

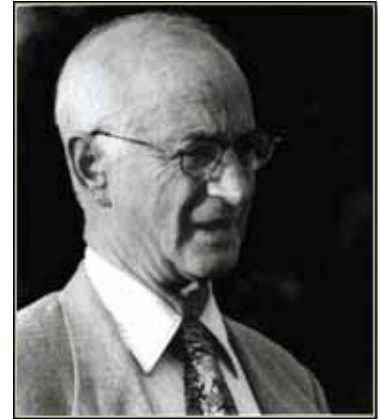
MYTHIC PASSAGES

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An Appreciation of Joseph Campbell

**From a speech delivered by
Dr. James Hillman
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The variety of people, the range of heritages and passions, and the particular focus of their abilities are all fathered by Joseph Campbell, in whose honor this assembly of the peculiarly original has gathered.

Joseph Campbell personally knew very few of us, for who knows one's readers or readers, their authors? As Gertrude Stein said, "I write for myself and strangers." Moreover, he belonged to a wonderful generation born before World War I, still blessed with the scholarly ideals and heroic abilities of intellectual adventure and mastery that characterized the 19th Century. And all this fruit, all we in this room, are fruits of his loom or fruits of his loins. He opened and continues to open the marvels of myth to the dulled, commodified imagination.

Now, the enormous range of Joseph Campbell's work – his Joyce studies, Indology, archaic rituals and customs, archetypal images and symbols all over the world and beyond it to outer space – and the vast comprehensiveness of his undertaking, I think for this two days that *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* is what I want to pinpoint or focus on. I'm doing it for several reasons; one of them is evident: that this theme of The Hero is the most relevant for our country and its civilization and its continued existence; also because the Hero theme epitomizes Campbell's own lifestyle and his person. Whatever he undertook, he did in a heroic manner. There is another reason, and it is appropriate to this Mythic Journeys conference and the Mythic Imagination Institute, its ambition, its scale, its dedication, and its honoring of the Dead. The Hero, let us not forget, is always a dead figure. The City is founded upon the burial tumulus of a dead Hero, as our capital city refers to our dead liberator Washington.

The free-thinking, secular state, wary of Imperial King and dogmatic Prelate, established on the foundations of the inherent reasons of the People for their common good, marks its heroic dead founders in the capital with memorials to Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and the dead heroes of Vietnam. In Atlanta, this burned and tragic city, was re-founded on those heroes and those principles by the community that re-fought in the 1960s the abolitionist heroic ideals of the 1860s.

So let us review these basic things that we get from the Hero figure as presented by Joseph Campbell. First, the relevance of the Hero now; not the Hero myth, but myth itself is the Hero.

In its liberating capacity, “the work of the Hero,” says Campbell, “is to slay the tenacious aspect of the Father/Dragon/Ogre/King, and release the vital energies that will feed the Universe.” To slay the Ogre, the reactionary aspect of the senex who promotes fear, sterility, poverty of children, the paranoid, suspicious, deceitful, illegitimate King and the nobles of the Court living in their gated communities (already having locked themselves up or committed themselves to the separated asylum of insanity, and with megalomaniac intentions) use the language of the legitimate Hero to free the world from Evil when they are themselves carriers of lies, cruelty and death.

Myth slays the Ogre by seeing the pattern in the paranoia. Myth reveals the myth in the mess. The old King, attempting to overcome the Father in Campbell’s terms, overcomes the Father by becoming the old King himself. This is about Jung but it’s relevant for Campbell... there was recently an Internet attack on Jung’s thought or Jung’s way from an oppositional position. The attack is on the fact that myth was so fundamental in Jung’s work, and that the presentation of the ideas was based not on biblical truths. The same idea appears – that Jung’s error was that he spent so many years absorbed with ancient cosmologies (sounds like Joseph Campbell), analyzing Gnostic, alchemical and mystical systems of thought, and provided commentaries to Richard Willhelm’s *I Ching*. Instead, in Jung’s psychology as in Campbell’s work, the attack reduces God to a mere archetypal image, a type of universal myth, as opposed to the Bible’s revelation of God as the truth, creator and judge. So you see that what myth does already within the culture is open it up from its literalism. Myth becomes heroic in the sense that it can release or liberate the mind, the imagination, and the heart from too narrow dogmatisms.

Myth promises another vision, a vision of the City – the City of the Mall triumphant – it’s promiscuity, not its purity, the misogynation of the nation of the peoples, their images, their stories, interpenetrating concourse of the imagination. The profusion of myths free the people and one of the tasks of the Hero from dogmatic identities, building a City of Imagination whose bible is the world. A new city in accord with the oldest American Dream, but not the City of Static Architecture, but as a throng, a flowing movement of widened knowledge where “throng” and “flow” are the original root meanings of the City as a Polis.

Joseph Campbell himself, his life and his person, embodied the Heroic manner. I suppose you know that he was a foot racer who ran at Columbia University, and he almost made the Olympics. It was one of his great disappointments that he didn’t quite make it, but he was always a challenged and challenging runner. The Olympic runners originally ran a quarter of a mile, and only later chariots and physical combat and so on and so forth entered. Campbell was a miler. The winner of the foot race in the old Olympics stadium was crowned with bay or laurel (in another kind of race, with parsley, wild olive, or pine depending on where the game was played). But the winner of the race was not just a winner. He was transported to immortality, and a cult developed around this swift fastest mortal.

A part of Campbell’s life was racing that was. He followed the Labors of Hercules in the servitude that he did and the Sisyphean toil. Imagine teaching undergraduates at Sarah Lawrence for 30 years! That’s Sisyphus rolling that boulder up the hill, year after year after year after year. The same toil, the same faces walking in again in the great Herculean or Sisyphean task. I remember the conference in San Francisco on Inner Reaches of Outer Space. We were all

having dinner first at some heavy-duty restaurant. I had gotten off the plane nervous, exhausted, tired, neurotic, complaining, whining – the whole set of natural characteristics belong to a Campbell ordered an over thick steak, drank a couple of whiskeys, and retired to bed in great spirits – a hero of the Irish dimension.

My mistake all along in attacking the Hero, which I've done in work after work, is to confuse or to think of the Hero in our times when the Gods have disappeared. When the Gods have fled, the Hero serves only the Ego. Whereas the original Hero was a culture hero who served the culture and the City, saved the City, rebuilt the City, founded the City, and served the Gods. The heroic aspect in Joseph Campbell's work was that it's all, in a sense, dedicated to this vast panoply of images of myths, of the Gods of all the worlds and all the peoples. Otherwise what the Hero does is protect the City from the Nihilism of Science, the Christianity of Redemption, and the Institutionalisms of Commodities. So the Hero wears a thousand faces, and it is not merely the Ego.

Finally, the convocation of this Institute dedicated to myth and in honor of its Hero, each day brings a fresh report of ugly deaths, children exploded into bits, crumpled soldiers, the tortured and the torturers. We, in the air-cooled cleanliness of this capitalist palace, are complicitous to these acts because they are perpetrated in our name, voted on by our representatives, and paid for with our taxes. You and I are in this war, no matter our protest and our pacifism. Our passivity only increases their power.

How can this gathering bear upon our actual world? For, if it does not, it becomes another entertainment, another divertissement, no matter how sincere and well conceived, keeping our minds from facing Truth.

Now, the idea of Truth is what I want to conclude with. In Greek the idea of Truth was *alethea*. It supposedly had three sources or three ways of understanding that word. First, truth is not pseudo; that is truth is different from or opposite to lies, deceits, falsities. The second version or meaning or root of truth is that it is not Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, so truth was a *lethe*. Truth is remembering, truth is memoria. It remembers. And third, truth is frank, direct, clear, evident, perception, seeing things straight. So myth is truth because it fulfills all three of these supposed meanings of *alethea*. Myth simply tells a just so story of things as they are, all the nuances, the complexities, the pathologies, the interweavings of plots, their twists and peculiarities. Mythical truth is never single, never simple, and therefore is only pseudo or false when reduced to an explanatory interpretation or a clear belief – that's when it is false. Simplification of meaning, simplification into literalism is falsification. Hence, fundamentalist ideas of truth are deceits.

Myth is truth in the second sense too, because it restores memoria, memory. Myths remember the archetypal themes, the repetitive patterns of existence. Myth does not forget the fundamentals of imagination that are formative of our personal lives and even collective history. Finally, the truth of myth restores our senses and our common sense to the common world we share, the world that presents itself to us clearly, evidently, directly as a world alive – animated, intentional, intelligible, and at moments vividly beautiful. Myths lets plants and animals speak, endows rivers and rocks with beings, trees with spirits, mountains with gods, and the underworld

alive with ghosts and ancestors below each footfall shadowing every thought, every feeling. Myth is truth because it is utterly of this world, no matter how far its range of fantasy. Never can myth say, as in the gospel of John, “my kingdom is not of this world.”

So, I felt it my job today to claim a great value for this meeting dedicated to the recovery and investigation of myths. The task of the Mythic Imagination Institute is a cultural task, a heroic task, and that is why I’ve conjured with the heroic figure of Joseph Campbell.