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# Mythical Identities, Scientific Realities, and Search for Transpersonal Meaning

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Myths weave in and out of historical context, even as dreams do relative to daily life, functioning in the modern world much as they did in earlier times, operating at both the personal and cultural levels. This essay discusses three special difficulties in appreciating the power of myth and understanding its reasons for being: (a) the nearly universal tendency to situate myth as the opposite of fact and truth, (b) the problem of identifying prevailing myths in culture and private life, and (c) the challenge of acknowledging myth as more than a personal intellectual construct or a cultural construction. Transpersonal theory offers a way forward in addressing these difficulties by placing personal and cultural myths and their relationship to historic–scientific fact in a greater context that endows them with greater meaning and reason for being than ordinarily appreciated by orthodox, mainstream Western psychology. Let us explore this premise in detail.

## "FACT OR MYTH; SYMBOL OR REALITY?"

One special difficulty in appreciating the power of myth and understanding its reason for being is the nearly universal tendency in modern times to place myth and mythology in an adversarial relationship with scientific and historical fact. Either you believe in the myth, or you believe what seems to be hard fact. On the one hand, myth and mythology are denounced as falsehoods, untrue stories that we tell ourselves about who we are and where we came from, or as fabricated inventions of the imagination and the emotions presenting distorted versions of factual events created by primitive minds to give meaning, order, and control over an otherwise unintelligible, chaotic, and frightening universe. Mythical thinking is viewed as a kind of irrationalism designed to inculcate a particular attitude, belief system, or set of values that go largely unquestioned and that gives rise to distorted or blatantly false accounts of "the truth about things" or "what actually happened" (i.e., historical fact; Heehs, 1994, p. 3). Such mythical thinking is said to characterize metaphysical systems known as Transcendentalism, Theosophy, mind cure/New Thought, and various forms of New Age spirituality that are construed to be little more than invented belief systems created by authors of sundry "movement texts" who attempt to legitimize their knowledge claims by appeals to authority, scientific data, or personal experience and by assertions of dubious historical continuity with some esoteric tradition (Hammer, 2004) (for examples of "invented traditions" and how historical facts can be progressively transformed into fictional narrative, see Heehs, 1994; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1985). Myths and symbols, as products of emotion and imagination, would thus seem to be a lie, or at least not factual.

The tangible material reality of physical "concrete fact," on the other hand, seems "provable," therefore more real and truer, by virtue of its susceptibility to being verified or falsified via one's own physical senses, by the eyewitness testimony of others, or by the material existence of historical documents where claims can be corroborated. Many

scholars make the further conceptual leap of placing fact and myth into distinct, non-interacting, and non-overlapping ontological categories (e.g., the real vs. the unreal, the possible vs. the impossible; the true vs. the not true) as if they were two entirely different kinds of things. On that view, the study of myth *as* myth or as metaphysics may have some value as an anthropological, sociological, or psychological curiosity, but such narratives are not to be construed to be a true account of any real state of affairs. This particular understanding of the nature and relationship of fact and myth is shared by many post-Enlightenment historians (Collingwood, 1946; Elton, 1976; Kirk, 1970).

The bifurcation of myth and fact, symbol and reality, into true/false categories of thought is arguably the result of enculturation and socialization learning processes early in life. Many people are taught from childhood that what is imaginary is not real and to consider so-called objective, sensory-based experience as the only criterion of reality. They soon refuse to admit into existence as real anything that they cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch through the physical senses and to regard any idea as not true unless it is "literal fact" because science tells them so. Concrete facts, in this way, come to serve as handy conceptual tools that lead us to make certain divisions in our experience which help us consign certain kinds of experiences as real, possible, and true and others as unreal, impossible, or untrue. We may be taught as children not to trust our personal experience, feelings, or dreams as offering any kind of valid explanation or understanding, especially when they do not fit accepted physical facts. Daydreaming or wishing is nothing more than "magical thinking," we are told, and will get us nowhere. With that understanding, it becomes extremely difficult to accept the validity of subjective feelings that alone give an event any living meaning or see how a myth can change the world unless that myth is seen to have some "provable" basis in physical fact.

## FACT AND MYTH AS RELATIVELY TRUE AND NOT TRUE

Because mythology weaves in and out of human history, myths sometimes *can* be linked to some "provable" concrete fact related to a person known to have lived (e.g., Jesus of Nazareth; Ehrman, 2012; King Arthur; Higham, 2005), a physical place known to exist (e.g., City of Troy/Ilion; Wood, 1998), or a natural event known to have occurred (e.g., The Flood; Dundes, 1988). This link to something physical is often construed as proof that the myth may be a literal fact. The tendency to construe myth as true if it can be connected to some material phenomenon in time and space, however, is a two-edged sword that, in the hands of the demythologizing historian, gives rise to the field of "geomythology" (Piccardi & Masse, 2007). Hesiod's narrative of Zeus's war against the Titans in Greek legend becomes explained as "creative misreading" of the eruption of a volcano, the Cyclopes who terrorized Odysseus in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* becomes reduced to the fossilized remnants of prehistoric elephant skulls, and the origin of the mythological griffin with a lion's body and bird's head becomes a case of "creative misrecognition" of dinosaur bones (Vitaliano, 1968, 2007). The mythic account becomes devalued, robbed of its significance, and literally "brought down to earth" (pun intended) causing the emotional power of the original myth to dissolve into thin air.

The emotional power of myth, on the other hand, can combine with historical fact in the opposite direction to magnify and enlarge the individual reality of real-life persons who take on the identity of folk heroes such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James, participate in cultic worship of dead celebrities such as Elvis Presley and Princess Diana, or attribute magical powers to religious artifacts such as the Shroud of Turin. Created from the fabric of physical reality and couched in imaginative terms, such forms of "living mythically" occupy a symbolic and historical space that arguably transcends conventional categories of the positivist historian. In the words of transpersonal scholars David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner (1988),

> To live mythically is to understand your life as an unfolding drama whose meaning is larger than your day-to-day concerns. . . . . to seek guidance from your dreams, imagination, and other reflections of your inner being, as well as from the most inspiring people, practices, and institutions of your society. . . . [and] cultivate an ever-deepening relationship with the universe and its great mysteries. (p. 1)

Many of the facts disclosed in the historical record may be true, but it is the omissions, the dramatizations, the selection, abstraction, interpretation, and integration of historical fact with reconstructive memory that arguably are responsible for the "euphemistic transformation of documentary materials into fiction" in modern times (Heehs, 1994, pp. 15–16).

Living mythically and the mythical identities that it elicits bring to mind an awareness that myth-making processes continue to retain their emotional power as cultural forces today. Motifs from classical mythology (e.g., Odysseus's adventures into the unknown, the pilgrim's journey in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Sir Galahad's quest for

the Holy Grail, the Greek fable of Psyche and Eros, and the dialogues of God and Satan in the Book of Job and of Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*) arguably speak to dilemmas germane to the modern psyche just as they did in ancient times and operate at both a cultural and personal level. Whether the myth-making process that gave rise to the motifs of classical mythology differs substantially from modern myth-forming processes remains a matter of healthy debate (Mayor, 2022; Murray 1960).

## MYTH AND FACT AS NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

The argument that myths are false narrative constructions is a two-edged sword in the hands of postmodern social constructivism. If mythologies are narrative constructions, the argument goes, then so are so-called historical facts and scientific truth-claims which are likewise unavoidably shaped by the culture, language, beliefs, and worldview of one's reference group (Kukla, 2013; White, 1973). Analyses of life stories and evidential historical documents, on that view, will always have weaved into them the historian's operational understanding of what is "true" and how that truth can be found through the application of a particular kind of method that is attuned to detect and verify that particular understanding of truth. In the context of scientific research, as cognitive scientist William Uttal (2001) put it, "*How* we measure in large part determines *what* we measure—or, perhaps more precisely, what we *think* we are measuring" (p. 91). Implicit assumptions behind the research inevitably shape historians' selection and interpretation of data used to justify knowledge claims about what actually happened in the past, where, by whom, and why. From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, the printed word on the page of an historical document only has the physical reality of black marks on a white field. The physical words do not *contain* information, but *convey* information. Where is the information if it is not located on the printed page? It resides within the self. The historian is always a part of any empirical facts that he or she perceives, interprets, and understands, and whatever historical account is communicated to others is inevitably colored by the personality of the historian who passes it on.

On that view, the selection and interpretation of extant "empirical facts" by different people at different times in different cultures produces any number of *probable* histories that depend on what aspects of the past are emphasized or considered important from the standpoint of the present. As behavioral scientists Brent Slife and Richard Williams (1995) put it:

> 'Empirical' 'facts' are never purely factual nor purely empirical. They are always interpreted in the light of what the observer is looking for and how the observer frames what he or she sees. . . . Data can never be facts until they have been given an interpretation that is dependent on ideas that do not appear in the data themselves. (pp. 6, 222)

In that respect, the problem of underdetermination of theory by evidence—that is, "the evidence available to us at any given time may be insufficient to determine what beliefs we should hold in response to it;" (Stanford, 2021, paragraph 1)—is not limited to scientific contexts, but also applies to the insufficiency of empirical facts practically available to the historian to provide an infallible account of any historical event.

## THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH AND GRAMMAR OF FACT

The apparent logical opposition of fact and myth may be more semantic and conceptual than real, and a function of the reasoning mind's natural tendency to categorize experience into abstract and theoretically distinct classes that renders them polar opposites and overlooks the ways they are related. Myth may be characterized as emotive, imaginative, symbolic, and associative whereas fact is described as rational, analytic, literal, and dissociative. Symbol and myth thus convey their meaning in the synthetic and metaphoric language of poetic and mythological images typically found in dreams and reveries, whereas the language and grammar of historical/scientific fact does so in abstract, linear, precise terms. As philosopher Alan Watts (1963) pointed out,

> Factual language has a grammar and a structure which fragments the world into quite separate things and events. But this is not the way in which the world exists physically, for there is no thing, no event, save in relation to other things and events. . . . Thought divides what is undivided in nature. . . . The importance of a box for thought is that the inside is different from the outside. But in nature the walls of a box are what the inside and the outside have in common. (pp. 5, 45–46)

The grammar of facts, on the one hand, thus deals with separations, divisions, and distinctions, giving certain names and symbols for objects and events, dividing the perceiver from the world that then becomes objectified. As a consequence, the language and grammar of fact brings about a certain artificial shrinking and scaling down of

what constitutes the basic reality of subjective life to those aspects that can be studied in an exterior, physical fashion. The more precisely a word or concept is defined, the less meaning it can contain.

The language of myth, on the other hand, deals with relationships, unities, and psychic realities that do not easily or comfortably fit the categorical assumptions and conceptual distinctions on which the grammar of concrete literal fact is based. Myth and symbol are languages of the psyche that simultaneously reveal the basic reality of subjective life, while also concealing that same reality in the guise of quasi-sensory imagery, metaphor and allegory, parables and fairy tales, stories and folklore. The world of myth with its poetic and mythological language offers the possibilities of glimpses of what lies beyond the scientific realism and historical facts of physical existence and affords transpersonal (beyond ego) glimmers of the greater creative drama of the life we are given. The world of physical fact offers "a weak brew of reality" and, practically speaking, one's experience of the world usually has little to do with the bare facts involved. We generally cannot and do not ever limit our lived world to the world of fact, even though we may try to do so.

Myth is more like poetry than like religion, science, history, or philosophy. This is why poetic and mythological images and symbols are so awkwardly and incompletely expressible in analytic, abstract, rational, linear, and scientifically exact terms. At those times when more efficacious ways are needed for communicating the ineffable meaning of a transcendent experience that occurs as a function of an individual's personal/cultural mythology, Abraham Maslow (1964) recommended the use of what he called "rhapsodic communication" (i.e., "poetic and metaphoric language, physiognomic and synesthetic language, primary process language of the kind found in dreams, reveries, free associations and fantasies" p. 85). From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, the species' religions, philosophies, psychologies, and sciences rise in response to an inner knowledge that is too vast to be clothed in the language of "outward things" and the grammar of normal waking consciousness alone.

## MYTH *AND* FACT, NOT MYTH OR FACT

From the point of view of the logical historian, the problematic relationship between myth and fact would easily be solved if the two spheres—historical/scientific fact and mythic/symbolic consciousness—could remain conceptually disconnected and kept sequestered into their own proper non-overlapping, non-interacting magisterium (Gould, 1997). The traditional view of myth and fact as being contrary and distinct things has evolved, however, with a growing recognition of the embeddedness of myth in historical experience and an acknowledgement that the evidential value of historical fact is not so easy to establish as previously believed (Heehs, 1994; Samuel & Thompson, 1990). The actual relationship between myth and fact, symbol and reality, has proven to be somewhat more complicated and much more profound than previously supposed.

The task of separating mythic interpretations from the factual components in historical accounts has become increasingly difficult to achieve as the symbiosis of symbolic myth and physical fact is recognized to be a function of *natural* human experience (Braud, 1994). As historian Peter Heehs (1994) put it,

> Historical narratives are made up of factual (*logos*) and fictional (*mythos*) components [and] the intertwining of logos and mythos seems to make it impossible to draw an absolute line between fact and fiction. . . . Both myth and history remain valid and valuable forms of explanation. . . . People will continue to seek meaning in history, and will continue to develop myths to help them in this effort. (pp. 5, 18–19)

If it is true, as historians Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (1990) state, that "myth lies behind any historical evidence" and that "myth [is] embedded in real [historical] experience: both growing from it and helping to shape its perception" (pp. 4, 6), then there is no need to choose one and jettison the other. To avoid dichotomizing these basically *inseparable* constituents of human thought, a both/and rather than either/or approach is required—what Maslow called "double-view thinking"—whereby one considers "in what sense is it right and in what sense wrong? Assume conflict, ambivalence, dichotomizing, & transcend them by inclusive or hierarchical or holistic or levels thinking" (Lowry, 1979, Vol. 2, p. 931).

The interweaving of fact and myth in historical accounts does not relieve the historian of his or her responsibility to base their accounts on documentary evidence of what actually happened in the past. Nor does it relieve historians of the obligation to deal with this evidence objectively so that the evidence is not misread and their concrete judgments of fact are not distorted as a result of hidden preconceptions, assumptions, or beliefs that the historian may implicitly hold. There are instances when historical facts and factual explanations of events are not "trivial," especially as applied in the arena of politics, pandemics, and climate change today. Historian William McNeill's (1986) theory of "Mythistory" suggests itself as one possible approach to the challenge of integrating

the psychic realism of myth and the scientific realism of fact—a version of the past that is "adequate to the facts that could be established beyond all reasonable doubt" but whose meaning remains trivial unless given meaning and intelligibility by the cultural and personal mythology behind those facts (pp. 8–9).

## THE MYTHS WE LIVE BY

So far, I have discussed the apparent adversarial relationship between myth and fact and how myth-forming processes that weave in and out of history can serve as a platform either to construct personal mythic identities or deconstruct the factual claims of traditional cultural mythologies. I examined the role of culture and language in the narrative construction of myth and historical/scientific fact-claims and explained why the traditional view of myth and fact as polar opposites requires rethinking, in light of the embeddedness of mythic thinking in historical experience. Precisely how mythic thinking that lies behind life stories and historical narratives finds its source in cultural and personal mythology, including in the creation of probable mythic identities, remains to be explored.

A special difficulty in recognizing the embeddedness of myth in historical experience and appreciating its power to shape historical events is that the prevailing myths of our times are not easy to identify because they are the psychological medium in which we live our life—as invisible as the air we breathe and as imperceptible as water must be to a fish. On an individual personal level, myths constitute (by hypothesis) private theories about the nature of the self, other people, and the world that guide behavior and structure memory. On a collective cultural level, myths take the form of basic assumptions and shared images and beliefs that are at the heart of a culture's enculturation and socialization learning processes (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988). The assumptions that lie behind personal mythology and the mythology of one's culture not only color a person's experience, but also lead people, individually and collectively, to *create* historical events that more or less conform to those assumptions. We interpret and organize the events of our life through our ideas and beliefs and have a tendency to only attend to those perceptions that give those ideas and beliefs validity. Through their cast, we view and act upon our world.

Operating for the most part outside of conscious awareness, these psychologically invisible ideas and beliefs about the nature of reality and the meaning of life (i.e., domains traditionally assigned to mythology) can program our experience to such an extent that they take on the appearance of fact. Interpreting the private and social events of daily life in light of one's beliefs about the nature of the self, other people, and the world, we unconsciously put together our perceptions so that they seemed to bear out those beliefs. Imagination and emotion, following the contours of those beliefs, selectively structure one's experience so that it comes to fit the beliefs one has about it. In this way, perception and belief become mutually reinforcing so that what one believes to be true becomes true in one's experience. Believed in fervently, the ideas come to act like powerful hypnotic suggestions that trigger specific actions strongly implied by the ideas. The result is a set of unexamined assumptions hidden behind ideas and beliefs that are automatically acted upon to create the artifacts, behaviors, and events that emerge as "historical fact" in time and space. According to transpersonal scholar Charles Tart (1975/1992), "As long as the assumptions [hidden behind these ideas and beliefs] are implicit, we have no opportunity to question them and possibly escape from their controlling power over us" (p. 111).

## CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY

The cultural myths of contemporary Western civilization that support the creation of mythical identities tend to be connected with religion, economy, patriotism, family loyalty, and political affiliations and emphasize themes supporting the gaining of wealth and the invention of technological marvels (e.g., "Money and technology will solve almost any problem"), the accumulation of power (e.g., "Might makes right"), the control and subjugation of nature (e.g., "Animals are given as a gift from God to humans for their own use and benefit"), and progress (e.g., "Our civilization, which is the greatest civilization that ever existed on this planet, is steadily progressing because it uses an aggressive, dominator-oriented approach in understanding and controlling the universe"). Some cultural myths serve to describe or explain the mysteries of life and the nature of the universe (e.g., "Natural disasters and illness are punishments sent by God, life is a valley of sorrows, and the universe is a harsh, uncaring, unresponsive place" or "We are children of the universe, life is good, and nature is filled with innocence and joy").

Other myths address the human condition (e.g., "Youth is the crowning glory of life from which there is no further journey but descent" or "Youth has its own wisdom and old age its joy;" "Women are feminine; men are masculine") or provide direction for social behavior ("Everything worthwhile in life comes through hard work;" "The end justifies the means"). Still other cultural myths are concerned with the purpose of life ("The only real purpose in life is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, make money and acquire more possessions"). Although not fully appreciated or understood as such, these ideas and beliefs

are mythical in character because they address one or more of the domains within which mythology traditionally functions; that is, they serve to explain the world, guide personal development, provide social direction, or address spiritual longings (Campbell, 1983).

Those myths that speak to the species' spiritual longing tend to transcend the culture of one's birth and exist in hundreds of versions around the world. The Cinderella fairy tale, for instance, conveys the idea that we have a hand in the creation of the events that seem to happen to us. The Christ story represents humanity's dream of achieving brotherhood and a workable morality. The Crucifixion tale stands for the notion that one must die first before one can be saved or obtain great knowledge. The Easter (Resurrection/Ascension) myth gives voice to the expectation that each person survives bodily death by virtue of his or her existence within an ultimate Divine. Each of these narratives, in their own way, connect the species with a dimension of reality in which dreams and ideals quite literally come true.

It may be difficult to perceive the mythical nature of science since it works so well (Bauer, 1992). Yet science also functions in one or more domains traditionally assigned to mythology in terms of its assumptions about the nature of reality (e.g., "Only the physical is real"), human knowing (e.g., "All true and certain knowledge must come through the physical senses"), and the purpose of the universe ("There is no purpose or reason for the universe existing because it was created accidentally out of nothing or created itself"). Scientific myths may serve as explanations of human nature (e.g., "We are our body and nothing more, completely determined by our genetic inheritance and environment, existing in relative isolation from our surroundings") and human consciousness (e.g., "Consciousness is produced by the activity of the brain with physical death the final termination of consciousness") (Tart, 1975/1992, Chapter 2). These descriptions and explanations of the "laws of nature" are considered "obvious facts" from the viewpoint of sensory-based, atheistic, materialist science. They are, nevertheless, still theories, relative truths, or operational beliefs that take on the appearance of "exact knowledge" and "empirically verified truths" only in reference to a particular experience with reality from the viewpoint of a certain level of consciousness as a result of a particular perceptive apparatus (Griffin, 2000). The myths of science program our interpretation of events just as much as the mythical characteristics of religion do. Researchers have been trained to believe that recreating or reproducing a phenomenon in a laboratory setting demonstrates control and mastery over the phenomenon, for instance. The more precise and faithful the replication of the phenomenon, the more complete the mastery. This has quite magical connotations.

Cultural myths of various kinds are disseminated through parents, teachers, and peers, books and songs, movies and television stories, and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Through the filter of a culture's mythology, members of a society come to interpret the events of their life, their triumphs and failures, health and illness, fortunes and misfortunes. Philosopher Sam Keen and psychotherapist Anne Valley Fox (1973) observed:

> So long as human beings change and make history, so long as children are born and old people die, there will be tales to explain why sorrow darkens the day and stars fill the night. We invent stories about the origin and conclusion of life because they help us find our way, our place at the heart of mystery. (p. 158)

Cultural myths permeate all areas of society to instill the collective mythology into an individual's personal mythology.

## PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY

For much of the history of human civilization, the myths held by individuals in a society were relatively uniform, allowing for little question or variation. Sons followed the trades of their fathers, people held similar religious convictions, gender roles were rigidly prescribed, moral "law" and social hierarchies seemed to be a part of the natural order. Not so today. Long-enduring myths, religious beliefs, family traditions, and cultural images have been cracking and drifting toward obsolescence. We are less able or willing to rely on the cultural myths of yesteryear to explain the world, guide personal development, provide social direction, or address the spiritual longings of today. As existential–humanistic psychologist Rollo May (1969) put it, "The old myths and symbols by which we oriented ourselves are gone, anxiety is rampant . . . The individual is forced to turn inward" (pp. 13–14). As a result, mythology has become an increasingly personal affair. Theologian Anthea Francine (1983) observed that the "revelations of the Divine [that] we once found revealed only in the form of myth and fairy tale, we must now seek also in the story of our own lives" (p. 77).

These life stories take the form of personal myth and personal mythology. The term "personal myth" was first introduced into the psychiatric literature by Ernst Kris (1956). The construct "personal mythology" was introduced later by clinical psychologist David Feinstein (1979) "to describe the way people construct their understanding of themselves and their place in the world [and] to present a

five-stage model designed to assist individuals in working with their inner mythologies" (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p. 10). In those terms, a personal mythology takes the form of an idiosyncratic self-psychology and model of reality that shapes how an individual sees herself or himself, other people in one's world, and the society and culture in which one lives. Personal mythology is often expressed in the form of competing themes or fragments of cultural myths, such as "I am too old (young, fat/skinny, smart/dumb, sensitive/unfeeling, athletic/non-athletic, etc.) to _____;" "Nobody loves me because I am unlovable;" "I always have bad luck;" "People are basically bad/good and out to harm/help me;" "Money (or being beautiful, talented, happy, etc.) is the most important thing in life;" "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better/growing worse, and so is the world." According to Feinstein and Krippner (1988),

> Your personal mythology gives meaning to every situation you meet and determines what you do in it. [It] acts as a lens that colors your perceptions according to its own assumptions and values. It highlights certain possibilities and shadows others, Through it, you view the ever-changing panorama of your experiences in the world . . . Personal myths explain the world, guide personal development, provide social direction, and address spiritual longings in a manner that is analogous to the way cultural myths carry out those functions for entire societies. Personal myths do for an individual what cultural myths do for a community. (pp. 1, 24)

From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, a personal mythology might be in the form of themes such as, "I am a good and deserving creature, eternally couched and supported by the universe of which I am a valuable part, and whose elements and parts are of good intent;" "It is good, natural, and safe for me to grow and develop and use my abilities, and by doing so I enrich all other portions of life, even as my own being is enriched by the rest of creation;" "All of my imperfections, and all of the imperfections of other creatures are redeemed in the greater scheme of the universe in which I have my being" (Roberts, 1997, p. 68).

## MYTHIC IDENTITIES AS PROBABLE SELVES

Much remains to be learned about the role of personal mythology in living mythically and in the creation of mythic identities. According to Feinstein and Krippner (1988), one's personal mythology is a function of four interacting sources: biology, personal history, culture, and transcendent experiences (i.e., "those episodes, insights, dreams, and visions that have a numinous quality which seems to expand our comprehension and inspire our behavior," p. 186). We still need to understand how people choose among particular myths and how they alter and reinterpret those chosen myths in light of experiences throughout their lifespan. What also remains to be investigated is how some of those re-interpretations break through an existing mythical frame to lead the individual to choose a different myth that opens up new areas of expression and avenues of choice previously ignored, overlooked, or denied and to pursue possibilities of transpersonal (beyond ego) awareness and development that may become a reality in an individual's probable future.

Transpersonal Psychology—an empirical (experiential) and hermeneutic (interpretive) subdiscipline of psychology that Abraham Maslow (1968) characterized as "transhuman, centered in the cosmos, rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization, and the like" (p. iv)—can make an important contribution in that investigation (Cunningham, 2022). I invite the reader to try the following experiment.

> Choose from your own past a scene in which a choice was involved that was important to you. Experience it as clearly as possible imaginatively. [Pause] Now imagine "what might have happened' had you taken the course you did not take with the other decision, or decisions that you might have made. [Pause] Now take any incident that happens to you the day you read this page with the idea of its probable extensions. See the particular chosen event as one that came into your experience from a vast bank of other probable events that could have occurred. [Pause] Try to trace its emergence from the thread of your own past life. [Pause] Then project outward in your mind what other events might emerge from that one to become actual in your probable future. [Pause] Now change your viewpoint; see the event from the standpoint of someone else who is also involved and see the episode through his or her eyes, using this altered viewpoint. (Roberts, 1977–1979, pp. 109–110, 179, 324)

From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, as this experiment is repeated over a period of time, alternate modes of perception may open up where you are likely to find yourself thinking about probable actions you could perform in the present and out of which other probable events and probable selves could emerge in the future. By viewing the choices you make from more than one standpoint, you may discover yourself breaking through

an existing mythical frame to find a line of development you wished you had pursued, but had not, and reflect on ways in which it could now fit into the framework of your present life. This is the search for transpersonal meaning in action. Transpersonal theory can advance understanding of the function that such imaginings of probable events and probable selves might serve in the creation of mythic identities.

## THE SEARCH FOR TRANSPERSONAL MEANING

Up to this point, I have explained why the oppositional relationship between myth and fact, symbol and reality, is more apparent than real and how cultural and personal mythology serves a constructive role in the meaning-making processes that inform life stories and historical narratives, including the creation of probable mythic identities. How the transpersonal nature of human psychology makes the relationship between myth and fact much more complicated and far more profound than ordinarily recognized remains to be discussed.

In differing ways, physical fact and cultural/personal mythology describe different worlds or rather the same world seen in another way. The two kinds of experience—the physical and the psychic, the literal and the symbolic, the factual and the mythic—constantly enrich each other and there are always interactions. They are related "like the poles of the earth or of a magnet, or the ends of a stick or the faces of a coin" or what is to my left can be to your right and involve no contradiction (Watts, 1963, p. 45). It is a creative error to see the world of fact and the world of myth as separate and apart. What is physical and what is symbolic are so inseparable and interconnected that an attempt to find one apart from the other automatically confuses the issue. I invite the reader to try the following experiment.

> Imagine that your present experience of the moment is a dream, and is highly symbolic. Then try to interpret it as such. [Pause] Who are the people? What do they represent? [Pause] If that experience were a dream what would it mean? [Pause] Into what kind of waking life would you rise in the morning? (Roberts, 1979, pp. 51–52)

From the transpersonal perspective of Aspect Psychology of Jane Roberts (1979), imagination "brings you into connection with a different kind of truth, or a different framework in which experience can be legitimately perceived. The larger truths of the psyche exist in that dimension. From it you choose physical facts" (p. 120). On that view, myths are natural kinds of phenomena, rising from inner realities of the human psyche, whose deeper actuality serves as source material for the world that we know.

The insights of Bruno Bettelheim (1977), Jean Shinoda Bolen (1984), Joseph Campbell (1968), James Hillman (1979), Jean Houston (1987), Robert Johnson (1986), Rollo May (1989), Arnold Mindell (1985), and William Irwin Thompson (1981) in the last century have added plausible credibility to the existence of a subliminal transpersonal (beyond ego) dimension that might serve as this source material. Myths often take the guise of dramas because, like dreams, they are a translation of a deeper experience that bridges perceptions from one level of the psyche to another. We see operative in cultural and personal mythologies many of the dynamic processes of dreamtime and dream work—the condensations, displacements, substitutions, amplifications, reversals, elaborations, and a "value fulfillment" that meets one's needs, fulfills one's desires, wards off one's fears, stimulates development, and points to further possibilities of development in personal and cultural consciousness (Krippner, 1990).

On that view, the interweaving of scientific realism of historical fact and psychic realism of dreams combines two realities that become a source of myth's power to infuse civilizations with a new vitality, open up new historical and cultural periods, and literally alter the course of humanity's evolution itself. Myths can be of such power and strength that whole civilizations rise from their source, much as the myths given in Christian theology established precepts on which early Western Civilization was built. The intuitive comprehensions and emotional realizations of myth and symbol connect to the physical world of historical fact so that that the world is never the same again. Historical fact, in itself, could never accomplish this on its own.

## IS ANYTHING REAL HAPPENING?

By hypothesis, the meaning and power of myth springs from its source in the actions of emotions, imagination, and dreams and gives us our closest contact with the natural psychic environment in which the species' own greater reality resides, mythic events happen, and historical fact emerges (Roberts, 1981, chapter 3). Personality action, at some level, reflects deep mythological images and archetypal dimensions of the human mind that transcend early conditioning and cultural setting, while simultaneously being shaped by the myths of the surrounding culture. By hypothesis, just as there is a "deep structure" to the grammar of native languages, there is a deep structure to the myth-making process that grounds the species' capacity to live mythically. For Jung

(1947/1960), "the essential content of all mythologies and all religions . . . is archetypal," p. 206) and, in that respect, *archetypes* would serve as one constituent of the deep structure of personal and cultural myth (Vaughan, 2013).

Myths are born of the emotions of creativity and are quite real in the Imaginal realms of the human psyche (Chittick, 1989; Corbin, 1969). The natural order and structure of the world of dreams, although unperceived by the physical senses, represent a reality as valid and significant as the natural world that is perceived by physical senses. It is the natural environment of imagination and emotion where a valid reality *that exists on its own* is experienced—a reality in which the psyche's own language of emotion and imagination is given greater freedom. It is an emotional and imaginative freedom in which experience and perception are not dependent upon precise spatial locations or dateable time periods of physical historical fact. It is a freedom that liberates the powers of the reasoning mind so that its range is expanded and its understanding is not limited by a language and grammar of facts that arbitrarily decides which things are true, real, or possible, and which things are not. It presupposes a subjective framework in which the individual freely experiences and expresses the most vivid ideas and moving emotions in the most direct of fashions, whether or not they are replicated in waking life as historical fact.

Jung (1933/1960) held the position that the world of imagination, symbol, and myth in many ways is closer to the way reality really is than what is referred to as physical, material, ''sensory-hard'' facts that one can see, hear, feel, smell, and touch. From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, myths are real in every fashion except that of physical fact. The existence of myths presupposes the existence of experience that is not defined as physical fact. In the life of the psyche, a myth is no more or less "true" or "real" whether it happens or not in waking life. Television characters of a favorite western, murder mystery, or science fiction drama, for instance, may attain a level of reality in the mind of viewers that is more real, tangible, and substantial than the lives of the actual actors who portray those characters. As Feinstein and Krippner (1988) put it, "Myths, in this broader sense, are not properly understood as being true or false, or right or wrong. They are ways of organizing experience that may ultimately be judged as more or less effective for the well-being and performance of an individual or group" (p. 4). In those terms, it is futile to question whether or not myths are true, for they simply are. From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, "To be, simply to be, is enough." Being requires no further justification.

## TWO EXAMPLES

The special difficulties in appreciating the power myth and understanding its reason for being can best be clarified by two examples: Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the prolonged apparition at Medjugorje. Charles Darwin's theory is examined to identify mythological elements that may partially account for its mythic status in modern times. The prolonged Marian apparition at Medjugorje illustrates how cultural and personal mythology combine to produce mythical identities in a religious and spiritual context.

### Darwin's Theory of Evolution

It is not sufficiently appreciated or understood how historical facts and scientific theories—like the myths they are expected to describe and explain—are formed and maintained through the use of human imagination (Brann, 1991). Consider the mythic status of imaginative constructs such as Freud's theory of the unconscious, science's ''Big Bang'' theory of the origin of the universe, and Darwin's theory of evolution that have literally structured generations of people's experience of themselves and of the natural world. The ideas, feelings, and values that endow Darwin's theory with its mythic status today are as real and, in some instances, more real than the chair upon which one sits because of its tangible effect on contemporary education, business, religion, psychology, politics, science, child-rearing practices, and social behaviors of all kinds.

Charles Darwin spent more than half his life proving the validity of his theory of evolution, and generations of scientists since have viewed the natural world through its light. Despite the theory's empirical problems—for instance, the absence of transitional species in the fossil record and the presence of fundamentally discontinuous, highly complex, *non-adaptive* body forms (*Bauplans*) and novel taxa-defining traits (e.g., feathers, fins, scales, wings, the placenta, the pentadactyl limb) that have no antecedent structure in any presumed ancestral form and that remained fixed for millions of years after their evolutionary emergence—that cannot be explained by the gradual, cumulative selection of small adaptive changes that is at the core of evolutionary theory (Denton, 2016; Wesson, 1991), scores of scientists continue to take Neo-Darwinian theories as being a literal interpretation of the origin of species and stubbornly attempt to make human nature conform to the picture of evolution as Darwin conceived it.

There are many theories of the species' origins other than Darwin's that have held sway over the imagination of humanity for far longer periods of time and whose

effect upon their culture was arguably equal to or greater than that of Darwin's theory upon our own culture today. Consider the longevity and impact on the early history of human civilization of the God myths of the religions of the Babylonians, Egyptians, and the ancient Greeks, whose effect upon their cultures was arguably as great as Christianity's upon our own. They understood their gods to be quite real—mythical beings who cast their light over historical events because they were responsible for those events. Those theories, like Darwin's, were likewise considered in their time to be a matter of historical fact and based on the evidence of experience and the authority of reason. From the Neo-Darwinism standpoint in the present, those ancient theories are considered myths—pagan stories that have no basis in the world of fact. That conclusion, in my view, follows from a fetish faith in the evidence of the physical senses and ignores the psychic (pertaining to psyche) dimension of emotion, imagination, and dreams that is the source (by hypothesis) of those physical facts of which they are so proud.

If I say that Darwin's theory of evolution is a myth, most readers will interpret this to mean that Darwin's theory has no basis in truth. That is *not* the meaning of the word "myth" that I use here. As an organizer of thought and energizer of action, myth is an indispensable constituent of human experience, thought, and behavior. In the words of philosopher Alan Watts (1963),

> Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large concrete image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. . . . The mythical mode of thought is able to convey things which are difficult to express otherwise, and therefore myth still has value for an age of science and scientific philosophy. (p. 3)

The early myths of humanity's origins convey the grandeur and energy of nature and carry remnants of the great sway of nature's own emotional force as it is interpreted through the species' experience. Once the myth becomes standardized and is interpreted too literally, however, and is tied too tightly to the world of physical fact, as Neo-Darwinian theory has become, then nature's manifestations become misread (Cunningham, 2009) and the myth is brought into areas where it does not meaningful apply (Rose & Rose, 2000).

## The Prolonged Marian Apparition at Medjugorje

A contemporary example of the synergy that can occur when cultural mythology combines with personal mythology to create mythical identities in the context of religion and spirituality is the prolonged apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) at Medjugorje in the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina of the former Yugoslavia. The Marian apparition was first reported by six Croatian adolescents on June 25, 1981, and continues to this day. No matter what the apparition's status turns out to be in the world of concrete fact, it has given an objectivity to believers' religious sentiments that it would not otherwise have (Cunningham, 2011).

The phenomenon of Medjugorje demonstrates how an apparition that only the six "Seers of Medjugorje" can perceive but which bystanders cannot, nevertheless attains a reality in historical fact because of the physical effect ("fruits") it produces in pilgrims' experience of themselves and their lived world (Margry, 2021). As William James (1902/1936) put it,

> The unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality . . . But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we have no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. (pp. 506–507)

As a symbolic representation of an inner order of events, the Marian apparition is true; as a literal interpretation of the basic reality of the BVM entity, it is false. The Medjugorje apparition would be considered both true and not true in those terms. The quasi-sensory symbol (i.e., the Marian apparition) is not the basic reality (i.e., the BVM entity) just as the map is not the territory, the menu is not the meal, and the printed word or oral report is not the thought or the emotion that it attempts to convey. They are arguably different orders of reality that interact and overlap, but to confuse them is to commit what Aristotle called a category mistake. The criteria used to measure what is "fact" at one level cannot be used to measure what is fact at another level. When literal interpretations are demanded, then the BVM must be seen to be believed and the methods of objective physical science are brought into an area where such methods do not meaningfully apply.

The problem is in taking the exterior dramatization and quasi-physical personification of the apparition to be

literally and concretely true—a natural enough mistake given that Western culture teaches that only ''literal fact'' is true. When symbolic realities become interpreted literally or when the symbol is accepted as literal truth—for example, God really did create the material universe and all of its inhabitants in six or seven days as described in Genesis; Moses really did part the physical Red Sea as described in the Book of Exodus; Jesus really was born of a biological virgin as described in the New Testament—then its nature is inevitably misunderstood, and personal difficulties can arise. When the Judeo-Christian myth of God is taken literally as a concrete fact—that is, there really is one white-haired, old, male super individual who exists as God in some remote, isolated heaven, who is kind to believers but threatens hell and damnation to sinners and disbelievers, and who will one day destroy the world—and the person finds that this does not make much logical sense to them, then they are confronted with a dilemma: Either believe the myth or reject the psychic reality that the God concept hints at (as humanity now envisions it) and the strong element of truth that still lies behind the myth.

The problem is in taking the symbol that stands for a reality that is not experienced in usual sensory terms and insisting upon a literal interpretation. ''When we accept the symbol as literal truth in a fact world," wrote trance channel Jane Roberts (1976), "we make lies of them or let them make lies of us, so that they stand between us and the truths they're meant to represent . . . We end up with romantic pretenses, false in both worlds'' (pp. 304, 352). From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, the answer or solution to the dilemma lies in looking behind the symbolism, beyond the inner morality play, for the greater meanings beneath. In the words of transpersonal theorist Ken Wilber (1999), "when myth is consciously used in an allegorical, symbolic, or interpretive fashion, it is actually drawing on higher cognitive faculties, reason to vision-logic, and, in that mode, occasionally stands open to transpersonal glimmers" (p. 110).

## CONCLUSION

In discussions concerning the relationship of mythic identities, scientific realism, and the search for transpersonal meaning, the first step is to shun the crude weighing of "mythos" against "logos." Recognizing the role of personal and cultural mythology in the production and interpretation of the story of our lives and in the analysis of historical documents of a culture brings into view a much broader understanding of the historian's craft (Williams, 2003). In the words of Samuel and Thompson (1990),

> We discover a psychic dimension which recognizes the power of myth and unconscious desire as forces, not only in history, but in shaping our own lives. We open up a history which pivots on the *active* relationship between past and present, subjective and objective, poetic and political. . . . in which some incidents are dramatized, others contextualized, yet others passed over in silence, through a process of narrative shaping in which both conscious and unconscious, myth and reality, played significant parts. (p. 5)

From the perspective of transpersonal meaning, the acknowledgement of a psychic dimension in the creation of historical fact brings an appreciation of the interweaving of myth in and out of history and of the role of emotions, imagination, and dreams in the creation of mythic identity at both the cultural and personal levels. It releases the historian from a slavish dependence upon literal concrete fact and raises new questions about the relationship between the scientific realism of physical fact and the psychic realism of cultural and personal mythology as source material of those facts. Importantly, it opens up further avenues of discovery regarding the basic reality of subjective life and the transpersonal nature of human psychology.

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