



The Power of Myth

Joseph Campbell, Bill Moyers

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The Power Of Myth launched an extraordinary resurgence of interest in Joseph Campbell and his work. A preeminent scholar, writer, and teacher, he has had a profound influence on millions of people. To him, mythology was the "song of the universe, the music of the spheres." With Bill Moyers, one of America's most prominent journalists, as his thoughtful and engaging interviewer, The Power Of Myth touches on subjects from modern marriage to virgin births, from Jesus to John Lennon, offering a brilliant combination of intelligence and wit.

The Power of Myth Details

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From Reader Review The Power of Myth for online ebook

Roy Lotz says

I have bought this wonderful machine—a computer. Now I am rather an authority on gods, so I identified the machine—it seems to me to be an Old Testament god with a lot of rules and no mercy.

Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a book that, for better or worse, will forever change how you see the world. Once you read his analysis of the monomyth, the basic outline of mythological stories, you find it everywhere. It's maddening sometimes. Now I can't watch certain movies without analyzing them in terms of Campbell's outline.

But that book had another lasting effect on me. Campbell showed that these old myths and stories, even if you don't believe them literally—indeed, he encourages you not to—still hold value for us. In our sophisticated, secular society, we can still learn from these ancient tales of love, adventure, magic, monsters, heroes, death, rebirth, and transcendence.

This book is a transcription of conversations between Campbell and Bill Moyers, made for a popular TV series. It isn't exactly identical with the series, but there's a lot of overlap. Moyers is interested in Campbell for seemingly the same reason I am: to find a value for myths and religion without the need for dogmatism or provinciality.

The book is mainly focused on Campbell's philosophy of life, but many subjects are touched upon in these conversations. Campbell was, in his own words, a generalist, so you will find passages in here that will annoy nearly anybody. (A good definition of a generalist is somebody who can irritate specialists in many different fields.) Personally, I find Campbell most irritating when he talks about how bad the world is nowadays since people don't have enough myths to live by. It seems obvious to me that the contemporary world, more secular than ever before, is also better off than ever before (Trump notwithstanding).

Campbell sometimes shows himself to be a sloppy scholar, such as his quoting of a letter by Chief Seattle, now widely believed to be fake. And I certainly don't agree with his adoption of Jung's psychology, which is hardly scientific. Indeed, to reduce old myths to Jung's psychological system is merely to translate one myth into another. Perhaps Jung's myth is easier to identify with nowadays, but I reject any claim of scientific accuracy. In sum, there is much to criticize in Campbell's scholarly and academic approach.

Yet his general message—that myths and religions can be made valuable even for contemporary nonbelievers—has a special relevance for me. I grew up in an entirely nonreligious household, and I'm thankful for that. Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder whether I have missed out on something precious. Religious is as near to a human universal as you are likely to find, and I have no experience with it. Often I find myself reading religious books, exploring spiritual practices, and hanging around cathedrals. Although many beliefs and practices repel me, some I find beautiful, and I am fitfully filled with envy at the tranquility and fortitude that some practitioners seem to derive from their faith.

Campbell has been most valuable to me in his ability interpret religions metaphorically, and his insistence that they still have value. Reading Campbell helped me to clarify many of the things I have been thinking

and wondering about lately, so I can't help mixing up my own reflections with Campbell's. Indeed, there might be more of my opinions in this review than Campbell, but here it goes.

One of the main lessons that art, philosophy, and religion teach us is that society imposes upon us superficial values. Wealth, attractiveness, sex, coolness, success, respectability—these are the values of society. And it's no wonder. The economy doesn't function well unless we strive to accumulate wealth; competition for mates creates a need for standards of beauty; cultural, political, and economic power is distributed hierarchically, and there are rules of behavior to differentiate the haves from the have-nots. In short, in a complex society these values are necessary—or at any rate inevitable.

But of course, these are the values of the game: the competition for mates, success, power, and wealth. In other words, they are values that differentiate how well you're doing from your neighbor. In this way they are superficial—measuring you extrinsically rather than intrinsically. One of the functions of art, philosophy, and religion, as I see it, is to remind us of this, and to direct our attention to intrinsic values. Love, friendship, compassion, beauty, goodness, wisdom—these are valuable in themselves, and give meaning and happiness to an individual life.

How many great stories pit one of these personal values against one of the social values? Love against respectability, friendship against coolness, wisdom against wealth, compassion against success. In comedy—stories with happy endings—the intrinsic value is harmonized with the social value. Consider Jane Austen's novels. In the end, genuine love is shown to be compatible with social respectability. But this is often not true, as tragedy points out. In tragedy, the social value wins against the personal value. The petty feud between the Capulets and the Montagues prevents Romeo and Juliet from being together. Respectability wins over love. But the victory is hollow, since this respectability brings its adherents nothing but pain and conflict.

Art thus dramatizes this conflict to show us what is really valuable from what is only apparently so. Philosophy does this not through drama, but reason. (I'm not claiming this is all either art or philosophy does.) Religion does it through ritual. This, I think, is the advantage of religion: it is periodical, it is tied to your routine, and it involves the body and not just the mind. Every week and every day you go through a procedure to remind yourself of what is really worthwhile.

But these things can fail, and often do. Art and philosophy can become academic, stereotyped, or commercial. And religion can become just another social value, used to cloak earthly power in superficial sanctity. As Campbell points out during these interviews, religion must change as society changes, or it will lose its efficacy. To use Campbell's terminology, the social function of myth can entirely replace its pedagogical function. In such cases, the myths and rituals only serve to strengthen the group identity, to better integrate individuals into the society. When this is taken too far—as Campbell believes it has nowadays—then the social virtues are taught at the expense of the individual virtues, and the religion just becomes another worldly power.

Myths can become ineffective, not only due to society co-opting their power, but also because myths have a cosmological role that can quickly become outdated. This is where religion comes into conflict with science. As Campbell explains, one of the purposes of myths is to help us find our place in the universe and understand our relationship to the world around us. If the religion is based on an outdated picture of the world, it can't do that effectively, since then it forces people to choose between connecting with contemporary thought or adhering to the faith.

For my part, I think the conflict between science and religion is ultimately sterile, since it is a conflict about

beliefs, and beliefs are not fundamental to either.

When I enter a cathedral, for example, I don't see an educational facility designed to teach people facts. Rather, I see a place carefully constructed to create a certain *psychological experience*: the shadowy interior, the shining golden altars, the benevolent faces of the saints, the colored light from the stained glass windows, the smell of incense, the howl of the organ, the echo of the priest's voice in the cavernous interior, the sense of smallness engendered by the towering roof. There are beliefs about reality involved in the experience, but the experience is not reducible to those beliefs; rather, the beliefs form a kind of scaffolding or context to experience the divine presence.

Science, too, is not a system of beliefs, but a procedure for investigating the world. Theories are overturned all the time in science. The most respected scientists have been proven wrong. Scientific orthodoxy today might be outmoded tomorrow. Consequently, when scientists argue with religious people about their beliefs, I think they're both missing the point.

So far we have covered Campbell's social, pedagogical, and cosmological functions of myths. This leaves only his spiritual function: connecting us to the mystery of the world. This is strongly connected with mysticism. By mysticism, I mean the belief that there is a higher reality behind the visual world; that there is an invisible, timeless, eternal plain that supports the field of time and action; that all apparent differences are only superficial, and that fundamentally everything is one. Plotinus is one of the most famous mystics in Western history, and his system exemplifies this: the principal of existence, for him, is "The One," which is only his name for the unknowable mystery that transcends all categories.

Now, from a rational perspective all this is hard to swallow. And yet, I think there is a very simple thought buried underneath all this verbiage. Mysticism is just the experience of the mystery of existence, the mystery there is something instead of nothing. Science can explain how things work, but does not explain why these things are here in the first place. Stephen Hawking expressed this most memorably when he said: "Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes universe for them to describe?"

It is arguably not a rational question—maybe not even a real question at all—to ask "Why is there something rather than nothing?" In any case, it is unanswerable. But I still often find myself filled with wonder that I exist, that I can see and hear things, that I have an identity, and that I am a part of this whole universe, so exquisite and vast. Certain things reliably connect me with this feeling: reading *Hamlet*, looking up at the starry sky, and standing in the Toledo Cathedral. Because it is not rational, I cannot adequately put it into words or analyze it; and yet I think the experience of mystery and awe is one of the most important things in life.

Since it is just a feeling, there is nothing inherently rational or anti-rational in it. I've heard scientists, mystics, and philosophers describe it. Yes, they describe it in different terms, using different concepts, and give it different meaning, but all that is incidental. The feeling of wonder is the thing, the perpetual surprise that we exist at all. Campbell helps me to connect with and understand that, and for that reason I am grateful to him.

Safat says

There is something very fishy about our existence. We are unaware of it most of the time, but it tickles us all

from time to time.

Suddenly we realize we 'are', we actually exist. That's a weird thing. One day we open our eyes, and there's a world outside.

These things trouble me. Since when do I exist? How come I wasn't here, then I suddenly came out of nowhere? How's it possible that something as concrete as 'I' actually came out of nowhere? And exactly at what time did I come into being? At my mother's womb, or after I've seen the first sunlight on this planet? If I started at my mother's womb, exactly at what time in my mother's womb? One week, one month, or 6 months? And when would I really cease to exist? I read that all the organs do not 'die' at the same time. Are birth and death as real as they seem, or just mere illusions? Neuroscientists tell us there's really nothing concrete within us that can be recognized as 'I', all things are in constant flux, nothing stays the same for long. What we experience as the continuous 'self' is actually an illusion. If there's no 'I' inside me, who was born and who would die? Maybe nobody.

Sometimes I wonder, What if I actually existed all the time, and will continue to exist?

There's a glass of water on the table and I touch it. It actually exists. How come a thing can 'exist' in itself? I feel an eerie tingling sensation in my lower spine. From where does these weird feelings really come? Where does thoughts come from? I don't choose my thoughts. I don't know what I would think one minute from now.

It's all very weird.

We try to build some logical explanation to cover up the freakish nature of reality, but it's not much of help. By scientific methodology, we know that everything is energy in one form or another, but we do not know what this weird thing energy really is. We see electron behaving as both particle and wave, which defies common sense. Nature shows us common sense doesn't work everywhere. We know the universe has come into being through some cosmic incident known as Big Bang, but we don't know why it had to be. Science help us to familiarize and to make sense of the world to a certain extent, but in the end science just exposes us the naked mystery itself. Black Holes. Quantum fluctuation. Entanglement. And scientists doesn't know what consciousness really is, some say it is unknowable.

We know there's more to the world than our eyes and our rational thoughts meet. We can feel it.

There's where myths come.

Myths are not science. Myths are not facts. Myths are not mere cuck and bull story stories.

Myths are poetry. Like poetry, myths doesn't have a linear, literal meaning. It stands for something beyond itself, beyond the words and images. Myths are a gateway to the transcendental realm where thoughts cannot reach.

When myths are taken as too concrete and literal, it loses its original essence. It becomes religion.

Joseph Campbell shows us the multi-dimensionality and the depth of myths and mythological symbols. Today we live in a world where we are totally accustomed to literal and linear thinking, we have forgotten how to think with symbols and imagery. We live in an alienated world.

Campbell is now more important than ever. We need to hear what the myths are telling us.

Nishat says

In my daily life, I talk about suffering a lot. I have had trouble accepting the fact that terrible things happen to people everyday, that the voiceless, the weak have to undergo great cruelty everywhere.

Campbell says, for our sake we have to affirm the brutality, the thoughtlessness of our surroundings too. By doing so, we affirm our world and the experience of eternity here.

I once mentioned to an older friend, if our world were to be a circle and we the dots to complete it, then our existence must be of utmost importance. The circle would remain incomplete without only one of us! I understand now that I was very naive. Anyone can be easily replaced. But the idea that I carry the stories of my ancestors, that my behavior is very much influenced by their way of life and that my manners, habits, doings are to an extent what they passed down, makes me less 'alone' and recognize this life to be more profound than I imagined.

Campbell likens us to '*One little microbit in that great magnitude*'. And he talks about '*following one's bliss*' a lot.

A few days ago, a distant relative of mine almost convinced me to study a certain subject of apparently great market value. She talked about future a lot. And about money. So, I was considering her words and harboring doubts about myself, about my decisions until I read this book.

Who would I be if I don't 'follow my bliss'? If I don't hang on to what I love? I would be anything but myself and that's a kind of death too.

Campbell says, we are partaking in something greater than us, than we can even grasp. That makes our experience here very humbling.

I didn't fully understand him though. I should have read his earlier works first in order to understand his jargon. I guess, I'll read this book again in a year.

Campbell's works resonate to this day. His insights greatly help explain our current culture. Reading this book was truly an enlightening experience for me.

Lauren says

Re-read this one after several years, and it was even more powerful this time. I think the time and the age between helped in my understanding and comprehension. Very accessible text, and I am sure I will revisit

this one again someday - maybe I can finally watch the PBS special too.

Katerina says

Apparently everyone loves this book, which shocks me. I found a lot of his references very interesting but I really despised a lot of the author's commentary on them (as well as the hundreds of times the author contradicts himself). Yes, he did come up with some pretty deep conclusions, but at other times I found his ideas to be so infuriatingly ridiculous that I, in fact, threw the book at the car window at one point when I read a particularly infuriating nugget of absurdity (I believe it was something about how people really shouldn't be punished for crimes during times of war). Overall I found it to be very preachy.

Mahdi Lotfi says

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Kelly says

I really do think that this should be required reading in high school, everywhere. Or beyond. Just in general. I read it in preparation for my AP year, and it really helps you to open your eyes quite a bit. Does Joe Campbell like to stretch his points? Yes. Are some of his ideas and allusions a little far fetched? Absolutely. Will you roll your eyes a few times? Of course! Unless you are more starry eyed than even I was.

However. What he says on the subject of myth and our current culture is so true, and so insightful, that I think that everyone should pause to think about it. The changes in our cultural upbringing are so profound and Joe Campbell really helps to explain how and why that happened and what that does to your psyche, and spirit. Just as a brief example: What /do/ we do without that moment that tells us that we're an adult now, and it is time to take on the behavior of that part of our tale? We have our current generation of 30 somethings that still dress like teenagers, go to rock concerts, and still think that having 'commitment issues' is cool. Why do people spend so much time trying to 'find themselves' now? Partially due to the lack of a cohesive culture and unit that people can base off of. I would argue that his observations on the loss of myth and its effects on a society are quite valid. The book is an interview, and his voice is so compelling. It's not hard to get behind a lot of his opinions. You want to. It's not necessarily a wholly bad or a wholly good thing, but it says so much about our culture. I guarantee you that this book will present you with several thoughts you might not have had, or thought in depth about before. Really, I think everyone should read this at least once.

Colie! says

Joseph Campbell is seriously incredible. Read this, listen to the PBS audio tapes, read anything he writes... he's just brilliant, erudite, illuminating, fascinating, lovable, enlightening... he reveals things articulately that you always sensed in the shadowy regions of your instinct, and having them so clearly identified has a revelatory and refreshing effect. It makes you pensive and hopeful. It makes you feel good about being human, part of this thing we do called life. I don't know, I think everyone should give him a try. If anything, he's at least incredibly interesting.

Stephen says

My 100th book for goodreads should be a memorable one.

TRUE STORY: I was facing one of those milestone birthdays where you find yourself asking the big questions like, "What the heck am I doing?" "Am I on the right course?" "Who am I?"

I wandered into a local bookstore thinking "Surely there's a book in here with some answers for me." I walked out with "The Power of Myth" by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, the companion book for their PBS series of the same name.

A few pages into their dialog, I realized my angst wasn't anything new; I was on my own modest sort of "vision quest"...

Campbell, "going in quest of a boon, a vision, which has the same form in every mythology... You leave the world that you're in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem either of staying with that, or letting the world drop off, or return with that boon and try to hold onto it as you move back into your social world again. That's not an easy thing to do."

For me, it meant that I had to change everything in my life. And become a writer.

That IS not an easy thing to do.

Marvelous book filled with journeys, quests and timeless lessons from many of the world's cultures and myths.

Foad says

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Austin Kleon says

A series of interview with Campbell, accompanied by lots of images.

My notes:

James Williams says

This is my first first-person experience with Campbell. And I find it an incredibly frustrating book.

There are parts that are wonderful: when Campbell takes a few moments to tell some of the myths that have been floating around for years. Or when he compares the motifs in multiple myths from different cultures in different parts of the world. Campbell was clearly a master story-teller, and even in just a couple of sentences, he really makes these ancient stories come alive.

Similarly, the comparisons really help draw me in to the idea of a single world-wide culture of humanity. As a sci-fi fan, this is hardly a foreign idea; but a shared mythology really drives home the point that all human beings share some really fundamental experiences.

Where Campbell starts to lose me is when he insists that these shared experiences (birth, adolescence, death, the physical act of eating something that used to be alive, etc.) are indicative of some Mystery that underwrites the universe. Here he becomes less historian or anthropologist and more of a mystic. By using the word "transcendence" a lot, he seems to think that it doesn't matter that there's no evidence or reason to think that this Mystery is real and not merely a by-product of our own brains firing in a pattern fixed by millions of years of evolution.

As a rationalist or realist or materialist or skeptic or whatever label you find on me, I find this sort of spiritualism pointless and silly. Beyond that, I think that focusing on this fanciful mystery so heavily can really lead to serious problems with living. At one point, Campbell says something to the effect of "But you can't try to make life better. This is all there is. You have to learn to accept it." But that's absurdly untrue. Thanks to people who refused to learn to accept it, we've built democracies that are more-or-less egalitarian (and thousands of times better for the average citizen than the brutal civilizations that gave us some of these myths). Thanks to people who refused to learn to accept life, we've developed communications technologies that allow mothers to not have to give up their children to distance in quite the same way that they had to before. We've developed medicine that give people more time than ever with their loved ones (including Campbell himself who was in his eighties when this conversation took place). And, it's entirely possible that we'll defeat death one day. Not in the mythical way that Campbell celebrates death leading to rebirth of a new generation. But actually making it so that death just doesn't happen anymore (at least, not death of old age: that's the first goal and it seems perfectly attainable in the next couple of centuries).

Think of that.

And none of this could ever happen if people took Campbell's advice of taking nature-as-it-is as the the only good way of the world. This approach made perfect sense to tribal hunter-gathers a thousand year's ago. I

think it's possible that, as a species, we've moved past that just a little. While nature is red in tooth and claw, maybe we can do a little better than that.

Campbell also commits one of my major pet peeves. At one point, he says something to the effect of "scientists don't know what a particle is. Is it a wave? Is it a thing? They don't know!". From this, he concludes that there must be a magic energy field in the universe which gives everything life. Or something. It's "transcendent" so he doesn't feel that he has to be specific.

This perversion of science *really* annoys me. Aside from getting the particle physics wrong (it's not that we "don't know". It's that the duality is actually what's going on. Or something. I'm also not a physicist so I won't pretend to have a real understanding of any of this!), he also really fails to understand the point of science. Scientists (and, through them, our entire civilization) are trying to understand the innermost workings of the universe. You can never do that if, when you find a question you don't know the answer to, you give up and say "Magic!".

The saddest thing is that this book has far more bad spiritualism than it does good history. Hence my low rating. Ultimately, I think the myths of our past have more to teach us about who we were and we are. Campbell thinks they also teach us what we should be. I find that notion to be abhorrent: we can be so much better than we are or were; and if we're going to settle for that, then we may as well give up. There's no more point to us.

Since the book is so much of this, I can't love it or even like it. Fortunately, there's enough in here that I do like (in bits and pieces), that I'm still looking forward to reading *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I understand that this is more historical and factual. Also, Campbell wrote it when he was much younger. So I'm hoping that the religious and spiritual life he made developed later in life won't pervade it so much.

I suppose I'll just have to find out.

Malynda Alice says

I don't know how he does it, but every time I read/hear/stumble upon some vague quotation of Joseph Campbell's work, my day gets better. The sensation I get when reading his work is of relief, that all the seemingly static and infallible truths of the world stem from very simple needs. Somehow knowing that frees me to pursue the quenching of the needs, rather than the physical trappings we have set up around that need. It is very interesting.

This book is a sort of revised and embellished version of the video interviews of Campbell conducted by Bill Moyers on Skywalker Ranch (home of George Lucas). The video is six hours long and was slimmed down from 26 hours of conversation on myth and its place in our lives. Joseph Campbell is so insightful--he sees the humanity of the study, as well as the science, spouting such sincere and life-changing directions as "follow your bliss." I mean, dang.

brian tanabe says

I started reading the hardcover version of this and immediately realized it is a companion to a PBS series

between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell. So I decided to switch to the audio version – highly, highly recommended over the book.

I found myself connecting with a lot of the passages, but one passage in particular definitely stands out, tackling the meaning of life. While I have a great amount of respect for Moyers, I was slightly annoyed at times with his attempts to assert his equanimity to Campbell and so I appreciate this particular exchange because of Moyers' immediate disagreement. And then like Buddha himself, Campbell happily goes on to explain himself. So beautiful.

Bill Moyers: And yet we all have lived a life that had a purpose. Do you believe that?

Joseph Campbell: I don't believe life has a real purpose. I mean when you really see what life is, it's a lot of protoplasm with an urge to reproduce and continue in being.

BM: Not true. That's not true.

JC: Now wait a minute. Just sheer life can't be said to have a purpose because look at all the different purposes it has all over the lot. But each incarnation you might say, has potentiality and the function of life is to live that potentiality. Well how do you do it? Well again, when my students would ask, "Should I do this? Should I do that? Dad says I should do this." My answer is, follow your bliss. There is something inside you that knows you're on the beam, that knows you're off the beam. And if you get off the beam to earn money, you've lost your life."

Jason Koivu says

The Power of Myth explores so much more than myth. It delves into the essence of life itself.

Joseph Campbell was mythologist, professor, writer, lecturer, historian...he was so much. His wealth of knowledge on faith, philosophy and humanity was astounding. He has left us, but he has left behind a body of work, a legacy of compassion and understanding for us and future generations. Thanks to this interview, conducted by journalist Bill Moyers, we have an encapsulated version of his teachings from Campbell's own mouth. The interview was and has been broadcast on PBS stations since the late '80s and includes some nice visuals, however, it's not necessary to view. This audiobook suffices.

You get some of what you'd expect from a title such as *The Power of Myth*: Heroes and legends from traditional sources such as the epic Greek poems and Norse gods; origin stories from Native America and Africa. But you also get Star Wars. The interview having been conducted at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch, some of the discussion spoke on the use of mythical archetypes, which became intrinsic to the success of the movie's popularity. After all, where would Luke be without the Force, and what is the Force but faith?

Yes, religion goes hand in hand with mythology. In many, or most, cases it is one and the same. Campbell's take on religion is refreshing. Hearing him speak on the various kinds of world religions, their differences and even more so their similarities, is enlightening.

When I first saw *The Power of Myth* on tv, I was only interested in the Star Wars material and the more fantastical elements of mythology, the bits about the gods and monsters. Today, while listening to the discussion, I'm most interested in the aspects of the birth, life and death cycle and of faith. Not that I'm any more religious than the atheist teen I once was, but these are the everyman topics. It is the human experience

that most entralls me now. Luckily for young me and middle-aged me (and probably old me), there's a little something in *The Power of Myth* for all.
