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“The Myths We Live By”

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I believe that the trajectory of our lives is determined less by rules, philosophy, or theology. The paths we take are determined by examples and myths. As we develop into adults we take the examples we see around us and make them our own. We also take those stories from our ancestors, our culture, our religion and our society and live them. This is not a new phenomenon; it has been our human development since prehistoric times. The Bible stories of our youth and previous generations produced many of these myths. We live these myths for their archetypal character.

Myth has another meaning in our culture; that if it is contrary to fact, something is a myth. And the midpoint of the 20th century tended to emphasize this meaning for myth. That something is either fact or myth. When the word "myth" is used anywhere in our society, it is used to denigrate an issue, like the phrase, “Free Enterprise is a myth.” This bad press is unhelpfully implying the myth is something untrue, rather than a myth is true but not factual. But real myth in the way I like to think of it has a deeper meaning in a more enduring way than mere physical facts. The book, The Cry of Myth, I read a few years ago by popular author and psychiatrist Rollo May defines “myth as a way of making sense in a senseless world. [And all worlds are senseless until we can find a way to make sense of them!] Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence. Myths are like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structure which holds the house together so people can live in it.” “Whereas empirical language refers to objective facts, myth refers to the quintessence of human experience, the meaning and significance of human life (p. 26).” Alfred Adler, another psychologist talked of these myths as our "guiding fictions.”

My first reading was from the Joseph Campbell an American mythologist. His work covered many aspects of the human experience and he found linkages between all cultures and common themes of mythology. One of his most famous books was the hero with a thousand

faces. In this study, he finds characteristics of all heroes from the dawn of historic time to be similar. George Lucas, the Hollywood filmmaker, credits Campbell for much of the work that went behind Star Wars film trilogy. One reason the Star Wars trilogy became such a cultural epic was that Lucas used many of those archetypal figures that Campbell identified in his movies. In doing so he created the primary cultural myth of the late 70s and early 80s. Luke Skywalker was the hero with 10,000 faces. He was relatively unknown and insignificant and rose-up to become the Savior of the myth. He went up against the larger force that was called the Empire. In this myth Luke had the spiritual backing of the force, a veiled analogy to God.

While this mythology was for its time, if we think of Ulysses from the Greek culture, or David from our Jewish ancestry, we have some of the same characteristics. Think of David, the young, poor, shepherd who comes out of an unknown and insignificant background to save the people of the Israel, and defeat Goliath as Luke defeats Darth Vader. Think of how many other myths have the same motif. There are folktales and the fairytales as well as sources of religious scripture. The Cinderella that Melissa described had a similar motif. The impoverished one becomes the Princess part by her own cunning and part by supernatural forces. All three of these myths have an underlying myth which is patriarchal. In both Star War's Princess Leia and Cinderella a patriarchal hero is necessary. I believe some of the same patriarchal themes are reflected in attempts to defund women's health services. This is how myth reflects our daily lives.

In the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita contains an epic story of the competition of their gods in war.

Myth can be a script for the way your life progresses that is buried deep within your consciousness or unconsciousness. Much of that myth may go back to your early youth and it makes us who we are. It can be the story, the plot, the way we live out situations and in fact be our moral compass. So our true myth is our life's script. It can be a story or a role which leads our actions. This can be individually, as a community, or as a nation. One of these myths I believe is that our Second Amendment rights give us more freedom, or keep us free. This is reflected in the myths surrounding our frontier heritage in which one person with a gun can do good.

The idea to ask whether myths or stories are "true" or not is not the right question. These are scripts for living and true and false are the wrong questions to ask. They are healthy or unhealthy, adequate or inadequate, good or bad in relation to your life. They can serve as good or bad guides for our lives. But once they are in place in our psyche, once we are living out our lives on their terms, they are very hard to change, or even to be aware. Rollo May said that these images of myths were the beams in a house, not exposed, but holding the structure together from within.

I'll give you a down-to-earth example. Who remembers the movie Cool Hand Luke with Paul Newman? What was the script that the Paul Newman character was living out in his life? Wasn't he the rebel without a cause, wasn't he the guy that was sticking it to the man? I see a lot of the cool hand Luke's being lived out; people constantly fighting authority to maintain some semblance of control. But who is really hurt in this script? Certainly not the man, authority, the bosses. The cool hand Lukes' of this world may gain a degree of notoriety, but who wants them around. I have a brother-in-law like this. He constantly strives to find something wrong with authority, and then complains about it. Who could possibly want someone working for them that has this attitude? Who would want to socialize with a person who acts like this? It's a self-defeating myth; a way of sabotaging your life.

In a past congregation, there was a lonely old man who acted out the cool hand Luke scenario. His constant need of attention had him acting out against authority, any authority; this behavior finally drove the congregational leadership to ask him to develop a behavioral covenant or not be a part of our community. Despite the fact the church community was the only thing he had, divorced, his children wouldn't talk to him; his cool hand Luke wouldn't allow him to change. He ranted verbally and on social media for the entire next year against the minister, me, and leadership that dared to demand a degree control over his behavior. He was miserable, but his narcissism or arrogance wouldn't allow him to accept the thing that he needed most which was community. That's what is meant by a script, a guiding fiction, a myth to live by. There is being lived out by millions of women and men.

There is another story, this is one that is acted out a lot by women. It is the story of Cinderella, who works and slaves for others, and whose only hope is that somehow a fairy Godmother or magical birds will see her pure heart, reward her as with a handsome prince, and usher in a kind of Judgment Day. The only way to win is to get out of this story and find a different kind of role to play, or change the behavior of the other characters in the story. But in real life, there is a great scarcity of fairy godmothers. Cinderella is a fairy tale. But the best myths have plots that have been told many times in many other ways. This Cinderella script, for example, is much like a traditional script of Christianity, especially for women. This is the script that says you spend your whole life giving; to your children, your family and to all others who ask, you spend your life as a kind of "suffering servant," and you'll get your reward in heaven.

Now to be fair, this role is not always bad and contributes much to our societies that is positive. It depends on the other myths, the characters of our story play. How do their myths complement the Cinderella? This is often a very rewarding role for women, because the people they sacrifice for appreciate and love them, not in another world way but here and now for their good heart and hard work. The Social Justice Team gave lots of this dedication to the Syrian family.

But where do these myths come from? They are in every media we are involved with. Look at TV shows; Grimm, Once upon a time, all the TV shows and movies that are based on comic book characters. In fact, most movies and TV shows and books that have characters that resonate with us are archetypal. That's why they resonate. They express human characteristics in a very basic way, ways we can emulate. For those of you who are fortunate enough (and that's a relative term) to have teenagers in your lives, these myths play out constantly. The troubles we have seen with some high school, college, or professional athletes are results of living out a type of myth. This is a myth that they are special, and the normal rules and social norms don't apply. They are all young princes and all in the world are their subjects.

One of the prevalent myths that too many Americans live out is the myth of the great frontier. This myth engages the individual to believe that governments are our enemies. In this myth taken to extremes, individuals and groups arm themselves to protect against the dragons

that they imagine in governmental authority. While we know there are always some abuses within any power structure, the need to protect one with arms is a powerful mythology. Yet it is a relevant theme in many of our movie presentations. This I believe is the myth of the great American frontier, and people captured by this myth live out a fortress like existence. Like most myths, the facts to support the premises are antidotal, exaggerated and even nonexistent.

Most of psychology names many of their mental illnesses after the myths of ancient Greece: narcissism after the character narcissus, who died from looking and admiring himself. Think of the characters from the Greeks who were warriors; Odysseus, Mars the God of war, Zeus, Apollo, and the Norse god, Thor, how many people do you know who are always on the offensive, maybe even in the highest element of government? Isn't this following another myth? Like with any of these myths we follow: there is a positive side, and there is a negative side. The successful trial lawyer, the venture capitalists, or the Green Berets or Navy SEALs, need these myths to be part of who they are to succeed. But success in life, I believe, is to know the myths that you are living and be able to be in that character, and get out of that character when it's not appropriate. We all live some sort of myth and our worlds are mythology of our mind. The problem with any of these myths is when you're living them and you are unaware that the Myth is living you.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen.