

“Blisters on the Way to Bliss”

A Story-based exploration of Bliss & the Hero’s Journey

By Catherine Svehla, Ph.D.



“Two Birds in the Tree of Life”

“Blisters on the Way to Bliss” is a New Mythos project produced with the support of OPUS Archives and the Joseph Campbell Foundation, which granted permission to use the material from the Campbell collection included herein. Copyright © 2010, Catherine Svehla and the Joseph Campbell Foundation. This material can be shared and reproduced for non-commercial purposes with proper attribution.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Genesis of the Project and Guiding Themes	3
Part One: Different Types of Quests and Questions	5
• The Frog Prince	
• Discussion Material	
• Nietzsche's Three Transformations of the Spirit	
Part Two: The Trackless Path	11
• Percival, the Grail, and the Fisher King	
• Discussion Material	
• Earned Character	
Part Three: Loyalty to Your Imperfections	19
• Blackfoot Myth of the Buffalo Dance	
• Discussion Material	
• The Buddha and the Bodhi Tree	
Part Four: Blisters on the Way to Bliss	24
• Personal Stories of Our Quests and Questions	
• Discussion Material	
• The Two Birds	
Selected Books By & About Joseph Campbell	27
Other Resources	27

Introduction

*“A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.”
—Joseph Campbell*

Joseph Campbell was a great storyteller, and in Joshua Tree, California, the High Desert Mythological RoundTable® Group is devoted to stories. Every month, we use a different myth or story as a lens through which to consider our lives and culture. Our collective capacity, as a group of ordinary folks, to deeply explore and expand the meanings and significance of these stories, to raise questions, find meanings, and get to know each other, is astounding. I always feel that we are carrying on in the Campbellian tradition, and since I am also a storyteller, it seemed right to organize the fruits of my research in his archives around some of his favorites.

The emphasis on Campbell and on story telling makes sense for another reason. “Blister on the Way to Bliss” was born from my desire for a new mythos or cultural narrative. Campbell was one of the first to clearly articulate, to a wide audience, the problems posed by an inadequate mythology. He also developed two of the most powerful and inspiring ideas we have about mythology and the modern (or post-modern) individual: “follow your bliss” and the mythic pattern of the Hero’s Journey. How these notions came to him can never be fully known, but Campbell was a student as well as a teacher of mythology. He loved and studied the images and stories, and his example suggests how we can conduct our own investigations into both his work and our own lives by doing the same.

But when I introduced the first discussion in this series, “Different Quests and Questions,” to the High Desert Mythological RoundTable, I was a bit nervous. This discussion revolves around the Grimm’s fairy tale “The Frog Prince,” also known as “Faithful Henry.” I am in love with the story after working with it and listening to Campbell tell it, on tape, a number of times. But I wondered if other adults would find a “simple,” “children’s” fairy tale juicy enough.

About twenty-five people gathered that evening. Everyone listened intently and laughed at the right places. When I finished, silence descended, lengthened. Then someone asked, “What happened to the kiss? I thought the princess kissed the frog to transform him but you tell us that she splatted him against the wall! What kind of princess is that?” Indeed.

There are an infinite number of answers to that question and we had an insightful and passionate conversation about this story for over an hour. Was the princess the woman of his dreams? Did she come into her own when she tossed the frog? Or was she a shallow, Paris Hilton-type? Why did she infuriate so many people in the group? We didn’t reach any consensus or draw absolute conclusions. We didn’t summarize what the story meant. Instead, we were provoked, engaged, invigorated, and entertained, by the story and by each other. At the end of the evening, several people confided to me that they had been dubious about the story.

Who would have thought that so many ideas and insights could come from a children's story?!

Joseph Campbell found this gold and shared it, repeatedly, in his lectures and books. The stories included here were often invoked in talks about bliss, the hero's journey, and the importance of a sustaining mythology. My personal understanding of these themes deepened when I began to focus on them. If you are interested in this aspect of Campbell's work, I offer them to you. The three stories at the heart of these discussion materials are stories that Campbell loved to tell, and perhaps you will too.



This exploration is organized into four separate discussions, each one designed to take about two hours, depending on the interest of the group. Although they were designed as a series, each story works independently and can be used to illustrate many other topics. Materials for the first three are comprised of a story, suggested discussion questions, and additional pieces from Campbell's work. The series culminates in an evening of storytelling among members of the group. I've included suggestions for framing and designing this story circle, along with some words from Campbell that might inspire the event.

A possible introduction question is also included for each of the four gatherings. Meetings of the High Desert Mythological Roundtable® Group begin with a round of introductions and an opening question. We usually have some new people, but some form of introductions is a good idea even when names and faces are familiar. A better container for group discussion and community is created when every person has a chance to speak, even briefly, and the answers to the opening question often provide an interesting context for what follows.

One final note, about my concerns and orientation to this project, which give it a particular flavor. I approached Campbell's ideas with a central concern: that bliss and the hero's journey be appreciated for their complexity, not reduced to another talking point in the rhetoric of optimistic, hyper-individualism. If a hero serves something larger than herself, I wondered, what does she serve? What did Campbell mean by "bliss?" What is the relationship between bliss, which seems to be a purely personal phenomenon, and the Hero's Journey, which culminates in a boon brought back to the community? Where is the shadow, the rejected, repressed, and unconscious, in the seeker, the hero, the quest, and in these notions of "bliss" and heroism? Finally, what does any of this have to do with the quest for a new, shared narrative?

I hope that the threads that weave through these four discussions will result in a deepening understanding of bliss, the hero's journey, and the prospect for a new mythos. But as the poet Rilke said, we must live the questions now and grow into the answers. Many, many thanks to OPUS Archives and the New Mythos grant committee for their support, and to the Joseph Campbell Foundation, which has granted me permission to use material collected from the archives and to share it with you.

Part One: Different Types of Quests and Questions

“The life of adventure is the quality of life lived in terms of its own inward dynamics.”—Joseph Campbell

A good introduction question for this gathering is: “Is there a story that has guided you or influenced your worldview?”

According to Campbell, myths perform four functions: mystical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical. A good myth inspires awe and wonder. It explains how the universe works and how people should properly relate to one another and the world. A good myth also provides models or guideposts to help the individual navigate the different phases of life. Throughout his work, Campbell emphasizes the importance of life stages: the long period of dependency, the move to adulthood, old age and the advent of death, and the need for rites of passage. Life is a series of births, deaths, and rebirths, he said, and we must make our way through them and discover who we are in the process.

This last point is crucial, I think, to understanding Campbell and his lasting appeal. He was a champion of the potential of Western individuality, and he taught people how to use mythology to further their personal quest for total fulfillment. A good myth, *your* good myth, is a valuable tool. In traditional societies, he said, there were essentially two mythologies—the mythology of the village compound and the mythology of the hero who ventured forth from it. Now we only have one, the mythology of the hero. There is no village compound anymore. Everything is in flux. We don’t have a tight social order and prescribed, even inherited roles. If your dad was a doctor that doesn’t mean you can’t be a piano tuner. Each of us is challenged to live a unique individual life and to take on the terrible risks of doing so.

The hero’s journey is a model for these life transitions but different needs or questions appear at different times. Campbell believed that recognition of the questions or quests that are appropriate to different stages in life was important. He frequently talked about Dante’s dark wood, or Yeats’ metaphor of the phases of the moon, or the four Hindu *ashramas* (life stages) to elaborate on the particular qualities of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Today, he observed, some Western people try to grow up too fast. Campbell told a funny anecdote about a young woman who told him that her generation went straight from infancy to wisdom. “That’s great,” he said, “All you’ve missed is life” (*Pathways to Bliss*. p. 108).

Appreciating our current life stage helps us understand our particular question or challenge. Campbell talked about these kinds of quests:

1. The Quest for identity, to find one’s proper role in society. This is often related to the quest for the father, and/or the search for one’s inner divinity. An example that Campbell used is the Navaho myth of the Hero Twins.
2. The Quest for love. This is one way to read Grimm’s fairy tale, “The Frog Prince.”

- 3, The Quest for power. Think of Jason and the Golden Fleece, for example.
4. The Quest for illumination, which is of another order entirely and involves death and resurrection and often a shamanistic psychological crisis.
5. The Quest for truth, which must be found in personal experience, not science or religion or social forms. This is an aspect of the mid-life crisis.
6. The quest for earned character, which may be the culmination of all the others.

The Frog Prince

This version of the story is like the one that Campbell told, based on the original by the Brother's Grimm. You can find a written transcript of the story in Campbell's unique style in *Pathways To Bliss*, p. 124.

Once upon a time, there lived a king who had three beautiful daughters. They were all lovely, but the youngest was so beautiful that the sun itself, which, indeed, has seen so much, marveled every time it shone upon her face. In the vicinity of the king's castle there was a large, dark forest, and in this forest there was an old linden tree, and beneath this tree there was a well. When the weather was warm the princess would go out into the forest and sit at the edge of the cool well. To pass the time she would take a golden ball, throw it into the air, and catch it. It was her favorite pastime and the golden ball was her favorite possession.

Now one day it happened that the princess's golden ball did not fall into her hands, that she held up high, but instead fell to the ground and rolled right into the water. The princess followed it with her eyes, but the ball disappeared, and the well was so deep that she could not see its bottom. She began to cry bitterly, "My beautiful golden ball is lost and what will I do? I'd give anything, if only I could get my ball back: my clothes, my precious stones, my pearls, anything in the world."

She cried louder and louder and she could not console herself. As she was thus lamenting, someone called out to her, "What is the matter with you, princess? Your crying would turn a stone to pity." She looked around to see where the voice was coming from and saw a frog, which had stuck his thick, ugly head out of the water. "Oh, it's you, old splish-splasher," she said. "I am crying because my golden ball has fallen into the well."

"Please stop crying," answered the frog. "I can help you. I can retrieve your golden ball for you. But what will you give me if I bring back your plaything?" "Whatever you want, dear frog," she said, "Why, I'll give you my beautiful dress. Or how about my pearls and precious stones? No, better yet, I'll give you my golden crown."

The frog answered, "I do not want your pearls and precious stones, and frankly, I have no use for the dress. I don't even want your golden crown. But if you will love me and accept me as your companion, if will let me sit next to you at your table and eat from your golden plate and drink from your cup and sleep in your bed, then I'll dive down and bring your golden ball back to you. Will you will promise this to me?"

"Oh, yes," said the princess, drying her eyes, "I promise all of that to you if you will just bring the ball back to me." The frog was thrilled and immediately dove down into the water. But privately the princess thought, "What is this stupid frog trying to say? Croak, croak, croak. He cannot be a companion to a human."

The frog paddled back up a short time later with the golden ball in his mouth and threw it onto the grass. "Here you are my princess," he said.

The princess was filled with joy when she saw her beautiful golden ball once again. She picked it up and ran back to the castle, leaving the frog behind. "Wait, wait," called the frog, "Take me along. I cannot run as fast as you." But she was long gone. The poor frog was left at the well.



The next day the princess sat down at the grand dinner table with her father the king. It was a marvelous meal with lots of her favorite foods. While she was eating there was a sound outside on the marble steps: plip, plop, plip, plop. That was strange enough, but then came a knock at the door, and a voice called out, "Princess, beautiful princess, open the door for me!"

The princess got up from the table and went to see who was outside. She opened the door and there sat the frog. Oops. Shaken, she slammed the door shut and returned to the table. The king saw that she seemed a bit tense and asked, "My child, why are you afraid? Is there a giant outside the door who wants to get you?" "Oh, no," she answered. "It's just a disgusting frog."

"A frog," said the king, "What does the frog want with you?"

"Oh, father," she said, "yesterday I went to the well in the forest and while I was playing my golden ball fell into the water. And because I was crying so much, the frog brought it back, and because he insisted, I promised him that he could be my companion. But I didn't think that he could leave his water. But now he is just outside the door and wants to come in." Just then there came a second knock at the door, and a voice called out: "Princess, beautiful princess, open up the door for me. Remember what you promised me yesterday, down by the well? I got your golden ball back, now open up the door for me."

The king said, "If you've made a promise then you must keep it. Go and let the frog in." The princess went and opened the door, and the frog hopped in and followed her up to her chair. After she had sat down again, he called out, "Lift me up onto your chair and let me sit next to you." She hesitated---the frog was pretty slimy looking and gross. But her dad was watching so she gingerly lifted him up with two fingers. When the frog was seated next to her he said, "Now push your golden plate closer, so we can eat together." She did it, but one could see that she did not want to.

The frog enjoyed his meal, but for her every bite stuck in her throat. Finally he said, "I have eaten all I want and am tired. Now carry me to your room and make your bed so that we can go to sleep." The princess was appalled at the idea of the slimy, cold frog in her beautiful, clean bed. But she finally picked him up with two fingers, carried him upstairs, and set him in a corner. Then she got into bed.

The frog crept up to her and said, "I am tired, and I want to sleep as comfortably as you do. Pick me up and put me on your pillow or I'll tell your father." The princess was thoroughly disgusted and she had had enough. "You will have your rest frog," she said, and she picked him up and threw him against the wall with all her might. Splat.

But when the frog fell down, he was a handsome prince. Now this changed things! He told her how a wicked witch had enchanted him, and that only the girl of his dreams could have rescued him from the well.

The next morning, just as the sun was waking them, a carriage pulled up, drawn by eight fine horses with white ostrich feathers on their heads. The young couple said good-bye to the king, who was pleased that his daughter would marry. At the rear of the carriage stood the young king's servant, faithful Henry. Henry lifted them both inside and took his place at the rear of the carriage. Off they went.

After they had gone a short distance, the prince heard a crack from behind, as though something had broken. He turned around and said: "Henry, it sounds like the carriage is breaking apart." "No, my lord," answered Henry, "the carriage is not breaking. That is the sound of the bands that have bound my heart breaking for joy, because you are no longer a frog and are once again a prince."

They safely reached the prince's kingdom and lived happily ever after.

Discussion Material

A good question or two can frame a discussion or get the conversational ball rolling (sorry!). Although there is often a popular position or favored interpretation, there are no wrong answers. What we like or don't like about a story and the interpretation we put forward provides some insight into our current life situation and outlook. A good story provokes thought. Here are some possible discussion questions (but let your own group dynamics be your guide):

- Campbell used this fairy tale to illustrate the Hero's Journey. Do you think this a heroic story? Who is the hero?
- The moment that the princess throws the frog against the wall is powerful and even disturbing. What can be made of the splat against the wall instead of a kiss? Why has the kiss version been more popular?
- Who or what is transformed in this story?
- What does the golden ball represent?
- What does the character faithful Henry suggest about the story? How does he fit in?

These are a few notes from Campbell's work that I found useful in working with the story and reflecting on the themes of bliss, the hero's journey, and the challenges posed by both. Consider them fuel for the fire, not "answers."

- Campbell uses this story in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* to illustrate the “Call to Adventure.” The adventure starts with a blunder, he observes. The princess plays with her most precious possession beside a deep well. But a blunder is often an energy that we unconsciously put into motion that initiates a passage of some sort, a passage that amounts to a dying and a birth. (Campbell also uses the story in Chapter VI, The Self as Hero, in *Pathways to Bliss*).
- The golden ball is associated with the sun and the three gold bands that snap. Gold symbolizes the eternal, the metal of the sun. The ball is also an archetypal form. Roundness, spheres, and circles suggest wholeness. The golden ball may be the deep Self. Campbell often said that the ultimate Quest in modern Western culture is something that has never existed before, the mystery of our own unique self. That said, this story can also be read as a quest for love or a rite of sexual passage into maturity.
- Whether an unconscious blunder or the deep Self, Fate or Destiny, each life has an inner dynamic or thread. Campbell liked the Schopenhauer essay, “On the Apparent Intention in the Fate of the Individual.” Even a messy, meandering life looks perfectly composed in retrospect, Schopenhauer writes, as if it was the dream of a great dreamer. Your life seems to have a plot, but who composed this plot? WE do--- it’s in us. (Campbell said that when he wrote *Myths to Live By*, he realized that he had been talking and writing about the same things for twenty-four years without grasping the continuities until that point.)
- One beautiful aspect of the story is the way the prince/frog and the princess aid in the transformation of the other. They were both in trouble. Note: the frog is a good metaphor for transformation because they literally do transform in the course of their life cycle.
- The end of the story and the snapping of the golden bands around Faithful Henry’s heart suggest that the prince’s kingdom was blighted while he was cursed, and connect this story with others that involve a wasteland. The image of the wasteland and the psychological cultural state that it represents is very potent in Campbell’s work. The wasteland comes again and again as the symbol for an inauthentic way of life. Campbell writes:

The Waste land, let us say then, is any world in which (to state the problem pedagogically) force and not love, indoctrination, not education, authority, not experience, prevail in the ordering of lives, and where the myths and rites enforced and received are consequently unrelated to the actual inward realizations, needs, and potentialities of those upon whom they are impressed. (*Creative Mythology*, p 388).

Nietzsche's Three Transformations of the Spirit

Campbell often spoke about Nietzsche's Three Transformations of the Spirit to describe the proper phases of personal psychological and spiritual development, and must have strongly felt its significance. What follows is from "The Psychological Basis of Freedom: Is Modern Man Different?" (L314, OPUS Archives). Campbell delivered this lecture at Bennett College on September 15, 1970. The Kent State massacre happened on May 4, 1970, and there was a widespread student strike on college campuses that summer. Revolution and calls to action filled the air and yet Campbell counseled the students to study, reflect, learn about their history and society, and find what truly moved them. Here is that portion of Campbell's lecture:

Individuation is the ideal, and we must have freely chosen the balance of obligation to society and the self. Nietzsche talks of three transformations of the spirit in *Zarathustra*. First the Camel, who says "Put a load on me." The camel takes on a heavy load and carries it, then goes into the desert. Next, the Lion. The Lion kills a dragon, the dragon named "thou shalt." The camel submitted to the dragon of "thou shalt" and the lion kills it but you have to be a camel first to be a lion capable of killing that dragon.

Finally, you become a child—a wheel rolling out of its own center. Then you are a gift to the world, even if you do nothing, just by existing. This is freedom that can't be granted by parents or society. "There does come a moment when you know what you were born for—you can rest in it—it gets deeper and deeper."

So in conclusion, enjoy taking on the camel load and one day you'll know how to throw it off. "Thou shalt" is pedagogical discipline to master and achieve competency. You do this because once you ingest the rules you can forget them. They are the background. When you learn to write, for example, you learn grammar and such things and then you write by inspiration.

Can you become a self-determining wheel rolling out of its own center? That's the theme that I want to bring out.

You can also hear Campbell talk about Nietzsche, Dante, and the Hindu system of life stages (or get a written transcript) on the Joseph Campbell Foundation website, www.jcf.org. Look for Lecture I.2.1 The Thresholds of Mythology in the Collected Lectures series. Some of Campbell's lectures are also available through itunes and amazon.com.

Part Two: The Trackless Path

“One day, the knights of King Arthur’s court were gathered in the great banquet hall waiting for dinner to be served. It was a custom of that court that no meal should be served until an adventure had come to pass. Adventures came to pass frequently in those days so there was no great concern for hunger, and on this occasion the Grail appeared, covered with a cloth. It hung in the air for a moment and disappeared. Everyone was exalted and Sir Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur, stood up and proposed a vow. “I propose that we should all go forth in quest to behold the Grail unveiled.” Everyone agreed. Further, they decided that each should go on this quest alone and enter the forest at the point of his own choosing, where it was darkest, because it would be a disgrace to go forth in a group.”—Joseph Campbell

A good introduction question for this gathering is: “Do you have a hero?”

At some point in life (probably multiple points), we hear the call to adventure and find ourselves on the hero’s journey. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell provides a roadmap to this mythic pattern: the Call to Adventure, Help Appears, Crossing the Threshold, Meeting the Monster, Going Down into the Abyss, At-one-ment, Apotheosis, Fire or Bride Theft, and Bringing Back the Boon. He offers a huge collection of myths and stories to illustrate this motif and told quite a few of them in his lectures and other books. But one of Campbell’s favorite stories was the Quest for the Grail, and the adventure of Percival in particular.

Percival’s adventure is a good example of the hero’s journey. It’s also a mesmerizing story about a great quest, perhaps the central quest in the heart of Western individuals: to realize our uniqueness. As such, it touches on questions raised in the introduction: who or what does the hero serve, and what is the relationship between personal fulfillment and community needs?

The Adventure of Percival and the Fisher King

This is a longer story that is part of the very rich and rambling legend of King Arthur and the Knights of The Roundtable. Chrétien de Troyes first created the adventure of Percival in the 12th century. Campbell knew several versions of the story and was very familiar with the entire King Arthur legend. He told different pieces of these stories at different times but was especially partial to Percival and the Fisher King.

There was once a handsome and sturdy young man who lived with his mother in the innermost folds of a wild forest in a distant part of Wales. His father died when he was just babe and this youth knew nothing of the ways of men or the civilized world. One day Percival went into the forest to hunt and saw an amazing sight. Five knights riding together through the woods, the sunlight glittering on

their armor. Percival had never seen anything so glorious and wasn't even sure what he was seeing. He was filled with awe and fell to his knees when they came near. "Are you angels?" he asked the knights.

The leader of the knights motioned for him to rise and said, "No, young man, we are not angels. We're knights, in the service of King Arthur. Who are you?" "I am called Darling Young Son," Percival replied, "and please tell me, how can I become a knight? "King Arthur bestows knighthood on the worthy," the knight told him. "Where can I find King Arthur?" Percival asked. "You can find King Arthur and his court at Carlisle," the knight said, and with that, the five knights rode on, their crimson banners fluttering in the breeze.

Percival was so excited that he went straight home and told his mother about the knights. "I am going to find King Arthur and become a knight too," he told her. His mother tried to discourage him. "My darling young son," she said, "the life of a knight is very difficult and dangerous. You have not known your father because he was a knight and he was slain, and so was my brother, your uncle. Please don't go."

But Percival could not be dissuaded. He was determined to leave. The next morning he packed his few belongings. His mother gave him a new homespun suit of clothes, made with her own hands. "Darling young son," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes, "Let me give you some counsel. Honor the ladies and come to their aid. Take only a kiss or a ring as a token. Always learn the names of your companions. When you see a church, which is God's house, go inside and pray for honor and joy."

Percival went out, saddled his pony and headed down the road. When he crossed the bridge he turned to look back one time and saw his mother collapse in the doorway. But he spurred his horse on, impatient to find King Arthur. He didn't plan to be gone long.

Percival rode for a while, we don't know how long, when he came to a clearing with a beautiful scarlet and gold pavilion set up in the center. "This is so beautiful," thought Percival, "it must be a church!" He entered the tent and found a beautiful young lady and a table spread with a sumptuous feast. Remembering the advice of his mother, Percival kissed the young lady. He noticed that she wore a golden ring and slipped it from her finger. The young woman was frightened, but when Percival sat down to eat, oblivious to her concern, she realized that he was harmless, some kind of fool.

Percival was harmless, but the lady was waiting for her knight, who would surely kill this young man if he found him there in his tent. She urged Percival to by on his way. He was done eating and got up with a smile. As he rode off into the woods, Percival thought, "Why life is good, just like mom said."



Percival rode on, we don't know how long. Maybe he spent one night in the woods, maybe two, maybe a week. He came to another clearing, very large, with a fine gray castle in the middle. As he approached the castle, a big knight in a full

suit of red armor rode toward him, coming the other way. Percival loved the armor. I want some red armor like that," Perceval thought to himself.

The red knight stopped. Who are you?" he asked, and Percival told him "I'm called darling young son. I'm on my way to see King Arthur and become a knight." At this the Red Knight laughed and laughed and laughed. He held up the beautiful gold goblet he clutched in his hand. "Well," he said, "I just saw the king and took this goblet from him. Spilled a few drops of wine on the queen so they aren't too happy back there. When you see King Arthur, give him this message. Tell him he needs to send his bravest knight out to challenge me or his kingdom will be mine."

Percival rode on the castle and the drawbridge was down so he went on inside. He entered the great hall and rode his little pony right up to king. Arthur was deep in thought and didn't notice until the pony nudged him on the arm. What an absurd situation. Percival asked, "Are you King Arthur?" "Why yes, said King Arthur, "and who are you?" "I'm called darling young son," said Percival, "and I'm here to become a knight. Can you make me a knight?"

The whole thing was ridiculous and Arthur could see that the young man was very rough around the edges, hardly a knight. But he was brave. Arthur was just about to say "no" when a young woman of the court, who had not smiled or laughed for more than six years, started to laugh. This seemed strange because it was said that she would only laugh again when she was the presence of the greatest knight in the world. King Arthur was not one to ignore the signs. He sensed that something strange was happening and knighted Percival. "But remember young man," he said, "This is only the beginning. Adventure makes the knight."

"I've got an adventure in mind," said Percival. "I'm going to fight the red knight and take his armor for myself." Arthur knew this was a bad idea and gave Percival a good horse. After the young man rode away, he motioned to one of his pages to follow, watch, and come back to give him a report.

Percival rode out to the Red Knight, who was waiting for the king's contender. He laughed when he saw Percival again. This must be a joke. "If you are the best that King Arthur has got," he roared, "His kingdom is mine!" "No," Percival roared back, "Your armor is mine!" With that, they rode at each other. The Red Knight lowered his lance and knocked the young man off of his horse. But he wasn't hurt. Percival leapt up quick as a wink, threw his spear, and struck the Red Knight in the eye and killed him.

Percival wanted that armor and tried to remove it but he had never seen such a complicated suit of clothes. So many straps and buckles. He was wondering if he should cut off the head when King Arthur's page appeared and offered to help him. When they had succeeded and Percival started to put the armor on, the page noticed his homespun wool suit. "If I may offer a suggestion sir," said the page, "take the padded silk tunic as well. This is customary and much more comfortable." But Percival would not part with his wool suit. "My mother made these clothes," he said, "And they're good enough for me." He put on the red armor and rode away.

Percival rode on, we don't know how long, until he came to another castle. The castle belonged to a nobleman named Gornamont. Gornamont saw the young

man ride up, welcomed him, and asked his name. "I am called darling young son," Percival said, "I am a knight of King Arthur's court." Gornamont smiled and in questioning Percival, discovered that the young man knew almost nothing about being a knight. "I can teach you a few things," he said, "Like how to handle your lance and sword, how to kneel before a king, and how to take your armor off and put it on again."

So Percival stayed with Gornamont for a bit and learned the basics of being a knight. One morning, although there was still much to learn, Percival decided that he wanted to return home to check on his mother. Gornamont was sorry to see him go but convinced him to accept a new suit of clothing, fit for a knight, and gave him some important advice. "Never slay an unarmed knight who begs for mercy," he said, "Assist women and offer them your protection. Go to church and pray for mercy and protection. Finally, don't ask so many questions--it makes you sound foolish!" Percival listened carefully. Then he set off for home.



Sometimes we seek adventure and sometimes it finds us. Percival thought of his mother and set out day after day to go home, but what follows are many adventures. He defeats all challengers but kills no one and sends the defeated knights to King Arthur, to tell the King of his exploits. He also meets a beautiful damsel with pale white skin and ruby red lips named Blanchfleur, White Flower, who later became his wife. But that is another story for another time ...

Percival rode on, we don't know how long. Maybe he spent one month in the woods, maybe two, maybe more. One day he was riding alone in a lonely country with no road or path, with no sense of direction or time. Near dusk he came to a wide rushing river. He saw two men in a boat. One was rowing while the other fished. The men called out to him that there was no bridge for many, many miles and offered him refuge at their castle nearby. Percival rode in the direction they pointed, into a valley between the hills. But he saw nothing, no building at all. Annoyed and tired, Percival was about to give up when he caught a glimpse of high turrets peeking through the trees.

It was the castle, and a grand one at that. The drawbridge was lowered so Percival went inside. There he found a fine hall filled with many people. The lord of the castle, who was none other than the fisherman, graciously received him. He was lying on a couch in front of a blazing fire. "Forgive me," said the lord, "for not standing up. I was wounded many years ago and cannot walk or stand." The two men talked. The lord presented Percival with a fine sword. Then a strange and marvelous thing occurred.

A young man came into the hall. He slowly walked the length of the room, bearing a white lance in front of him. From the tip of the lance, Percival saw a single drop of blood emerge and run down its length on to the youth's hand. Percival was amazed. He opened his mouth to ask about it but remembered Gornamont's parting advice and kept quiet. Then two more youths entered the hall carrying two

magnificent golden candelabra. They were followed soon after by a beautiful maiden who held in her hands a golden grail decorated with precious gemstones. The grail shimmered with such a dazzling light that the candles momentarily lost their brilliance. The procession crossed the hall and filed abruptly into a room on the opposite side.

Percival was consumed with great curiosity but followed Gornamont's advice. He stayed silent. Three times this procession passed by and each time the tables in the dining hall were filled with food and drink and the assembly ate, all but the Fisher King, who took only a piece of bread and a few sips of wine. The hour grew late, the king groaned with pain and bid the young man good night. He was carried off to bed in a litter. Percival was taken to a lovely chamber and made comfortable for sleep. There in the darkness, he recalled the mysteries of the evening. "I will ask a servant about it in the morning," he decided, and fell asleep.

The next morning, Percival woke up to find his clothing cleaned, his armor shined, and his horse saddled. To his great surprise, the hall was empty and there was no sign of the previous night's company. So he armed himself and rode out over the drawbridge. But before he got completely across, the bridge began to rise under him and his horse was forced to jump for the far side. They made it, the bridge just nicking the back of his horse's hooves. Percival turned and called out to whoever raised the bridge, but there was no one to be seen and no answer.

Percival rode into the woods and came across a fair young damsel cradling the corpse of a headless knight in her arms. "Can I help you?" Percival asked. "Only if you can bring him back to life," she replied. "Where did you come from?" she asked, "There is no lodging anywhere nearby." "Why, there is castle just over those hills," said Percival, and at this she shook her head. "You have been in the Grail Castle in the company of the Fisher King," she told him. "Tell me, did you see the lance that bleeds?" Percival nodded. "Did you see the grail?" Percival nodded again. "These are great mysteries" she said, "Tell me, what did you do?" "Nothing," said Percival, "I did nothing." "Oh, this is very bad news," the damsel told him. "A question from you would have healed the king and his lands, but now the suffering will continue. What is your name?" she asked. "Percival of Wales," said Percival. For the first time, he knew his name and who he was.

Percival rode on, we don't know how long, when he got word that King Arthur and his court were nearby. He went to join them and was welcomed as a hero. All of the defeated knights and rescued young ladies had told the stories of Percival's adventures to King Arthur. A big party was thrown in his honor and for three days the company enjoyed food and drink and music and dancing and games. But on the fourth day the festivities ground to a halt. Everyone was gathered in the great hall when suddenly the door was flung open and in rode a hideously ugly woman on a mule. She had eyes like a rat and long crooked yellow teeth and nasty nails. She was bandy legged and hunchbacked and she rode right up to Percival and wagged her finger in his face.

"You are a disgrace," she said. "It was too much trouble, I suppose, to ask a simple question or two in the presence of the Grail and the Fisher King? Why didn't

you ask, ‘why does the lance bleed?’ Why didn’t you ask, ‘whom does the Grail serve?’ There will be great suffering for many people for a long, long time because you were afraid of looking foolish.” Then she turned and rode away.

Percival was filled with shame. He vowed to find the Grail castle again. “I will not spend two nights in one place until I find it,” he declared, “I will right this terrible wrong I have committed.” He wandered alone for five long, lonely years.

Discussion Material

Chrétien de Troyes ended his narrative here. Others later elaborated on the story and provided a satisfying ending in which Percival finds the castle and the grail again and brings healing to the realm. But this version of the story contains many of Campbell’s favorite themes and is so richly loaded with symbolic imagery that dozens of themes and discussions could sprout from it. Given the themes of bliss and the hero’s journey, here are some possible questions for discussion.

- Is Percival a hero?
- When does he become one?
- What is the significance of the Red Knight and the armor?
- What is the grail?

These are a few notes from Campbell’s work that I found useful in working with the story and reflecting on the themes of bliss, the hero’s journey, and the challenges posed by both.

- Campbell may have recounted the appearance of the grail and the vow to venture forth along on a trackless path more often than any other story. He constantly reinforced our need to go it alone, and do it our own way. If you follow a path, he said, it’s someone else’s. And yet the end result of this adventure connects the health of the individual to the health of the “land” or community.
- The situation in the story, the realm of the Fisher King, is that of the Waste Land. The kingship is inauthentic because the king inherited his place, he did not earn it, and this falseness affects the entire community. Campbell also said that the Fisher King’s wound is a split between spirit and nature, resulting in the loss of generative power.
- The proper response to the wasteland situation is to heal the split by following one’s own nature. Percival failed because he stifled his own instincts and followed the advice of others. He succeeds later on in the story (this portion is grist for yet another gathering) and can then be seen as the Wise fool, guided by the Self. (This reminds me of the Buddhist concept of the beginner’s mind).

- Percival or Parsifal means “to pierce the veil,” or “to pierce through the middle.” His is the middle way. Man is black and white, good and bad; that’s the way it is, Campbell says. Vacillation tips you toward black but you can stay in the middle if you follow your nature. Life is like this too. It’s bittersweet, a mixture of joy and pain.
- At what point does a person suspend obedience to society and begin to listen to his or her own truth? This is the trajectory in Nietzsche’s *Three Transformations of the Spirit*, and we find it in Dante. “When I had journeyed half of my life’s way, I found myself within a shadowed forest...” It happens in mid-life, through great difficulty.
- The Grail castle appears and disappears. It is in liminal space, in the world behind the worlds, and the grail with its gifts is also part of the transcendent realm. The grail is true abundance, not of material stuff but of being, inherent completeness. You can’t find the grail on purpose. It can’t be pursued and it only appears to the worthy.

Earned Character

According to Campbell, the great quest of the Western tradition is the quest for earned character. In the chapter titled “Experience and Authority”, Campbell links the quest for earned character with the image of the “trackless way” and discusses the Schopenhauer essay, “World as Will and Idea” that greatly influenced his thinking. Here is that definition of earned character:

The inborn or, as Schopenhauer terms it, *intelligible* character is unfolded only gradually and imperfectly through circumstance...We have to learn through experience what are, want, and can do, and ‘until then,’ declares Schopenhauer, ‘we are characterless, ignorant of ourselves... We finally we shall have learned, however, we shall have gained what the world calls character—which is to say, *earned* character. And this, in short, is neither more nor less than the fullest possible knowledge of our own individuality.’ *Creative Mythology* p. 35):

As the word “earned” suggests, the acquisition of this kind of character is a process over time—hence the need to understand life stages. In one lecture, I heard Campbell describe it like this:

First you get adjusted to society and then there is a mid-life crisis. Suddenly or gradually you start to question the value of what you do and you want more, because a society never asks you to be a whole person, just a part of it. Adjusting to society comes at a cost and the rejected part of your humanity

asks to be met. This rejected aspect may be the dragon or obstacle in the hero's journey, the confrontation with that which must be integrated. Jung called the process "enantiodromia," integrating the "other" side, the shadow side. (L206 Modern Myths of Quest)

Earned character is an important aspect of the Percival story. The Fisher King was anointed; he had not earned his authority (character), and therefore his kingdom was a Waste Land. Healing happened when Percival learned to follow his own nature. But Percival had to learn this lesson through failure. Success was not a slam-dunk. He had to grapple with his own limitations and transform them. One of these limitations was his innocence. He had to stop being naïve and instead become the Wise Fool. Campbell says, "Your vice is your clue to your capacity, but get it turned in an inward direction." (Living Your Personal Myth, Esalen March 1973). We have to transform, not deny, our various qualities.

Campbell writes, "You should find a way to realize your shadow in your life somehow" (*Pathways to Bliss*, p. 75). This is the essence of earned character. Joseph Campbell was interested in the self-responsible individual. Freedom, he said, is not what you do but what you are. He believed that we can develop mythologies of this quest but they cannot be handed down. "You find your own myth by watching your own life--you see what your highest concern is—if you read or study mythological images, find the one that inspires you." (Lecture L340, Myths of Alienation and Rapture)

The story of Percival and the Fisher King was one such image for Campbell. What is yours?

Part Three: Loyalty to Your Imperfections

“Life isn’t meant to be happy. That’s not what it’s about. Ah, the damage that is caused by that attitude. All life is sorrowful. Sorrow is the essence of life. But can you handle it? Are you affirmative enough in your relationship to life to say ‘yea’ no matter what happens?”—Joseph Campbell

A good introduction question for this gathering is:” How do you feel about the world today? If you could change one thing about it, what would you change?”

Part of the heroic creed in a heroic culture is the expectation that everything can be improved. There seems to be an obsession with self-improvement, coupled with the belief that if you are not happy and continually feeling satisfied, you have a problem that can and should be solved. Dissatisfaction with the world and ourselves can easily become perfectionism or denial. We often insist on too much or too little, especially from ourselves. But Campbell willingly admits and embraces the inherent dangers and sorrows of the quest and also calls the goal of a perfect life in a perfect world into question. The call to adventure can end in bliss or fiasco. The hero’s journey is a series of deaths, and our journey ultimately culminates in the greatest mystery of all, death. Life is full of grief and loss, yet Campbell insists that we must learn to live fully and deeply.

Each of us faces the problem of reconciling our consciousness to death and accepting the relationship between life and death. Life feeds on life, Campbell reminds us, and our mythologies must handle this fact. All myths, he said, fall into one of three categories or attitudes. The first is life-affirming; you say yes to all of it, even the horror. This is seen in primitive hunting rites. The second is life negating, for example, Buddhism. The world isn’t real. Then there is the attitude of conditional affirmation, in which you assume that basic conditions can and should be changed and when they do, you’ll accept it. According to Campbell, all modern Western mythologies —Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Marxism, revolve around the restoration of the good society. A secular form of the conditional “yes” is the myth of progress, a myth that animates many of today’s popular self-help messages, I think.

Blackfoot myth of the Buffalo Dance

Campbell said that his interest in mythology started when his father took him to see Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show. He identified with the Indians and read everything that he could about them. This is a Blackfoot myth Campbell often told. You can also find a version of this story in *Pathways to Bliss* (p. 27) and *Myths to Live By* (p. 37).

The Blackfoot tribes lived out on the vast grassland plains. In order to feed themselves and acquire food for the winter, the tribes would drive large numbers of buffalo over a cliff, then kill the animals at the bottom and harvest their meat and skins. One year, however, an unfortunate tribe couldn't seem to get the buffalo to go over the cliff. Time and again they drove the animals to the edge, but at the last moments the buffalo would turn aside and just run along the edges of the cliff back to safety. This was a terrible situation for the people, who were facing winter starvation.

One day, a young woman of the tribe went to get water for her family. She looked at the cliff and the buffalo and said, "If you would just go over the cliff, I would marry one of you." Suddenly the herd of buffalo poured over the cliff face. The girl watched in shock as a distinguished-looking buffalo, the leader of the herd, came trotting over to her and said "Off we go my dear girl. You will be my wife and I will be your husband."

The girl protested that she couldn't leave her family. She offered up a bunch of excuses. But the head buffalo gestured to all of the dead buffalo at the foot of the cliff and said, "All of my relatives lay dead at the base of the cliff. We have kept our word—now you must keep yours." A deal had been made and she was compelled to honor it.

The next morning, her family awoke to find the young woman gone. Her father looked at the tracks outside, all around the camp, and saw that she had gone off with a buffalo. He set out after her. After a long while a magpie visited him. "What are you looking for?" asked the bird. The father said that he was searching for his daughter. The magpie told him that his daughter was not too far away and agreed to carry a message to the girl. "Please tell her," the father said to the bird, "to meet me at the buffalo wallow."

The magpie delivered the message and the girl was desperate to see her father. But she knew that they were in a dangerous situation. Her buffalo husband was quite large and powerful. She started to devise a plan, but then her buffalo husband unwittingly offered her an opening. "Go to the wallow and bring me back some water," he told her. And of course she agreed and hurried off to the wallow and her waiting father.

When the young woman arrived she told her father what happened with the buffalo and the cliff. He feared for her safety and tried to convince her to go with him. But the girl was afraid. "I can't leave," she told her dad, "and you really must go before the buffalo find you." But it was too late for such caution. The buffalo husband sensed that something was up, (perhaps she was gone a few moments too long?) and gathered the rest of the herd together. They went down to the wallow. There they found the girl and her father. The buffalo all made a mighty sound and then they danced together and trampled the father to death. He was so ground up into such small pieces that he disappeared entirely into the earth.

The young woman began to cry. "Why are you crying," asked her buffalo husband. "Because he is my father," she said. "And what about us?" the buffalo

replied. "Our families, our children, wives, parents, sisters, and brothers are all dead at the bottom of your cliff. Who mourns for us?"

The girl continued to cry. At last the buffalo said, "If you can bring your father back to life, both of you can go free. You can go home to your people." Well, she didn't have much to work with since her father was ground up so good. But the magpie helped her to find a small piece of her father's bone, which she covered with a blanket on the ground. Then she sang a magical song. The buffalo stood around watching and listening. The bone under the blanket grew and grew until it was the size and shape of a man. After some more time, her father came back to life.

The buffalo were amazed. The head buffalo said to the young woman, "If you know how to do this, why don't you do it for us?" She said that she would do so, and the buffalo showed the girl their magical buffalo dance and song, and asked her to teach it to her people so that they could bring the buffalo back and maintain the cycle of life.

The girl and her father took the buffalo's request back to their people, and forever afterward everyone danced and sang to bring the buffalo back to life.

Discussion Material

- What do you think of this view of death and how does it line up with your own view?
- Is this a story of a hero's journey?
- What is the relationship between the tribe and the buffalo?

These are a few notes from Campbell's work that I found useful in working with this story and understanding why we need to contemplate stories like this one.

- "We have to have a sense of awe. Awe is the source of meaning. This is the first function of myth, to be a guide to mystical experience, which is shut off in our society. The big problem is how to reconcile our consciousness to death and accept the fact that life feeds on life...In earlier societies the difference between killing an animal and killing a man was not so great as it has become for us." (L179 Mystical Experience and the Hero's Journey)
- "The desire for meaning is a way of short-circuiting the mystery of life. Life has no inherent meaning. We make meaning and there are many possibilities." (L179 Mystical Experience and the Hero's Journey)

Saying "yea" to life and accepting it all means accepting and integrating the whole self too. This requires compassion for both yourself and the world. Campbell addresses the issue of our personal imperfection, authenticity, and compassion (and take us back to Percival).

- “In the West we ask people to find their own value system and yet we also want conformity. In a traditional society you learn the collective value system and that’s it. The ego is not developed psychologically and you don’t relate personally to circumstances, only through the social order. (Lecture L194 Mythologies of Quest and Illumination)
- “Personality, being anything, is an imperfection. But we cultivate our imperfections, our own nuttiness. This is an altogether different view of the adult individual and it creates tension in our society. How to be true to our Self, to our own uniqueness and be able to fully relate to others in a deep way, “thou art that,” this is the challenge. It is a delicate problem, to participate in community and recognize oneness with all things and cultivate one’s individuality and bring it to flower.” (Lecture L194 Mythologies of Quest and Illumination)
- Being loyal to your imperfections is authenticity. In a lecture titled “Loyalty to Your Imperfections: Wasteland versus an Authentic Life,” Campbell says,

A human being in action cannot represent perfection, they always represent one side of a duality which itself is perfection, the two—in being loyal to your part of it you are keeping history in form...We live in duality; perfection is non-dual. The only ‘perfect’ existence is non-existence...When we reconcile ourselves to this, when we accept imperfection in the world and ourselves and go ahead and live, that’s joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.
- “[Compassion is] what the story of Percival represents in the Grail romances—the principle of compassion with suffering in which you recognize your essential transpersonal identity with the very life that’s facing you.” (*Joseph Campbell This Business of the Gods...in conversation with Franz Boa* p. 59)
- “Disillusion is inevitable . . . It is a fashionable idiocy to think that life has not come up to your expectations. . . Throw it out. Have compassion for the world and those in it.” (*Pathways to Bliss*, p. 77)
- “Every human being is a bundle of imperfections and those imperfections are precisely what is human and what is lovable. The perfect is only admirable.” (Lecture L206, Modern Myths of Quest)

The Buddha and the Bodhi Tree (or The Great Struggle)

Campbell talked about bliss and “following your bliss” in a wide variety of contexts. Sometimes bliss sounds like a matter of occupation, of getting the job that you love, or of working at a passion without regard for money. Sometimes bliss

seems like the object of the ultimate quest, or a metaphor for the journey itself. The most useful definitions that I found at this mid-stage in my life revolve around the challenge to realize the eternal and transcendent in my particular, time-bound life. “Bliss” is underneath or beyond joy and sorrow. As the background for all temporal experiences, this definition of bliss is linked to the ability to accept imperfection and live compassionately.

Campbell connected this notion of bliss with the Sanskrit phrase “sat-chit-ananda,” which means being-consciousness-bliss. In a taped lecture in which I first heard Campbell tell this story of the Buddha and the Bodhi Tree, he tells his audience to “follow your bliss.” Here is the that story he told:

In mythological imagery, the tree in the center of the garden is the place where freedom exists. The universe is a wheel with a hub, the place in the middle where movement and stillness come together. It’s a place to find your self.

In India, we have the image of the Bodhi tree. The Buddha was seeking release from the world of causality and he comes to this tree and places himself at the foot. Then comes the antagonist Kama-Mara, the god of desire and death who motivates and moves all things. It’s yearning and fear.

The lord Kama-Mara presents himself first as Love. He brings out his three beautiful daughters (Desire, Pining, and Lust) and parades them before Buddha. But because he had no thought of “I,” the Buddha had no thought of “They.” The temptation failed.

The great being then turned himself into a monster of terror, and hurled rocks and thunder and flames at the Buddha. But because the Buddha had no thought of “I,” he had no thought of “They” and he had no fear. As these weapons reached him, they turned into flowers and he was filled with bouquets of flowers.

Buddha had eliminated the ego; he was not moved by the daughters or death. Then Kama-Mara turned himself into a social scientist and said “Prince, why aren’t you in your palace, in your power?” and the Buddha touched the earth—center and stillness—and asserted his right to be there, right there.

The Buddha was in the immovable spot, where one breaks through into one’s own metaphysical entity. At the moment of breakthrough, we have two temple guardians often portrayed as warriors. I saw an article on the Japanese and religion in the *New York Times* that showed a photo of these fierce temple guardians. It said “the Japanese worship gods like this.” To which, I thought, “Not they, we. We are the ones who worship gods like that.” In Christianity, there are two cherubim with flaming swords to keep us out of the garden ever since Adam and Eve. In Buddhism, they’re there to show you what is keeping you out.

Your desires and fear. Your own, that’s all that’s keeping you out of the garden. So first, refine your desire and fear system. What do you yearn for? What do you fear? You can change this. Then you can decide what you stand for. Then, eliminate it. (L314 The Psychological Basis of Freedom: is Modern Man Different?)

You can also find this story in *A Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

Part Four: Blisters on the Way to Bliss

“When we talk about settling the world’s problems, we’re barking up the wrong tree. The world is perfect. The world is a mess. It has always been a mess. We are not going to change it. Our job is to straighten out our own lives.”—Joseph Campbell

“In effect, the individual must learn to live by his or her own myth.”—Joseph Campbell

Mythologies make the world for good or for ill. They are a collective enterprise and collaboration between conscious and unconscious forces in a culture and the cosmos that cannot be controlled or predicted. I’m concerned about where our stories are taking us, about the values and models and meanings behind our actions. But modern mythologies are also particular to each individual. The center of gravity, meaning, and experience has shifted away from traditional authorities and come to rest with personal, inner experience. Campbell taught the beauty and relevance of mythic patterns in contemporary life and encouraged individuals to embark on their hero’s journey, to follow the trackless path, and to find their bliss, their unique calling.

We don’t know the future. But people awake to the power of myth and alert to emerging plot lines, can encourage the birth of new ideas, images, and mythic forms. We can re-imagine our lives and relationships to teach and inspire each other. We can sit together, as human beings around the globe have done for centuries, to talk about life and who we are by sharing our stories. This is the program for this last gathering. The suggested theme, “Blisters on the Way to Bliss,” brings us back to the questions posed in the introduction, about the nature of bliss, the hero’s journey, and the relationship between personal fulfillment and community. How have these dreams and questions appeared in our own lives?

Personal Stories of Quests and Questions

There are many ways to structure a storytelling circle, from the totally spontaneous (a talking stick, for example) to the finely orchestrated. For this type of storytelling, I prefer organizing those who want to tell their story to tell in advance. Float the plan for this gathering ahead of time to give people a chance to muse about the themes and the possibilities. Find out who wants to participate at the previous meeting. A bit of organization helps the facilitator of the group massage the evening to bring out the synergy between stories. Part of the power of storytelling circles originates in the respectful container created by the group, for the stories and their tellers. As part of the introductions, you can invite each person to offer a word or blessing to the storytellers and the tales they plan to tell at this gathering.

An important aspect of the storytelling container is time. Establish a time limit for each teller. Leave a few minutes of breathing room between tellings for people to reflect on what they have heard. A few moments of silence is okay. Also leave some time at the end for people to respond to the experience. If you have too many stories for one gathering, have two!

Finally, consider adhering to the notion of “telling,” not reading from a page. Telling a story is an empowering experience and not as hard as some people think, especially when you are the main character. Telling also creates a very different listening experience. The community and mutual participation that arises when stories are told is more important, in this case, than the polish of the written word.

Discussion Material

There may not be any discussion other than the reactions and reflections elicited by the stories told in the group. Follow what emerges. Here are a few words from Campbell that might aid in the process. These can also be circulated in advance of the gathering, to help people find and frame stories to share.

- “Today we don’t have the stasis for the formation of a mythic tradition. We’re all free falling. The best sources for models are: personalities that you admired in your youth, and bliss. Bliss is the welling up of the transcendent in you.” (L965 Transformation of Mythologies Through Time)
- “The demon that you can swallow gives you its power, and the greater life’s pain, the greater life’s reply.” The Power of Myth
- Essentially, myths are made today by individuals and small groups, largely in literature and art (Mann, Eliot, Jeffers, Joyce for example). But these are individual achievements; collective mythologies are essentially the old traditions. The new thing for us is the east, especially Japan, the gurus and roshis, and psychedelics. LSD frequently conjures up eastern images but these have nothing to do with our Western social institutions. We have the problem of integrating mystical (eastern) experiences with our Western mythologies and institutions (L340 Mythologies of Alienation and Rapture)
- “Mythology begins where madness starts, where a person is seized or gripped by some fascination for which he will sacrifice his life, his security, his personal relationships, his prestige, and his self-realization.” (Living Your Personal Myth, Esalen March 1973).
- “He [Schopenhauer] doesn’t say ‘it is.’ And that’s very important. The great mythological point of view is, ‘It is as if.’” (*Interview With Fraser Boa, “This Business of the Gods...”* p.128)

Two Birds

“[Bliss is] That deep sense of being present, of doing what you absolutely must do to be yourself.”—Joseph Campbell

In *An Open Life: Joseph Campbell in Conversation with Michael Toms*, Campbell talks about bliss, compassion, and the eternal dimension in life. He shares a verse from the Rig Veda about two birds and the tree of life. These birds are fast friends. One eats the peaches and the other watches. Campbell explains:

Those are two aspects of ourselves. We eat the fruit—we kill a life in order to eat, and we play in the world of action. But then in contemplation, as the meditative one, we are removed from that world and its destiny. Those are the two positions: the general, which looks at the duality of life; and the particular, which involves participation—the sorrows of life. There’s a Buddhist formula of the bodhisattva for the one who has illumination but determines to remain in the world: all life is sorrowful. So the Bodhisattva participates which joy in the sorrows of the world.”

Another analogy Campbell used for this duality was a tennis game. Both players play to win, he said, and you have to play to win for the game to be fun or have any vitality. But you also know that it’s a game and that winning and losing are not as important as playing. To play without attachment to winning or losing, that’s participating with joy in the sorrows of this world. That’s entering the eternal. A person has to live on both planes without blame or taking it personally. There are no ultimate judgments, but there is still action and ethical engagement.



“Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told. So this is the penultimate truth. It’s important to live life with the experience, and therefore the knowledge, of its mystery and your own mystery. This gives life a new radiance, a new harmony, a new splendor. Thinking in mythological terms helps to put you in accord with the inevitables of this vale of tears. You learn to recognize the positive values in what appear to be negative moments and aspects of your life. The big question is whether you are going to say a hearty yes to your adventure.”—Joseph Campbell

“Not only are new mythologies possible, but new mythologies are absolutely necessary if human beings are going to live as human beings...People are not living by anything else but mythologies.”.—Joseph Campbell

Feel free to contact Catherine Svehla at drcsvehla@gmail.com with your comments and suggestions about these materials. Like everything else, it’s a work in process.

Selected Books By & About Joseph Campbell

Boa, Fraser. *The Way of Myth: Talking with Joseph Campbell*. Shambala: Boston & London, 1994.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series, 3rd edition. New World Library: Novato, California, 2008.

-----*The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*. Harper & Row: New York, 1986.

-----*The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*. Penguin Books: New York, 1968.

-----*Myths to Live By*. Bantam Books: New York, 1973.

-----*Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*. Edited and with a foreword by David Kudler. New World Library: Novato, California, 2004.

-----*Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*. Edited and with a foreword by Eugene Kennedy. New World Library: Novato, California, 2001

Larsen, Stephen and Robin. *Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind*. Inner Traditions: Rochester, Vermont, 2002.

Maher, John M. and Dennie Briggs, editors. *An Open Life: Joseph Campbell In Conversation With Michael Toms*. Maher, Foreword by Jean Erdman Campbell. Harper & Row: New York, 1989.

Zimmer, Heinrich. *The King and the Corpse*. Edited by Joseph Campbell. Bollingen Series XI. Princeton UP: Princeton, 1948.

Other Resources

Joseph Campbell Foundation. Information about Joseph Campbell and the Mythological RoundTable Program and a wide range of materials available for purchase or download. The growing Lectures Series (audio and transcripts) is available to anyone who becomes an associate of the foundation (there is no cost to join). The JCF hosts a variety of on-line forums (Conversations of a Higher Order) and maintains a mythological resources database. www.jcf.org

OPUS Archives & Research Center. Located on the campuses of Pacifica Graduate Institute, OPUS is free and open to the public. Arrangements to visit OPUS may be made by calling the Executive Office at (805) 969-5750 or Richard Buchen, Special Collections Librarian, at (805) 969-3626 ext. 397. www.opusarchives.org.

Catherine Svehla is a writer, storyteller, and scholar with a Ph.D. in Mythological Studies from Pacifica Graduate Institute. She lives in Joshua Tree, California, where she leads the High Desert Mythological RoundTable Group. Contact Dr. Svehla at drcsvehla@gmail.com or visit www.catherinesvehla.com.