

JOSEPH CAMPBELL CENTENNIAL

Remembering a master mythologist and his connection to Santa Barbara

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Joseph Campbell, who was born 100 years ago this Friday, is best known for his gentle admonition to "Follow your bliss."

But since that three-word phrase has been widely misinterpreted, it is perhaps better to celebrate the birthday of the master mythologist with a different quote.

"The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast," he wrote, "stands this afternoon on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the light to change."

That sidewalk scene embodies the essence of Joseph Campbell. As he gazed out of the window of his modest Manhattan apartment, he saw myths everywhere, playing themselves out through the lives of everyday people. Thanks to his engaging personality and graceful writing, millions of others began to see them, too.

Mr. Campbell, whose personal library is housed at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, was a true rarity: an academic who connected with the public, and a rigorous scholar who was comfortable exploring the realm of mysticism. Through his books, television appearances and the movies that were inspired by his scholarship -- does anyone remember a 1977 art-house hit called "Star Wars"? -- he transformed mythology from a musty academic pursuit into a popular path leading to a richer understanding of ourselves and our world.

Myths, he informed us, are not old and dead, but alive and vital. Through them, we learn the norms of our culture, obtain valuable clues as to how to navigate our way through life, and -- if we are open to seeing it -- even get a glimpse of the divine.

"He brought mythology into the public arena," said Richard Hecht, a professor of religious studies at UCSB who was thrilled to have Mr. Campbell as a guest lecturer in the early 1980s. "He believed it was very important as a form of orientation to the world, a way to explore the big questions of meaning like 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I going?'"

"He showed us that the old stories apply to contemporary living," added psychologist Jonathan Young, who served as Mr. Campbell's assistant on a number of visits to Santa Barbara. "He would tell a tale from thousands of years ago and make it clear that it is about our own lives, our own times."

Born outside New York City on March 26, 1904, Joseph Campbell's introduction to rituals and symbolism occurred in the Catholic Church, where he served as an altar boy. Fascinated by the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show at Madison Square Garden, he spent much of his boyhood reading books about American Indians. In a sense, his cross-cultural studies of mythology had already begun.

After earning degrees in English and medieval literature from Columbia University, Mr. Campbell spent a year in Paris, where he became intensely interested in the novels of James Joyce. He approached and ultimately befriended Joyce's publisher, Sylvia Beach, who explained to him the novelist's idea of the "monomyth."

That concept -- that there is a single, overarching story that every human being lives out, regardless of race, status or culture -- would prove critical in Mr. Campbell's thinking.

After a year in Munich, where he read Freud and Jung, and a visit to California, where he met John Steinbeck, Mr. Campbell returned to New York and began a 38-year stint as a professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College.

"His students were all women, and he discovered early on that to appeal only to the intellect, he was losing half his class," said Steven Aizenstat, president of Pacifica Graduate Institute and a longtime friend. "Not that the women weren't intellectual; it's just that they were interested in the relationship between what these mythologies of ancient cultures and the actuality of their lives. That's when he really started to shape his material into what he later called the 'myths we live by.' "

That material found its definite form in his 1949 best seller, "The Hero With A Thousand Faces."

Using James Joyce's idea of the monomyth and anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's outline of rites of passage, he recounted what he called the "hero's journey" myth -- a tale of triumph and transformation that can be found in literally every culture on earth.

Mr. Campbell did not restrict the term "hero" to warrior or lifesaver; he used it to describe anyone who had the courage to follow his or her calling, obtain the necessary knowledge and skills, and then use that wisdom and experience for the benefit of his or her people. For him, slaying the dragon or other monster -- a regular feature of these stories -- was symbolic of overcoming the self-centered demands of the ego.

Mr. Campbell's concept of the hero's journey intrigued film director George Lucas, who used it as the foundation of his original "Star Wars" trilogy. As Mr. Young points out, Luke Skywalker is on what Mr. Campbell called "an initiatory quest" -- a dangerous journey on which he is forced to face his own dark side and learn how to align himself with the wisdom of the universe, which Mr. Lucas called "the force."

"I remember him telling me that there was a young filmmaker up the coast who was a fan of his books and wanted to talk to him," Mr. Aizenstat recalled. "He wanted to know what I thought. I had seen (the early Lucas film) 'THX 1138' in college, and I said, 'He's done some really great work.' He said, 'Well, I'm going to go up and talk with him.' "

Mr. Campbell's own hero's journey consisted of a two-part quest: to compare, contrast and examine the similarities in the myths of many cultures; and to explain to the public how myths function and why they are important. This dual role of scholar and popularizer led, not surprisingly, to some professional jealousy. Some colleagues complained that he was distorting and oversimplifying material in order to prove his thesis. Others disliked his interpretations of these stories as symbolic of inward, psychological journeys.

"Scholars who are more historically oriented, who prefer to look at folklore and mythologies as mirrors of their own times, say it isn't fair to the stories to apply them to contemporary living," said Mr. Young. "In terms of fully understanding the stories with perfect accuracy, they're probably right. But the mythic imagination is certainly alive and well today. It's in 'The Lord of the Rings.' It's in 'Big Fish.' Campbell's claim of its universality, which is a point of controversy, sure seems to hold up."

Mr. Campbell also made enemies among religious leaders. In spite of his Catholic upbringing, he saw the church -- and indeed all Western religions -- as hopelessly literal in their thinking. He considered the Old testament problematic, in that it portrays a deity who favors one group of people and sanctions violence against their enemies. (That destructive mythology -- the conviction that God is on our side -- is, needless to say, alive and well today across much of the globe.)

He saw the New testament not as literal truth, but as one version of mythic stories that can be found in many cultures, such as the virgin birth. This led to some spirited debates, including one Dennis Slattery, who is currently teaching a course on Campbell at Pacifica, witnessed at the University of Dallas in 1974.

"I was a graduate student in literature and psychology," he recalled. "He spoke in Lynch Auditorium, and the name was quite appropriate. Two members of the philosophy department and the president of the school attacked him as a heathen.

"Campbell was not denigrating anyone," Mr. Slattery noted. "He was pointing out the pattern of the mythic hero ethos. Christ fit into this pattern, as opposed to being the one and only (savior of mankind).

"I remember Campbell taking two steps back on the stage and saying, 'I have been talking about the hero's journey for 25 years. Never have I been so viciously attacked.' I was ashamed of the school. There is a brutality to fundamentalism."

Mr. Campbell no doubt felt those hostile Dallas academics were stuck in a familiar human dilemma: the inability to understand that these ancient stories are metaphors. "He wasn't opposed to people being in a religious tradition," said Mr. Aizenstat. "But he wanted them to appreciate that the religious traditions are the map, not the territory."

As Mr. Slattery's story suggests, Mr. Campbell was no mild-mannered professor. "He was very strong-willed," recalled Mr. Aizenstat. "He was a track star (as a youth). He was fierce. There was fire in his belly, particularly in relation to his discipline. He had tremendous passion for the material he was working with."

Mr. Aizenstat was a UCSB undergraduate when he first encountered Mr. Campbell, at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. "I was deeply touched (by his teaching)," he recalled -- enough so that he returned to Santa Barbara determined to find a way to bring him to the city.

Mr. Aizenstat was a founder of the Isla Vista Counseling Center -- which ultimately morphed into Pacifica Graduate Institute -- and it was under the auspices of that organization that he invited Mr. Campbell to town, beginning in the late 1970s. "The first seminar was at the Unitarian Church," he recalled. "There were 20 of us."

In spite of this weak turnout, Mr. Campbell agreed to come back the following year, and ended up returning once or twice annually through 1985. Attendance gradually grew, and after several years the seminars were moved to the La Casa De Maria retreat center in Montecito.

"They were usually in the big chapel," Mr. Young recalled. "There is a big cross. He would usually start by saying, 'Let's honor the tradition here that's visibly present,' and talk about the symbolism of the cross. He saw it as the intersection of two kinds of time: the linear time through which we live our lives, and eternal time. The place where they meet is a the experience of enlightenment, a mystical moment."

Mr. Campbell would often donate his honorarium back to the sponsoring organization, Mr. Aizenstat recalled. Similarly, according to Mr. Hecht, he accepted no payment for stopping at UCSB when he was in town.

"He was one of the most powerful teachers I've ever seen work in a classroom," Mr. Hecht said. "I remember him lecturing one day nonstop from 9 to 1, then from 2 to 6:30. He never used a note, never repeated himself, never got lost. An extraordinary mind, a gifted teacher."

Mr. Young agreed, calling him "the most charming man I ever met. I noticed how generous and humble he was in person. I remember I'd pick him up at the airport, and he'd have two suitcases. One would have three or four items of clothing; the other would be filled with books. His scholarship was his meditation."

If Mr. Campbell was relaxed on his visits here, it may be because his ideas were more readily accepted in California than they were in New York. He saw much wisdom in Jungian psychology, and his studies were cited as evidence of the psychologist's concept of the "collective unconscious."

While Mr. Campbell was an agnostic on that point, the association nonetheless bothered much of the East Coast intellectual elite, which worshipped Freud (think of the classic Woody Allen movies) but found Jung too mystical.

"The more popular Joseph Campbell became in California, the less esteem he was held in New York," Mr. Young noted.

If Mr. Campbell was considered suspect by his fellow academics, his work was embraced by many artists, according to John Blondell, professor of theater at Westmont College and artistic director of the Lit Moon Theatre Company. "He certainly was a generative influence on my work," he said. "His notion that dreams are private myths and myths are public dreams had a big impact on me."

Mr. Blondell noted that the most important avant-garde theater artists of the past 40 years, including Joseph Chaikin, Julian Beck, Richard Foreman and Robert LePage, "use dream, myth and ritual" in their work. He strongly suspects this reflects the way Mr. Campbell's ideas have seeped into the culture.

Like those playwrights and directors, television journalist Bill Moyers found himself entranced by Mr. Campbell's ideas. In 1986 and '87, he sat down with the mythologist for 24 hours of interviews, most of which were recorded at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch in Northern California. Their final talk took place at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where Mr. Campbell saw his first American Indian artifacts as a boy.

Mr. Campbell died on Oct. 30, 1987, at age 83. Mr. Moyers' interviews, edited down to six one-hour broadcasts, premiered on PBS a little over a month later. They quickly became one of the most-watched shows in the network's history, and Mr. Campbell's books began to sell at a rate they had never reached while he was alive.

While Mr. Campbell would no doubt be pleased with that, he never ached for greater recognition during his lifetime. "He never sought money or fame, and he never made much money," Mr. Young said. "He and his wife (dancer and choreographer Jean Erdman, a former student of his at Sarah Lawrence) lived in a tiny one-bedroom

apartment -- and the bedroom was his study. They slept on the couch. He didn't have much, but he had everything."

Which brings us back to the Campbell phrase that has been most widely circulated in the years since his death: "Follow your bliss."

"Both his critics and some of his fans have misunderstood the phrase," said Mr. Young. "It isn't, 'Go have a good time.' It's, 'Pay attention to the still, small voice -- to that unique calling that seems to know your name.'

"It is the seeker's life. It can be a life of incredible hardship and sacrifice. But there is a kind of joy in being in sync with your nature, with a sense of purpose."

"Sometimes that phrase gets sentimentalized into a Hallmark card version of a life path," agreed Mr. Slattery. "Campbell was a realist. When you answer the call which is your bliss, it is not a cakewalk. To be called authentically is to enter the woods where there is no path."

CARPINTERIA'S JOSEPH CAMPBELL LIBRARY

Asked to describe his personal method of meditation, Joseph Campbell replied that he underlined passages in books. It's hard to know whether his response was entirely serious. But the great mythologist, who reportedly read for seven hours a day, certainly did so with a pencil in one hand.

For evidence, one can head to the Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, a school that offers master's degrees in mythology and depth psychology. On the grounds is the Joseph Campbell Library, which contains the 3,000 or so books he owned at the end of his life.

In many, extended sections are underlined carefully in pencil (the ruler he used is in a nearby display case). In the margins are his handwritten notes, usually succinct summaries of the essential point made in the underlined passage.

The library, which opened in 1991, is used mainly by Pacifica students and visiting scholars, but it is open to the public by appointment. (For more information, call 969-3636, ext. 133.) It consists primarily of volumes on mythology, psychology, anthropology and religion, as well as literature -- mostly from the medieval period.

"Only in this collection is Shakespeare considered modern," said special collections librarian Richard Buchen. "(Aside from James Joyce and Thomas Mann) Campbell didn't have a lot of interest in modern literature."

The fact Mr. Campbell donated his personal library -- as well as his manuscripts -- to Pacifica is evidence of the close link he felt to the school, which sponsored many of his visits to Santa Barbara. That link continues to this day.

Pacifica is sponsoring a conference, "The Legacy of Joseph Campbell," from April 16 through 18 at the Radisson Hotel in Santa Barbara. It will include a talk by philosopher and author Jean Houston, as well as an opportunity to visit the library. For more information, call 969-3626, ext. 103, or go to www.pacifica.edu on the Web.

-- *TOM JACOBS*