

Discovering Mythic Truth:

One of the most important types of religious lore is stories about the God/desses. We call these stories myths. Myths are not factual accounts, but neither are they lies or falsehoods. They are our collective dreams, deep and significant truths of the inner realms.

Here's how my *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word "myth:"

"A traditional, typically ancient, story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the world view of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society. A story, a theme, an object, or a character regarded as embodying an aspect of a culture. Such stories considered as a group."

Some experiences are beyond words. They are *ineffable*, which means "incapable of being expressed; indescribable or unutterable." What is ineffable cannot be told, only shown or shared. We share ineffable experiences, always imperfectly, through metaphor, symbol, ritual enactment and myth. Myths are the great teaching stories, told by the ancestors, polished through countless generations, conveying all that is strong and worthy in a culture.

Dreams are personal; myths are collective. Myths arise from the shared experience and the collective unconscious of the group. They give us some sort of way to communicate about ineffable experiences. If we share the cultural referents from which the myths are built, so much the better. Think of a graceful suspension bridge, poetry in form and function. The interaction of forces made visible by that construction are like the power of the Ancient Gods. The cultural referents are like the steel and stone and cable, the materials that make that power visible and usable. We compose our dreams from fragments of our day, and our myths from fragments of our culture. Both tell us things we need to know.

Myths are also stories told by fallible human beings who are struggling to convey experiences beyond words. As people's consciousness is shaped, so the myths they create are shaped, by culture, gender, geography, class and more. The proof of this is that myths demonstrably change over time, and vary from one place to another. If they were objective descriptions of literal facts, myths would be much more consistent across cultures and centuries, just as the chemical formula for water is the same everywhere.

The world was not created in six days flat. Neither did the great magician Gwydion make a flower-bride for his nephew. Not in the literal sense, although both those stories convey meaning and values within their native cultures, and maybe for others.

It's important to discern what is deep mythic truth, and what is the cultural and personal overlay that masks and sometimes distorts it. Myths and dreams both tell us much more than we thought we knew, bringing to consciousness the insights and wisdom of the deep mind, and perhaps the counsel of the Ancient Gods. Also like dreams, the meanings of myths are not immediately obvious.

We can work with myths just as we work with dreams, exploring the threads of association and meaning that run through them. Because myths spring from a collective cultural unconscious rather than an individual or personal one, it's important to do some research first. This is the method that Alice Karlsdottir explains in her essay on Jarnsaxa . Your reading and research establish a framework, your active imagination fills in the details.

Organizing material helps to understand it. We can borrow two important organizational structures from scholarly, non-fundamentalist Christians:

- **Synoptic gospels:** As you know, the Greek Bible contains four variant narratives of the life of Jesus, called the gospels. Three of these are very similar to each other. One way to present them, for the convenience of students, is in a three-column format, one narrative in each column. The gospels don't all cover the same incidents. When an episode is skipped in one of the gospels, blank space is left in that column, so the same stories appear side by side. This format allows readers to conveniently compare and contrast the reports of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

For those myths that come from literate classical cultures, we also have a variety of tellings: Hesiod, Homer and the Orphic hymns, for example. It might be possible to arrange some of them in parallel columns. At minimum, if you are interested in a God/dess from a well-documented culture, you should read good translations of all the original source material you can find, from different periods of that culture, paying careful attention to similarities and differences in the stories. See if you can relate those variations to invasions or migrations, changes in economic structure or technology, climate change, or change in any other aspect of that culture.

- **the Interpreter's Bible:** This reference work is intended as a resource for ministers preparing sermons, but the structure would be equally useful for any serious student of any mythic or liturgical text. It's really just a systematically, and extremely, annotated edition of the Bible. Each page is divided in three parts. The top section contains some of the actual text. The middle section holds scholarly notation: word origins, archeological notes, parallels with other contemporary myth systems --

anything that seems interesting or relevant. The bottom section explores the application of the text to people's lives. The amount of space each section takes on any given page varies according to need.

You can use this method with any primary source material, ancient or modern. It will work just as well with sections of a good translation of the *Mabinogion* or the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* -- or a poem by Doreen Valiente -- as it does with the Bible.

In the middle section, write definitions of any unfamiliar words (tracing the word's roots can be really instructive), synopses of the stories of any God/desses mentioned, correspondences, notes about the cultural context of the selection. This is the scholarly part.

The bottom section traces inner connections. Write your personal associations and reflections. For very important concepts, consider drawing a mind map on a separate blank page. Be alert to connections between the themes of the text and issues in your life.

Scholarship definitely comes first. But scholarship is simply a way of gathering all the ingredients. It's just a preparation for the real cooking, which is active imagination. Set aside some time, and create sacred space. Make yourself physically comfortable. Relax and build a daydream from the components you've assembled. Keep it first person, present tense. You can witness the story or play a role, even a principle role if you feel up to it. Pay attention to your emotional responses. Pay attention to your dreams for the next few nights. Record your results in your journal.

Developing a Personal Mythology:

Myths serve people as basic structures for interpreting our experiences. They are also sources of power and guidance, vocabularies for communication about the inner worlds, doorways to Sacred contact. They support the richness of spiritual life. But not always as well as they might.

We all inherit the myth system of our culture, and also, even more strongly, that of our immediate family. Only a very few of us were raised in Pagan households. Most adopted Paganism as a conscious, adult choice. We know, if anybody does, that inherited myths sometimes point us in ways we do not want to go. There's many a myth, for example, of the submissive female who finds contentment through being mastered by some dumb stud.

Knowing this, and knowing that it is possible to choose, it makes little sense for us to abandon one mythic system only to adopt another whole cloth. Instead, we can take responsibility for creating our own personal synthesis from among all the teaching

stories that are available to us. How? By magic, of course, by the sacred act of changing consciousness -- and in this case even changing the unconscious mind -- in accordance with will.

There are many good books available with advice on specific techniques. I want to recommend one in particular: *The Mythic Path* by David Feinstein et.al. (LA: Tarcher, 1997). You can also get a tape containing the guided meditations from the book. Both are available through Feinstein's web space, Innersource.

You might also want to visit *Encyclopedia Mythica*, a website with an encyclopedic collection of mythology links.

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