# The Mystical Function And The Primal Goddess

This function of mythology introduces us to (and reminds us of) the fact that there are things about existence, the universe, and life experience that are *transcendent*, not submissible to formal, scientific analysis; things which simply must be accepted as they are and recognized as having a significant impact on human experience, a “… reference … to something that transcends all thinking. The ultimate mystery of being … beyond all categories of thought.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The biologist J. B. S. Haldane wrote that, “Theuniverse is not only[stranger] than we imagine, it is[stranger] than we *can* imagine.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that there are aspects of living experience which are not explicable via reason does *not* mean that those experiences are to be avoided nor dismissed — they are certainly not to be denied. Indeed, the very nature of “mythos” in contrast to “logos” is the assimilation of the wisdom of experience *disconnected* from reason and logic. Some things *just are*.

The idea that no matter how many numbers you count up to, you can always count one more. The concept that no matter how far out in space you travel, there will always be more space stretching out before you. The riddle that even if our universe had a beginning, the wider cosmos in which it is embedded has always existed – it never “began” and it never will “end.” The notion that a thing is itself and its opposite at the same time. That your own awareness, and all the other awarenesses around you, are merely temporarily isolated elements of a cosmic awareness that can be infinitely subdivided and yet is always whole. That the insignificance of a thing is what makes it significant.

Imagine a tapestry (it doesn’t even need to be an infinite one; just a plain, old tapestry will do). It is composed of all the threads which form the pattern it displays. The tapestry *is* the strings that make it up; without them, it wouldn’t exist. Remove any string and the string, in itself, isn’t particularly significant, but the *identity of the tapestry* as a whole *depends upon that string being there*. Replace that string with another string, and the tapestry is a different tapestry. Switch two of the strings; it is no longer the same tapestry, though it contains all the same strings. It may not be immediately obvious at-a-glance that the string is either missing or has been replaced or has changed places with another string, but a close enough inspection would reveal the difference its absence or replacement makes. Thus, the tapestry *is* the strings; it has no existence (and thus no meaning) without them. But, the strings only have significant meaning in the context of the tapestry. And, now, realize that each string is made up of smaller threads, without any one of which it is no longer the same thread….

You can easily give yourself a migraine following such a line of thought. Or, you can simply accept that there’s a tapestry, and that it has components and aspects of which you are only dimly aware (or utterly *un*aware), but that having intimate knowledge of those manifold subdivisions of the tapestry isn’t *necessary* to experience the tapestry and acknowledge its meaning as part of your experience. This is the crux of the Mystical Function: never forget that there’s a wider reality than you are currently experiencing, but don’t let that distract you from this particular experience.

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The **Primal Goddess** is the representative of this function because of her association with the mysteries of life and death. Her dichotomous nature as *both* mother-nurturer *and* implacable punisher reflects the inexplicable variety and vagaries of the natural world: the Earth provides food but also produces earthquakes and volcanoes. This contradiction was a mystery, certainly to early cultures, and it is not unknown even to contemporary societies, as reflected in the question: “Why do bad things happen to good people?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Protology: Automatic Myths Of Origin

There also occurs a parallel between this function of mythology and *automatic* creation/origin myths, wherein the fundamental elements of creation either already exist or come into being without explanation (they are *automatically* part of the myth, and accepted as apodictic). Examples include Gaia in the Greek tradition[[4]](#footnote-4), arising from the primordial chaos — she does not cause her own creation (*sui creates*) — she just “happens” as a result of the inherent properties of the *ylem[[5]](#footnote-5)*; Tepeu and Gucumatz in the Mesoamerican tradition, pre-existing in a cosmic ocean (again, without an explained origin)[[6]](#footnote-6); the Great God Vishnu (*Mahavishnu*)[[7]](#footnote-7) in the Hindu tradition, who is interwoven throughout the fabric of the universe, but nevertheless contains it simultaneously. There are examples from every mythic tradition, no matter how ancient.

## The First Steps Away From Animism

The British historian and documentarian, Bettany Hughes, in the first episode (“When God Was A Girl”) of her three-part her televised series, *Divine Women* discusses the fact that, “If you look at the total number of human figures unearthed between now and around 30,000 BC, then the massive majority of them are of the female form”[[8]](#footnote-8), and goes on to propose that the earliest expressions of human spiritual awareness are evidenced first in abstracted feminine figurines and later in specifically goddess-depicting statues and carvings. Among the earliest such depictions she references is a carving of a woman who “… looks like she is both being penetrated and giving birth at the same time … and whoever made it obviously thought it was both important, and appropriate that a woman should be commemorated right at the heart of a prehistoric temple”[[9]](#footnote-9).

She posits that the mystery of the Earth giving rise to plants (humankind’s earliest source of nutrition) and the similar mystery of the females of all species giving birth (apparently miraculously) to live young were connected in the minds of Neolithic peoples. Reay Tannahill, in her 1980 book, *Sex In History*, also opines that “… homo sapiens, after more than 100,000 years of fully-fledged existence, may still have been unaware of the biological facts of life when the Neolithic Revolution began.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

These two examples give weight to the idea that early humans were unaware of the relationship between sexual intercourse and birth. Early peoples, apparently found the production of life to be a mysterious, even magical. It seemed typical of their broader experience of the world as a place of unexplained and inexplicable objects and occurrences which must simply be accepted in-and-of themselves. As a species, we were primarily *reactive*.

Thus, in Campbell’s words, the Mystical Function is that of “…opening the world to the dimension of mystery … [realizing] the mystery that underlies all forms,”[[11]](#footnote-11) and reminding us that there are aspects of human experience which logos (science) cannot explain (and which it often declines to investigate).

For example: Imagine you find yourself thinking of a friend or family member to whom you haven’t spoken in quite some time; your phone rings, and when you answer it, that self-same person is calling you.

Logos would call this event a *coincidence*; arguing that in an infinite universe, “uncanny” events are bound to happen from time-to-time. Logos-thinking declares that there is no demonstrable *causal connection* between you thinking of the person and them choosing that precise moment to place a call to you.

Carl Jung, working with Wolfgang Pauli, described such a happenstance as *synchronicity*; arguing that although there may be no demonstrable physical causal connection between the two events, *psychologically there seems to be a connection*, and this seeming causal connection impacts your *reaction* to the event, which then has an effect upon your immediate environment. Thus, an event of synchronicity has an effect “… equal in rank to causality as a principle of explanation”[[12]](#footnote-12). It may be *objectively* insignificant, but its *subjective* significance is profound and not to be dismissed.

A fascinating sidenote here is that the word “coincidence” is Latin, meaning “happening at the same time”; whereas “synchronicity” is Greek, meaning … “happening at the same time.” Greek is the older language, and as stated earlier, the pre-Socratic Greeks saw mythos as the primary means of acquiring knowledge. Thus, the words, themselves, encode the realization that humans were having experiences and assigning meaning to them (the Mystical Function) long before we began to cogitate upon their causes (the Cosmological Function).

## The Growth Of The Goddess

As human consciousness expanded, men and women began to ask “why?”, “… the question that marked humanity's final, irrevocable divergence from the apes,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and to utilize the rudimentary answers they found in their first, halting steps to have some sense of agency and empowerment to consciously direct the paths of their lives. This marks the transition of the female figurine from a simple expression of the abstract concept of the powers of nature into representations of a personified director[[14]](#footnote-14) of natural events.

The discovery at the bottom of a grain bin at Çatalhöyük of a carving of a seated woman flanked by two lionesses has been described by Shahina Farid, field director of the site until 2012 as:

… a life-giving force, [but] I don't think she's a goddess at this stage, and I think we're at the beginning of this role of the female form becoming a goddess. Mother Goddess did not come from nowhere; she has to start somewhere. And we think that Çatalhöyük is one of the places where she started.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As Hughes then points out, “As societies developed in scale and got more sophisticated the goddess … got bigger; she's no longer one of those diminutive, little figurines at Çatalhöyük. Now, she's a kind of dominatrix, guarding and ruling over a vast landscape.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Dr. Taciser Sivas of Anadolu University at Eskişehir, Turkey, has remarked, “… she controlled nature. She controls the animals. She controls the wild world … so the Mother Goddess was the protector of the people.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Hughes continues, “As prehistory gives way to history, and men and women start to write down the stories of their lives, we begin to learn the names of some of these divine women: Isis; Ishtar; Inanna, the Queen of Heaven. They actually come in all shapes and sizes, but a notable number share two key traits: These are still creatures in charge of both life *and* death, of conflict and fertility: they inspire awe … and they are terrifying.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

But, the continued growth of human intelligence and the increasing levels of our ability to manipulate nature (which gave us a growing false sense of control), meant that our thinking processes steadily progressed from mere awareness of experience to contemplation of causes and effects. Thus, we began to develop disciplined structures of asking questions and ferreting out answers, a process which Richard Shlain believes led to the domination of the explanations of the “left-brain” in human cognition, at the expense of the insights of the “right-brain”. He observes:

… left hemispheric modes of thought are reinforced at the expense of right hemispheric ones, which manifests as a decline in the status of images, women's rights, and goddess worship.[[19]](#footnote-19)

And as Robert M. Pirsig observes in *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, “It’s been necessary since before the time of Socrates to reject the passions and the emotions, in order to free the rational mind for an understanding of nature’s order, which was as yet unknown.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

1. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. B. S Haldane, Alfred H. Jacobs, and Charles E. Rosenberg, *Possible Worlds and Other Papers* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 298-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walter Burkert and John Raffan, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Ylem.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ylem. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. V. Satish., *Tales of Gods in Hindu Mythology* (n.p.: Partridge Singapore, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Joseph Campbell, "The Message of The Myth," interview by Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, aired 1988 (first broadcast 1988), on Athena. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Persi Diaonis and Frederick Mosteller, "Methods of Studying Coincidences," *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 84, no. 408 (December 1989), 853-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. But not necessarily originator. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Divine Women*, episode 1, "When God Was A Girl," narrated by Bettany Hughes, aired April 11, 2012 (first broadcast April 11, 2012), on British Broadcasting Corporation, The Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Viking/ Penguin, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Bantam edition. ed. (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975), 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)