

READING

Robert A. Johnson, in the introduction to his little book *She: Understanding Feminine Psychology*, writes about the role of mythology:

Myths are rich sources of psychological insight. Great literature, like all great art, records and portrays the human condition with indelible accuracy. Myths are a special kind of literature not written or created by a single individual, but produced by the imagination and experience of an entire age and culture and can be seen as the distillation of the dreams and experiences of a whole culture. They seem to develop gradually as certain motifs emerge, are elaborated, and finally are rounded out as people tell and retell stories that catch and hold their interest. Thus themes that are accurate and universal are kept alive, while those elements peculiar to single individuals or a particular era drop away. Myths, therefore, portray a collective image; they tell us about things that are true for all people.

This belies our current rationalistic definition of myth as something untrue or imaginary. “Why, that is only a myth; it’s not true at all,” we hear. The details of the story may be unverifiable or even fantastic, but actually a myth is profoundly and universally true.

A myth may be a fantasy or a product of the imagination, but it is nonetheless true and real. It depicts levels of reality that include the outer rational world as well as the less understood inner world.¹

Getting Unstuck from Fear

Jerry Jacoby

UUCM, August 9, 2009

Those of you who read in the Order of Service a list of my interests over the last ten years have a hint that today's sermon will be a little different. Then the reading suggests something very different. "Myths ... can be seen as the distillation of the dreams and experiences of a whole culture." They may not have actually happened, but in a higher sense they are "nonetheless true and real."¹ I am convinced that mythology is more important than history. Joseph Campbell once said, "The first function of a mythology is to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of wonder and participation in the mystery of this ... universe."² This is different than what we learned in school about mythology; that is, the tales of the Greek gods and goddesses and their shenanigans. Here in the Western world we focus on historical events, and we try to get to the truth of history—what really happened. In the process we lose a lot.

The story of *The Little Engine That Could*, that Marilyn Winters read for the children, contains themes or motifs that are common to many stories. Something unusual happens. In this case the first engine breaks down, and everyone gets stuck. Then we hear some minor characters react to the situation, and their function is to give contrast to the hero. Then the heroic character comes into the story and goes "over the mountain" to save the day. We serious adults put up with the anthropomorphism of talking steam engines, because it's obviously a children's teaching story. The children are encouraged to not be arrogant like the freight engine, nor to self-aggrandize like the passenger engine, nor to be a hypochondriac like the old, tired engine. Rather, children hopefully become more like the little engine that could.

Many of the same motifs appear in the story of Lugalbanda discussed by Jeffrey Melcher on July 19.³ For those who weren't here then, the legend was about a boy in ancient Persia named Lugalbanda. In the story, the king decided to go to war, and the boy went along with the army. The king and his army laid siege to a distant city, but they got stuck. They couldn't go back, because of the fearful mountains, and they couldn't make progress in the siege, because they had lost favor with the goddess. There were minor characters, such as Lugalbanda's brothers, who were there to give contrast to the hero. The hero went "over the mountains" to deliver a message to the goddess, received a message, and returned to save the day. The lesson for the reader is once again to be less like the minor characters and more like the hero. There are many other lessons in the myth of *Lugalbanda*, of course, because it's a much longer, more complicated story than *The Little Engine That Could*. My point is that there are common themes in both stories.

Joseph Campbell was the most well-known mythologist of the twentieth century, and his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a classic. He found common themes in myths from all over the world.⁴ At the risk of oversimplification, there is first the Call to Adventure, followed by the adventure itself, and then the return. The details of the Call are always different—unique to every individual and situation—but the general outline is always the same: the hero or heroine is called out of his or her comfort zone to do something new and different.

We have all, at one time or another in our lives, been offered an opportunity to do something different, to venture forth from our comfort zone into a new way of being. It happened to me in October 1986, in the form of a very unpleasant experience. I had spent the previous fifteen years as an applications programmer, and I was very comfortable. In March of that year I finished a project, and my group leader said I did a good job. In June I received a very favorable, above

average performance appraisal. In July I finished a small but high profile project, and once again my group leader said I did a good job. But alas, in September I made a mistake, the details of which are irrelevant now, and I discovered my group leader had a very short memory. In October he announced that I wouldn't get a raise, because I was the worst employee he had ever had, and the only reason I wasn't getting a cut in pay was because he didn't think I was worth the paperwork to bring it about.

That was hard to take, and after a few days I went to see a company therapist. He was a feisty man, and he said I had an open-and-shut case. Written policy was that a person's raise was to be based on overall performance, not on a single incident. So he recommended I file a grievance. Actually, if I remember correctly, he used the words, "Sue the bastard."

There was something that didn't seem right about his advice. Perhaps he was a bit too enthusiastic. In any case, after a couple more days of stewing and fretting (you see, I was stuck), I went to see a second therapist, Francis Menlove, and she became a personal heroine. After listening to my story, with a question here and there to draw me out, she asked the crucial question: "Jerry, what do you want?"

That was an easy question to answer, because over the previous eight years I had finished the course work for a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering and passed my qualifying exam. So I wanted to get a job where I could use my new knowledge. With that answer, the correct course was obvious. She coached me on how to placate an angry group leader and how to work the system to my advantage. Oh yes, and keep my resume up to date. But the point is that by heeding Menlove's advice, I got unstuck and was able to move forward.

It took two years, but I did find a new job as an engineering analyst, and a few months after that had the mind-blowing synchronicity that I told you about on May 24th.⁵ Recall, on the way

to work one morning I had an urge to do a certain simulation. It took five or six hours to complete the simulation, and I got the right answer on the first try. At that moment my supervisor walked into my office and asked if I had ever run the simulation that I had just finished.

I need make a brief digression at this point and say a few words about the adventure itself. For the Little Engine it was the climb over the mountain—a suitably brief difficulty for children’s attention span. For Lugalbanda, it was the journey back to his home to deliver the message to the goddess, followed by the journey back to the king to deliver the message. For most of us it can seem like hacking our way through thick underbrush with a machete, with little or no sense of where we are nor how far we have yet to go. The lesson to be learned, I think, is perseverance. The guiding principle for me is one day at a time, or, sometimes, one step at a time. What works for me is to pause when I’m agitated or uncertain and ask, “What’s the next right thing to do?” or “What can I do next?” When I remember to do that, then the answer is usually clear. Furthermore, by consistently doing the next right thing, I have learned to be at peace with the process. The promise of the myths we live by, and this is why mythology is more important than history, is that someday, perhaps when we least expect it, we will find ourselves on a mountain top, metaphorically speaking, where we can see. And from this higher vantage point we will gain a wider perspective on events and on our lives. And thus it happened for me. Eventually, I came to be grateful for that kick in the backside, so to speak, because it got me out of my comfortable rut. It’s been said, the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth and the width. If I had heeded that first therapist’s advice to sue the bastard, I would have stayed in the rut.

More recently, a second Call to Adventure for me happened in October 1999, when I attended the *Prayer and Spiritual Life Conference* at the Nevada County Fairgrounds. Juan Carlos Ortiz from the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove spoke for two hours on the subject of food—spiritual food. Ortiz made an analogy. As babies, we eat baby food. As we grow and become able, we eat solid food. So Ortiz reviewed the simple teachings of the spiritual life—the baby food. Then he moved on to the more mature teachings—the solid food. I was enthralled for the entire two hours—and we were sitting on metal folding chairs. Can you imagine sitting still for two hours on these comfortable padded chairs. I changed direction because of Ortiz’s talk and decided to seek out this solid food, so to speak. I became aware that the teaching I was getting in the church I was attending at the time was baby food, and I wanted the real meat.

Consequently, I began a serious study of Christianity. But something unexpected happened. I thought that by deepening my understanding of the Bible I would deepen my faith. But the more I learned, the more appalled I became. To give you a little background, I was raised in a series of Fundamentalist churches, where I was taught to take the Bible literally. And during my years in Sunday School, there is one story that stands out more than any other: The story of Lot’s wife in Genesis 19, which I will summarize in five sentences: Two angels came to Sodom where Lot and his family lived. Lot met them and prevailed on them to be a guest for the night in his house. The next morning, the angels took Lot, his wife, and their two unmarried daughters by the hand outside the city. The angels told them to flee to the hills and not look back. But Lot’s wife did look back, and she was turned into a pillar of salt. As a very impressionable ten-or-twelve-year-old, I was told that her treatment was God’s punishment for her lack of faith. The message was very clear: don’t have lack of faith, or you, too, may be turned into a pillar of salt.

Furthermore, Proverbs 1:7 was quoted, which says that “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And so, fear framed my life well into my twenties.

Fast forward now through thirty years in Los Alamos, where I joined the United Church of Los Alamos when I was 48, and eventually became an elder at the age of 56. When Jan and I retired to Grass Valley in 1998, it seemed natural to join the Sierra Presbyterian Church on Ridge Road. A year later, the Presbyterian Church was one of the co-sponsors of the prayer conference, and it seemed natural to attend, where I heard the speech by Ortiz about spiritual food and decided to change course. In retrospect, the past ten years seem like a giant synchronicity, in which I have been guided along this path I’m on. It’s as if some kind of spirit guide stood at intersections and pointed in the direction to take.

In particular, one of the many books I encountered during the last ten years was *Idioms of the Bible Explained; and, a Key to the Original Gospels*, by George M. Lamsa. Lamsa was born and raised in the Middle East, and his native language was Aramaic. That’s vital, because the language—the lingua franca—of Palestine two thousand years ago was Aramaic. Furthermore, Aramaic is closely related to ancient Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. So, being a native speaker of Aramaic, Lamsa naturally was aware of idioms. Idioms, you ask? You’re saying there are idioms in the Bible? I hope you all see a huge red flag waving, because in every language, idioms, such as the one I just used, never mean what they literally say. I brought the little paperback with me today, and you can peruse it after the service.

Going through the book, I shortly came to Genesis 19, which contains at least four identified idioms: First, Lamsa says that angels in this context are spirits, or God’s counsel, or God’s thoughts. Second, at the start of the story, Lot sat at the gate, which means that Lot was on the city council—the story has nothing to do with gates or sitting at them. Third, to look back meant

regretting or wasting time—it has nothing to do with which way you’re facing. And fourth, a pillar of salt means lifeless, or stricken dead.⁶ In particular, in Lamsa’s translation of the Bible (which I also brought along) there is footnote 1 after the word salt, and the footnote says, “*Pillar of salt* means that she became petrified with fear and died.”⁷ So the story, contrary to the words of my Sunday School teacher, has nothing to do with table salt.

When the meaning of the idioms was explained, it became clear to me that this story is a teaching story about being stuck in fear. In fact, Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, points out that this is an example of refusing the Call to Adventure.⁸

It is germane to make a brief aside at this point, because it is also instructive to study what happened to Lot later in the story. Next, Lot took his two daughters to the small town of Zoar, but he was afraid to stay there. So he went into the hills and lived in a cave. What is it about a cave? My interpretation is that when you’re in a cave, you can’t see very far. So Lot’s two daughters couldn’t see that, at most a two-day journey away, there were many men to choose from in Abraham’s camp. So they both committed incest, which was a mistake that had far-reaching consequences later on. This aside had a hypothetical parallel in my own life. It corresponds to the path I might have taken had I heeded the first therapist’s advice back in 1986. I would have lived in a metaphorical cave for a long time.

In my study of the Bible, I’ve learned that great insight can be found by comparing nearby stories, often in adjacent or nearby chapters. One comparison is with Abraham. When he was Called to Adventure, he left his home town in southern Iraq and journeyed northwest to near the Turkish border. (I’m using contemporary geography.) The point is, he responded to the Call and didn’t get stuck in fear. He lived for awhile in northwest Iraq and then journeyed to Israel. We can learn from Abraham’s story. He took the journey in stages—he did not rush headlong into

the Land of Canaan. When we answer the Call, in whatever form it comes to us, we don't have to rush headlong into the Adventure either. We can take it one step at a time. Rev. Meghan wrote in her sermon *All in Good Time*, "We run the risk of not fulfilling our potential if we allow ourselves to be immobilized by fear or perpetual waiting for just the right moment."⁹

So, how do we get unstuck? First, it's very helpful to talk with someone—someone safe—about your fear. Fear is an emotion, and like every emotion, it has power when it stays hidden. When we openly express our fears, they lose their power over us. Recall my counseling with Francis Menlove. She was a professional psychologist, and I had confidence she would keep our conversation confidential. This community is uncommonly fortunate to have a minister of the caliber of Rev. Meghan. A good second choice is to ask a trusted friend to take a long, gentle walk. I point out, for example, that in Condon Park outside the centerfield fence there is an isolated picnic table in the shade of a tree.

A second technique for dealing with fear is to write those fears on a sheet of paper. In my experience there was something almost magical about the act of admitting the fear in writing. The act seemed to take the sting out of the fear and other emotions and bring them down to right size. It also helped to remember that I didn't have to show those sheets to anyone. I decided to burn those papers, thus "sending them up to God," so to speak. I sat on the floor in front of my fireplace and watched the sheets of paper turn to ashes. Afterward, for some inexplicable reason I felt unburdened, almost free.

I think it is also helpful to recognize what's happening. Self-awareness really is the key. Anita Wald-Tuttle, the past president of our community, in her talk on July 26th, said that spirituality for her is "the heightened awareness of oneself in relationship to humankind and the

universe.”¹⁰ When we achieve this awareness, we can often see what is happening, even as it is happening, and we can make a choice to flow with the Call to Adventure.

It is also important recognize that an ounce of prevention is sometimes worth a megaton of cure. Remember the two-word bumper sticker made famous by the movie *Forrest Gump*: Shit happens. Therefore, it’s important to keep in fit spiritual condition. As the Desiderata says it, “Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.” But how do we nurture strength of spirit? The psychologist Andre Marquis writes,

What most clients describe as their “problems” are situations or feelings that, in one way or another, knock them from their center of balance. Thus, it is helpful to teach and encourage the practice of centering skills ... Life will always throw us curve balls, and rest assured, we *will*, even if only temporarily, lose our balance. If we have cultivated our capacities to regain our own balance and center, those moments of distress will be fewer, or at least briefer.¹¹

My wife, Jan, is a Christian Science practitioner, and she describes it a lot more succinctly, “You’ve got to stay prayed up.”¹²

The Desiderata continues with these words: “But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.” I had a friend named Kathy, who passed on a couple of years ago. She was a widow during the last years of her life, and often suffered from loneliness. But she had a great insight a year or so before she died, which she shared with us: “I don’t need a relationship. What I really need is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” In other words, she had learned how to nurture and be gentle with herself.

Kathy also gave us a helpful hint about talking to friends. She had learned from experience that in moments of stress, in times of trouble, the phone seemed to weigh about 600 pounds, and she couldn't pick it up. So she had learned to make practice calls to her friends. When her life was flowing smoothly, and she was feeling good, she would call a friend and say hello. When asked why she was calling, she would reply that she was just making a practice call. She knew from experience that sometimes life throws us curve balls, and we might need help getting back in balance. After a few practice calls, the phone has a manageable weight, and we can pick it up and call a friend.

I could stop here, and I think this would be a good sermon, but I decided to take a chance and go a little further. The word fear is also an acronym for False Evidence Appearing Real. Recall my former group leader's assessment of my abilities, that I was the worst employee he had ever had. That was false evidence. Recall my former Sunday School Teacher's words about turning into a pillar of salt. That was false evidence.

So what *IS* real? What resonates with me is this quote by P. M. H. Atwater, an expert in near-death experiences:

I offer this observation without hesitation, for one cannot research near-death and other transformative states as long as I have without recognizing a greater power at work, as well as a subtle spirit or soul force that appears to be responsible for the outworking of that greater power.

Repeatedly, [people who return from near death experiences] describe this subtle presence as a highly organized, intelligent luminosity that plays the role of emissary for the Divine, God, Source, or whatever title one prefers. Apparently, this intelligent luminosity ... is always available as a nonenergetic force, a Holy

Spirit capable of moving in and through us once we are ready or once we surrender to it.¹³

Another way to say it is that if we choose to answer the Call to Adventure, there will be spirit guides waiting at decision points, helpfully pointing toward the best way to take. I find both comfort and inspiration for the journey in the words of one of my meditation books:

Deep within, we are always safe, always protected, always loved. Those of us who have not yet realized this truth need only venture into the realm of the spirit, where the god of our understanding offers us freedom from fear. Nothing and no one can harm us in the center of our being. It is truly ours to own. We are safe here.

But how do we get there? Perhaps all our lives we were told no such place exists, or if it does, that it's out there, outside us. Getting there now takes time, patience, commitment, and faith. It means cultivating an awareness of the voice within that may be barely a whisper. It means trusting the voice. No easy task, but if we're alive there is such a voice, however faint.

We have days when we can't hear it, but our Higher Power always can. If we can remember only this, we can know safety. We can know freedom from fear.¹⁴

It is my hope that all of us in this community will answer our own Call to Adventure however it comes to us, and that by so doing we come to know this freedom from fear.

Amen.

Footnotes: (References follow.)

1. Johnson, p. x, xi.

2. Campbell, 1988, p. 17.
3. Jeffrey Melcher, “Lugalbanda,” a sermon given at UUCM, July 19, 2009.
4. Campbell, 1968, p. 3 and the whole first chapter.
5. Jerry Jacoby, “SYNCHRONICITIES – Communications from Spirit,” a sermon given at UUCM, May 24, 2009.
6. Lamsa, 1931, p. 4.
7. Lamsa, 1933, p. 25.
8. Campbell, 1968, p. 63.
9. Meghan Cefalu, “All in Good Time,” a sermon given at UUCM, June 20, 2009.
10. Anita Wald-Tuttle, personal communication, July 29, 2009.
11. Marquis, p. 32.
12. Janice True Jacoby, personal communication, ca. 2008.
13. Atwater, p. 26, 27.
14. Coleman and Porter, September 23.

The author would like to thank Rev. Meghan Cefalu for her constructive comments on an earlier draft of this sermon.

REFERENCES

- P. M. H. Atwater, *The New Children and Near-Death Experiences*, Bear & Company, 2003.
- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Second Edition*, Princeton University Press, 1968.
- Joseph Campbell in conversation with Michael Toms, *An Open Life*, Larson Publications, 1988.

Sally Coleman and Maria Porter, *Seasons of the Spirit, Daily Meditations for Adults in Mid Life and Beyond*, Hazelden, 1994.

Max Ehrmann, 1927. The *Desiderata* was long thought to have been found in Old Saint Paul's Church, Baltimore, and dated 1692. However, it was actually the inspired work of a Terre Haute, Indiana poet named Max Ehrmann, dated 1927.

George M. Lamsa, *Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text*, A. J. Holman Company, 1933.

George M. Lamsa, *Idioms in the Bible Explained; and, a Key to the Original Gospels*, Harper San Francisco, 1931.

Robert A. Johnson, *She: Understanding Feminine Psychology, Revised Edition*, Harper Perennial, 1989.

Andre Marquis, "An Integral Taxonomy of Therapeutic Interventions," *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, 4(2) (Summer 2009).

Juan Carlos Ortiz, a speaker at the *Prayer and Spiritual Life Conference*, Nevada County Fairgrounds, Grass Valley, CA, October 19-21, 1999.

Watty Piper, *The Little Engine That Could*, Platt & Munk, Publishers, 1961.