

‘BeBrooding a Few Ideas’: Joseph Campbell’s Journaling into Destiny

And heard a hawk, whose cry sounded almost like the music of a Japanese flute.
Nature imitating art? (*Sake and Satori*, 184)

I confess that I have kept journals for the past twenty years. They are lined up on my study’s shelves. I cannot open them; they are full of too painful experiences that if I were to open special ones, their pages would catch fire when they hit the open air. I am mildly interested in memoirs, not too enamored of biographies, mildly magnetic towards autobiographies. Each of these revelatory forms of disclosure open some particular trap door of one’s privacy. But journals, those in between forms of prose that may have been written for the writer alone, or for an intimate, or to make visible the foreign, the bizarre, the strange, the destined in oneself that one does not know. I find journal writing among the most captivating forms of all prose that spins out of one’s conscious and unconscious intentions.

In journal writing, one is often closest to self-creation, self-castigation, self flagellation and self forgiveness. I believe that journal writing is one of the most mythic forms of written expression we are capable of entering into. Now granted, it depends on one’s intentions in journal writing—to assume a posture of privacy when in fact one is hell bent on publicity. Let’s set those charlatans aside for a moment. I want to think that

my own journaling is representative of why many engage in this almost clandestine form of prose slippage.

First, it is a less censored form of expression than most other manufactured prose; it walks a fine line between private intimacy and a larger inadequacy, a kind of feeling or probing of the soul to see what is stirred up. Journaling reveals a different movement of the soul for it rests on a threshold between an outer public personal and an inner raw, individual uncensored. Journals are like authentic and often anguished, also joyful expressions in letter form that are never mailed, never intended to be; but in the writing that unplanned purpose stays underground.

As I said, I have kept a journal—and what a phrase that is—to keep a journal. I don't keep a letter; I address the envelope and let it fly. I don't keep an essay, or a presentation like this one; but journals we keep; perhaps journals keep us, keep us intact, keep us questioning. In journal writing I am a kept man, something a bit erotic in that, perhaps even illicit. Something is indeed elicited in journal keeping that must will out. My journals are more reliable records than photos of my first communion or marriage, more accurate than a pencil hash mark in the lintel of a door for marking my vertical climb from the ground. I believe, and this is why I find Joseph Campbell's journals of his year long Odyssey round the world so

fascinating, is that “journal keeping” moves us closer, in an uncensored and a bit censorious way, to the myth we are living.

In journals we can doodle, draw pictures, muse, sketch, reveal unbidden and forbidden thoughts, fantasies, write in fragments—oh the freedom therein lying! and remember differently. Yes, the memory is addled differently in journal writing—a free fall and a free flowing back and forth, up and down, between past and future, the explicitness of above ground conversation and the below ground black dirt of thoughts as contraband.

As I write in my journal daily, I find that I am split and united: I am the instigator and the audience of the rhetoric, the list, the poem, the question, the assertion. I have in my journal to feel the bliss that I am following of having to prove nothing. I can skate freely and with a certain flourish and abandon on my impressions alone needing to impress neither myself nor any other audience. But most enjoyable and mysterious is the way that journal writing is a way to channel my personal mythos into consciousness. Writing is indeed a form of self creation, self remembrance; in journal writing I remember myself into the future differently.

Several years ago I loaded my truck with books, clothes, other trappings and went on the road for three and a half months. I stayed in various monasteries and retreat centers in the western United States. On

that trip I wrote in my journal every day. I filled two on this particular run. From them I wrote a 450 page manuscript of my interior and exterior journey. It was published at half the size. Lots of fluff. Not in the final version, I hope, but in the original, uncensored version. I related in the introduction of that book that I was embarking on, to use a clumsy neologism, a pengrimage—for this journey was both an exterior motion through the world of monasticism, forests, state parks, camp sites along the road—and an interior journey that allowed me, helped me, to cross over, at age 54, from one dimension of being to another.

If you wish to see a life unfolding as it is in the process of being made, shaped, contoured, twisted, read that person's journals. I am coming to Joseph Campbell's. But before him, I loved to read the journals of the Cistercian monk and poet, Thomas Merton. His journals number 8 volumes of 300 plus pages in each. I love the journals of the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. His *Diary of a Writer*, which he wrote and is published in two massive volumes, was where he tried on ideas before they became columns in the newspaper, *Vremia*, that he and his brother began in Petersburg. He also kept meticulous journals of his five great novels: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Adolescent*, *The Possessed*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. What we should all be grateful to his editor, Edward Wasiolek

for, is that he kept all the doodles, cross-outs, write-overs in the printed version so we can watch one of the great creative geniuses of the novel ever, work through and be shaped by the fictions that consumed him. We are, in these journals, right up against the bone of psychic activity that defines a life. we are privy to an uncensored self at play, anguishing, working something in process, right now, straining under the load of false starts, half ideas, cul-de-sacs, plots that peter out. QUOTE SOMETHING HERE OF DOSTOEVSKY'S WRITING; ALSO MERTON'S).

Journal writing puts us close to pure process with no hankering or lusting after a finished product. That is what I love about journals—their open-endedness, like a life, nothing yet foreclosed, even while so much is disclosed; not a hang or a harangue for product. The assembly line is running in a journal. One does not have to color within the thick black lines of the figure; journaling allows one to use huge red and purple colors and break the surface tension of the figure being filled in. Reveries often work that way; the power of journal reverie is the distance it can create and enjoy between the boundary line and the infinite access that is beyond it.

If the poet Novalis is correct, as Joseph Campbell cites him with delight often in his more formal writings, that the seat of the soul exists at that juncture where one's external and interior life meet, then journaling move

to expose and explore that region, that terrain of one's biography, right where the ink of the pen or the hiss of the deskjet printer hits the paper. Journal writing is the intimate personal proposal to make a myth visible, tangible, and to reflect on it without the aid of therapist, spouse, intimate, companion, pet or promise; it is indeed a dialogue between self and soul.

The Larsons' biography of Joseph Campbell relate how the young Joseph kept a journal at a relatively early age. Already the acorn of a writer had fallen from the inverted tree. There, his bruises, not his bliss, were brooded upon. The Irish are famous breeders and incorrigible brooders. Brooding and breeding, a fine breeding, mind you, are intimate in the Irish psyche. Some deep and personal congress with the muses is part of the Irish settler, one who settles into writing, into the language, into the sound of words. When, for example, his is in New Delhi on the year long sojourn from September 1954 to August, 1955, Campbell walks the streets of its hot house climate and confesses later in his journal that he "sweated like cheese." (7). The image is a delicate one, memorable. He is, in his journals, not a little like Stephen Daedalus, the hero of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist and Ulysses*, and Campbell's travels and travails carry the load of such an artist, a poet of world stories, an itinerant pots and pans man roaming the globe in search of the monomyth, a word that Joyce planted in him and from

which he made a life long career and a permanent impression on anyone who reads him with care.

Both journals, *Baksheesh* and *Brahman* with the subtitle: *Asian Journals—India* edited by Robin and Stephen Larsen, *Joseph Campbell's biographers of Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind*, and *Antony Van Couvering*, and *Sake and Satori: Asian Journals—Japan*, edited by David Kudler comprise just under 700 pages of script, photographs taken mostly by Campbell, a seasoned and devoted photographer, as well as sketches and drawings done by him as well, were not published in his lifetime. He had, as the Larsons affirm, “flirt[ed] with the idea of publishing it, though he never attempted it” (*Baksheesh*, ix).

What is astonishing, perhaps, is to learn that as early as age 12 Joseph Campbell kept a regular journal, which begins in 1917 (*A Fire in the Mind*, 14). Sick and feeling miserable at age 13, he writes in his journal: “sick again,” or “ I feel rotten but I’m the only one who knows it” (14). Along with his constant preoccupation in his early years with stories contained in myths and legends, Campbell was already paying close attention to his own dramatic unfolding. In addition, in the early journals, as the Larsens relate, he was fascinated by the appearance and presence of animals and their many descriptions and classifications appear in writings of “pileated woodpeckers,

pintail ducks, barred owls, marsh hawks, loons” (Fire 17). This was the early primal material in his impulse and apparently real skill at classifying and remembering the details of these forms of wildlife as well as other elements in nature: “In the stars I saw Mars, Leo, Ursa Major and Minor, Canis Minor, Bootes, Virgo, Canes, Venatici, Cassiopeia, Draco and Hydra” (17). His powers of observation and seeing by analogy were early born in him; his walks in the woods were often recorded when he returned home, as in this occasion. “Walking in the woods by Corilla Lake, he encountered a kind of totem stick with a ‘funny face’ already on it, which he felt was fascinating because through it was a humanlike thing, ‘it was made by nature’”(18).

These and other journal entries show the growing preoccupation of a precocious youngster towards seeing by resemblance, perceiving by analogy, sensing a relation between the natural and human orders of being and, above all, paying attention, noticing what was around him, seeing in it relationships to other things. All of these qualities of being present to what he observed become the primary instruments for creating a comprehensive and very complex series of relationships between and among world mythologies. The acorn has indeed taken root in fertile soil, in a welcoming soul. His early view of the world seems to be one of collecting and collating experience, a gathering up, and a hunting down; I think he felt comfortable

as both a hunter and a gatherer, two different yet related activities to make sense of what he discovered.

On Wednesday, 25 August 1954 he boards a Pan American Airlines tourist class to Beirut via Shannon and Paris; then after a day's delay, on to Basra-Karachi, New Delhi, landing at the Palam Airport (5). Such begins *Baksheesh and Brahman*. He returns to New York and Idlewild Airport on Wednesday, 7 September, 1955. His last entry in *Sake and Satori*: "Chicago, for a brief stand-up breakfast snack in the airport. Jean, not feeling well, did not leave the plane. Arrival at Idlewild Airport, about 11:45. But to air terminal, New York City. Taxi home—and the round is complete" (280). Between these two entries, and some six years after the publication of *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1948), Joseph Campbell journeys and journals himself into the work that would occupy him full time for the remainder of his life, some 32 years. He died before *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers was aired on national television.

I would mention right here regarding time something that intrigues me about the timing of all this today. He was exactly 50 years old when he made his voyage; it is just about the same length of time, 50 years, that this conference is being held given that his birthday was 26 March. So, we are in a curious time line today, right in the middle of his birth and this celebration,

when he found, fifty years ago, what he was destined to follow. Perhaps life begins at forty, but I doubt it; on the other hand, perhaps bliss begins at fifty, or so Campbell's time line suggests.

Early on in his pilgrimage, he drives with others to Amarnath and stops at Pahalgam, a "tradition starting point for the annual pilgrimage...to the Siva Sanctuary, a natural cave with an ice-covered stalagmite" (Baksheesh 21). He writes later: "During the drive I had time to brood a bit more on the Indian problem." He loves that word "brood," which is repeated in other places. In this same paragraph he opens his comparative sensibility with some revealing intensity. (Read par. On 22). Here is the classifier and parallelist at work. But his comparative approach is thrown off in the next paragraph, where an event that others might have missed, throws him into what James Joyce called "aesthetic arrest," a term and an experience that was important to Campbell's almost mystical disposition:

Last evening, during our boat ride, I saw a woman standing alone, in one of those canal-vistas, and she seemed to me to be linked to nature in the way of these people, that is to say, linked to nature by being linked to a principle beyond nature, through a ritual attitude: something very different from the romantic return to nature and intuition of God through nature. (22-23)

And then, same entry: "But, on the other hand, what I am to study is definitely here: folk religion, with its roots in the deep past; aristocratic

religion, represented in the ruins of the temple art of India; the phenomenon of the sadhu—past, present, future; the bourgeois religion of the Birla Temple (and compare that with St. Patrick’s Cathedral....)(23).

As one continues to read the ever growing thickness and clutter of the journals, one witnesses Campbell beginning to resort to lists to keep gathering up what is assaulting him as new, different, unique yet at the same time carrying rich and diverse “inflections,” one of his favorite words to connote the dissemination of the mono-myth into local, tribal, ethnic and cultural varieties. At one point he offers this reflection on the city of Puri—“a city devoted to a celebration that takes place once a year, and to its temple—I felt for the first time the real throb of India. A fully medieval combination of religion and life, with people doing crazy things...because of the God—a greater clatter everywhere, and all with a transcendental reference” (88), which brings him to his more deeply cultivated comparative imagination:

“The great difference between our two civilizations is the humanist versus transcendental orientation: the humanist now having broken through to a subliminal and even transcendental level, but the reference-emphasis remaining, even so, phenomenal man” (88-89).

One can track between the lines and observe his process or sorting through the debris of the politics, religion, poverty, the transcendent mystery imbedded in place, all of which are working him in puzzling or bebrooding over what his work should be in the face of the mystery of India that takes him over. His own inflection at this time in his journey is toward the works of Freud, Jung and Roheim because they emphasize “the process of symbol formation and interpretation from within” (162), which brings him to begin to clarify his own work off against India’s mystical and transcendent reality he feels and finds in the streets. He reflects at this juncture on his earlier work, which has gained wide popularity:

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I distinguished between the spheres of the village compound and the realm of adventure. In the former the “religious” people remain, whose spiritual needs can be satisfied by the fixed patterns of the already found, while into the latter go the heroes who meet and become the vehicles of the living spirit.” (162)

Perhaps the most ironic accent on his observation above is that Campbell himself is fully enmeshed in the hero’s journey, where he is now one of those historical figures “who meet and become the vehicle of the living spirit,” who wishes to, or is destined to engineer this voyage and to return to the community fully loaded with the cargo the boon, of comparative mythological insights, the foundation for what he originally labeled *The*

Basic Mythologies of Mankind, but which morphed instead into the four volume, *The Masks of God*.

At this same time, he seems to grow into a vision of what the trajectory of his destiny is to be: “The course of history shows a gradual enlargement of the ‘compounds,’ from a village size to tribal, from tribal to regional, from regional to sectarian (the so-called ‘world religions), and now to global. The immediate problem is to formulate an effective symbolism for the ‘global compound’” (163) wherein the simple folk will sustain the form while the “creative geniuses will be led to seek their destiny” (163), of which one of those figures will be Campbell himself. Listen to the questions that immediately follow this revelation:

What is the status of my present field-trip study of the Orient? What have I learned? What are the outstanding problems? What plans should I make for further research? (163)

Good questions for someone writing a dissertation, choosing a career or making a way for herself in the world. I believe that while the above self-questioning and self-guiding interrogation is not the only major insight Campbell had about his work, it is among the most salient. It is as if this trip, like his predecessor and hero, James Joyce’s when he left Ireland in order to see it clearly and write about its epic mythology whole cloth, was for Campbell a way to reclaim a vision by backing up to see the entire landscape

rather than a parcel of land within it. To see something with a clarity, one must not move closer to it but farther away. Such is vision's paradox, perhaps the paradox implicit in understanding itself. The journals capture such a revelation; the poverty, squalor and structure of the world of "the Oriental psyche" (164) clarifies his vision; he sees himself at once in a double methodology between West and East for an instant, in a new place personally and professionally, where a life change is imminent if not encouraged. By leaving the United States, indeed, the West in toto, Campbell returns to it in his imagination, and sees it anew. Such is psyche's recursive, reiterative and spiralic motion. Repetition into newness, a folding back which is at the same instant a pitching forward. He admits to himself: "Each psyche must develop along its own lines (at least for the present) in a world that is receiving all of its creative life and inspiration from the West.

Such a paradox he lives at this moment in his voyage: being in the Orient, in India, he pulls back from it, believing it has nothing new to teach us; at the same time, distant from the West, his imagination pulls him back into its centrality:

The hope, the immediate future, and the teacher of the modern world is the West. The main problems of the modern world are functions of the Western style of life and thought. The most significant approach to the modern problems, therefore, must be via the modern Western psyche—and most emphatically, via the modern American psyche, since America, at the present moment, is the ideal-giver even to Europe. (165)

On this premise, this insight, it seems almost exclusively, Joseph Campbell jettisons his plans to write a series of works on Oriental religion and legend. Now he narrows, focuses, finds his foothold for his work: [I] plan to concentrate on the legendary and mythological themes of the West—for example, *The Life of Judas*, *The New World of Batholome de las Casas*, *The Death of Captain Cook*” (165). And then this commitment: “Become a Westerner again” (165). There is much to think about here regarding place, place that is so radically different from the world Campbell grew up in, as that same terrain that brings him to a clear consciousness of his place in the world and the boundaries of his work—an interior placement, finding home within a strange land and customs.

A quick side bar to the *augenblick*, his pregnant moment and the quality of the condition that aroused it. In his new book, due to be released at the end of May, 2004, Thomas Moore writes in *Dark Nights of the Soul* of an insight Jung made earlier and is expressed so well here in its Irishness:

You can find your life’s poetry, words and images that express the contradictions and ironies that shape you. One of the simplest expressions of this mystery are the Irish knots and spirals, images that go back thousands of years, showing the complexities and circularities of every human life...the Irish spirals complement the Taoist idea that a thing is always entangled with its opposite; yin always looping into yang. 306

As he continues to travel east, to Ceylon, Thailand, Cambodia and then to Japan in March, 1955 his thoughts and imagination are on another flight flying first class due west. Campbell loves Japan; he is social, gregarious, an extrovert running full tilt towards the more demure Japanese outback. He loves the night life, the Geishas, the tea ceremonies, the Japanese body, the Kabuki theatre. Gathering his thoughts one evening, he recalls a recent visit to a striptease club:

In the striptease stunts there is another very amusing sign of the dual world. The Japanese physique is distinguished by relatively short thighs: to match the long-legged ideal of the American striptease, therefore, the girls wear very high heels—and the effect is quite definitely OK. (*Sake and Satori*, 54)

Yet his night life, his social engagements have a counterweight. Every morning he prepares his Japanese language lessons before a class that he is taking with other Westerners. He is fiercely competitive, born under the red banner and terrible energy of Mars, is aggressive, confrontational when needed and, like the track athlete of his earlier years where his speed made him one of the fastest milers in the world, Campbell regiments his daily life with a discipline that is consistent and productive. His social life as well as his professional impulses follow one of the fundamental teachings of Zen, as he paraphrases it: “The fundamental principle of Zen seem [sic]to be: ‘Do what you have to do, perfectly, and without reservation’” (*Sake* 86).

Allow me to conclude this presentation with a few remaining citations that witness Campbell's growing certainty about the direction and tracking of his own contribution both to mythology, literature and religion. It is an involved process that he works out piecemeal in Japan, which once again, allows him to see India, this time, more clearly, with a form of selective memory that actually seems more fair to the experiences he recorded while in India. So what is at work here? A journey into newness that analogically allows the once familiar to participate in that newness, that fresh vision of the conventional, what one thought one knew, and then in the writing to create a *tertium quid*, a third thing that is the new resolved and the old renewed, revived, replenished, revised. Such is the power that journaling and journeying combine to channel in the life of the psyche.

Perhaps if the journals were read in their entirety from an archetypal angle, then one might see the deep stream of analogy running through so much of what Campbell experienced in the exterior world that then moved his interior design along the same contours. Let me offer an example. Eight months into his trip, and now in Kyoto, he finds in *Time* magazine, the inaugural lecture of C.S. Lewis, who has just been installed as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University. Campbell is deeply stirred by what he reads of Lewis' words.

Lewis observes that “in politics, art, and religion, the old frames have been shattered” (102). But what affects Campbell the most is Lewis’ observation that “the biggest change of all is that born of machines, for they have in their presence dissolved most all vestiges of “permanence.” He writes:

I submit that what has imposed this climate of opinion so firmly on the human mind is a new archetypal image [*italics Campbell’s*]. It is the image of old machines being superseded by new and better ones....Our assumption is that everything is provisional and soon to be superseded [*italics Campbell’s again*], that the attainment of goods we have never yet had, rather than the defense and conservation of those we have already, is the cardinal business of life, would most shock and bewilder our ancestors....I conclude that it really is the greatest change in the history of Western Man.... (*Sake* 102)

Lewis’ insight strikes Campbell to the core, at such a depth that it prompts him to write: “This, precisely, is one of the ideas that has been most forcefully represented to me by the experiences of my voyage this year” (102). It also crystallizes for him the absolute necessity to retrench: “It now seems to me best to leave these doctrines [of the Orient] exactly where they are—namely, in the Orient—and to initiate the next Western step from a completely Western position” (102). The next page is full of resolve, of a reawakened resolution not only of his subject matter, which will become the four volume *Masks of God*, but also the methodology that he is to use in constructing them. He seems to understand for the first time that while he

wishes to be comparative in approach he must be historical and objective in manner and stance: “Make no great cultural leaps, and even within a given culture, do not try to harmonize what the philosophers of that culture itself have not harmonized. Stick to the historical perspective and all will emerge of itself” (103).

What shifted his work so much at this juncture? Lewis’ identification of what he believed was “a new archetypal image.” That’s one. The other is a distinction Lewis asserted just before this phrase, namely, that while at one point in history the central division was between “Pre-Christian and the Christian,” now there is a third, “Post-Christian” (102). The Post-Christian ushers in a new imagination, one that I believe so stirred Campbell’s imagination that the Masks of God were now to have as part of their profile an unmasking of the Post-Christian face.

Then, a month later, in early June which marked now two months in Japan, he is restless, a kind of Western bodhi who has now awakened to his life’s work, anxious to return to New York, but with months ahead of him on his voyage: “My thoughts are beginning to point in very strongly toward the problem of returning to New York with my present set of new feelings, plans and studies fully functioning.” He chomps at the restraints of his trip, and in so doing relays this plan to himself: “The whole emphasis in reading

is to be on Mythology and Comparative Religion...I must rebuild my class notes [in resuming his teaching duties at Sarah Lawrence College] (and perhaps use a wire recorder to catch my lectures), and with Viking [publishers] I must get back into the writing swing” (148).

Perhaps it is the water or the shushi in Kyoto, but whatever the impulse, as Campbell begins his last nine days there, beginning 16 July 1955, his vision of the world’s cultures continues to expand to take in what could be termed a global imagination, one that sees within the great web of complexity of difference the skeins, threads and patterns of a human culture: “and the great question for each living—as opposed to dying—culture is this: what can it contribute, what has it to contribute, to the common pool; not, what can it get by one stratagem or another, from its creative neighbors” (227).

Working by correspondence, by analogy and relationship, deductively, from the general to the specific, he turns in his journals more inwardly on himself to announce his own contribution to the world’s soul: Resolution: *Comparative mythology* (philology, in the German sense) is indeed my field—and the method is to be first of all *philological* (*The Basic Mythologies of Mankind*) and secondly, that of the Jungian *amplification* (example: *The King and the Corpse*)” (227). Philology, from the Greek,

philologos= fond of words. Campbell sees his work slipping across disciplines, from the scientific study of languages in the relationships to one another and to the cultures that give rise to them, as well as a depth psychological inflection of Jung's work and that of the famous Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943). He has, just nine days before the first anniversary of his departure from New York, Campbell has found not only his subject matter but the methodology he plans to engage, another example of lapping two or more approaches over and under one another, like the Irish knots cited earlier.

I cannot help end with a comparison. In another journal, this time kept by the hero of James Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the young Irish renegade prepares to leave his island home for Paris and Trieste. On his last days, Stephen writes in his own journal, dated 6 April: "I desire to press in my arms the loveliness which has not yet come into the world" (524). Two weeks later, his mother packs his bags as she assists her son, who is determined to fly by those nets of family, church, and country. In the novel's last entries, 26-27 April, Stephen Dedalus and Joseph Campbell seem to flying in the same skies, having seen, perhaps for the first time, their destinies scratched in the surface of their respective journals, a face of their soul's history and future in the mythic images feeding them

both. Listen to Stephen's last entry as he calls up his own Heinrich Zimmer, this time in the figure of the grand creator, Dedalus:

“Welcome, Oh life! I go to encounter for the millionth time, the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. And then his final farewell, which is the beginning of his deeper quest: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and forever in good stead” (526).

Works Cited