

Is Myth a Lie?

In the opening pages of Joseph Campbell's book *Thou Art That*, he tells an amusing yet profoundly important anecdote about a run-in with a hard-nosed radio host who started off an interview by insisting that a myth is a lie. Campbell writes,

"So I replied with my definition of myth. "No, a myth is not a lie. A whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of a given culture at a given time."

"It's a lie," he countered.

"It's a metaphor."

"It's a lie."

This went on for about twenty minutes. Around four or five minutes before the end of the program, I realized that this interviewer did not really know what a metaphor was. I decided to treat him as he was treating me.

"No," I said. "I tell you it's metaphorical. You give me an example of a metaphor."

He replied, "You give me an example."

I resisted, "No, I'm asking the question this time." I had not taught school for thirty years for nothing. "And I want you to give me an example of a metaphor."

The interviewer was utterly baffled and even went so far as to say, "Let's get in touch with some school teacher." Finally, with something like a minute and a half to go, he rose to the occasion and said, "I'll try. My friend John runs very fast. People say he runs like a deer. There's a metaphor."

As the last seconds of the interview ticked off, I replied, "That is not the metaphor. The metaphor is: John is a deer."

He shot back. "That's a lie."

"No," I said, "That is a metaphor."

And the show ended.

In short, Campbell encountered in the interview what many of us do when we tell someone we study mythology: a very strong and narrow opinion of what a myth “is.” Someone who, perhaps, has only been exposed to the negative use of the term as a phrase for something that is seen as a “mistruth.” Something told with the intent to deceive, or from the vantage point of a naive or uneducated mind. For many, calling something a “myth” is to associate it with a profound deception: a feeble or unsophisticated attempt to explain material reality before the advent of the scientific age. Some see the term as an equivalent to the more modern “fake news.” The contemporary conception of *myth* as *falsehood* has led people to think of *myths* as *fairytales* (another complex story structure that is often dismissed as containing much less essential truth than they actually do).

But for Campbell, myth presents a version of the truth that is far more essential than that which can be gleaned from almanacs, censuses, and encyclopedias, whose “facts” are dependent on the experience of the field of time and are often outdated as soon as they are published. Look at his definition again,

“A whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives, metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience and the fulfillment of a given culture at a given time.”

It will be important to work with, and from, these simple, straightforward definitions as we proceed. Complexity and specificity can be added as different traditions and cultural periods are discussed, but these basic, expansive, and widely-applicable types of definitions are what make Campbell so valuable to us in this course. They are interdisciplinary, open, and yet still focused and mature in scope. We will build on this dynamic as we move forward together: expansive, adaptive, respectful, and accessible.

Campbell next makes a startling admission; a diagnosis really. Reflecting on the disagreement with the radio host, he claims,

“It made me reflect that half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have people who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.”

Campbell, J. (2001). *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*. Novato, CA: New World Library