CHAPTER TWO

MYTH AND RELIGION

Myth is a word that is forced to carry excessive weight. Myths function both to limit and to expand preconceived ideas. The American myth, for example, provides images and ideals that set Americans apart from other peoples. But myths also play a broadening role, especially in religious myths that bring us into contact with the gods, heroes, and saviors that are latent at the core of our selves. In this book we give our attention and emphasis to this second role, and we emphasize the capacity of myths to help persons expand their selves and achieve wholeness.

Myths are stories that give significance to historical events, revealing the mysteries of archetypes, the constants of human experience. As sacred stories structuring the meaning and values of human existence, they strengthen and complement the doctrines of religious traditions.

The Myth of Myth

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to a proper understanding and appreciation of myth is its misuse in the everyday speech and writing of many people. For example, when they mention the
"myth of male chauvinism" or the "myth of racial equality" or the "myth of the Loch Ness monster," they refer to something that is false or needs clarification. Even when myth refers to stories, it implies that these stories are not true; and lacking truth, they are no longer to be taken seriously. Living as we do in a scientific Western world view (perhaps we should say scientific Western myth), we tend to consider the stories in myths as anachronistic, surviving only in an environment that is somehow protected from the impact of historical change and understanding.

From the scientific perspective, the only truths are those which can be verified by empirical methods: What is true is what is testable and predictable. Myths here are illusions or even lies, primitive and mistaken ways of relating to the world that are destined to be replaced by science.

To many, myths have a pejorative connotation, such as when they say, "We have to distinguish the myth from the reality." Dictionaries foster this sense when they define myth as a fictitious story, an unscientific account, or an imaginary person or thing spoken of as existing. Some tend to reduce myth to a kind of rationalization for human behavior. But by and large, the battle against this downgrading of myth in the name of science has been won.

It is generally recognized that when people reduce their beliefs and hopes to empirical certainties or philosophical proofs, they impoverish and delude themselves. It is not so much that they have reduced human life to a story without a point or a journey without a goal. It is rather that they have fabricated other myths of economics, or politics, or technology. Far from avoiding myth, they create demeaning ones; and in limiting truth in this way, they have to find some other way to describe those meaningful elements of life that cannot be reduced to their model, elements like grief, or happiness, or friendship.

Another popular usage of myth, which also detracts from its power today, considers it as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world, a naive philosophy that may have been true "once upon a time." Myth was necessary for those primitive people living thousands of years ago. It was necessary for them, for it provided a way of projecting their fears and hopes onto the mysterious gods. It provided them with a vehicle for moral truths, for sentimentally describing nature, perhaps even for controlling nature by magic or sacrifice. It was all very odd, very queer, not rooted in real life.

To reduce myth to some kind of sociological function in this way is to say, in effect, that myths are other people's view of life with which we disagree. It denies that other people who may have been more primitive from the point of view of the scientific myth really knew what it meant to be fully human or how to relate to each other in a civilized way.

This approach to myth is also generally considered to be invalid. Now we recognize that these earlier groups had powerful ways of relating individuals to the group. Far from the alienation and lack of social cohesion that many experience today, primitive people asserted that the group had a special power that emanated to each individual who participated in the stories. The sacred beliefs and practices evoked in the myths united the believers into a single community. The myths narrated the fundamental unity of the group and actually created it. Telling myths created a group self-consciousness, a common story in which all who participated knew who they were.

A third misleading usage of myth regards it as the product of poetical fantasy, a type of literature not really different from legends, folk tales, or even fables. It is contended that like these other literary forms, myths furnish entertainment, awe, nostalgia, or amusement by evoking a make-believe world. Also, they may contain some moral truths, but these are presented in allegorical form so that they might be easier understood, digested, and accepted. Like legends, folk tales, and fables, myths are never to be taken too seriously, provide no breathless air of authority, and are best suited as plots for movies.

In this view it is generally recognized that myths are much more than these other forms of literature. Legends and folk tales, for example, are imaginative treatment of events that are believed to be historical at least to some degree. The neatness and finality with which an awkward situation is resolved or any enemy confounded brings much satisfaction to their hearers. Legends and folk tales are didactic, cleverly illustrating proper political or ethical behavior by evoking a world of magic. They are national in their presentation of human character; for example, Odysseus is the embodiment of Greek ideals of manly courage, sagacity, and endurance; Sigurd, the personification of the Norse Code of heroism; King Arthur, of Norman-English chivalry.
Myths, as we are using them, do include not only stories about gods, heroes, and saviors, but also those historical events of religious significance in a tradition, such as the account of Israel’s delivery from oppressive slavery in Egypt, or Muhammad’s Night of Power and Excellence, or the narratives of Jesus’ resurrection. But generally they do not depend upon or revolve around a historical basis because their concern is with basic human dilemmas that transcend place and time.

Much of the value of myths lies in their open-ended meanings, their way of illuminating a wide range of experiences, telling us much about ourselves, whoever we are and whatever our circumstances. Myths are the revelation of mysteries rather than clever illustrations or didactic entertainment. Their preoccupation is with more profound problems, such as creation, the origin of evil, or the destiny of humankind. Myths are cosmic and universal rather than national and immediate. They offer reflections on the constants of human experience, both personal and social.

**Myth and the Religious Self**

Myths help humans in their quest for the religious self. They are a complex of images, metaphors, and rituals that provide humans with a map for charting their course through the baffling regions they encounter in their lives. An integral part of religion, they proclaim a central reality and then build a structure of values around and in relation to it. Their stories point to the inner meaning of the universe and of human life. Appealing to the imagination, they provide a comprehensive view of reality. They serve to reveal or explain the mysteries of life, death, and the universe, though their images at once reveal and conceal, are implicit rather than explicit, and suggest rather than state. Myths are religious, for their narratives deal with the Absolute Reality at the core of the self, the essence of the self, which is both transcendent (true for all times and places) and immanent (true here and now). Myths convey concrete notions about how this Absolute Reality at the core is to be approached.

Insofar as myths are sacred stories that traditionally have structured the meaning and value of human existence, they are part of the language of religion. Myths show how the experience of the sacred is given form within an individual’s life and the life of the community. They outline a picture of a larger reality beyond our own limited personal experience. Adumbrating an entire universe of sacred and secular, they provide a perspective on human origin and destiny, the limits of human power, and the extension of human hopes and desires. They circumscribe all of human experience, providing stories of the values that give significance to people’s lives and lift them out of the humdrum of daily existence.

Like all symbols, myths function on levels of the human psyche other than the rational. They fulfill deep psychic and spiritual needs by providing the images, symbols, and rituals that enable people to cope with limiting situations, such as suffering, evil, or death, and to pass through important transitions, such as birth, puberty, adulthood, and old age. They narrate the human dilemma, the discordance between our fundamental reality (symbolized as the divine image at our core) and our actual mode of being (symbolized as sinful, guilty, and alienated from or unaware of that core). Myths let us divine (rather than define) how to resolve this dilemma by relating the aspects of our existence to that religious core.

Myths provide “soul”; they get beyond “merely making a living.” The stories they narrate are classics because their message and significance are permanent. Myths are texts that never belong to the past but always to the present; they are always contemporary, for in them humans, precisely because they are humans, keep rediscovering themselves. Their themes of love, truth, courage, mercy, compassion are valid for all generations and transcend any concrete, material expression of them. Their themes cannot be analyzed by empirical methods but demand to be illustrated in stories.

Myths are not the same as doctrines, though they both are ways of bringing insight to religious experience. Doctrines basically use philosophical language as their form of expression. Myths exist alongside and in interaction with the more abstract ideas of the doctrinal dimension. They are generally located in and derive their authority from the sacred books, the scriptures, of the world’s major religious traditions. These scriptures include, for example, the Hebrew Scriptures for Jews and the Bible for Christians, the Qur’an for Muslims, the Lotus Sutra for many in the Buddhist tradition, the Vedas and perhaps the Bhagavad-Gita.
for Hindus. These scriptures are generally older than the doctrines that often take centuries to develop. Myths are told not to distort these doctrines but to strengthen them and root them in the religious tradition. This does not mean that myths are necessarily the source of the religious doctrines; indeed, these doctrines often derive from other sources.

Myths and doctrines both have an element of compelling authority, both have an equal claim to be believed, for they are both attempts to provide people a way of experiencing and interpreting the mystery of human existence. Still, neither doctrines nor myths are to be equated with the experience of the Absolute Reality. This would lead to a dysfunction, and perhaps to a loss of faith.

Myths are not the enemy of doctrines but their complement. The stories in myths help provide some understanding of the more abstract content of doctrines. They can enhance traditional interpretations and illumine perennial theological problems. They can liberate doctrines from the strait-jackets that were fastened on them by all the cultural, intellectual, and political circumstances they encountered when they were formulated. By attending to the images, symbols, and metaphors in myths, people can come to a greater appreciation of the content of the doctrines of their own religious tradition and they can relate more constructively to the myths and doctrines in other religious cultures.

The use of the term “myth” in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral regarding the story told in the myth; indeed, the actual story may not be factual. Myths may be false. Still, the truths that myths deal with are “infinitely true”; that is, they tell a special kind of story that describes the basic mysteries of life and provides a way to respond to them. Myths are not just pictures of images that might be meaningful to religious believers but remain meaningless to the outsiders. Rather, they are dramas placed in the familiar world of space and time that attempt to reveal, through particular details, universal truths. There is a sort of convergence at the level of truth in the great religious traditions. It makes no sense to say that one religious myth is “better” or “truer” than the other. They are not antithetical. We cannot say, for example, that the truths in the myths of Buddha must be contrasted with the truths about Jesus in the gospels, or that the truths in Taoism must be opposed to the message of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures.

The Hindu Vedas express it this way: “Truth is one; the sages call it by many names.”

Myths are responses to the real world that seek, in their various conditioned ways, to reveal to religious believers an unconditioned reality. Beyond the variety of languages and expressions, there is a common meaning; beyond the disparity of religions, there is a common revelation. To refuse to recognize this truth, we fall into the trap that a Buddhist parable warns us against: We mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. To recognize this truth, we shift our sight from the pointing finger to the moon itself. We then transcend any particular mythic (or doctrinal) expression and experience the reality at the very core of our humanity.

Approaches to Myth

There have been skirmishes on the nature and function of myth in many academic areas in the past century. Linguistics, psychology, cultural anthropology, and structural analysis are just a few of the fields that claim myths as their special province and their particular possession. They have charted the relationship of myths to rituals, struggled over the origin of myths, traced the diffusion of myths from one culture or religious tradition to another, and developed typologies of myth (cosmogonic, heroic, utopian, etc.). While admitting valuable insights from all these fields, I feel that it would take us too far afield to rehearse all their arguments here.

Myths won’t go into one packet; they cannot be coerced or owned by one academic area. They are too rich to allow for only one method of interpretation. They never allow of a single meaning, once and for all. Valuable insights into how myths interact with and challenge the human personality to strive for wholeness may be drawn from any number of methods of interpretation. Freud’s classical tri-layered picture of the personality (the id, ego, and superego), and Levi-Strauss’ model of binary oppositions, for example, are neat, elegant, and attractive. Important, too, are the phenomenologists who provide insights by studying the variants of particular myths, and also literary critics who explore the symbolic language of myths from still different perspectives.
Throughout this book I will be utilizing the insights of many persons, most of whom build on the thoughts of three persons. I would now like to introduce the major thrust of each of these three — Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and C.G. Jung—who have had such an influence on scholarship in myth studies. I pick them because they attend specifically to the religious and communal dimensions of myth. They have opened up perspectives that beckon us further to become conscious of and to consent to the mysteries of our existence. They concur that the underlying thrust of myths is somehow connected with deep impulses in our psyche and that the ultimate function of myths concerns the achievement of personal wholeness.

This wholeness is not fully understood or achieved except in a context of the community. Myths, they insist, are not just about me; they are about us. Myths tell the members of the religious tradition who they are and where they are going. The insights of these three men on the religious and communal dimensions of myth have helped many persons develop an attitude toward myth that makes their past sensible, their present meaningful, and their future possible.

**Mircea Eliade: Sacred Beginnings**

A champagne bottle is used to whack the prow of a ship to launch it into the waters for its maiden voyage. Politicians and local entrepreneurs appear at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new business. Hospital and school administrators have their picture taken with the first overturned shovel of dirt from the construction site of a new wing. All of us delight in celebrating birthdays and in making New Year’s resolutions. People delightfully celebrate religious rituals of beginnings, too. The Jews, for example, commemorate their deliverance from slavery each year at Passover time; at Easter, Christians rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus.

The human desire to commemorate our beginnings is at the basis of Eliade’s writings on myth. The pattern of the eternal return to the beginnings, to the sacred, primordial time is found throughout *Sacred and Profane, Patterns in Comparative Religion, From Primitives to Zen, History of Religious Ideas,* and his many other works. For him, the fundamental characteristic of religion, expressed in myths and rituals, is the “nostalgia for paradise,” the desire to live as much as possible in the sacred, ideal world of the beginning.

In retelling myths, humans relive their deepest symbols and re-create the realities (the gods, heroes, saviors) at the core of their religious self. They recall the fabled time of the beginnings when they are released from the terror of history into a secure and meaningful world. They overcome the tyranny of time, which affects everyone to the extent that they allow themselves to be governed by deadlines, clocks, and schedules, or to live in the shadow of time and change. In narrating myths and celebrating rituals, they exercise a way of healing, of overcoming time, the devourer. They annihilate chronological time and come into contact with sacred reality. For example, for the Jews, Yahweh is liberating his people now (not just at Passover); for the Christians, Jesus is risen today (not just at the first Easter).

Because myths (and rituals) are not mere commemorations but true experiences of the sacred beginnings, Eliade asserts that they are the most precious human possession. They are sacred, exemplary, and significant.

First, myths are sacred. For Eliade, the sacred is not another world alongside the “real world” of everyday existence. The sacred world is a real world of events and things that can be re-experienced within the everyday world. The symbols and images of myths provide the framework for uncovering this real world.

Persons in religious traditions want to participate in this sacred reality, to be saturated with its power. They want to find ways of discerning evidence of this sacred in their consciousness. They open themselves up to this sacred world when they recount and appropriate the primordial deeds of the gods in forming, establishing, or creating the cosmos.

At the sacred time of the beginnings, the supernatural beings brought a reality into existence, whether the whole of reality (the cosmos itself) or a fragment of it (such as an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution). This is the sacred time of the primordial events, a time qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of everyday existence that persons desire to re-enter and re-experience. The sacred beings brought order out of chaos at the beginning. In opening themselves up to this sacred world, persons hope to put some order into the chaos of their own environment, so as not to be overwhelmed by it. Repeating
and participating in the myths of the beginnings, they then attempt to articulate their behavior, their understanding of the world, and their value systems in terms of a sacred time and a sacred space.

Second, myths are exemplary. The primordial happenings recounted in myths are the exemplary models for all behavior in the profane world. Although people want to shape the profane world according to their needs, they want to bring themselves into conformity with the sacred world. By encouraging pre-existent models, myths thus promote social cohesion. To treat religious myths and rituals as efforts to gain control over new dimensions of the environment would be to consider religion as magic. They are rather the elements of religion that bring humans and their world into harmony with the objectively real world (which they cannot control). This harmony comes gradually through the constant repetition that lends importance and significance to the stories and dramatic action.

What happens on earth, in history, is unreal and illusory, while what happens in myth is real and substantial. To the extent that persons coordinate their earthly activities with the deeds narrated in the myths, they participate more fully in reality. Through regular repetition, they recall and imitate the exemplary pattern of their gods, which thus constitutes their world view and lifestyle and organizes and shapes their environment.

Third, myths are significant. They convey the models or paradigms of meaningful human actions. Myths address the whole person, not the intelligence or the imagination only; and they put persons in touch not only with themselves, but with the entire cosmos. They speak to the similarity of existential situations in which humans find themselves: similarities of social relationships (of male and female, of parent and child), of physical environment (storms, sunshine, drought), and of individual experience (of birth, growth, maturity, old age, death). Myths of the different religious traditions have much in common, for they all treat those common problems and struggles (of goodness vs. evil, of life vs. death, of unity vs. diversity) that make life meaningful. Far from alienating persons in different religious traditions, myths can unite them by revealing the very substance of human existence and the meaning of human destiny in recounting the deeds of the gods.

Elia's understanding of myth is very beneficial for us, but it is not beyond all criticism. For example, his notion that myths are always accounts of beginnings is a bit narrow. Perhaps stories about origins may be the prototypes for other myths, but they are not the only type. Not all myths should be interpreted as accounts of how time-bound things came out of something timeless and eternal, out of something that was "in the beginning." Myths of heroes' quests, myths of saviors, and utopian visions of the end of the world are obvious examples of myths that cannot be reduced to this pattern.

Secondly, his division of the world into sacred and profane, into real and unreal, seems to discount all those moments of time that are not a repetition of a mythical beginning. By separating the world into sacred and profane, there is a tendency to empty the profane sphere of significance and worth. Actually, the reaction should be quite the opposite. When events of the immediate, ordinary world are related to sacred time, they should be viewed with renewed fascination, for they become significant and noteworthy in their own right. All time is now sacred, either as ecstatic moments when we are called outside the realm of everyday experience or as moments when we stand more deeply within that experience, reaffirming and revitalizing it. Sacred and profane time interpenetrate each other; they are not rival modes. If we understand this, we can stifle the temptation to find new universals by means of which we order the world and the temptation to regard the empirical world as the "real" world (since it is experienced daily).

Joseph Campbell: The Monomyth

When Joseph Campbell was asked if he considered himself a guru for students of myth, he replied that he was not directing anybody and that his idea of a top scholar in myth studies was Eliade. Campbell suggested that he and Eliade stand back to back, one facing a popular community, and the other the academic community. Despite Campbell's reluctance to admit his own scholarship, his contributions to the study of myths, including The Hero With a Thousand Faces, the four volumes of The Masks of God, the lavishly illustrated The Mythic Image, and The Way of Animal Powers, have secured his place among this century's top mythologists.

Campbell describes myths in many ways. They are symbols that evoke and direct psychological energy. Vivid stories or legends, they are but one part of a larger fabric that expresses a culture's attitude toward life, death, and the universe. Myths are not fantasies or misstatements; rather, they are veiled
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the grieving, sharing food after the funeral) all help build up a sense of group solidarity through communal expression of sorrow.

If it seems that the social function of myth suggests that some necessity of conformity is vital for society — "We've always done it this way," or "Where do you draw the line if we allow some changes?" — it is more than offset by the final function, which calls for creative individuality.

The fourth function, the psychological, initiates persons into the order of realities of their own individual psyche, guiding them toward their own spiritual enrichment and realization. Campbell states that this is the most important of myth's functions. It guides individuals, stage by stage, through the inevitable crises of a useful life: from the childhood condition of dependency, through the traumas of adolescence, and the trials of adulthood, to the deathbed.

Myths help children through the fears that arise from their smallness and dependence by alluding to the hidden power they have within, not yet quite ripened or revealed. Mythic fantasies keep children from being overwhelmed by a world of large and mysteriously powerful adults. Adolescent boys and girls are eased through crises by supernatural helpers who encourage them to trust their intuition, and take the risk, to challenge elders when they are no longer worthy of respect.

Adults find in myths the insight that people who misuse their potential lose it, but those who use their power and creativity both generously and wisely are richly rewarded. Those who spend their lives for the sake of others achieve the complete realization of their religious selves.

Finally, those in old age find in myths the vehicle for communicating their wisdom to the younger generations. Moments of fullness and moments of happiness are not something in the distant future awaiting us after death; rather, these moments are possible in everyday experience to be realized here and now.

Myths make possible the experience of such moments of wholeness, of complete realization of the religious self, by enabling persons to participate in the greater drama concerning the journey of the human race. Through sharing the adventures of the gods, heroes, and saviors, they discover this precious secret: The god is not just Yahweh or Brahma; the hero is not just Perseus or Parsifal, the savior is not just Ahura Mazda or Jesus.

These and other mythical figures are just the local faces or the temporal manifestations of the numinous. The true gods, heroes, and saviors, by contrast, are at the heart of the self; indeed, they are the self. By developing this spiritual awareness, persons help to heal the split between their subjective psyche and their objective world, between their ego and their religious self. Problems and dis-ease of emptiness and meaninglessness are dissolved as persons become aware of and consent to this larger self, this divinity within.

Campbell's four functions of myth, and the psychological function in particular, are developed within the framework of his monomyth. This monomyth is his attempt to synthesize different myths from around the world into a single unified whole, a kind of multiplicity within a unity. Campbell adumbrates a universal pattern of departure, initiation, and return by linking together the heroes of various cultures and traditions who set out to answer the call of adventure, the call of life itself. Impelled by some crisis, the hero leaves the protective but unchallenging milieu of home and sets out feeling that he will be incomplete unless he does so. The hero has embarked on a quest for separate identity as a person of exceptional courage and wisdom. After crossing the threshold of the unknown, the hero has to perform some task, perhaps slaying a monster, rescuing someone, gathering up a hoarded treasure, or fetching the water of life from a well at the world's end. Vulnerable and facing the possibility of failure, the hero generally achieves the task. Occasionally, the hero is reluctant to return to his everyday world, but most often the hero does return, transformed. In the homecoming he shares the fruits of his labor, his boon or reward for the task, with the community.

Implicit in the departure, initiation, and return of the monomythic hero is a kind of spiritual death and transformation that is valid for humans as well. What the hero ultimately finds is his own self, his identity. Every person lives, in symbolic fashion, through the same stages in the process of maturing into the religious self. Myths thus portray a universal condition, outside of time and applicable to all humans. By participating in the myths, and, in particular, the monomyth, humans embark on a life cycle greater than their own and follow a model on the path to psychological and religious maturity.

Campbell's reconstruction of the monomyth is criticized by scholars. In tracing it through several cultures and religious
traditions, Campbell is very selective and focuses on those features that are the same in all the variants. He randomly skips centuries and cultural provinces to dwell on the myths that fit his overarching pattern well. His desire to synthesize world mythology, to find a unity in human cultural history, is most intriguing, especially since so many extraordinary features fall into place. But the connection is only suspected and not susceptible of proof. Whether this criticism is valid or not, Campbell’s monomyth paradigm may help us understand ourselves better and provide insights into the nature of the religious self.

The other criticism routinely leveled at Campbell concerns his hypothesis that mythology is a function of genetics or biology. It may be intriguing to suggest that myths are a product of the human imagination moved by the energies of the nervous system operating against each other, but this, too, is no more than a suggestion. It is gratuitous to argue that myths are similar because humans have the same biological needs and the same kind of unconscious processes no matter what situations they find themselves in. Scholars would prefer to approach mythic similarity in terms of diffusion from one culture to another. Whatever the cause of the similarity, there is still much we can learn about our own mythic structure and our religious self by studying the mythic themes common to the world’s religious traditions.

C.G. Jung: Individuation and Wholeness

The language I used in Chapter One to explain the spiritual journey from the empirical self (the center of our consciousness) to the religious self (at the core of our unconsciousness) is based on the insights of Jung. His commentaries on the reality of myths (as well as dreams and fairy tales), which greatly influenced both Eliade and Campbell, are spread throughout the more than twenty volumes of his Collected Works. Representative of his approach to the interpretation of myths are Aion and Mysterium Conjunctionis; a short book he edited near the end of his life, Man and His Symbols, is probably more easily accessible.

Jung was fascinated that the same stories arose in India, the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, as well as in China and Japan. So many of the same symbols and mythological motifs are found in different parts of the world. In spite of differences in culture and consciousness, there is something universal in human experience. Similar, if not identical, reactions to the same basic human situations are found in people throughout history and in all parts of the globe. For him, this was the clue that their proper soil and seeding place is not in any geographical location but in humans themselves. Myths are indestructible and they have a startling likeness to one another around the planet. The same themes seem to emerge, he felt, as though something in the psyche of a race had ripened and produced a fruit that corresponded, not in its form but in its substance, with the fruit of all other races.

Jung contended that myths give expression to certain unconscious processes that produce dream images that apparently have no relation whatsoever to conscious experience but are similar in all persons. He was convinced that within every person exists the “collective unconscious,” the seedbed of images linking each person to the psychic life of human beings everywhere. Different from the personal unconscious that contains all the repressed, forgotten, subliminally perceived experiences of each individual’s life, the collective unconscious consists of the elements characteristic of the human species. It contains the whole spiritual heritage of humanity’s evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual. Biologically inherited, these images do not exist passively, but have their own energy and operate on the emotions, drives, and interests of human beings. They influence how humans behave and react to others.

Jung referred to these images that regulate the forces of the psyche as “archetypes.” The archetypes are analogous to the instincts, but operate in the psyche instead of the body. They are inherited primordial images that emerge from the unconscious to bring the human psyche some insight and awareness into the constantly repeated experiences of humanity. As universal and timeless patterns or dramas of human experience, they are manifested in the individual’s psyche in ways that are drawn from and peculiar to that person’s total experience.

Archetypes are not the same as prototypes. Prototypes are acts or events that happened at a certain time in history and continue to be effective throughout history. They are formative insofar as they change people’s lives and continue to influence subsequent generations. Really, though, they are relevant only for the culture or tradition in which they first occurred. When they are repeated, it is because they were effective at one time, and
people within that culture hope they will be so again. Archetypes, on the other hand, have universal application. It is their timelessness that people value. Archetypes show the truth of the moment as having the same structure and meaning as an absolute and eternal truth.

Nor are the archetypes the same thing as stereotypes, which are outer forces or patterns of activity. Stereotypes refer to the roles that a society or culture expects persons to perform. They are unvarying forms or patterns, fixed or conventional notions or concepts, allowing for little individuality, freedom, or critical judgment. As for archetypes, though, they are powerful and invisible forces that shape behavior and influence emotions. They are the inner forces personified by the gods, heroes, and saviors in myths, which do make individuality, freedom, and wholeness possible.

Since many archetypes repeatedly appear in the cycle of human life, we will have occasion to look at many of them in the course of this study of myths. Perhaps the most basic archetype is the self, which, as we have already seen, is the center of the total personality, which no longer coincides with the ego but with a point midway between the conscious and the unconscious. A psychological construct that served to express an unknowable essence that could not be grasped or defined, this self was called the “god within us” by Jung.

A second archetype, the hero, exemplifies the course of action needed to achieve the task of creating the self. This is spelled out at length in Campbell’s monomyth of the hero who sets out on the journey or quest for a successful life. Two other essential archetypes, the anima and the animus, are the contrasting parts of the psyche, the image of the other sex that each of us carries within. Developing this unknown side of the self is another of the tasks for each person, female or male, in the process of coming to maturity.

One last archetype, the shadow, is a composite of personal characteristics and potentialities the individual is unaware of. It usually contains inferior characteristics and weaknesses that the ego’s self-esteem will not permit it to recognize. This archetype is relevant in any discussion of evil. As with any of the archetypes, it can be interpreted either in a negative or positive fashion, depending on the context in which the ego experiences it.

The archetypes lead the way in each person’s spiritual development, playing an important role in the journey toward wholeness. When a person knows which gods, heroes, and saviors are dominant forces within, he or she can acquire self-knowledge about the strength of certain instincts, about priorities and abilities, and about the possibilities of finding personal meaning through choices that others might not encourage. The archetypes in myths are worthy of our attention because they help bring meaning to the facts of ordinary life. Transpersonal and transcultural, they speak directly to the perennial mysteries of life—birth, fear, hope, love, suffering, death—as they are experienced by each person. The archetypes in myths provide structures of consciousness through which the entire human situation can be appropriated. They can give new depth and meaning to each human life, insofar as we become conscious of them and consent to their action in us.

The spiritual development of the individual, as it is achieved through recognizing and appropriating the archetypes, leads to the reconciliation of the different, polarized aspects of the personality. To this process of reconciliation, Jung gave the name individuation, which for him is the future goal toward which humans strive, for the most part, unconsciously. Myths help make this striving conscious. They are the doorways to wonder, the passageways to the experience of the numinous. Arising out of permanent and universal elements of our human spirit, myths transmit signals to our psyches from the collective unconscious. They provide the clues for potential development, for the self’s possibilities with respect to the future. When they become alive and enable individuals to make continual contact with their inner selves, myths have great power to vivify persons and bring them to wholeness.

Awareness of and consent to the archetypal elements in myths thus help persons appropriate the elements of the collective unconscious. These elements are constellated in polar, binary groups—Eros and Thanatos, good and evil, man and woman, love and hate, order and chaos, Yin and Yang—which serve to distort the totality. Though the totality of human life consists of both sides, we lean toward one pole or the other. We are either male or female, young or old. We, therefore, need myths which help us attend to both poles without neglecting either one. Through the archetypes, the myths rehearse for us our limitations,
our undeveloped human elements. Through them we enlarge our vision and embrace the totality of what it is to be human. We discover our self-enhanced, enriched, supported, and magnified. Through stories and rituals of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, and so forth, myths incorporate our individual life-cycles and life-deeds into a larger whole. This is a healing process moving toward that wholeness in which we recognize that we are one with the universe.

Criticism of Jung’s thought, as with Campbell’s, centers around the hypothetical nature of his concepts. They are not clearly defined, nor are they based on hard empirical evidence. He presents the archetypes and the collective unconscious as universals in such a way as to make them immune from psychological or sociological analysis. His suggestion that certain behaviors are appropriate and necessary for all individuals if they are to achieve individuation is derived from non-scientific generalizations. Just to give one example, his archetype of the anima seems to have resulted from forcing a mirror image where there is none, from deducing its presence in women solely on a conclusion from his hypothesis that the anima is an essential feminine component in the masculine psyche.

Admittedly, there are risks involved in utilizing someone else’s concepts, especially if we remove them from their original context (in Jung’s case, analytical psychology) and start from different assumptions. Still, Jung’s system is very useful as a way of teasing the fragments of life into a vision of wholeness. His language of individuation, collective unconscious, and archetypes has been a welcome tool for understanding and interpreting myths and for describing the development of the spiralling, religious self. His insistence that it is impossible to achieve an authentic personal identity if we are forced to discard the encounter with the numinous as unscientific nonsense is a powerful stimulus to self-development.

The Value of Myths

Myths from different cultures and different times in human history have provided different points of view and different stories about the meaning and outcome of life. Since humans all share basic experiences, myths often contain the same or similar motifs, modified and elaborated. They confront us in the telling, and we can learn something about ourselves in listening to them. The whole pattern of our lives and thoughts is symbolized in a few recurring themes. Myths are the food that feed our sense of identity, often leading us to exclaim, “Aha, that’s my story too.” By evoking the gods, heroes, and saviors that exist as perpetually incarnate in ourselves, myths help us see our purpose from the vantage of the religious self, the full and eternal significance of our humanity appears. We are acting out not mere piddling affairs of everyday life, but the great archetypal situations. Myths enable us to see our identity and our destiny in relation to the unseen world — God, Dharma, Tao, Nirvana — and give us an added impulse, a sparkle to our faith, our feelings, and our dignity.

Even though myths contain similar motifs, their interpretation cannot be reduced to illustrating some simple truism. There is no way of interpreting myths that solves all the problems they raise, and no two interpretations leave all the same problems unsolved. Myths bear a meaning and a permanence that resist definitive interpretation. The three approaches to the interpretation of myth that we have glanced at in this chapter are all similar in approach, but their differences do shed new insights on each other. Eliade’s approach is more retrospective; Campbell’s is more oriented to the present; and Jung’s is more teleological. Taken together, they help us understand better the gods in our past, the heroes in our present, and the saviors in our future.

These three approaches to myth, taken from so many other possible approaches, stress more than others that when we enter the realm of myth, we are already in the “eternal now,” as much as we will ever be in some imagined heaven later on. Myths, according to their interpretations, help us live fully in the present time, making grand connections with our future and our past. They help us “overcome time” by linking us with the past and orienting us to the future. They tell us not what did take place, but rather they point to those universal events that always do and will take place. Myths tell us of those events that can focus our impressions of human life, rather than leaving them loose and disorganized. They transform life from a wearying succession of isolated events into a passion for meaning.

Though myths of different religious traditions and cultures deal with the perennial themes of shared human experience, they
offer different paradigms and idiosyncratic metaphors. The religious traditions offer their own integrated system for understanding all the parts of reality as a whole. And that is precisely the attraction of studying the myths of the various religious traditions. To the extent myths are dissimilar, they introduce us to something new, unexpected, unpredictable. To the extent they are similar, they help us find points of contact with our own myths. They are dissimilar enough that we can never complain of boredom; they are similar enough that we can find the overarching patterns.

The viability of the myths of other religions depends on their applicability to peculiar conditions of history and environment rather than on the extent that we find them useful or entertaining. These stories merit our understanding as well as our admiration, for they can tell us truths about ourselves as well. The joy and fun in studying these myths is not in taking them literally, for this would turn them into obstacles of meaning rather than conveyors of it. Taken literally, the myths would describe a world removed from and irrelevant to our own.

If we study them precisely as myths, we let their power become conscious. They can stretch our minds and imagination, opening up new paths for further exploration of the nature of the religious self. Myths have the power to transform us when we appreciate them for what they are, rather than getting bogged down in details about their source, their variants, their translations, their claim to be taken literally. They can move us beyond our limited horizons of experience by their power of disclosure. Studying them in their variations and in their various interpretations, we can integrate our life experiences into a totality and can respond to the pull of the religious self at our core.

**Review Questions**

1. Describe some ways the word “myth” is misused and misunderstood in everyday speech today.
2. How do myths help humans on their quest for the religious self?
3. In what ways do myths differ from religious doctrines?
4. What does Eliade mean when he suggests that the fundamental characteristic of religion is the “nostalgia for Paradise?”
5. What does Eliade mean when he suggests that myths are sacred, exemplary, and significant?
6. Explain the four functions that Campbell assigns to myths.
7. What does Jung mean by the “collective unconscious?” What are archetypes?
8. What does Jung mean by the process of individuation?

**Discussion Starters**

1. “The occupational hazard of mythologists is a Faustian drive to round up all the myths of the world in a single place and sprinkle scientific salt on their tales.” (Wendy O’Flaherty)
2. “Myths are maps, and myth is a symbolism, and for this reason myths are not to be taken literally. It is rather that when the dust falls from before our eyes, human beings are themselves the gods and demons, acting out, not the piddling business of worldly life, but the great archetypal situations and dramas of the myths. The gods are the archetypes, but they exist as perpetually incarnate in ourselves.” (Alan Watts)
3. “In dealing with symbols and myths from far away, we are really conversing with ourselves—with a part of ourselves, however, which is as unfamiliar to our conscious being as the interior of the earth to the students of geology. Hence the mythical traditions provide us with a sort of map for exploring and ascertaining the contents of our own inner being to which we consciously feel only scantily related.” (Heinrich Zimmer)
4. “Myths permit us to examine our place in the world by comparing it to a shared idea. Myths are shared fantasies that form the tie that binds the individual to other members of his group. Such myths help to ward off feelings of isolation, guilt, anxiety, and purposelessness.” (Bruno Bettelheim)
 CHAPTER FIVE

TRICKSTERS

Religious traditions tell creation myths to bring a sense of order to life and to provide a pattern of orientation in space and time. These myths also describe the separation between Absolute Reality and humans, perhaps due to a process of evolution into higher consciousness or a devolution from some pristine state. We are now going to consider a third element often found in creation myths: the helper in the process of creation commonly called the culture hero or trickster.

This mythic figure in most ancient form serves as a link between the heavens and earth, a channel to the gods. He bestows on humans gifts of their material and spiritual heritage and makes them aware of their godlike knowledge and their responsibilities to civilization. As cultures become more sophisticated, the trickster’s role undergoes a transformation. No longer is he pictured as one who helped shape creation and furnish order; on the contrary, he comes to stand for the principle of disorder, irrationality, and arbitrariness. This second form is familiar to us: the trickster as serpent, as spoiler, who plays a variety of mean tricks on the world, and thus introduces disorder.

What the trickster is to myths, the clown is to religious rituals. We will see that clowns, especially at carnival time, help provide us with a period of release from rules and obligations of civilized society. By their fun, recklessness, and loosening up of proprieties, they provide feelings of relief and a general relaxation from everyday obligations. By highlighting the contrast between the realm of orderly belief and that of chaotic forces, they show the sense of relativity that clings to all of life and they help revitalize society by calling it to higher truths.

Tricksters and clowns bring out our utopian urge, our desire to live where we are all equals and where there are no social restraints. At the same time, they show the very need for rules, boundaries, and laws in human societies. Tricksters and clowns make it easier for us to live with uncertainty, to be resilient when we encounter difficulties in our plans, to consent to the arbitrary in life, and to admit our own self-insufficiency. They help us make contact with the numinous, integrate the demonic, and assent to the mystery of the universe which forever eludes and surprises us.

MAUI-OF-A-THOUSAND-TRICKS

Mauiof-a-thousand-tricks performed many exploits that are still told by Oceanic peoples. Perhaps the most famous story, and the one told with the most variations, describes his theft of fire. In the Hawaiian version, Maui and his brothers see a fire burning on shore while they are out fishing. They try to slip ashore unnoticed to capture this fire, but the birds who made the fire are alarmed, put it out, and fly away to hide. After several unsuccessful attempts to surprise them, Maui hides on shore and sends his brothers back out in the canoe, hoping to fool the birds. They refuse to rebuild the fire, for they perceive that one of Maui’s brothers is missing from the boat. At last Maui hits upon a stratagem. He and his brothers set up a dummy in the canoe. Then he remains ashore while the brothers put out to sea again. The birds are deceived this time and build their fire. Maui seizes the moment to grab one of them. He threatens to kill the bird unless it divulges the secret of how to make a fire. At the peril of its life, the bird tells him the correct sorts of wood to use, and thus the mystery of fire is learned.
Another myth of the secret of fire was even more widespread. Maui, the much-loved independent child, always full of mischief and able to trick and deceive his elders, usually without hurting them, visits the underworld where he meets with his grandmother, the owner and guardian of fire. When he begs her for a gift, she gives him one of her fingers in which the igneous element is concealed. Thanking her, he wanders out of sight and quenches the fire in a stream and returns for more. She gives him another finger, which he also extinguishes, and in this fashion he obtains all her fingers and toes, except the last. Just what happens next varies according to the storyteller. In one version, his grandmother, angry now, sets the world afire. Maui has to enlist the forces of rain, snow, and hail to save it. Only with a great struggle does he succeed in putting out the conflagration, saving the world from total destruction. In another version, the fire-goddess throws the last of fire into the trees. Since that time these trees have preserved the seed of fire, which can be called forth by friction. In a third version, Maui succeeds in bringing the fire back to earth by himself after he has stolen it. But since the fire is a good servant and a bad master, it burns down many houses before it is tamed as people learn to be more careful.

There are dozens of stories about Maui’s exploits in helping to shape and transform the world. In old days, the sun moved irregularly and traversed the world at speeds much faster than now. The people didn’t have enough time to mend their nets or finish their other work because night fell too soon. The sun had to be brought closer to the earth so that it might more quickly heat the stones that the people used in cooking their food. So Maui determined to harness the sun. He resolved to cut off the legs of the sun so that it could not travel too fast. Maui’s mother presented him with a magic club that would aid him in this. As the sun came up out of the underworld, Maui noosed its legs one after the other and tied the ropes to great trees. The sun could not get away, and Maui gave it a tremendous beating with his magic weapon. To save its life, the sun begged for mercy. It had been beaten so badly that it was unable to travel as fast as before. Still, Maui released the sun from its bonds only after it promised to go more slowly from that time on.

Maui pulled the land out of the sea with his magic fishhook. His brothers ignored his caution not to turn back to look at what they were pulling, and when they did, their line broke, and the mass of land fractured into the group of islands we find in the Pacific today. In another exploit, he raised the heavens to their present height in the sky. Before this time, the heavens had been held up by plants and trees, which owe their flat leaves to the pressure exerted on them. His greatest exploit, however, was one in which he was not successful: his attempt to secure immortality for humans. He wanted to bring to life those who had died. He determined that the way to do this would be for him to be reborn, and with this in view he tried to reenter his mother’s womb. His mother is described as mother earth or as a volcano. Her eyes are bright red, her teeth as sharp and hard as pieces of glass, her hair like the tangles of long seaweed, and her mouth like that of a barracuda. He started the process of reentry, but the chatter of some nearby birds disturbed the mother. His head was crushed by her startled movement. Maui was killed just as the victory over the realm of death was all but gained. Thus there was to be no rebirth for humans.

The cycle of myths about the mischievous deeds of Maui tell us about a graceless creature, much beloved because he reflected the common human frustration with the rules of everyday conduct. A capricious and lovable fool, he broke every taboo ever known, but was always forgiven in the end for his thefts and lecheries. He was wrong to do what he did, but his unconventional actions—especially the gift of fire—had the most rewarding consequences for the human race.

Maui’s exploits are reminiscent of Prometheus, the Greek Titan who stole fire from the gods to bring to humankind. Prometheus was a paradoxical character, as wise and kind as a god, but still less than a god. Manifesting a native sympathy for law and order, Prometheus had originally espoused the cause of Zeus. But when Zeus found people hopelessly faulty and planned to create a new race in their place, Prometheus could no longer maintain his allegiance. He broke with Zeus and defiantly became the sponsor of the human cause. Since Zeus had deliberately withheld the gift of fire from humans, Prometheus, moved with pity, stole the fire from the hearth of Zeus (or from the fiery chariot of the sun, or from the workshop of Hephaistos, depending on the version) and gave it to humankind. Through this theft,
humans were enabled to begin life anew and, little by little, to evolve the arts and crafts.

But Prometheus paid the penalty for stealing fire. Zeus had him chained to a barren rock at the edge of space and time and appointed an eagle to gnaw at his liver, consuming each day what had been restored during the previous night. His fate was somehow appropriate. He loved humans very much and became involved in their lives. Thus he was destined to remain just out of their reach. Still, his spirit was not dimmed, for he was armed and comforted with the "foreknowledge" (as his name itself implies) that someday he would be released and that Zeus would be dethroned. In due time, he knew, Hercules would kill the eagle and break his shackles.

Myths about the theft of fire could be multiplied, but Maui’s and Prometheus’s exploits are sufficient to show the central place of the culture hero and the trickster in furthering creation. Fire is a most fortuitous gift for humankind. For example, the Greeks regarded all fire as originally divine, as the strongest and most subtle force of nature, and a most potent factor in the advance of humanity. Of course, we understand fire today as combustion, and we put it in the dictionary rather than in mythology. Still, we read these stories and ask ourselves, ‘What’s it all about?’ And the way we use archetypal characters such as Maui and Prometheus tells us something about ourselves in our relationship to the Absolute Reality and to the cosmos.

Maui and Prometheus are both culture heroes and tricksters. They are both a link between heaven and earth, a channel to the gods. Their stories are about the interaction of the gods and humans. Fire was an appropriate gift to bring, since it has always been associated with the divine. Some felt that in discovering fire, humankind could rekindle the power of the sungod himself. Fire then, like the gods, was both feared and desired. As the gods’ secret, it could be both comforting and terrifying. Maui and Prometheus gave humankind a gift to reduce the power that fate and chance have over humans, who now have the power to determine their own destiny. Maui and Prometheus thus lead them out of an ignorant, innocent state, and give them godlike knowledge and an awareness of the responsibilities of civilization.

Types of Tricksters

To refer to Maui and Prometheus as culture heroes and tricksters is not quite accurate. The culture hero and the trickster really represent two quite distinct eras in the development of myths. Within the void or chaos, which is nearly always the starting point of creation myths, were contained the principles that would eventually be distinguishable as opposites, differentiating between persons and things. Looking at this vast horizon of "no meaning," the early religious traditions attempted to provide some clue to the order that must be there. They devised myths to explain how the world and its inhabitants came to be. They treated basic elements, such as fire and water, not just as accidental aspects of life, but rather as important natural forces established at the beginning. Their myths provided clues about the source of evil, the separation from the Absolute Reality, and usually promised some kind of Golden Age where conflict and strife would end. The beginning of life, its present condition, and its fulfillment were all brought together in their stories.

The myths looked for the relationship between people and the world, for harmony within the totality of each person’s environment. They told of the roles and regulations that made their lives together coherent instead of chaotic and deadly. Their social arrangements were made intelligible by attributing them to the gods. The myths of the early traditions helped to give order and structure to their world and brought meaning and purpose to life. In their attempt to define and structure their world, they provided themselves with an appreciation and understanding of areas outside human control that affected their well being and destiny. They tried to discover a universal order that transcended all the separate parts of reality, to find some all-encompassing unity. They attempted to order their world by finding the source of unity that lies beyond the complexities, changes, and limits of this world.

In describing the process of creation, the cosmogonic myths serve primarily to bring order out of the chaos the people found all around them. In their myths of the formation of the cosmos and of the first humans, they somehow involved the all-encompassing unity that brings order to their universe. This unity, this Absolute Reality, was often directly involved in the origin of particular components of the world: the sun and the moon,
animals, and humans. In many creation myths, however, the Absolute Reality plays only an obscure part. In some myths its role is relatively passive, and in others it doesn’t appear at all. Once the primary creation has occurred, much of the work of shaping, assisting, and furnishing creation is attributed to another figure. This figure is the culture hero, a powerful figure that almost totally replaces the Supreme Being as the creator.

In his original significance, the culture hero transforms the world after its creation or assists the Absolute Reality in the act of creation. He may dive to the bottom of the ocean to bring up the first bits of earth, or he may put salmon in the rivers, or stars in the sky in a non-geometric pattern, or make rivers flow in one direction or the other. He changes the shape of the landscape — putting waterfalls here and hills there — and divides living being into animals and humans. In a word, he is the originator of many of the present conditions of nature.

This figure is called the culture hero, not because of what he does in shaping the cosmos, but because of the boons he brings to humans. He is the bringer of culture and the source of uniquely human institutions, such as agriculture, or language, or the technique of brewing beer. He bestows on humans their material and spiritual heritage, their arts and crafts, their laws and ceremonies. He is the mythical link between the original sacred realm in which time and space were first formed, and the mundane secular world of ordinary human life. From this “other” world he steals daylight, or the sun, or water as gifts for human-kind. Typically he is the bringer of fire, that energy that turns the raw into the cooked, and rocks into metal. He is a monster slayer, helping rid the people of giant cannibals and other monstrosities. He is the agent of change, the transformer. He sets free humans who have been enclosed in a cave or imprisoned by monsters. He is the archetype of the hero, the giver of all great boons, the teacher of humanity.

As the creation myths became more and more complicated and as rituals were developed to bring some institutionalization and stability to the culture, it became obvious that no stories of a culture hero could adequately capture and explain the world sufficiently in terms of human knowledge. In trying to bring order to their world, the religious traditions unknowingly pointed to the very need for disorder. What this meant for the culture hero was that, in time, he came to be seen in conflict with the creator.

Perhaps the culture hero was seen to have a twin. Prometheus is one example, one bringing good and the other evil, one productive and the other destructive. Prometheus’ dull-witted brother, Epimetheus — “afterthought” — dispensed various qualities to animals such as swiftness, courage, and the like. He left nothing for humankind. So Prometheus gave them an upright posture like the gods, enabling them to survive.

But most often the culture hero is pictured as being in enmity with the creator. He degenerates into a symbol of what is evil and distorted in existence — a far cry from his earlier role as bestower of a cultural and spiritual heritage. He becomes responsible for inflicting misfortunes on humans, sometimes, it appears, intentionally. In his futile competition with the supreme being, he came to represent the somewhat capricious, dangerous, malevolent aspect of the supernatural.

The serpent in Genesis 2-3 has much in common with this degenerated culture hero. Tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit with the promise of godlikeness, he is responsible for destroying the perfectly harmonious relationship between the creator god and the first humans. Through him, death comes into the world, women suffer in childbirth, and men carry their bread by the sweat of their brow. Pandora, too, shares some of these characteristics. Her box marks the end of the Golden Age. Like the serpent, she is responsible for the destruction of sacred time and the human idyllic state. Through her, mundane time is initiated, and along with it, disease, labor, and death.

Evil and disorder could not be swept away as myths looked to find total order in the universe. The devilish individual, the spoiler who played a variety of mean tricks on the world, became more and more prevalent. Far from the original culture hero who displayed some of the more ideal characteristics of the supreme being, this irreverent and unpredictable being displayed ludicrous weakness, great deficiencies, and clumsiness in his competition with the divine being. And yet, he is still portrayed as a wonderfully comic figure, who knows nothing and yet everything, both manlike and animal-like. He epitomizes the spirit of disorder and is the enemy of boundaries and definitions. He is ambiguous, arbitrary and capricious. The deeds attributed to him, the activities he is supposed to have set in motion, are not the result of some master plan or carefully calculated purpose or unfolding cosmic destiny. They are disagreeable and
unintelligible events, due to his weakness and fumbling, or they are the result of chance events, accidents, and mistakes. His stories personify our human inability to give reasons for things that settle once and for all why there is something rather than nothing, or why this particular thing rather than another, or why there is an incredible variety of things.

In the myths of religious traditions, the culture-hero-become-trickster is unmistakable, but his actions vary according to the cultural context. As a trickster, the comic side comes through, rather than the devilish. He is the image of the actual conditions of human life.

In primitive religions such as the North American Indian traditions, the trickster is variously Raven, Coyote, Great Hare, Old Man, or The Foolish One. He is a spider, a mink, a bluejay, a bat. Sometimes humanized and ennobled, the figure is usually the earthy, greedy, sensual child-animal who believes everything, tries everything, and finds nothing unnatural. A vagabond, erratic in purpose, he is exposed to all kinds of tortures. He survives by his own cunning and prowess. With his power as shape shifter, he has the capacity to turn himself into a variety of forms (perhaps becoming a bird, or invisible) to escape punishment for his tricks, sly jokes, or malicious pranks. He always manages to survive, to pick up the pieces and move on to another picturesque adventure. Thrown into existence, he seems doomed to learn through trial and error. He takes life as it comes, in all innocence, and never seems to learn from his experiences.

His left hand doesn’t know what his right hand is doing. He is sly and stupid at once, with a price of idiocy about him. He is woman-chasing, gluttonous, scurrilous, playful—knowing nothing of good or evil. Wandering from one adventure to another, he is an itinerant hero with no clear place or clearly defined social identity. He fends for himself in a world of competing forces, with no foreknowledge of how best to proceed. He seems to hover between worlds, dwelling in a world of his own, a world without boundaries. Though he is easily outwitted, he is never entirely defeated or dispirited. He possesses a certain resiliency, taking the bounces as they come. Getting in and out of tight spots, continually bungling or being hoodwinked, he gropes and grasps his way along, wresting survival from nature.

In the historic religions, there does not seem to be much room for the primitive form of the culture hero or trickster. Still, he is always present under some guise. In Hinduism, for example, the aspect that quickly sticks out is that of the change and unpredictability of the great Shiva. Shiva creates and destroys, gives gifts and destroys evil forces. Shiva evokes images of a wild dancer with serpent hair, accompanied by a retinue of ghosts. His consort is the grim Kali with her bulging eyes and tongue hanging out to lap the blood of her victims.

In Judaism, the trickster element is not so much the serpent, which is often called the Devil and confused with Satan; rather, it is the element of deception, found in many of the family stories in Genesis. The frequency with which the trickster role is enacted suggests that deception was socially legitimized behavior available to both men and women within the social structure. Thus, Jacob tricks his father Isaac, and Rachel tricks her wily father Laban; Abraham tricks the pharaoh, and Lot’s daughters trick their father. In Christianity, the trickster’s arbitrariness is the theme of the song Mary sings in Luke’s infancy narrative. The priest will be scattered, and the humble shall be exalted. Also, Jesus performs in the manner of the culture hero who creates good things for humankind from his own deprivations. He suffers and, in dying, gives a share of his life.

Clowns and Carnivals

The culture hero and trickster developed in proportion to how much order and purpose the various religious traditions attempted to bring into their teachings, rituals, and myths. They welled up in the unconscious as a sign of the inherent human repugnance against putting too much order in life and a sign of the natural rebellion against a life that is totally predictable or one-dimensional. They are the mythical vehicle for persons to come to terms with the arbitrariness of life without any elaborate attempt at rationalization. Culture heroes and tricksters are a way of underlining that the whole of a culture is an artifact whose structure is logically arbitrary: It could have been otherwise. Not only is the non-rational a part of life, but the very fact that we have chosen one lifestyle and world view rather than another is itself non-rational and arbitrary.
Culture heroes and tricksters are paradoxical. They bring the gifts of civilization, and yet they break every taboo and shatter every moral boundary that civilization sets up. While bearing the gift of fire, and with it, reason and enlightenment, they represent the principles of inevitable chaos, disorder, and the irrational. More than symbolizing human complaints and despair over the basic needs and difficulties of life or human attempts to rationalize mysteries, the culture hero and trickster are reminders of the original unity of humans with Absolute Reality. They conjure up images of the separation from the original oneness and recall human hopes for some kind of perfect world other than the one we know and experience every day. They serve as a release from the pressure of having to find a reason for everything in much the same manner as many today try to outwit evil forces, encourage good fortune, and obtain guidance by a miscellaneous of techniques, such as reading tea leaves or diligently consulting the daily horoscope or engaging in State lotteries.

Rituals in many religious traditions also celebrated the nostalgia for paradise and provided a sacred period of release from the roles and obligations that came with civilized society. These rituals, with clowns and other masked figures playing the key role, were associated with springtime and harvest rituals, where the joy of life was paramount and the renewal of life through food and fertility were celebrated. Trying to recapture and reinvigorate a Golden Age, a time or condition in which limitation and renunciation did not exist, the people permitted debaucheries of every kind and transgressions of what, at other times, were the most sacred sanctions. This festival was a time of parenthood, a holiday period in which nightmare images sprang to life and released a breath of madness. The mechanisms for this uninhibited world of carnival were similar everywhere — in the Greek Dionysian orgies, the festival of the Saturnalia in Rome, the Feast of Fools in France, and many other comparable rites of reversal.

In the Revels of Dionysius, the ancient Greeks stalked the alleys and squares of Athens in honor of the god of wine, madness, and rebirth. This ritual centered around the mystic experience of death and rebirth associated with the springtime regeneration of the earth. Masked and shrouded in animal skins, a whirling procession of men in women’s garb blended enthusiasm, merrymaking, violence, eroticism, and the ridiculous into a profound drama of death and rebirth. Groups of women streamed out of Athens in disguises and roamed the mountains for several days, tearing to pieces with indescribable savagery any living animals they caught. These festivities centered on the god Dionysius who, born with goat’s horns, brought up as a girl, and raised on honey, was driven mad by the goddess Hera and wandered over the world with a wild mob of satyrs, bringing people the gift of wine and leaving a trail of murder and insanity in his wake.

These gruesome activities were softened when they were translated to Rome. They became the rituals of the Saturnalia, a festival celebrated at the winter solstice. Rather than destructiveness and unbridled license, the emphasis shifted to fun and reckless spirits and a general loosening up of proprieties. There was a humorous reversal of roles, for example, where slaves were served by their masters (a practice still evoked on Boxing Day in England and in Sadie Hawkins dances). The annual feast commemorated the reign of Cronus (or Saturn), a time of release from everyday obligations (as some still do on Saturn’s Day, Saturday). It was a momentary return to a Golden Age when all persons were equal and the good things of life were held in common. It was a time of happy anarchy, a time when no war could be begun or criminals be punished (for what was war and who were criminals in the Golden Age?).

Early Christianity also had ritual ceremonies that abrogated rule and provided for a reversal of socially accepted roles and values. The old pagan festivals were again transformed. Saturnalia became Carnival (carne vale means “Farewell to the flesh”) and was moved to the days preceding the Lenten period of austerity. This ritual period grew wilder, madder, and more menacing with the centuries, culminating in the medieval Feast of Fools and Feast of Asses.

The Feast of Fools was an obscene and blasphemous burlesque of the ceremonies of the church. A ritual of undisciplined wildness, unrestrained wantonness, and irresponsibility, it was a mockery of the ecclesiastical structure. The priests who took part elected a Pope of Fools and appeared at the liturgy either wearing masks or dressed as women. While the priest celebrated Mass, the people danced, played dice, and sang indecent songs. At the singing of the Office for the Feast, the priests and clerics
again donned monstrous masks and danced in the choir. They
incensed the congregation with stinking smoke from the soles
of old shoes and roused the laughter of bystanders with indec-
cent gestures. In the later Feast of Asses, an ass, or a man
wearing the mask-head of an ass, was introduced into the sanctuary
during Mass. The Song of the Asses was sung, accompanied
with the congregation chanting "hee haw, hee haw." At the end of
the Mass, the celebrant, instead of singing "Go, the Mass
is ended," brayed three times, and the congregation, instead of
responding "Thanks be to God," also brayed three times.

The more ridiculous the ritual, the greater the enthusiasm
with which it was celebrated. Such rituals were eventually
banned, but only over the course of centuries. Even then, many
of the practices were retained in profane theatricals. Indeed,
many of these elements, stripped of their ritual context, still sur-
vive today. April Fool's Day with its pranks, and New Year's
Eve with its paper hats and charades are only pale reminders
of the medieval Carnival. But the giants on stilts with hideous
grinning masks, crudely fashioned dragons and misshapen beasts,
horses trampling on crowds, men painted up as women and
women swaggering in men's clothing, and the general drunken
reveling that occur during Carnival time in New Orleans and
Rio and during Fasching season in Germany are direct descen-
dants of these medieval rituals.

Ritual clowns still survive today, in particular, among many
of the North American Indian tribes. Playing out their hilarious
activities during the public performances of annual festivities,
these clowns perform an important ceremonial role. Their bu-
foonery and frivolous pranks help ease the pressure brought on
by the tense and solemn atmosphere during the sacred cer-
emonies. Early observers were slow to recognize the importance
of the clowns' religious role, probably because their sensibilities
were threatened by the shocking behavior and because they felt
such conduct had no place in civilized society. They did not
realize that it was precisely because of their deviances from the
norms of social behavior that the clowns stimulated feelings of
relief and malicious joy among the people.

The ritual clowns go by different names in the various North
American religious traditions, names such as Funny Men, False
Faces, Fool Dancers, or Contraries. Their humor often centers
on gluttony. They are willing to do anything for something to
eat, and they eat constantly throughout the days of ceremony,
consuming amazing quantities. Their fare is often dirt, live mice,
sticks, stones, or whatever is considered offensive and defiling.
Their sexuality is exaggerated. They enact skits portraying
aspects of human sexuality, or they appear nude and engage in
explicit sexual activities, even in the most sacred places during
public ceremonies. Their antics are often done expressly to annoy
spectators. They might smear mud or excrement over their bodies
or drink urine and pour it on one another. They might drop
live coals or ashes on people, scoop handfuls of cinders and spray
everyone in sight, or plunge their hands into boiling water to
demonstrate their power. Sometimes the clowns will act in a
contrary fashion. They might reverse the world of language by
talking backwards and saying no when they mean yes, or they
might ride backwards on a horse, put their boots on the wrong
feet, or wear heavy clothing in summer.

Social Reversal and Release

Maui and Prometheus were helpers in the process of creation,
bringing to humans the gift of fire, a symbol of enlightenment
and civilization. With the beginnings of civilization, life
became more complicated and sophisticated. The Golden Age,
a time of simplicity and innocence, faded away. People lost their
close union with the creator, the Absolute Reality, and with it
their sense of harmony and balance with the world and with each
other. Chaos dominated, and they had to introduce more and
more order, rules, and regulations into their society for things
to run smoothly. In the attempt to dispel disorder, they almost
shut out an essential part of their lives. Taboos became rigid;
guilt and embarrassment accompanied their human clumsiness;
and the arbitrary and unpredictable had no legitimacy.

The tricksters, clowns, and carnivals came along with the
phenomenon of cultured societies. The more primitive groups
had no need for an outlet against too much regimentation and
reason, for the return to chaos was something that loomed over
them at every hour. In cultured societies, however, these figures
developed as social outlets for humans to protest against the
obligations connected with their social order. The movement
from culture hero to clown was the movement from ethical law-
maker to ethical lawbreaker.
With their excessive behavior, the tricksters and clowns are earthy disruptive merrymakers who help elicit an ambivalent laughter from the members of cultures and religious traditions. They stimulate feelings of relief and malicious joy in a ritual context because of their many deviances from the norms of social behavior. They know the taboos and can break them with impunity. Though their function includes entertainment and comic relief, it is much more profound than merely providing a spirit of play in a world of seriousness. Their role is essential and full of religious significance. In poking fun at the establishment, whether at police officers, priests, or politicians (as the comedians — our modern tricksters — do very well), they might appear to weaken the very fabric of society, but actually they are revitalizing it by calling attention to higher truths.

During the 1968 student riots in Paris, someone had scribbled across one of the large advertising signs that line the subway walls: “Attention all anarchists. There will be an organizational meeting next Monday night at 7:30 in the foyer of the Sorbonne.” Paradoxical as it was, the students felt that they needed to organize, even in the very act of trying to bring down the organization. In their protest against regulations that are concomitant with living in a civilized society, they institutionalized their protest against that institutionalization. This was a mythic act worthy of tricksters and clowns.

As soon as the conditions of stability for living in a civilized society become oppressive, then the need for a compensating period, a time of anarchy and license, however brief, becomes manifest. Most societies recognize this need and channel it, containing it within the specified dates of their local calendar. We see this, for example, in the revelry of Halloween, and Mardi Gras, and New Year’s Eve, and even in the pageantry of the Superbowl. Tricksters and clowns manifest the human desire and human struggle to be free of rules, to be unbound and without limitations. They personify a utopian urge to return to a time prior to obligations, a desire to be unconfined, even while admitting that we have to live by society’s rules if we are to escape chaos. Ironically, they offer relief from too much order, and relief from too much freedom. They question our established ways and our ability to question.

Tricksters and clowns, as well as our modern comedians and political cartoonists, are profaners, offering an ironic and essential contrast between the realm of orderly belief (with its tendency toward the one-dimensional, the reliable, the dependable), and the realm of chaotic forces (with its celebration of ambiguity and randomness). They act as an officially sanctioned exception clause, keeping society from taking itself with ultimate seriousness. They profane the ideologies and myths of society and balance excessive order by conveying a sense of the relativity that clings to all of life.

In their revelry and mock ridicule, the tricksters and clowns turn the distinctions of rank and status upside down. They deflate the pompous, skewer the self-righteous, and chide the hypocritical. They subject authority figures and ceremonial regulations to wild burlesque, enabling people to give way to great outbursts of pent-up repression. They temporarily turn society inside out with the shrewdly permitted license of the holiday of the vacation period. Striking a blow against law and order, they reach out for a state of pure freedom, a return to the time prior to repressive laws and other civilizing influences. They reverse social roles and social norms in the extravagant joy of overthrowing those restraints and inhibitions that are the price for civilization. The world becomes, for the moment, a place where discrepancies disappear and all become equal. The joy of the beginning, which has been irrevocably lost from the earth, is made present for the moment. In the dissolution of the stiffened traditional order, there is a reactivation of the boundless power and creativity of the beginning.

The real irony, though, is that by doing the forbidden, by representing the forces of chaos and disorder, the tricksters and clowns are thereby creating a meaningful world. By openly flaunting social customs and compromising cultural values, they are actually revealing the very need of the boundaries that give order. By flaunting cultural restraints, they make people aware of their need for restraints. They encourage assent to the regulations of society by negative example. Their actions discourage actions by exposing them. They reinforce the status quo in the act of providing temporary relief from it. They introduce and define elements of a culture’s world view in the act of defining them. Their “civil disobedience” presupposes authentic civil obedience and recognizes the authority and office both of the state and the religious tradition as legitimate but to be taken with provisional, rather than ultimate, seriousness.
Laughing at Ourselves

Maui and Prometheus and their successors, the tricksters and clowns, keep us from taking ourselves too seriously. In offering themselves as objects of laughter, they take upon themselves the imperfections of us all. They are the foil for our own insecurity. We jeer, knowing that their failures are really our own. They poke fun at our grandiose schemes by showing that some, after the fashion of the Merry Prankster, Till Eulenspiegel, and the bumbling TV detective, Columbo, will achieve through their bungling and stupidity what others fail to achieve through their best efforts. How clumsy we really are. Who of us hasn’t held the door open for someone only to have it slip out of our hands just as they are walking through it? Who hasn’t offered a box of candy to another, only to have it drop out of our hands at the worst possible moment? We cannot tame or order or control everything. The best laid plans go awry. The tricksters and clowns point to our own need for resiliency when we encounter difficulties in our plans and fail to carry them off smoothly.

The tricksters and clowns are teaching us about ourselves. Many of their purposely exaggerated actions mock those needs and drives which are distinctively human. Often glutinous or greedy to the point of destroying what they are unwilling to share, often making the same mistake repeatedly in the failure to see the obvious, they are reminding us of a childlike element in ourselves. They are saying that we are all too often too serious. 
We have forgotten how to be children. Sometimes we should have no aspirations beyond the present moment. Occasionally we have to defy the universe to live in joy, and for that moment at least to ignore any ultimate purpose in life. When children are outsmarted or act stupidly, they are not entirely defeated but spirited; they bounce back without grudge or malice, a little bruised or hungry perhaps, but also a little wiser. They don’t feel hemmed in by regulations. If the score is lopsided in their pick-up ball game, they’ll quit, choose up teams again, and start over. Children are not weighed down by misfortunes or limitations or by the apparent inequities and injustices of life. For them, life is a challenge and they make a game of it. Winning or losing — these both lead to laughter as well as to tears and dismay.

The trickster and clown enable us to embrace ourselves and each other as humans. They reaffirm our human condition and reduce life to the basics. Our requirements are simple: a good meal and restful sleep, freedom from anxiety and bodily problems, the enjoyment of sex and the laughter of children, the satisfaction of work and the pleasure of play, the conviviality of friends and internal peace.

Still, we cannot be “up” all the time. Some moments are moments of unrestrained joy; at other times we are sluggish, gloomy, grave, leaden. We are at times jovial or saturnine, moonstruck or mercurial. Recognizing our basic needs and realizing that we cannot always achieve them, we consent to a larger vision of humanity, a more inclusive acceptance of the many-sided self and other selves. In this, the world does not seem as inflexible and confining as it did before.

In the celebration of our common humanity, we find that being human is not a heavy weight that drags us down or lays a curse on us, but something potentially delightful. We are saying yes to the tricksters and clowns in ourselves, clothed in the awkward innocence of essential humanity. Not a lofty comedown from some idealized image we have of ourselves, it is a reaffirmation of our totally human condition, not as impure, or profane, or shameful, but as fundamentally good.

The trickster and clown not only give us a larger vision of our common humanity; they also bring to consciousness many of the human instincts of our undeveloped state. They provide at once a mockery of the over-heroic life and a corresponding mockery of a life that is merely natural. The tricksters, and especially the clowns in their rituals, open us up to another reality, the dimension of the numinous and the mystical. By evoking fright and terror, or by prompting laughter, they open people to experience not mediated by rational or scientific explanation. They bring the primordial, subliminal elements of our selves to the conscious level in a mythic or ritual setting.

The trickster and clown often represent behavior that is not approved by our conscious minds. The more civilized we are, the more we pretend to ignore their importance, or even their existence, usually with disastrous consequences. We have to somehow make room in our selves for the reality they evoke — the reality of demonic power, of Satan, of suffering. Rather than trying to explain away all the manifestations of the demonic (due,
we might say, to black cats, rabbit's feet, jinxes, gaffes, bad luck), the trickster and clown mythically and ritually express our need to admit and to harmonize it into our lives. They give the demonic its due, and help us integrate it rather than repress it. They represent the goblins and ghosts of Halloween night that balances with All Saints' Day; the suffering of Good Friday that balances with Easter; the fun and games of Mardi Gras that balances with the austerities of Ash Wednesday. By recognizing the demonic both in our unconscious and in the world, we admit our own self-insufficiency. We acknowledge that ultimately we have no control over the world and open our selves to help from a savior in our quest for the religious self.

Topsy-Turvy World

Admitting the demonic in ourselves, we recognize that no matter what efforts we take at shaping things into a rational, orderly, meaningful whole, life is not intelligible or predictable or just. Although we may attempt to define the significance and value of this or that aspect of life or assign causes or develop a logic of relationships, we recognize that a fundamental arbitrariness is quite transparent. No matter what stories we tell to bring purpose and order and no matter how "advanced" our technological society, we still cannot control the quirks and accidents of life. The need for balance always asserts itself. There will always be the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Some of us will live short lives, others long lives. Randomness sorts us into the intelligent and the retarded, the attractive and the unattractive.

The tricksters and the clowns help us to come to terms directly with the unpredictable. They make us accept arbitrariness as essential to life itself. The theologies and philosophies of the world's religious traditions, which define cosmic order, divine plans, historical patterns, and ultimate destinies, are all attempts to help us cope with this uncertainty. By contrast, the tricksters and clowns do not offer some well-hidden cosmic plan nor do they attempt to justify the ways of the gods to our ways. Theirs is not the language of sin and judgment, of providence and predestination, of karma and reincarnation, of the fates and the stars. They invite us, instead, to play in the rough and tumble of life, without glossing over what is not always pleasant.

The tricksters and clowns live in us all, for they represent the principle of uncertainty, and their manifestations are universal. We conjure them up when we cross our fingers, knock on wood, blow on dice, or buy dashboard saints. We acknowledge them when we admit down deep that no matter how much structure and order we give to our lives, no matter how much meaning and direction we see or think we see, no matter how successfully we believe we are making progress, our lives and our stories still manage to move in mysterious and unforeseen ways. We consent to them when we admit that no matter how much progress in science and technology we have made, we cannot bring things under control. Paradoxically, the more we bring greater predictability and security to our lives, the more we expose our selves to the unpredictable: What would nuclear winter, power blackouts, and oil tanker spills have meant to those in earlier cultures?

Order and chaos are both essential for our full selves. We can never say that a time will come when there is absolute predictability, when precise calculations will eliminate all the element of mystery. If we were to demand such absolute points of reference, then we would opt for absolute monotony. We would refuse the adventure, risk, challenge, and drama that the trickster and clown personify and completely close our selves off from, and not be free to truly laugh before, the mystery of the universe, which forever eludes and surprises us.

Consenting to the arbitrary in our lives, we are playing the game for the sake of the game. Rather than striving for a perfectionism that can infect or cramp our lifestyle, rather than being involved in cutthroat competition, we can now celebrate our common humanity. Instead of having to be experts, pursuing even our hobbies with a vengeance and treating our play and our games as a burdensome job, we say yes to the curious business of being fully human. When we realize that there are no ultimate answers, and that the thing to do is to live, we are freed from the burden and the awesome responsibility of having the last word. We are freed from the impulse to play God relative to the universe. Being human is not a curse, but potentially delightful, a "happy fault." Those who recognize and consent to the tricksters and clowns inside themselves are saying yes to all sides of their humanity and are not pretending to a divinity that they have not yet attained. They embrace themselves as they are.
Review Questions

1. Why do you think trickster myths are so prevalent in world mythologies?
2. Trace the development from culture hero to trickster.
3. What are the major characteristics of the trickster? Which of these elements do you find in yourself?
4. What are the major functions of tricksters in myths?
5. What is the relationship between tricksters and clowns?
6. Explain: By representing the forces of chaos and disorder, tricksters and clowns are creating a meaningful world.
7. Explain: Tricksters make it easier for us to live in a topsyturvy world?
8. What is the nature and purpose of the ritual of carnival?

Discussion Starters

1. “The source of unhappiness lies in man’s effort to control his destiny, thereby impeding the natural flow of spontaneous events.”
2. “I find comfort in things like earthquakes and eclipses of the moon because I have no hand in them. They relieve me of responsibility. I find comfort in fatalism and inevitability.” (James Taylor)
3. “It is always good to be distinguished by something. I ask nothing better than to be pointed out as the only one in our serious age who is not serious.” (Kierkegaard)
4. “The moment you begin to tell your stories you may find that memory is a trickster who picks and chooses scenes. What happened to you in the past has yet to be determined.”
5. “In Trickster is embodied the human struggle against the confinement felt by being bound to place, even within the obvious necessity of such definition in order to prevent chaos. In many of his adventures, Trickster permits people to experience the vicarious thrills and freedom of a utopian existence. But his folly reveals the very meaning of the boundaries that give order to human life.” (Sam Gill)
6. “In the fragment of a lost play by Aeschylus, the bisexual god Dionysus is greeted by cries of ‘Where have you come from, man-woman, what is your country? And what is that garment?’—questions which incidentally might well be addressed to a contemporary teenager. This deliberate confusion of sexes is also a part of the basic aim of Carnival which seeks, however crudely, a dissolution of the stiffened traditional order, a reversal of all accepted values, and a reactivation of the boundless power and creativity of the Beginning.” (Alan MacGlashen)
7. “For those who require clean lines, precise calculations, absolute points of reference, and clear and distinct ideas, clownish revelations may not be so amusing. But for those who are not pretenders to thrones that are not theirs or to a divinity they have not attained, or even to some superior form of humanity, the clown enables us to embrace ourselves and one another as the luminous lumps that we are.” (Conrad Hyers)
8. “In Halloween a strange alliance is formed between the innocent and the wicked, between children and witches…. Their masks inscribe the children anonymity and endow them with the powers of monsters and supernatural beings…. They purge the community by the terror of trick or treat, as if a touch of sin and evil were necessary for building community: There is always a happy fault at the heart of any religious system.” (Victor Turner)
9. What movie and TV characters today remind you of Trickster? If you could meet one of the tricksters in religious myths, which one would you choose? Why?
CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HEROIC TASK

Human lives are in every instance far more complex, elaborate, subtle, and indeterminate than any model can provide. Models can give us perspectives on our lives but not absolutely unchallengeable descriptions or prescriptions. Myths of heroes are such models, relevant for those experiences we have along with everyone else. Heroic myths provide a pattern for organizing data, a common thread for analyzing our reactions to our experiences as we pass from one stage of life to another. We are the heroes. We are Rama, or Odysseus, or Parsifal, for example. By understanding their heroic tasks or quests, we know more about what our universe looks like and our place in it.

The theme of the hero's quest is among the earliest and best developed myth-narratives formulated by religious traditions and cultures. The quest pattern is known to us all, for it is the pattern of our own experience. The hero is not only the one who acts for all of us, who stands in our place to face dangers and risks, but his quest is really a model of our own quests. In the Odyssey and Aeneid, in the struggles of Perseus and Theseus and Heracles, in Parsifal's search for the Holy Grail, we see enlarged in story form the pattern of our own experience. Again
and again, like the hero on his quest — entering the unknown, struggling with what lies there, finding something of value, and returning with it to the community — we find ourselves facing the unexpected, with its risks and opportunities. Heroic myth stories help us to create and interpret our own lives; they make us conscious of our various possibilities, both comic and tragic, and help us consent to experience them. The more we know about the hero’s quest and the more we identify with it, the more it helps us compensate for the insignificance and banality of the humdrum existence from which, in reality, very few of us can escape. Looking at the hero’s trials and participating in a life cycle greater than our own gives glamour to our own restricted quests and to the seemingly mild tests of everyday life.

Though the entire life of the hero is often considered a quest, our interest here is with the central task-struggle-journey that marks his adult life. The hero has gone through the period of withdrawal, the period of meditation and vision quest, and now he has to perform his adult task, the deed that will bring a real boon to the community. He has to prove his self with an action of universal importance in the prime of his life. He has established his origins by finding the divine destiny within the self, and now he has to act on that destiny. The quest is always toward a goal and should be distinguished from mere adventure, which may be undertaken for any number of reasons and may lead anywhere. The grave and serious nature of the undertaking contrasts with what may well be frolic in an adventure. The quest is always marked by a sense of struggle, of imminent or actual danger in which all of the hero’s will and power will be called forth in order to push on. The hero’s quest goes beyond self-fulfillment, culminating in a boon (gift) that has social and cultural value for the community as a whole.

The Ramayana

One of the most beloved myths in India and Southeast Asia is the love story of Rama and Sita found in the Ramayana. The Ramayana holds great religious significance as part of the Hindu sacred literature (which includes the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and the Mahabharata). Dating from about 200 B.C., it exists in different versions with many additions by later generations.

Rama, along with Krishna, is a human avatar, incarnation, of the god Vishnu, the “preserver of the world.” He embodies the Hindu virtues, including a sense of duty and even-mindedness. Though Rama is a savior, it is his human quest that concerns us here. During his heroic odyssey, he meets many types of people who open his eyes to the nature of things. His strange adventures — living in a hermitage, fighting a battle with demons, and losing his wife — give him the wisdom and knowledge that eventually enable him to regain his country, throne, and wife.

Rama was sent to the world to save it from Ravana and his demons, who harassed the holy hermits and kept them from offering sacrifices to the gods. Rama was the handsomest and strongest of the four sons of the king since his mother had taken more magic potion from Vishnu than the women who bore the king’s other sons. When Rama grew to manhood, he heard of Sita, who was beautiful, talented, and virtuous. Her royal father had resolved that whoever could bend a bow would have Sita for a wife, knowing that no ordinary mortal could possibly accomplish it. Rama bent the bow with such strength that the weapon snapped in two, and Sita became his wife.

The heroic crisis in Rama’s life was precipitated when his father proposed that Rama should be crowned his successor. One of the queens, however, exploited her special position to prevent his succession to the throne. Because she had been promised two boons by the king, she demanded that her son, Bharata, should be made regent and that Rama be exiled for 14 years. Though the king was sad, he had given his word and had to fulfill his promises. As a dutiful son, Rama prepared to go into exile. Claiming that a wife’s place was with her husband, Sita and Rama’s brother, Lakshmana, both insisted on accompanying him. The three left and stayed at the hermitage of a holy man. Meanwhile, Bharata refused to accept the kingdom and set out to find Rama to ask forgiveness for his mother. Rama, however, had given his word to his father and remained in exile. Bharata placed Rama’s sandals on the throne as a symbol of his right to the kingship and himself lived a hermit’s life.

A demon-maiden fell in love with Rama. Spurned by him, she sought revenge and asked her brother Ravana (the demon-king of Sri Lanka) for help. Ravana’s power was so great that it could be broken only by an alliance of men and monkey people.
He sent a demon disguised as a deer to lead Rama astray while on a hunt. When he failed to return, Lakshmana went in search of him. Meanwhile Ravana came in the form of a hermit, and when Sita showed him hospitality, he assumed his horrible form as a ten-headed demon. He proposed that she become his wife, but she poured scorn on him. He lifted her by force into his chariot to take her to his kingdom. Sita threw off ornaments toward a group of monkeys so that news of her abduction would reach Rama. Put into Ravana’s harem under strict guard, Sita was given a year to make up her mind — marry him or die — but she spurned his advances with utter contempt. Rama, learning from a vulture of her imprisonment, allied himself with the monkey people.

Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys, was a valuable ally. On a spy mission, he went to Sita and told her of Rama’s plans. Then he mischievously began destroying Ravana’s city, tearing up trees and pulling down buildings. He fooled Ravana’s army as he continued his destruction. He was finally caught but escaped and set the whole city on fire with burning rags that had been tied to his tail.

Though Rama wanted the waters to part so that he could cross directly to Ravana’s island, he had to build a causeway. At last he and Hanuman’s army of monkeys besieged the city, and a great battle raged for days. All the demons except Ravana were killed, and he and Rama engaged in single combat. Ravana had ten heads, and when one was cut off, another grew in its place. Rama, however, had a powerful weapon, a magic spear from Brahma, and was able to kill Ravana.

Freed, Sita rushed into Rama’s arms, but he was cruel and cold. He said she could no longer be considered his wife since she had been defiled by another. Because Rama was adamant in not listening to her pleading, Sita asked for wood to build a fire so that she could call on the gods to prove her innocence. When she threw herself on the flames, the flames lifted her from the ground and set her down in front of Rama. Because she had proved in ordeal by fire that she was still virtuous and worthy to be his wife, Rama embraced her joyfully.

Rama and Sita returned home, along with Lakshmana, and Rama became king. Rumors began to fly around, however, that Sita had been unfaithful. Since no one had seen the trial by fire except Rama and Lakshmana, there was no one to vindicate her, and she was sent into exile. Sita went to live in the ashram of Vedamiki (who would compose the Ramayana) and shortly afterward gave birth to Rama’s sons. When these sons grew up, they came unknowingly to Rama’s court and sang the story of Rama and Sita. Rama claimed them as his sons and sent for Sita. When she was again asked for a proof that she had been true to her marriage vows, she refused to accept the man who had twice accused her of unfaithfulness. She cried out: “Mother Earth, if I have been pure, take me unto yourself.” The earth opened and and Sita disappeared into it.

Rama went mad with rage and despair, and his friends feared that he would take his own life. But Brahma suddenly appeared to him and gave him this message: “Have you become so wrapped up in the world of illusion that you have forgotten who you are? You are the great Lord Vishnu, and this body you are in is only a temporary form you assumed in order to destroy Ravana. This woman you called Sita was an incarnation of your eternal wife, and she awaits you in your heavenly home.” Rama was again at peace and soon after disappeared from the earth into the heavens where, as Vishnu, he continues to watch over the world and wait for another time when he must come to earth again to save it from destruction.

This hero’s story is traditionally interpreted as placing before us the ideal of a harmonious pursuit of the principal goals of life, especially Dharma (duty and righteousness) and Moksha (liberation of soul). Happiness is based not on material possessions and environment but on proper human relations and performance of one’s duties as a member of the family and the community. Thus Rama’s submission to his father’s decision and his struggle against the forces of evil and adversity, and Sita’s obedience, patient suffering, and above all, faithfulness make them exemplars of ideal behavior.

Other Hindu religious ideals are also apparent. There is emphasis on proper social order and the orderly functioning of society. There are repeated references to the human will’s subservience to the divine order and the power of destiny — karma — over people’s lives. Though Rama occasionally swerves from these canons of conduct, he exemplifies the qualities of courage, truthfulness, generosity, forgiveness, deep respect for elders, and honoring one’s word at all costs. The message he receives from Brahma at the end regarding the illusory nature...
of the world is the boon he leaves for the community: even-mindedness in success and failure, in joy and sorrow, in opulence and poverty is conducive to liberation and happiness.

The Heroic Monomyth

Perhaps to appreciate better what we can learn about ourselves from the hero Rama, it would be useful to look at elements from the Ramayana from the perspective of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth of the hero. In The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Campbell has provided a schematic summary of the interpretative elements that function typically in heroic myths.

During Rama’s 14-year exile, he had to go to the demon kingdom to rescue his wife Sita. In the call to adventure of Campbell’s hero, this is where the hero sets forth from home, with its protective but unchallenging milieu, and is lured or voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure. In a condition of need, a crisis, with a symbolic deficiency — perhaps a golden ring is missing, or the people are living in a wasteland, or a monster is threatening the lives of those in the community — the hero is called to action. His call may be voluntary (Theseus desiring to go into the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur), involuntary (Odysseus being carried over the seas by the winds of the angered god Poseidon), or due to mere curiosity (Moses exploring the burning bush). In any case, the hero’s activities must be directed toward some goal outside himself to lead to his authentic wholeness.

Rama learns of Sita’s whereabouts through the vulture messenger and arrives at the demon kingdom through the aid of the monkey, Hanuman. These are examples of the protective figure that helps the hero as he journeys to the threshold of adventure. This protective figure may appear as a wizard, a hermit, a shepherd, or perhaps as talking birds in the forest. In some religious traditions, this helper may be a guru, a teacher, a ferryman, or a conductor of souls to the underworld (Hermes-Mercury). Perhaps the protector may be a goddess who lures, guides, or bids the hero to follow her wisdom and take her as she is, without undue commotion and with the kindness and assurance she requires. The protective figure aids the journey, whether in time or space, encouraging the hero in his uncertainty (for he cannot be certain in advance of success or failure).

All of this is necessary for the hero to establish his separate identity as a person of exceptional courage or wisdom.

Though Rama would like to take the easy way out and have the waters parted to the island of Sri Lanka, he has to build a causeway to the devil’s kingdom. The passage of the threshold is never easy. Usually the passage to the other world involves getting past preliminary dangers. The realm of the unknown may be guarded by gargoyles, dragons, lions, or cherubim; perhaps there is a drawbridge, or Scylla (the six-headed monster) and Charybdis (the giant whirlpool). The hero has to defeat, or at least conciliate, these powers before he can encounter the object of his quest-struggle-trials. This passage over the threshold is a kind of self-annihilation, either in a god or in a godward, a contest between contradictory forces within the self, which the hero must face before he can perform his life-renewing act.

After a long difficult struggle, Rama defeats the ten-headed demon Ravana. This he does with divine help, the sacred weapon of Brahma. This is the hero’s task, the central act of the heroic quest, the struggle within the struggle. Beyond the threshold, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar forces that present him with his supreme ordeal. Such a series of tests would screen out someone unworthy, but in them the hero is revealed. The hero may have to slay a dragon, rescue some beleaguered maiden from unspeakable fate, fetch a cup of the water of life from the well at the world’s end, or measure the dark in the belly of the whale. The hero Theseus, in order to prove himself worthy to be the heir to the throne, killed the robber Procrustes to make the road safe for travelers, killed the monster Minotaur which lived at the center of the labyrinth, and had to find his way back by means of the single linen thread of Ariadne. The hero Hercules, to be cleansed of the frenzied crime of killing his wife and three sons, had to undergo twelve tasks of labor, including killing the Hydra (a creature with nine heads and poisonous breath), obtaining the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, picking the golden apples of the Hesperides, and bringing back Cerberus, the dog that guards the underworld. In these and similar struggles the hero comes to wholeness and a new relationship to the world and is made suitable for his role within the culture.

Having conquered the demon, Rama rescues Sita, who proves to be a boon for the people as the queen of their kingdom.
The hero thus receives the boon, which is for the common good of the society the hero belongs to. Once he has proved he is worthy of it, he receives this gift from the gods and goddesses. It might be a miraculous energy, or wisdom, fire, Golden Fleece, or perhaps a peace pipe. Intrinsically, this gift will be an expansion of the hero's and the people's consciousness and their very being, through illumination or transfiguration.

Finally, there is the heroic return. Rama returns after fourteen years to reign as beneficent monarch. He winds up where he started, but with a difference. If the divine powers have blessed the hero in the struggle, as with Rama, he returns under their protection and as their emissary; if not, he flees and is pursued with further adventures and escapades, often with the "good" gods fighting the "bad" gods who try to set up magical obstructions to his return.

Sometimes the reintegration with society is difficult. Perhaps the desire to return has been lost, or perhaps he fears he will be misunderstood (Moses was reluctant to return from Mt. Sinai because he felt the people would never believe him). Still, the return has to be made for the heroic task to be complete. The boon must be shared for the quest to be successful; only then is the society re-created, only then does the hero spiral his egocentric nature, his small self, into a larger self that is identified to some extent with his culture.

The basic elements of Campbell's paradigm we have outlined in skeletal form — the call, the protective figure, the passage over the threshold, the task, the boon, and the return — reveal the way each of us must travel toward wholeness. In the hero's struggle we can anticipate the outlines of our own quests. This holds true whether we tell of a specific task (Rama defeating Ravana to rescue Sita) or of the quest of an entire lifetime (Rama incarnated to struggle against demons, in which case the boon is the message that he receives from the god Brahma about the illusory nature of the world, and the return is his ascent to the heavens).

The major benefit of this model has been well stated by Joseph Campbell:

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; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, 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.

The outward adventure of the hero reflects an odyssey of the spirit through which the hero in each of us explores the wilderness of his own selfhood. No one else can go where we must go; no one else can wrestle with our freedom and our dreams for us. It is both the heroic burden and the crowning gift of each of us to go on our quest for the self, it is our capacity for being heroes.

The Heroic Pattern

Many of the experiences of our lives are disjunct. Experiences seemingly not connected come together as each of us realizes that the hero in the myths is really our selves and that the hero's actions are reminiscent of the activities in our own lives. Before looking at other benefits of this heroic model, I would like to introduce a second, similar pattern, one allied to the rites of passage we considered in the previous chapter. This second pattern highlights the ritual element of the heroic quest. Religious traditions often ritualize the hero's quest either to commemorate their reception of the divine boon or to provide a pattern for the initiatory rites of other members of the society. Ritualizing the hero's quest and boon are both a commemoration and a preservation of the tradition.

During their exile, Rama and Sita had many adventures, and the places where they stayed are today reverently visited by throngs of pilgrims. In fact, in India each fall, the myth of the Ramayana is acted out in the ritual of Ram Lila. For over a week, segments of the story are acted out in songs and dance in religious fervor and excitement, becoming especially vivid at the moment when Hanuman, the monkey, burns down the demon's kingdom. The people's involvement in the ritual pageantry of the victory of Rama and the forces of good over the demons and the forces of evil is their own rite of passage. In this and similar rituals in other cultures, the dramatic re-enactment helps conduct the people across thresholds of change and growth, both in their conscious and unconscious lives.
Similar to rites of passage, the hero’s quest contains a crisis, an initiatory struggle, and a return. First, the hero is forced, due to some need, to leave the security of home. He then undergoes a series of tasks on his journey, generally for the community’s benefit. Finally, after a symbolic undergoing of death in his trials, the hero receives a boon from the gods which he brings back to the people in his triumphant return. These are all vividly demonstrated in the heroic struggle of Perseus.

1. Crisis. The people are worried that Perseus’s mother will have to marry the tyrant Polydectes, and the only way that this can be forestalled is for Perseus to bring him back the head of Medusa (a winged monster whose very look could turn man to stone).

2. Initiatory Struggle: First journeying to the land of the dead, he finds several boons that will help him: The gifts from the gods include winged sandals, a shriveling pouch, a cap that makes him invisible, Hermes’s sword, and Athena’s breast plate. With this divine aid, he is able to trick Medusa and cut off her head.

3. Return: After saving princess Andromeda (who has been chained as a sacrifice to the sea serpent) and marrying her, he returns home with Medusa’s head, and all Polydectes’s cronies are turned to stone when he takes the head out of the bag. Perseus and Andromeda then live happily as king and queen.

The reason for introducing this second heroic pattern, similar to the rites of passage, is to remind us again of the key moments of liminality. It is precisely at those marginal points of transition between stages, those moments between the secure past and the untied future, where the mythic images spark and ignite new self-realization. These are the moments when, precisely through clashes with the unknown, the person dies to the old self and is born to a new self. From this perspective, the quest becomes a series of transformations, and each liminal moment becomes the grist for the mill of other similar transformations in the quest for wholeness.

The hero, and each of us, becomes separated from the ordinary flow of life with concomitant losses; in his struggle, he is betwixt and between, neither where he was and not yet what he will be; in his re-incorporation, he lets go of his former state and grows into a new one. In his crisis, the hero becomes aware of forces he cannot handle alone; in his struggle, he takes on the power of these other forces and incorporates them into his self; and finally, he returns to his community, a new self in a new relationship.

The two liminal moments are crucial: the first, when the hero commits himself to change his situation of existential need, and thus, permits new growth in the self; and the second, when the journey begins to reverse itself, that moment at which the task is finished, an insight attained, or a new power appropriated, and the hero begins the return with his gift for the community. These liminal moments are moments of grace, when the up and down, the now and then, the past and future come together, and the hero passes to a new stage of personal and human wholeness.

Both patterns of the heroic quest help individuals understand, appreciate, and consent to the human tasks in their own lives. Hidden in the adventures of the hero are the answers to life’s questions, but none of these questions can be tackled until the individual is willing to undertake the quest. And there will always be stern tests before any concluding formula can be uttered. There are no automatic successes. Any victory must be dearly, rather than cheaply, won. Indeed, evil is a necessity in the hero’s world, present under the aspect of terror and the imminence of defeat. There is no way to discount the reality of these risks and dangers or to guarantee the outcome before the very end. But the quest has to be undertaken, and there has to be a willingness to give of the self before a person can grow, before arriving at a “oneness” or reunion with all creation, with the spiralling self, and with the numinous forces active in each life. It is the giving of the self to the quest, the consent to the struggle, that opens up possibilities for a fuller life and a new relationship with the world.

Though we share in the hero’s physical triumphs, their validity depends on the spiritual effects. Ultimately, the goal of the hero’s quest, and ours, is self-realization, a keener self-understanding that resolves our lives in new directions. The hero’s quest corresponds to our subjective experience of life. In reliving it, we do not escape to a world of fantasy but to a world through which we begin to see our own world more clearly. By participating in the hero’s struggles and triumphs, we probe our spiritual nature and come into contact with the mysterious other world of the human soul. We find strength for our own struggles, our sojourn through sorrow, our attempt to define the nature
of good and evil, the quest for meaning and happiness. We find courage to continue our quest to work well and love well and to meet the still greater challenges that run the full gamut of human existence.

Participating in the hero's quest helps us in our movement from consciousness to consent throughout life, for example, in moving from the awareness of our sexuality to our consent to intimacy with another, from the consciousness of death to consent to our own mortality, from our first job to consent to our life's work. Sharing the hero's quest helps our maturation from concern for the self, to concern for the self and another, to concern for the community—the ever-expanding self and circle of concern.

The two heroic quest patterns provide another benefit for us by dramatizing the value of life-enhancing qualities in our journey from childhood to adulthood, from arrogance and foolishness to humility and wisdom. The Ramayana extolled duty, submission to divine will, and concern for proper social order. Other cultures or religious traditions might highlight the courage to undertake a risk, or to labor and struggle against monster forces for the benefit of society. Evident, too, is the joyful disposition of the hero, not a joy apart from sorrow, but a joy distilled from the experience of agonizing choices and painful awareness of the errors in human decision making. Occasionally, too, the hero will show sacrificial compassion: Jesus, for example, not only cooperated in the events leading to his death but to a large degree he engineered them, as if he were acting out a painful but urgent ritual. Ingenuity is another heroic virtue, a certain resourcefulness in escaping from danger or overcoming the villain, a mental agility as thrilling as his physical prowess.

Other life-enhancing qualities are manifested not as virtues in the hero, but as flaws to be avoided. For though we create heroes through whom we can vicariously live out our fantasies of glamorous living without hardship, we also inevitably find ways to knock our creations off the pedestal, to show their weakness, folly, and commonness. Good judgment, for example, is more important than physical strength (Heracles and Samson may have been strong, but their strength was as often a source of harm as of benefits). Modesty is more important than the hero’s idle boasting, which often precipitates struggles not related to the quest. Also, confidence and enthusiasm are more effective than reticence or reluctance (Moses was an effective prophet in spite of his threefold attempt to get out of the task of freeing the Jews from slavery under the Egyptian pharaoh).

To delve further into some of these life-enhancing qualities that the hero personifies, let us take a closer look at two more hero quests, one from the Greek tradition (Odysseus) and one out of the medieval Christian tradition (Parsifal and the quest for the Holy Grail).

**Odysseus**

Homer's *Odyssey*, dating back at least as far as the 8th century B.C., is part of the universal heritage of humanity. More than an epic romance of high adventure, it exemplifies the heroic pattern and points to many of the heroic virtues that make human life admirable. Odysseus goes through the spiritual process of loss and growth (that is, the dying to the old self and the rebirth of the larger self) and as restorer of the kingdom at Ithaca, he incarnates the socially responsible self.

Odysseus embodies several qualities the Greeks admired. Though he was at first reluctant, even feigning madness to avoid sailing hundreds of miles away, he did commit himself to battle, all to vindicate the honor of a minor Greek prince whose wife had run off with an Asian nobleman. A wanderer, Odysseus met emergencies with a cool head and was able to survive hazards by his resourcefulness as much as by his strength. He survived the ten years of battle and the next ten years of wandering through strange seas by his self-reliance and confidence in his own powers against fate, by his cunning and by his courage. Indeed, as the wily instigator of the ruse of the wooden Trojan horse (with the aid of Athena), he was instrumental in ending the war.

He had several soldiers hide in the hollow belly of a great wooden horse. The next day the other Greek soldiers were gone, and this huge mysterious horse was sitting before Troy. The Greeks left behind a solitary soldier, who claimed that he had been destined to be a human sacrifice to the gods, but had managed to escape. He told the Trojans that the Greeks had left the horse in order to placate the angry goddess, but they secretly hoped that the Trojans would desecrate it, earning Athena's hatred. His lies were convincing. In spite of Cassandra's
warnings, the Trojans dragged the horse into the city gates to honor Athena. That night, the Greek soldiers crept out, let the rest of the army in, set the city on fire, and massacred the Trojan soldiers and citizens.

Having avenged the honor of Helen's husband in the war at Troy, as told in the *Iliad*, Odysseus desired to return home. This is the crisis that precipitates the many struggles, the heroic tasks, that are recounted in the *Odyssey*. His journey is presented retrospectively as a long and painful return to his homeland, hindered several times by the insubordination or madness of his companions. When they forget their troubles by eating the lotus in the land of the Lotus Eaters, he was obliged to take them back to the boats as prisoners. On the island of Aeolus, they thought that the god's wind bags were full of great treasures. Opening the bags, they let loose the evil winds that flung the fleet far from its goal.

Enraptured by drugs and other seductions of the nymph Circe, the companions drank her wine and were transformed into pigs and imprisoned in a pigsty. Odysseus freed them with the help of a magic potion from Hermes but then succumbed to her charms and had to be roused from a long hedonistic sojourn by his homesick and impatient men. Again, on the island of the Sun, the companions destroyed the sun god's cattle, thus incurring his curse and their own death, as they were subsequently destroyed in a great storm.

Three of Odysseus's tasks merit special attention: his adventures with Cyclops, with Tiresias in the land of the dead, and with Calypso. The Cyclops were a race of monsters with one eye in the middle of their forehead. One of them, Polyphemus, entrapped Odysseus and his search party in a cave, threw the men against the wall, dashing their brains out, and ate two of them at each meal. Devising a plan of escape, Odysseus got the Cyclops drunk with wine. Odysseus then said: "You haven't asked my name, but I'll tell you anyway. My name is Nobody." His men took a sharp pole, made it hot in a fire, and drove it into the huge eye which hissed in the heat. When the Cyclops cried out, his friends asked who was hurting him. He replied: "Nobody is hurting me." They hollered that if nobody was hurting him, there wasn't much they could do about it.

The next morning, Odysseus and his men escaped by hanging underneath the Cyclops's sheep as he let them out to pasture.

This episode was just one of many in which Odysseus would mask his identity and give fictitious accounts of himself. On his return to Ithaca, he put on the mask of a ragged old wanderer and told stories of how he was a fugitive killer, a prince down on his luck, a rich youth sold into slavery by his protectors, and a beggar whose former prosperity had taught him the difficulties of fortune.

When Odysseus had persuaded Circe to assist him to find his way home, she included in her sailing instructions a visit to the spirit of the prophet, Tiresias, in the Hyperborean region, the Land of the Dead. Having escaped her charmed circle, he wanted to find out how to appease the sea god Poseidon. But the visit was much more than that, for here he had a vision of his past and of his future. He talked with his mother and his dead soldier friends, Achilles and Agamemnon. Tiresias warned Odysseus that lawless and violent men had taken over his royal hall and were courting his wife Penelope, and that he would face additional difficulties on the sea before his return. The good news was that he would eventually arrive home. Thus reoriented in the Land of the Dead, Odysseus was not afraid to continue the rest of his tasks and struggles to return home.

Many more dangers had to be endured. Odysseus had to stuff his men's ears with wax to pass the Sirens, those beautiful women whose voices lured travelers to their death on the rocks. He had to expose them to the narrow channel of Scylla (a six-headed monster) and Charybdis (a giant whirlpool that could have easily sunk the whole ship), only to be washed up eventually on the island of Calypso where he would remain a prisoner for seven years. Calypso, whose name means "concealer," kept beguiling and coaxing him, hiding Ithaca and Penelope from his mind. A conflict of interest was apparent in Odysseus: He found the goddess both dreadful and fascinating, yet still retained his wish to return home. Though he was held captive by this fascination, he gradually came to realize that he was a mortal and could never live with an immortal goddess. Though he had encountered the divine Calypso, he opted for the mortal Penelope. Conscious of his own humanity, he consented to return to the human Penelope rather than spend an eternity with Calypso. Acknowledging the link between his mortal humanity and his sexuality, he consented to his humanity and was now ready for his return to Penelope.
Having undergone all his tasks, Odysseus is now ready for the return home. Leaving Calypso, he is again shipwrecked, washed ashore, and received warmly by the Phaeacians, who listen as he recounts all his trials. After being nursed back to health, he is transported, asleep, to the shore at Ithaca. In this way Odysseus reaches his much longed-for home without knowing it. On awakening he doesn't recognize where he is, until Athena, the goddess of wisdom and his divine protectress, lifts the fog and shows him his homeland. Athena advises him that more than a hundred men have divided up his land and cattle and even want to force his wife to marry one of them. Though Penelope has put off the suitors by telling them to wait till she has finished weaving a garment (which she then secretly unravels at night), they have caught on to her ruse, and have forced her to choose. At Athena's suggestion, Odysseus makes himself known to a few loyal servants and to his son Telemachus.

Athena's plan calls for Odysseus to disguise himself as a beggar. The suitors commit outrages against this stranger, refusing courtesy and hospitality, and force him to undergo humiliations. Meanwhile, Penelope, forced to marry one of them, decides to have a contest. In an episode reminiscent of Rama and Sita, she will marry the man who succeeds in stringing Odysseus's bow and shooting an arrow through a dozen ax handles. None are able to string the bow, much less shoot it. When the beggar Odysseus asks to try, the suitors object but Penelope says that she will merely give him a new coat and tunic if he succeeds. He performs this task effortlessly, and with the suitors still stunned, he begins killing them. Athena, disguised as a bird watching from the rafters, aids Odysseus by fending off the arrows. In a massacre, Odysseus and his faithful few kill the suitors. At last, Odysseus manifests his true identity publicly.

But this is not enough for Penelope, for she demands her own private test. Unlike Sita who first proved her innocence to Rama and then to the public, Odysseus first proves his identity publicly and then has to do it privately. Penelope had already put him to the test. In addition to the bow and arrow episode, she had casually asked him what her husband was wearing when he departed twenty years earlier, and he had described perfectly the robe she had woven for him.

But she still wasn't convinced. Their son Telemachus is angry that his mother is so hard-hearted, but she tells him, "If he's Odysseus truly home, beyond all doubt we two shall know each other better than you or anyone. There are secret signs we know, we two." She then tells her maid to make up the big bed in her room and drag it outside into the hall. Odysseus cries out that it is impossible to move that bed, for he had built it himself using an olive tree with its roots still in the ground. This is the proof she needs. Her knees tremble, for no one but Odysseus could know the secret of the marriage bed, of how Odysseus had built it and rendered it immobile. She throws her arms around him and weeps for joy. At last the return — to their blissful beginning — is complete.

Odysseus finishes his heroic trials and returns home, a larger self. In many quest myths, the hero assumes the throne of the kingdom and claims as his bride a wonderfully beautiful woman he has delivered from imprisonment to some adverse power. We saw this in the Ramayana. But Odysseus's quest is different, for the feminine principle plays a much larger role in tempering his virility to make him a well-rounded person. His rite of passage is centered on one woman, his wife Penelope; it is guaranteed by the female goddess Athena who instills in him cleverness, endurance, and adaptability; and it is foiled along the way by the charms of the sorceress Circe and the numinous Calypso. For the success of his quest, he has to become conscious of and consent to the feminine side in himself.

Another element is needed, too, for the success of his heroic quest. Every path toward wholeness requires that persons strip themselves of their ordinary and habitual self in order to truly become a larger self. This transformation doesn't occur without sacrifice, humiliation, and self-denial. Thus Odysseus is Nobody to the Cyclops, loses all sense of direction after visiting Circe, and has to visit the land of the dead (that is, he has to die to his smaller self) to get his bearings once again. At the beginning of his quest, his ships and men are loaded down with treasures; at the end, everything is stripped away, and he is cast ashore naked and exhausted.

At the beginning, he is an egocentric, aggressive warrior; at the end, he has a deepened awareness of the meaning of home and his return there. He has learned, both in his visit to the land of the dead and among the hospitable people of Phaeacia, the model of domestic and community values. And this is the boon he brings back to his own people: In the role he has to play,
ultimately, he returns to Ithaca to restore the kingdom and set up the democratic way of life (so prized by the Greeks). This way of life, energized by his responsive and responsible self, is the gift he shares with the community.

**Parsifal and the Holy Grail**

Just as Odysseus exemplifies Greek ideals and virtues and symbolizes the person who enlargest the self by losing it, so from a Christian point of view does the medieval hero, Parsifal, in his quest for the Holy Grail. There are as many interpretations of the meaning of this quest as there are versions of the story. It has been suggested that the earliest versions transmitted glimpses of an initiation ritual that blended Christian and pagan ideas, glimpses of a series of initiatory ventures in which the ritual question (“Whom does the Grail serve?”) permitted entrance into the sacred mysteries. It serves equally well as another example of the hero’s quest, with its attendant crisis, struggle, and return.

The general setting belongs to the cycle of myths of King Arthur and his knights. Full of high purpose, valor, and strength, they all must undergo trials to test their courage, power, and nobility before they can perform their great deeds. The knights all have flaws (such as pride, lust, rashness, vengefulness), but they rise above these faults in the contribution they bring to the kingdom. Concerning the Grail itself, a few knights do attain a partial vision — Galahad (the stainless virgin knight who would have nothing to do with women), as well as Gawain and Lancelot. In the German and French versions, which I will blend together, the hero is Parsifal, the “holy fool,” who represents the ordinary person’s search for the supreme mystery of life.

The young Parsifal is so dazzled by some knights who ride by that he desires to be a member of Arthur’s court. His mother dresses him in fool’s garb, hoping that he will be disillusioned with the world and return to her. But she cannot dissuade him and he pulls up roots. Early in his travels, Parsifal is befriended by a woman who sends him off in the opposite direction from Arthur’s court, for she fears that in his innocence he will lose his life in knighthly combat. He finds his way to the castle of Gurnemanz where he goes through training to become a knight. When the rough edges have been taken off and he has finished his training, he is given precise instructions that when he reaches the Grail Castle he must ask the question “Whom does the Grail serve?” Departing, he meets a woman, Blanche Fleur, who asks him to conquer the enemy besieging her castle. He spends the night with her, marries her, and then leaves her.

Continuing his travels, Parsifal comes upon a fisherman, the Wounded Fisher King, who tells him where to find the only lodging in the region. This hostel turns out to be the Grail Castle (also called “Monsalveshe”). The Fisher King presides over this Grail Castle, but he cannot touch the Grail nor be healed by it. He is wounded and his kingdom is a barren, infertile wasteland. This curse on the king and his kingdom can be removed, the court fool had prophesied, only when an “innocent fool” arrives in the court. Thus Parsifal arrives at the Grail Castle for the first time.

His first glimpse of the Grail comes when a procession of youths and maidens carry the object through the hall of the castle. The appearance of the “grail” (literally, a dish) produces a banquet. As it goes through the throng, each knight receives, miraculously, the meat and drink of his choice. Perhaps Parsifal is dazed by all the splendor, by the knights, by all the festivities. At any rate, he fails to ask the question. When he awakens the next morning, he finds that the people of the castle have all disappeared. Then the castle itself disappears, but not before his horse’s hooves hit the drawbridge.

When Parsifal first entered Arthur’s court, he made a damsel laugh — no small feat, since the woman hadn’t laughed in six years. As a reward, Parsifal is told that he can have the horse and armor, if he can get them, of the Red Knight who had stolen a chalice from Arthur. Parsifal seeks out and kills the Red Knight, piercing him through the eye and taking his armor. His brave adventures continue and he subdues many knights. The women he meets berate him for failing to ask the question when he was in the Grail Castle. Arthur sends out knights to search for him so that he can be properly honored, but he is reluctant to go back. After many years of killing, he sees the blood of some geese in the snow. In a trance-like state, he thinks of Blanche Fleur, the wife he left behind, and becomes melancholy. Soon after, a hideous damsel, a sorceress, confronts him and tells him everything he has done wrong — the knights he has slain, the damsels he has left weeping, the lands he has
devastated, the children he has orphaned. As the women before her, she tells Parsifal to search for the Grail Castle again, and this time to ask the right question.

His adventures continue, for a short while or a long while depending on which version we read, when one day he meets some pilgrims who ask him why he is bearing knight's arms on Good Friday. He suddenly remembers what he has forgotten all these years and goes to a hermit for confession. The hermit absolves him and tells him to go immediately to the Grail Castle. This he does, and this time he quickly asks the question, "Whom does the Grail serve?" The reply is given, "The Grail serves the Grail King." At this moment the Fisher King is healed immediately, and the wasteland and all its people can now live in peace and joy. Parsifal soon has the joy of being reunited with his wife, and they have a son, Lohengrin.

In spite of the considerable variations of detail in the different versions — the role of King Arthur and his court, the identity and relationship of the Fisher King and the Grail King, the timing of his slaying the Red Knight and his marriage to Blanche Fleur (or another), and the wording of the crucial question — the main outline of the heroic quest remains. There is the call to knightly adventure; the advice from the protective Grail Knights; the women, and the hermit; the threshold crossing at the drawbridge; the tasks of fighting knights and searching for the Grail; the return to the castle; and the boon of restoration of the wasteland.

Parsifal's crisis is precipitated when he doesn't recognize the importance of the Grail on his first visit. His task is to ask the question after he proves his fitness through his knightly adventures. And his return, with the boon of health and life to the king and his kingdom, occurs gradually, only after he realizes that knighthood is not enough, and that the answer is really within himself.

What really is the Grail? Though a "grail" was a large "dish" on which meat was served at banquet, the Grail has been considered variously as a cup of wine, a stone, a product of alchemy, a divine person. In any case, the Grail is beyond all earthly joy; it is the source of life, both physical and spiritual. Whatever it is, it is considered to be so profound and mysterious that people believed it worthwhile to spend their whole lives searching for it. Through a play on words, the "sang real" (Holy Grail) becomes the "sang real" (royal blood). In the medieval Christian milieu, the life-giving properties of blood are extended to include the cup in which it is carried. The Grail is to be found in the Grail Castle, "Menacalves" (the mountain of salvation), a castle that has to be earned. It is the reward for fulfillment of a quest, not something that a knight can blindly stumble into and fully understand. The Grail doesn't exist in physical reality. It is a powerful inner reality, a mystical perception, a vision of beauty and connectedness. At the heart of mystery, where only a few can recognize its truth, the Grail is the symbol of the supreme spiritual value, attained not by renouncing the world or social custom, but by participation in the pulling of the heart. It is achieved only gradually through self-consistent action.

The Grail myth carries the insight that self-realization does not depend on external qualities such as wealth, position, or physical strength, but rather on private integrity and valor in pursuing great goals. Each of us is on our Grail quest, too, and this quest never truly ends, for it is the quest of seeking to become a fuller self, of penetrating the Grail of one's own being. When Parsifal first comes upon the Grail Castle, he fails to ask the required question because he does not perceive it to be his responsibility. Virtues entailed in the question, "Whom does the Grail serve?" (and its variant "Unde, what ales thee?"), such as compassion and serving the needs of others, are developed only after a search, only as we learn to turn from the truths we can see to those we cannot see. With our first Grail visit, often in the innocence of youth, we have a vision of our self as unique and very precious. But we can't cope with or fully understand this experience, so we lose it. Much of our adult lives is the time between the two Grail visits, when we search for something that is within us all along.

When we become conscious of and consent to the reality that it is we who serve the Grail, then there is a paradoxical surprise in store: The Grail serves us. Beyond earthly joy, the Grail is the happiness that comes through serving others and healing their wounds. The Grail — happiness — comes when we no longer make it the goal of our lives, but rather seek happiness of others. If we ask the Grail to make us happy, we preclude happiness; if we serve the Grail and the Grail King, we will be flooded with happiness.
In the Christian context of the myth, serving the Grail is doing what God does — healing and serving, forgiving and loving. Failure to recognize this spiritual truth means expulsion from the castle, and the search has to begin again. But the lost Grail can be found again, and the afflicted wasteland can blossom anew. That makes the search worthwhile.

The Archetypal Quest

Mythic heroes embody the accepted culture traits and the collective achievement of the religious tradition. Thus, for example, the Hindu hero Rama exemplified the ideals of duty and destiny, Odysseus reminded the Greeks of the virtues of a democratic society, and Parsifal recalled the virtues of compassion and service. In the intuitive vision of the world and life that they represent, we see that the individual and society are not in conflict but require each other. That is, the significance of the hero’s quest is not in puffing up his imperial self but in spiraling the self into a greater self by bringing a boon to the community. The gift he brings to the community affects his own wholeness. His heroic accomplishments are realized at the cost of his symbolic death: a dissolution of his childish innocence and selfishness and a gradual rebirth into a new world of interdependence.

The adventure elements in the hero’s quest — destroying cities, conquering demons, and slaying monsters — serve only a subordinate function. It is the inner component that brings about genuine change and makes the hero’s story a valid paradigm for others. That is why the heroes we looked at in this chapter are more than just cultural heroes; they are archetypal. They reflect and symbolize the essential developments and real conditions of every human’s existence. They are bigger-than-life figures around whom people of all religious traditions can weave their growth. Through cycles of life and death, good and evil, temptation and intrigue, weakness and innocence, despair and guidance, the myths of these heroes can help every individual achieve harmonious growth as they gradually become aware of the unseen real spiritual world.

The hero myths may not be true stories, but they are not unreal. They are the story of each human soul. They tell us that every path leading toward spiritual wholeness requires that we strip ourselves of our ordinary self in order to become a religious self. Our personal quests for self-realization are heroic to the extent that we attend to the crucial process of crisis, struggle, and return, to the rounds of destruction and re-creation that occur at graced moments throughout our lives. And the quests are successful to the extent that we assume a public destiny and are involved in the fulfillment of all humanity rather than merely our own personal self-fulfillment.

Review Questions

1. Describe the crisis, struggle, and return of the hero Rama.
2. What are the major stages in the heroic monomyth as described by Campbell?
3. Explain: The heroic quest pattern dramatizes the value of life-enhancing qualities.
4. What is the mythic significance of Odysseus’s adventures with Cyclops, his visit to Tiresias, and his stay with Calypso?
5. What is the significance of the Holy Grail?
6. Explain: “Much of our adult lives is the time between the two Grail visits.” What is the difference between the two Grail visits?
7. The Parsifal-Holy Grail myth has been called “The Christian myth of the Middle Ages.” Show how the answer to the question “Whom does the Grail serve?” summarizes the “truth” of Christianity.

Discussion Starters

1. “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the problem is to change it.” (Karl Marx)
2. "Whether I win or lose is not important, only that I follow the quest . . . . the effort remains sublime." (Don Quixote)

3. "Man does not always win his quests. Sometimes the hero loses because he is too weak and the task must wait for a stronger man. But sometimes the task itself may be too great. Throughout history man has been very sensitive to his limits and to the differences between himself and his god. Only in the past fifty years has man begun to feel that his only limit is himself." (Barbara Stanford)

4. "The end of life is now not so terribly far away — you can see it the way you see the finish line when you come into the stretch — and your mind says, 'Have I worked enough? Have I eaten enough? Have I loved enough?' All of these, of course, are the foundation of man's greatest curse, and perhaps his greatest glory. 'What has my life meant so far, and what can it mean in the time left to me?' And now we are coming to the wicked, poisoned dart: 'What have I contributed to the Great Ledger? What am I worth?'" (John Steinbeck)

5. St. Paul's hymn in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians is an account of the paschal journey, or hero's quest, of Jesus. Describe the various stages of that quest.

6. "Life is death for those who do not have adventure. Adventure comes to those who are willing to take chances and daring enough to take the risk." (Prince, the musician)

7. "Odysseus heading into the Atlantic was going in the wrong direction, but his errancy was what taught him to value what he eventually found."

8. If you could meet one of the heroes of the classical traditions, which one would you choose? Why? What would you like to ask him? What advice would you give?

9. Have your heroes and villains switched places over the years? Why?

10. What movie and TV characters today remind you of the heroes in this chapter?