

The Journey Inward

Excerpt from The Power of Myth Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers

Moyers: You talk about mythology existing here and now in dreamtime. What is dreamtime?

Campbell: This is the time you get into when you go to sleep and have a dream that talks about permanent conditions within your own psyche as they relate to the temporal conditions of your life right now.

Moyers: Explain that.

Campbell: For example, you may be worried about whether you are going to pass an exam. Then you have a dream of some kind of failure, and you find that failure will be associated with many other failures in your life. They are all piled up together there. Freud says even the most fully expounded dream is not really fully expounded. The dream is an inexhaustible source of spiritual information about yourself.

Now the level of dream of “Will I pass the exam?” or “Should I marry this girl?” – that is purely personal. But, on another level, the problem of passing an exam is not simply a personal problem. Everyone has to pass a threshold of some kind. That is an archetypal thing. So there is a basic mythological theme there even though it is a personal dream. These two levels – the personal aspect and then the big general problem of which the person’s problem is a local example – are found in all cultures. For example, everyone has the problem of facing death. This is a standard mystery.

Moyers: What do we learn from our dreams?

Campbell: You learn about yourself.

Moyers: How do we pay attention to our dreams?

Campbell: All you have to do is remember your dream in the first place, and write it down. Then take one little fraction of the dream, one or two images or ideas, and associate with them. Write down what comes to your mind, and again what comes to your mind, and again. You’ll find that the dream is based on a body of experiences that have some kind of significance in your life and that you didn’t know were influencing you. Soon the next dream will come along, and your interpretation will go further.

Moyers: A man once told me that he didn’t remember dreaming until he retired. Suddenly, having no place to focus his energy, he began to dream and dream and dream. Do you think that we tend to overlook the significance of dreaming in our modern society?

Campbell: Ever since Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* was published, there has been a recognition of the importance of dreams. But even before that there were dream interpretations. People had superstitious notions about dreams – for example, “Something is going to happen because I dreamed it is going to happen.”

Moyers: Why is a myth different from a dream?

Campbell: Oh, because a dream is a personal experience of that deep, dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives, and a myth is the society's dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth. If your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn't, you've got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you.

Moyers: So if my private dreams are in accord with the public mythology, I'm more likely to live healthily in that society. But if my private dreams are out of step with the public –

Campbell: -- you'll be in trouble. If you're forced to live in that system, you'll be a neurotic.

Moyers: But aren't many visionaries and even leaders and heroes close to the edge of neuroticism?

Campbell: Yes they are.

Moyers: How do you explain that?

Campbell: They've moved out of the society that would have protected them, and into the dark forest, into the world of fire, of original experience. Original experience has not been interpreted for you, and so you've got to work out your life for yourself. Either you can take it or you can't. You don't have to go far off the interpreted path to find yourself in very difficult situations. The courage to face the trials and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience – that is the hero's deed.

Moyers: You say dreams come from the psyche.

Campbell: I don't know where else they come from. They come from the imagination, don't they? The imagination is grounded in the energy of the organs of the body, and these are the same in all human beings. Since imagination comes out of one biological ground, it is bound to produce certain themes. Dreams are dreams. There are certain characteristics of dreams that can be enumerated, no matter who is dreaming it.

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