

## **Joseph Campbell – Unitarian Saint**

Delivered by Mark I. Bernstein at the Unitarian Society of Germantown

October 3, 2004

Good Morning.

Today I'd like to discuss with you the transcendent mystery of life, this creation in which we participate, and our role in it. This is my topic because this was what Joseph Campbell addressed in his life work. This is my topic because it is the subject of all mythology and all religious experiences.

So please, let us all stretch our imagination this morning. As a ritual representation of stretching our imagination, please stand and stretch. And while you are up, pass the peace and welcome each other to this wonderful morning service.

### **I. Reflections on Joseph Campbell**

I grew up in a Jewish religious tradition in New York City. In Synagogue the sacred Hebrew phrase: SHMA YISROEL ADONAI ELOHENU ADONAI EHAD was repeated. Hear oh Israel our God is the lord, our god is one. The idea that the Jewish people were the “chosen

people” and that our god Adonai was the one and only true god did not resonate in my heart. It was too exclusive, too elitist. It relegated other good people to the category of “not us”, not as good. Yet I was taught that we were the one people chosen of God and that the bible, the Old Testament, was an accurate history of the Jewish people and their sacred relationship to the one God and the only true sacred writing.

Those who grew up in a Christian tradition may have learned comparable lessons about the New Testament. That the gospels tell the historically accurate story of God’s appearance as man in the Middle East 2000 years ago, his death, resurrection and physical ascension into heaven.

In College, I studied other sacred writings including the gospels and the writings of Paul. Because of a classical education I came to appreciate the Greek Myths and their gods. Through youthful play with the I Ching I was exposed to the Taoist writings of Lao Tzu. And from that introduction to Eastern thought, the dramatic life of Buddha, his four noble truths and his eightfold path, seemingly so different from western religions.

An interest in Gandhi’s work and the history of India lead naturally to an appreciation of Hinduism especially the role of Maya or illusion in our everyday lives.

Maya is the concept that all reality is one and only human illusion causes us to see differences. To me this was resonant of Paul's vision "through a glass darkly" and Plato's description in the Republic that we see the world as shadows from inside a cave. Maya also felt connected to the 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific concepts that energy was mass and mass energy; all things are the same even though what we see and experience is only difference. Maya also felt related to God's creation of the universe from a void and the Jewish concept that God is one. Could that Jewish mantra; God is one, be the same philosophical concept as Maya, the realization that all God's creation is one though we see only differences?

If all is one, is there any difference between God's creation and God? Is that what was really meant by "created in god's image?" Was Shma Yisroel, God is one something much more profound than an Israelite tribal deity's battle cry? I had begun to read the bible not as history or fact but as literature and metaphor.

Growing up I had learned only differences between the religions. Then I came upon the writings of Joseph Campbell's, which unified all mythological and religious experience and explained their metaphoric meaning.

Joseph Campbell studied the mythologies and religions of the world. He recognized that myth was only a derogatory name for former religions that were no longer believed because the culture out of which they arose had changed. When he considered the unity of all myth and religion he found the same themes repeating, themes of chosen people, virgin births, gods descending and becoming man and resurrection. Rejecting a literal or historic interpretation, and relying upon the disciplines and sciences of archeology, anthropology, linguistics, history, art analysis, psychoanalysis, biology physics and comparative religion, he found the same poetic, metaphoric meanings in ancient myths, folk stories and modern religious systems. I knew I had come upon either a very wise teacher or a kook.

At that time, PBS ran a series of conversations between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell called “The Power of Myth”. Many of you may have seen it, six wonderful hours of conversation between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell illustrated by fabulous pictures, photos and video clips, animated by Campbell’s wonderful storytelling. My question had been answered. His scholarship was real. His insight prophetic. All myths, all religions speak to the same reality and convey the same message. The stories differ because a different language was needed to speak to each time and culture. The message is how to live in this world.

I cannot convey the depth of Joseph Campbell's scholarship today, or even summarize his profound conclusions. I hope that within this service you experience a glimmer of his truth, and feel a need to learn more. I invite you to join us at the third Thursday vespers service for another discussion of his work.

Our responsive readings reveal the unity of spiritual message from the Unitarian Minister Ralph Waldo Emerson and from the ancient Hindu text the Bagavad Gita.

[READINGS HERE: Responsive Reading #531 "The Oversoul;  
Responsive Reading #611 Brahman"]

## **II. Reflections on Joseph Campbell**

Joseph Campbell grew up Catholic. His lifelong journey through myth and religion began as a child with a visit to the New York Museum of Natural History. The American Indian exhibits captivated him. How could the American Indian stories contain same themes taught by Catholicism? After graduating from Columbia University he was blessed by the depression. Unable to find employment, he retired to the Maine woods

surrounded by books. He emerged understanding the unity of the world's mythology, religion and spirituality. In the artwork of the Paleolithic caves, in the little clay goddesses discovered in household shrines all over the world, the myths and stories of the American Indian, African pygmy, Sumerian or Inca civilizations or in the sophisticated writings of the Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish, or Christian religious traditions, the same questions were asked, the same answers were given. Stories spoke to the human condition in this world through images of birth; growth, death, destruction, miracle and virgin birth, and resurrection were found in every culture. Allow me to borrow an example from the conversations between Moyers and Campbell. All cultures have creation myths.

Consider the biblical story of creation and the “fall” of man; read in conjunction with other creation myths.

Genesis I: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep”

From “The Song of the World” a legend of the Pima Indians of Arizona: “In the beginning there was only darkness everywhere—darkness

and water. And the darkness gathered thick in places, crowding together and then separating, crowding and separating...”

Genesis I: “And the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the water and God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light.’”

From the Hindu Upanishads: “In the beginning there was only the great self reflected in the form of a person. Reflecting, it found nothing but itself. Then its first word was, “This am I”

Genesis I: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”

From a legend of the Bassari people of West Africa: “Unumbotte made a human being. Its name was man. Unumbotte next made an antelope, named Antelope and a snake named snake. And Unumbotte said to them, “The earth has not yet been pounded. You must pound the ground smooth where you are sitting.” Unumbotte gave them seeds of all kinds and said: go plant these”

Genesis 2: Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all the host of them. And on the seventh day god finished his work which he had done....”

From the Pima Indians: “I make the world and lo the world is finished. Thus I make the world and lo the world is finished”

Genesis I: And God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good”

Upanishads: “Then he realized, I indeed. I am this creation for I have poured it forth from myself. In that way he became this creation. Verily, he who knows this becomes in this creation a creator.

Also, the fall of Man:

Genesis I: “Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, ‘The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate. Then the Lord God said to the woman, what is this that you have done? The woman said, the serpent beguiled me, and I ate.

### **A VERY WELL KNOWN AND UNIQUE STORY!**

The Basari legend: One day snake said, we too should eat these fruits. Why must we go hungry? Antelope said, but we don’t know anything about this fruit. Then Man and his wife took some of the fruit and ate it. Unumbotte came down from the sky and asked, who ate the fruited? They



answered we did. Unumbotte asked, who told you that you could eat that fruit? They replied: “Snake did”

The SAME STORY; the same forbidden fruit, the same passing of the buck and as Joseph Campbell emphasizes in both legends the initiator is the snake!

[Joseph Campbell explains the symbology: The snake is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing, as a snake sheds its skin and continues its life. The snake represents life renewed. Life throwing off death to be born again, such as the regeneration of plant life or the generations of animal life.

Snake, in each story, is the symbol of time and the story is mankind recognizing a consciousness of time, and with it consciousness of death. Thrown out of the eternal Garden of Eden, mankind achieves a consciousness different from any other animals. We recognize past, present and future, and appreciate death. Man has become different from all other creatures, man has learned dualism by eating from the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Even though all is one, we see everything as different. Maya has come into the world, we see through a glass darkly; we have become different from the rest of creation.

### **III. Reflections on Joseph Campbell**

Joseph Campbell asked: Why do the world myths tell common metaphorical stories? How do the same motifs reappear using similar symbology, the most universal of which is the idea of a transcendent force itself, an invisible platform which is the grounding of all being, the concept of God, or Gods, which are always aspects of this force.

Only two things could explain the commonalities, dispersion from a single source, or independent creation by diverse peoples emerging from common human experience, emanating from the same human psyche, which is in fact connected with a transcendent reality. Joseph Campbell's scholarship ruled out dispersion from a common source.

Joseph Campbell explains independent creation. However different the cultural and technological lives of people across the ages and across the continents, however different their ways of life all people share the same physical and psychic structure. Our DNA is 99% common with the cave man. Therefore we experience the same world in the same essential way. And because a transcendental force does exist, whatever name different people give it, it should not surprise that common mythology and religious themes appear across time and place. He expresses this concept thus:

“The animal envoys of the Unseen Power no longer serve, as in primeval times, to teach and to guide mankind. Bears, lions, elephants, ibexes and gazelles are in cages in our zoos. Man is no longer the newcomer in a world of unexplored plains and forests and our immediate neighbors are not wild beasts but other human beings, contending for goods and space on a planet that is whirling with out end around the fireball of a star. Neither in body nor in mind do we inhabit the world of those hunting races of the Paleolithic millennia, to whose lives and life ways we nevertheless owe the very forms of our bodies and structures of our minds. Memories of their animal envoys still must sleep, somehow, within us, for they wake a little and stir when we venture into wilderness. They wake in terror to thunder. And again they wake, with a sense of recognition when we venture into any one of those great Paleolithic painted caves. Whatever the inward darkness may have been to which the shamans of those caves descended in their trances, the same must lie within ourselves, nightly visited in sleep.”]

The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung reached the same realization. Exploring the unconscious mind by studying his patient’s dreams he found archetypal dreams symbols, which were incredibly similar to those of the world’s myths. What Emerson called the Oversoul, Jung called the

collective unconscious. Jung concluded that an archetypal collective unconscious mind existed. A universal consciousness out of which the imagery of personal dream symbols emerge.

Just as our individual dream stories express our unconscious stirrings in the context of our individual lives, so too inspired visionaries, sometimes founders, always prophets have expressed universal truths in language of story and myth appropriate to their society and time. Jung concluded that mythology is the communal dream of the collective unconscious expressed in language understood by the society and times. Since times change, the language changes, the stories seem different but when understood are the same.

Religious thought which does not keep up with the times, confront the science of the day and become ancient mythology and cannot survive as a living force. Joseph Campbell expresses it this way:

“The imagery of mythology is symbolic of spiritual powers within us: when these are interpreted as referring to historical or natural events which science in turn shows could not have occurred, then you throw the whole thing out.”

Spiritual leaders teach their insights. The true religious experience at the heart of every organized religion is in fact, the same, the experience of unity with creation, an intense physical appreciation of the mystery of life. Eventually their teaching become institutionalized by a religious establishment, which proclaims poetry to be prose, metaphor to be history, and establishes creeds. When spiritual revelation becomes organized religion the differences between peoples and religion are emphasized for political purposes. Often the religious institutional response when historical accuracy is challenged by scholarship, or science, or contact with other faiths is not to seek origins of common spiritual message but to retreat into insistence on unwavering faith, fundamentalism and often religious war, from the crusades to the wars of the reformation, to the jihad today.

Joseph Campbell identifies the central problem of modern life as the replacement of mythological perspective, by the concretization, historicalization, the secularization of the sacred replacing all spiritual appreciation of the common metaphor and poetry of all religious belief with creedal fundamentalism inconsistent with the modern world. We see the results all around us, from despair at the meaningless of life, materialism, holy war, and drug abuse.

Unitarian-Universalism is a different religion, the uncommon denomination, the antidote to the malaise of technological society. We believe the spirituality and wisdom of religion and of all the great mythological systems should be appreciated. Our faith recognizes a common continuing revelation, expressed by the Goddess and nature religions, articulated by Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha and a thousand other unknown prophets. A common continuing revelation, which can be experienced today as the mystery of this life. There is no chosen people. We are all chosen, none are born in original sin. Each of us, at birth is equally bathed in the glow of universal salvation, the prayer of human potential.

Ours is a religion without creed because a creed requires belief in the literalism of events as historic fact rather than as a poetic metaphor pointing to transcendent truths. As metaphor all religions are true, all myths are real in their universal unity, pointing to the mystery of life.

Joseph Campbell interprets the poetry and finds the universal meaning in the myths and folktales and religions. His immense scholarship and insight express a scholarly framework, for our Unitarian Universalist belief that true religion is found in all sincere spiritual seeking.

We recognize that accepting a spiritual path and struggling on that path is in itself a path of divine revelation. The hero's journey is the journey each of us must take from birth to death. Do we take this journey as a secular material life? Or do we seek a spiritual reality? It is a choice each of us must make as we journey on our individual hero journey.

The Catholic Church canonized Thomas Aquinas because he modernized theology when he unified medieval science, which was the logic of Aristotle, with the gospels and the holy writing of Paul. St. Thomas Aquinas constructed what was thought to be a scientific philosophical proof of the truth of the Catholic faith. In a similar fashion, Joseph Campbell combines modern scholarship and scientific truth with the transcendent meaning of myth and religion pointing to a transcendent reality. His scholarship reveals a philosophical proof of the truth of the Unitarian-Universalist faith. Having accomplished this, I suggest he may be considered a Unitarian Saint.

Closing Words: We have two closing words today: From a rising star in Unitarian Ministry, our own Rev. Kent Mathies: “If we are to do religion well, we must connect philosophy, theology, arts, politics, science and spirituality.”

And from Joseph Campbell: “The ancient myths were designed to harmonize the mind and the body...to put the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way nature dictate. Myths share with all religions the human objective to live the “good life” in harmony with existence and thus experience the mystery of life.”