

The Power of Myth

A Conversation Between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers

In 1988, PBS produced a six-hour series called The Power of Myth. It consisted of six conversations between Joseph Campbell, author and professor of literature, and Bill Moyers, journalist and documentarian. Subsequently, these conversations were published as a book, which became a best-seller. Here are some excerpts from the chapter called "The Hero's Adventure."

MOYERS: Why are there so many stories of the hero in mythology?

CAMPBELL: Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.

MOYERS: So in all cultures, whatever the local costume the hero might be wearing, what is the deed?

CAMPBELL: Well, there are two types of deeds. One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle and saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life and then comes back with a message.

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from which something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning.

But the structure and some of the spiritual sense of this adventure can be seen in the puberty or initiation rituals of early tribal societies, through which a child is compelled to give up its childhood and become an adult – to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo. We are in childhood in a condition of dependency under someone's protection and supervision for some fourteen to twenty-one years – and if you're going on for your Ph.D., this may continue to perhaps thirty-five. You are in no way a self-responsible, free agent, but an obedient dependent, expecting and receiving punishments and rewards. To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance acquires a death and a resurrection. That's the basic motif of the universal hero's life journey - leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or more mature condition.

MOYERS: So even if we happen not to be heroes in the grand sense of redeeming society, we still have to take that journey inside ourselves, spiritually and psychologically.

CAMPBELL: That's right...

MOYERS: How is a hero different from a leader?

CAMPBELL: That's a problem Tolstoy dealt with in *War and Peace*. Here you have Napoleon ravaging Europe and now about to invade Russia, and Tolstoy raises this question: Is the leader really a leader, or is he simply the one out front on a wave? In

psychological terms, the leader might be analyzed as the one who perceived what could be achieved and did it.

MOYERS: It has been said that a leader is someone who discerned the inevitable and got in front of it. Napoleon was a leader, but he wasn't a hero in the sense that what he accomplished was great for humanity's sake. It was for France, the glory of France.

CAMPBELL: Then he is a French hero, is he not? This is the problem for today. Is the hero of a given state or people what we need today, when the whole planet should be our field of concern? Napoleon is the nineteenth century counterpart of Hitler in the twentieth. Napoleon's ravaging of Europe was horrific.

MOYERS: So you could be a local god and fail the test on a cosmic level?

CAMPBELL: Yes. Or you could be a local god, but for the people whom that local god conquered, you could be the enemy. Whether you call someone a hero or a monster is all relative to where the focus of your consciousness may be.

MOYERS: So we have to be careful not to call a deed heroic when, in a larger, mythological sense, it simply doesn't work that way.

CAMPBELL: Well, I don't know. The deed could be absolutely a heroic deed - a person giving his life for his own people, for example.

MOYERS: The German soldier who dies -

CAMPBELL: - is as much a hero as the American who was sent over there to kill him.

MOYERS: So does heroism have a moral objective?

CAMPBELL: The moral objective is that of saving people, or saving a person, or supporting an idea. The hero sacrifices himself for something - that's the reality of it...

MOYERS: Does your study of mythology lead you to conclude that a single human quest, a standard pattern of human aspiration and thought, constitutes for all mankind something that we have in common, whether we lived a million years ago or will live a thousand years from now?

CAMPBELL: There's a certain type of myth which one might call the vision quest, going in quest of a boon, a vision, which has the same form in every mythology. That is the thing I tried to present in the first book I wrote, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. All these different mythologies give us the same essential quest. 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 of either staying with that and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again. That's not an easy thing to do.

MOYERS: So the hero goes for something; he's not simply an adventurer?

CAMPBELL: There are both kinds of heroes, some that choose to undertake the journey and some that don't. In one kind of adventure, the hero sets out responsibly and intentionally to perform the deed. For instance, Odysseus' son Telemachus was told by Athena, "Go find your father." That father quest is a major hero adventure for young people. That is the adventure of finding out what your career is, what your nature is, what your source is. You undertake that intentionally. Or there is the legend of the Sumerian sky goddess, Inanna, who descended into the underworld and underwent death to bring her beloved back to life.

Then there are adventures into which you are thrown - for example, being drafted into the army. You didn't intend it, but you're in now. You've undergone a death and a resurrection: you've put on a uniform, and you're another creature.

One kind of hero that often appears in Celtic myths is the princely hunter who has followed the lure of a deer into a range of forest that he has never been in before. The animal there undergoes a transformation, becoming the Queen of the Faerie Hills, or something of that kind. This is a type of adventure in which the hero has no idea what he is doing, but suddenly finds himself in a transformed realm.

MOYERS: Is the adventurer who takes that kind of trip a hero in the mythological sense?

CAMPBELL: Yes, because he is always ready for it. In these stories, the adventure that the hero is ready for is the one he gets...

MOYERS: We seem to worship celebrities today, not heroes.

CAMPBELL: Yes, and that's too bad. A questionnaire was sent around one of the high schools in Brooklyn which asked, "What would you like to be?" Two thirds of the students responded, "a celebrity." They had no notion of having to give of themselves in order to achieve something.

MOYERS: Just to be known.

CAMPBELL: Just to be known, to have fame - the name and fame. It's too bad.

MOYERS: But does a society need heroes?

CAMPBELL: Yes, I think so.

MOYERS: Why?

CAMPBELL: Because it has to have constellating images to pull together all these tendencies to separation, to pull them together into some intention.

MOYERS: To follow some path.

CAMPBELL: I think so...

MOYERS: Do movies create hero myths? Do you think, for example, that a movie like *Star Wars* fills some of that need for a model of the hero?

CAMPBELL: I've heard youngsters use some of George Lucas's terms - "the Force" and "the dark side." So it must be hitting somewhere. It's a good, sound teaching, I would say.

MOYERS: I think that explains in part the success of *Star Wars*. It wasn't just the production value that made that such an exciting film to watch; it was that it came along at a time when people needed to see in recognizable images the clash of good and evil. They needed to be reminded of idealism, to see a romance based upon selflessness rather than selfishness.

CAMPBELL: The fact that the evil power is not identified with any specific nation on this earth means you've got an abstract power, which represents a principle, not a specific historical situation. The story has to do with an operation of principles, not of this nation against that. The monster masks that are put on people in *Star Wars* represent the real monster force in the modern world. When the mask of Darth Vader is removed, you see an unformed man, one who has not developed as a human individual. What you see is a strange and pitiful sort of undifferentiated face.

MOYERS: What's the significance of that?

CAMPBELL: Darth Vader has not developed his own humanity. He's a robot. He's a bureaucrat, living not in terms of himself but in terms of an imposed system. This is the threat to our lives that we all face today. Is the system going to flatten you out and deny

you your humanity, or are you going to be able to make use of the system to the attainment of human purposes? How do you relate to the system so that you are not compulsively serving it? It doesn't help to try to change it to accord with your system of thought. The momentum of history behind it is too great for anything really significant to evolve from that kind of action. The thing to do is learn to live in your period of history as a human being. That's something else, and it can be done.

MOYERS: By doing what?

CAMBELL: By holding to your own ideals for yourself and, like Luke Skywalker, rejecting the system's impersonal claims upon you.

MOYERS: When I took our two sons to see *Star Wars*, they did the same thing the audience did when the voice of Ben Kenobi says to Skywalker in the climatic moment of that last fight, "Turn off your computer, turn off your machine and do it yourself, follow your feelings, trust your feelings." And when he did, he achieved success, and the audience broke out into applause.

CAMPBELL: Well, you see, that movie communicates. It is in a language that talks to young people, and that's what counts. It asks, are you going to be a person of heart and humanity – because that's where the life is, from the heart – or are you going to do whatever seems to be required of you by what might be called "intentional power"? When Ben Kenobi says, "May the Force be with you," he's speaking of the power and energy of life, not of programmed political intentions....

MOYERS: When I was a boy and read *Knights of the Round Table*, the myth stirred me to think I could be a hero. I wanted to go out and do battle with dragons; I wanted to go into the dark forest and slay evil. What does it say to you that myths can cause the son of an Okalahoma farmer to think of himself as a hero?

CAMPBELL: Myths inspire the realization of the possibility of your perfection, the fullness of your strength, and the bringing of solar light into the world. Slaying monsters is slaying the dark things. Myths grab you somewhere down inside. As a boy, you go at it one way, as I did reading my American Indian stories. Later on, myths tell you more, and more, and still more. Myths are infinite in their revelation.

MOYERS: How do I slay that dragon in me? What's the journey each of us has to make, what you call "the soul's high adventure"?

CAMPBELL: My general formula for my students is "Follow your bliss." Find where it is and don't be afraid to follow it.

MOYERS: Is it my work or my life?

CAMPBELL: If the work that you're doing is the work that you chose to do because you are enjoying it, that's it. But if you think, "Oh, no! I couldn't do that!" that's the dragon locking you in. "No, no, I couldn't be a writer," or "No, no, I couldn't possibly do what So-and-so is doing."

MOYERS: In this sense, unlike a hero like Prometheus, we're not going on our journey to save the world but to save ourselves.

CAMPBELL: But in doing that, you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes, there's no doubt about it. The world without spirit is a wasteland. People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules and who's on top, and so forth. No! Any world is a valid world if it's alive. The thing to do is bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find where the life is and become alive yourself....

MOYERS: Which stories from mythology help us understand death?

CAMPBELL: You don't understand death, you learn to acquiesce in death... The story of Oedipus and the Sphinx has something to say of this. The Sphinx in the Oedipus story is not the Egyptian Sphinx, but a female form with the wings of a bird, the body of an animal, and the breast, neck, a face of a woman. What she represents is the destiny of all life. She has sent a plague over the land, and to lift the plague, the hero has to answer the riddle she presents: "What is it that walks on four legs, then two legs, then on three?" The answer is, "Man." The child creeps about on four legs, the adult on two, and the aged walk with a cane.

The riddle of the Sphinx is the image of life itself through time – childhood, maturity, age, and death. When – without fear – you have faced and accepted the riddle of the Sphinx, death has no further hold on you, and the curse of the Sphinx disappears. The conquest of the fear of death is the recovery of life's joy. One can experience an unconditional affirmation of life only when one has accepted death, not as contrary to life, but as an aspect of life. Life in its becoming is always shedding death, and on the point of death. The conquest of fear yields the courage of life. That is the cardinal initiation of every heroic adventure – fearlessness and achievement.

Campbell, Joseph. "The Power of Myth." By Bill Moyers. Literary Cavalcade,
Nov. / Dec. 1988.

“The Power of Myth”

1. How does Campbell define a “hero”?
2. What are the two types of deeds that the hero performs?
3. What is often the purpose of the usual hero adventure?
4. What is this “psychological” transformation that everyone has to undergo?
5. What is the basic motif of the universal hero’s journey?
6. How is a hero different from a leader?
7. Does heroism have a “moral objective” according to Campbell? What is it?
8. What are two types of heroic adventures?
9. Explain the “vision quest.”
10. Explain the “father quest.”
11. What is the problem with worshipping celebrities?
12. Why does a society need heroes?
13. Why is Star Wars so important as a model of the heroic?
14. Explain what “the Force” is according to Campbell?
15. Explain how “the conquest of fear yields the courage of life.”