

**Turning Myth into Meaning**

The final project of my literature class was supposed to be based on a work of fiction: I chose the Bible. I was a freshman in high school then, and I so offended my instructor that I was asked by the administration to write her a formal apology and redo my project. It was not my intention to offend, but I cannot pretend the irreverence did not appeal to me.

Many of my high school classmates were devoutly Catholic. When our history class studied how politics have shaped Christianity, a few students found the lesson to be so offensive that they turned their backs on the teacher before it even started and flatly refused to participate. Heated conversation followed. As an atheist of Judaic ethnicity, I had no emotional stake in the debate; for me the discussion was purely intellectual. Perhaps for that reason, my classmates, even some of my closest friends, were resentful of my participation. Though I am usually at ease in class, that afternoon, I felt uncomfortable. When I did speak, which was hardly at all, I sensed a vocal majority ready to dispute my words before they even left my lips. I was not paranoid; I think a mob mentality developed, a Christians-against-the-world mind-set. For as long as I can remember, discourse about religion has made me resentful because of that sort of attitude.

I see now that the repression I experienced as an atheist in that history class motivated my book report on the Bible. For weeks I pored through the parts of the Bible relevant to my project. I carried the thick, leather-bound volume with me everywhere. It traveled with me from to class to class and home each night. I think my classmates were taken aback; my parents were deeply uncomfortable. Religion was taboo at home as my

parents, in an effort not to influence their children's religious beliefs, refused to speak of their own convictions. Yet I was adamant about continuing my project. At the end of those few weeks I realized that despite their years of CCD and churchgoing, I knew more than any of my classmates about what was actually written in their Book. No one harassed me about religion again.

I was uncomfortably aware that my attitude toward religion was conflicting, perhaps even hypocritical. I cannot believe in a sentient being that is "God." Yet, for reasons I failed to comprehend, my appetite for biblical knowledge became insatiable. Religion became increasingly important to me, almost an obsession. Before long I was seeing Judeo-Christian motifs everywhere. In the literature I read, I found subtle references to religion I had never picked up on before: the apocalypse, virgin birth, baptism... I wrote about Jesus in papers and referenced biblical quotes in my diary entries. I read Flannery O' Conner, James Joyce, and Barbara Kingsolver. Even stranger to me was that although I did not believe in religion, I was in love with ritual. Even as a child I was entranced by temple services. The Hebrew, stories, and songs, put me in another plane of consciousness—one in which I felt no awareness of my physical presence. I felt only introspective and calm.

Two years ago I participated in an overnight fast at a church as part of a program to raise money for African children. I woke just before dawn and slipped into the service room so that I could sit by the altar as sunlight peeked through stained glass. Just the setting—the crosses, the books, the paintings of saints I could now name—was enough to put me into a trance. It was hours before anyone else woke to interrupt my reverie. I was

deeply troubled that morning, confused because I did not know why I had allowed stories, what I believed then to be mere stories, to reshape my life.

In my freshman year at MIT, I discovered a book that tied my loose ends together in a way that was entirely unanticipated. *The Power of Myth* held answers I was seeking and insight I did not even know I was looking for. The book is the transcript of a conversation on mythology between Joseph Campbell, an American philosopher whose expertise was mythology and comparative religion, and news reporter Bill Moyers. For Campbell, “mythology” encompasses Judeo-Christian beliefs and those of other religions, as well as classical Greek mythology. His message made sense to me: “Myths are our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance.” They need not necessarily be bound to one particular moment in history; they are the stories about the constants of human experience: birth, coming of age, death, relationship with nature, relationship with society, morality. The intrinsic value of mythological stories is that they tell us about ourselves, and in that manner, serve as a guide to life. Campbell said that “When the story is in your mind, you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. It gives you perspective on what’s happening to you.” Soon after I read the book, I began to recognize how much those biblical stories I became obsessed with in high school inform us about ourselves.

The summer after freshman year of college, my closest friend Katy and I spent a week Cancun. From four books I learned that “Cancun” means “Snake Pit” in the Mayan language. Snake pit. In my mind I associated “snake” with manipulation and betrayal. At

Chichén-Itzá, I was disturbed when the entrances to the pyramids were adorned with stone snakes of enormous proportions. I was shocked when our tour guide taught me that the snakes were there because they are a symbol of good luck to the Mayan people. I was not aware until that moment how intrinsic the belief that nature is evil is to me. In retrospect, it makes sense that I was stunned to find that the snake is revered in the Mayan culture; according to Judeo-Christian custom, the snake was partially responsible for the Fall. Furthermore, Jesus speaks of snakes only once: “You brood of vipers! How can you speak of good things, when you are evil?” (Matthew 12:34). Calling humans a brood of snakes is equated with the accusation “you are evil,” in this context. The essential evil of the snake, then, as well as the people, is assumed. In the Judeo-Christian culture, “snake” has drastically negative connotations.

Yet the snake is not the only form of nature condemned as sinful in the Bible. All nature, at least in the Genesis and the Gospels, is ubiquitously associated with evil. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in Eden (another natural image), and “The Lord God sent him [and Eve] forth from the Garden of Eden” (Genesis 3:23). The event is called The Fall, because humankind *fell* from both paradise and an initial state of purity. In the words of Joseph Campbell, “In the bible, eternity withdraws, and nature is corrupt, nature has fallen. In biblical thinking, we live in exile” (3). The belief that nature is inherently sinful manifests itself in the Gospels; images of wilderness are associated with temptation and Satan, while descriptions of tamed land, such as when Jesus compares himself to a carefully cultivated vine, are correlated with goodness.

Campbell's explanation of the of the two different types of mythology accounted for my bewilderment at Chichén-Itzá. One type of myth comes from earth-cultivating cultures and so is nature oriented. Because growers are dependent on the land for survival, according to Campbell, there is a "glorious interest in the beauty of nature and cooperation with nature." The other mythology comes from nomadic people and is socially oriented. Christianity is, of course, socially oriented; "nature is thought to be evil," Campbell says, so "you don't put yourself in accord with it, you control it, or try to, and hence the tension, the anxiety, the cutting down of forests and annihilation of native people." When I skimmed the Gospels and Genesis, I saw clues that nature is essentially evil everywhere. In this instance, the Bible informs us that our culture holds that nature is inherently evil.

I learned from Campbell's book that religion and mythology are intrinsically valuable, even for those of us who don't believe that Jesus walked on water or that a giant turtle heaves the world about on its back. The literature and the rituals teach us about ourselves and about the experience of being human. Rites of passage like confirmations, bar mitzvahs, and bat mitzvahs mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. In doing so they follow the biblical edict that we are to become adults: "When I was a child I spake as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (Corinthians 13:11). Some Australian aborigine tribes send their boys through an ordeal of circumcision and the drinking of men's blood. The Power of Myth suggests that both seemingly prosaic and extreme rituals do more than just delineate child from adult; they help us to make meaning in our lives.

When I think back on my history class, I wonder, how many of those students who so adamantly opposed any questions of their faith actually used Biblical stories as a lens through which to interpret the world. Very few, I should think, since I know for certain that most had no idea of what is written in the Book. I once spent an hour arguing that nowhere in the Bible is Mary Magdalene referred to as a whore. She isn't. Anywhere. My classmates were reluctant to believe me; they knew better because Christianity is their faith and not mine. Yet so many of my friends blindly adhere to a belief system that they know almost nothing about. Then I wonder, why subscribe to a religion based on a breathtaking collection of literature, literature that represents the collective wisdom of generations, and read none of it?

\*Notes: The sources cited in this essay include Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth (1991) and The New Revised Standard Version Bible.

## Works Cited

Moyers, Bill. The Power of Myth. New York: Apostrophe S. Productions, Inc. and Alfred van der Mark Editions, 1988.

*New Revised Standard Version Bible*. United States: Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1989.