



# STANLEY KRIPPNER

## Personal Mythology



Joseph Campbell cautioned that if humanity is to survive, its dysfunctional myths must be transformed. At the end of the millennium, there were a number of writers who heralded the twenty-first century as one of untold possibilities and of new guiding myths. These became known as “Millennium Myths” and portrayed a New Golden Age, the New Jerusalem, the Peaceable Kingdom, or the City of the Sun. In some of these mythic narratives, “Heaven will come down to Earth”; other narratives foretold the arrival of the Messiah, the return of Quetzalcoatl, the appearance of Maitreya, or the emergence of the Goddess.

Instead of looking at myth from a metaphysical and esoteric perspective, I prefer to define myth in the context of common sense. A myth, then, can be seen as an imaginative story about an important, existential human issue that has behavioral consequences. Some myths, such as those held by most religions, are considered to be “sacred,” but the myths that guide our daily behavior—our personal myths—are simply examples of “self-talk.” Personal mythologies are derived from our biology, our cultural environment, our interpersonal relationships, and our transpersonal experiences. They are the microcosm of the macrocosm.

Beneath the narrative of our personal myths are feelings, images, and attitudes of which we are typically dimly aware, but which are very important to our vitality, for better or worse. These feelings,

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images, and attitudes attract things from our own lives or from the environment; thus a personal myth is a “chaotic attractor.” What we attract supports or detracts from our peak vitality.

More often than not, peak vitality is used as a stereotype that relates to bodily health and to being in good condition for the purpose of athletics, longevity, or sexual prowess. I take a more holistic approach. Physical vitality is only one aspect of peak vitality, which also includes emotional vitality, intellectual vitality, spiritual vitality, and social vitality. They are integrated, all part of one piece, and each can interfere with another and with overall vitality if they are not synchronized and headed in the same direction.

To understand how to transform our personal myths in favor of our vitality, let us return to the definition of myth.

The first part of my definition sees myths as imaginative narratives. Thus a myth could be one sentence long or it could comprise an entire book such as *Tristan and Isolde* or the *Odyssey*. These narratives are usually expressed in words, but sometimes they include pictures, architecture, sculpture, dance, or song.

Second, myths concern themselves with important, existential human issues. They are not about trivial matters, but about life and death, birth and rebirth, starvation and bounty, love and war. Myths confront us with the here and now: What do we do when we are in the middle of a crisis? What do we do if we want to make changes in our lives? What do we do when a moral choice is demanded of us? Whether we know it or not, we fall back on personal, cultural, or religious myths to direct our behavior.

Third, myths have behavioral consequences. They are not just fanciful tales of fantasy, they impact the way we make decisions and live our lives. They play an important role in determining who we will marry, what work we will choose, the way in which we will raise our children, and how we will relate to God, the Tao, the Ground of Being, or whatever we believe to be greater than ourselves. For Carl Jung and other writers who saw the relevance of myths to contemporary times, mythology was of critical importance because it contained profound psychological insights essential to the art of “soul making.”

Campbell and Jung both wrote about such critical concepts as the survival of humanity and the fate of the Earth. Yet when individuals think in these terms, it can be overwhelming. “Global warming, social crises, paradigm shifts are happening right now,” we think. And then we ask, “What can I do in the face of such tremendous obstacles and such widespread dysfunction?” It is at this point that people need to

feel empowered, to know that positive change is possible, and that their vitality—or inner resources—is the key to mythic change, both on a personal level and on a cultural level.

Such cultural myths as the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the Shiva and Shakti stories, and the Australian aborigines' Dreamtime posed the same questions. These issues are also addressed by religions myths and proclaimed in churches, temples, and mosques, often giving the worshippers contradictory messages. World leaders, when they make crucial decisions about war and peace, neglect the world of mythology at their peril.

In addition to personal and cultural myths, there are distinct family mythologies. Some families, for example, expect their children to marry within the same religion, and there is often a crisis if they don't. Family mythologies encompass the family's cultural mythology and religious mythology, or lack thereof.

Why do I use the term "mythology" as opposed to "worldview" or "belief system"? Beliefs are very intellectual; mythology is not only intellectual, it is also attitudinal and emotional. Mythology combines our unconscious as well as conscious inclinations, and it involves symbols (such as mandalas and crucifixes) and metaphors (such as "running with the wind") in addition to straightforward language.

We can ask if a myth is "functional" or "dysfunctional." That is, does the myth support a person's life and well-being or does it lead to fanaticism, depression, or constant anxiety? Our basic guideline is that functional myths are those that enhance our vitality; dysfunctional myths are those that hamper our vitality.

Functional myths differ from person to person, yet even the "most functional" mythic structures continually evolve if they are to further the person's optimal adjustment and development. The symbols and metaphors inherent in our myths have the power to transcend polarities and unite opposites, fostering a transition from psychic conflict to the achievement of greater unity. Sometimes a superficial mythic structure is revealed by an individual's "persona," a term Jung adopted from the Greek word for "mask," which is basically a role that is enacted to adapt to the requirements of specific life situations. This persona can reflect deeper layers of the psyche or it can disguise what people actually feel, think, and believe. In other words, it may be a mask for the deep-seated personal myths of the person wearing it.

Conflicts in our inner lives and external circumstances are natural markers of times of transition, times when we can transform our personal myths. Since personal myths are more than intellectual, it

is essential that we create new myths that pack an emotional punch. Many resolutions for the New Year are never carried out, for example, because they are simply words that lack the emotion, the intention, and the vitality to bring about a long-term behavioral change.

Year after year, Marie resolved to improve her habit of procrastinating, but by the end of January she had lapsed into her previous dysfunctional behavior patterns, telling herself, “It really doesn’t matter if I put off an assignment or am late for an appointment; everyone else does it.” A friend suggested that she add an exercise routine to her agenda. Marie discovered that half of an hour of vigorous exercise five times each week provided her with a source of vitality she had ignored. For the first time, she was able to finish job assignments on time, appear punctually for appointments, and transform the personal myths she had used as an excuse for procrastination. Other people have enhanced their vitality through changing their diet, by setting aside some time each day for meditation or contemplation, or simply by getting an extra hour of sleep each night.

Personal myths that have been with us since childhood are very difficult to change. Something that is learned early in life is hard to unlearn later in life. We don’t just stop what we are doing; we must learn to behave differently. Yet this is not how we commonly go about trying to make change. Instead, people who have the urge to keep doing something over and over again—like a compulsive sex or drug addict, for example—tell themselves, “When I have enough willpower, I will just stop.” But the behavior does not stop because the verbal resolution does not reflect the deepest layers of the addict’s psyche.

Change is not easy. The sex or drug addict must find something to replace the compulsive habit or a different way of finding pleasure. Quite often, they need professional guidance to help them understand the reason for their compulsion, bring that reason into the light of day, and get social support for making a change. All of these are forms of relearning, which is the best way to change a habit. So-called willpower is purely intellectual, which is why it usually doesn’t work for most people. An addict has to plunge deeply into the attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and intentions that will establish new patterns of learning.

Embodying a new myth is one of the best ways to make a change. Our bodies usually tell us whether we are ready to make a beneficial change. Our bodies provide clues that inform us in our dreams, in our periods of meditation and contemplation, and in our bodily symptoms, or lack of them. Can we relax easily? Are we beset with

aches and pains? If a medical examination can find no reason for bodily discomfort, we might look into our personal myths to see if there are some that are dysfunctional and not working on our behalf. Do we spend too much time with people who give us “a pain in the neck?” Do we have “gut feelings” that we ignore when making decisions?

Besides learning from my friend Joseph Campbell, I also learned a great deal from Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy. Early in his career, Ellis realized that what he was then calling Rational Therapy was not descriptive enough. He changed the name because he understood that it was necessary to bring emotions and behavior into the process. These two luminaries are just two of many who provide us with wisdom on how to change our dysfunctional myths. In the Western world, we have more options and choices than are available in developing countries. Even so, many people still suffer from depression and apathy. More often than not, this suffering stems from a collection of dysfunctional personal myths, an insight that the Buddha grasped centuries ago. These men and women have imagined the way their world “should be.” When the world does not measure up to their expectations, they suffer. Remember that I defined “myths” as “imaginary” narratives. If we have imagined the world in an unrealistic way, we can learn to imagine the world in a realistic way. And when we improve our mythology on the personal level, we will have an opportunity to change our interactions with people on the social and cultural level.

Jackie Robinson grew up in poverty but wanted more than anything to play major league baseball. The cultural myths of the time told him, however, that black athletes couldn't be baseball players. The best they could hope for was to get a decent job and play baseball on weekends, or perhaps participate in one of the “colored leagues” that consisted only of black athletes. Robinson started out by playing baseball in one of the “colored leagues,” where talent scouts noticed him. Branch Rickey was a team manager for the Brooklyn Dodgers whose scouts identified Robinson; Rickey courageously signed him and that action changed the face (and the color) of baseball. Rickey did not accept the current mythologies and neither did Robinson. Together they made a paradigm shift—not in the world at large but certainly in the world of sports.

Jackie Robinson walked his talk, fighting for civil rights the rest of his life, even after he retired from baseball. Changing the mythology of the baseball community, as he and Rickey did, began to change the cultural myths about race relations. In time, people began to see that if Jackie Robinson could excel in baseball, if Duke Ellington could

excel in music, and if Harry Belafonte could excel in movies, the cultural myths of the era must be dysfunctional. Eventually, African-American candidates for the presidency of the United States emerged in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

I am not an advocate of the one-person theory of history, nor do I hold that there is a simple cause-and-effect relationship between events. When the times are ready for it, however, one person or a small group of people can initiate a change, especially if there are social supports in place to reinforce and to build on the new cultural myths that come into play.

To accelerate this process, it would help each of us to know what we want to do and to establish a belief system that supports *what we want* and not what *we don't want*. One way to discover the belief system that underlies our current personal myth is by finding out the underlying intention that is running our mythology. Here are some myths that reveal various intentions: I want peak vitality because I want to win every basketball game this season for my team. I want peak vitality because I want to be a better sexual athlete in bed. I want peak vitality because I want to live a long and healthy life. I want peak vitality because my body is the temple of God. I want peak vitality so that I can do all of my tasks and not be fatigued at the end of the day. I want peak vitality so that I can be a role model for my children. I want peak vitality so that I can maintain my mental and spiritual health.

If a personal myth is too lofty or unrealistic, a binge or backslide is likely because the individual cannot implement the myth in behavior. Personal myths have to be realistic and geared to the individual. They have to be implemented one step at a time, one day at a time. For instance, if you are not a runner already, don't plan to run a marathon in a week. You need to break up your conditioning schedule into practical and achievable goals.

Pacing is very important. By pacing, I mean the ability to expend your energy at the right time and in the right place and based on common-sense habits such as adequate sleep, proper diet, regular exercise, mental alertness, emotional health, social support, and spiritual connection.

In replacing a destructive myth with a constructive one, choose a new myth with a higher emotional proficient than the old one. Pick something that draws you to it, or inspires you. Joseph Campbell said to follow your bliss. In keeping with that, go with the choice that will provide you with reinforcements, rewards, and satisfaction on the most levels: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual. Or you can ask yourself which is going to provide you with a

maximum reward in one of these areas. You might get such emotional satisfaction out of the choice that it's all right that it doesn't give you much intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Your body will tell you whether the new myth is constructive or destructive, which is why you need to learn to trust and listen to your body. Your body will tell you in terms of relaxation, exaltation, and freedom from aches and pains that your choice is right. Physical vitality is your guide to your emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social vitality. You can sense *all* of them by how your body feels, which is why it is so pertinent to be aware of what your body is saying. To stay attentive to my body's cues, I do yoga every morning and moving meditation or sitting meditation. The body is an excellent guide. It is constantly telling you something, which is why embodying a change is the best way to bring about that change. So simply take time to focus on your body. Ask yourself what your body is telling you.

There is more room for change in personal myths than many people recognize. If you have intention, if you know what you are doing and where you want to go, if you are clear on what you want, then you start to pick up, by subtle or blatant clues, who or what will be an ally in the transformation of your myths. Now there is no guarantee that this is always going to happen, but by making your personal myth and your intention stronger, you increase its likelihood and also raise your vitality.

Joseph Campbell said that we each have to create a new myth for our time. He was absolutely right. Many of the old myths are played out.

The need for a new unifying mythic vision amidst the disorienting cacophony of competing myths persists. Abraham Lincoln's famous Civil War speech plea is more appropriate than ever. He observed that "the dogmas of the past are inadequate to the stormy present. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." This is not inconsistent with the mythology of the North American Iroquois who ask in what way the decisions we make today will affect the seventh generation that follows us.

As a result of studying Native American and other indigenous people's mythologies, some contemporary anthropologists and psychologists have proposed a number of strategies for implementing new functional mythologies:

- 1) *Learned optimism* counters the tendency to believe that when something terrible happens to one's group or nation, it will be permanent and pervasive.

2) *Subordinate goals* are mutually beneficial outcomes that transcend the separate interests of conflicting groups.

3) *Synergy* leads to beneficial outcomes that transcend the separate interests of the group and the individual.

4) *Emotional education* supplements reasoning and critical thinking with the development of children's ability to defer gratification, control their anger, cultivate insight about their own feelings, and develop empathy for others.

5) *Spiritual enrichment* can clarify an individual's values and ethics, as well as those held by groups.

In conclusion, Joseph Campbell understood the importance of myth for our time, and he popularized this understanding through his books, his lectures, and his television series. Other scholars have reached the same conclusion, though they may not use the term "mythology." But time is running out. We need to translate theory into action. A living mythology is more than belief, more than attitude, more than emotion. If dysfunctional myths and paradigms are going to shift, the new narrative needs to lead to new behaviors.

Vitality is a canvas and we need to have a palette with different paints on it to create a beautiful, multicolored picture. This self-portrait is composed, in great part, of our personal myths, and we need to select those self-statements, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that will keep us physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually vital. Indeed, we must think anew and act anew.

