

MYTHIC PASSAGES

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Michael Meade
Storyteller, Healer, Founder of Mosaic
by Mary Davis

The drumbeats draw us into the circle, and the master storyteller's voice draws us closer. His voice is deep, and the story comes in measured cadences, the rhythm of his voice, rising and falling, matches the drumming of his hands on the djembe drum... bringing us back to the image we carry in our old memories, the ancient tribal circle around the fire... and we are all right here, now, present and alive in this moment! Captured, attentive, mesmerized!

Michael Meade is this man, a man who is first and foremost, a magnificent storyteller. He pays attention to words, as well he should! They saved his life. As Meade was entering adolescence on the rough streets of his particular Irish American section of New York City, a rival youth group decided to kill him. Fortunately, just prior to this incident, his aunt had given him a book of myths, which he had read, had passionately consumed. So this little red-headed Irish boy, when faced with immediate death, told his captors the old stories he had just read. In response to his stories, the gang members who had decided to kill him changed their minds!

Meade also shares the vivid story of his experience with the Vietnam War. Still a boy, he was drafted, and after much deliberation, he decided not to go. He then sent a letter to the authorities refusing to go, explaining that he did not want to kill people he did not know. Faced with jail or the Army, he went into the Army. There he learned that he did not take orders well, when the orders did not make sense. In fact, he believes he holds the record for the number of times an individual was court-martialed (76), although he notes that many of these were for refusing the same orders oft repeated. He finally got to court and was subsequently placed in solitary confinement.

Understanding that he had "issues with authority," facing seven years in Leavenworth Prison, and also facing the possibility of execution, he decided to take off his uniform, be naked, and to stop eating. He drank a small amount of water every other day. At the age of twenty, Meade went from 155 pounds to 87 pounds. He almost died several times. But several interesting things happened to him during this time. First, the officers who had been vilifying him started coming into his cell and confessing to him! Second, he began to have "visitors" from the old stories, the myths, and he thought, "I am either losing my mind or I am finding my mind." He felt fed by both the officers' confessions and the visitations from the old stories. He says, "I

learned which is more fearful, to die or to live a life which I cannot bear, and I learned that death is less fearful.”

After the national media focused attention on his situation, he was moved to a remote hospital where he would have remained out of sight, ill and starving. However, a friend interceded, someone in the Washington political arena found his location, and Meade did not die. Eventually, he returned to the community, where he was welcomed back by in-country Vietnam veterans. Later, as we know, he became one of the founders of “the men’s movement.” He continues to study myth, anthropology, psychology, religions, and the world’s cultures and their rituals.

Meade uses the story from his life in the Army to discuss the initiation process. He says that life is set up so that on the way to our birth, we forget what we have come to live. The tribal approach to initiation helps you with the process of finding meaning, finding what you have come here to live, of “finding your deity for you, for the end of your life.” He says that the initiation process requires three steps: separation, ordeal, and return to the community with recognition, welcome, and celebration of the new person you have become. When we do not get the third step, the welcomed return, we go back and repeat the trouble again, because the psyche wants wholeness! He speaks about the need in our culture to develop meaningful ritual and “conscious initiation.”

At the Mythic Journeys Conference, many of us were able to experience the wisdom of Michael Meade. He taught us songs about the meaning of life and then we sang together! He drummed us into his circle as he spoke of “the world behind the world.” He and Professor Jim Flannery shared a session discussing Cuchulainn, the legendary Celtic warrior whose story illustrates the impact of the rage of battle on human beings and how that rage can be healed... in Cuchulainn’s case, so the story goes, by 150 women who bared their breasts and brought three vats of water to cool him down. His fury caused the first vat to burst, the second to boil, and the third to become only very hot, allowing Cuchulainn finally to rest and stop killing.

More recently, some of us attended Meade’s Atlanta lecture and workshop, *Holding the Thread of Life*. The theme that dominated the weekend was the individual’s finding meaning and purpose in our world.

Meade spoke about teaching mythology to both Ph.D. students and to street level students, with whom he spends much of his time now. He created the MOSAIC Multicultural Foundation, which teaches mythology and helps young people find that which is “poetic by nature” within them. As he says, “...it (MOSAIC) wanders through Native American reservations, in and out of prisons and detention centers, down the streets of America’s ghettos and barrios, through the halls of higher education and out to remote nature camps where the modern refugees gather.”

Meade feels that we are “**living at the cosmic turn**,” that many of our institutions have become hollow, that “the world, in a sense, is unraveling.” He notes the current popular interest in apocalyptic issues.

Meade feels that culture comes from “the vision of youths and the dreams of the elders.” He says that grandparents and grandchildren get along, since both are close to the other world (birth and death); that the role of the elders is “to bridge to the other world, to remember what counts, to preserve life itself, that when the elders remember to be awake and remember up to the end, it helps. The issue is to become an elder and to dispense Medicine (inner medicine) before stepping out the door of death, where we all go.” He speaks of now, when we live in a world with a collapsed, forsaken world-view; with a 47 – 52 (often a 50 – 50) split on most of the important issues in our culture; with a loss of imagination in the world. The question is, **what does an individual do?**

Part of Meade’s answer to this question is, “...to live a bigger life in these times; to get closer to this burning seed inside; to recover the importance of the sacred, the importance of myth.” He encourages us to notice that every event – inner or outer – has a hidden meaning trying to be revealed, “a mystery trying to reveal itself.” Meade encourages us to find our center, to get the earth and nature back to the center. He says there’s a reason that gardening and yoga are the two most widespread current hobbies!

Michael Meade teaches us “to sing over.” He encourages us to see study and education as a spiritual practice, that “*educare* means to lead the spirit out.” Teaching us a song from the Dagara People of West Africa, which praises the Earth and praises the Mother, he notes that “songs ease the soul.”

“Nature is the breath of spirit,” he says, “and when one finds one’s inner nature, one finds the connection, the umbilical cord to Nature.” He speaks of this world as Mythos, a radical, constantly invented story saying, “myth fills in the spaces of what’s missing.” **He encourages us to “live our own life, the words written on the soul, to sing the song that’s written on our soul!”** He reminds us that Jung taught: when we don’t deal with what’s on the inside, those issues appear on the outside as fate.

As Meade continues to discuss the basic question of an individual’s action in the world, he notes the connection between “the wound and the gift,” that our wounds are the quickest way to get to the core Self, that joy lies concealed in grief. He cautions that finding our center requires changing all the time and that the ego doesn’t like it; that between the ego and the deep Self is the zone of emotions. “Emotions are the water of the psyche, emotions heal and protect.” He encourages us to use our emotions, including fear, as a guide to the place we are to go, saying that “fear and courage are companions, not opposites. Growth requires stepping through one’s fear, and that fear tells you something is imminent. He also reminds us that we are attracted to and repulsed from the very thing we have to get close to. He says that ritual has the containing power to hold the person while the ego freaks out and quits, and the Self heals.

Full of much more wisdom, and speaking in a way that is easily accessible, Meade uses rhythm, poetry, humor, specific myths, and fairy tales to weave his ideas together. Among his storytelling tips, he shares his view that the human brain thinks in rhythm. He uses drumming to bring the story to our lower chakras, connecting our minds, bodies and feelings. His “trance-rhythm” allows each of us to hear the story with our whole Self.

And the stories he brings! Native American stories, African stories, Irish stories, and more!

He tells a beautiful story from Asia about a young woman who wishes to help her young man overcome his distance and anger. The sage tells her that to do this, she must acquire the whisker of a living tiger. Her love gives her the courage to overcome her deep fear, to develop the practice, a step at a time, to bring rice to the tiger, addressing this noble unknown creature from the other world, who eventually allows her to take a whisker. Of course, in the process, she learns how to approach her angry young man and herself, also. Meade uses this story to teach us that we treat our enemies as we treat ourselves (projection); that in order to be in love, we have to love ourselves. He says, “The tiger represents the brilliance of the other world, the healing if you can stand the brilliance, that healing hurts a little, and that one can access the nobility and grace of the other world if the approach is right.”



Michael Meade brings hope as he speaks of the serious issue for each of us, “this fever for manifestation of the deep Self, this thing written in the Soul.” He reminds us that according to all the Old People, each person is deeply, uniquely valuable. He also reminds us of the old story which says each Soul picks the time it wants to live...and if that is true, that means we have all come here to change things, that is, if we don’t like the way things are!

Meade quotes Hafiz, saying after you find that worry doesn’t work too well, perhaps you should find a better job! There is only one of each one of us in time, and the expression of each one of us is very important. Our job is to keep that expression, to keep it clearly and directly, and to keep the channels open. He reminds us that in fairy tales and folk tales, “redemptions occur, when the spell is broken.” Our job is to break the spell and find the vitality, to live the life we came here to lead!

Author's notes: These notes have been written from a conversation with and from presentations in Atlanta by Michael Meade. We have been promised a more in-depth interview with him when he has time in his hectic schedule.

To learn more about the MOSAIC Foundation and to obtain copies of recorded Michael Meade workshops and seminars, as well as his books, check the website [Mosaic Voices](#). His available recordings include: Peace and the Salt of the Earth, Entering Mythic Territory, Holding the Thread of Life, Fate and Destiny, Poetics of Peace, When the Women Went One Way And the Men Went the Other, The Water of Life: Stories of Spirit, and Descent and Healing. He is the co-editor (with James Hillman and Robert Bly) of The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart, a wonderful collection of poems.