

“Our Myths, Our Truths, Ourselves”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
delivered on October 14, 2018
at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

Who’s your favorite character?

I’d like to start off with a little moment of reflection. Take just a moment to think of your favorite character from a book, a movie, or a story.

[PAUSE] Was everyone able to think of someone?

How many of you knew your answer right away- you had no trouble thinking of a favorite character? [GO DOWN TO THE FLOOR WITH MIC]

Who’s brave enough to share their character? [PICK SOMEONE, HAVE THEM ANSWER]

And what do you like about that character? What makes them your favorite?

[HAVE THEM ANSWER]

Who else? Who has a favorite story character? [GET ANSWER]

And why are they your favorite? [GET ANSWER]

It seems as though there is something we appreciate about a human *being human*, in the midst of all their humanness. Whether we admire them, relate to them, or are amused by their antics that we would never do ourselves, seeing characters in stories face challenges in *their* humanity helps us understand *our own* humanity.

There is something about using characters and stories to convey truths about being human that makes these truths easier to understand. And sometimes, these stories are called myths.

What Myth Is

Now, as we explore Myths today, I want to acknowledge this is a term with multiple meanings. Myth sometimes means a common misconception, referring to something that is widely believed, but factually untrue. But this is not the context that I mean when I talk about Myth today.

Not every story is a myth, but myths are always stories; they are metaphors in narrative form. They are poems, fables, and ballads that shape our cultural attitudes. They have characters and a plot. And, myths have a function: they exist to tell us something about who we are, where we come from, and insights into our very nature as humans.

For example, many myths are moral stories that convey lessons about our role in society, and what is culturally appropriate.

Fables do this explicitly, like the story of the Lion and the Mouse that we heard earlier. But the way that characters behave in Myths, and then how those behaviors are either rewarded or punished in the story serves to reinforce cultural norms of acceptability.

Origin stories are another popular form that myths can take. Some origin myths attempt to explain how everything, including humanity, came about, like the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...*

Other origin stories are more specific, accounting only for the beginnings of a particular people. In the Near East epic of Gilgamesh, the story begins in an already-established world, with already-established humans. In fact, while various Sumerian poems address the creation of humans, sheep, and grain, no myth from this civilization has been discovered that tells of the initial creation.¹

Especially interesting is this Babylonian creation story: Marduk, a warrior god, fights and kills Tiamat, the creator of the gods. He then uses Tiamat's deconstructed body to create the sky, stars, moon, and sun, as well as the clouds, mountains, and earth.² Doesn't that one make you all warm and fuzzy inside?

As different as they may be in content and style, origin stories have the common effect of shaping our cultural worldview, the lens through which we see and make sense of the world.

What Myth Is Not

Having said a little about what Myth is, I think it is also worth sharing what myth is not.

To quote Joseph Campbell: "Wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history, or science, it is killed."³

¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/epic/hd_epic.htm

² Metropolitan Museum of Art: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/epic/hd_epic.htm

³ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1949.

I'll tell you more about Joseph Campbell in a moment. But what he is seems to be saying here, is that a Myth is not a historical account. The purpose of myth is not to preserve a detailed and accurate series of events. Myth is not about the scientific method or provable facts.

The confusion around Myth

And I think this is where some confusion around Myth comes in. To quote Campbell again, he said, "Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions... are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies."

So if Myths are neither facts nor lies, then what are they? Can we understand the truth and wisdom of myths in this space between?

We can if we take myth seriously, not literally. There is truth and power in metaphors, but only if we learn to get over literalism, past the need to prove or disprove.

In the story of the Lion and the Mouse, I need not believe that a real mouse literally saved a lion in order to know the truth and wisdom of the story.

If I'm arguing with someone over the feasibility of this happening, then I've completely missed the point.

We would do well to remember, as Campbell puts it, that "All religions are true but none are literal."

The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell was a professor of literature who studied myth and religion, and came to be one of the foremost experts on the subject of Mythology. In his examination of many religions and cultures, Campbell identified a pattern that seemed to run through many of the stories and myths he encountered. Noticing that the hero of a myth would go through a departure, a transformation, and then a return, he called this sequence The Hero's Journey, or The Hero's Path to describe this story pattern that he found to be shared across many diverse cultures and traditions.

This led Campbell to write a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a title which references a universal quality about Myth. While The “Hero” in each of a thousand cultural myths may have a different name, face, or identity, Campbell believed they were actually all the same “Hero”, united across many cultures, by the shared experience of The Hero’s Journey.

Why Myth Is Important

And to take his idea even further, Campbell didn’t believe that the Hero’s Journey applied only to Mythical heroes, but to all of us, the heroes of our own stories. After all, are mythical heroes the only ones who wrestle with questions of meaning and purpose? I doubt it. And this is exactly why myths are so compelling and powerful across cultures, traditions, and religions.

It’s not that myths claim to have all the answers.

We need Myths, because we need stories that we can identify with, and see ourselves in. We need to know that others share our experiences of being human.

We need the assurance that whatever challenges we are facing, whatever questions we are wrestling with, we are not the first; we are not the last; and we are not alone.

Myths remind us that we, too, are on the hero path, like so many who have come before.

As Campbell said,

“We have not even to risk the adventure alone
for the heroes of all time have gone before us.
The labyrinth is thoroughly known ...
we have only to follow the thread of the hero path.
And where we had thought to find an abomination
we shall find a God.

And where we had thought to slay another
we shall slay ourselves.
Where we had thought to travel outwards
we shall come to the center of our own existence.
And where we had thought to be alone
we shall be with all the world.”