

Chapter 3
On Considering the Sacred in the Context of Personal Mythology

On Establishing a General Framework for Exploring the Nature of “the Sacred”

“What characterizes religious behavior,” writes William E. Paden, “is that it takes place with reference to things that are deemed *sacred*.” Replacing the concept of a supreme being as the “defining referent of religion,” he continues, “the modern, cross-cultural term is *the sacred*.” The use of this term by contemporary religious scholars, Paden is careful to observe, “assumes neither the reality nor the unreality of what is considered sacred, but simply the fact that people do take certain beings, traditions, principles, or objects to be sacred and these serve in turn as the organizing points of reference for defining their world and lives.” As a result, he concludes, “The sacred can have any content, though to the adherent it is always something of extraordinary power and reality” (11).

In the broadest possible context, therefore, this idea of “the sacred” can be said generically to describe the focus and object of all religious activity. While most people would probably assent to use of this term as a general descriptor for the focus of religious behavior, however, it is also true that few concepts have had their specific meanings argued about longer or with greater passion. Given the both the nebulous nature of this idea and the centrality of its position within any discussion of religious concerns, it is critically important to acknowledge the absence of a truly objective stance from which to inquire about the nature of the sacred. As a result, since any discussion regarding the nature of the sacred will retain an inescapable and inherent quality of subjectivity, it becomes essential to define as carefully as possible the frame of reference to be employed in the exploration that follows.

First, since this study focuses on the use of personal mythological reflection as a means of religious or spiritual investigation, it will intrinsically focus on the significance of such engagement for the individual religious or spiritual seeker. As a consequence, any observations made or cited in this study regarding the nature of the sacred should not be assumed to bear any particular relationship to communal conceptions of the sacred, particularly as such conceptions reflect the theological assumptions of established religions. Indeed, since this study intentionally seeks ways of comprehending the sacred outside the bounds of organized religion—or, at the very least, ways that do not require adherence to any particular form of organized religion—it will emphasize approaches that tend to be open-ended, ecumenical, and universalist in orientation.

Secondly, this study assumes that any exploration of religious or spiritual concerns through the vehicle of one's personal mythology will be inherently experiential in nature. The choice of theological approaches employed in this study, therefore, emphasizes those frameworks that can accommodate and even facilitate an experiential orientation toward the sacred. For the same reason, the following discussion will also tend to emphasize ways of considering the experience of the sacred that are inherently phenomenological in approach.

Thirdly, given the essential role of symbolic and metaphorical consciousness in working with personal mythological material, this study highlights those theological frameworks that emphasize a symbolic and metaphorical approach to encountering the sacred. Similarly, this study seeks to underscore those religious orientations that encourage the use of imagination and engagement with the imaginal realm as valuable pathways for encountering and reflecting upon the experience of the sacred. In this same

vein, conceptual approaches to religious experience that are compatible with an archetypal frame of reference will also be emphasized.

In searching for an exemplar of the kind of orientation to the sacred that this chapter seeks to delineate, is doubtful that one could do better than to cite the following passage by Keith Ward. Part of a chapter entitled “A Feeling for the Gods,” Ward describes in this text the personification of a morning mist on the sea as the rising of the nymph Thetis, a shape-shifting goddess of oceans and streams. In this remarkable passage, Ward manages to unify the universal, particular, experiential, phenomenological, symbolic, archetypal, and mythic dimensions of the sacred into a single, highly evocative perspective:

When instead of simply seeing a misty morning by the sea, we see Thetis rising through the swell of the sea at early morning, going up to the vast sky and to the presence of Zeus, the gatherer of clouds, then we discern in the morning sea-mist a disclosure of unbounded infinity and mystery, power and beauty, but we also see something more. (31)

On the Religious Dimension of Mythology

Before proceeding with a discussion of various ideas about the sacred that might relate to the notion of personal mythology as religious or spiritual pathway, it would be worthwhile to explore in broader terms the perennial and profound relationship that generally exists between mythology and religion. Indeed, the religious dimension of mythology is arguably the most ancient and potent of the roles it has played in the evolution of human consciousness. Commenting on this aspect of the mythic, Joseph Campbell writes that the first and foremost function of a living mythology, “its properly religious function, is to waken and maintain in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and respect, in recognition of that ultimate mystery, transcending names and

forms” (*Masks of God* 609). Similarly remarking on the profound relationship between mythology and religious awareness, Philip Wheelwright observes, “The very essence of myth is that haunting awareness of transcendental forces peering through the cracks of the visible universe” (“Poetry, Myth, and Reality” 10). In a similar vein, William Doty suggests that myths are “narrative fictions whose plots read first at the level of their own stories and then often as projections of immanent transcendent meanings” (*Mythography* 42). Because some myths can also function at this second level of meaning, he observes, such narratives “are not little but big stories touching not just on the everyday, but sacred or specially marked topics that concern much more than the immediate situation” (15).

In considering uniquely contemporary approaches for engaging the religious aspect of mythology, it is important to bear in mind the difference between such methods and older, more traditional approaches to interpreting religious myths. For example, while the latter focus exclusively on the relationship between two inherently different kinds of beings, namely divine figures and human beings, modern mythologists like Campbell and Doty propose adopting a more creative, mythopoetic stance to engaging the sacred dimension of myth. Employing such an approach, Doty writes, “permits speaking of the sacred not purely or exclusively in terms of deific figures disclosing, revealing themselves to mortals,” but also as “an aspect by which figures of the lived world are marked out as especially significant” (*Mythography* 75). Most importantly, by adopting a creative, mythopoetic approach to sacred myth, one begins to open up the possibility of considering the religious dimension of myth in terms of personal mythological consciousness.

Regarding the idea of encountering the sacred through a more traditional religious perspective on myth, Doty candidly observes that such an approach should “be left behind only when more meaningful individual patternings of the resources and significances of human existence are found in the personal mythostory” (201). Recognizing the enormous challenge of seeking the sacred entirely through one’s own mythology, however, Doty suggests that one might facilitate this process by also attempting “reconnection with the energy systems” represented in existing religious myths “in such a way as to lead to a personal affirmation of one’s own mythic system and hence to a meaningful personal universe” (202).

In addition to Doty and Campbell, a wide range of others writing on the subject of personal mythology have also commented on the religious or sacred dimension of personal mythic consciousness. For example, Dan P. McAdams observes that one’s personal myth “is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies personal truth,” adding that “to say that a personal myth is ‘sacred’ is to suggest that personal myth deals with those ultimate questions that preoccupy theologians and philosophers.” He goes on to suggest that a core challenge for modern humans involves creating “personal myths that will serve to sanctify our lives” (34). In a similar vein, Robert Atkinson describes one’s personal myth as “the sacred story of the beliefs and experiences that order, shape, and direct one’s life” (207). Yet another writer addressing the question of the religious dimension of personal mythology, Stephen Larsen observes that until modern times, “mythic orthodoxy has dictated [. . .] what forms it shall revere as holy, which mental imagery shall constitute an epiphany, and which a trip to the stake” (*Mythic Imagination* 231). In the absence of such orthodoxy, he continues, one must now

learn to trust the inner mythic world of dreams and visions and the outer mythic world of archetypal coincidences (181).

On the Etymology of “the Sacred” and Related Questions

Before exploring particular approaches for understanding and interpreting the nature of the sacred, it would be useful to first consider the derivation and usage of the word “sacred” itself. In doing so, one also finds that the history of the usage of this word is intertwined with that of another term often associated with it, namely the word “holy.” In his article on “The Holy” in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Willard Gurdon Oxtoby writes “By ‘the holy’ and ‘the sacred’ we in the twentieth century denote what partakes of qualities ascribed to the divine,” adding that “in some current contexts the two terms appear virtually interchangeable” (511).

The first point worth noting with regard to this statement is that it attempts to define sacredness or holiness in terms of another idea, that of divinity. Indeed, one implication of the idea that the sacred “partakes of qualities ascribed to the divine,” is that those qualities first belong to a divine being or energy and are subsequently shared or passed on to the person, object, or event considered to be sacred. The second noteworthy point in Oxtoby’s statement is the observation that the terms “sacred” and “holy” have largely become synonymous in contemporary English.

Saving discussion of the first point for the moment, consideration of the second point suggests that, despite the modern tendency to view sacred and holy as largely synonymous, the history of their usage nevertheless reveals some significant distinctions that—at least connotatively—persist in their usage today. In this regard, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “holy” derives from the Anglo-Saxon and Old

English term *halig*. This dictionary further states that *halig* is related to the Old English adjective *hailo*, meaning “free of injury, whole, hale.” In addition, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is careful to observe that “the pre-Christian meaning [of *hailo*] is uncertain, although it is with some probability assumed to have been ‘inviolable, inviolable, that which must be preserved whole or intact, that cannot be injured with impunity.’ ” As a result, the *Oxford English Dictionary* continues, “the adjective would naturally be applied to the gods and all things pertaining to them.” Indeed, given that the English words “whole,” “heal,” and “hallow” all are derived from the same root as “holy,” one may sense a much richer range of meaning connected with the pre-Christian usage of this word.

In his article on “The Sacred and the Profane” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Carsten Colpe notes that the English word “sacred” is derived from the Latin noun “sacrum.” For the Romans, Colpe writes, “sacrum meant what belonged to the gods or was in their power” and “was primarily concerned with the temple and the rites performed in and around it” (511). The word “sacred,” states Colpe, is also related to the Latin adjective “sacer,” referring to the particular quality of the innermost portion of a temple, that section “walled off or otherwise set apart” from ordinary use. Colpe further observes that, for the Romans, the meaning of “sacrum” and “sacer” was interconnected with the term “profanum,” the word that described both the literal area outside the sacred precinct of a temple and the ordinary, everyday activities that take place outside of any space consecrated to a divinity. As a result, the word “sacred” tends to connote a quality of objects and events that is inherently different and set apart from that of ordinary life and everyday consciousness.

Interestingly, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the use of “holy” (initially in the form of *halig*) predates the usage in written documents of any form of the word “sacred” by more than five centuries. While it is not particularly surprising that the Anglo-Saxon term appears in British documents as early as 825 A.D., it is noteworthy that use of the Latinate term can be documented back only as far as the late fourteenth century. For whatever the reason, the older term seems to have been sufficient to describe that aspect of experience connected with divinity for a considerable period of time before authors felt it useful to begin using its Latinate counterpart.

Moreover, as Oxtoby observes, with the arrival of ‘sacred’ into the language, “a partial separation of functions between the two words took place.” The linguistic separation of the meaning of these words, he notes, came to suggest “a difference in the degree to which the user of these words is willing to imply participation in the religious traditions under discussion.” In other words, while “sacred” gradually came to take on a more generic descriptive quality regarding things and experiences concerned with divinity, “holy” came to connote a specific sense of affirming personal belief or affiliation with the sacredness of the thing or event in question.

In this context, Oxtoby observes that in English usage “to refer to something as holy implies [. . .] a commitment to the proposition that the thing in question is in fact holy, that it has been hallowed by God.” On the other hand, he continues, “to call something sacred [. . .] may or may not imply a commitment to its sacredness on the part of the speaker, for the term is descriptive of the veneration [generally] accorded by men”. To clarify this point, Oxtoby adds “The general contrast between the semantic fields of the two words is obvious if one pairs the Holy Bible with the Sacred Books of the East; in

the first case, one's own tradition affirms the writings' holiness, while in the latter the title is descriptive of others' reverence for them" (511).

Noting yet another important distinction regarding the comparative English usage of the words sacred and holy, Oxtoby observes that, as compared to the word sacred, "the word holy has been not so much a key term for independent reflection as it is has been an attribute of the divine" (512). In that regard, Oxtoby argues, while the term "sacred" refers to a particular quality that may be ascribed upon reflection to especially meaningful or significant *experience*, the term "holy" more accurately refers to the divine or transpersonal *source* of such experience.

It is largely because of this difference in connotation between the terms holy and sacred that the latter word was chosen for use in this study to refer to the goal of engaging in personal mythwork as a religious or spiritual activity. While this study is primarily focused on the use of personal mythology as a tool for both engendering and reflecting upon religious or spiritual experience, it is nevertheless true that for many people such experience remains intrinsically bound up with some concept of divinity, the implied referent of holiness.

Contemplating the conceptual relationship between an individual's experience of the sacred and the ultimate source of such sacredness often leads, in turn, to the posing of questions about the nature of divinity. Such questions traditionally have been a key concern within the study of theology, a discipline whose name derives from the Greek word for divinity. Of course, approaching the sacred through the vehicle of personal mythology does not require contemplating the concept of divinity, since one's mythology may ultimately draw one toward non-theistic approaches to the sacred. It is also true,

however, that questions relating to the concept of divinity are often likely to arise when one engages in the process of religious or spiritual inquiry.

Not surprisingly, all such theological inquiry and discussion will be constrained by a range of issues, including both the limitations of language when describing the ineffable and the impossibility of objectively validating propositions concerning the nature of divinity. Contemplating theological questions from within the context of personal mythology, however, is complicated still further by the need to find approaches to god-talk that are also fundamentally open-ended and capable of accommodating a very wide range of theological orientations. If one's experience of the sacred is based on the archetypal significance of dreams and synchronicities combined with one's deep, personal attraction to particular images and symbols in myths and sacred stories, one accordingly needs to be able to conceptualize the source of such experience in many ways.

The desire to develop broader and more open-ended frameworks for theological discussion is not a new one and has been a growing within religious studies for much of the last half of the twentieth century (Bratten). Much of this ferment and development has been fueled by the need to find theological approaches large enough to accommodate broadly based interfaith and ecumenical dialogue (Merrigan; Wells). This trend toward seeking broader frames of reference for theological discussion has also been driven by the intellectual challenges of postmodernism (Griffin; Griffin and Smith). Expressing the broader implications of this movement toward more inclusive frames of theological reference, David L. Miller observes that theology "is not what we in the west have come to think it is—at least it is not necessarily the abstract, dogmatic, doctrinal, and credal business of Occidental monotheistic thinking alone." Instead, he suggests, "Any thinking

and speaking about ultimate matters of human meaning and being is theologia” (New Polytheism 48).

Indeed, over the past several decades, challenges from both ecumenism and postmodernism have led to the evolution of a range of new theological approaches unconstrained by many of the old conceptions about the nature of divinity, notions long deemed outmoded, ineffectual, and irrelevant by the modern perspective. While these new theological developments were not specifically intended for the purpose of working with the religious implications of personal mythology, two trends emerging as a result of these efforts seem particularly relevant to the idea of personal mythwork as sacred practice. These two evolving trends within contemporary theology include a focus on the inherently symbolic and metaphorical nature of religious discourse and a growing interest in the role of imagination as a tool for theological reflection.

On the Symbolic and Imaginal in Contemporary Theological Inquiry

Among the most dynamic and influential theological developments of the past several decades has been a growing focus on the complex role of symbol and metaphor within religious discourse. The idea that theology is concerned with symbols and metaphors is not, of course, a new idea. As a result of challenges arising from both postmodernism and religious pluralism, however, some theologians have chosen to explore the deeper implications of the ways symbol and metaphor have been applied within theological discourse. These scholars have also begun to consider the role of symbolic and metaphorical consciousness in the evolution of a postmodern, pluralistic understanding of the nature of divinity.

Among the individuals who have played a key role in this process is the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. In his book *The Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich addresses the particular problem posed by the tendency to literalize religious symbols and metaphors. In this work, Tillich also intentionally broadens the meaning of the term “myth” to include the totality of the symbolic and metaphorical content of religion, regardless of whether that content takes the form of narrative, visual image, or ritual. Regarding the concept of myth in this wide-ranging context, he notes that all myths can take one of two forms, forms described by Tillich using the terms “unbroken” and “broken” (50). Most importantly, the particular quality that distinguishes one form of myth from the other is the degree to which myth is viewed as literal truth.

According to Tillich, since the peoples of the pre-modern world believed in the literal truths of their myths, myth remained unbroken for them. For the vast majority of people living in the modern world, however, such literal belief in myth cannot be sustained without the repressive qualities of some form of fundamentalism. That myth is no longer viewed as literal truth, Tillich argues, does not mean that the need for myth is something that humans have somehow outgrown. Rather than discarding all myth as meaningless or false, he continues, one needs instead to reflect consciously on the symbolic significance of any particular myth. According to Tillich, if one is able to do this—recognize and embrace the symbolic significance of a myth without any effort to literalize that significance—then that myth “can be called ‘a broken myth’ ” (50).

While Tillich’s concept of living within an unbroken myth tends to be associated with ancient and indigenous religious traditions and the idea of living within a broken myth is associated with a contemporary orientation to religion, a particularly insightful

instance of the latter exists within the religious tradition of the Hopi people of the American Southwest. This example of consciously breaking a previously unbroken myth concerns a critical stage of the ritual process for initiating Hopi children in adulthood. Central to this ritual process are the kachinas, the pantheon of divine figures central to the Hopi religion. For the Hopi, the kachinas represent the spiritual energy of both ancestral and historical figures, as well as of all of the natural forces and elements of the physical world. In the performing of Hopi rituals, these sacred figures are embodied by masked and costumed dancers.

As Sam D. Gill observes, Hopi children “are lead to believe that the kachinas visit the village at certain intervals throughout the year, and they come to expect gifts from them.” Until the age of initiation, Hopi children are “very carefully protected” from seeing either these impersonating kachina figures without their masks or the masks when not being worn. Then, “just prior to their initiation in adulthood and their formal participation in adult religious life,” Gill continues, adolescents undergo a religious ritual lasting several days. “During the kachina cult initiation rites,” he writes, these adolescents “are frightened by the ogre kachinas,” “entertained by numerous kachina dances,” “come into close contact with a great many kachinas,” and “are told secret stories about the origin of the kachinas.” But the most lasting impression, Gill observes, is purposely saved for the final night of this ceremony.

That night the youths are taken into to a kiva, an enclosed ritual space dug into earth, to await a particularly important kachina dance. Describing this stage of the initiatory experience, Gill writes that the adolescents initially hear the kachinas calling out as they approach the kiva. They then witness the invitation extended by the elders

from within the kiva for the dancing gods to enter the ritual space. Gill emphasizes that everything in the ritual up to this point is now entirely familiar to the initiates. What happens subsequently, however, is totally unexpected because “to the children’s amazement, the kachinas enter without their masks, and for the first time in their lives, the initiates discover that the kachinas are actually members of their own village impersonating the gods” (9). Describing the effect of this unprecedented turn of events, Gill observes:

With the unmasking of the kachinas, the naiveté of the children is shattered once and forever. The existence of the kachinas, the nature of their own destiny, the trust in their parents and elders, and the very shape of reality itself are all, in a flash, brought into radical question. The children can either accept the world as bereft of meaning, with the Hopi religion a sham, or find some deeper sense in the ceremonies and objects which had come to mean so much to them. Necessarily, they begin their religious life in a state of serious reflection and in quest of understanding the sacred profound enough to sustain their new life. (8)

Further commenting on the effect of this initiation ritual, John Shea observes that for the young Hopi this “experience of disenchantment is the beginning of mature religious consciousness.” For all the years leading up to this ritual, he continues, Hopi children “naively believe the masked dancers are really the Hopi gods.” Living in an unbroken myth, these children assume the symbols of the sacred, namely the masked dancers, are the sacred itself. “The unmasking conclusion shatters this childish faith,” he continues, pushing the initiate “into adult life with a profound religious question.” Knowing what these young people now know, he suggests, they must ask themselves if the *kachinas* “are to be left behind with childhood or is there a way of bringing them forward into adult life?” If the latter is the answer, he argues, the kachinas “must be appropriated in a new way.” Now living in world of broken myths, these young people

must acknowledge that while the sacred expresses itself through the figures of the kachinas, “any simple identification of symbol and the sacred is naïve” because the sacred “is infinitely more than the masked dancers” (33).

While this process of “breaking the myth” admittedly induces an element of profound uncertainty for the person who has made its symbolic character conscious, Tillich argues, learning to live with such uncertainty is the only hope we have today for connecting to the sacred dimension of existence. Commenting on the paradox of the power of the broken symbol, Robert Cummings Neville writes, “a broken symbol is one that effectively engages us yet whose limitations are also known” (*Truth of Broken Symbols* x). Expressing the ongoing theological challenge posed by the pressing need to reject all unbroken myths, Neville writes: “The question is, if we know that all the symbols are wrong, how can any be effective for us? In this secular age in which every transcendent reference is demythologized and everything else is deconstructed, how can people be gripped by the infinite toward which finite symbols so brokenly point?” (xii). At the very least, Neville suggests, contemporary theologians need to open themselves to the possibility of the emergence of as-yet unknown symbols capable of imaging the sacred, “to cast nets of new representations to know the divine more deeply” (*Behind the Masks of God* 169).

A theological concept related to Tillich’s differentiation between unbroken and broken myths and symbols is the distinction made by Paul Ricoeur between two different kinds of consciousness for responding to any myth or symbol. Designated by Ricoeur as “primitive naïveté” and “second naïveté,” these two types of consciousness correspond, respectively, to the distinction between living in an unbroken relationship to a myth or a

symbol versus living in a broken one (351). Much as living in an unbroken relationship with myths and symbols requires that one remain in a pre-rational state of consciousness, so too does sustaining Ricoeur's state of primitive naiveté. Moreover, just as Tillich recognizes that modern, rationally oriented people cannot consciously embrace unbroken myths and symbols, so too does Ricoeur acknowledge that they can no longer approach myths and symbols from the perspective of a first naiveté.

Describing what happens within the state of consciousness characterized as primitive naiveté, David E. Klemm observes, a symbol "remains unquestioned and unquestionable in its self-evident meaning and truth," as a result of which "the expression of the symbol and the reality it signifies remain undivided." In contrast, he continues, entering into a second naiveté "requires the full emergence of reflexive consciousness," thereby resulting in the breaking of the symbol (72). However, this secondary kind of naiveté, he cautions, is not simply the dismissal by rational consciousness of symbols as meaningless, but rather a kind of reappropriation of them in a more mature form.

In this way, Klemm suggests, the response of second naiveté engages the symbolic by simultaneously retaining the directness of the instinctual and emotional response of primitive naiveté, while invoking the analytical and interpretive qualities of the rational mind. Describing this process, Ricoeur observes that the conscious engagement of second naiveté results in "a creative interpretation of meaning, faithful to the impulsion, to the gift of meaning from the symbol, and faithful also to the philosopher's oath to seek understanding" (348). As a result, he continues, even if "we can no longer hear the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original

beliefs in them, we can [still] aim at a second naiveté in and through criticism.” In this way, he concludes, “by *interpreting*, we can hear *again*” (351).

While one aspect of the current theological interest in the symbolic and imaginal is concerned with encouraging the creation of new symbols and metaphors for the sacred, William C. Shepherd emphasizes the importance of including the widest possible range of such symbols and metaphors in the development of a postmodern religious orientation. This melding of disparate and even contradictory religious symbols into a dynamic individual religious framework is a phenomenon Shepherd terms “polysymbolic religiosity” (78). Polysymbolic religiosity describes a religious framework that disputes the value—and perhaps even the validity—of maintaining an internal purity, consistency, and exclusivity of religious symbols, beliefs, and practices within religious traditions. Just as the necessarily limited and localized cultural perspectives of the past made it appropriate and necessary for people to limit their lifelong religious adherence to one tradition, Shepherd suggests, given the growing diversity of an emerging global culture, it is now preferable for one to “consider and formulate one’s own eclectic synthesis of available religious vehicles of meaning” (79).

Engaging the sacred through the context of personal mythology, recognizing the sacred as it manifests in the diverse and ever-evolving realm of personal experience, is a process very much in keeping with a polysymbolic form of religious orientation. Perhaps the most important quality of polysymbolist religiosity in this regard is its intrinsic relationship to the imaginal. Commenting on the significance of this relationship, Lonnie D. Kliever writes, “Polysymbolism’s brazen subordination of the religious traditions to the individual [. . .] implicitly asserts the priority of the religious imagination.”

Moreover, he continues, “Polysymbolism’s exuberant experiments with individualized symbol systems (‘man makes himself by making his own gods and that is poetry’) indirectly reflects the plasticity of the religious imagination” (193).

Further supporting this relationship between theology and imagination is John C. Meagher’s conception of “God as an imaginative option” (40). In an article entitled “God as Imaginative Option, God as Truth,” Meagher argues that it is only through the agency of imagination that any personally meaningful conception or belief about divinity can arise. Regarding the primary role played by imagination in the conceptualizing of divinity, however, Meagher is careful to observe:

That does not make God imaginary; it makes God imagined. So, admittedly are elves and banshees and bandersnatches and Middle Earth; but so are the quarks of subatomic physics, the workings of the psyche, the essential personal reality of the person one loves most, and how tomorrow will be spent. God can be brought into consciousness only by an act of imagination, but what is there in consciousness that got there by another route? Imagined is not imaginary. Imagination imports goods lavishly, and cannot pay the required duty on it all; what can’t be afforded must be sent back, devalued, or confiscated. But the goods arrive the only way they can, on the wharves of the imagination, and the inspections and decisions must take place in the course of their slow and careful unpacking. (45)

While asserting the imaginal nature of any conception or belief about God, however, Meagher also shares Neville’s concern for seeking the “truth” of theological propositions. In the second half of Meagher’s proposal regarding divinity, that God is also truth, he begins by observing that whatever one’s conceptions and beliefs about god may be, they are not truth, but are instead illusions. Still, he argues, “they are illusions capable of bringing about truth” or, employing truth as a verb, “able to true.” If this proposition appears contradictory, he reminds the reader that truth is “often brought about

through the instrumentality of illusions, some of them instinctive and some of them deliberately chosen.”

According to Meagher, “truth is essentially the power of truing, or the power that makes reality true” (52). As such, it is simultaneously that which “holds the real together in coherent, ordered, and intelligible relatedness” and that which “brings us into harmony and right relationship with it.” Meagher also suggests that the power that defines and sustains reality for each of us is a “power in which we participate” (55). This is so, he continues, because “it is ultimately identical with the power that holds us together and makes us who we are, since the two are, as far as we can know, reflexes and reciprocals of one another.” Moreover, Meagher proposes, “the power in which and by which this truing is brought about is named God” (56).

Because humans widely differ in terms of cultural background, temperament, upbringing, and other attributes, Meagher writes, “The God who is truth will differ accordingly, at least in its provisional illusory but truing forms.” Moreover, even within the experience of any particular human being, the process of truing is not consistent or unchanging. As a result, Meagher willingly acknowledges, “my truth is not uniform, because I am not. What is true for me at this moment is of temporary authority, and differs from other phases of myself in age, setting, health, mood, and time of day. My imagination encompasses them all, more or less, but their variability has an important bearing on my address to God” (59). In other words, the God that one initially conceives of through imagination becomes the God that reveals to one that which is true, that which “trues” one relationship to life. For one’s relationship to truth to remain continuously valid, Meagher argues, one must continually re-imagine one’s vision of God.

On the Role of Narrative in Contemporary Theology

Another trend in contemporary theological discourse directly related to the idea of personal mythology as a religious endeavor is the emerging recognition of the central place of narrative and story in modern religious understanding and experience. This growing emphasis on the importance of narrative and story-telling within the field of religious studies is paralleled by similar developments in fields as diverse as depth, narrative and social psychology, cultural anthropology, literary criticism and hermeneutics, philosophy, oral history, documentary filmmaking, and patient-directed healthcare (*Narrative*). The sheer depth and breadth of these developments also resoundingly testify to what James B. Wiggins has described as “the collapse of the story to end all stories,” meaning the failed attempt on the part of post-Enlightenment human beings to “live entirely without stories” (3).

Specifically within the realm of theological discourse, a primary manifestation of this burgeoning interest in narrative and storytelling has been the rise of a new field called “narrative theology.” Also known as “story theology,” this new approach to theological reflection can be traced back to an essay, entitled “The Story of Our Lives,” written in 1941 by H. Richard Niebuhr. According to Gary L. Comstock, while Niebuhr’s “theme lay undeveloped for several decades, it burst forth onto the theological scene in the early 1970s.” Defined as “reflection on religious claims embedded in stories,” narrative theology is, as Comstock further observes, “one of the most significant currents in late twentieth-century thought” (687).

While theology has always been concerned with religious stories, Andrew Greeley observes, the focus of that concern has tended to be on the interpretation of such stories rather than on their intrinsic communicative power as carriers of meaning. More

recently and in contrast to this theological tradition, he continues, many religious scholars:

have come to believe that the story is the truth and that the exegesis of the story, however necessary it may be, invariably deprives the story not only of its wonder and its fascination but also of some of the resonances and nuances that lurk in the periphery and the penumbra of the tale. (39)

Within the approach to religious understanding called narrative theology, Greeley writes, religion is understood fundamentally to be concerned with story. In this regard, he argues, religion is “story before it is anything else, story after it is everything else, story born from experience, coded in symbol, reinforced in the self, and shared with others to explain life and death” (40).

The narrative approach to theology recognizes that the power of story as a vehicle for encountering the sacred derives from narrative’s inherently symbolic, metaphoric, and imaginal qualities. Starting with the premise that key theological ideas are symbolic and metaphorical in nature, Dae Sung Lee observes that such symbols and metaphors “can be meaningful only within the context of a story which encompasses the world of these symbols and metaphors.” In this sense, Lee suggests, “Theological truth is more like the truth of a poem” (123). Rather than arguing, as does much of traditional theology, that poetic language obscures religious truth, narrative theology recognizes that such language might actually offer an innate asset over that of logical discourse. In this sense, Lee observes, narrative theologians “take the polyvalent and metaphoric character of language as an advantage to explore the deeper meaning in theology, which cannot be attained by simple propositional statements” (124).

While the metaphorical nature of narrative makes it well suited for reflection on the symbolic core of theological ideas, the experiential quality of hearing and telling

stories affords narrative approaches to theology an advantage in terms of understanding how such ideas might actually apply the lives of people. Commenting on this experiential dimension of sacred narrative, Terrence Tilley observes that the metaphors “which might fit our lives” are contained within “the stories which form the traditions in which we live, be they humanist, Christian, therapeutic, etc.” In this regard, Tilley continues, “to say what that root metaphor means for us is to tell or retell, to adopt or adapt, the story carrying that metaphor from the tradition into one’s own life (5).

Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan extend this argument by suggesting that, within a religious frame of reference, “the primary prerequisite for a story, if it is to be true and worth telling, is that it be lived” (63). Indeed, they continue, such a story “is given to be transformed into experience, into reality, into something that has the power to transform people.” In the end, they write, a sacred story “calls on us to obey, to respond by making the story true, through living it, through making the words take flesh in us” (64).

Paul Brockelman also writes about both the experiential aspect of sacred stories and the religious imperative such narratives imply regarding their enactment in life. In this context, he contends, “religious life entails understanding in two ways.” The first way, he writes, is through “the narrative disclosure of the ways of seeing life as a meaningful whole,” while the second is “actually coming to live-out such an interpretation of life as a personal story.” As a result, he continues, “stories that inform us about how we ought to live can lead us to transform and deepen the way we actually do live.” Deepening Brockelman’s sense of the existential power of sacred stories is his contention that all such narratives are fundamentally mythic in nature. In this regard, he

contends, “there is no mythology without concrete ways of being which reflect it,” and “no concrete ways of living without a mythological vision to inform and support them.” Moreover, he argues that these “are not two different kinds of religious understanding,” but rather “different aspects or steps in the total process of actively living a narrative vision of what reality demands of us” (101).

Related to the idea of narrative or story theology is the concept of “biography as theology” (McClendon 87). This concept focuses not on the personal implications of sacred stories, but rather on the sacred implications of personal ones. “People become theologians,” observes Peter Gilmour, “when they tell their story or write their memoir, a particularized form of narrative theology” (70). Such a personally derived approach to theology, he suggests, “is not an abstract, research-oriented mode of studying the holy, but a democratized, holistic, postmodern approach to knowing God” (71). Commenting generally on the idea of biography-as-theology, Greeley suggests that “the stories you tell about what endows your life with meaning are your religious stories” (40).

Regarding the implications for organized religion of this development within narrative theology, Tilley observes that the “process of story-telling—especially that of autobiography—provides the bridge for canonical images and metaphors from the community or tradition to the individual” (5). Even for those, however, “who no longer find in the stories and myths of orthodox religion the power to inform life with creative meaning,” Sam Keen suggests, seeking the sacred dimension of one’s personal story “points to a locality and a method which may be useful in discovering a sacred dimension of life.” Engaging this approach to religious life, he continues, requires asking a critical question of oneself: “Is there anything on the native ground of my own experience—my

biography, my history—which testifies to the reality of the holy?” If so, he argues, “we have every right to use the ancient language of the holy, and therefore, to mark out a domain for theological exploration” (*To a Dancing God* 100).

A variation on the idea of “biography as theology” is Maurice Friedman’s concept of “theology as event.” Regarding this approach to theological inquiry, Friedman writes that to speak of theology as event “changes radically the meaning of theology.” In such a context, he observes, theology “no longer rests upon a set of traditional beliefs and presuppositions nor even upon a traditional interpretation of ‘sacred history’ and biblical events.” Rather, he continues, “it is the event itself that again and again gives rise to religious meaning, and only out of that meaning, apprehended in our own history and the history of past generations that we made present to ourselves, do religious symbols and theological interpretations arise” (*Heart of Wisdom* 86). Further commenting on the significance of adopting such an approach to the comprehending the sacred, Friedman writes that the idea of theology-as-event “makes a staggering claim, namely that it is in our lives that we apprehend the divine—not through sacred times and places and rituals alone but in the everyday happening, ‘the days of our years’ ” (*Via Humana* 87).

One obvious manifestation of the idea that the sacred might be found in the stories of individual people’s lives is the genre of autobiographical writing comprising religious or spiritual memoirs. While few examples of this genre are overtly mythological in focus or approach, it has been suggested that, at their core, such writings have an inherently mythic quality. In this sense, Shea suggests that whenever biographies are deeply probed, “a root metaphor appears, a myth which gives unity and meaning to our lives” (56). In this vein, Maureen Murdock observes, “Memoir, like myth, is a quest for

meaning.” Further commenting on the relationship between myth and memoir, she observes that myth “owes its persistence to its power to express or symbolize typical human emotions that have been experienced throughout successive generations,” while memoir “owes its popularity to its poignancy in portraying these enduring patterns of behavior or archetypal themes in an individual’s life” (130). In this way, she suggests, myth “is an ordering principle that gives coherence to the way memoirs unfold,” in that a myth “is the pattern or blueprint or structure upon which we hand the remembered incidents of our lives” (133).

In the context of this dissertation, a particularly interesting sub-set of writings within the genre of religious or spiritual memoir are those works that might be uniquely characterized as “mythic memoir.” What distinguishes mythic memoir is the memoirists’ overt focus on archetypal and mythological themes and figures in the recounting of and reflection on their life experiences. Examples of such works include Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, key segments within many of the writings of Christine Downing (for example, *The Goddess, Gods in Our Midst, The Long Journey Home, and Psyche’s Sisters*), numerous portions of Keen’s *To a Dancing God* and *Hymns to an Unknown God*, and Jean Houston’s *A Mythic Life*.

Of Immanence and Transcendence, the Sacred and the Profane, and the Ordinary Sacred

A particular theological dilemma that tends to arise in the attempt to re-imagine divinity concerns the relationship between the concepts of transcendence and immanence. These two approaches to conceptualizing the source of sacred have traditionally been seen as endorsing opposing, mutually exclusive points of view. Expressed in somewhat simplistic terms, the transcendent orientation presumes divinity to be inherently separate

and distinct from the world, while the idea of immanence takes for granted the inherent inseparability of divinity and the world.

Considering the latter of these two extreme perspectives, George Brantl observes that when the divine becomes totally immanent, associated completely and literally with finite objects and values, it is reduced to some form of what traditional religion might call idolatry. On the other hand, Brantl cautions, when the divine is viewed as totally transcendent, religious experience become divorced from the everyday world of lived experience (623). Meaningfully dealing with the dilemma posed by the opposition of the transcendent and immanent dimensions of divinity, he suggests, requires that humanity paradoxically seek “a new way of experiencing the transcendent [. . .] in the full immanence of experience” (907).

Describing the efforts made by contemporary theologians to deal with the paradoxical relationship of immanence and transcendence, Roger Hazelton writes, “What has really been going on might be called an effort to relocate the meaning of transcendence.” This process, he observes, involves abandoning “thinking about transcendence as confined to ‘God,’ as though this name pointed to an entity distinct and distinguishable from ‘man’.” Such a re-visioning of the idea of transcendence, he adds, would require an acknowledgement that the “God-question” is bound up with the “humanity-question” to such an extent “that they became the same question” (101). As a result, Hazelton concludes, “if either immanence or transcendence are to mean anything, their meanings must be seen to interlock and interpenetrate [...] one another” (108).

Paralleling the paradox of the relationship between the transcendent and immanent dimensions of divinity is a second, equally paradoxical relationship. That

relationship exists between those aspects of the phenomenal world considered sacred or holy and those considered profane (derived from the Latin term for the unhallowed space outside of a temple or sacred precinct), mundane (derived from the Latin term for “world” and referring to that which is worldly), and secular (derived from the Latin term for a particular generation or age and referring to that which is “of the temporal” or, more colloquially “of time”). In particular, although the exclusively transcendent view assumes that divinity is separate from the world, it has tended to suggest that the world of everyday activities, material things, and chronological events, the world of time and space, is inherently *not* sacred.

Directly addressing this paradox, Lynda Sexson asks “How is it then that thinking and things are made holy or sacred?” She suggests that exploring the etymologies of the latter two words will help to answer this question. In this context, she reminds her readers that the word holy is etymologically related to “wholeness” and that the word sacred carries connotations of “consecrated, set apart and purified.” She then argues that the “dualism that divides the world into the sacred and the profane, or the holy and the ordinary, actually undercuts or eradicates the holy (wholeness) since all reality must be—or is potentially—sacred (consecrated)” (8). The assumption of the potential sacredness of all things, Sexson further suggests, implies that the proper task of religion is “the consecration of experience or person, so that the person or experience is made whole (holy)” (9).

Regarding the relationship between the sacred and the ordinary, Sexson also introduces a concept she describes as “improvising the sacred.” In this context, she observes:

Inventories from children's hiding places and from religious holy places bear a remarkable similarity: bones, bright stones, beads, fur feathers, bits of writing, nuts, a pictures; or relics, *urim* and *thummim*, the borrowed power of the totemic animal, the regenerative grain, the sacred text, the host, the icon. (5)

Sexson rhetorically asks “Why do children collect feathers, hide gold paper, delicately perch a marble in the arms of an unresisting house plant, or stick shells under their beds or stones into their mattresses?” The reason, she answers, is that “the ‘junk’ that is precious to children—and to adults—is precisely the stuff of the sacred.” In this sense, Sexson suggests “the holy is made up of words and works identical to all the stuff in the profane world” (8).

Also commenting on this interrelationship between the sacred and the profane, Lawrence J. Hatab writes “the sacred does not mean exclusively the supernatural or otherworldly, but simply the *extraordinary*, the uncommon, both wondrous and terrifying.” According to Hatab, the profane, therefore, “does not mean something sacrilegious but simply the *ordinary*, the common.” For Hatab, the distinction between sacred and profane “does speak of two worlds, but rather a single, two-dimensional world.” In this sense, the sacred can be said to show itself “whenever something affects the existential situation in important ways—exciting terror, hope, joy, or awe” (23). In contemplating the ultimate personal implication of such a coming together of the sacred and the profane dimensions of experience, Sam Keen writes, “If there is some sacred ground and meaning for my life, it must be discovered here and now” (*Hymns to an Unknown God* 41).

At the beginning of his book on personal mythology, D. Stephenson Bond provides a sort of case study on both the peculiar interrelationship of the sacred and the

profane and on the imaginal and perceptual process by which the profane becomes sacred. That case study takes the form of a meditation on the particular small stone that Bond carries in his pocket as a sort of talisman. At the beginning of this account, he describes how he inadvertently came upon the stone one day while working in his garden. It attracted his attention, he writes, because it was shaped like an arrowhead, “not the fancy kind you see in the museums, but a very primitive arrowhead.” Bond is careful to note that the stone “could have been an arrowhead,” an arrowhead “shaped by a bony hand long before the white man’s era.” On the other hand, he realizes, it also “*could* be utterly natural, carved by nature, in a way that seems eerily conscious.”

Bond observes that the key to his fascination with his particular stone was in the ambiguity of its nature. He writes that his stone “cannot make up its mind to be of human or natural origin, conscious or unconscious” (4). By engaging Bond’s imagination in a process mythic reflection, the stone’s ambiguous character actually becomes the source of its sacred or religious quality for him. In that process of imaginal reflection, for example, Bond’s mysteriously ambiguous stone comes to be associated with the prehistoric standing stones of northern Europe and aboriginal stone fetishes. It also becomes imaginally linked to the river stone Jung carried in his pocket as a boy and the stones from Lake Zurich that he played with as a form of unconscious therapy during his famous midlife breakdown.

Bond recounts the small ways in which he begins to act ritualistically with regard to his mythological stone, attributing a kind of sacred power to his relationship with it. At the same time, he is careful to note his realization that the attribution of such power to a stone is, in actuality, a projection of some quality inside of him. Bond observes of his

pocket stone, “One minute it was a rock, and the next a talisman, a charm, a fetish, a relic.” Describing the ultimate outcome of this process of imaginal transformation, he concludes, his stone was “made sacred by human imagination” (8). Bond’s stone and his relationship to it are also an example of what Tillich calls a “broken myth,” a myth that retains its power in spite of—or perhaps because of—one’s conscious awareness that one is engaging something mythic. In this regard, Bond is also manifesting the form of symbolic and imaginal consciousness that Ricoeur calls *second naiveté*. Most importantly, it should be noted that Bond’s recounting of this story provides a simple demonstration of the manner in which the sacred is made manifest through one’s personal experience of the mythic.

On Myth, Meaning, and Mystery

While religious scholars tend to define the idea of the sacred in conventionally religious terms, it is also possible to contemplate the sacred in the larger and more philosophical context of the “search for meaning.” For many people, particularly those who consider themselves “non-religious,” it is this latter sense of what constitutes or makes something sacred that is particularly important. Given its role as a mediator of the sacred, mythology is intrinsically involved in this search for a personal sense of meaning.

Commenting on this idea, Thomas Moore observes that myth “gives a person the sense of living in a meaningful story, the feeling that one’s life makes sense and has value” (*Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life* 238). Further emphasizing this meaning-making role of myth, Rollo May has observed that myth is a tool for “making sense in a senseless world,” adding that myths are essentially “narrative patterns that give significance to our existence” (15). Writing more specifically about the relationship

between a personal encounter with myth and the experience of meaning, Bond observes, “What we experience as our own individual life as well as what we experience as universally human can only be expressed—which is to say can only become a meaning—through personal myth” (59).

While most of those writing about personal mythology explicitly consider this ability of mythic consciousness to convey a sense of both existential and universal meaning to life experience, it is important to note that many of these authors also take pains to focus on the inherently symbolic, metaphorical, and imaginal nature of mythic meaning. “When someone has an ‘Aha!’ response to an interpretation of a myth,” writes Jean Shinoda Bolen in this context, “the particular myth is symbolically addressing something that is personally important to him or her” (*Goddesses in Everywoman* 6). In emphasizing the intrinsically imaginal nature of meaning construed mythically, Mark Schorer goes so far as to define a myth simply as “a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life” (355).

In addition to being inherently symbolic and imaginal, it is also important to recognize that meaning understood in mythic terms is also fundamentally experiential in nature. In other words, the mythic meaning of a life experience is not something to be found separate and apart from either the experience itself or the memory of the experience. Commenting on this existential quality of myth, Eric Gould observes, “the sacredness of myth... is not an abstract point, but a living principle, dependent on the phenomenological fact that the world is what we perceive—not an idea, but an event which is lived through” (198).

Because of its inherently existential, experiential nature, Bond writes, a mythic sense of meaning “does not come ready-made,” as a result of which “our problem is [. . .] not so much to preserve the meanings we inherit, as to participate in the process of meaning unfolding” (59). Moreover, as Stephen Larsen observes, since a mythic sense of meaning will necessarily manifest as an integrated aspect of the unfolding of one’s experience, one cannot anticipate or control when one will encounter such meaning in one’s life. As such, mythic meaning “cannot be compelled or defined,” he observes, but “simply presents itself to the receptive consciousness” (*Mythic Imagination* 31). In this sense, writes Hatab, mythic meaning “is not invented but rather *revealed*” (21).

In systematically contemplating the relationship between mythic consciousness and a sense of the meaningfulness of life experience, Robert J. Hater has proposed a three-tiered model of mythic meaning. Describing the least powerful, though most common, of these levels of mythic meaning as “secondary mythic meaning,” Hater observes that this level of mythic meaning can be engaged through one’s most mundane and unreflective interactions with the material world (5). While such activities and things, he notes, are largely concerned with the functional aspects of life, they also potentially can assume “a deeper mythic meaning” (60). This happens, Hater suggests, when these mundane activities also serve some significant mythic, archetypal, symbolic purpose. As an example of experience manifesting secondary mythic meaning, Hater cites the parent who toils away at an otherwise meaningless job to support his or her family. Secondary mythic meaning is often present, Hater observes, even when the mythic significance of the activity remains completely or largely unconscious. At its strongest, however, secondary mythic meaning manifests as a sort of dim awareness of

the symbolic or metaphorical significance of one's engagement in mundane, functional activities.

The next most powerful level of mythic meaning, which Hater calls "primary mythic meaning," is generated when more powerful experiences in one's life are "filtered through memory, imagination, and reason." As an example of an experience capable of engendering secondary mythic meaning, Hater suggests the sense of meaning encountered in the reflection of a mother contemplating the love she feels for her child. Not surprisingly, there is a deeper emotional charge connected with primary mythic meaning as compared with the secondary level and, as a consequence, a greater sense of imperative connected with consciously engaging this level of mythic meaning. While we may comfortably remain emotionally and intellectually unconscious of the significance of secondary mythic meaning, "when confronted by primary mythic meaning," he writes, "we cannot remain neutral," adding that such an encounter "demands a response" (6).

The most powerful dimension of mythic meaning, according to Hater, is "core mythic meaning," the level connected with the most transpersonal or universal dimension of consciousness (7). Unlike both secondary and primary mythic meanings, which are largely centered on a sense of that which is meaningful on a purely personal level, this third category is primarily concerned with such ultimate and universal concerns as the "quest for identity, life's purpose, ultimate destiny, a reason for living, an explanation for suffering, and the desire for transcendence" (63). When one becomes aware of the transpersonal and universal significance of particular personal experiences, Hater suggests, the dimension of core mythic meaning is engaged. Moreover, while this level of mythic meaning is focused on concerns that transcend the purely personal, Hater

emphasizes the idea that “the dynamics surrounding core mythic meaning also root all primary and secondary mythic responses” to life experience (10).

In his discussion of both the primary and core levels of mythic meaning, Hater emphasizes that a fundamental aspect of meaning when conceived in mythic terms is its relationship to what has commonly been referred to as “mystery.” “Meaning is framed in mystery,” he writes, which is why both “core and primary mythic meaning elude full rational comprehension” (20, 23). Contemplation of the complex relationship that exists between myth, meaning, and mystery is a frequent theme in the literature on both myth in general and on personal mythology in particular. Writing on this relationship, James Hollis observes that a fundamental function of myth has traditionally been to serve as a bridge “from the unknown to the knower,” helping “the human stand in some sort of meaningful relationship to mystery” (*Tracking the Gods* 8). Writing specifically about sacred myths, Hatab proposes that the “basis of myth is neither the human self nor the objective world but a sacred, extraconscious mystery which arrives” (42).

Among the key indicators of the depth and resilience of a particular religious or spiritual frame of reference is its relationship to the particular aspect of the mystery of existence that might be described as the “dark sacred.” Referring to such painful yet inescapable life issues as suffering, grief, and despair, the dark sacred has always been a key focus of concern for religious traditions. Commenting on this dimension of the sacred, John E. Nelson and Andrea Nelson write about the need to “embrace sadness, emptiness, and despair as powerful teachers of life’s most profound lessons,” as well as of the importance of returning “a sense of sacredness to all human experience, especially those sorrows that most try our souls” (2). Also writing about this concept of the dark

sacred, Greg Mogenson observes, “Whether a divine being exists or not, the psychological fact remains that we tend to experience traumatic events *as if* they were in some sense divine.” In this regard, he continues, “Just as God has been described as transcendent and unknowable, a traumatic event is an event which transcends our capacity to experience it” (1).

Among the most ancient and prevalent of mythic images connected with the idea of the dark sacred are those connected with wounds and wounding. Citing the abundance of instances of wounding in Western mythology—from Adam’s rib, Achilles’ heel, and Jesus’ stigmata to Prometheus’s liver, Jacob’s thigh, and Dionysus’ dismemberment—Jean Houston suggests that “all of these myths of wounding carry with them the uncanny, the mysterious, the announcement that the sacred is entering into time” (*Search for the Beloved* 105). Also writing about the potentially sacred dimension of personal psychic wounds, Lionel Corbett writes, “By contemplating the painful aspects of one’s story in the context of the great mythic stories of suffering [. . .] the sufferer’s pain is located within a much larger drama and is not an isolated event” (*Religious Function of the Psyche* 163). This process, he adds, uses ancient myth “as a way of amplifying and deepening one’s own condition,” as a result of which “the myth has become a personal myth” (164).

The interweaving of myth, meaning, and mystery would seem to lie at the core of any attempt to encounter a sacred dimension of consciousness through the vehicle of personal mythology. The process by which this interweaving transpires is profoundly existential in nature, requiring a deep personal engagement of the symbolic and the imaginal, as well as a sustained tolerance for paradox and uncertainty. Regarding this

perennial relationship between mythology, the quest for meaning, and the enduring mystery at the core of both, much can be said, but perhaps the most evocative observations on the subject are those contained within the following passage by Conrad Hyers:

Myth arises out of a profound sense of the mystery of existence—the mystery of existence as such and the mystery of every existing thing. Yet though an attempt may be made to respond to this mystery by offering interpretations of life that somehow ‘reveal’ this mystery, the mystery is never exhausted or overcome. [...] We are not confronted with mystery in the sense of a problem to be solved, a puzzle to be put together, or a detective story that discloses the culprit on the final page. This mystery stands at the beginning and end of all thought. It represents the limit, the final reaches, of every reason and system. Insofar as myths offer themselves as the ultimate answer or truth, it is properly so in the sense that they function on the horizon of the last understanding, where all understanding proceeds from and is returned to the mysterium out of which it has come. (128-9)