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Preliminary Report, New Mythos grant

“Blisters on the Way to Bliss: Toward a New Understanding of Heroism,” a project in the Joseph Campbell archives

Overview

Joseph Campbell taught modern Western people the importance of mythology. He understood the human need for myth to give shape to the cosmos, to structure societies, and to provide guideposts for individual development. Campbell was particularly focused on the significance of the individual and his most popular ideas, “follow your bliss” and the Hero’s Journey, reflect this concern. These ideas continue to inspire many people and have been borrowed, elaborated, and woven into a wide range of works by psychologists, artists, teachers, self-help gurus, writers, filmmakers, and social commentators. Campbell’s legacy is still relevant, and people still face the problems that he described, the problems of an inadequate, irrelevant, or absent mythology. For these reasons, Campbell’s work is valuable to the search for a new mythos.

But Campbell first talked about “bliss” over fifty years ago. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* was published in 1949. The struggles between tribal mythologies are even more intense, the ecological crisis more dire. The extreme individualism of the West, and the United States in particular seems to be just that, extreme. Individualism seems to be connected to a myopic self-interest and Campbell’s mantra of bliss is used as justification. Have it all and do it all, and let the benevolent universe open all of the doors and handle all of the details. Of course, this is one end of the spectrum. At the other lie a growing number of people, the Atlanta JCF Myth RoundTable and Mythic Journeys, for example, who use Campbell’s work to inspire others to “be the change you want to see in the world.” Is there an inherent connection between individual fulfillment and the collective needs of the society, of the planet? Who can we think about it?

The goal of “Blisters on the Way to Bliss” is to restore depth and complexity to Joseph Campbell’s concepts of bliss and heroism, to deepen the conversation, and to link his work with a conscious search for a new mythos. I thought I would accomplish this by bringing Campbell’s thoughts about the challenges and perils, as well as the gifts, of the hero’s journey to the foreground. My plan was to collect and organize salient unpublished pieces on the trials and tribulations associated with bliss and the hero’s journey to amplify and draw attention to these ideas in his more familiar works, while also emphasizing the need for community and service to something greater than the self.

I made research visits to OPUS Archives in January, March, and September, and spent six days in the Campbell collection, listening to audio taped lectures, looking through lectures notes and written transcripts, unpublished transcripts, and books by other people who were inspired by their contact with Campbell. Tellingly, many of

these books revolved around bliss, the hero's journey motif, or both. The material I examined spanned Campbell's career. A list of the audiotapes that I investigated, which forms the bulk of my research, is at the end of this report.

I suppose that one always starts a research project with a set of expectations that are not all clearly articulated. My ideas and expectations, about Campbell, about my research, and about the meaning of a "New Mythos" project were uncovered and clarified in the hours that I spent with Joseph Campbell. He is a partner in an ongoing dialogue in ways that I didn't expect. My personal agenda, one that I believe I share with the New Mythos grant project, is to encourage a new (that is "better,") mythology. A "better" mythology is one that supports the creation of a more sustainable, just and tolerant society, a more beautiful (and perhaps myth-friendly) culture. I hope for this development at the same time that I have many questions about the viability of the whole idea. I am a mythologist and an activist. I wanted Campbell to be too.

My expectations for my research, and by default, for Campbell, were clarified through absence. I didn't find what I wanted to find. First of all, I did not find much unpublished material on my topics. There are many audio lectures in the Campbell collection that deserve airing because Campbell was such a delightful speaker. He is truly engaging, hour after hour, and I prefer the relatively straightforward presentation of ideas in these talks to some of his denser, more flowery, writing. But Campbell does not break new ground in these lectures. He is remarkably consistent in his handling of a set of stories and ideas that he clearly made his own, ideas that appear, repeatedly, in his already published works.

I hoped to find new material because I hoped for a less upbeat and romantic Campbell. After all, in the preface to *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* he writes,

My hope is that a comparative elucidation may contribute to the perhaps not-quite-desperate cause of those forces that are working in the present world for unification, not in the name of some ecclesiastical or political empire, but in the sense of human mutual understanding.

I found these sentiments repeated, alongside comments about the ecological crisis. (I was thrilled when I found a short diatribe against the proliferation of plastic products in the transcript of a workshop at Esalen.) But I didn't find a deeper, darker Campbell dropping dismal hints about the future or sharing the details of his dark night of the soul.

Nor did I find a closet activist Campbell, intent on personally bringing forth a new mythos or saving the world. In fact, Campbell believed that injustice and suffering are permanent features of this already perfect world. He is firmly rooted in the Eastern tradition of compassion, the bodhisattva, and the realization of the Eternal in the present. These ideas intrigue me but rest uneasily beside my politics. Further, Campbell frequently invoked Spengler's *The Decline of the West* to explain the disintegration of contemporary culture, which is another argument against conventional activism.

Campbell shunned politics. As a college professor, he exhorted students to study art and literature, not protest the Vietnam War.

In short, the Joseph Campbell that I knew from a distance at the start of my research, a man who both inspires and infuriates me with his romanticism, his conservative politics, and emphasis on the individual “hero,” has come into better focus. The picture is clearer, and it is more complicated. Joseph Campbell will not provide exactly what I wanted and he won’t even express consistent interest in my agenda. He talked about connecting with the transcendent in life and in the self, not social or political discourse. This quest cannot be put into the service of anything else. Campbell himself found inspiration in what he considered to be the highest human achievements, works of art, and the walk on the moon. Ambiguity and tensions can’t be avoided.

So I return to the question: What is the connection between individual fulfillment and the collective needs of the society, of the planet? The exploration is open-ended and the answers marvelously multiple. Bliss is the transcendent reality and the realization of unique capacities. The hero’s journey is a model for individual development that concludes with a return, boon in hand, to the larger community. The quests are inner, Campbell said, but the fulfillment is external, in the world. Campbell and I don’t have to agree or validate each other to have a fruitful conversation. This may be the heart of a new mythos.

The Most Exciting Moment

Listening to Campbell’s audio lectures is a treat. He’s a wonderful storyteller and listening to his voice, hour after hour, creates a certain intimacy. My familiarity was limited to *The Power of Myth* before my visits to OPUS. There are also a great many lectures, and figuring out which ones might yield fruit is a bit daunting. And since Campbell’s lecture notes and outlines are quite sketchy, you have to listen for nuances. On paper, many of his talks look the same, and they are both repetitive and unique.

In January, I listened to L314 *The Psychological Basis of Freedom: Is Modern Man Different?* Campbell delivered this talk at Bennett College September 15, 1970. He sounds strained, a bit sharp, and comments more directly on campus politics than he does in other lectures that I heard. The lecture revolves around notions of “freedom,” and Campbell gives a different twist to some of his standard motifs. He often ended lectures during this period with a discussion of Nietzsche’s *Three Transformations of the Spirit* (camel, lion, child) and the necessity of passing through each phase in turn. The emphasis that he placed on “being a camel,” on learning and accepting your social role first, seemed especially potent this time and I wondered if the applause was as lukewarm as I imagined.

The Q&A begins with good questions and Campbell starts to soften. “There are many paths to the top,” he says, “follow your bliss.” He goes on to define bliss and connect it to the Sanskrit *Sat-chit-ananda*. I was thrilled. Thrilled because I didn’t know

what was in this lecture and wonder if others do. Thrilled because of the context, because of the spontaneous way this idea seems to emerge in the overall context of the lecture. (My notes on this lecture are included with this report.) It didn't sound like something Campbell planned to say. It sounded like something that he was moved to say.

The Kent State massacre was May 4, 1970. Campbell spoke to Sarah Lawrence alumnae the following day and did not mention the event, although I wish I could have heard and seen him firsthand when he said that the romantic European idea of a unique destiny is so grand that nothing else compares! There are no recorded lectures in the archives between this one and the Bennett College lecture in September 1970. At that time, the college strike was in full swing. This says something important I think, about the depth of Campbell's commitment to his idea of bliss.

Project Status and Timeline for Completion

"Blister on the Way to Bliss" will result in two products. First, is a four-part curriculum or study guide on bliss and the hero's journey, with background reading materials and discussion questions, for use by JCF Mythological Roundtables around the world. Second, an annotated bibliography or index of the pertinent archive material to facilitate further research by other interested parties.

The study guide will weave together insights gathered from archive research and in print material with background reading and discussion questions. The working titles for this four part discussion are: Discussion #1: Finding and Following Your Bliss, Discussion #2: Different Types of Quests and Questions, Discussion #3: The Trackless Path, and Discussion #4: Bringing Home the Boon. Discussion #1 will focus on Campbell's definition of bliss and the "delicate problem," as he called it, of recognizing the oneness of bliss and realizing one's unique individuality. Discussion #2 will focus on the ideas of life stages and earned character, and include Nietzsche's Three Transformations of the Spirit, a motif that Campbell often used in his lectures but doesn't appear as frequently in his writing.

Discussion #3, The Trackless Path, will focus on meeting the dragon and the aspects of the Hero's journey that are typically understood to be challenging. Discussion #4 will focus on compassion and loyalty to imperfections, and return to the starting question: what is the relationship between individual fulfillment and the collective needs of the planet? Motifs from the Grail myth, which Campbell dearly loved and worked extensively, will weave through each of the four discussions.

Material/Quotes Currently Shaping the Project

"Mythologies point to truths, facts of inner life. And the myths that you allow to guide you will determine your own success in discovering your potential." L340 My Alienation and Rapture

"The whole problem of mythology (see Ovid) is how to contact immortal forces with our mortal forms. What is mortal will be transformed." L130 Cosmogonic and Hero Cycles, 11/30/65, Sarah Lawrence

"You have to have a sense of awe and myth should provide this. It's the center of religious experience. You must reconcile your self to life, to life feeding on life and find the mystery of your own being (which is not the 'you' as you define it)!" L179 Mystical Experience and the Hero's Journey, 10/13/1967

"You can't find the Grail on purpose. You can't force it." L180 Mystical Experience and the Hero's Journey, 10/14/1967

"You go inside for quests but the fulfillment is outside. Relationships are the means through which you find your own interiority." L215 Are New Mythologies Possible Today? Spring 1973, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, written transcript

"Not only are new mythologies possible, but new mythologies are absolutely necessary if human beings are going to live as human beings." L215 Are New Mythologies Possible Today? Spring 1973, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, written transcript

"The notion of the mythology of humanity, not only humanity in the gross or in the whole but the specific human being, is the great mythology of Europe and exists nowhere else in the world. The individual as living phenomena whose life is important." L215 Are New Mythologies Possible Today? Spring 1973, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, written transcript

"A human being in action cannot represent perfection. They always represent one side of a duality which it itself the perfection, the two. In being loyal to your part of it you are keeping history in form. We live duality; perfection is non-dual, so the only "perfect" existence is non-existence. So reconcile yourself to that. Be imperfect and go ahead--that's joyful participation in the sorrows of the world." L1194 Loyalty to Your Imperfections, 11/21/83, Esalen.

"Do you get the ambiguity of this thing? Bliss is the ability to absorb the horror of that message, that truth. Life is a killer. The question is, 'Does your love absorb it/' It's a terrible message and yet it's the bliss message. Bliss absorbs pain. But it's certainly not happiness." Joseph Campbell, This Business of the Gods, In Conversation with Fraser Boa, p/ 105.

Conclusion

Answering the question, solving the riddle, finding the balance – between personal desires and destiny and the demands of the larger community, of the global community, is a central task, one that may be necessary to our survival. Campbell understood this without resorting to social prescriptions or political agendas. He placed the question in the larger backdrop of ideas, of myths about the individual, destiny, and the transcendent. Campbell's work doesn't provide an "answer," but it supplies a needed framework for thinking about and living through the dilemma. The fact that he sided squarely with the individual and placed his trust in the possibility of individual integrity is one reason for his continued popularity. It can also be a rousing challenge, a call to wake up.

I am honored to be a New Mythos grant recipient and have learned a great deal from my time in the Campbell collection at OPUS archives. I owe my current understanding of Campbell's work to the time I spent listening to hours of lectures that are only available at OPUS. I plan to bring all of that insight and energy to my final products in the coming months. I also give a big "Thank you" to Richard Buchen, whose knowledge of Campbell and the collection, and willingness to discuss ideas, is invaluable.

Archive material of use to the "Blisters on the Way to Bliss" project (this material will be indexed as one outcome of my research)

Audio 102: L73 The Sacrifice of the Ego 11/30/1962

Audio104: L164 Aesthetic Arrest and the Hero Cycle 1/5/1967

Audio 126: L130 Cosmogonic and Hero Cycles 11/30/1965, SLC

Audio 126: L179 Mystical Experience and the Hero's Journey 10/31/1967, Esalen

Audio 126: L180 Quest for the Grail 10/14/67, Esalen

Audio 105: L194 Mythologies of Quest and Illumination 4/18/1968, Goddard College

Audio 105: L196 Necessity of Myth 5/9/1968

Audio 105: L206 Modern Mythologies of Quest and Illumination 9/30/1968

Audio 105: L208 Creative Mythology in the Modern Age 11/13/68 Syracuse University

Written transcript L215 Are New Myths Possible Today, Spring 1973, U of Arkansas Fayetteville

Audio 106: L250 The Necessity of Myth 4/17/68 University of Vermont

Audio 108: L340 Mythologies of Alienation and Rapture 4/16/1971 (two tapes)
Audio 108: L313 Mythological Concepts of Destiny (5/5/70) SLC alumnae
Audio 108: L314 Psychological Basis of Freedom 9/15/70, Bennett College ("FOLLOW YOUR BLISS")
Audio 108 L322 Mythic Approach to Life, Literature, Art 1/14/71 Kent State
Audio 108: L340 Mythologies of Alienation and Rapture, 4/16/71

Written transcript L437 Living Your Personal Myth 10/22/72 Analytical Psychiatrist Club of Chicago

Written transcript L468-472 Living Your Personal Myth 3/16/73, Esalen

Audio 111, L535 The Impact of Science on Mythology, 1974, unknown location

Audio 120, L965 Transformation of Mythology Through Time sides 15 and 16 of a series, 1981, unknown location

Audio 121: L1170 Journey Into Your Own Mythology (Sam Keen) Esalen, 12/3/74

Audio 122: L1187 Blockages of the Hero's Journey Nov 1983, Esalen

Audio 123: L1194 Loyalty to Your Imperfections 11/21/1983, Esalen

Written transcript Joyce/Picasso Seminar 10/18/82, Open Eye