



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“A World Apart,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on May 17, 2015

Mythology was originally designed to help us to cope with problematic predicaments and in this age of reasoning, myths have almost been banished. One might even say gone like the Holy Bible in many of our UU sanctuaries. I was a little surprised last month to see two Bibles prominently displayed in the sanctuary at the Gloucester UU Church during the Ladies Circle pilgrimage.

The stories in myths, such as the stories found in the Bible, once helped people to find their place in the world. These stories gave people true orientation. This is what Karen Armstrong reminds us of in today's reading; that we all want to know where we come from and we also want to know where we are going.

We need to explain uplifting and magnificent moments in our lives that our logical sides can't make sense of. We know that there is more, but words are ill-equipped to do the job. Yet, there are times when we seem to be transported beyond ordinary concerns by the sublime. Myths help to explain experiences of transcendence and like Karen Armstrong says, “There is more to human beings and to the material world than meets the eye.”¹

In her book titled *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong tells the tale of the life of myth and how it has co-existed with history of human beings. She reaches back as far as the Palaeolithic Period before proceeding to break down the human religious landscape into five addition segments. She takes us from the age of hunters to the rise of the farmer, the Early Civilizations, through the Axial Age when Jesus was born, The Post-Axial Period that leads us through the dark and middle ages up the Renaissance, and finally to now, what is called The Great Western Transformation.

Throughout the twenty two thousand years, Armstrong looks at how humans used both logos and mythos. For instance in Judaism, logos meant the divine wisdom of the word of God, today we would understand it more as logic or our thinking way of being. Mythos points to a set of attitudes or an interrelated set of beliefs or values held by a society or culture.

Mythos gets at the heart of why we do what we do where logos is the functional and logical way we get there. Even though mythos offers us why we do what we do, it does so without empirical data. There is no hypothesis that may support the outcome. In an age where science seems to explain all and logic turns mythos into a shrinking violet, we are still left with the premise that

¹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2005), 7.

myths were designed to help us to cope with the problematic predicaments that logos can't think our way out around.

By the end of the 19th century as German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, claimed "God is dead" not long after the rise of Darwin's evolution and other scientific discoveries that squash whatever was left of mythos after the Enlightenment. It seemed that Western culture was resolved to do away with mythos because we couldn't prove it. Science was where we would find all our answers, right?

We entered the twentieth century thinking we could think our way into a peaceful existence. We no longer needed God or religious institutions or their leaders to explain how we should live. After two world wars in less than fifty years, each with trials of genocides and horrors that followed in their wakes, we found this was not true.

Still mythos crept back into the scene by new group willing to carry forward the message. This is when the artists and writers took over this role after the religious leaders took it off their list of ministerial duties. This is when we begin to see prophetic statements like Picasso's *Guernica* or T.S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land."

Picasso's painting brought to life the slaughter of over 1600 people in 1937 by the Nazis under the orders of Franco during the height of the Spanish Civil War. Eliot's poem unmasks the threat of the end of the Western civilization brought on by alienation, nihilism, egotism, and utter despair. "The Waste Land" reminds us of the familiar myth of the Holy Grail where the waste land was a place where people lived inauthentic lives. There, people would blindly follow the societal norms without conviction. The people there found it impossible to lay down roots when they could not understand why they were even there. Without this understanding, tradition falls apart into what Eliot called 'a heap of broken images'.²

Within myths hides glimpses of hope. They offer examples of how to overcoming all odds. We need these stories of hope. We need both logos and mythos. We cannot scientifically formulate a better way to live. Mythos is the glue that holds together the foundation of our belief. 3M or Elmer's may be working on a better bond, but so far, no luck. We must bring mythos and logos back together, neither can live a world apart.

I do not buy my local newspaper because that would be wasteful since I could never read the entire thing. I need to be politically correct and be green, right? Have any of you gone this way? I do still have friends that break the trend. I read the paper when I'm at their house or the occasional pick up at the corner store.

Last week, I was stopping by to visit with a paper buying friend. She was detained on the telephone, so I settled into the front page of the May 3rd Sunday *Concord Monitor*. The front page picture was a real grabber, a Hindu priest and a Bhutanese Refugee lovingly speaking to one another at a vigil for Nepal. The headline was A World Apart: a Family's Journey: a year in the life of refugees in Concord, Part 3 Nepal's earthquake brings newcomer Bom Rai a sense of belonging.³

² Ibid, 137.

³ Ray Duckler, "A World Apart," *Concord Monitor*, May 3, 2015, A1 & A3.

My friend got off the phone and she smiles at me as she said, "You need to take that with you, don't you?" I replied, "Yes, thank you." She knew of my journey with another Rai family, unrelated to Bom Rai. Some of you may also remember the Rai family when they visited here. Binita came to with an immigration slide show and Basanta danced Bhutanese cultural dance.

Bom's story was not much different than the refugee story I told you about in my January sermon. He was once from Bhutan and cast out, he lived for many years in a Bhutanese Refugee camp in Nepal before recently being resettled in Concord, NH.

Now living in his third country and without citizenship, Bom struggles to find his way in a new land. He has simple goals; learn English, educate his kids, find work, and live far away from the dangers of the refugee camp. With their culture nearly lost, he now finds he is living an infantile life where he needs help doing almost everything. He can't drive or work and he worries how he will support his family in this alien place. This is freedom? This is a typical refugee story- a story where one goes through darkness before they get to the light.

When things couldn't get worse, tragedy hits. Not in Concord, but a world away in Nepal. The earthquake is felt throughout Nepal and the Greater Asian Region killing over 8000 people. It ripples back to Concord, NH and Bom. He hears of a vigil happening in Hooksett, NH and he feels he needs to be there. Without a ride, he calls the folks at the newspaper that have been featuring his family's journey. The photographer agrees to drive him there and the journalist brings him home.

Is this another two Americans news men trying to get a story or has their involvement in this series helped them to have a transcending experience? They stick to the facts while telling the story of how sometimes Bom and his wife, Devi, feel lost. A couple without an identity or a country, but the earthquake has helped open both their eyes and their hearts. Bom's neighbors in the refugee camp fared well, nobody died or was hurt. However, Devi's sister and brother-in-law's house was flattened by the quake.

At the vigil, Bom stood in a crowd. In a picture, you can see a sea of people with a rainbow of skin colors. The story claims that three religions were present; Buddhist, Hindu, and Christians. There may have even been some Jewish friends, too. There, in Hooksett, they all found common ground. Bom was a lucky one; he also found a much needed bond.

At the end of the vigil, Bom connected with the Hindu priest from the front page picture, the one with a long silver beard stretching to his chest. The same one that earlier led others in a healing rhythmic chant. It happened that the priest had been in NH from Ohio to celebrate the life of his late uncle when the quake struck. It turns out this was not the first time these two men had chanted together. Long ago, the two had traveled together in India where they chanted hymns of inner peace. In Hooksett, after being a world apart they were reunited. Bom found a way to transcend tragedy with an old friend he thought he might never see again.

You cannot convince me that Bom's story isn't some kind of miracle. I could sense the holy in his story as he reunited with the Hindu priest from Ohio. Finally, Bom felt at home in this strange land.

Last Friday, I met the folks behind this story at multicultural fair at my daughter's school. I thanked them for lifting up Bom's story of hope. They are the heroes of modern myths showing us a better way. This is a story that mirrors the myths that once explained the many lessons of life: give and

you will receive so much more in return. This story helps us transcend our own difficulty as it uplifts us by their willingness to help people find their place in the world. They're giving people true orientation and it's what Karen Armstrong claims we all want- to know where we come from and to know where we are going.

I don't profess I know the end of their story. Or even of the end to my own story with you, but that doesn't make it any less holy to me. I'm leaving this community next month and I trust we will always be interconnected in heart and mind. I believe we must remain open to the chance that someday we will find ourselves chanting together again. Our paths will cross, the reunion will be sweet, and we know that deep down it's not solely because we've engineered a logical way to understand this junction, but we have come to a place where both head and heart live peacefully together.

Blessed be. Amen.