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Standing On The Bridge of Wonder
With Joseph Campbell

“Through fire we enter the realms of Original Experience,” or so I thought I heard him say. The year was 1989 and I was at a Beginnings And Beyond Initiation Workshop in Memphis Tennessee. The point of the workshop was to help leaders of worship, such as myself, to create a more meaningful experience for those congregations involved in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. We were doing a mock Easter Vigil, which began with the lighting of a “new fire.” Though the liturgists leading the workshop had never heard of Joseph Campbell, they had prepared a wonderful, enormous fire, and as we walked slowly back to the auditorium, we were using as a “church,” we walked between rows of lighted torches. I cannot convey the profound impact the whole experience had on me, beginning with those simple rites involving the new fire. While I had been involved in similar rites for many years — this was, something new and it hit me right in the stomach. Only sometime afterwards did I connect my experience with the words I had heard on the PBS *Power of Myth* series featuring Joseph Campbell. However, the actual quote, in reference to visionaries was, “They’ve moved out of the society that would have protected them, and into the dark forest, into the world of fire, of original experience.” *Moyers* [41].

Since my days in elementary School, I have had an abiding interest in mythology, but until that balmy evening in the deep south, I had never connected those ancient stories with anything remotely contemporary. However, after that workshop experience, my

entire approach to liturgy changed. Prior to that time, I had considered aspects of the Easter Vigil and other ceremonies as arcane vestiges of the past, which needlessly prolonged the “real” rites we were celebrating. With the insights into mythology of Joseph Campbell, who was already deceased, I began to explore the connection between myth and liturgy and to create much more powerful experiences for the congregations I served. One of the ironies of this connection is that Joseph Campbell was somewhat hostile to his Roman Catholic background, yet through me, his ideas were used to dramatically improve the religious experience of many people in the Catholic Church.

That irony is one of the two ironies that form the basis of this reflection. The other irony involves an image I have of a bridge over an immense chasm of mystery, linking two lands: “*that which has been*”, and shrouded in fog, “*that which is yet to be.*” In my imagination, Joseph Campbell and I stand on the bridge with fishing lines cast over the side, considering the mythic supports upon which the bridge of wonder we are standing on is built. The irony that I am considering is that Campbell has led countless people to that bridge and given them the tools and the guidance needed to cross over, yet he himself may have been content to only stand on the bridge and merely contemplate the other side.

There are many people who may have had experiences with the Catholic church that were similar to Campbell’s when he states,

“I was born and grew up a Catholic, and I was a very devoted Catholic. My beliefs however, fell apart because the Church read and then presented its symbols in concrete terms. For a long time I had a terrible resentment against the Church and I couldn’t even think of going into a Catholic church.” *Campbell 2001* [59].

He goes on to state, “What I rejected was the literal, concrete, historical forms that were appropriate when I was young.” [59]. In chapter nine of *Creative Mythology*, he goes into quite a diatribe against William of Occam, Aquinas and Augustine for the literalism of their belief. Furthermore, insisting that more than a billion people cannot have a transcendent experience, because he did not, he states:

This substitution of social work, or heavy involvement in regulating the intimate decisions of family life, has nothing to do with the real calling of the clergy to open to their people the dimensions of the meaning of the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. These latter constitute a system of symbols that works perfectly.

Missing that simple orientation, the Roman Catholic Church, for example, has translated its Latin liturgy into local languages, thereby diluting or removing its essential mystery. When Catholics go to Mass in Latin, the priest is addressing the infinite in a language that has no domestic associations; the people attending are thereby elevated into transcendence.

But when the liturgy is recited in a person’s own local language, and the altar is turned around, the priest resembles less an intermediary of mystery than he does Julia Child, the television cook. The very possibility of transcendent experience is destroyed. [33].

In other words, others and myself cannot have had experiences such as the one mentioned above, which is truly ironic. For that is what Campbell was accusing the Church of doing to Aquinas and others, telling them that they cannot have had the experience they expressed. I suspect that he may have forgotten what he told Bill Moyers, “When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all the myths have to deal with is transformations of consciousness of one kind or another.” *Moyers* [126]. All of which brings us to the second irony.

Joseph Campbell has led me, and undoubtedly others, on a journey that has brought me to this bridge of wonder, to stand there with him and contemplate mystery, the past and the future. As he so eloquently says,

...Through an intelligent “making use” not of one mythology only but of all of the dead and set-fast symbologies of the past, will enable the individual to anticipate and activate in himself the centers of his own creative imagination, out of which his own myth and life-building “Yes because” may then unfold. But in the end, as in the case of Parzival, the guide within will be his own noble heart alone, and the guide without, the image of beauty, the radiance of divinity, that wakes in the heart amor; the deepest, inmost seed of his nature, consubstantial with the process of the All, “thus come.”

In other words, the myths we encounter in life will help us get across by supporting that bridge and allowing us to enter bravely into the land of yet to be. However, we must cast off the outworn modes of thinking which hold us back, and undertake a hero’s journey across the bridge of wonder to attain that promise. So, I wonder if I ask Joseph Campbell if he will cross the bridge with me, will he undertake the journey.

Regardless, I stand on this bridge of wonder with him and see vistas that I would not have otherwise noticed. For instance, I notice that while he employs no particular system or structure to his approach to myth, Campbell offers insight and awareness into what I would call “The Impulse to Myth” of people throughout the world. In the next paper, I will explore Campbell’s subtle system and then suggest some additions of my own that might be helpful in developing a Skeleton’s Key to Joseph Campbell.

Works Cited

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