

THE MYTHIC RETURN

The Hero's Journey and corrupted mythology in advertising

By Sydney Solis

"There is only one journey, going into yourself." -- Rainer Maria Rilke

On television this winter there was an advertisement that showed young children searching in an ancient tomb, which looked a lot like an Indiana Jones movie. This 8-12-year-old girl and boy had their torches. They searched courageously down the dark corridors and had the look of mystery in their eyes as they touched the hieroglyphs on the wall. Finally they found what they were looking for and they were in awe. But what did they find when they reached their goal? A box of Rice Krispies.

In a United Airlines advertisement, a young boy's father goes off on a business trip, is transformed into a knight around King Arthur's roundtable and does battle with a dragon. Upon the return flight he brings home a stuffed animal to his son. Perhaps it was his free gift after signing up for a United credit card at the airport.

What was once Egypt's Isis with baby Horus on her lap, and Mary with baby Jesus, has transformed into Britney Spears, holding her new baby on the cover of a magazine in the supermarket check out lane. The chorus of headlines shouts that her hubby is sleeping in the basement and on the next magazine over, Jennifer Aniston is said to be looking pregnant. Myths have always sustained us and have guided us in our lives and pointed us toward the spirit. Modern advertising has corrupted this role and it betrays us by pointing our hearts down a dissatisfying path with misleading images and symbols of products.

Where once we journeyed to discover ourselves, we now journey and find Rice Krispies. Where once a knight journeyed and returned, he now flies business class and bring home the rewards of capitalism – security in the form of a teddy bear. Where the sacred mother Mary was once the feminine heart of Christianity, a pop idol with a deadbeat of a husband is now our object of worship and it's used to sell magazines.

Shiva hum, reminds us that everything, even capitalistic advertising, is divine, so this modern *maya* can be an opportunity for yoga. We are able to see how far we've strayed and strive to reunite with a life lived according to mythic values. We can return to the old myths and symbols the original stories tell, find the map there and embark on a mythic journey of yoga into one's self. One can cut through the dragons and demons of false profit, cast out the moneychangers hanging around the temple of the heart, and succeed in the quest for the eternal self, the true source of peace, in this modern age.

For all of humanity, the mythic images of gods and goddesses acted out the divine play of our lives -- those experiences and energies doing battle inside our bodies, hearts and psyches that get projected into the real world. In Greek psyche means soul and the Greeks said that the soul speaks in an image. This *Imago Dei*, the image of God, is imprinted on and is the language of the heart. Symbols speak to us on an intuitive level in the body through dreams and visions, and then informs the mind.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell said the purpose of a myth is to keep the mind in harmony with the body, which in turn stays in harmony with the environment. This is yoga and yoga therefore is a hero's journey into the self. Myths and stories then serve as guides in this process, as well as explain humanity's relationship to the universe, reconcile guilt of life feeding on life, act as a psychological aide as well as hold the values of a people and a

community together. The reenactment of the myth is the ritual, Campbell said, and by today's standards, our rituals serve ourselves and an artificial corporate idol rather than sacred living in the world.

Modern advertising and consumer culture has infiltrated symbolism's role. Myths are to point us toward the heroic journey of the quest for the self and its return embrace into nature. Advertising's corruption of these myths conspires in *avidya*, or false cognition, and leads us down the wrong path as it asks us to indulge in selfish actions and consumption. This keeps us separate from each other and in a state of anxiety. When we are authentic people rather than a standardized product, we enter into sacrifice and commune in unity and peace with nature and each other.

Corrupted mythology of advertising and the media urge us to identify with a consumer culture based on values of desire and fear. The culture encourages interaction with each other using a false identity, *asmita*, based on these products and values of consumerism and materialism. For capitalism to succeed it needs mass consumption from standardized people with standardized tastes coming from standardized educational systems identifying with artificially contrived storylines that condition us to consume nature rather than commune with it. For if our values, or opinions about the value of a good is not standard, then what is its true value? If a symbol on a shirt is not recognizable, then it has no value as status.

A mythic and heroic journey of yoga requires the seeker to move past this external obstacle, discover his own myth and identify with the true self within. This union with the nameless, ineffable and eternal life is a Vedantic philosophy and solves the problem of duality. The hero's return from this space is Tantric. Now that the hero has found within the pearl of great price – the treasures of the spirit - the yogi embodies this blissful experience in the world with

full awareness and in service of others. The unity experienced inside is seen on the outside, as the powers of nature, the yogi and all people are one. Therefore, working in service of the other is the only way to find peace. These treasure of the spirit are shared through such values as charity, love, friendship, forgiveness, art, music and sacred ritual and community.

Traditionally, peoples believed in bringing forth what is inside the heart. It was a process that was part of life to find out what the personal calling is, what is inside a child, her imprint, and to discover and develop the unique talents and gifts the child has which meant to bring joy. The market is the culture and it's impressed on us, rather than we diving into ourselves, finding our true self and gift and ultimately expressing it in the world.

By marketing products to be somehow spiritually transcendent, it betrays us by making us think it will make us happy and give us freedom. However, since it is based in the temporal world, it only leads to restlessness, disappointment, suffering, and betrayal. For the only image that will give eternal life is that which cannot have an image, or conceptual example as Campbell says is the final obstacle to enlightenment. The Tao that can be named is not the Tao. Only the Self satisfies the Self, the Bhagavad-Gita said. A mythic image is supposed to point to eternity that is not of this temporal world. Connecting Rice Krispies to our mythic goal of spiritual experience is rather blasphemous. Considering the state of the world, corruption of these myths and their symbols seem to be having some ill effects.

Anthropologist and Storyteller Michael Meade said that traditional peoples looked to the youth to see what spirit was coming into the world. The 8-12 year old period of a child's development is when the mythic imagination is really taking form and it's also the most impressionable. Keeping advertising out of traditional myths is essential, as conversion rates for life-long religious devotion are

high during this age. So the wrong message is getting in. Today, one out of five youth cut themselves to make visible the emotional pain and emptiness felt inside, and Hispanic youth have the highest suicide rates, CNN recently reported. And 42 million sleep prescriptions were filled last year in the U.S. The world is at war and wracked in corruption and greed, and our natural environment is in crisis. This points to a certain poverty of spirit, which I believe is best described as a presence of the true power of myth. That power that guides us and informs us as to our moral values and potential as humans.

What is needed is a restoration to past myths and a creation of new myths with the intention behind them to reestablish a spiritual connection to self and society. All that advertising offers is a great opportunity to rediscover what the real myths were trying to tell us in the first place. Instead of acting on McDonald's recent advertising to sell a burger with the slogan, *Carpe di Yum*, we can do what the Roman poet Horace wrote, *Dum loquimur fugerit invida aetas. Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero.* "As we speak, jealous time flees. Seize the day, with little belief in the next." Or in other words, follow your bliss, now.

An article in the Boulder *Daily Camera* said the Bible would be taught at Boulder High School to teach children about symbolism, because children can't grasp the allegories behind literature such as Shakespeare, Chaucer and Dickens. Whether it is from Biblical, Hindu, Buddhist, Native American or the world's myriad mythologies, mythic imagination is essential to humanity. Studies prove that children who can't get an imaginative and creative life by the age of six can't learn to read and write and are permanently damaged as adults. Math, writing and speech are all symbolic languages. How do we find the peace we are seeking and cut through the materialism and find union with the self, which has no symbol, no false idol or product to represent the unnamable? How do we return from that mystical union and bring forth our gift and

live engaged in the world with compassion and love that a virgin birth symbolizes?

Once again myth can return to offer as a guide to put the mind in harmony with the body so that the body can be in harmony with the environment, and values can be placed on a sacred quest for the joys of the spirit, rather than the joys of materialism. Yoga is a form of the hero's journey. The mythic yogi is on the hero's quest, given an opportunity to turn away from the false self that the market as well as conflicting personal emotional stories control, and search for the self within. Finding one's person's expression of the experience with the divine is a deeply personal thing. It's also a difficult journey. Going into oneself and looking at one's personal story can be frightening, painful and shocking. It requires a discipline and a path to follow. The old myths and stories help, as they offer codes for our psyches to follow. In yoga, Patanjali's 8-limb path, which includes ethics of the yamas and niyamas, is a way. Any spiritual following of your choice is a way.

When we enter into therapy, we are also entering onto the path of spirit, as the root word for therapy is *theus*, which is God. To peel off the layers of the onion, as Carl Jung would put it, in search of the real self. Diving deep into the shadow and into one's personal *Jihad*, or holy war within, and making peace in one's heart.

It is a search into who am I without my media dictated haircut and hair products? Who am I if I am not valuable as a product in the marketplace because of my looks, my education, my job, my spouse, my house? Campbell reminds us the gods and goddesses are all already inside you, and the hero has gone before you so you don't have to fear. And you will find your goal; it just won't be tangible like a box of Rice Krispies. The Grail will never be found because it's a symbol for something inconceivable. Although the human body could be the Grail, in which the grail serves the grail king, and once made aware of this king in your castle, you can heal

yourself and others. Once we have identified with the self and are in union with the powers of nature through the body, we return from whence we came to realize the kingdom's gifts and to bring those gifts them into the world engaged and in harmony with nature. Once we've had the experience of God in ourselves, there is a gift. There is a peace within from that union that reengages with the world after sacrificing the false self. This peace is recognition of that union, and seeing it in all things and people. You are not separate from your neighbor. Therefore your neighbor's happiness is of deep concern to you. You live in connection with self, and in loving service of the world. By finding this gift of self, we still can return to the world and have at least redemption and at most bring the divine into earthly being, a heaven on earth.

In a Hindu myth from the Puranas, Dhruva was denied his father's kingdom. Determined to get it back, he went to the woods and meditated on Lord Narayana, asking for his grace. When he received that grace through intense devotion, he was so enraptured in bliss that he realized how insignificant it was to ask for material rewards that are temporal and fleeting. Dhruva then asked for eternal life instead. Upon his return home, he was able to rule the kingdom anyway as an enlightened being, and ultimately became the star Polaris, which in modern myth is a star by which to travel by.

These myths bring us back to the importance of living by the significance of the myth, the values that point toward enlightenment, and then a return to rule wisely. A return to a lifestyle that rewards personal ethics and a meaningful life, as well as concern for the community.

Psychologist Marion Woodman said the symbolism of the Virgin Birth is that when love and compassion goes out from one's heart to another person, that is the child being born. Psychologist Erich

Fromm, in his book, *The Art of Loving*, said that humanity needs to learn how to love. It's an evolutionary thing to turn way from childish, materialistic selfish ways to the sacrifice of one's self in concern for the other. Whereas Adam abandoned Eve in the Garden of Eden by letting her take the blame for the fall, he should have protected her. That would be mature, by one definition. It would be his realization that in union with someone, the anxiety of separation is removed and peace is achieved. We have a war within, this inability to love, as Adam exemplifies. Fromm explains, Jonah's doesn't want to warn the people with God's message to change their ways or else for fear that God would forgive the people for their sins. So Jonah flees into the belly of the whale. His isolation within the belly of the whale is symbolic of his isolation from those that he was unable to love.

In love, we find that kingdom that we truly seek. And often the moral obtained from our journey is that the only worthwhile thing is love. It is our "grail" and much of what composes our "self". We are to learn to love more, to love our neighbor and to make peace with them and ourselves. We are to stop the war in the heart and to read the old symbols, to slay ourselves, our dragons and demons.

The journey cannot end with a box of cereal. A knight cannot slay a dragon and bring a teddy bear back as his grail and a United Airlines get all the credit. And a pop star, with no more moral leadership than manufactured great popularity among teens cannot replace the love of Mary for the baby Jesus. Cut away all that false self, find the real self. To return to a life filled with love, community and union and a mythic relationship to all things. Do not be fooled by those false gods that block in the way. Do not be deterred from your goal. The promise of your fulfillment and bliss you will surely find, *sat chit ananda*, being, consciousness and bliss, a heaven on earth.

Namaste.