

“Meet Joseph Campbell”

[For almost four decades, Joseph Campbell taught comparative mythology at Sarah Lawrence College, authoring a series of books on the archetypes that shape the human mind and our relation to the cosmos, titles like The Masks of God and The Hero With A Thousand Faces. But he’s probably best known as the consultant to George Lucas who helped envision Star Wars as a myth for modern times. This morning’s presentation is drawn from interviews Campbell shared with Michael Toms of New Dimensions Radio and conversations with Bill Moyers shortly before his death in 1987. Here, then, in his own words, is a chance to meet Joseph Campbell.]

One of our problems today is that we are not well acquainted with the literature of the spirit. We’re interested in the news of the day and the problems of the hour. Greek and Latin and Biblical literature used to be part of everyone’s education: Plato, Confucius, the Buddha, Goethe, and others who speak of the eternal values that have to do with the centering of our lives.

These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don’t know what the guide signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself.

When you get to be older, and the concerns of the day have all been attended to, and you turn to the inner life—well, if you don’t know where it is or what it is, you’ll be sorry.

I was brought up as a Roman Catholic. Now one of the great advantages of being brought up a Roman Catholic is that you’re taught to take myth serious and to let it operate on your life and to live in terms of these mythic motifs. I was brought up in terms of the seasonal relationships to the cycle of Christ’s coming into the world, teaching in the world, dying, resurrecting, and returning to heaven. The ceremonies all through the year keep you in mind of the eternal core of all that changes in time.

And then I fell in love with American Indians because Buffalo Bill used to come to Madison Square Garden every year with his marvelous Wild West Show. And I wanted to know more about Indians. My father and mother were very generous parents and found what books were being written for boys about Indians at that Time. So I began to read American Indian myths and it wasn’t long before I found the same motifs in the American Indian stories that I was being taught by nuns at schools.

Later I became interested in Hinduism, and there were the same stories again. And in my graduate work I was dealing with the Arthurian medieval material, and there were the same stories again.

You’ve got the same body, with the same organs and energies, that Cro-Magnon man

had thirty thousand years ago. Living a human life in New York City or living a human life in the caves, you go through the same stages of childhood, coming to sexual maturity, transformation of the dependency of childhood into the responsibility of manhood or womanhood, marriage, then failure of the body, gradual loss of its power, and death. You have the same body, the same bodily experiences, and so you respond to the same images.

For example, a constant image is that of the conflict of the eagle and the serpent. The serpent is bound to the earth, the eagle in spiritual flight—isn't that conflict something we all experience?

You're born as a child in a condition of dependency. The whole psychology of a human being for the first 12 to 15 years of life is in the mode of dependency. And if you're going for your Ph.D., this'll go on till you're forty-five. You can tell if the person has broken through by the number of footnotes in his writing.

Then there comes a central requirement, and this is one of psychological transformation, and mythological themes and ritual practices help to make this. The individual must move from dependency to authority, must move from childhood to adulthood. And that's the crisis that Freud is dealing with in his psychoanalysis all the time, the person who is still a child to the father or the mother ... To evolve out of this position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance requires a death and resurrection. That's the basic motif of the universal hero's journey—leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition ... And in old traditional cultures, well for example India, there is a moment of transformation where the clothing that is worn is changed on a ceremonial occasion and the little boy and little girl become then adults.

Now it's easier for women to grow up than for men. [*Men are more likely to get stuck in a state of arrested development.*] Believe me, I taught women for 38 years and I know. Life overtakes the woman, with her first menstruation she's a woman. She didn't have to do anything about it. The boy has to act. And this is the sense of the ferocity of so many of the male initiation rites. And the boy must be transformed. The girl is transformed by nature, the boy by society. He's circumcised and scarified and all kinds of things are done to him, so that he no long has the little boy body.

This is an important transformation that the myth must help us define. But the transformation always takes place in terms of a given society. Then within that given society there may be transformations further, the assumption of authorities: the putting on of the robes of a judge or of the doctor or whatever the role is that the individual has to learn to serve—an idea, a craft, a technique, a truth—and not himself.

And finally then comes the disengagement. There comes a moment in life when you've really had it. If you didn't do it, it wasn't done. You can't do it now. And this business of disengagement, of letting go, letting go, that requires mythological help ... Birth, marriage, and one's funeral. Those are the three great moments.

But during the lifetime there are these other transformations that I think are best mapped, best symbolized, in the wonderful tradition from India of the Kundalini yoga. And you can see how life can be lived on these seven levels.

The first level, the first chakra down at the base of the body, is simply uninspired hanging on to life. There is no enthusiasm. There's no action, only reaction. You're living in terms of concrete facts and well, I always think of dragons when I think of this. Dragons guard things in caves—they guard piles of gold and beautiful virgins. And they don't know what to do either of them. And so they just hang on. People like that we call creeps. This is the lowest range.

Then the next—and this is the awakening that comes with adolescence—is the erotic. Suddenly life is transformed. Nietzsche describes the first condition as groveling before sheer fact. There no such thing as a sheer fact. There's only a fact for a subject. And suddenly at adolescence one falls in love and that stupid fact that was only Suzy yesterday is a goddess today and you have turned her into something. And there is an initiative coming from you. There's a whole realm of religious disciplines based on this love principle, the ways of love, the five ways that they speak of in the Vaishnava tradition—the way of a servant to a master, the way of a friend to a friend, the way of the parent's love for the child ... and the way of love in marriage, and then just the wild mad love when it overtakes you and the world can go to pieces. When love hits you that way, you're lucky and you're lucky if you survive it. It's a tremendous thing. That's when the separateness is annihilate and you break through to a metaphysical realization.

But then comes the next level, and this is the one on which the world lives. It's that of the chakra at the level of the navel which is of aggression. All politics is aggression. It has to be. Cause you're standing for a group, you're standing for an idea *against* something. May be the most spiritual idea but it's again what isn't spiritual. The whole aggression of the missionary movements is an example of this.

Live on these three levels? Animals live on these three levels. Those are the levels of holding onto life, reproducing life, and winning. And this is what popular religions are concerned with: health, wealth and progeny. Winning the war, god send us rain for our crops, and all that sort of thing.

And for each of these four centers there is envisioned a symbolic form. At the base, for example, the first one, the symbol is the lingam and yoni, the male and female organs in conjunction. And at the heart center, there is *again* the lingam and yoni, that is to say, male and female organs in conjunction, but here they are represented in gold as symbolic of the virgin birth, that is to say, it is the birth of spiritual man out of the animal man. It happens when you awaken at the level of the heart to compassion, compassion, shared suffering: experienced participation in the suffering of another person. That's the beginning of humanity.

And when it happens, then you might say we come to this center here where the vision

of God is. The vision of God? What is the vision of God? It's right here in front of our face. The idea of God in the West is that God is a fact, somewhere, and that this fact created the world. That's a very crude idea about God. God is the personification of an energy. It's the energy that fills our world, it's the energy of life, it's the energy of consciousness that's right in here. And if you want to see it personified, look around you. There it is. The only personification, the only anthropomorphic manifestation of God is in men and women and children. And that kind of realization—people are ready for it! But they been told, “No, no, God's out there.”

At a lecture a long time back I had the indiscretion to say to a group of people “Bring forth the Christ in yourself,” that Christ power, which is Buddha power (all beings are Buddha beings, all people are Christ people). And there was a priest there who said, “That is blasphemy.” Now when you have a religion that transforms a metaphor into a fact you're in trouble. God is a metaphor. It's a poetic idea, speaking past the self.

There is an hermetic text that was translated in the 13th century from the Greek into Latin called *The Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers*. And there we read “God is an intelligible sphere (a sphere known to the mind) whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.” And the center is right where you're sitting. And each of us is a manifestation of that mystery.

Ramakrishna once said that if all you think of are your sins, then you are a sinner. And when I read that, I thought of my boyhood, going to confession on Saturdays, meditating on all the little sins that I had committed during the week. Now I think one should go and say, “Bless me, Father, for I have been great, these are the good things I have done this week.” Identify your notion of yourself with the positive, rather than with the negative. You see, religion is really a kind of second womb. It's designed to bring this extremely complicated thing, which is a human being, to maturity ...

Before I was married, I used to eat out in the restaurants of town for my lunch and dinners. Thursday night was the maid's night off in Bronxville, so that many of the families were out in restaurants. One fine evening I was in my favorite restaurant there, and at the next table there was a father, a mother and a scrawny boy about twelve years old. The father said to the boy, “Drink you tomato juice.” And the boy said, “I don't want to.” Then the father, with a louder voice, said, “Drink you tomato juice.” And the mother said, “Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do.” This father looked at her and said, “He can't go through life doing what he wants to do. If he does only what he wants to do, he'll be dead. Look at me. I've never done a thing I want to in all my life.”

That's the man who never followed his bliss. You may have a success in life, but then just think of it—what kind of life was it? What good was it—you've never done the thing you wanted to do in all your life. I always tell my students go where you body and soul want to go.

Now I came to this idea of bliss because in Sanskrit, which is the great spiritual

language of the world, there are three terms that represent the brink, the jumping-off place to the ocean of transcendence. *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. The word "*Sat*" means being. "*Chit*" means consciousness. "*Ananda*" means bliss or rapture. I thought, "I don't know whether my consciousness is proper consciousness or not; I don't know whether what I know of my being is my proper being or not; but I do know where my rapture is. So let me hang on to rapture, and that will bring me both my consciousness and my being." I think it worked.

The religious people tell us we really won't experience bliss until we die and go to heaven. But I believe in having as much as you can of this experience while you are still alive.

Follow your bliss and you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid

The big question is whether you are going to be able to say a hearty yes to your adventure ... the adventure of the hero—the adventure of being alive.