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Joseph Campbell: Myths to Live By (Part One)

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Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell explore the enduring universal myths that continue to influence our lives daily, and examine the myth-making process from the primitive past to the immediate present. This was the first of Bill Moyers' conversations with Joseph Campbell.

TRANSCRIPT

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: [voice-over]: Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo-jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse, now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairytale, it will be always the one shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find. Together with the challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will be ever be known or told. Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance the myths of man have flourished, and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared on the activities of the human body and mind; It would not be too much to say, that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep boil up from basic magic ring of myth.

BILL MOYERS: [voice-over] Tonight, we'll visit that magic ring of myth with Joseph Campbell. I'm Bill Moyers.

BILL MOYERS: [voice-over]: Joseph Campbell at 77 has been on a lifelong journey into the interpretation of myths and their meaning. His quest began early, as a boy, when his father brought him here to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Young Campbell was transfixed by the totem poles and masks housed in the Hall of Northwest Coast Indians. Who made them, he wondered, What did they mean? He began to read everything he could find about Indians, their myths and legends, and by ten Joseph Campbell was into the pursuit that would make him today one of the world's foremost scholars of mythology. He studied at Columbia University, where he was also world-class half-miler in the 1920s. In 1934, he joined the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College, teaching there for over 30 years while also traveling the world in search of ancient and present myths. He has published *The Masks of God*, a four-volume work ranked as one of the most comprehensive studies of mythology ever published, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a familiar companion on college campuses, and *The Mythic Image*, portraying the visual aspects of myth. We talked in the same room at the Museum of Natural History where for Joseph Campbell the myths of the past first came to life.

BILL MOYERS: What is a myth?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, let's begin with what a mythology is. A mythology is a system of images that incorporates a concept of the universe as a divinely energized and energizing ambience within which we live. Do you understand what I am saying? And a myth, then, is a single story or a single element of the whole mythology, and the various stories of the mythology interlock — they interlock to be consistent within this great world image.

BILL MOYERS: So, a myth would be an attempt by someone to tell a story about a larger drama than that person is at the moment participating.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes, but myths are not invented as stories are. Myths are inspired — they really are: They come from the same realm that dream comes from. People ask me frequently, “Well, what is the future myth?” Well, I could ask, “What are you going to dream tonight?” The — you don't know. The — the myth world and the dream world come from that level below the threshold of consciousness, which is that what I would call the nature wisdom, the life wisdom, the body wisdom. The body knows how — knew how to build itself in the mother womb. The body knows how to digest the meal. I've got a bad cold — the body is at work healing it, doing better than the doctors. I could go to sleep, and the body gets to work. There is a kind of wisdom in nature.

BILL MOYERS: So there is in the myth a kind of message from the unconscious to the conscious.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Right. And if — it takes only a little training to be able to understand the language of this vocabulary. Now when people try to interpret what I call a spiritual symbol, an image that refers to a psychological potentiality within an individual, when you interpret that image as though it referred to a concrete fact, you've lost the message.

BILL MOYERS: Give me an example.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, the one that is most immediate to think of, is the image of the virgin birth. This is a motif that occurs in all the mythologies of the world. And I found it — I was brought up Roman Catholic, I'd become interested in myths, Indian myths, there's virgin births all over the place. What is the virgin birth? The virgin birth is symbolic of the birth of the spiritual life, the spiritual being from the body of animal man. We share with animals the interest in hanging onto life, in begetting new life, in feeding and fighting for this life, but there's a spiritual trajectory -living for a spiritual aim that no animal possibly knows. It's the birth of that that is the virgin birth.

BILL MOYERS: And you say that this exists in many cultures, of many times.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes.

BILL MOYERS: Well, how do you explain the ubiquity of these tales?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: There are only two kinds of explanations. One is that they are immediate productions of the human psyche, and since the human psyche like the human body is essentially a constant, the product of its imagination will be constant also. They'll be essentially the same.

BILL MOYERS: You use a term that we'd better define at least while we're this early into the conversation, and that is "psyche." What do you think the human psyche is?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I think the human psyche is the inside experience of the human body. The — there's a nervous system here. Every organ has its impulse to action, and the psyche is the inward experience of this whole organic and nervous system.

BILL MOYERS: And where does it get its — its messages from?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, that's the reason we speak of the divine. There's this transcendent energy source. When the physicist observes subatomic particles, he isn't seeing the subatomic particles, he's seeing a trace on a screen of some kind, and he doesn't know where it's coming from. These things come and go, come and go, and we come and go, and all of life comes and goes, and that energy, that energy is the informing energy of all things, that's what these people recognize in the animals, in the trees, in the world of nature. And it's to that that the mythic worship is addressed, and it's out of that that the impulse comes for that kind of realization.

BILL MOYERS: And these mythic images, this energy, these tales, get carried forward generation to generation, almost unconsciously, are unconsciously —

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: They're utterly fascinating, because they are speaking about the deep mystery of yourself and everything else. It is as I say, a mysterium, a mystery, tremendum et fascians, tremendous, horrific, because it smashes all of your fixed notions of things, and at the same time utterly fascinating, because its — its of your own nature and being. When you start thinking about these things, about the inner mystery, inner life, the eternal life, there aren't too many images for you to use. You begin to, on your own, to have the images that are already present in some other system of thought.

BILL MOYERS: Because the human psyche, as Jung said, is not of today, it goes back millions of years?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Millions of years, yes, and there's this constant, constant repetition of themes. It's sometimes quite stunning, and even lifts the hair on your head, to run in some very primitive people, some little people in the Congo jungles, the pygmies for instance, they're about as primitive as any people you find today. Gosh, a myth turns up there that is practically that of the Garden of Eden, and there is one, and not eating of the fruit of the tree, and God getting angry because they' do eat the fruit of the tree, and God withdrawing from man because he has eaten the fruit.

BILL MOYERS: What were some of the earliest myths?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, the first inkling we have of mythology at all comes from the period of Neanderthal man in Europe. This is about 100,000 to 40,000 B.C. And the reason we know that he begins to have a mythological idea is that he buries his dead. This is the beginning of the burial of the dead, as far as we know. Also that same period shows sanctuaries in some of the high mountains, in little cave~ in the high mountains, sanctuaries

in which the anthropologists have found storage rooms full of cave-bear skulls. And cave-bear skulls set sometimes with a round of stones around them, or one particularly vivid one with the long bone of the same bear in the bear's mouth, and so forth and so on. There is some kind of cult going on there. Just when men begin to ask, "What is it that happens when the body turns cold? Where and what has happened?" Then they begin to think of the animals whom they have killed also in the same sense, and you have simultaneously burials of human beings and sanctuaries of worship for animals, dealing with that mystery world beyond the visible life. That's the beginning of the mythic mystery — virgin birth, the birth of another kind of human being, another kind of human life dedicated to that mystery.

BILL MOYERS: And this arose in order to confront the reality of mortality — death, the void beyond death.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: That's the first sign we have — it's in the glimpse of death that the understanding that life is a mystery too comes along and, what is it that's come, where's it going, that's the basic myth.

BILL MOYERS: What did you mean when you wrote that myths are themes of the imagination?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, they're not factual, are they? They come from the imagination.

BILL MOYERS: What is the imagination?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: The imagination is moved by its own inward experiences, by your own inward experiences of the aspects of your psyche that are asking for fulfillment in your life.

BILL MOYERS: For which you are neither responsible nor which you understand, where these come from.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: You really don't.

BILL MOYERS: I mean, they are part of the collective record and experience of the human race, is that what you're saying?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I'm saying, yes, that they're normal experiences.

BILL MOYERS: I remember once, if I may indulge a personal recollection, my first visit to Kenya — going out alone to one of the ancient sites of a primitive camp on what used to be the shore of a lake, and staying there until night fell, and feeling a sense of the presence of all creation — feeling underneath that night sky, in that vast place, that I belonged to something very much ancient than I, and very much still alive even though it was a million years old. Is that sentimental, is that naive?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: No, you've brought up the whole story. I think it's Cicero who says you go into a great tall grove and the presence of the deity is known to you. There are sacred groves everywhere. Going into the forest, I can remember as a little boy, I learned about it first from the Indians, but then my family used to go in the summer to a beautiful woodland place, and sit there. I can remember worshiping a tree, a great big old tree, thinking my, my, what you've known and been, and all this kind of thing. It comes over one. I think it's a basic mood of man, mythological. We live now in a city. It's all stories and rock. And it was manufactured by human hands and put together — it's a different kind of world to grow up in when you're out in the forest and the little chipmunks and the great owls, and all these things are around us as presences, representing forces and powers and magical possibilities of life, that are not yours, and yet are all part of life and that opens it out, and then you find it echoing in yourself, because you are nature, you are nature. When a Sioux Indian would take the calumet, the pipe, he would hold it up stem to the sky so that the sun could take the first puff. And then he'd address the four directions always, everything, you're addressing yourself to the horizon, to the world that you're in, and then you in your place in the world. It's a different way to live.

BILL MOYERS: Does your study of mythology lead you to conclude that a single human quest, a standard pattern of human aspiration and thought, constitutes for all mankind something that we have in common whether we live today or a million years ago, or will live a thousand years from now?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well there's a certain type of myth which one might call the vision quest, going in quest of a boon, a vision, that has the same form in every mythology. That is the thing that I tried to present in the first book I did, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. That here are all these different mythologies giving us the same essential quest, and it amounts to leaving the world that you're in, going into a depth or into a distance or to a height, and there coming to what was missing in your consciousness in the world that you were formerly inhabiting, and then comes the problem either of staying with that, and letting the world

drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold it. Trying to hold it as you move back into your social world again. That's a — not an easy thing to do.

BILL MOYERS: Now this is a very old myth, isn't it? The quest, the individual —

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Everywhere.

BILL MOYERS: What's a hero for in mythology?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: A hero, in mythology, usually is the founder of something — the founder of a new age, the founder of a new religion, the founder of a new city, the founder of a new way of life. And in order to found something new, one has to leave the old and go in quest of the seed idea, the germinal idea, that will have the potentiality of bringing forth that new thing. The founders of all religions have gone on quests like that. The Buddha went into solitude and then sat beneath the Tree of Immortal Knowledge. Jesus, after baptism by John the Baptist went into the desert for forty days, and it was out of the desert that he came with his message. Moses goes to the top of the mountain and comes down with the tables of the Law. In all, all the great religions this is the case, that's the founder of a religion. Then you have the one who founds a new city — almost all of the old Greek cities were founded by heroes who went on quests and then founded the city, and so forth. And you might say the founder of a life, one's own life, instead of living everybody else's life, this comes from a quest too.

BILL MOYERS: Do you have a favorite mythic hero?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: When I was a little boy I had two heroes. One was Douglas Fairbanks and the other was Leonardo da Vinci, and I wanted to be a synthesis of the two. Now today, I don't have a single hero at all.

BILL MOYERS: Does our society?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, you see, it did have, it had the Christ. And then America had men like Washington and Jefferson and then later, Daniel Boone and the heroes of our American life. But life today is so complex, and it has changed so fast, that there is no time for anything to constellate itself before its thrown over again, you know?

BILL MOYERS: We seem to worship celebrities today, not heroes.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Oh, yes that's too bad. A little questionnaire was sent around one of the high schools in Brooklyn: What would you like to be? And two-thirds of the students said a celebrity. And no notion of having to achieve something, you know —

BILL MOYERS: Just to be known.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Just to be known, and have fame — name and fame. It's too bad.

BILL MOYERS: But does a society need heroes?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes, I think so.

BILL MOYERS: Why?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, because it has to have constellating images to pull together all that tendency into separation. To pull it together into some term, some intention, worth intending.

BILL MOYERS: To follow some path.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I think so. I mean the nation has to know — has to have a single intention somehow to operate as a single power.

BILL MOYERS: What did you think of the outpouring over John Lennon's death recently? Was he a hero?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Oh, he definitely was a hero. For a whole world of — well, everything was represented in the — in the rock and roll, and young people's atomic culture movement.

BILL MOYERS: Explain that in the mythological sense.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, in the mythological sense he is the innovator, and those young men, those four young men had achieved something, they brought forth an image for which there was a readiness. Somehow it was in tune with the time. If that same constellation had turned up thirty years before, it would have fizzled out. But there was something just to the time. Of course that's an important thing with respect to the public life hero, that he should be sensitive to the needs of his time. And what those young men gave, the Beatles there, was a whole new spiritual depth to music and all, and they started the whole fad, let's call it, for meditation, and Oriental music, which had been over here suddenly, now, we know

what it's about, we hear more of it, and it is used in terms of its original intention as a support for meditations, and so forth. That's what they did.

BILL MOYERS: That's the story of the hero again.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: That's it.

BILL MOYERS: In fact, don't many of the heroes in mythology in a way die to the world? They suffer, they're crucified.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well," many of them give their lives. But then, the myth also says that out of given life comes a new life. It may not be theirs personally, but it's a new life, of a new way of living.

BILL MOYERS: What does it say to you, that there runs through all cultures, this quest, this pursuit?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: What it says to me is that man knows that there is an eternal life inside him. Because the going down into the depth, there is always going down into the finding the thing in oneself.

BILL MOYERS: The hero is always —

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: It's symbolized as outside, but it really is an inward quest, and it's a finding of something in here, and then coming back with it into the world. The life that lives in us is an eternal life, there's no doubt about it, and we are bubbles on top of it. And in our bubble existence, in our existence in the field of time and space, it's possible to become so linked to the time-space aspect of the experience that you never realize the depth of it. But it's possible also to experience the depth. I remember hearing at a wedding ceremony the clergyman say to the young couple, "Live your marriage in such a way, live your life in such a way, that you'll experience eternal life in the next." And I thought, "No. That's wrong. Live your marriage in such a way that you 'll experience through it eternal life here and now."

BILL MOYERS: You 'll have to explain that. Are you saying that you don't believe-in a life after death, the way Christian theology postulates it?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I will say this~ a general rule. To interpret a mythological symbol as though it referred to a concrete or historical fact is to misread the symbol. The symbol of heaven, the symbol of eternal life, refers — is a symbol. And then you can turn it into a fact

and say, "Shall I be alive later on?" And the people who have the reincarnation idea are doing the same thing. They take reincarnation, which is a symbolic image, and turn it into a fact. And so they're worried about reincarnation. What these things tell you is that the depth of your life and the breadth of your life is much deeper and broader than you conceive it to be here. And what you are living in the way of the actuality of your existence is but a functional inkling of what is really within you as being lived and as giving you your life and all of that thing. You can live in terms of that depth. You can experience it, and suddenly all the religions are talking of that.

BILL MOYERS: You mean you can experience eternity now?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes.

BILL MOYERS: You can taste eternal life?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: If you don't get it now, you'll never get it. Because it's not a long time after this one. "Shall I be alive after I'm dead?" Well, so what, there you're just alive again. You've got to get the experience somewhere along the line, or you'll never have it.

BILL MOYERS: How do you do it? How do you get that experience?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, read myths. They begin to tell you that you can turn in, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read them, I think, read other people's myths — not those of your own religion because your own religion you begin to interpret in terms of facts — but if you read the other ones you see, you begin to get the message that beyond the two of them. This is the business of folk ideas and elementary ideas, by comparing, you've — the message comes through. It's good — it's a good experience.

BILL MOYERS: I was going to ask you, why read myths, what do these myths have to teach us? You said somewhere that it's good for us to know if our conscious minds would be kept in touch with our own most secret motivating depth. It's good to read these myths, and I was going to ask you, why is good? A pragmatic person who is not in touch with his deepest motivations would say, "Well I've gotten along quite well without such knowledge."

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Good for him. It's not an easy thing to give up success in those terms in order to have a success in this other way of finding the inward life.

BILL MOYERS: The spiritual.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes. And I would say if a person is perfectly happy running along like that, don't disturb him. It's a perfectly good life, too, you know, it's there. He's getting more out of it than you would think, or than he knows. But some people find that that's not good enough, that's all. There's an image that I find a very important and helpful one. This one of the serpent and the moon, you know? Moon throws a shadow and is born again, casts off — as they say in the Bhagavad Gita, the eternal presence puts on bodies and puts them off as a man puts on and puts off clothing. This eternal thing goes through. The sun, which is the opposite image to the moon, does not have a shadow in itself. It never dies. When the sun goes down it hasn't died, it's just gone where we're not, but the moon dies in front of your face, you know you can see it go. So that these two celestial signs represent two ways of experiencing eternal life. One is in the world as the serpent throwing its skin or the moon casting its shadow, eternal life in the field of time. The sun represents eternal life absolute.

BILL MOYERS: When I was a boy, myth stirred me to think that I could be a hero. I mean when I read "Knights of the Round Table," I wanted to go out and do battle with dragons, I wanted to go into the dark forest and slay evil. What does it say to you that myths can cause the son of an Oklahoma farmer to think of himself as a hero?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, because it inspires that possibility, the realization of that possibility of your, your perfection, the fullness of your strength, and the bringing of the solar light into the world. Slaying monsters is slaying the dark things, and as I say, these things have grabbed you somewhere down inside, and as a boy you go at it one way, as I did reading my Indian stories, later on it tells you more, and more, and more. I think anyone who has ever dealt with religious or mythic ideas will tell you that, that you learn them as a child on one level, and then another level is revealed to you and more, and more, and they're infinite in their revelation. Myths primarily are for fundamental instruction. The great civilizations of the world were built on myths. And when you approach a medieval town, go to Chartres in Paris, in France, now south of Paris, the first thing you see is the cathedral. That the cathedral is the tallest building and it represents that which is the reason for this life in this community. The whole essence of the society is mythologically grounded. Then — well now, to move along this thread that just opened in my mind, in the 17th century when you approached a city, what you would see would be the highest would be the palace. There you have a political accent, the nationalism and all that coming in. And now when you approach, what do you see? You see economic structures and dwellings, apartment houses and office buildings. The society now is not giving us that mythic inward instruction and so we find it hard to find where it is and what it is.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I have a kind of theory that if you can find out where a person is stuck, no matter what his life, some crazy idea is blocking him; you will find a mythological counterpart for that idea. See, myths, I like to say and I think it's important to say, they serve quite different functions. They serve basically four functions. The first I would call the mystical function — that is the one I've been speaking about, realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are, and feeling awe before this mystery. That's the mystical dimension. The second is a cosmological dimension — the dimension with which science is concerned. Showing you what the shape of the universe is, but showing it in such a way that the mystery comes through. Now one of the things that scientists tend to do is to say, "Oh, we've got the answers." But the good ones say, "No, we haven't got the answers. We're telling you how it works — what is it?" You strike a match, what's fire? You can tell me about oxidation, but that doesn't tell me a thing. On what are we sitting here? And the mystery dimension, through the universe as it is. The third function is the sociological one — supporting and validating a certain social order. And here's where the myths vary enormously from place to place. You can have a whole mythology for polygamy, a whole mythology for monogamy. Either one's okay, depends on where you are, you see, the society~

BILL MOYERS: Different costumes.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Different costumes. But the fourth function of myth, I would call the pedagogical — that is, to guide the individual through the normal crises of a lifetime decently and harmoniously. And these crises are basically three — the first is, that of a child becoming an adult. As a child for fourteen years, it's in a situation of dependency and the psychology of dependency is ingrained, it's inevitable. Then there comes a time when it has to be self-responsible. Take care of itself and be responsible for what it does. If he can't cross that threshold, that's the basis of neuroses. Then comes the one after you have gained your world, of yielding it. The crisis of dismissal, disengagement.

BILL MOYERS: And ultimately death?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: And ultimately death, that's the ultimate disengagement. So myth has to serve both aims, that of inducting the young person into the life of his world — that's the function of the folk idea, do you see what I mean? Then disengaging him, then the folk idea unshells the elementary idea, which guides you to your own inward life.

BILL MOYERS: Why is a myth different from a dream?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Oh, because a mythic dream is a personal experience of that deep dark ground which is the support of our conscious lives, and the myth is the society's dream. I use a little formula, you know: myth is a public dream and the dream is the private myth. And if your private myth, your dream, happens to coincide with that of the society, with the mythology of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn't, you've got an adventure ahead of you, in the dark forest.

BILL MOYERS: So if my private dreams are in accord with the public mythology, I'm more likely to live healthily in that society.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes —

BILL MOYERS: But if my private dreams are out of step with the public —

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: You'll be a neurotic, you'll be in trouble, if you — if you're forced to live in that system.

BILL MOYERS: But aren't many visionaries and even leaders and heroes close to the edge of neuroticism?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes, they are.

BILL MOYERS: How do you explain that?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well because they've moved out of the society that world have protected them, they've moved into the dark forest into the world of fire, and that's to say, of original experience, that's experience that has not been interpreted for you, and that you've got to work out yourself. Either you can take it or you can't. You don't have to go far off the interpreted path to find yourself in very difficult situations. And if the courage to face that out and to bring a whole new body of possibilities into the field of interpreted experience for other people to experience, that is constitutes a hero's deed.

BILL MOYERS: Can dreams help you do that?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Dreams help a good deal.

BILL MOYERS: How do you pay attention to your dreams? How does — how does an untutored layman pay attention to his or her dreams?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well all he has to do is remember it in the first place, and then when he remembers it, write it down. And then take one little fraction of the dream, one or two images or ideas, and associate with them, and write down what comes to his mind, what comes to his mind, what comes to his mind. You 'II find what the body of the dream is, is based on body of experiences that have some kind of significance in your life that you didn't know were influencing you. And pretty soon the next dream will come along and it'll interpret it still further, and so on.

BILL MOYERS: When you were in India there was this wonderful story of the saintly guru who asked you a question, "Where are you, Joseph Campbell, between two thoughts?"

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes, that was a -great man. His name was Sri Krishnamenon, not the Krishnamenon of Nehru's entourage, but this was his name. And his holy name, his saint name, was Atmananda, "the rapture of the soul." And I faced him, I was invited up to his attic, and he sat, just as we're sitting now facing each other. First thing he asked was, "Have you a question?" Well, I had the good fortune to ask him as I learned later, the question that had been his first question to his guru, so we had a very good conversation. And my question was, "Since all is bukman, since all is a manifestation of that divine mystery, no matter how we judge it ethically, or no matter how we judge it in terms of prudence and things of this — values of this sort, it is nevertheless the divine. So should you say no to stupidity, to ignorance, to brutality, to war, to everything that the world gives?" And he says, "For you and me, this is the way." And ever since then I've been confirmed in that affirmation, that total affirmation, of the way life is.

BILL MOYERS: What do you do with suffering in your life, with pain, with evil, with cruelty, with injustice?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: If — and there are two aspects to a thing of this kind. One is your judgment in the field of action, and the other is your judgment as a metaphysical observer. That's the way life is. You can't say there shouldn't be poisonous serpents, but in the field of action, if you see a poisonous serpent about to bite somebody, you kill it. That's not saying no to ,the serpent, that's saying no to that situation. This is the whole trick — it's a duality in the way of living. There's a wonderful verse in the Rig Veda that has stood me in — as a model for this. It says, "On the tree," that's the tree of life, the tree of your own life, "there are two birds, fast friends. One eats the fruit of the tree, and the other, not eating, watches." Now the one eating the fruit of the tree is killing a fruit. When people go in for meditation, very often they no longer can participate in the ruthlessness of life. Life lives on life, that's what it's all about.

There's a wonderful little legend from India, a myth. The great god Shiva, the lord whose dance is the universe, and he had as his consort, Parvathi, the goddess, daughter of the mountain king. A monster comes to him and says, "I want your wife as my mistress." Shiva was simply indignant and he opened his third eye, the eye here, and lightning bolts struck the earth, there was smoke and fire, and when the smoke cleared, here was this enormous lean monster with hair like the hair of a lion flying to the four directions, there to eat up the first monster. The first monster saw his situation — now what do you do when you're in a situation like that? Traditional advice is, throw yourself on the mercy of the deity. So, he throws himself on Shiva's mercy. He says, "Shiva, I throw myself on your mercy." Now there are game rules for this god game, and when someone throws himself on your mercy, then you yield mercy. So Shiva said, "I yield my mercy, don't eat him." "Well," says the second monster, "what do I do? I'm hungry. You made me hungry, to eat this guy up." "Well," said Shiva, "eat yourself." So he starts on his feet and he comes chomping up, chomping up like this — this is an image of life living on life, this is what it's all about. Finally there was nothing left but a face. Shiva was excited, he thought, this — I've never seen a greater demonstration of what life's all about than this. And so he said, "I will call you Kirtimukha — face of glory." And you will see that mask, that face of glory, at the portals to Shiva shrines and also to Buddha shrines. And Shiva said, "He who will not bow to you is unworthy to come to me." The story is, you've got to say yes at this miracle of life as is, not on condition that it follow your rules, you know? Otherwise you'll never get through to the metaphysical dimension.

BILL MOYERS: You've said that there never was a Garden of Eden, there never was a time when the serpent could talk, there never was a fall, there never was an exile from the garden, there was no universal flood, there was no ark of Noah, and yet such tales turn up everywhere. How do you explain the phenomenon that when myths are no longer scientifically believable, they persist anyway? They are durable, and people use them for their belief systems.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Yes, because they — they are the images through which one points the way, the marga, the path to one's own — to one's own thing. Now what is the flood story? The flood story is the story of the end of time, chaos, and out of it comes a new time. The moon dies and is resurrected. The world dies and is resurrected. Jesus dies and is resurrected. The serpent sheds its skin and is resurrected. This whole thing of life transcending the death, no matter what the dimensions of the chaos and agony, life goes beyond that. Life can go past and through it.

BILL MOYERS: All right, but, you know, you certainly don't have to believe that there was a flood to get that message.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: No, you don't.

BILL MOYERS: You don't have to believe that there was a King Arthur to get the significance of those stories, but Christians say you have to believe that there was a Christ, or the miracles don't make sense.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: They are the same miracles that Elijah performed. There's a whole body of miracles that come along, there are — they float, like particles in the air, and a man of a certain achievement, of a certain type of achievement comes along, and in the stories about him, all these things cluster around him. What they do is say. This man was a man who was preaching a spiritual order that is not to be identified with the physical order, therefore he could do spiritual magic. It doesn't follow that he really did spiritual magic. He — sometimes I've seen it happen — men of power do things that you don't think could be done, but some of these don't have to have been done. They mean this is a release from the mere physical bondage into the trajectory of a spiritual life.

BILL MOYERS: You know, but as you talk you seem to me to even be refuting something you said twenty years ago, when you said, the symbolism of the Bible today is hardly fit to turn anybody on. And yet I still sense that you're turned on by it, and I've seen millions of people, not including only the members of the Moral Majority, so-called, who are energized by the symbolism of the Bible.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I said that twenty years ago, I know better now.

BILL MOYERS: You've changed your mind since then?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, I would have changed it right here from what you've just told me. It is, it is true that the spiritual life of perhaps 70% of the people in the United States is based on the Bible. So it's a work that's supporting their spiritual life. But there are some things about it that I think are perhaps a little bit archaic now. The whole idea of a chosen people I think is not for this time. You know, myths are for different times, just as for different ages of a life. The notion that we have it in our religion, and no one else has it. This is a problem Christianity's got to face. A great example of the problem came up when the Dalai Lama was over here. He was received in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and there were the Catholic clergy, there were the Eastern Orthodox clergy, there were the rabbis, there were

Protestant ministers, and so forth, and it looked like something that Hindu or Buddhist could really understand, namely, all of these methods for achievement of this great spiritual goal are here together. And the Dalai Lama said we are all intending the same goal — these are different methods. And Cardinal Cook had to stand up and say, "Oh, no. This is quite different. This is not the same religion, ours, as these others." That's a characteristic of Christianity, which I think now has to be left behind. Well, two days later after this event at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Dalai Lama was speaking to a group of Buddhists, or at least to Buddhist groups in New York of St. John the Divine, they opened St. John the Divine to him, about a thousand people there. And they put on a ceremony of chanting and so forth, such as you might have heard in Jokan and Lhasa, before Lhasa was destroyed, before the Jokan was destroyed. And finally the Dalai Lama had a word to say. He spoke Tibetan, and there was a wonderful translator, a young man, a professor from the University of Virginia, I think, named Hopkins, as I recall; translated, you know, immediately, instant translation out of the Tibetan. Said the Dalai Lama, "Keep up your practice. It won't happen fast. The transformation of consciousness is slow. Do not become attached, however, to your method. There are other methods for other people. And when your consciousness will have changed, then you will realize all methods are methods to the goal." That is an answer, to the goal.

BILL MOYERS: And the goal is?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: The goal is illumination, higher consciousness, the participation in the eternal, rather than simply in the temporal aspects of existence. This was his answer, quietly, to Cardinal Cook, who was attached to his method. Now, when you believe that you are attached to your method because your teacher was God, no one else had it, you see, then you — what can I say, you have — you'll have great difficulty in moving into the, what I call global age that we're in now. Every mythology grew up within a horizon, every single one, and the so-called world religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, those are the three world religions — they have grown up inside of horizons also. Now those horizons are broken, and all of the religions have to universalize themselves.

BILL MOYERS: Broken by what?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Jet airplane travel, intercontinental economics, I mean, it's no longer a congeries of separate societies, this is a one world society, it really, really is, on every level. The economic level, politics, and spiritual life as well.

BILL MOYERS: I remember eleven years ago when man first set foot on the moon, you were really excited by that.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: I was indeed, yes.

BILL MOYERS: You thought we had entered a new spiritual age. What did you think when you watched television and saw men walking on the moon?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, I had a number of thoughts. I thought of the model of our own minds and the machinery that we have brought together, and the cooperation of human beings. The three or four men in the module, they were just the demonstration point of an enormous cooperation. It was a — it was an international one. I thought, well, the great moment for me was before George — before Armstrong's foot came down on the moon. The flight before that. Ground Control asked, "Who's navigating now?" And the answer that came back was, "Newton." I thought, listen, this is terrific. Immediately I thought of Immanuel Kant's essay on metaphysics. Prolegomena to Any Metaphysic Whatsoever. "How is it," he asks, "that you can make measurements that are valid in this space here and know with absolute certainty that they will be valid in that space there, where you've never been?" How is it that we could make calculations, or that Newton could make calculations in his head, that which worked in a space that man had never been in before? Around the moon, so they could direct that jet in a certain direction, and bring that little craft down within a mile of a boat in the Pacific Ocean? The laws of space are in our heads! In our heads! And we have been born from space — the galaxies; planets, we, born from our planet; we are as it were the hair, the eyes, the voices of our — of earth, that's what we've come from. And it's a — it's divine, and alive, and outer space, where god's Jaws are. I thought, good Gosh, this is as they say, far out!

BILL MOYERS: Literally.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Literally, literally far out.

BILL MOYERS: And metaphorically.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: And also, you see, it breaks that older mythological idea of a spiritual realm and an earthly realm that is not of it. So that the — what is out there has to breathe its life into what's here. No, no, it's here, this is alive. And the whole story of evolution, how out of a curious sort of amino acid or so forth, the whole life has come forth, and here we are, and this room around us, all out of that. It's a tremendous thing, and it doesn't have to have anyone thinking all of the energy is out there, it's all in here. It's the energy for the whole cosmos it's another kind of mythology. It's another kind of mythology.

BILL MOYERS: I thought in 1968 and '69 we were on the moon and around the moon, what a wonderful thing is man's curiosity. And in reading your account of it, I was struck by that scene in the opening of 2001, Stanley Kubrick's wonderful metaphor on celluloid of our journey, of the apes around the object that arrives. And do you remember how some of them hung back and one or two of them moved up, very, very curious, angling around it, circling in, and finally touching it? [film clip]

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: The thing that has elevated man from the apes is the sense of awe and mystery, the first function of mythology, and it is that that carries him on. I thought it was simply marvelous. The idea of awe as carrying man from the mere fight of the apes. The apes are fighting for sandwiches, health, education and welfare, and the one who really makes the progressive mood is the one who follows the star of mystery and awe. And behind the moon, do you remember, there was a column, and there were the astronauts or people up there, putting their hands on it just as the apes did down here. And when we finally got up to Jupiter, or wherever it was, there it was floating there, too, this humming whatever it was, the mystery, Om. The mystery sound. Now there's a modern mythos, do you know, comes out of a basic mythic idea, namely, that the spiritual life is one that transcends the fighting for pieces of bread. There is a Raymond Dart, a South Africa anthropologist, who was the one who first found those Australopithecines, those fighting manlike apes, and he noticed that on one skull that he found there was a double indent. Somebody had hit this thing and killed it, do you see, and the object that had hit it had been the thigh bone of another ape, which exactly fitted that thing. And do you remember, he hit the thigh and then that thing flew up and became the space ship, the first tool.

BILL MOYERS: Where does, in a word, this awe and wonder take us today?

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, it took us to the moon. I think it did, and I think it's sending those space ships out there, but you know, I'm having a hard time with this very present moment in the field of — of what might be called a public concerns. I think it's all economics.

BILL MOYERS: And yet man does not live by bread alone.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: That's the whole point. And that looks like the end of a story, rather than the beginning.

BILL MOYERS: When I read your myths, your study of the myths, I think, "Moyers, what mythology has done for you is to place you on a branch of a very ancient tree. You're part of a society of the living and dead that came long before you were here and will be here long after

you are gone. It nourished you and protected you and you have to nourish it and protect it in return.”

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: Well, it’s been a wonderful support for life, I can tell you. In my case, I mean, it’s tremendous what this kind of resource pouring into you can do.

BILL MOYERS: From the American Museum of Natural History in New York, this has been a conversation with Joseph Campbell, which will continue next week. I’m Bill Moyers.

This transcript was entered on May 7, 2015.

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- Joseph Campbell: Myths to Live By (Part One)

TOPICS: Faith & Reason

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