

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myths with Bill Moyers*. New York, Doubleday, 1988.

Moyers: Don't you think modern Americans have rejected the ancient idea of nature as a divinity because it would have kept us from achieving dominance over nature? How can you cut down trees and uproot the land and turn the rivers into real estate without killing God?

Campbell: Yes, but that's not simple a characteristic of modern Americans, that the biblical condemnation of nature which they inherited from their own religion and brought with them, mainly from England. God is separate from nature, and nature is condemned of God. It's right there in Genesis: we are to be the masters of the world. (p. 32)

Moyers: Take the creation story in Genesis, for example. How is it like other stories?

Campbell: Well, you read from Genesis, and I'll read from the creation stories in others cultures, and we'll see. (p. 42)

Moyers: Genesis 1: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

Campbell: And from the Upanishads: "Then he realized, I indeed, I am this creation, for I have poured it forth from myself. In that way he became this creation. Verily, he who knows this become in this creation a creator."

That is the clincher there. When you know this, then you have identified with the creative principle, which is the God power in the world, which means in you. It is beautiful. (p. 45)

Moyers: But Genesis continues: "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."

You talk about buck passing, it starts very early.

Campbell: Yes, it has been tough on serpents. The Bassari legend from West Africa continues in the same way. "One day Snake said, 'We too should eat these fruits. Why must we go hungry?' Antelope said, 'But we don't know anything about this fruit.' The Man and his wife took some of the fruit and ate it. Unumbotte came down from the sky and asked, 'Who ate the fruit?' They answered, 'We did.' Unumbotte asked, 'Who told you that you could eat that fruit?' They replied, 'Snake did,' " It is very much the same story.

Moyers: What do you make of it—that in these two stories the principal actors point to someone else as the initiator of the Fall?

Campbell: Yes, but it turns out to be the snake. In both of these stories the snake is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live.

Moyes: Why?

Campbell: The power of life causes the snake to shed its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The serpent sheds its skin to be born again, as the moon its shadow to be born again. They are equivalent symbols. Sometimes the serpent is represented as a circle eating its own tail. That's an image of life. Life sheds one generation after another, to be born again. There is something tremendously terrifying about life when you look at it that way. And so the serpent carries in itself the sense of both fascination and the terror of life.

Furthermore, the serpent represents the primary function of life, mainly eating. Life consists in eating other creatures. The serpent is a traveling alimentary canal, that's about all it is. And it gives you that primary sense of shock, of life in its most primal quality. There is not arguing with that animal at all. Life lives by killing and eating itself, casting off death and being reborn, like the moon. This is one of the mysteries that these symbolic, paradoxical forms try to represent. (p. 45)

Now the snake in most culture is given a positive interpretation. In India, even the most poisonous snake, the cobra, is a sacred animal, and the mythological Serpent King is the next thing to the Buddha. The serpent represents the power of life engaged in the field of time, and of death, yet eternally alive. The world is but its shadow—the falling skin.

The serpent was revered in the American Indian traditions, too. The serpent was thought of as a very important power to be made friends with. The interplay of man and nature is illustrated in this relationship with the serpent. A serpent flows like water and so is watery, but its tongue continually flashes fire. So you have the pair of opposites together in the serpent.

Moyers: In the Christian story the serpent is the seducer.

Campbell: That amounts to a refusal to affirm life. In the biblical tradition we have inherited, life is corrupt, and every natural impulse is sinful unless it has been circumcised or baptized. The serpent was the one who brought sin into the world. And the woman was the one who handed the apple to man. This identification of the woman with sin, of the serpent with sin, and thus of life with sin, is the twist that has been given to the whole story in the biblical myth and doctrine of the Fall.

Moyers: Does the idea of woman as sinner appear in other mythologies?

Campbell: No, I don't know of it elsewhere. The idea in the biblical tradition of the Fall is that nature as we know it is corrupt, sex in itself is corrupt, and the female as the epitome of sex is a corrupter. Why was the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to Adam and Eve? Without that knowledge, we'd all be a bunch of babies still in Eden, without any participation in life. Woman brings life into the world. Eve is the mother of this temporal world. Formerly you had a dreamtime paradise there in the Garden of Eden—no time, no birth, no death—no life. The serpent, who dies and is resurrected, shedding its skin and renewing its life, is the lord of the central tree, where time and eternity come together. (p. 47)

Moyers: Why the Serpent and Eve are seen as negative figures?

Campbell: There is actually a historical explanation based on the coming of the Hebrews into Canaan. The principal divinity of the people of Canaan was the Goddess, and associated with the Goddess is the serpent. This is the symbol of mystery of life. The male-god-oriented group rejected it. In other words, there is a historical rejection of the Mother Goddess implied in the story of the Garden of Eden.

Moyers: It does seem that this story has done women a great disservice by casting Eve as responsible for the Fall. Why are women the ones held responsible for the downfall?

Campbell: They represent life. Man doesn't enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering.

Moyers: What is the myth of Adam and Eve trying to tell us about the pairs of opposites? What is the meaning?

Campbell: It started with the sin, you see—in other words, moving out of the mythological dreamtime zone of the Garden of Paradise, where there is no time, and where man and women don't even know that they are different from each other. The two are just creatures. God and man are practically the same. God walks in the cool of the evening in the garden where they are. And then they eat the apple, the knowledge of the opposites. And when they discover they are different, the man and women cover their shame. You see, they had not thought of themselves as opposites. Male and female is one opposition. Another opposition is the human and God. God and evil is a third opposition. The primary oppositions are the sexual and that between human beings and God. Then comes the idea of good and evil in the world. And so Adam and Eve have thrown themselves out of the Garden of Timeless Unity, you might say, just by that act of recognizing duality. To move out into the world, you have to act in terms of pairs of opposites.

Out of one comes two. All things in the field of time are pairs of opposites. So this is the shift of consciousness from the consciousness of identity to the consciousness of participation in duality. And then you are into the field of time.

Moyers: Is the story trying to tell us that, prior to what happened in this Garden to destroy us, there was a unity of life?

Campbell: It's a matter of planes of consciousness. It doesn't have to do with anything that happened. There is the place of consciousness where you can identify yourself with that which transcends pairs of opposites.

Moyers: Which is?

Campbell: Unnameable. Unnameable. It is transcendent of all names.

Moyers: God? (p. 48)

Campbell: God is an ambiguous word in our language because it appears to refer to something that is known. But the transcendent is unknowable and unknown. God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name "God". God is beyond names and forms. The mystery of life is beyond all human conception. Everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, true and untrue. We always think in terms of opposites. But God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites, that is all there is to it.

Moyers: Why do we think in terms of opposites?

Campbell: Because we can't think otherwise. (p. 49)

Campbell: There is a standard folk tale motif called the One Forbidden Thing. Remember Bluebeard, who says to his wife, "Don't open that closet"? And then one always disobeys. In the Old Testament story God points out the one forbidden thing. Now, God must have known very well that man was going to eat the forbidden fruit. But it was by doing that that man became the initiator of his own life. Life really began with that act of disobedience.

Moyers: How do you explain these similarities between different myths all over the world?

Campbell: One explanation is that the human psyche is essentially the same all over the world. The psyche is the inward experience of the human body, which is essentially the same in all human beings, with the same organs, the same instincts, the same impulses, the same conflicts, the same fears. Out of this common ground have come what Jung has called the archetypes, which are the common ideas of myths.

Moyers: What are the archetypes?

Campbell: They are elementary ideas, what could be called "ground" ideas. These ideas Jung spoke of as archetypes of the unconscious. The Jungian archetypes of the unconscious are biological. All over the world and at different times of human history, these archetypes, or elementary ideas, have appeared in different costumes. (p. 51)

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Moyers: But weren't the people who told these stories asking, for example. Who made the world? How was the world made? Why was the world made? Aren't these the questions that these creation stories are trying to address?

Campbell: No. Its through that answer that they see that the creator is present in the whole world. You see what I mean? This story from the Upanishads that we have just read—"I see that I am this creation," says the god. When you see that God is the creation, and that you are a creature, you realize that God is within you, and in the man or woman with whom you are talking, as well. So there is the realization of two aspects of one divinity. There is a basic mythological motif that originally all was one, and then there was separation—heaven and earth, male and female, and so forth. How did we lose touch with the unity? One thing you can say is that the separation was

somebody's fault—they ate the wrong fruit or said the wrong words to God so that he got angry and they went away. So now the eternal is somehow away from us, and we have to find some way to get back in touch with it. There is another theme, in which man is thought of as having come not from above but from the womb of Mother Earth. Often, in these stories there is a great ladder or rope up which people climb. The last people to want to get out are two big fat heavy people. They grab the rope, and snap!—it breaks. So we are separated from our source. In a sense, because of our minds, we actually are separated, and the problem is to reunite that broken cord. (p. 53)

Moyers: What is the metaphor?

Campbell: A metaphor is an image that suggests something else. For example, Jesus ascended to heaven. We know that Jesus could not have ascended to heaven because there is no physical heaven anywhere in the universe. Even ascending at the speed of light, Jesus would still be in the galaxy. But if you read "Jesus ascended to heaven" in terms of its metaphoric connotation, you see that he has gone inward—not into outer space but into inward space, to the place from which all being comes, into the consciousness that is the source of all things, the kingdom of heaven within. (p. 56) The images are outward, but their reflection is inward. The point is that we should ascend with him by going inward. It is a metaphor of returning to the source, alpha and omega, of leaving the fixation on the body behind and going to the body's dynamic source. Now, according to the normal way of thinking about the Christian religion. We cannot identify with Jesus, we have to imitate Jesus. To say, "I and the Father are one," as Jesus said, is blasphemy for us. However, in the Thomas gospel that was dug up in Egypt some forty years ago. Jesus says, "He who drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I shall be he." Now, that is exactly Buddhism. We are all manifestations of Buddha consciousness, or Christ consciousness, only we don't know it. The word "Buddha" means "the one who waked up." We are all to do that—to wake up to the Christ or Buddha consciousness within us. This is blasphemy in the normal way of Christian thinking, but it is the very essence of Christian Gnosticism and the Thomas gospel. (p. 57) Civilizations are grounded on myth. The civilization of the Middle Ages was grounded on the myth of the Fall in the Garden, the redemption on the cross, and the carrying of the grace of redemption to man through the sacraments. (p. 59) The Christ story involves a sublimation of what originally was a very solid vegetal image. Jesus is on Holy Rood, the tree, and he is himself the fruit of the tree. Jesus is the fruit of eternal life, which was on the second forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. When man ate the fruit of the first tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he was expelled from the Garden. The Garden is the place of unity, of non-duality of male and female, good and evil, God and human beings. You eat the duality, and you are on the way out. The tree of coming back to the Garden is the tree of immortal life, where you know that I and the Father are one. Getting back into the Garden is the aim of many a religion. When Yahweh threw man out of the Garden, he put two cherubim at the gate, with a flaming sword between. Now, when you approach a Buddhist shrine, with the Buddha seated under the tree of immortal life, you will find at the gate two guardians—those are the cherubim, and you're going between them to the tree of immortal life. In the Christian tradition, Jesus on the cross is on a tree, the tree of immortal life, and he is the fruit of the tree. Jesus on the cross, the Buddha under the tree—these are the same figures. And the cherubim at the gate—who are they? At the Buddhist shrines you'll see one has his mouth open, the other has his mouth closed—fear and desire, a pair of opposites. If you're approaching a garden like that, and those two figures there are real to you and threaten you, if you have fear for your life, you are still outside the garden. But if you are no longer attached to your ego existence, but see the ego existence as a function of a larger, eternal totality, and you favor the larger against the smaller, then you won't be afraid of those two

figures, and you will go through. We're kept out of the Garden by our own fear and desire in relation to what we think to be the goods of our life.

Moyers: Have all man at all times felt some sense of exclusion from an ultimate reality, from bliss, from delight, from perfection, from God?

Campbell: Yes, but then you also have moments of ecstasy. The difference between everyday living and living in those moments of ecstasy is the difference between being outside and inside the Garden. You go past fear and desire, past the pair of opposites. (p. 107)

Moyers: So when Jesus says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," he is saying in effect, "Love thy neighbor because he is yourself."

Campbell: There is a beautiful figure in the Oriental tradition, the bodhisattva, whose nature is boundless compassion, and from whose fingertips there is said to drip ambrosia down to the lowest depths of hell.

Moyers: And the meaning of that?

Campbell: At the very end of the Divine Comedy, Dante realizes that the love of God informs the whole universe down to the lowest pits of hell. (p. 111) That's very much the same image. The bodhisattva represents the principle of compassion, which is the healing principle that makes life possible. Life is pain, but compassion is what gives it the possibility of continuing. The bodhisattva is one who has achieved the realization of immortality yet voluntarily participates in the sorrows of the world. Voluntary participation in the world is very different from just getting born into it. That's exactly the theme of Paul's statement about Christ in his Epistle to the Philippians: that Jesus "did not think Godhood something to be held to but took the form of a servant here on the earth, even to death on the cross." That's a voluntary participation in the fragmentation of life.

Moyers: So you would agree with Abelard in the twelfth century, who said that Jesus' death on the cross was not as ransom paid, or as a penalty applied, but that it was an act of atonement, at-one-ment, with the race.

Campbell: That's the most sophisticated interpretation of why Christ had to be crucified, or why he elected to be crucified. An earlier one was that the sin in the Garden of Eden had committed mankind to the Devil. So he offered his own son, Jesus, as the redemption. Pope Gregory gave this interpretation of Jesus as the bait that hooked the Devil. That's the redemption idea. In another version, God was so offended by the act of impudence in the Garden that he became wrathful and threw man out of his field of mercy, and then the only thing that could atone man with God was a sacrifice that would be as great in its importance as the sin had been. No mere man could make such a sacrifice, so the Son of God himself became man in order to pay the debt. But Abelard's idea was that Christ came to be crucified to evoke in man's hearth the sentiment of compassion for the suffering of life, and so to remove man's mind from blind commitment to the goods of this world. It is in compassion with Christ that we turn to Christ, and the injured one becomes our Savior. This is reflected in the medieval idea of the injured king, the Grail King, suffering from his incurable wound. The injured one again becomes the savior. It is the suffering that evokes the humanity of the human heart.

Moyers: So you would agree with Abelard that mankind yearning for God and God yearning for mankind met in compassion at that cross?

Campbell: Yes, as soon as there is time, there is suffering. You can't have a future unless you have a past, and if you are in love with the present it becomes past, whatever it is. Loss, death, birth, loss, death—and so on. By contemplating the cross, you are contemplating a symbol of the mystery of life.

Moyers: That is why there is so much pain associated with the true religious transformation or conversion. It is not easy to lose yourself. (p. 112)

Campbell: The New Testament teaches dying to one's self, literally suffering the pain of death to the world and its values. This is the vocabulary of the mystics. Now, suicide is also a symbolic act. It casts off the psychological posture that you happen to be in at the time, so that you may come into a better one. You die to your current life in order to come to another of some kind. But, as Jung says, you'd better not get caught in a symbolic situation. You don't have to die, really, physically. All you have to do is die spiritually and be reborn to a larger way of living. (p. 114)

Campbell: Before I was married, I used to eat out in the restaurants of town for my lunch and dinners. Thursday night was the maid's night off in Bronxville, so that many of the families were out in restaurants. One fine evening I was in my favorite restaurant there, and at the next table there was a father, a mother, and a scrawny boy about twelve years old. The father said to the boy, "Drink your tomato juice." And the boy said, "I don't want to." (p. 117) Then the father, with a louder voice, said, "Drink your tomato juice." And the mother said, "Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do." The father looked at her and said, "He can't go through life doing what he wants to do. If he does only what he wants to do, he'll be dead. Look at me. I've never done a thing I wanted to in all my life." That's the man who never followed his bliss. You may have a success in life, but then just think of it—what kind of life was it? What good was it—you've never done the thing you wanted to do in all your life. I always tell my students, go where your body and soul want to go. When you have the feeling, then stay with it, and don't let anyone throw you off.

Moyers: What happens when you follow your bliss?

Campbell: You come to bliss. In the Middle Ages, a favorite image that occurs in many, many contexts is the wheel of fortune. There's the hub of the wheel, and there is the revolving rim of the wheel. For example, if you are attached to the rim of the wheel of fortune, you will be either above going down or at the bottom coming up. But if you are at the hub, you are in the same place all the time. That is the sense of the marriage vow— I take you in health or sickness, in wealth or poverty: going up or going down. But I take you as my center, and you are my bliss, not the wealth that you might bring me, not the social prestige, but you. That is following your bliss. (p. 118)