

By Telling Legends, He Became One Himself

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Special to The New York Times

YONKERS — He was most of all a teacher, and in his 38 years at Sarah Lawrence College, Joseph Campbell brightened his small classes in literature and mythology with luminous stories, a distinctive slant on life and the admonition to "follow your bliss." Many of his students were changed forever.

He did not gain popular prominence until long after his retirement in 1972, and not fully until this year, a year after his death at age 83, when six televised hourlong conversations with Bill Moyers on the Public Broadcasting Service brought his wisdom and vitality to millions of viewers, many of whom were also changed forever.

'He Really Taught You to Think'

On Tuesday night, 600 former students, colleagues and other people whose lives he touched — people like Jacqueline Onassis, Mr. Moyers, the "Star Wars" creator George Lucas, Laurence Rockefeller and Joan Konner, dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism — gathered on the campus here to remember Mr. Campbell and to try to articulate what made him so special.

"He freed the boundaries of my mind," said

Nancy Sureck, the class of 1950, who took Mr. Campbell's class 40 years ago. "He could travel across centuries, and he could travel across continents. He made us think differently."

"I walked away from his conferences and I felt like doing cartwheels," said Sara Hunter Hudson, '62, now a banker with Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company. "I felt my work with him was the apex of my intellectual experience, not only at Sarah Lawrence, but of my whole life. He really taught you to think and gave you confidence to go into the depths of your mind."

Mr. Campbell, a mythologist, saw myths not just as stories but as expressions of human stirrings and found unities between the classical and religious myths of the West and the East. He joined the literature faculty at Sarah Lawrence in 1934 but did not drift to mythology, he recalled shortly before his death, until some years later, when three students asked him to give a course on the subject. "It had become evident to these three," he said, "that mythology was my principal interest."

It was his twice-a-month conferences with young women at Sarah Lawrence that led him

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Joseph Campbell, who taught at Sarah Lawrence College, was remembered Tuesday at a party.

How a Teacher of Legends at Sarah Lawrence Became One Himself

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to the ideas that produced the 1949 work "The Hero With a Thousand Faces," a comparative study of Eastern and Western myths.

In that book, he wrote: "Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse, or now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale, it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told."

Sarah Lawrence Chair Endowed

Forty years later, "The Hero With a Thousand Faces" has been on the New York Times best-seller list for 16 weeks. A second book, "The Power of Myth," based on his conversations with Mr. Moyers, has been on the list for 24 weeks. More than 35,000 tapes

of the Moyers-Campbell conversations have been sold.

Campbell insights abound. A typical one holds that God can be seen as neither a believer's real presence nor an atheist's lie, but as a metaphor for "spiritual realizations" potential within the human heart, which are to be brought into play in human life. Students recall his fascination with the symbol of the circle and the idea of birth, quest, death and rebirth.

Those who gathered here at two different programs, sandwiched between a tea, a cocktail hour and a dinner, agreed that Mr. Campbell had, in the words of Mr. Moyers, an ability to project his qualities as a "great teacher and a great human being."

The college has raised \$750,000 toward an endowed Joseph Campbell Chair that will be held for five years by the Asian studies scholar J. Mason Gentzler; it is seeking an additional \$250,000 to establish a lecture fund.

"A teacher is the most valuable treasure you can have in life," Mr. Moyers said, "and when Joe Campbell came on, he was irresistible."

Mr. Moyers said Mr. Campbell had "honest eyes" and an ability to talk with enormous intimacy, even when

An alumna 'felt like doing cartwheels' after class.

cameras were on him. He also had a wonderful collection of stories, including fables he had created from incidents he had read or heard, Mr. Moyers said.

Mr. Campbell, he said, had a powerful impact on people who would otherwise have little interest in mythology. Mr. Moyers told of encountering a woman on Eighth Avenue who related how years before she had reached such despair with her acting career that she went home and turned on the gas, hoping to die. As the gas spread, she noticed Mr. Moyers on television "talking to a wonderful man." It was the first half of a two-part interview Mr. Moyers did with Mr. Campbell in 1981, and at the end of the show, Mr. Moyers said

he would be back next week with the rest of the conversation.

"I thought, 'I've got to hear that,'" the woman told Mr. Moyers. "I turned off the gas and opened the windows."

Stories like these suggest that Mr. Campbell is fast becoming the subject of myth himself. Mr. Campbell's widow, the dancer and choreographer Jean Erdman, was honored at the tribute. Her marriage to Mr. Campbell in 1938 is part of his legend as well; she had been his student.

Mrs. Onassis, who acquired "The Power of Myth" for Doubleday, said Mr. Campbell was "accessible and funny," striking different chords in different people. "But obviously people are seeking for something," she said. "It's an anxious time to be living."

Ms. Konner, a 1951 alumna and executive producer of the recent six-part Moyers series, spoke of Mr. Campbell's ability to inspire people to "find out what it is you really intend — those things that have inner value for you — and spend the rest of your life trying to realize them."

Students who took his class told how they have heeded his advice and

"followed their bliss." Ms. Hudson went from a career as an editor on an art magazine to one as a banker. Lora Schultz, '62, gave up designing jewelry to ride show horses.

Ms. Sureck, now a consultant specializing in arranging centennial celebrations, said Mr. Campbell inspired her to "go to an unknown place, explore your stamina, trust yourself to survive in an unknown place." As a young woman, she spent two years on the then-primitive island of Cozumel, off Mexico, working in a silk-screen studio and learning to dive.

Recently, she said, her 25-year-old daughter, Suzy, suffered a crushed hand in an accident in a sculpture foundry. She is still undergoing operations to rebuild the hand and regain functions, but when she regained the ability to type, the first sentence she pecked was a quote from Campbell on the journey the hero must take:

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."