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By James Harvey Stout

What is mythology? It is an organized collection of stories (i.e., "myths") by which we explain our beliefs and our history. Beneath the story-lines, myths usually confront major issues such as the origin of humanity and its traditions, and the way in which the natural and human worlds function on a profound, universal level. Other myths, however, seem merely to narrate the deities' daily activities -- their love affairs and pleasures, their jealousies and rages, their ambitions and schemes, and their quarrels and battles.



Myths, legends, folktales, and fables. We commonly use the word "myth" interchangeably with the following terms, but some authorities have made distinctions (which, like many definitions, might not be valid in all cases):

1.Legends. Unlike many myths, legends generally do not have religious or supernatural content. Legends emphasize the story more than the significance of the story; we might still gain a philosophical and moral meaning from a legend, but we probably will not feel the archetypal intensity which permeates myths. An example of a legend is the tale of Atlantis.

2.Folklore. While legends and myths might be embraced as true stories, folktales are generally known to be fictitious. They are often told only within a limited geographical area -- one town, one mountain range, or one country. Examples include the stories of Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle from early American history.

3.Fables. Even more so than folktales, fables are acknowledged to be fictional -- certainly when the characters include talking animals. A fable's emphasis is on a "moral." Examples include Aesop's fables, such as the stories of the tortoise and the hare, and the fox who complained about "sour grapes."



Mythology serves many purposes.

1.Myths grant continuity and stability to a culture. They foster a shared set of perspectives, values, history -- and literature, in the stories themselves. Through these communal tales, we are connected to one another, to our ancestors, to the natural world surrounding us, and to society; and, in the

myths which have universal (i.e., archetypal) themes, we are connected to other cultures.

2.Myths present guidelines for living. When myths tell about the activities and attitudes of deities, the moral tone implies society's expectations for our own behaviors and standards. In myths, we see archetypal situations and some of the options which can be selected in those situations; we also perceive the rewards and other consequences which resulted from those selections.

3.Myths justify a culture's activities. Through their authoritativeness and the respected characters within them, myths establish a culture's customs, rituals, religious tenets, laws, social structures, power hierarchies, territorial claims, arts and crafts, holidays and other recurring events, and technical tips for hunting, warfare, and other endeavors.

4.Myths give meaning to life. We transcend our common life into a world in which deities interact with humans, and we can believe that our daily actions are part of the deities' grand schemes. In our difficulties, the pain is more bearable because we believe that the trials have meaning; we are suffering for a bigger cause rather than being battered randomly. And when we read that a particular deity experienced something which we are now enduring -- perhaps a struggle against "evil forces" -- we can feel that our own struggle might have a similar cosmic or archetypal significance, though on a smaller scale.

5.Myths explain the unexplainable. They reveal our fate after death, and the reasons for crises or miracles, and other puzzles -- and yet they retain and even encourage an aura of mystery. Myths also satisfy our need to understand the natural world; for example, they might state that a drought is caused by an angry deity. This purpose of mythology was especially important before the advent of modern science, which offered the Big Bang theory to replace creation myths, and it gave us the theory of evolution to supplant myths regarding the genesis of humanity. And yet, science creates its own mythology, even as its occasional secular barrenness threatens to strip us of the healthful awe which other types of mythology engender.

6.Myths offer role models. In particular, children pattern themselves after heroes; comic books and Saturday-morning cartoons depict many archetypal characters, such as Superman and Wonder Woman. Adults, too, can find role models, in the stories of deities' strength, persistence, and courage.



There are various types of myths.

In The Global Myths, Alexander Eliot defined four types of myth:
Primitive myths (which were generally stories about nature, as told by shamans).

Pagan myths (which were mostly from the Greek and Roman tales of the interplay between deities and humans).

Sacred myths (as in the stories from current eastern and western religions such as Christianity and Hinduism).

Scientific myths (i.e., "the most solemn and revered creeds of science -- from Lucretius on Nature through Darwin's The Origin of Species").

David Adams Leeming, in The World of Myth, listed four other types:

Cosmic myths (including narratives of the creation and end of the world).

Theistic myths (which portray the deities).

Hero myths (with accounts of individuals such as Achilles and Jesus).

"Place and object" myths (describing places such as Camelot, and objects such as the Golden Fleece).



We have had deities for many aspects of life....The Egyptians had more than 2,000 deities; the Hindus have 333 million. Deities have governed virtually every possible activity, object, and emotion. In addition to the broad categories (e.g., war or the sea), we have had deities for individual items; for example, the Irish honored both the goddess of rivers (Boann) and the goddess of the Lagan River (Logia). There have been deities for individual cities (Athena for Athens), mountains (Gauri-Sankar for Mount Everest), lakes, tribes, plant species, temples, constellations, parts of the body, etc. In some cultures, each home possessed its own deity, to supplement the culture's "goddess of the home" (who was named Hestia in the Greek religion). Deities governed not only major phenomena such as agriculture or love or the sun, but also such common matters as leisure, reptiles, the kitchen stove, guitars, jeering, the nose, politics, prostitution, singing, burlesque, doors, virginity, willpower, firecrackers, gambling, face cream, drunkenness, and the toilet.

"God" is different from mythological gods and goddesses. In mythology, the deities are not like the monotheistic deity of western religion. (Hinduism has its quasi-monotheistic deity -- Brahman -- but it also has millions of lesser deities.) Mythological deities were not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. Like people, they were viewed as limited, flawed, and driven by emotions and ambitions; their main difference from humans was that they had more knowledge and power.



Ancient myths live in our culture. We find references to those myths in many contemporary words and expressions, such as Pandora's box, Oedipus complex, nymph, and Olympian. Other words derived from mythology include adonis (from Adonis), aurora (from Aurora), chlorophyll (from Chloris), chronology (from Kronos), discipline (from Disciplina), discord (from Discordia), eros (from Eros), fate (from Fate), fauna (from Faunus), fidelity (from Fides), flora (from Flora), fortune (from Fortuna), fraud (from Fraus), Hades (from Hades), Hell (from Hel), hygiene (from Hygieia), jovial (from Jove), liberty (from Libertas), lunar (from Luna), morphine (from Morpheus), mortality (from Mors), mute (from Muta), narcissism (from Narcissus), nemesis (from Nemesis), ocean (from Oceanus), -- and the names of the planets, and some of the months (including Janus for January), etc. Mars (the Roman war god) is remembered in words such as Mars (the planet), March (the month), and martial (as in martial arts).



Our modern society has its own myths. Some authors say that our society lacks a vigorous mythology; they believe that this lack can cause a sense of meaninglessness, estrangement, rootlessness, and the cold brittleness of a life devoid of reverence and awe. Other authors assert that we do have a mythology -- in certain concepts (such as "progress") and in our larger-than-life celebrities (e.g., Mother Teresa as the goddess of compassion, Albert Einstein as the god of the intellect and the imagination, and Bill Gates as the god of commerce). "Screen goddesses Marilyn Monroe and Madonna incarnate the alluring qualities of Aphrodite. Aristotle Onassis expressed the wheeling-and-dealing Zeus qualities that built a shipping empire, while Muhammad Ali called on the aggressive instinct of Ares, the god of war, every time he stepped into the boxing ring." (As Above So Below, copyright 1992 by New Age Journal.) The media enlarges certain people to mythical proportions, and we each do the same (often by projecting the "Hero" archetype onto other people). Corporations have a mythology, in their "corporate culture." There is a mythology in every group -- our social club, our family, our profession, our subculture, our ethnic group, our religion and denomination, our city, our neighborhood, our friendships, etc. Our mythology changes as our culture changes -- from one generation to the next, from one presidential administration to the next, from one decade to the next.



We each have our own mythology. Consciously or unconsciously, we create our own myths. We have our deities -- the things which are important and valued and vibrant to us personally. We are heroes in "mythic journeys" by which we romanticize our various passages through life. Although we generally accept cultural myths to the extent to which we are a part of our culture, the truly satisfying and exciting myths are those which arise from our own passions, our own dreams, and our own visions.



Similar myths exist in every culture. The myths have different characters and different plot-lines, but we do find some common themes. Some of the recurring themes include a Golden Age, a fall from a heavenly state, resurrections from death, virgin births, worldwide floods, creation stories in which "one becomes two," and a future apocalypse. When Carl Jung examined the commonalities of myths, he developed his theory of archetypes, which are universal forces which influence us to manifest their particular trait.



Myths are metaphorical. Some people regard myths as mere fabrications, to be discarded in our enlightened age. Those people are repelled by the myths' preposterous elements (such as centaurs) and contradictions (within an individual myth, or in its revisions from one oral transmission to the next). But mythology's enduring worth is not in its possible historical or scientific accuracy; instead, myths are important because they are metaphors. We learn about life and people and values in a way which cannot be offered by dry historical or philosophical accounts; in mythology, we learn through imagination, as we feel and visualize the colorful adventures of the deities. Although mythology is not a literal rendering of a culture's history, we can still use myths to explore the culture -- its viewpoints, activities, and beliefs.



Myths represent forces in the psyche and the world. As Joseph Campbell said, in *An Open Life*, "The imagery of mythology is symbolic of spiritual powers within us." In this symbolism, we see mythological characters who represent love, youth, death, wealth, virility, fear, evil, and other archetypal facets of life -- and we also see natural events such as rain and wind. The

deities are personifications of those facets, those "energies." As we read about the interplay of deities, we are viewing a dream-like fantasy which portrays the interaction of the elements of our own lives. To say that the deities are symbolic is not to say that they might not exist as actual beings; after all, some contemporary people believe in a deity which is an individual "person" (portrayed in art as an old man), so we might grant equal respect and open-mindedness toward those who have believed in the literal reality of ancient deities.



Mythology is a valid way to look at the world. Even if we respect the archetypal significance of mythology, we might disregard myths as primitive, clumsy attempts to express those psychological truths. But some authors have argued that mythology is actually a sophisticated means of labeling and studying psychological dynamics -- a means which is as cultured and insightful as that of modern psychology. Surely some myths were concocted by soma-intoxicated shamans, but perhaps others were devised by thoughtful scholars and mystics who intentionally chose mythology as a vehicle for passing on their revelations. These sages might have realized that myths are:

1. Easy to remember in an illiterate society in which ideas cannot be written nor read.
2. Approachable and somewhat understandable by people of any level of intelligence, including people for whom a philosophical discourse would be incomprehensible.
3. Stimulating to the imagination and feelings, where the effect can be more profound and life-changing than that from intellectual comprehension.



Can we use mythology in psychology? Although we might include mythology within psychology, we would surely not abandon psychology's scientific approach for the stories and practices of traditional mythology. (I, for one, would feel silly burning incense to Apollo.) But the idea of a "mytho-psychology" is intriguing. We can envision the advice given by a Roman priest in a counseling session with a person who, for instance, was experiencing problems due to a lack of self-discipline.

1. "Know the power of Disciplina, the Roman goddess of discipline." Simply to accept the reality of this force (whether internally or externally) is a primary step in resolving a condition which has been exacerbated by denial, repression, and lack of development. (However, the "acceptance" of the

reality of Disciplina would be virtually impossible in our culture; mythological characters seemed real in other cultures, but that milieu of mythology is simply too alien to provide an effective format for contemporary psychological therapy. But let us continue anyway ...)

2. "Honor Disciplina." To "honor" her, we would respect her importance as a goddess. (In therapy, we might learn to respect ourselves, including our natural drive to seek goals and fulfillment through self-discipline.)

3. "Fear the wrath of Disciplina, whom you have angered; she has cursed you with poverty." Actually, the poverty is the result of a lack of self-discipline, but at least the priest explains that some type of cause-and-effect dynamic is occurring, so that we might recognize our responsibility in the dilemma.

4. "Seek guidance from Disciplina." If we try to contact Disciplina via a type of receptive meditation, the meditation might arouse our intuition to suggest ways to increase our self-discipline. This meditation might even precipitate an experience of Jungian "active imagination," in which we would "converse" with whatever parts of the psyche manage our self-discipline; this part might assume the mind's-eye appearance of Disciplina.

5. "Perform these rituals." The rituals could include actions in which we exercise our self-discipline (as a tribute to Disciplina), and also ceremonies in which we symbolically strengthen the self-discipline or destroy whatever disrupts it. Perhaps we would chant incantations, which are analogous to "affirmations." Rituals can indeed produce psychological changes if we believe in their potency and we perform them with feeling.



Why do we mythologize? We do it to acquire the benefits which have been described throughout this chapter. But, beyond the pragmatic reasons, we do it to satisfy our natural, healthy craving to live in a world which is still filled with mystery and wonder and archetypal grandeur.