

Chapter 5
All the Gods Are Within Us:
Joseph Campbell and the Religious Power of Personal Mythology

On Joseph Campbell and the Religious Dimension of Personal Mythology

Of all of the figures who can be said to have played seminal roles in the development of the concept of personal mythology, Joseph Campbell is probably the individual most commonly associated with this idea. Moreover, with particular regard to the idea of personal mythology as pathway to the sacred, no one has done more than Campbell to convey the enormous power of adopting a personal approach to myth as a means of invigorating and enhancing spiritual or religious life. In commenting on the effect of this achievement, William G. Doty writes:

That ordinary lay persons could wrestle with gripping issues about the meaning of the universe, the nature of gods and goddesses, how to face death, where to turn to find a moral community, and how to pursue religious interests in a context free of denominational cant and privilege—we all have Campbell to thank for his impetus in this regard. (“Joseph Campbell’s Myth and/versus Religion” 440)

A particularly compelling quality of Campbell’s approach to the religious function of mythology stems from his blending of the mystical dimension of religion with contemporary psychological ideas regarding the nature of the unconscious. Indeed, Campbell recognizes that the religious and the psychological domains of human life are inextricably interwoven into one complex and ever-evolving tapestry of which mythic consciousness is both weaver and loom. The ultimate implication of the profound interconnectedness of the religious and the psychological is that, as Campbell expresses it, “All the gods are within us” (*Power of Myth* 39). Indeed, this often quoted statement—a phrase that Campbell, in turn, borrowed from the work of his mentor Heinrich Zimmer, a renowned scholar of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions—

encapsulates the core of what it means to speak of personal mythology as a religious pathway.

Throughout his long career, Campbell taught that direct experience of the symbolic power of myth creatively woven into a personally meaningful framework of narrative and image could serve as a viable alternative religious option for those contemporary people who could no longer find the sacred through traditional religious means. This process of creative mythic encounter, he argues, not only bypasses traditional theological frames of reference, but more radically leads to “the secularization of the sacred,” a term which “suggests an opening of the sense of religious awe to some sphere of secular experience, or more marvelously, to the wonder of this whole world and oneself within it” (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 193).

In considering the religious significance of Campbell’s insistence on personal encounter with myth, Walter B. Gulick observes that such mythic engagement offers the possibility of engendering a sense of “originative religious meaning.” In general, Gulick writes, experiences of religious meaning occur when key elements of a person’s sense of selfhood “are integrated with that person’s notion of what is ultimately most real, valuable, and/or powerful through a myth, symbol, ritual, creed, or experience interpreted as religious.” In particular, he continues, an experience of originative religious meaning “awakens a person to previously unrecognized sacred dimensions of reality and incidentally contributes to a transformed notion of oneself and life’s possibilities.” Describing the effect of experiences of originative religious meaning on the individual, Gulick observes, one is forced “to reconceive what is of religious importance in life” (42).

Campbell deeply recognized the failure of mainstream Western religion to provide experiences of originaive religious meaning for many people. He also recognized that this failure ultimately deprived such individuals of a sustainable and resilient metaphysical framework for encountering life. At same time, Campbell understood the personal and collective dangers of attempting to return to a literalized and constricted religious fundamentalism as an alternative to a mainstream religious orientation. Nevertheless, as Lonnie D. Kliever writes, while Campbell fully recognized that “the great traditional mythologies have lost their exclusive monopoly on world construction and personality formation,” he also believed “that deliteralized and deabsolutized mythologies can have a vital and permanent role in human life and thought” (176).

In this context, observes William D. Dinges, Campbell believed that a personal encounter with mythic symbols and stories could still draw individual seekers toward a whole range of experiences once considered the sole province of conventional religion. In particular, Dinges credits Campbell’s work with demonstrating how myth functions as a powerful vehicle for drawing one toward “inward illumination, to an experience of ultimate meaning beyond the bounds of ordinary certainties and knowledge, to the fullest potentiality of personhood, to an experience of heightened consciousness from which vitality flows” (11). Consideration of some of the important ways in which Campbell’s orientation to myth encourages the evolution of a more personal orientation to the religious dimension of life is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

On the Symbolic and Universalist Nature of Campbell’s Orientation to Myth

In reading Campbell’s books and essays as well as the writings of those who have

critiqued his work, two characteristics of Campbell's orientation to mythology soon become evident. The first of these aspects of Campbell's basic frame of reference toward myth relates to his emphatic and repeated insistence that mythology is inherently and perennially symbolic and metaphorical in nature. Summarizing much of the commentary on Campbell's linkage of the mythic with the symbolic and the metaphorical is Joan Weatherly's observation that "underlying Campbell's whole conception of mythology is its synonymy with metaphor" (141). Typifying this aspect of Campbell's frame of reference is his definition of mythology as "an organization of symbolic images and narratives metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience" (*Thou Art That* 1-2). Moreover, he continues, the very life of a mythology "springs from and depends on the metaphoric vigor of its symbols" (6).

The second essential quality of Campbell's approach to myth is his equally consistent emphasis on the universality of mythic themes and characters. "Reviewing with an unprejudiced eye the religious traditions of mankind," he observes, "one becomes very soon aware of certain mythic motifs that are common to all, though differently understood and developed in the different traditions" (*Inner* 11). In this regard, while remaining generally attentive to many of the particular or local aspects of the mythic traditions he explores, it is on their universal dimension that Campbell primarily and most steadfastly focuses his attention. At the same time, bearing in mind the understanding that all mythic symbols and stories inevitably retain the limiting aspects of their particular local inflections, Campbell cautiously comments on "the provincial character of *all* we are prone to regard as universal" (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 120)

Critical to understanding both the symbolic and universalist dimensions of his approach to myth is Campbell's interest in the work of the nineteenth century anthropologist and ethnologist Adolf Bastian. Bastian had earlier observed this tendency of particular ethnic and religious traditions to embody a common pool of core motifs. In his writings, Bastian describes these core universal motifs as representing "elementary" ideas, while he calls the particular manifestations of such core motifs "ethnic" or "folk" ideas. When he later encountered the ideas of Jung, Campbell recognized an important connection between Bastian's work and a core concept in Jung's approach to psychology, observing that the same mythic motifs that Bastian described as "elementary ideas," Jung called "archetypes of the collective unconscious" (*Thou Art That* 6).

Moreover, just as Campbell understood that the ethnic or folk manifestations of recurring motifs are the "concern properly of historians and ethnologists," he recognized the underlying elementary and archetypal nature of these motifs to be a core concern of both depth psychology and a depth psychological orientation to religious experience (*Inner Reaches of Outer Space* 11). As a result, in Campbell's view, the symbolic nature and universalism of mythology functions to fundamentally underscore and facilitate the role of myth as the psychological carrier of the experience of metaphysical meaning. "The metaphorical languages of both mythology and metaphysics are not denotative of actual worlds or gods," Campbell observes in this regard, "but rather connote levels and entities within the person touched by them" (*Power of Myth* 7). In this way," he continues, "the images of myth are reflections of the spiritual potentialities of every one of us," adding that "through contemplating these we evoke their powers in our own lives" (217).

On the Mystical Foundation of Campbell's Approach to the Religious Function of Myth

Campbell's emphasis on the symbolic and universalist qualities of myth is, in turn, even more fundamentally grounded in a particular form of mysticism which both informs and supports all of Campbell's work. To grasp the religious dimension of Campbell's approach to myth—and, more to the point, to comprehend his contribution to the idea of personal mythology as a religious endeavor—it is necessary to explore this mystical vision underpinning Campbell's work as a comparative mythologist.

The particular mystical orientation underlying Campbell's approach to myth, an approach that draws heavily upon Hindu religious ideas, grew out of his early association with the work of Zimmer. This orientation is also largely congruent with the principal tenets of the "perennial philosophy," a metaphysical perspective focused on seeking a universal framework for understanding mystical experience. Aldous Huxley, the novelist and religious seeker who first popularized this perspective in the West in the mid-1940s, states that the perennial philosophy "recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and [to] lives and minds." Huxley further observes that this approach to mystical understanding psychologically finds in the soul of each individual human being some essential aspect coinciding with this "divine Reality" (vii).

Detailing a number of other key precepts incorporated within the perennial philosophy, Paul O. Ingram writes:

What is 'perennial,' meaning 'no matter what, when, or where,' about the [perennial philosophy] is: (1) 'God' or 'Godhead' or "Absolute' or 'the Sacred'—whichever one prefers—is the ultimate reality to which each religious Way points; (2) human beings possess the capacity to ascertain truth about this Sacred reality; (3) the most important of these truths is the Sacred's ultimacy in comparison with the world's finitude; (4) the Sacred, however it is named, is beyond all names and predicates. (30)

More generally describing the doctrines of the perennial philosophy, Huston Smith observes that they are “derived from metaphysical intuitions” and that, “like mystical theophanies, metaphysical intuitions are ultimately ineffable” (554). As a consequence, he continues, “No more than the former can they be adequately rationalized; strictly speaking, they can only be symbolized.”

In the concluding essay of *Myths to Live By*, a collection of lectures published in 1971, Campbell directly refers to the idea of the perennial philosophy. “When the symbolic forms in which wisdom-lore has been everywhere embodied are interpreted not as referring primarily to any supposed or even actual historical personages or events,” he writes, but rather “psychologically, properly ‘spiritually,’ as referring to the inward potentials of our species, then there appears through all something that can properly be termed a *philosophia perennis* of the human race” (264). Later in that same essay, Campbell further observes that mythologies which retain their power “point infallibly through things and events to the ubiquity of ‘presence’ or ‘eternity’ that is whole and entire in each” (266).

More than twenty years earlier, in his seminal work *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell first expressed the sense of a “universal doctrine” underlying his vision of myth, observing that “all the visible structures of the world—all the things and beings—are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they rise, which supports them and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve” (257-8). Forty years later and at the end of his career, in the television series *The Power of Myth*, Campbell reiterates his integration of the core vision of the perennial philosophy with his understanding of the nature of mythology, observing simply that “the

basic theme of all mythology [...] is that there is an invisible plane supporting the visible one” (71).

Another particularly important aspect of Campbell’s orientation to the mystical relates to Walter T. Stace’s distinction between “introvertive” and “extrovertive” forms of mystical experience (15). Regarding the former approach to the mystical, Stace writes “the introvertive way turns inward, introspectively” and is “wholly nonsensuous” in nature (16). In contrast, he observes, “the extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there” (18).

Citing Stace’s work, Robert A. Segal suggests that Campbell’s form of mysticism is of the “extrovertive” variety, noting “the mysticism that, according to Campbell, all myths express is of a world-affirming rather than world-rejecting variety” (“Myth versus Religion for Campbell” 43). In comparison to introvertive mysticism, which seeks to ignore the realm of the senses, “rejecting earth for heaven, body for spirit, and humanity for god,” Segal further observes, “extrovertive mysticism embraces rather than rejects the everyday world.” In this way, he continues, “Campbell’s extrovertive mysticism finds heaven in earth, the spirit in the body, and god in humanity” (“Joseph Campbell, the Perennial Philosopher” 93).

Another key element of the mystical orientation implicit in Campbell’s approach to myth is his emphasis on the profound inter-relatedness—and ultimate oneness—of the metaphysical and psychological dimensions of experience. A number of commentators on Campbell have written about the importance of this bringing together of mystical metaphysics and depth psychology in the shaping of Campbell’s particular approach to myth. “Because Campbell interprets myth psychologically as well as metaphysically,”

Segal observes, myth becomes a tool for celebrating “the oneness of the unconscious with everyday consciousness as well as the oneness of ultimate reality with ordinary reality” (“Joseph Campbell, the Perennial Philosopher” 93). In this same vein, Kleiver also comments on the interweaving in Campbell’s work of the teachings of the perennial philosophy with an understanding of the nature of the unconscious based in depth psychology. “Stripped of their supernatural, literal, and historical posturings,” he writes, “the myths of humankind give expression and form to those two mysterious voids which come from life and to which it returns—the unconscious self and the unlimited universe” (176).

Described by Campbell himself as “the great key to the understanding of myth,” is the recognition that although “the two worlds, divine and human, can be pictured only as distinct from each other,” these two worlds “are actually one.” Once one has grasped the significance of this recognition, he writes, one learns that “the realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the [everyday] world we know” (*Hero with a Thousand Faces* 217). Expressing this fundamental tenet of his orientation to myth in other words, he states that mythologies “having sprung from the psyche, point back to the psyche” and that “anyone seriously turning within will, in fact, rediscover their references in himself” (*Myths to Live By* 266).

In this sense, it can be seen that, though Campbell delineates the metaphysical and psychological as separate functions of myth, these functions can never be wholly differentiated in practice. Regarding these two functions, Campbell describes the metaphysical as serving to express our relationship to divinity, “that ultimate mystery, transcending names and forms,” while the psychological function serves to “foster the

centering and unfolding of the individual,” enabling one to find the meaning inherent in the inner workings of one’s own psyche (*Masks of God* 6, 609). As Mark Meadows observes, for Campbell, these two functions interpenetrate each other, simultaneously operating “in the depths of the psyche and in the transcendent aspect of the macrocosm itself,” thereby engaging one in a “psychological experience of seeing the material world as a symbol of an unseen unity that undergirds and informs that phenomenal world” (253).

On Myths Being “Transparent to Transcendence” and Myths as the “Masks of God”

The mystical foundation of Campbell’s approach to myth can perhaps best be understood in terms of two often-quoted, interrelated concepts essential to his work. The first of these two interconnected ideas states that if symbols and stories are to function effectively as myth, they need to be “transparent to transcendence” (*Hero’s Journey* 40). This concept, adopted by Campbell from work of the German mystic and depth psychologist Karlfried Graf Durkheim, suggests that mythic symbols and metaphors must not be allowed to become opaque to the mystical consciousness or essence to which they refer. For Campbell, the transcendent realm to which myth must remain transparent is identical with the sense of an “invisible plane supporting the visible one” at the core of the perennial philosophy (*Power of Myth* 71). Equally importantly, the transcendent referent of mythic symbols and metaphors cannot be seen as separate from one’s experience of the world of people and things.

When mythic material becomes opaque to transcendence, in Campbell’s view, the local (e.g., the cultural, ethnic, historical, or sectarian religious) interpretation of a particular image or narrative has obscured its universal significance. Moreover, in

Campbell's orientation to myth, grasping the universal significance of mythic material implicitly requires recognition of the sort of mystical vision implicit within the perennial philosophy. Conversely, engaging the metaphysical dimension of mythic narratives and symbols requires imaginably stepping outside of limited, literalized, local interpretations of them.

The second of these core inter-related concepts within Campbell's work states that if mythic stories and images remain transparent to the transcendent realm, they are then able to function metaphorically as the "masks of God." In this phrase, Campbell employs the word "God" as a referent for the transcendent, as opposed to the term "gods," a word he frequently used to describe the many different kinds of masks. Since the transcendent is always manifest and yet hidden, simultaneously beyond "definition, categories, names, and forms" and yet "the very substance, energy, being, and support, of all things, including ourselves," it can never be represented in all of its ultimate-ness and universality (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 196).

As a result, human consciousness requires symbolic interfaces with transcendence—"masks" in the form of particular mythic images and stories—that speak effectively to both the psychological and metaphysical dimensions of awareness, yet always point indirectly beyond themselves to an ultimate and perennial reality. For this reason, Campbell writes, "the metaphorical languages of both mythology and metaphysics are not denotative of actual worlds or gods, but rather connote levels and entities within the person touched by them" (*Thou Art That* 7). Indeed, Campbell emphasizes, one must never mistake the limited, localized mask for the transcendent reality both concealed and revealed by it. Such confusion of the mask, a particular

manifestation of transcendence in time and space, with the timeless and unchanging nature of transcendent reality itself means that the myth represented by the mask has ceased to be transparent.

Commenting on Campbell's concept of the "masks of God," Robert Cummings Neville ironically observes that when one attempts to peer behind the many masks, one finds that "behind the masks of God are more masks" (*Behind the Masks of God* 1). Neville further observes that contemplating what lies behind the masks is not about obviating the need for them or seeking to abandon them, but rather "to understand the contexts in which they are true expressions of divinity" (2). Moreover, given that behind the masks of god one eternally finds only more masks, Neville asks if religion and theology—and, by extension, mythology—can therefore deal "only in appearances." Attempting to answer his own question, he first observes that all religious concepts, symbols, and images are inherently "partial and inadequate." As a result, he continues, "we've never said enough, and everything we've said is at least a little wrong" (1). Echoing Campbell's sense of both the value and limitation of any of the countless masks of God, Neville emphasizes that while "every mask, every symbol [. . .] has validity in some time and condition," it is equally true that "each is also limited," since "divine reality is never exhausted in a finite collection of symbols or theological assertions" (168-9).

One potential source of confusion regarding what Campbell means to imply by the phrases "masks of God" and "transparent to transcendence"—indeed, a potential source of confusion regarding his whole frame of reference regarding the nature of the sacred—lies in not fully comprehending Campbell's use of the term "transcendence."

That this term is crucial to Campbell's approach to myth can be seen in his simple declaration that "the word transcendence is the key word for mythology" (*Hero's Journey* 162). As opposed to the meaning of this word in the context of traditional Judeo-Christian theology, referring to the idea of divinity transcending the phenomenal world, Campbell always employs the term transcendent to mean "that which is beyond all concepts" and "all categories of thinking." Explicating this idea further, Campbell observes that within the limited awareness of ordinary human consciousness, one "always think in terms of opposites," adding that "everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, true and untrue." In contrast, he argues, "God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites" (*Power of Myth* 62).

Moreover, since "the transcendent is unknowable and unknown," he continues, "God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name 'God'." As a result, Campbell declares, quoting the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, "the ultimate and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God, leaving your notion of God for an experience of that which transcends all notions" (*Power of Myth* 49). Myth, in Campbell's view, is meant to facilitate just such a leave-taking by imaginally and symbolically pointing one toward an experience of "that which is [. . .] ultimately transcendent of all definition, categories, names, and forms" (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 196). Commenting further on the proper relationship between the many masks of myth and transcendence, Campbell observes, "Myth is but the penultimate; the ultimate is openness—that void, or being beyond the categories—into which the mind must plunge alone and be dissolved" (*Hero with a Thousand Faces* 258).

It is essential to recognize that, in keeping with the metaphysical framework of the perennial philosophy, Campbell never views “divine reality”—both the transcendence to which myth should remain transparent and the God behind the many masks—as any sort of differentiated personal divinity. Rather, as Phil Cousineau observes, for Campbell, “every deity is a metaphor, a mask, for the ultimate mystery ground, the transcendent energy source of the universe, that is also the mysterious source of your own life” (Introduction xv). In this regard, Campbell writes, “the gods are agents, manifestations, or imagined functionaries of an energy that transcends all conceptualization” and, as such, “are not the source of the energy but are rather agents of it.” (*Thou Art That* 18).

Equally important to an understanding of Campbell’s approach to the study of mythology is the concept that this mysterious ground of being and transcendent source of energy is actually the fount from which all genuine religious myths and meaningful god-images spring in the first place, the ultimate source of all of the many masks of God. In other words, the universal, eternal energy source that creates and supports the phenomenal world is also the energetic point of origin of the symbolic forms by which human consciousness recognizes the existence of that transcendence.

Understanding the proper relationship between all mythic forms and the ultimate field of consciousness that is both their referent and their source is, in Campbell’s view, crucial if one is to appreciate the sacred dimension of mythology. For this reason, he declares, what is “holy and to be sought [is] not the promise of any given myth or the claims of any inherited god but the living source of all myths and of all the god and their worlds” (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 6-7). The wisdom of this guidance regarding “given

myths” and “inherited gods” is particularly urgent today, Campbell observes, because “there is nothing now that endures.” In this context, he continues:

The known myths cannot endure. The known God cannot endure. Whereas formerly, for generations, life so held to established norms that the lifetime of a deity could be reckoned in millenniums, today all norms are in flux, so that the individual is thrown, willy-nilly, back upon himself, into the inward sphere of his own becoming, his forest adventurous without way or path, to come through his own integrity in experience to his own intelligible Castle of the Grail—integrity and courage, in experience, in love, in loyalty, and in act. (*Masks of God* 677)

On the Experiential Dimension of Myth and Engaging the “Symbol without Meaning”
Central to Campbell’s approach to the religious dimension of myth is his idea that

myth is meant to function as both stimulus and vehicle for the direct experience of the sacred. Indeed, one of the most distinctive general features of Campbell’s work is his repeated insistence that the power of myth resides specifically in its ability to stimulate personal experiences of a profoundly existential nature regarding the sacred dimension of human life. In particular, Campbell continually links myth with the experience of two interwoven mysteries connected to the sacred: the mystical experience of the mystery of transcendent reality and the existential experience of the mystery of being passionately alive in the phenomenal world.

Speaking of this experience of a mystery that is simultaneously mystical and existential, Campbell tells Bill Moyers in the *Power of Myth* television series:

People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. (5)

Regarding the ability of myth to direct one toward such an experience of transcendence, Campbell observes that mythic symbols and narratives “deliver more than just an

intellectual concept, for such is their inner character that they provide a sense of actual participation in a realization of transcendence.” As a result, he continues, such symbols and narratives convey “not just an idea of the infinite but some realization of the infinite” (*Thou Art That* 6). Describing this aspect of Campbell’s orientation to myth as “symbolico-experiential mysticism,” Doty observes that Campbell “believed that myths could give conscious access to the underlying and transcending cosmic powers” (“Joseph Campbell’s Myth and/versus Religion” 422). In this regard, he adds, “mythic/mystic symbols are for Campbell the bearers of [a] great energetic, spiritual source” and “important entities that release energies not otherwise accessible” (427).

One of Campbell’s most significant and controversial concepts regarding personal engagement with mythic stories and images is the notion of the “symbol without meaning.” Campbell first introduced this concept in a lecture delivered at the Eranos Conference in Ascona, Switzerland, in 1957. Subsequently published in the official proceedings of that conference, as well as in an essay in the collection *The Flight of the Wild Gander*, this lecture directly addresses Campbell’s conception of the essential role of myth in an existential and experiential approach to the sacred.

In this lecture, Campbell discusses two mutually exclusive functions that can be served by mythic images and stories, functions that Campbell labels “engagement” and “disengagement” (168). Like the literalized and largely unconscious level of mythic engagement that Paul Tillich calls “unbroken,” Campbell writes that when a mythic image or story “is functioning for engagement, the cognitive faculties are held fascinated by and bound to the symbol itself, and are thus simultaneously informed by and protected from the unknown.” In contrast, Campbell observes, when the symbolic nature of a

mythic image or story is made conscious and thus becomes “broken” in Tillich’s terms, such mythic material is then allowed to function for the purpose of “disengagement, transport, and metamorphosis.”

Connected to this distinction between the engagement and disengagement functions of myth, Campbell also observes that the unknown can take on one of two possible forms, categories described by Campbell as “the relatively unknown” and “the absolutely unknowable” (169). While the former category of the unknown contains all those kinds of mysteries which are potentially solvable, like mystery stories where one is supposed to figure out “whodunit,” the latter category consists of all those eternal mysteries which, like the questions posed in Zen koans, are inherently unsolvable. While the former category of the unknown is today the proper concern of science, Campbell writes, it is the latter category “to which all of the high mythologies and religions are ultimately directed.” It is to this category of the absolutely unknowable kind of mystery that Campbell devotes the first of his four functions of mythology, the specifically religious function devoted to the numinous experience of the sacred.

With regard to this numinous quality of the absolutely unknowable, Campbell writes, “two attitudes have been fostered.” Describing the first attitude as “absolute terror, submission or, as we say, piety,” Campbell observes that in the pietistic response to the overwhelming quality of the sacred, “one does not seek to penetrate, for that would be hybris.” As a result, adds Campbell, “one remains with [the] symbol, as the only possible medium of relationship.” Campbell associates such a response with conventional religious orientations and the “engagement” function of myth.

The alternative response, Campbell argues, is to open oneself to myth's ability to disengage one from the experience of living exclusively in the safety of a relatively known and knowable relationship to the sacred and thereby "propel the soul" into an experience of genuine mystery (171). When myths are allowed to function in terms of disengagement, Joseph Felser suggests, their symbolic content serves to direct one toward "a more or less shattering experience of the numinous and not, as in the past, to a safe, comfortable identification with a limited social group and its peculiar rituals, ethical values, etc." (406).

A third distinction that Campbell makes in this essay—a distinction connected to both the idea of the engagement and disengagement functions of myth and the relative versus absolute forms of the unknowable—states that mythic symbols possess two different and mutually exclusive aspects. In this regard, he states, one must be careful to distinguish "between the 'sense' and the 'meaning' of the symbol" (*Flight of the Wild Gander* 188). Campbell connects both the engagement function of myth and the idea of the mystery that is only relatively unknown with the search for concrete, literal meanings behind mythic symbols. In contrast, he continues, "the ineffable, the absolutely unknowable, can be only sensed" and, as a result, cannot be conveyed in terms of any concrete or literal meaning that might be ascribed to mythic symbols. It is precisely for this reason that, at the beginning of this lecture, he comments on the "provincial character" of all symbols (93).

Explaining why mythic images cannot offer any form of concrete, unchanging meaning if they are also meant to point one toward a direct experience of what Campbell calls transcendence, David L. Miller writes, "If someone assigns a so-called 'meaning' to

a myth or symbol, this ‘meaning’ serves for engagement of energy and consciousness to itself.” In this context, Miller also comments on the critical importance of Campbell’s metaphor of myth functioning as a bow intended to release an experiential, existential arrow. “For the symbol to work properly (if indeed the symbol, the myth, and the religious text do indeed refer to something unknown and unknowable),” he observes, “ ‘meaning’ must be withdrawn so that the symbol, like the bow, may function to disengage the arrow” (“Flight of the Wild Gander” 114).

Further commenting on the significance of the idea that mythic symbols must remain without permanent meaning, Felser observes, “To say that the symbol lacks ‘meaning’ is to say that its significance cannot be literal, its references cannot be to transient particulars, and hence that its values and purposes, if there be such, cannot be to establish an emotionally charged identification with some in-group and its ideology” (408). Indeed, given Campbell’s devotion to embracing the symbol without meaning, Sandler and Reeck view him as a figure “whose religious passion is so strong as to lead him beyond institutions and creeds to confront in his own person the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” (4). In so doing, they suggest, Campbell becomes a fearless exemplar of the creative vision of mythology he encourages others to pursue. Describing the simultaneously existential and profoundly religious outcome of applying such an approach to the mythology of one’s life, he writes:

Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reinvigorating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of becoming the thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it *will be* or as it *should be*, as it *was* or *never will be*, but as it *is*, in depth, in process, *here and now*, inside and out. (7-8)

On the "Hero's Journey" as Metaphor for Seeking the Sacred through Personal Myth

Of all of the ideas associated with Campbell, it likely that none have achieved greater public recognition and critical comment than that of the "hero's journey," a concept Campbell introduced in 1949 in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Borrowing a term from the work of James Joyce, Campbell describes the concept of a universal heroic journey of discovery as a "monomyth" underlying much of the world's mythological narratives. "Essentially," Campbell writes, "there is but one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many lands by many, many people" (*Power of Myth* 136). Characterizing the concept of the hero's journey as a kind of metamyth, Cousineau describes its theme as "the universal quest for self-transformation," further suggesting that Campbell's concept offers "a philosophical reading of the unity of humankind's spiritual history" (Introduction xvi).

Characterizing this mythic figure, Campbell observes that the hero "is usually the founder of something," adding that "in order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, a germinal idea that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing." This theme of leaving of the known and familiar in search of that which is unknown and original is key to the myth of the heroic journey.

Translating this archetypal theme from the level of the heroic figures in ancient myths to the life experience of contemporary individuals, Campbell proposes that one "might also say that the founding of a life—your life or mine, if we live our own lives, instead of imitating everybody else's life—comes from a quest as well" (*Power of Myth* 136).

At the outset of the journey, Campbell observes, "destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (*Hero with a Thousand Faces* 58). Paradoxically, at the same time that the

hero is journeying from the spiritually familiar into territory that is unknown, he or she is also seeking to rediscover the universal and archetypal roots of the particular world from which they have come. As a result, Campbell writes, the heroic figure “is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (19). For such a person, he goes on, “one’s visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought.” As a result of drinking deeply from such archetypal springs, Campbell proposes, “the hero has died as a modern man,” to be reborn as “eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal man” (20).

In keeping with the initiatory nature of the hero’s journey, Campbell observes that the three phases of the hero’s journey—stage of departure or separation, the stage of transition and transformation; and the stage of reintegration and return—are identical to those found in many of the world’s initiation rituals. Implying a commonality of theme and function between the mythic hero’s journey and traditional initiation rituals, Campbell ascribes to the latter the power “to conduct people across those difficult thresholds of transformation that demand a change in the patterns not only of conscious but also of unconscious life” (10).

In contemplating core aspects of Campbell’s hero monomyth, one can find connections to many of the essential themes encompassed within Campbell’s approach to the religious or spiritual dimension of myth. In this regard, one can see within Campbell’s discussion of the hero’s journey a discourse on the universal nature and form of the personal encounter with that mystical transcendence of which the perennial philosophy speaks. Commenting on this dimension of the hero’s journey, Campbell

writes that the monomyth reflects the realization that “the two—the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found—are understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world” (*Hero with a Thousand Faces* 40). Further reflecting on the mystical dimension of the hero’s journey, Segal observes, “Just as Campbell’s hero returns to the everyday world only to find within it the strange new world he assumed he had left behind, so all who heed the message of myth eventually find ultimate reality within, not outside, the everyday world” (“Joseph Campbell, the Perennial Philosopher” 92).

In Campbell’s vision of the hero’s journey, one can observe a kind of mythic model or template for the personal experience of existential meaning by contemporary men and women. In this regard, one should consider the implication of Campbell’s rhetorical question to Bill Moyers at the end of the segment on “The Hero’s Adventure” in the *Power of Myth* television series. “The big question,” Campbell states, “is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure,” an adventure that Campbell describes not only as “the adventure of the hero,” but also as “the adventure of being alive” (163). Of course, since Campbell considers the experience of the adventure of being alive and the experience of transcendent reality to be inextricably interconnected, the hero’s journey must be seen as the simultaneous model for both.

For Campbell, one of the greatest gifts that can come to an individual who has successfully undertaken the rigors of the journey is an awareness of what Campbell call’s one’s “bliss.” The admonition to “follow your bliss,” which has become a catchphrase even among those who are otherwise unfamiliar with Campbell’s work, is often misinterpreted as being roughly synonymous with another popular maxim from the

1960's and 70's, namely "if it feels good, do it." Such a misinterpretation of Campbell's idea seriously trivializes what is, in essence, a profoundly religious concept.

Derived from the Hindu tradition, writes Doty, the term bliss refers to "the attainment of insight into one's proper place in the universe, one's appropriate relationship to the divine energies" ("Joseph Campbell's Myth and/versus Religion" 429). Moreover, Doty continues, one needs to bear in mind that bliss "is the highest value not of traditional, orthodox religious teaching but of the left-hand, unorthodox path," the path of the mystic (430). Regarding the left-hand path, Doty writes, "it is the path that recognizes fully the paradoxicality of life and can absorb the horror of the Fall" (431). In this context, Campbell observes that knowing one's bliss also brings awareness that "Life's a killer." While this may be a "terrible message," he continues, it is nevertheless "the bliss message" (*This Business of the Gods* 105). Moreover, he cautions, while it is true that bliss "absorbs pain," it's "certainly not happiness" (*Hero's Journey* 214).

In opposition to any suggestion of an "offer of easy grace," Doty further observes, Campbell's version of bliss "is not cheap, easy, or attained as a gift, but something gained by experience and discipline" ("Joseph Campbell's Myth and/versus Religion" 430). In Campbell's view, the attainment of bliss is the outcome of wholeheartedly responding to the "call" of the hero's journey and, in this sense, is related to the ideas of vocation, calling, and mission. As a result, following one's bliss requires a courageous willingness to defy both social and religious conventions, thereby risking the alienation and sacrifice that such defiance often brings. "Bliss is adduced from the deepest place within oneself that harbors one's sense of personal mission," writes Doty. Emphasizing the profound

sacrifice that following one's bliss may entail, he also suggests that seeking such a life path is "comparable to what lead Jesus to the cross and crucifixion" (431). Honoring the enormity of both the cost and the reward involved, Campbell considers the attainment of one's bliss to be the ultimate and appropriate outcome of the hero's "mythologically-inspired life" (*Hero's Journey* 64).

Finally, to appreciate fully the significance and power of Campbell's vision of the hero's journey as a religious or spiritual template, one must be able to appreciate its fundamentally universal frame of reference. Just as Campbell understood the many masks of God to represent the countless ways in which the peoples of the earth have personified the transcendent throughout history, so to are the thousand faces of the hero seen to highlight a perennial and enduring heroic quality within the human spirit. Paradoxically, as with every other aspect of Campbell's orientation to myth, it is precisely in the universal nature of the hero's journey that one may find the most profoundly personal significance. Commenting on the personal significance of Campbell's universal hero, Belden C. Lane writes:

The story of the hero [. . .] ultimately turns us back to our own experience. I am Telemachus, ever waiting for the lost father Odysseus to come home; I am Gilgamesh, longing to overcome the mystery of death. There is in me the blood-red hatred of Kali, who is consumed by her own rage; in me too is Demeter, the earth mother that loves and nurtures. I am Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the learner and the teacher, preparing for bold action. All these stories are my stories. (652-3)