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Understanding myth

On centennial of his birth, Joseph Campbell admirers find his work more relevant than ever

By Michael Sandrock, For the Camera
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Mel Gibson likely never met Joseph Campbell, which is a shame, because the movie star-producer might have had some interesting conversations with Campbell, the late comparative mythologist who was born 100 years ago Friday.

Gibson as the producer of "The Passion of the Christ," interpreted the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus Christ through the lens of Christ's extreme physical suffering.



Barton Glasser / For the Camera

Deborah Bowman, right, and one of her teaching assistants Dan Archer, left, stand before a painting used in art therapy at Naropa University. Bowman uses the teachings of Joseph Campbell in her lessons.

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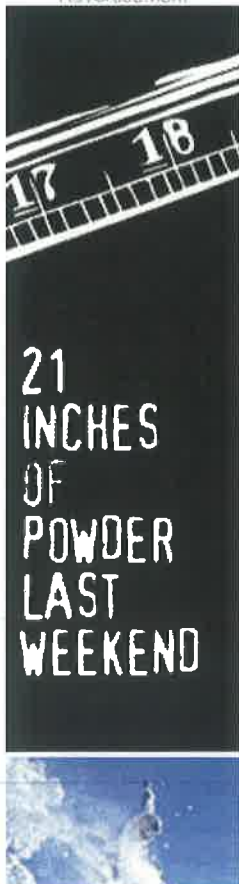
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Campbell, on the other hand, looked at the crucifixion in as a historical event that became mythologized. He would likely have seen Gibson's movie as one of many possible interpretations of Christ's life and death.

Campbell, who died in 1987 and who became known to the general public through the PBS series "The Power of Myth," was a champion of the world's mythology, in which he included religion. In the new, centennial edition of "The Hero's Journey," (New World Library) Campbell tells an interviewer that religion is "mythology misunderstood."

It is a misunderstanding, he says, that confuses the metaphors that are the language of myth with historical fact, leading to a loss of the wisdom inherent in the stories that comprise mankind's spiritual journey. Now, 100 years after his birth, Campbell's work in explaining the meaning of the mythic metaphors is more important than ever, say locals who studied under Campbell and who use his work in their own teachings.

"Joseph Campbell made an indelible mark," said Deborah Bowman, chairwoman of Naropa University's Transpersonal Psychology Department. "He was such a powerful teacher. He is very relevant still. He struck a deep chord."

That chord resonates with young people eager to discover answers as they start out on their own life's journey, said Waylon Lewis, publisher of the

DEFINE





Boulder-based magazine "elephant."

"Campbell, in his interviews with (PBS's) Bill Moyers, first opened my eyes to the relevance of ancient, strange myths from every culture you can think of to 'now,' to society," Lewis said. "He showed that if we let go of taking our myths literally you know, 'whoever begat whomever who lived 560 years,' as in the Old Testament, or they captured the sun in a cave, as in the Shinto tradition then we are free to access the timeless wisdom and values expressed in those traditions."

Campbell was captured by the power of myth early in life. He was born in New York City March 26, 1904, and discovered an early interest in Native American life and lore after attending Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. From that early love of Native Americans, Campbell's studies broadened from the sciences to include all the humanities after reading "The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci" when he was 18.

After studying at Columbia and Princeton, and in Paris and Munich, Campbell returned to the United States just before the Depression. With no jobs to be found, he spent five years in the woods of New York doing nothing but reading. There, engrossed in the great stories of the world's cultures, with no distractions, and fueled by a sharp mind and an insatiable curiosity, he began formulating his theories of mythology before going on to teach at Sarah Lawrence for 38 years.

Nancy Ortenberg, a Boulder psychotherapist, calls herself fortunate to have studied under Campbell at seminars in California late in his career.

"Campbell's teachings have an emphasis on metaphor, mythology and the creation of meaning in one's life," she said. "He inspired me greatly. He was like a grandfather, telling stories. He was so moving and inspiring to be around."

Adds Bowman, "He was an illuminator. He would meet individually with every one of his students, find out what was going on in their lives, what their bliss was. He saw how the basic stories of myth are repeated across cultures, and he had a delight and wonder he shared. Aren't these jewels and gems wonderful? And we can share in that delight."

Those "jewels and gems" include the whole range of the world's mythology that has been accumulated through generations, from the first paintings on the caves of Lascaux in France to the works of James Joyce, Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee that he encountered in Paris while a graduate student at the Sorbonne, and on to the landings on the moon.

Campbell took a "much bigger picture" than one individual religion or myth, Ortenberg said. "He believed stories, myths and metaphors run across religion. He said, 'I don't believe in God. I know God.' He would talk about having the religious experience vs. the religious belief."

Despite his non-literalist view of religion, Campbell did not try to dissuade people from religion. In fact, he said in "The Hero's Journey," he found that the faith of believers actually deepened after his classes or seminars.

In explaining the Grail romance and the 1922 T.S. Eliot poem "The Waste Land," Campbell said that some people today live in the "wasteland" of an "inauthentic" life.

"They just get a job because they've got to live and that is rubbish ... Now how does that get healed? It gets healed through the example of an authentic life."

Mythology, Campbell believed, such as the Grail story of the Christian knight Parzival, can show humans how to lead authentic lives if they know how to understand the myth.

Take the crucifixion of Christ.

"If you think of this as a calamity that is the result of your sins and Adams's sin and all that, that Jesus had to come down, the Son of the Father, give himself up on the Cross for death, and look sad there that's one reading," Campbell wrote in "The Hero's Journey,"

There is, however, another way of understanding the crucifixion, he explained: "as the zeal of eternity for incarnation in time, which involves the breaking up of the one into the many and the acceptance of the sufferings of the will as part of the organic delights ... St. Augustine says this somewhere, where he says, 'Jesus went to the Cross as the bridegroom to the bride.' That's a total transformation of the idea."

Campbell saw a similarity between the crucifixion and the Buddhist saying that "Life is the joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.' All life is sorrowful. You are not going to change that. It's all right for everyone else to be sorrowful, but what about you being sorrowful? Well, participate. For me that is the sense of the Crucifixion."

Campbell's legacy, Naropa's Bowman said, was one of seeing in mythology "guiding themes for society, individually and collectively. It resonates and helps us understand our own journey better. That we are part of something larger than ourselves. It is both reassuring and inspiring, that the outer journey is mirrored by the inner journey."

Added "elephant's" Lewis, "Most convincing of all was the fact that all of Campbell's learning and insights only made him more open-minded, more curious, more cheerful. Campbell can show my generation how religions and spirituality of the entire world are not only precious but in some way united. They all point to peace, non-violence and living in harmony with nature. And how to achieve it."

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