

G. Charles Andersen
Dennis Patrick Slattery, PhD.
Cultural Mythologies I:
Joseph Campbell (MS514)
EII Winter 2005

A Skelton Key For The Mythic Enterprise
Inspired By The Work of Joseph Campbell

Previously, we stood on the Bridge of Wonder with Joseph Campbell contemplating the mythology of the world and considered how it acted as supports for the bridge. I explained the impact the work of Campbell had on my personal and professional life. While chronicling the formation, expansion and evolution of human consciousness from the earliest hominids to *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Campbell describes what can only be called a “Mythic Enterprise” (a term used by Hillman in *Blue Fire* (164)). I return to an earlier paper written for another class [MS 620] to describe my understanding of the “Mythic Enterprise.”

My understanding of the nature of mythology is that myths are ubiquitous to humans throughout the world. Therefore, based on readings of Eliade, Campbell and others we can conclude in a Popperian sense that all cultures have myths. If all cultures have myths, then all humans have myths, whether or not they consciously engage those myths or mythic systems. In a phenomenological sense, we can assume that one of the aspects of culture or of being human is the creation and transmission of myths via what can only be described as the “Mythic Enterprise.” Interestingly, cultures seem to define and express themselves through the myths they have created and conversely, myths seem to create the cultures they define and express. In some respects, the Mythic Enterprise seems to be a chicken/egg type of phenomena.

So, as part of a culture, myths are conveyed via the media of stories, symbols and rituals. These media for transmitting mythic patterns and elements (Mythic Media) are distinguishable but interchangeable aspects of the same process. Stories can exist without rituals, and rituals can exist without stories but together stories, rituals and symbols form a powerful matrix that has impacted many people throughout the ages. I’m going to assume that the idea of a story is self-evident, and because defining symbols and rituals is so complex I’m merely going to suggest that they

are means of conveying and participating in myths or mythic systems. For more details on ritual, see Catherine Bell and for more detail on symbols and mythology see D. Stephenson Bond

While I cannot find an instance where Campbell referred to the “mythic enterprise” as such, I think that he would have little trouble with the label. As the chronicler of the Mythic Enterprise, Campbell developed his four functions of myth, which have been widely recognized and can be summarized thus:

The first is the cosmic, or what one would call the archetypal: To reconcile individual consciousness to the sea of the unknown—the *mysterium tremendum*—on which it rests. The second is the cosmological or religious: To create an image of the great mystery meaningful to the times so it may communicate "from heart to heart by way of the brain." Third is the social: To justify the moral order and customs of society (presumably, into which the member are to be initiated). Fourth is the psychological or developmental: To guide the individual through the stages of life according to the demands of society, religion, the universe at large, and the great unknown (Campbell, 1968, 4-6).

These four functions form the heart of Campbell’s system as well as the basis of some strident criticism of Campbell. For instance, of these functions Segal states that Campbell speaks dogmatically and continues, “Why these four disparate functions Campbell never explains.” Segal (138). I think the skeleton key will provide an answer for that critique.

Beyond the four functions of his system, additional criticism is aimed at Campbell for rarely referring to other modern theorists in his writing, according to Segal. Among other criticisms, a final critique that Segal levels against Campbell is regarding the irreplaceability of myth. Segal writes,

For all Jung’s praise of myth, he does not regard it as indispensable. Religion, art, dreams and what he calls the “active imagination” can work as well, even if at times Jung uses the term “myth” so loosely as to encompass these alternatives to it. For Campbell, by contrast, myth is irreplaceable. Campbell attributes to myth so many disparate functions

that it is hard to envision any possible substitute. Moreover, he defines myth so broadly that religion, art, and dreams become instances of myth rather than substitutes for it. Jung considers myth neither necessary nor sufficient for human fulfillment. Campbell considers it both. Where for Jung therapy supplements myth, for Campbell myth precludes therapy, which is only for those bereft of myth. Segal (120).

Because of the scope and expansiveness of his thinking, the work of Joseph Campbell will continue to invite criticism. The purpose of this skeleton key approach is to respond to some of that criticism and demonstrate why Campbell's thinking continues to open up the Mythic Enterprise to new generations of students. The vehicle I propose is using the works of Campbell as the basis for a skeleton key to the Mythic Enterprise that I have developed. This approach is largely an experiential theory used metaphorically. Because we will begin in the area of meta-linguistics, I will refer to Lakoff and Johnson to explain the process.

An experiential theory of definition has a different notion of what needs to be defined and what does the defining. On our account, individual concepts are not defined in an isolated fashion, but rather in terms of their roles in natural kinds of experiences. Concepts are not defined solely in terms of inherent properties; instead, they are defined primarily in terms of interactional properties. Finally, definition is not a matter of giving some fixed set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept (though this may be possible in certain special cases, such as in science or other technical disciplines, though even there it is not always possible); instead, concepts are defined by prototypes and by types of relations to prototypes. Rather than being rigidly defined, concepts arising from our experience are open-ended. Metaphors and hedges are systematic devices for further defining a concept and for changing its range of applicability (125).

Meta Linguistic Interface

As mentioned above, the Mythic Enterprise concerns the interaction of symbols, myths and rituals. As Campbell states, "The best things cannot be told, the second best are misunderstood." 1968 (84). Along the lines of Cassirer (Meletinsky 31-36), I am

suggesting that these three elements can be considered “meta-linguistic phenomena,” that is, vehicles for communication that exist within and beyond the boundaries of spoken language. Because of the poly-modal nature of these phenomena, there is currently no commonly agreed upon definition for symbol, ritual or myth. Furthermore, I am suggesting that these three elements, alone or in combination, can act as a “Meta-Linguistic Interface” which can lead to a “Mythogenic Experience.”

The term Mythogenic is derived from the suffix “genic” which is the cause or effect of something, such as “carcinogenic” or a quality inherent in something such as “photogenic.” Therefore, that which is Mythogenic causes or is caused by myth or something mythic and/or reflects an inherent quality of myth. Campbell uses the term “mythogenesis” as a section heading in *Creative Mythology* (514), but never actually uses it in the text or explains his understanding of the term. Mythogenics is not to be confused with Campbell’s term of “Mythogenetic” which he uses in the sense of Mythogenetic Zone (a geographical area of mythic tradition) or in a temporal sense Mythogenetic Moment for the period 450-950 A.D. (516).

So, what is a Mythogenic Experience? The following illustration might help (see figure 1). What the model suggests is that when we engage a Meta-Linguistic Interface (consisting of symbols, myths and/or rituals), there is a mytho-catalytic reaction that produces an experience in our mind that seems to trigger some type of encounter with a form of trans-phenomenal reality, expressible often in terms of mystery, wisdom or beauty. As one continues to respond and participate more fully in that encounter, two dimensions of Mythogenic Experience emerge, personal and trans-personal.

Trans-Personal Mythogenic Experience

The Trans-Personal realm of Mythogenic Experience is what is most commonly conceived of as the field of mythology. Certainly, *The Masks of God* and *The Mythic Image* are primarily about aspects of this dimension of Mythogenic Experience. Because the focus is on cultures and civilizations over immense spans of time, there is little regard for how a particular individual would be affected or involved in such experiences. As I understand it, this form of experience consists of the following elements: 1) Interface Dynamics, 2) Mytho-Liturgical Structure, 3) The Sacred Center (Axis Mundi), 4) The Sacred Mirror (Images of the Divine), and 5) The Vineyard of Time. (See figure 2).

Interface Dynamics

Seemingly, most of the theoretical work in the field of mythology is involved primarily, but not exclusively, with analyzing and dealing with this aspect of mythology. Endless debates are initiated regarding the origin, meaning and function of the various myths within the cultures that gave birth to them. Campbell oftentimes paid little attention to the interface, not telling the entire myth or using it for didactic purposes. A good example of this is the way he split the story of the Frog-King in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. He begins telling the first part of the story on page forty-nine and fifty, and then suspends the story and waits until page one hundred and nineteen before completing the story. Such disdain for the integrity of the interface can be somewhat annoying, particularly for those whose primary approach to mythology is centered on the interface.

However, one aspect of the interface that was of abiding interest to Campbell was in terms of the Mythogenetic Zone, where he conceived that particular geographic areas

shared mythological “genes” in terms of the diffusion of particular stories. This interest in diffusion was strongly developed in *The Mythic Image* and I believe was largely responsible for the organization of *The Masks of God*.

Mytho-Liturgical Structure

As a liturgist, the interplay of myth and liturgy is of considerable interest to me, but only of marginal interest to Campbell. The three areas of primary consideration in a mytho-liturgical sense would be 1) Divination, (particularly in an expanded sense to incorporate Western religious practice), 2) Sacrifice, and 3) Possession (dealing with the nature of deity “indwelling” which could also include “communion.” In *Primitive Mythology* and *The Mythic Image* there are considerations and discussions of sacrifice and divination within the context of dreams, but seemingly that is about as far into these subjects as Campbell was willing to go.

The Sacred Center (Axis Mundi)

In the *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell spent considerable effort discussing the “Navel” of the World and its corollaries. The theme was reflected later in *The Mythic Image*, dealing with temples, pyramids and cathedrals as the World Mountain. While he explored the calendar at great length and the cosmic implications, he did not discuss in any great detail the idea of the “Cosmic Crossroad” which is reflected in such places as Chaco Canyon.

The Sacred Mirror (Images of the Divine)

This is one of those areas of mythology where the thinking of Campbell is a bit intertwined with his personal opinions. As he writes in *The Mythic Image*,

There are three points of accord that make it possible to speak of modern depth psychologies in the same context with yoga. First, there is the idea that the fate of the individual is a function of his psychological disposition: he brings about those calamities that appear to befall him. Next, there is the idea that the figures of mythology and religion are not revelations from aloft, but of the psyche, projections of its fantasies; the gods and demons are within us. Finally, there is the knowledge that an individual's psychological disposition can be transformed through controlled attention to his dreams and to what appear to be the accidents of his fate. (278).

In other words, Campbell is a humanist. However, regarding the nature of the gods, the jury is still out on that question for many people on this planet, and there is nothing in mythology that answers the question definitively. As Paul Veyne said in answer to the title of his wonderful book, *Did the Greeks Believe In Their Myths?*, he stated, "But of course they believed in their myths!" (129). Mary Lefkowitz laments in her book *Greek Gods, Human Lives*, "Campbell is interested in what human beings do in the stories, not in the actions of the gods." (8). She goes on to state that "Campbell also changes the emphasis of stories to give them modern psychological meanings." (9).

The Vineyard of Time

The nature of time as cyclical, linear and rhythmic is truly the substance of mythology on both a personal and transpersonal basis. However, many cultures have been virtually obsessed with time in terms of ordering their existence. Within this context are creation stories, stories of the eschaton, harvest and vegetation cycles, hunting and even divination. In terms of the writings of Joseph Campbell, this is a very rich area to consider.

The above schema provides a reasonable conceptual framework for dealing with most of the trans-personal areas of mythology. However, considering the four functions of myth designated by Campbell, there is also the personal dimension to consider.

Personal Dimension of Mythogenic Experience

The graphical symbol for this dimension of experience is two inter-penetrating triangles (see figure 3), which interestingly are one of the symbols for the heart chakra, symbolizing the merging of the nature of Shiva and Shakti. According to the model I have developed, one of the triangles represents the primary personal aspects of mythology: 1) Action, 2) Consciousness, and 3) Meaning. The other triangle represents the emotive aspects of dealing with the other triangle in terms of fear, desire and belief. Space requirements limit our discussion of the interplay of these elements, however the graphical elements may help establish the nature of the relationships. I call this particular model, the Mythogenic Heart.

Action

This model takes the hero's journey as one of the fundamental metaphors for the action of psyche in the world. Within the realm of the personal dimension, we each undertake action under the metaphor of our life's journey. Within this model, (see figure 4) the nature of that journey can be summed up as undertaking a quest, a mission or a burden. All of this is suggested in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, where it is not just the heroes and gods who undertake such tasks, but as Campbell has pointed out, we all do. As he stated in *The Power of Myth*, "...there is an old story that is still good, and that is the story of the spiritual quest. The quest to find the inward thing that you basically are is the story that I tried to render in that little book of mine written forty-odd years ago" (139).

Consciousness

The importance of this area cannot be emphasized enough. As Campbell says,

When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness. And what all myths have to deal with is transformation of consciousness of one kind or another. You have been thinking one way, you now have to think a different way. (1988, 127).

Within the model of consciousness we are using for the skeleton key, there are three types of consciousness to deal with: 1) Cosmogenic Consciousness, in terms of how the universe and the world we live in affect the story of our lives. Environment impacts our journey on so many levels. The model for this dimension of consciousness (see figure 5) reflects some of the theories of David Bohm, in terms of the implicate order of reality. 2) Ontogenic Consciousness is the awareness of ourselves in the world. The model (see figure 6) is a very complex representation of the levels and layers of the psyche at work with the physical body. 3) Anthrogenic Consciousness regards the essential question of “what does it mean to be a human being?” The various arenas (see figure 7) indicate the complex interplay of roles and expectations that constitute the mythology of “my life.”

Meaning

When I applied to Pacifica, among the materials I included was an elaboration of this particular model (see figure 9). Interestingly, the binary oppositions of Levi-Strauss may have more applicability to this area than the thoughts of Campbell. The oppositional elements are reflected on the left and right side of the model. However, in the end, the process is a spiral road.

The Emotive Elements (Fear, Desire, Belief)

In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell states, “Desire and fear: these are the two emotions by which all life in the world is governed. Desire is the bait, death is the hook.” (140). Belief is the sustaining mediator between these two powerful emotions. The Mythogenic Heart is alive with the energies these emotions generate, which powers the actions of the psyche in the world.

So the model of the Mythogenic Heart provides the basic elements of the skeleton key to the dimension of Personal Mythogenic Experience. Coupled with the elements of the Trans-Personal Experience, I feel this provides a comprehensive and useful conceptual framework to consider when dealing with the Mythic Enterprise.

In terms of the criticisms of Joseph Campbell by Segal and others, I think one can see by using this skeleton key, it becomes fairly obvious why Campbell chose those four functions for his system—they sum up virtually every aspect that the skeleton key reveals with an economy of words and concepts. I know of no other system that is as comprehensive or complete.

Finally, in terms of the irreplaceability of myth, Segal refers to Campbell as an “evangelist.” While that may be true, the importance of myth and similar values are shared by others. For instance, G.S. Kirk, who is by no means a romantic, states:

Myths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal or non-urban cultures, which makes them one of the main objects of anthropological interest; not only for the grip that versions of ancient Greek myths have gained through the centuries on the literary culture of the western nations; but also because of men’s endearing insistence upon carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into a supposedly scientific age. (2).

Hopefully, the ideas presented convey the depth and breadth of Joseph Campbell's thinking about mythology and provide a reasonable basis for understanding some of the work and debates that continue in this field of study. Perhaps one day this skeleton key will provide the basis for deeper exploration into some of the areas presented. Regardless, thanks to the work of Joseph Campbell we have a wonderful legacy to explore the riches of mythology and mythological thinking.

MYTHO-CATALYTIC EXPERIENCE

(Meta-Linguistic Interface)

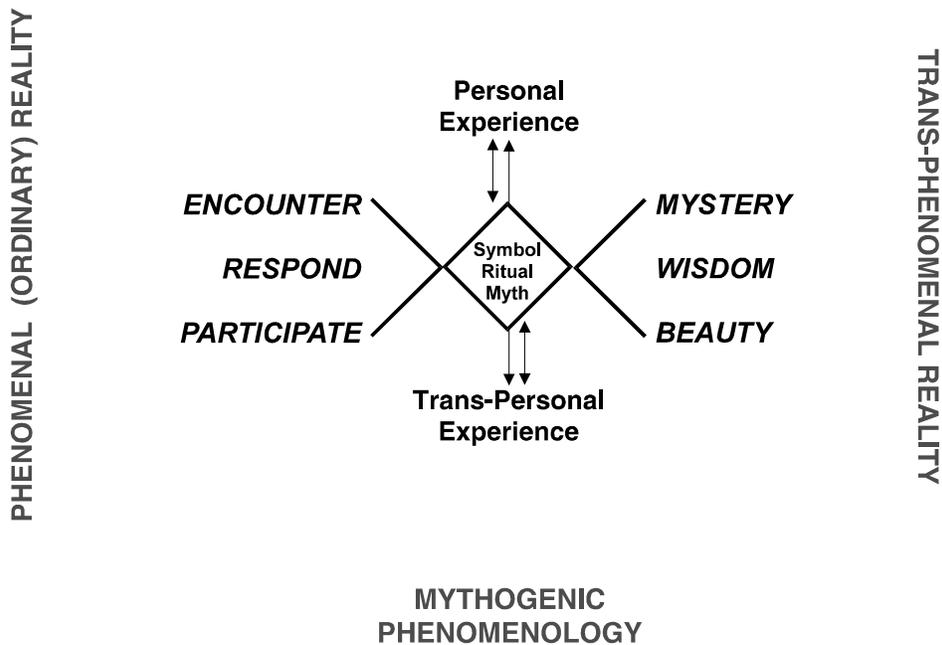


Figure 1

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF TRANS-PERSONAL MYTHOGENIC EXPERIENCE

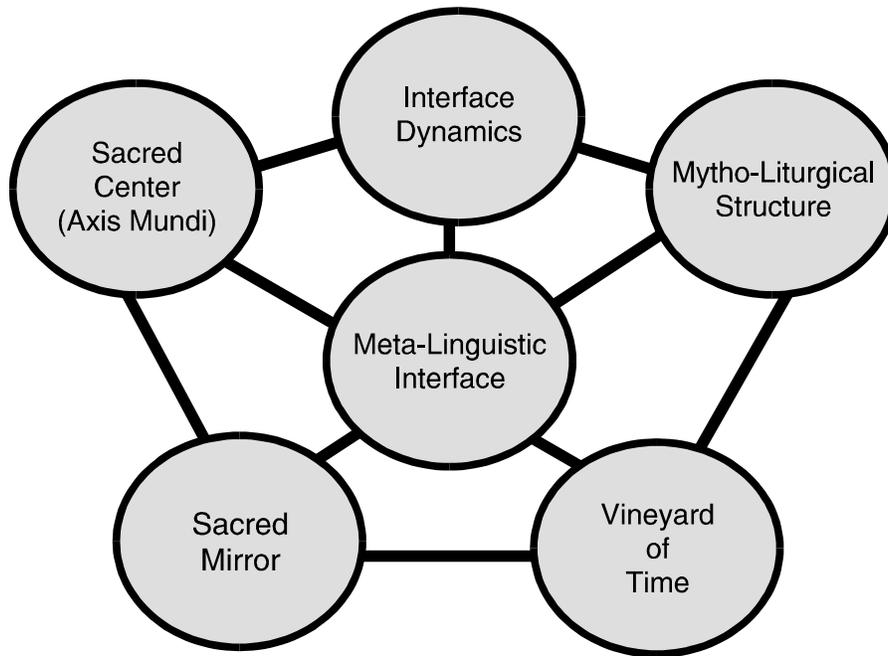


Figure 2

PERSONAL MYTHOGENIC FIELD

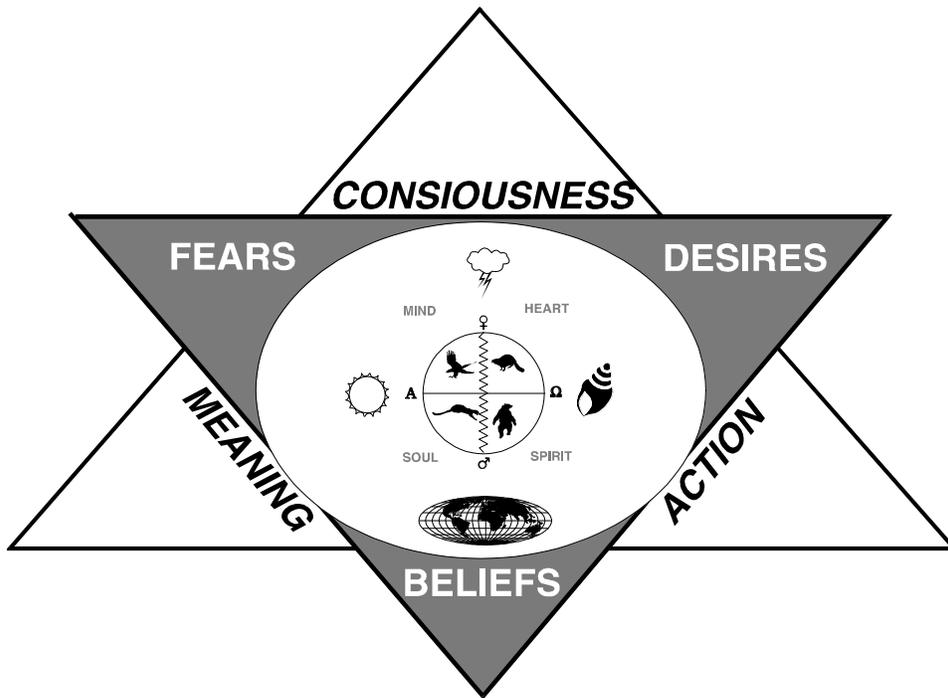
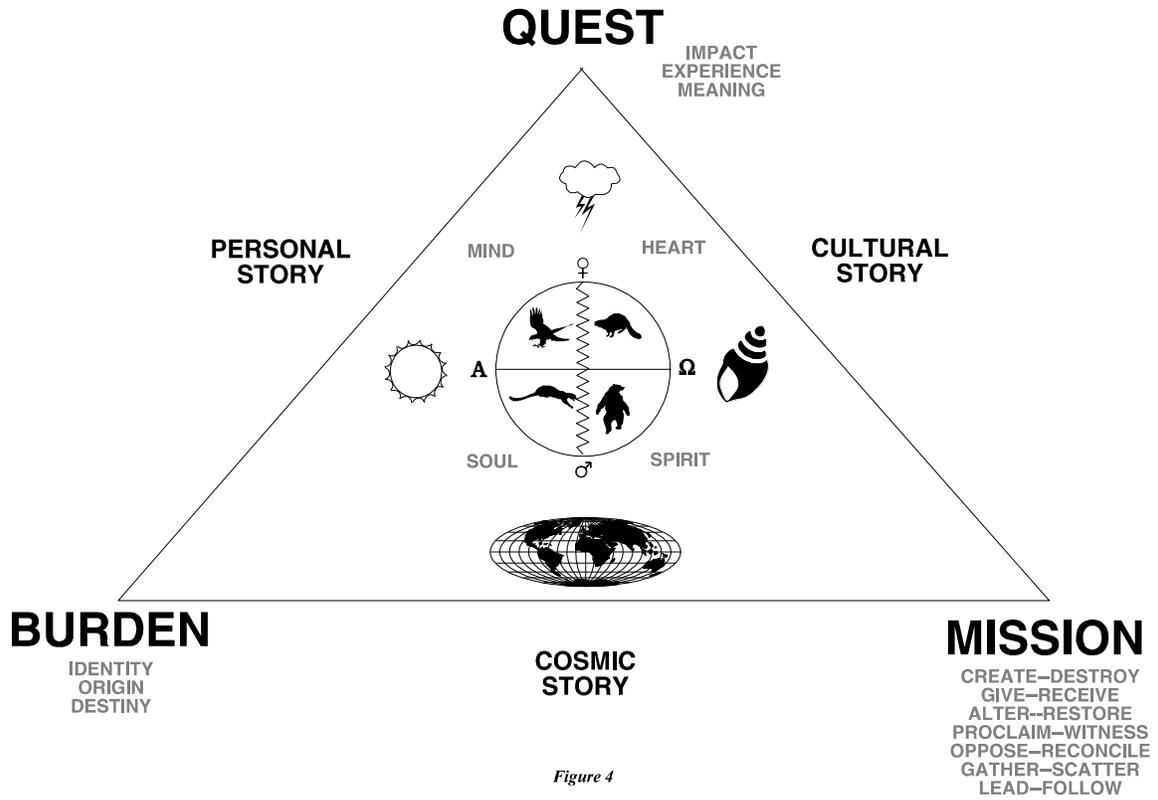


Figure 3

MYTHIC TASK

(Ergo-Mythic Enterprise)



**DIMENSIONS
OF
PSYCHO-MYTHIC CONSCIOUSNESS**
(Dreams, Myths & Minds)

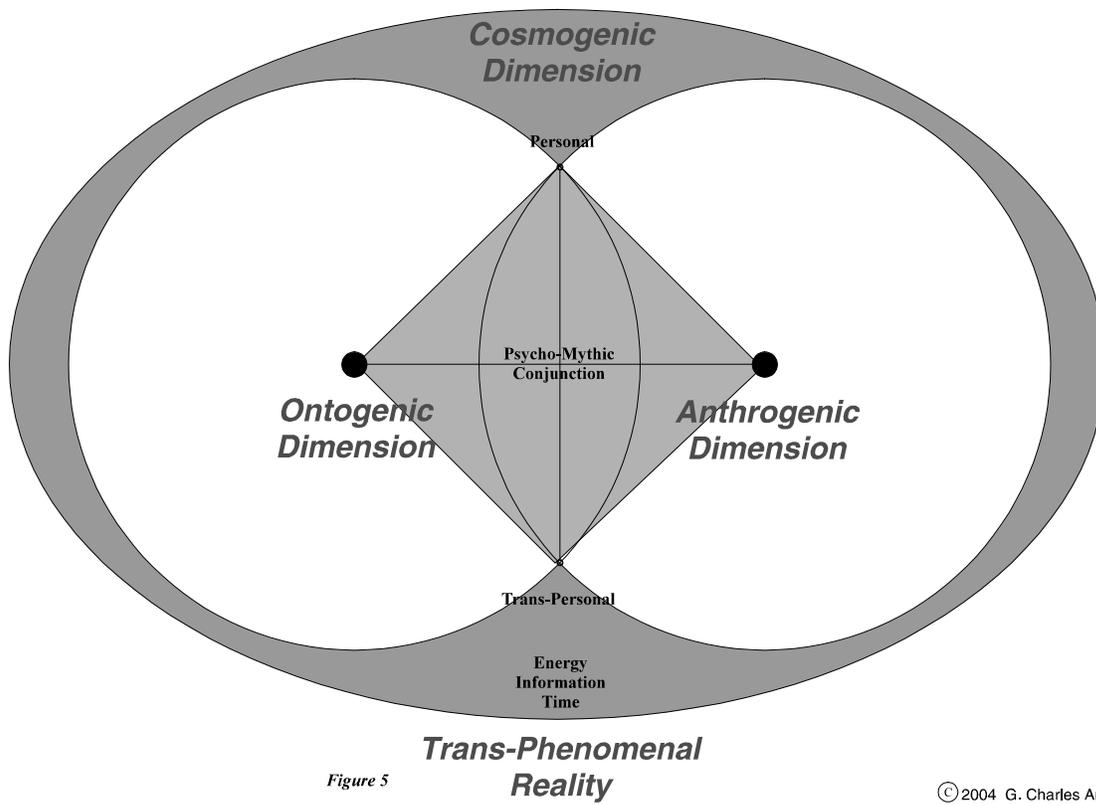


Figure 5

COSMOGENIC DIMENSION

(Landscapes of Reality)

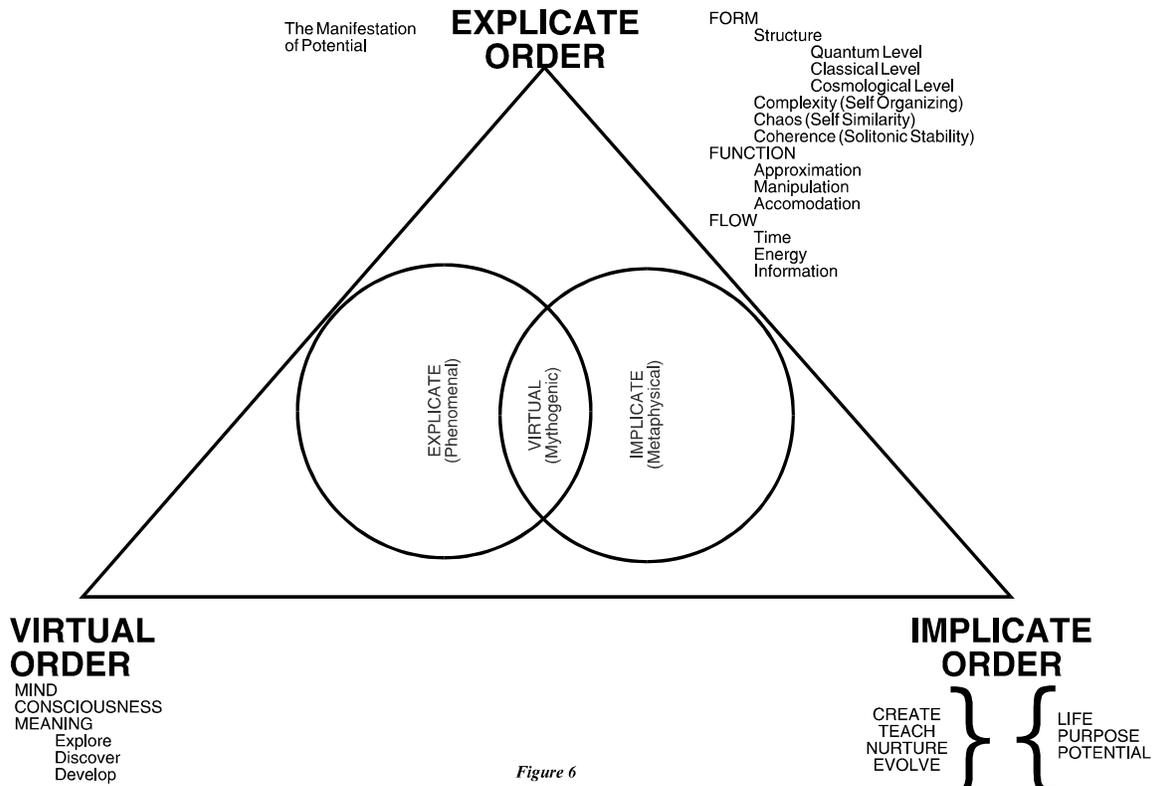


Figure 6

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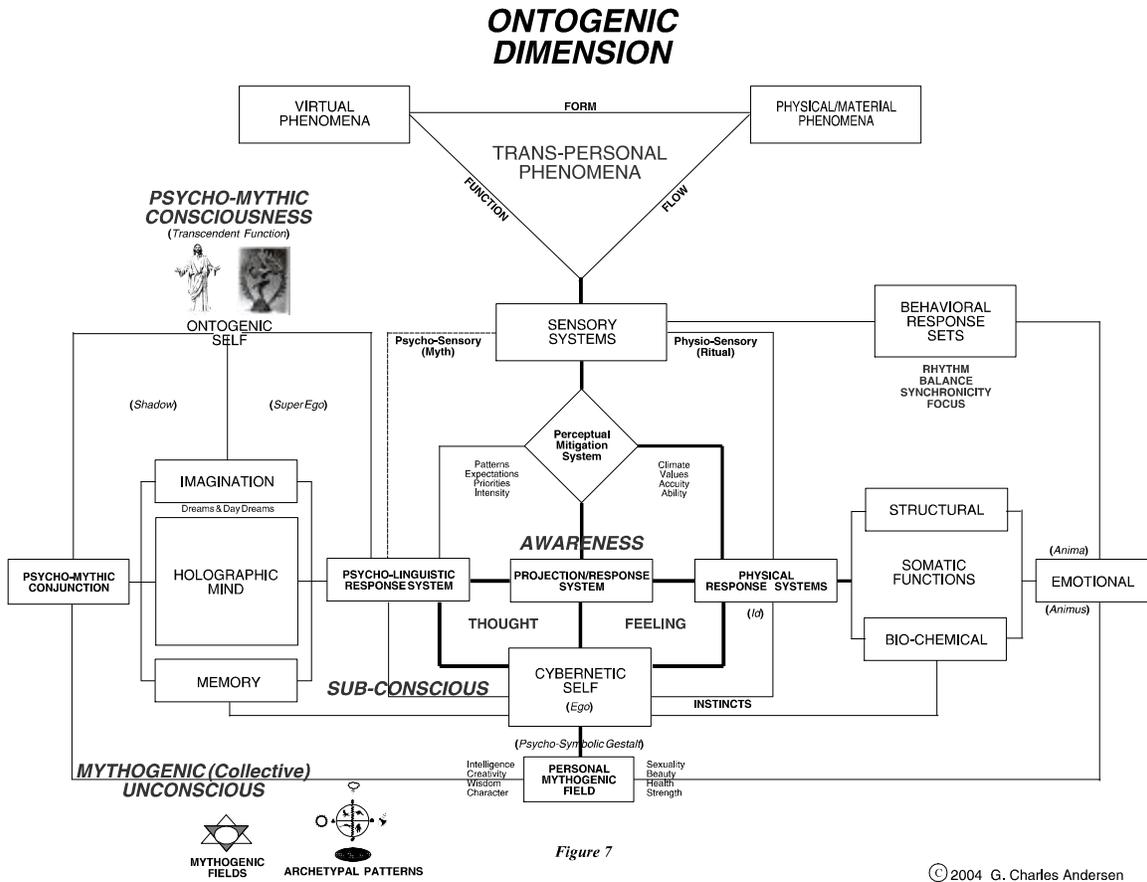


Figure 7

ANTHROGENIC DIMENSION

(Virtual Arenas of Life)

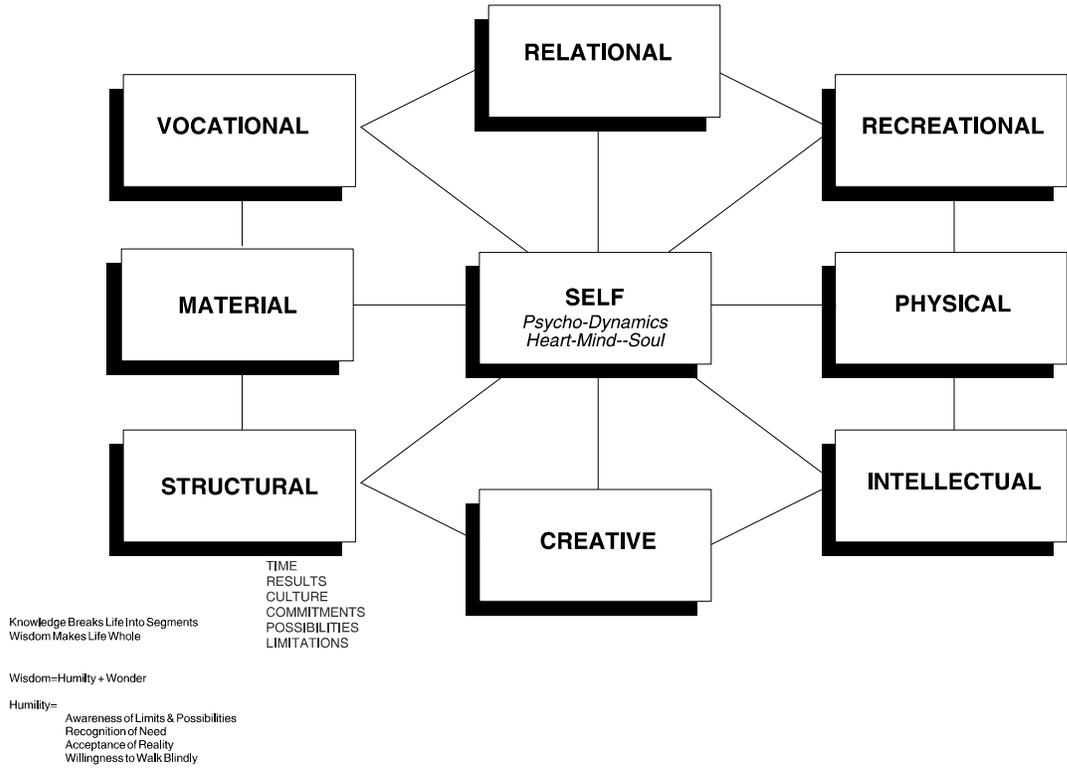


Figure 9

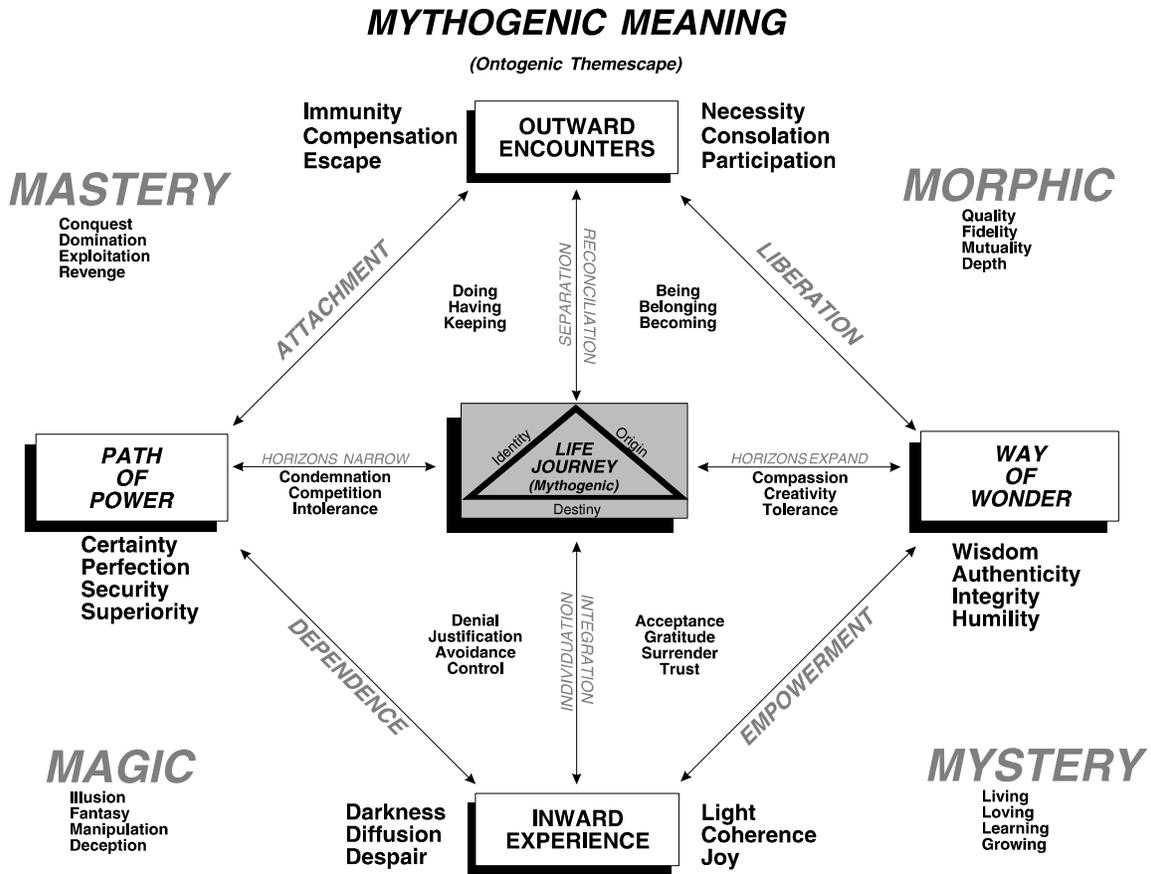


Figure 10

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