. The ancient cultures of Mesoamerica, however, had a more positive take on these fearsome creatures: the jaguar was associated with the earth, royalty, and the supreme Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca.



Serpent A symbol of destruction and rebirth, wisdom and sin, healing and eternity, serpents are found worldwide and hold an array of meanings. For the ancient Egyptians, the cobra goddess Wadjet was a protector, depicted rearing on the pharaohs' crowns. In Judaism and Christianity, the snake represents both knowledge and temptation, and was

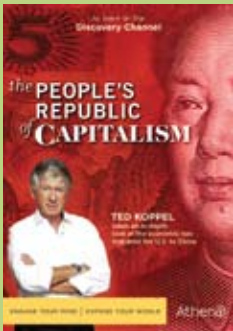
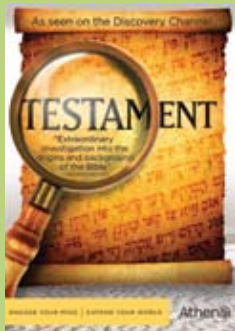
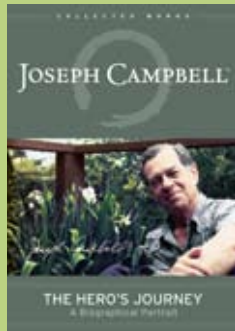
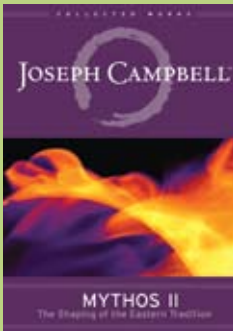
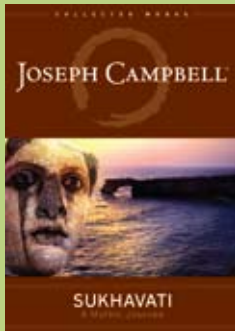
the impetus for Adam and Eve's ejection from the Garden of Eden. Hindu belief associates the serpent with creation and birth, while the caduceus staff of Greek myth, with its two entwined snakes, is associated with the tree of life and today's medical professions.



Dragons In many Western myths, serpents and dragons are conflated into fearsome, sometimes many-headed figures of evil that must be slain by legendary heroes, from Heracles killing the Hydra to St. George destroying the dragon. In Asian cultures, however, dragons are distinguished as good beings, bringing luck, power,

wisdom, energy, and rain. Chinese *lung* (dragons) are linked to Taoism and Buddhism and also served as emblems of the imperial family; only the emperor and his representatives were allowed to picture the sacred five-toed dragon on their clothing.

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