



Coming to Joseph Campbell for Spiritual Direction

Joseph Campbell (JC): Welcome, please come in.

Spiritual Seeker (SS): Thank you for seeing me.

JC: Yes, of course. Thank you for coming here in 2019. What brings you?

SS: Your work about the importance and meaning of myth to human beings resonates with me. But I feel lost. I don't feel my own life is a part of a story that is shared by humankind. I am deeply pessimistic.

JC: As many have said we humans were meaning-seeking creatures. I spent my entire life working to understand stories, especially the big stories, or myths, as I called them, which give meaning to humankind.

I see that in 2019 humankind has lost its essential story. Let me give you an overview of the evolution of human myths and the dilemma which I perceive you are wrestling with.

SS: Yes, please do.

JC: Each era of human history has had a myth, or big story, that most people could understand. They felt that they were a part of this story and it gave meaning to their lives. Let me outline them.

First, there was the magical mythic era. Humans projected human attributes on imaginary magical figures, who they believed were responsible for the material world — these figures were called gods. When a god was angry and thunder clapped, humans had to do something to appease the angry god, such as give burnt offering sacrifices. You get the idea.

The first axial turning, around 2500 BC, brought a new era. The beginning of this new area is marked with the advent of Buddhism, the Greek philosophers and the Old Testament Jewish prophets. We see a turning from a magical story to a new story based on greater human consciousness.

This was a new era of coherent religious myth— whether you were Buddhist, Christian, Jewish or Muslim, you were a part of a world view that was dominated by the religious ideas of your tribal or ethnic culture. There was certainty and meaning in this story.

From the Christian perspective, a person was a part of the Great Chain of Being. Everyone understood their relationship to God and the meaning of their connections with others. All of these great religious traditions taught taking care of the sick, hungry, orphans and widows. In other words, these obligations spoke to the connectedness of everyone within their religious group. Christianity was ground breaking in that it was the first non-tribal, belonging religion.

SS: I think my grandparents would relate to seeing themselves within the story of a Christian myth.

JC: Yes, most people through the last century experienced this connection. And at the same time, modernity broke apart this mythic reality that held and provided meaning to most people. This was a slow process initially starting with the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods.

From the religious perspective it was signaled in the West, when Henry VIII broke off from the Catholic church, and when Martin Luther initiated the Protestant reformation. With Henry VIII and Martin Luther and the advent of modern science, religious cultural authority and religious mythic

meaning began eroding. On the one hand, religion was not from God as much as from what a secular ruler decided, and on the other, religious truth was not dependent on religious authority but what each person decided was true. Religion became more fragmented and the Christian myth in Western Europe and America began to fracture.

What took the place of the Christian myth was the myth of the imperial nation state. This myth took several forms each centered on one of three different ideas: superiority, equality and freedom. In all these myths everyone had their place as a soldier or producer of goods to sustain the mythical body of a nation state.

SS: I have never thought of nation state myths. Please explain these for me.

JC: The superiority nation state myth was played out by many nations during the days of empire building, especially during the 1800s by Britain and came to a climatic end with the thankfully aborted effort of Hitler to create a super-race imperial state. Hitler's national socialism embodied the idea of a superior people ruling the world and taking care of the superior people— a fulfillment of identity. Nazism was defeated, and despite continued fringe support, that myth has ended.

SS: What came next?

SS: Emerging in 1917 in Russia and later in China, we see the advent of the egalitarian nation state myth. In this myth everyone is equally a part of the nation state and a religious-like, heroic future material vision of plenty for all is held up as an ideal.

This heroic future ideal was so appealing that for years it tolerated despotic totalitarian leadership for the sake of the ideal vision.

SS: When did this mythic era end?

JC: The most iconic moment of this era ending was when the Berlin Wall fell. Of course, the decline of Communism took decades and a Confucian version of it with segments of free enterprise still exists in China.

SS: Tell me about the third version of the imperial state.

JC: Ah, yes the liberal democracy nation state myth. This started in the 1700s with the American and French revolutions, and offered the myth of economic freedom, political freedom and personal freedom (for white people). White people were happy with this myth as long as it seemed to provide economic stability, at least the trappings of political freedom, and a sense of personal freedom often understood as extreme individualism in the United States. When those in this myth, who believed, rightly or wrongly that they were losing their economic stability (expressed as a loss of economic freedom, which they blamed on the government) and/or loss of the illusion of privilege (experienced as a loss of personal freedom), a regressive reaction to try to preserve this myth occurred.

This populist revolt reached a crest in the 2010s and 2020s, emerging from the anger of people who, like you, felt they were no longer a part of a shared myth, albeit a white one.

SS: I don't think I identify with those people at all.

JC: I understand that you do not. I don't think you would be here if you did. But sometime myths die slowly and you do have in common this experience of loss of a larger myth that most of society could feel apart of. Your response to this loss is existential loss, worry and pessimism. And to come see me.

Many others experienced loss because 1) they did not identify with the increasing reality of a multicultural society and 2) they experienced the loss of real or imagined white privilege.

Part of this estrangement occurred because liberal democracy morphed into this myth of individualistic meritocracy. Those left out felt rejected by the liberal democratic nation state myth they had bought into. They were increasingly marginalized by, on the one hand, feeling the winners of the meritocracy race controlled and perpetuated a cultural myth of gender plurality and secular bias, and on the other, by eroding economic security. Anger swirled into the political arena from the perceived loss of the freedoms that the liberal democracy myth offered.

By the 2010s the meritocracy goal was to be a tech entrepreneur and make massive amounts of money for personal gain. Most people could not

participate in a meaningful way in this myth. It wasn't about them or for them.

SS: Well, I can relate to that. I am just an ordinary guy. I am not a meritocracy winner.

JC: I understand. Classically, in a liberal democracy the cultural goal was to go into a profession such as education, medicine, law or a useful trade where you would have skills people around you needed and you would serve people. Your life had meaning, and within a culture of free public education your children would have even a better opportunity to contribute and grow. This myth was largely intact when I died in 1987. Even African Americans who have been denied an equal place at the American dream-table for centuries held out hope for this mythic story to become real for them.

The terribly disheartening problem is that we have lost a common story or myth that we all can identify with and feel a part of. The United States and many other Western countries have lost their way. Right now, all the work I did in my lifetime to help people see the importance of myth seems to have been for nought.

SS: Do you see hope for the future, a new myth?

JC: With the loss of a common story, tribalism has re-emerged. With it there is a regression to a more unconscious way of understanding the world. At the same time the means to hijack people's mythic consciousness is very real and will become even more of a threat to humankind.

SS: What do you mean hijack people's consciousness?

JC: The Christian creation myth suggests Adam and Even were in a trance in the garden of Eden. You could say they were asleep. At some point they woke up, that is their brains got more subtle and complex, they were able to handle abstract reasoning and their consciousnesses grew. They woke up to see some things were good and some evil, and they became curious about this.

Now we see people are going back into tribal trances. This is encouraged and effected in 2019 by whatever media silo someone happens to

participate in. The techniques of Madison Avenue have been fine-tuned for a number of years since the start of television in the 1950s. Any time you consume something free you become a product that is sold to someone who wants to change your thinking without you knowing it, so you will become susceptible to ways of thinking that you believe are your personal preferences not those programmed for you. Of course, it is one thing for you to become convinced by watching a tv commercial that you desire a particular soda pop. It is an entirely different thing, but just a small jump, to be citizens in a nation state where money and media are used to warp election outcomes using the Internet.

America has forfeited political freedom to the Internet and the rich and entrenched power brokers who manipulate personal taste and ideological belief with it. So all different sectors of society—the haves, the almost haves and the have-nots—are feeling the absence of a compelling cohesive myth. Even those in the meritocracy myth who succeeded and have economic and personal freedom because of their wealth, when they look around they realize they do not have political freedom.

SS: Madison Avenue techniques have been around for a long while. You seem to be saying that in 2019 things are precipitously getting worse?

JC: Yes, through technology. Right now most trance behavior comes about through manipulation by the media you are exposed to, that is the manipulation is external to you, even though it is seeking to play with your mind. But soon this manipulation will come about internally. Your watch or Fitbit will provide data that when you observe certain things your pulse rate increases, you start to perspire, etc. In the West, as it is going now, all this data to mediate your thoughts and impulses and dictate your purchases and ideology will be controlled by large corporations. In North Korea, you can easily imagine in a few years everyone will be required to wear identity bracelets. If you walk down the street past a picture of Kim Jong-un and your bodily data stream indicates anger, chances are good you will not be around for long.

SS: So our challenge is to find a myth that will allow us to deal with this increasing ability of big data to manipulate our reality?

JC: Yes, something like that. There might be just the slightest glimmer of hope. The new myth needs to be one that encourages us all to take charge of

our way of having our taste and beliefs shaped. To use the tech term, we need to take charge of our own algorithm. If we don't, we will have large corporations or an autocratic government imposing theirs on us.

The new myth that has to emerge is one that embraces greater consciousness for everyone so we don't automatically fall for our thoughts and emotions as being who we are. The meditation and contemplative traditions that run across all religions show us that these tools can be used to retake our lives back from the automatic patterns of responding that we learn as our ego grows up. These spiritual tools also allow people to experience their connection with each other and nature. So it is possible, if people are partaking in a myth of greater consciousness that they might also have the political will to do something meaningful about climate change, which threatens everyone.

SS: So you are suggesting that the only response we have available to preventing our humanness from being hacked is to become more spiritual?

JC: People must be able to be in charge of their own algorithm, as well as feel more connected, to address global problems everyone faces.

The challenge is that there is no heroic leader or economic force that is at hand to generate the impulse for the kind of grassroots commitment to spiritual transformation that needs to occur.

Right now there is not a compelling narrative to encourage people to embody a new myth. For the most part a spiritual growth narrative has not emerged from religious institutions. On the contrary, most mainline denominations are on their back heels, and the religious brands that are growing are those catering to tribalistic regression.

SS: You paint a bleak picture.

JC: I believe it is always darker before the dawn of a new age. We are probably mistaken to be looking for heroic leadership for this new mythic era — a new Buddha or new Jesus. My intuition is that we are in a post-heroic age and that this kind of transformation will only occur organically from the grassroots.

SS: What would you name the new age?

JC: Unrecognized prophets in the world today are talking about an era of interspirituality.

SS: How would a sense of belonging for everyone arise in a new mythic era of interspirituality?

JC: From the process of the spiritual practices of meditation, or centering prayer, which allow people to take back their own algorithm. If everyone did their spiritual work — it is individual work, but is best and most quickly achieved in a community of fellow seekers — then there would exist a sense of interconnectedness and belonging of all people and we could focus on our common goodness as well as better face difficulties.

What I am talking about is the kind of transformation of consciousness that all the great spiritual teachers, like the Buddha and Jesus, spoke about. In the latter case, Jesus describes it as bringing about heaven on earth. While they both spoke about internal transformation, their followers tried to capture the wisdom of their lives in external forms and for the most part the need for internal transformation faded away.

One of the most important aspects of this work is that spiritual transformation allows for the arising of witnessing consciousness so that a person's patterns of reacting to life becomes apparent. More conscious individuals are less apt to have their humanity hacked by a high tech behemoth or an autocratic tyrant.

For the most part, the myths of world history gained their staying power from an external form e.g. going to temple or church, having a set of beliefs to learn. What I am suggesting is a myth that has internal vitality in people's consciousness. The beauty of spiritual growth and transformation is that it both frees the individual from his or her personal ego and tribal structures, and also connects people more universally in ways that would allow for continuing evolving creative external forms. Humankind might have for the first time both individual freedom and collective cooperation. Without this kind of spiritual revolution the odds are decidedly against the human race.

SS: Maybe there is hope. We have a universal mythic form in Fifa, the world-wide football (soccer) organization that, despite its governing

problems, fosters a common sport played around the world. I am a Liverpool fan and they did well in the 2018-2019 season and the team which has Muslim, Senegalese and Scottish stars draws great crowds whether it is playing in Liverpool, or the United States or Japan.

JC: That is a helpful example. Another example might be recycling. Twenty years ago hardly anyone recycled and a change in understanding of the magnitude of harm caused by our throw-away culture has made recycling the norm.

Maybe there is a sliver of hope. There are examples of external forms that induce cooperation and draw people together. Anything that does that on a large scale produces a cultural myth.

The mythic age of interspirituality would increase abundance and unity through a kind of diversity that spiritual consciousness cherishes. Greater diversity creates stronger more unified systems in the natural world and in the systems humans create. The mythic age of interspirituality would be one in which different religions were like different forms of native dress that people wore to acknowledge their sense of historical identity. The irony is that the more diversity you have the greater the unity experienced. Without diversity there is no contrast to give rise to a rich experience of unity. The experienced sense of unity and connectedness then allows each individual's transformed consciousness to experience a place of value and belonging to the entire family of humankind.