Joseph Campbell
The Power of Myth

I

MYTH AND THE MODERN WORLD

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. 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.

MOYERS: Why myths? Why should we care about myths? What do they have to do with my life?

CAMPBELL: My first response would be, "Go on, live your life, it's a good life—you don't need mythology." I don't believe in being interested in a subject just because it's said to be important. I believe in being caught by it somehow or other. But you may find that, with a proper introduction, mythology will catch you. And so, what can it do for you if it does catch you?

One of our problems today is that we are not well acquainted with the literature of the spirit. We're interested in the news of the day and the problems of the hour. It used to be that the university campus was a kind of hermetically sealed-off area where the news of the day did not impinge upon your attention to the inner life and to the magnificent human heritage we have in our great tradition—Plato, Confucius, the Buddha, Goethe, and others who speak of the eternal values that have to do with the centering of our lives. When you get to be older, and the concerns of the day have all been attended to, and you turn to the inner life—well, if you don't know where it is or what it is, you'll be sorry.

FACING PAGE:

Vairocana, Tibetan tanka, Po Monastery, Stiti, twelfth century.

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Greek and Latin and biblical literature used to be part of everyone's education. Now, when these were dropped, a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you perspective on what's happening to you. With the loss of that, we've really lost something because we don't have a comparable literature to take its place. These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't know what the guide-signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself. But once this subject catches you, there is such a feeling, from one or another of these traditions, of information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort that you don't want to give it up.

MOYERS: So we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality?

CAMPBELL: I think so, yes. Novels—great novels—can be wonderfully instructive. In my twenties and thirties and even on into my forties, James Joyce and Thomas Mann were my teachers. I read everything they wrote. Both were writing in terms of what might be called the mythological traditions. Take, for example, the story of Tonio, in Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*. Tonio's father was a substantial businessman, a major citizen in his hometown. Little Tonio, however, had an artistic temperament, so he moved to Munich and joined a group of literary people who felt themselves above the mere money earners and family men.

So here is Tonio between two poles: his father, who was a good father, responsible and all of that, but who never did the thing he wanted to in all his life—and, on the other hand, the one who leaves his hometown and becomes a critic of that kind of life. But Tonio found that he really loved these hometown people. And although he thought himself a little superior in an intellectual way to them and could describe them with cutting words, his heart was nevertheless with them.

But when he left to live with the bohemians, he found that they were so disdainful of life that he couldn't stay with them, either. So he left them, and wrote a letter back to someone in the group, saying, "I admire those cold, proud beings who adventure upon the paths of great and daemonic beauty and despise 'mankind'; but I do not envy them. For if anything is capable of making a poet of a literary man, it is my hometown love of the human, the living and ordinary. All warmth derives from this love, all kindness and all humor. Indeed, to me it even seems that this must be that love of which it is written that one may 'speak with the tongues of men and of angels,' and yet, lacking love, be 'as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.' "

And then he says, "The writer must be true to truth." And that's a killer, because the only way you can describe a human being truly is by describing his imperfections. The perfect human being is uninteresting—the Buddha who leaves the world, you know. It is the imperfections of life that are lovable. And when the writer sends a dart of the true word, it hurts. But it goes with love. This is what Mann called "erotic irony," the love for that which you are killing with your cruel, analytical word.

MOYERS: I cherish that image: my hometown love, the feeling you get for that place, no matter how long you've been away or even if you never return. That was where you first discovered people. But why do you say you love people for their imperfections?

CAMPBELL: Aren't children lovable because they're falling down all the time and have little bodies with the heads too big? Didn't Walt Disney know all about this when he did the seven dwarfs? And these funny little dogs that people have—they're lovable because they're so imperfect.

MOYERS: Perfection *would* be a bore, wouldn't it?

CAMPBELL: It would have to be. It would be inhuman. The umbilical point, the humanity, the thing that makes you human and not supernatural and immortal—that's what's lovable. That is why some people have a very hard time loving God, because there's no imperfection there. You can be in awe, but that would not be real love. It's Christ on the cross that becomes lovable.

MOYERS: What do you mean?

CAMPBELL: Suffering. Suffering is imperfection, is it not?

MOYERS: The story of human suffering, striving, living—

CAMPBELL: —and youth coming to knowledge of itself, what it has to go through.

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 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 for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.

CAMPBELL: People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. 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.

MOYERS: Myths are clues?

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

MOYERS: What we're capable of knowing and experiencing within?

CAMPBELL: Yes.

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

CAMPBELL: Experience of *life.* The mind has to do with meaning. What's the meaning of a flower? There's a 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. That's it. And your own meaning is that you're there. We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about.

MOYERS: How do you get that experience?

CAMPBELL: Read 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 the experience is. Marriage, for example. What is marriage? The myth tells you what it is. It's the reunion of the separated duad. Originally you were one. You are now two in the world, 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's 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 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'll marry the wrong person. By marrying the right person, we reconstruct the image of the incarnate God, and that's what marriage is.

MOYERS: The right person? How does one choose the right person?

CAMPBELL: Your heart tells you. It ought to.

MOYERS: Your inner being.

CAMPBELL: That's the mystery.

MOYERS: You recognize your other self.

CAMPBELL: Well, I don't know, but there's a flash that comes, and something in you knows that this is the one.

MOYERS: If marriage is this reunion of the self with the self, with the male or female grounding of ourselves, why is it that marriage is so precarious in our modern society?

CAMPBELL: Because it's not regarded as a marriage. I would say that if the marriage isn't a first priority in your life, you're not married. The marriage means the two that are one, the two become one flesh. If the marriage lasts long enough, and if you are acquiescing constantly to it instead of to individual personal whim, you come to realize that that is true—the two really are one.

MOYERS: One not only biologically but spiritually.

CAMPBELL: *Primarily* spiritually. The biological is the distraction which may lead you to the wrong identification.

MOYERS: Then the necessary function of marriage, perpetuating ourselves in children, is not the primary one.

CAMPBELL: No, that's really just the elementary aspect of marriage. There are two completely different stages of marriage. First is the youthful marriage following the wonderful impulse that nature has given us in the interplay of the sexes biologically in order to produce children. But there comes a time when the child graduates from the family and the couple is left. I've been amazed at the number of my friends who in their forties or fifties go apart. They have had a perfectly decent life together with the child, but they interpreted their union in terms of their relationship through the child. They did not interpret it in terms of their own personal relationship to each other.

Marriage is a relationship. When you make the sacrifice in marriage, you're sacrificing not to each other but to unity in a relationship. The Chinese image of the Tao, with the dark and light interacting—that's the relationship of yang and yin, male and female, which is what a marriage is. And that's what you have become when you have married. You're no longer this one alone; your identity is in a relationship. Marriage is not a simple love affair, it's an ordeal, and the ordeal is the sacrifice of ego to a relationship in which two have become one.

MOYERS: So marriage is utterly incompatible with the idea of doing one's own thing.

CAMPBELL: It's not simply one's own thing, you see. It is, in a sense, doing one's own thing, but the one isn't just you, it's the two together as one. And that's a purely mythological image signifying the sacrifice of the visible entity for a transcendent good. This is something that becomes beautifully realized in the second stage of marriage, what I call the alchemical stage, of the two experiencing that they are one. If they are still living as they were in the primary stage of marriage, they will go apart when their children leave. Daddy will fall in love with some little nubile girl and run off, and Mother will be left with an empty house and heart, and will have to work it out on her own, in her own way.

MOYERS: That's because we don't understand the two levels of marriage.

CAMPBELL: You don't make a commitment.

MOYERS: We presume to—we make a commitment for better or for worse.

CAMPBELL: That's the remnant of a ritual.

MOYERS: And the ritual has lost its force. The ritual that once conveyed an inner reality is now merely form. And that's true in the rituals of society and in the personal rituals of marriage and religion.

CAMPBELL: How many people before marriage receive spiritual instruction as to what the marriage means? You can stand up in front of a judge and in ten minutes get married. The marriage ceremony in India lasts three days. That couple is glued.

MOYERS: You're saying that marriage is not just a social arrangement, it's a spiritual exercise.

CAMPBELL: It's primarily a spiritual exercise, and the society is supposed to help us have the realization. Man should not be in the service of society, society should be in the service of man. When man is in the service of society, you have a monster state, and that's what is threatening the world at this minute.

MOYERS: What happens when a society no longer embraces a powerful mythology?

CAMPBELL: What we've got on our hands. If you want to find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read the New York *Times.*

MOYERS: And you'd find?

CAMPBELL: The news of the day, including destructive and violent acts by young people who don't know how to behave in a civilized society.

MOYERS: Society has provided them no rituals by which they become members of the tribe, of the community. All children need to be twice born, to learn to function rationally in the present world, leaving childhood behind. I think of that passage in the first book of Corinthians: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

CAMPBELL: That's exactly it. That's the significance of the puberty rites. In primal societies, there are teeth knocked out, there are scarifications, there are circumcisions, there are all kinds of things done. So you don't have your little baby body anymore, you're something else entirely.

When I was a kid, we wore short trousers, you know, knee pants. And then there was a great moment when you put on long pants. Boys now don't get that. I see even five-year-olds walking around with long trousers. When are they going to know that they're now men and must put aside childish things?

MOYERS: Where do the kids growing up in the city—on 125th and Broadway, for example—where do these kids get their myths today?

CAMPBELL: They make them up themselves. This is why we have graffiti all over the city. These kids have their own gangs and their own initiations and their own morality, and they're doing the best they can. But they're dangerous because their own laws are not those of the city. They have not been initiated into our society.

MOYERS: Rollo May says there is so much violence in American society today because there are no more great myths to help young men and women relate to the world or to understand that world beyond what is seen.

CAMPBELL: Yes, but another reason for the high level of violence here is that America has no ethos.

MOYERS: Explain.

CAMPBELL: In American football, for example, the rules are very strict and complex. If you were to go to England, however, you would find that the rugby rules are not that strict. When I was a student back in the twenties, there were a couple of young men who constituted a marvelous forward-passing pair. They went to Oxford on scholarship and joined the

rugby team and one day they introduced the forward pass. And the English players said, "Well, we have no rules for this, so please don't. We don't play that way."

Now, in a culture that has been homogeneous for some time, there are a number of understood, unwritten rules by which people live. There is an ethos there, there is a mode, an understanding that "we don't do it that way."

MOYERS: A mythology.

CAMPBELL: An unstated mythology, you might say. This is the way we use a fork and knife, this is the way we deal with people, and so forth. It's not all written down in books. But in America we have people from all kinds of backgrounds, all in a cluster, together, and consequently law has become very important in this country. Lawyers and law are what hold us together. There is no ethos. Do you see what I mean?

MOYERS: Yes. It's what De Tocqueville described when he first arrived here a hundred and sixty years ago to discover "a tumult of anarchy."

CAMPBELL: What we have today is a demythologized world. And, as a result, the students I meet are very much interested in mythology because myths bring them messages. Now, I can't tell you what the messages are that the study of mythology is bringing to young people today. I know what it did for me. But it is doing something for them. When I go to lecture at any college, the room is bursting with students who have come to hear what I have to say. The faculty very often assigns me to a room that's a little small—smaller than it should have been because they didn't know how much excitement there was going to be in the student body.

MOYERS: Take a guess. What do you think the mythology, the stories they're going to hear from you, do for them?

CAMPBELL: They're stories about the wisdom of life, they really are. What we're learning in our schools is not the wisdom of life. We're learning technologies, we're getting information. There's a curious reluctance on the part of faculties to indicate the life values of their subjects. In our sciences today—and this includes anthropology, linguistics, the study of religions, and so forth—there is a tendency to specialization. And when you know how much a specialist scholar has to know in order to be a competent specialist, you can understand this tendency. To study Buddhism, for instance, you have to be able to handle not only all the European languages in which the discussions of the Oriental come, particularly French, German, English, and Italian, but also Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and several other languages. Now, this is a tremendous task. Such a specialist can't also be wondering about the difference between the Iroquois and Algonquin.

Specialization tends to limit the field of problems that the specialist is concerned with. Now, the person who isn't a specialist, but a generalist like myself, sees something over here that he has learned from one specialist, something over there that he has learned from another specialist—and neither of them has considered the problem of why this occurs here and also there. So the generalist—and that's a derogatory term, by the way, for academics—gets into a range of other problems that are more genuinely human, you might say, than specifically cultural.

MOYERS: Then along comes the journalist who has a license to explain things he doesn't understand.

CAMPBELL: That is not only a license but something that is put upon him—he has an obligation to educate himself in public. Now, I remember when I was a young man going to hear Heinrich Zimmer lecture. He was the first man I know of to speak about myths as though they had messages that were valid for life, not just interesting things for scholars to fool around with. And that confirmed me in a feeling I had had ever since boyhood.

MOYERS: Do you remember the first time you discovered myth? The first time the story came alive in you?

CAMPBELL: I was brought up as a Roman Catholic. Now, one of the great advantages of being brought up a Roman Catholic is that you're taught to take myth seriously and to let it operate on your life and to live in terms of these mythic motifs. I was brought up in terms of the seasonal relationships to the cycle of Christ's coming into the world, teaching in the world, dying, resurrecting, and returning to heaven. The ceremonies all through the year keep you in mind of the eternal core of all that changes in time. Sin is simply getting out of touch with that harmony.

And then I fell in love with American Indians because Buffalo Bill used to come to Madison Square Garden every year with his marvelous Wild West Show. And I wanted to know more about Indians. My father and mother were very generous parents and found what books were being written for boys about Indians at that time. So I began to read American Indian myths, and it wasn't long before I found the same motifs in the American Indian stories that I was being taught by the nuns at school.

MOYERS: Creation—

CAMPBELL: —creation, death and resurrection, ascension to heaven, virgin births—I didn't know what it was, but I recognized the vocabulary. One after another.

MOYERS: And what happened?

CAMPBELL: I was excited. That was the beginning of my interest in comparative mythology.

MOYERS: Did you begin by asking, "Why does it say it this way while the Bible says it that way?"

CAMPBELL: No, I didn't start the comparative analysis until many years later.

MOYERS: What appealed to you about the Indian stories?

CAMPBELL: In those days there was still American Indian lore in the air. Indians were still around. Even now, when I deal with myths from all parts of the world, I find the American Indian tales and narratives to be very rich, very well developed.

And then my parents had a place out in the woods where the Delaware Indians had lived, and the Iroquois had come down and fought them. There was a big ledge where we could dig for Indian arrowheads and things like that. And the very animals that play the role in the Indian stories were there in the woods around me. It was a grand introduction to this material.