

Discussion Questions for *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers

1. Campbell defines myth in various ways in the book, including:
 - a. A way to experience life
 - b. A clue to the spiritual potential of human beings
 - c. The song of the imagination
 - d. The reconciliation of the conditions of life, that is, that life is about the killing of other organisms
 - e. The one grand story of humankind
 - f. Myth affirms that there is an invisible plane which supports the visible plane
 - g. Myth teaches us when to let go
 - h. A fairy tale is a child's myth

Do you agree with Campbell's various definitions of myth? Do you have a different definition of myth? Is there one definition that seems more apt than others?

2. Campbell claims that there are two different kinds of myths:
 - a. A portion that relates to nature and man's place in nature
 - b. A portion that is sociological, that is, how men fit into their societyDo you agree with Campbell that there are two types of myth? Are there other types of myths? Are there myths which do not fit into one of these two categories; if so, which ones?

3. The hero, according to Campbell is a:
 - a. Person who faces trial and tribulations as a result of bringing new possibilities into the field of interpreted experience
 - b. Lives in the field of time and must make decisions about good and evil
 - c. An artist who helps develop and communicate myths today (he cites James Joyce as an artist who develops modern myths)
 - d. Someone who has given his/her life to something that is bigger than his/her self
 - e. A person who embarks on a quest to find, discover, or begin something new
 - f. A person who sacrifices him/her self for the greater good

Do you agree with these various definitions of hero? Are there other kinds of heroes? Is the modern definition of a hero more akin to that of a celebrity, which Campbell derides?

4. Myth serves four functions according to Campbell:
 - a. Mystical
 - b. Cosmological
 - c. Sociological
 - d. Pedagogical

How do these four functions fit in with Campbell's various definitions of myth? Do myths have to have a purpose?

5. Campbell claims that myths and dreams originate in the unconscious; myth from the collective unconscious and dreams from the individual unconscious.

Why do myths have to derive from the unconscious? Does this imply that all men have certain unconscious beliefs which form the basis of mythology? How can all men share the same unconscious mythology?

6. Campbell claims that all religions have a resurrection and/or messiah myth, and that the resurrection myth depends on the type of culture that the myth is grounded-in.
 - a. In vegetative/matrilineal societies, the resurrection myth is grounded in the death and resurrection of plant life
 - b. In hunting culture, the resurrection myth is grounded in the sacred animal which gives up its life so that the “people: can thrive

Does Campbell’s assertion that all religions have resurrection myths somehow diminish the claims of the Christian and Jewish religions which assert that Christ has risen in the case of the Christian faith and that there is a messiah who will come in the case of the Jewish faith?

7. Campbell believes that there is a different emphasis in Eastern versus Western religions.
 - a. Eastern religions emphasize the renewal of paradise on earth, that is, paradise can be achieved by inward-directed actions, and the Earth is inherently holy.
 - b. Western religions believe that man is fallen and therefore corrupt, along with the Earth. Paradise can only be achieved in the afterlife after purification.
 - c. He believes that religion should not be understood literally, but metaphorically

Why does Campbell say that religions should be understood metaphorically? What does he mean by this? How do the different perspectives of the Earth lead to a different understanding of the nature of sin, as well as the idea that the Earth has somehow become polluted by man’s fall?

8. Campbell believes that all civilizations are founded on myth, and that in the West, mythology has lost its meaning, causing people to lose their way. He credits such things as gangs as a form of initiation that was formerly held by the rituals which were an important element of mythology. He says that people have become isolated from the world and that, as a result, they have a feeling of ennui.

Do you agree with Campbell that the loss of myth has created a sense of isolation and despair in society? How can the loss of mythology account for a loss of direction in the modern world? Why does Campbell believe that ritual is so important, and why does he think that ritual has lost its significance in the modern world?

9. Campbell’s advice to his student is for each of them to follow his/her bliss. What does he mean by this? What happens if everyone follows his/her bliss’ how does the world continue to function?