4. Mythology--Stories of Who We Are

Some of the myths we like are the traditional ones of Greco-Roman, Scandinavian, American Indian, African, or other countries' gods and goddesses, or of such fairytale creatures as elves, dwarves, and dragons. Other myths are contemporary "urban" myths. Urban myths are stories that make up our modern lives and sound possibly true, even though they almost never are: most of us, for example have heard about alligators ten feet long living in the underground sewer system of the closest city, or of the serial killer with a hook for a hand and the dating couple who find the hook dangling from their car's door handle after they leave a lonely place where they were parked. Still other myths are those of our own individual making or of our peer groups—the time Grandpa, Grandma, or a close friend did this or that--stories that become embroidered, made ever better by slight exaggeration, over a period of time. Other myths come from or cultural or geographical heritages, myths such as those about Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Pecos Pete, John Henry, Ichabod Crane, Trickster God, etc. All of these myths are part of our present and past cultural traditions; in many ways, they define who and what a culture is.
Ancient, Classical, and Medieval Mythic Gods and Beings

Humans have believed in gods, goddesses, and other mythic beings from the earliest recorded times through the present. These beliefs have taken many forms over the millennia. A few of the major trends are as follows.

Creation Myths and the Ancients: Most cultures have creation myths and myths of how the first gods/goddesses developed. Many of these myths speak of the original or primal Being as a single, all-encompassing god that was both male and female. This god somehow divided into (or created--as in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Adam and Eve story) male and female. In many cultures, a primal egg or egg-like shape existed from which the universe was created. Once male and female principles had been divided--often creating a primal Father God and a primal Mother God--then other gods followed or developed somehow from them. In Greek myth, for example, the Titans were said to have preceded the normal Greek gods about which we know. The Titans were an early race of gods about which the Greeks seemed to know little or have little to say, except that they were very powerful and gave birth to the normal Greek gods of which we know more.

Mother Religions: In actual practice, anthropological evidence suggests that most early cultures believed in some kind of female power or beings. Much of the evidence we have for this exists in the form of cave drawings and of small stone sculptures fashioned in the shape of females. The most famous of these is the Venus of Willendorf (ca. 15,000 BC), a squat, round figure several inches in length. Many similar objects have been found throughout the world, especially in Europe, some of them dating back to 20,000 BC or earlier. We also know, as Esther Harding and Anna Freud have discussed, that some of the earliest religious rituals consisted of women dancing, singing, and or chanting to female powers or deities. In addition, most religious activity before the advent of the classical gods and goddesses whose names we know seemed to have been led by women. Most contemporary theorists believe that it is probable that female, Mother-Goddess religions preceded male, Father-God religions in most places around the world.

Father Religions: The male, Father-God religions are the ones of classical antiquity about which we know so much: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Thor, Loki, Odin, the Great Spirit, and
Trickster Coyote are just a few of these gods and goddesses. These religions included a pantheon of male and female gods who behaved like an extended, dysfunctional family with a wide range of emotions and powers. In addition to these Father Religion gods and goddesses were a number of minor beings, powers, forces, and spirits, most of which were connected to nature or important local or regional places or events. Nymphs (water, sea, and air), Naiads, fire beings, half-human and half-animal beings, and many others are among these lesser mythological spirits in ancient times. Many theorists believe these lesser mythic beings may have been older nature gods and goddesses that at one time were important in local cultures, and as these cultures were conquered by and absorbed into the stronger, more dominant ones, the older gods and goddesses remained as minor mythological spirits.

Fairies, Elves, Dwarves, and Dragons

The typical mythic beings of our modern fairy tales and legends--those, for example, who inhabit J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, primarily are products of medieval tale and legend, which in turn developed from classical antiquity. From approximately 1200 BC to 500 AD, a new religious ferment developed, and the great religions of the world developed: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Islam (and other versions of these). The many minor mythic beings, spirits, and minor nature gods and goddesses of the earlier Father Religion times still were worshipped or at least respected in many locales, and these "pagan" or old-religion beliefs remained, especially in rural areas and in villages and towns remote from the centers of power. Just as the major religions consolidated their belief systems over many centuries of practice, so did the pagan, old-religion beliefs develop their own consolidation. The many different types of nature spirits and elementals on the European continent became, for example, fairies and elves. Various separate types of fairies, elves, and dwarves were (and by purists still are) recognized, but the three general types gradually became known from post-renaissance times to the present as having the particular forms by which we now call them. The same happened to dragons (which, in European countries, even as recently as medieval times, were known as different kinds of serpents, lizards, and giant snakes), goblins, and other basic types of mythic beings that now appear in the children's and folk literature of most contemporary cultures. Most of these mythic creatures' nature and appearance were affected to some extent by changing social, moral, and religious codes: it is said, for example, that the Inquisition--the period of time during which the Roman Catholic Church attempted violent means to stamp out paganism, witchcraft, and devil worship--was itself the most powerful creator of a modern
mythological system of witches, warlocks, their elemental animal spirit assistants such as black cats and crows, and the entire regalia of witchcraft myth that we find in works such as the Harry Potter novels and C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series.

**Psychological Meanings**

There are many psychological theories and meanings that interpret mythology.

Myth as Representation: The most common belief about the psychological value of myth is that myths represent different elements of our own psyches or souls. Even ancient writers engaged in this type of interpretation. Roman goddess Venus (Greek Aphrodite), for example, is perhaps the best-known symbol: she represents love, especially in its romantic and sometimes erotic aspects. Mars represents war, aggression, and assertion; wing-footed Mercury, messenger of the gods, represents messages; Hera, the home and hearth; etc.

In renaissance through contemporary times, these symbolic meanings have been important in literature and art as important literary references to psychological states of being (e.g., *The Birth of Venus*, Shakespeare's mythic beings and references to them, and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*), in astrology's planets and their godly cosmic tendencies, and in psychology as popular reference points (e.g., *Women Are from Venus, Men Are from Mars*). Our culture is literally submerged in such references.

Type and Archetype: Karl Jung, one of Sigmund Freud's most important followers, broke away from Freud to develop his own form of psychology and psychoanalysis: archetypal psychology. Jung developed the theory above of representation by arguing that each of the many different beings, creatures, and stories of mythology represent specific "types" of human experience, thought, and feeling, and that most of the popular mythic beings and stories--the ones most of us can understand and appreciate--represent "archetypes." "Archetypes" are symbolic meanings common to all humans. According to this theory, for example, heroes and heroines are archetypes of the strong part in each of us striving for perfection; goblins, dragons, and serpents are archetypes of the deeper, darker parts of our
personalities or areas of ourselves that feel dangerous to us; and elves, dwarves, and fairies are archetypes of our images of ourselves when we feel what these mythic creatures appear to embody.

These archetypes, says Jung, all exist in what he calls the "collective unconscious." This collective unconscious is to human society what Freud's individual unconscious is to one individual. Freud's unconscious represents the parts of our minds (and bodies) that operate outside of our consciousness, automatically: brain cells grow and make connections without our conscious awareness, our hearts beat, our bodies feel fear and joy while we sleep, unaware, etc. Similarly, according to Jung, we have a collective unconscious where our humanity's memories, dreams, and reflections lie. It is a pool of archetypal images, feelings, and thoughts that is common to us all and into which we all may tap at times. Many of these acquire or exist in mythological form when we bring them to the surface to discuss, analyze, and feel them.

Myth as a Necessary Component of the Human Psyche: Some theorists believe that myth is such a necessary part of the human psyche that we all need myth in our lives to live a normally functional existence. Recent theorists have argued, for example, that humans are genetically programmed to think in story form: stories, they say, are how we best remember the important events in our own lives, how we interpret meaning in the lives of those around us, and how we best remember world events.

As a psychological term, myth is defined as part truth and part fiction. According to mythic or story-oriented psychologists, almost every element of what we say, do, and believe is mythic. For example, when five people watch an event happen and then try to describe it afterward, there usually are five different versions of what happened, each version at least somewhat different. They are different, not because people necessarily lie or change reality, but rather because people see reality slightly differently. Each of us sees it through a slightly different filter, much like in the parable at the beginning of this lesson, of the four blind men trying to describe an elephant. We thus see part of reality and fill in the rest with our own assumptions, expectations, needs, wants, pasts, presents, futures, and desires. This, such theorists point out, is precisely the meaning of myth: we mythologize our lives, making stories of them that fit our understanding of reality. Not only is this how our minds work, but also we are attracted to such stories that make sense to us, and so many of us take great pleasure in hearing various kinds of myths, too. Myth- and story-oriented psychologists say that whether we make our own myths or we enjoy others, ancient or new, the important threads of our constructed selves--of our life meanings--are mythic.
The most important contemporary commentator on myth is Joseph Campbell. His many well-illustrated books and videos show mythic developments throughout history and the world. One of the more radical and important of Campbell's beliefs is that the myths of the world show such similar roots at their beginnings that it is possible, perhaps even probable, that the myths of all ancient cultures developed from a single mythic source.

Campbell argues, for example, that most developed ancient cultures had a primary mother goddess, a primary father goddess, fertility goddess, a messenger god, a fire god, and others. It is quite obvious, he says--and this part of his argument is well accepted by now--that the gods and goddesses of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, Germany, and even India bear such striking resemblances that an intermixing of attributes or even a common source is likely. In addition, nearby accessible countries such as China, Japan, Iceland, and those in Africa also developed some of their primary mythologies from this intermixing or common source.

However, says Campbell, the evidence suggests that even disparate mythologies from other parts of world, such as North and South America, apparently bear origins similar to the Egyptian, Indonesian, and European ones. There are too many unusual similarities, says Campbell, between gods who are completely divided from each other geographically. For example, he says, how did an American Indian trickster god who also was a messenger god--one who also stole from other gods--develop in complete separation from the trickster messenger god of Europe--Hermes/Mercury/Loki--who also stole? Campbell's answer is that there are too many similarities to be more coincidence. He develops a good deal of evidence to support his theory.

Campbell's theory is similar to the belief by some linguists that almost all languages throughout the world are based on a single ancient language called "proto-Indo-European." This linguistic theory, well accepted by many current linguists, shows how a set of several hundred basic sounds were the source of most words developed in ancient languages throughout most of the world.

If Campbell's theory is true, it means that at one time all human beings came from a single source, one that had a high culture--developed enough to not only create and develop stories
of gods and goddesses, but also a culture sufficiently developed to pass these stories down from
generation to generation. Such a culture must have had a well developed sense of language, of
symbolic meaning, and of the importance of developing a stable, functional society. If
Campbell is correct, this cultural development would have had to occur before humans left the
Eurasian and African continents and spread into North and South America. In other words,
civilization and culture first may have existed in some organized, intelligent form not just
several thousand years ago, as is now commonly believed, but possibly ten, twenty, or even
thirty or forty thousand years ago.

No matter how we choose to understand mythology, it is clear that the tracks it leaves through
time--both historically and in the present--help us interpret the nature of culture, society, and
what it means to be human. Without mythology, our history as a human race and indeed, for
many of us, our present, would be less rich. Mythology gives us a common set of symbols for
complex human actions and emotions, a set of symbols that stretches across many cultures and
time periods. Indeed, it is through the power and content of myth that we often can directly and
empathetically relate to peoples who have gone before us, even if they lived thousands of years
ago. The making of myth is so common to so many cultures of all times that we can argue that
myth is one of the deepest, widest, and most important ways that the human race itself creates
meaning.

Lesson 4 Review

Directions: Follow the directions in each exercise below. Be sure to use complete sentences and
correct English writing rules in your responses.

Exercise 1

Identify a myth not listed in the reading above and discuss its meaning according to Section 2,
Psychological Meanings.

Exercise 2

Identify a current story (written after 1950) that may be considered a modern day myth. Explain
how you think this story fits into the myth category. Refer to the information in Sections 1 and 2
to support your statements. Don’t forget to cite your sources and identify any websites that you
use in your answers.

Exercise 3

Summarize Joseph Campbell’s “Single Source Theory.”