

BLOG ENTRIES

BY LEIGH MELANDER

IT'S A MYSTERY! WHAT IS MYTH?

5.05.06

At the Imaginal Institute's initial public gathering, First Fools, one of the topics of conversation was "What is myth and why should anybody care?"

I posed this question to the group because I believe that one of the truly marvelous things about being somebody who plays with mythology is trying to continually assess my own answers to it. And I love this question because there isn't just one simple answer.

If you look up myth in the dictionary, it generally says something about a myth being a story that attempts to explain a set of beliefs or natural phenomena in a given culture. There is generally an assumption implicit in this definition that the people originating these stories were somehow naïve, childlike, even primitive. They could not scientifically understand the world around them, so they made up nonsense to make sense.

While I love the idea of using nonsense to make meaning, this is a limited and largely erroneous view of myth, at least in my understanding of it. It also gives rise to the common usage of myth in contemporary Western culture, at least, as something that is simply not true. "Oh, that's just a myth," we say when we're dismissing something utterly, "It's just not true."

(This puts an interesting spin on being a mythologer, when people think you specialize in archaic fantasies and lies, and is the source of the blank faces that precede the question, "So what do you DO with a degree in myth?")

More importantly, however, I think it misses the point of myth. The ancient Greeks talked about myth as being that which is, simultaneously, least and most true. And they were on to something.

Far from taking myth as literal truth, many cultures that have recognized and embraced their mythology understand even in the weaving and telling of it that it is fiction. And they understand that there is truth behind the fiction. Looking at myth this way forces us deep into the story, delving its deeps for the pieces that ring true to us not on a literal level, but in our psyches. These are truths that cook in ourselves not on the surface, not empirically, but instead on a metaphorical level.

The roots of the word metaphor lie in Greek for metapherein - which translates "to transfer." Metaphors transfer meaning from literal and concrete to intuitive and imaginal. And this is not a small movement - as a prefix, meta suggest something that is comprehensive and transcending. So metaphors transform meaning, their movement into the nonliteral giving us a glimpse of transcendent meaning.

This is what myths do. They give us moments of understanding transcendent meaning. It's why taking myths as literally true is such a mistake - one that our culture intuits when it says "That's not true, it's just a myth," but only intuits part of the movement, and deafens its collective ears to the transcendent truths behind, under, and between the cracks of the myth. And it's the same mistake in the other direction when people grope towards the comfort of taking myth literally - for example, the conservative Christian community, when it chooses to assert that the world was made in seven days. Literally. No! The power of this story is not in its literal truth, but in its metaphor - what is it saying about a universe and how it was birthed and the generative, creative, imaginative energy that could create such an exquisite infinity? And populate it with such exquisite minutiae?

So, then, for me myth opens our eyes to seeing beyond what is in front of our faces. These stories, whether they are ancient, beginning of the world tales, or the smaller but equally important stories we tell ourselves about our families, our community, our own psyches, give us insight. At least they can when we stop to hear ourselves tell our stories, and let our sight get pulled inward and outward into imagination. Through their fiction, they give us truth. And it that truth, there is meaning.

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PLUTO'S REVENGE

8.29.06

The last couple of weeks have been chaotic. The local monster children who have roamed my community's streets all summer upped the ante, and spent a fun-filled night vandalizing property, culminating in trying to set my old pickup truck on fire. (Fortunately, apparently none of them were ever boy scouts, and were not particularly effective fire-starters, so the damage was limited. Our criminal wannabe element is not the brightest bunch.) As I've talked with police, they've told me that there has been a rash of vandalism, theft, and domestic violence in our normally quiet valley. Enough such that they are not only noticing the difference, but are also disquieted by it.

Communication has been weird, as well. I had the sense that I was standing in looking glass country in more than one conversation this week: what I was saying and what other people were hearing were two distinct, often completely unrelated things. I even had one friend turn to me and say, "was that in English?" after I'd asked her a question. And I'm hearing from other people that they've had a similar experience, that they're not being understood, that people have gotten angry at them for what seems to be mystifying reasons, and that they just seem to be confusing one another.

On August 17th, thousands of astronomers met in Prague to redefine the parameters of what makes a planet, and by August 24, Pluto had been booted, demoted to "dwarf planet" status. Aha! Could this be the answer? One friend wryly suggested that Pluto is exacting his revenge.

While I'm not a literalist about astrology (or very much of anything, for that matter), and I'm fairly sure that a god isn't sitting somewhere in a snit because he's not been given the respect he's due, I am sufficiently intrigued to think a bit about the mythological and archetypal implications of dissing Pluto.

Pluto is the dark lord, reigning over the land of death. A bit of chaotic energy here -- these are the shadow lands, the domain of the deepest unconscious. Are we somehow dismissing the dark burblings in our psyches by demoting his planet, inviting some kind of emergence of those energies by repressing them? Could this be a metaphorical cause of the chaotic, chthonic dynamics taking over our conversations? (And, in the case of the monster children, infusing their destructive tendencies with more zest, if not competence.)

Frequently people assume that Pluto is the Roman variation on the Greek god of the underworld, Hades. However, (like most myths) it's a bit more complicated than that. Interestingly, Hades translates to "The Invisible" - which is oddly appropriate for a far-off celestial body with an uncertain pedigree. He certainly has been made less visible over the last week.

However, the Greeks, according to Pierre Grimal's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, didn't use his name for superstitious fear of getting his attention, and perhaps rousing his ire. (And before you scoff too quickly about that, how often do you touch wood?) Instead, they created a host of euphemisms for the Dark Lord, including Pluto -- which translates to "wealth."

In *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, Alan Bernstein writes that he was given the name Pluto "because he obtained all that is earth and within the earth. Thus he is rich because everything originates from and returns to the earth."

So, Pluto holds not only the emptiness of death, but the wealth of everything of the earth - minerals, gems, oil, gold: the matter, and substance of wealth. Cold and hard, perhaps, like a diamond or cash, but opulently so.

So if there is some psychic significance to our dismissing Pluto, perhaps we should be looking at our understanding and communications about wealth and belongings, of ownership and power that comes with that ownership. Could the monster children have been responding to some astrological/psychic force about the redistribution of wealth by trying to destroy other people's property? As I think about my own communication issues over the last couple of weeks, the misunderstandings generally arose from a misconstrued sense of ownership or power.

It could be, then, that Pluto has dissed us right back. The last twist in this word/thought play is about dissing itself - the Romans translated Pluto to "Dives," and then shortened it to "Dis." So, we have dissed Dis, and Dives has divested us of a clear sense of our own wealth and power. So we argue and trash trucks, in the grip of the pulls of the heavens.

Or, it could all just be a coincidence.

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IS THAT TRUE? ABSOLUTELY!

2.03.06

*Truth, poor girl, was nobody's daughter
She took off all her clothes and jumped into the water*

I read this week about a new book entitled *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity and the Culture Wars*, by two evangelists, Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti. In it, they reportedly take on the "secular liberalism" that has, in their minds, destroyed truth with a big ole capital T's legitimate central place in our understanding of the world. As evangelical Christians, and obvious social (if not political) conservatives, their point is, I guess, understandable.

(When you literally subscribe to a religion and believe in a mythology that not only insists it's the only right way to think/believe, but also condemns anyone who doesn't agree with you to the worst thing you can imagine - eternal fire and damnation, I guess the "Absolute Truth" stuff is pretty appealing.)

However, it leaves me with a queasy feeling. First, they assert that not only is truth, Truth, but it's their truth that's Truth. How gloriously relieving that is! I'm not only right, I'm Right. RIGHT! Then you must be wrong. I don't have to worry about it any more. I am content, secure, robust in my rightness. (You, on the other hand, must be against us if you're not with us, and you could very well be one of those evildoing evildoers.)

More bizarrely, however, is that they insist that you've got to believe in "Absolute Truth" to truly be tolerant: through some twisted logic they arrive at the conclusion that people who are willing to acknowledge that their perceptions of the truth might be different than others' cannot actually be tolerant.

To follow what I'm understanding their logic to be, one can only be tolerant if one suffers the foolishness of nonbelievers, knowing that your belief system is the only one that is really worth believing in. People who actually acknowledge that others may believe different truths with the same legitimacy and passion apparently can't be tolerant. Guess we're all just deluded. (And damned, while we're at it.)

The final irony of this to me comes to me while musing on the origins and definition of the word "absolute." It comes from the word in Latin for "to free" or "to absolve."

If there are absolute truths, then they should be freeing - not only to those who see them, but to everyone. That's sure not what this feels like to me.

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TRUTH, OPINION, FACT, CONFUSION

2003

I was in an airport a few nights ago watching CNN and the lovely and talented Wolf Blitzer was doing his thing in the (booming, Godlike voice) **Situation Room** – they were, as usual talking Iraq.

That I find Mr. Blitzer anything short of inane is, perhaps, the topic of another rant, but what makes me utterly insane about his and CNN's presentation of the news – in all of its careful, factual, coolly analytical approach (please read dripping sarcasm here), is their watcher surveys.

They ask such thoughtful questions to eager viewers as:

“Did Saddam Hussein have weapons of mass destruction?”

“Has the terrorism in Iraq been the work of outside terrorists or regime loyalists?”

And then they urge viewers to call in and answer their question of the hour.

That afternoon the story centered on George Bush's comments on the attack in Iraq on the Red Cross Headquarters, and his statement that it was a combination of “foreign terrorists and regime loyalists” that were up to no good over there.

So Blitzer's (and CNN's) thoughtful response to this was to do yet another survey of their viewers -- the question this time being: “Has the terrorism been the work of outside terrorists or regime loyalists” and then Wolf looks directly at the camera and says, “We want to hear from you! You tell us.”

I almost threw my bar stool at the tube.

This is a problem that we seem to have completely missed in contemporary culture. The question wasn't even “which do you THINK,” but tell us, as if the average American had the vaguest of clues as what really is happening over there, that our completely unfounded biases and theories based on absolutely no evidence are FACT.

It's as if we've kept the language and moral certitude of scientific, analytical thinking without an iota of understanding of what it means to be able to make pronouncements of fact.

This is, I think, one of the largest issues underscoring our current political nightmare -- people make grandiose statements, with no burden of proof, but if they sound sure enough, they are taken as experts.

And simultaneously we've decided that the man in the street is the expert. (Think that this all rolls around with the 'reality TV' crap that's going around, as well as a sense that we are voiceless and powerless at the same time -- so our opinions will be touted as fact to keep us anaesthetised enough to not notice that the power brokers are doing whatever they damn well please and are taking us out.

We all editorialize, and no one seems (or very few) to be questioning the bases on which the editorializing (just wrote 'idiotoralizing' by mistake, thank you Mr. Freud) are made. And it happens all over -- just read a surprisingly good article by a columnist in our area daily paper, who was bitching, rightly so, about the bubble and helmet heads who sit in TV studios as 'news' casters and who were editorializing right and left about how the firemen weren't making the right decisions fighting the wildfires burnig on the other side of the hill.

Her point, obviously, was, how the hell do broadcasters know what the right decisions are?

But the problem is that this is happening everywhere, about everything...

And that's not just my opinion, that's a fact.

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HUMPTY HAGGARD HAD A GREAT FALL

11.06.06

The fall of the reverend Ted Haggard is a tragedy.

No, wait, I am a deceiver and a liar.

The fall of Ted Haggard is completely gratifying, as another one of the sanctimonious Humpty Dumpty's smashes to the ground, their vitriol oozing out into a viscous mass.

The yolk's on him.

And his wife, who stands by him, echoing their arrogance as she gallantly jokes that people should be able to relate to them now, as their marriage isn't, perhaps, as perfect as everyone thought. (As if being perfect, as a pastor's wife, is a cross you must bear to begin with as you reach out to the sinning masses.)

I have danced my dance of unholy glee at this latest unmasking of a smug sophist, (and another one bites the dust), deliciously delighted that this man who hasn't deserved reverence is revealed as a hypocrite, thinking, finally, the buggers are going to be seen as they are, rather than as they market themselves.

Except that the fall of the reverend Ted Haggard is a tragedy.

As I read about his belated admissions of his escapades and his pathetic, caught little boy dissembling as he scrambled to not lose everything, I also read about the response of his churchgoers.

And I realized that rather than bringing clarity to his followers about the perversion of his abhorrence for gays in this country, his tumble has simply legitimized it. For Haggard, and now for his parishioners, their lurking discomfort with homosexuality now has a live form - furtive, drug-fueled trysts with an escort. Tawdry, twisted adultery, woven with lies.

So, instead of understanding that love is love, and that men can, and do, and women can, and do, love each other with divinity and kindness, and that partnerships come in many shapes, and gender isn't the denominator, they've been justified in their judgement.

As they pray over their smashed hero, Humpty has merely proven his point.

And that is tragic.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH CULTURAL MYTHOLOGISTS

9.22.05

(One of an ongoing set of interchanges with academic colleagues on the nature of what we do and how we connect as a community.)

I think, as you far more poetically suggest in your piece than I'm going to get to here, that doing this myth thang is both most profound and preposterous-- that we are on to some really big stuff, and stuff that matters not a whit-- that is deep, and rich, and hard to figure out, and is so damn obvious that it blots out our fingers as we hold them in front of our faces.

I think, as I wrestle with my intentions to save the world, that you are right-- we are not the special caste of redeemers. We are a bunch of people who dream and fart and fuck things up and very occasionally, fall into that moment of magic where the atoms make music and the stars dance. If we're very, very lucky, we point our fingers in time for others to hear and see it, and then realize that there were thousands there before us, already pointing...

And to meld this for a moment with the discussions on community-- the more invested I get in building communities, the more I realize that the only way to do so is to open-handed, hearted, and mindedly invite each person in the world to bring their superbness to the conversation, without distinction and delineation.

I want to be a part of a community of people who care about the world around them, about their neighbors, about the trees in their backyards (be that 50 feet or 50 countries behind their houses) and the squirrels hanging out in those trees; a community where we tell each other stories and really hear the stories that are told to us; where it's more important to be passionate than it is to be right; and where sometimes it's just fine to slam the door shut in a moment of "I WANT to be alone...".

So I don't yearn to be, necessarily, a part of a community of mythologists (whatever that is!), or one that's got a corner on the revelations market, or more important insights than the rest of the world has-- but feel that I am, already, a part of a community, many communities, that give a damn and are willing to sit in the wonder of the questions and reach a helping hand, heart, or metaphor out to someone stumbling towards us, or within us, or even away from us. I think we've got a splendid beginning towards that kind of a community here.