

THE POWER OF MYTHS TO MOTIVATE - Michael Bennett
(www.michaelbennett.org.uk)

Having spent some time considering the various features and functions of myths and outlining the importance of reflexive myths as a source of moral motivation let us look a little closer at the mechanics of how myths motivate and effect personal change.

We know that reason has insufficient power to provide moral motivation. With our earlier discussion on communicative rationality we are hopefully more comfortable with the fact that reason and emotion are not necessarily antinomies and, as a result, they can complement each other in processes of deliberation. Just as we looked at the role of rhetorical devices in deliberation we need to understand what it is about myths that enables them to touch our lives in such a way as to lift us with a sense of enchantment which provides us with 'an experience both of accord with the social order, and of harmony with the universe.' (Campbell 1991: 5)

People don't fight for political goals, moral values or personal quests solely with the aid of abstract arguments and logical deduction, they need symbols and images with which to identify. Thus, the first building block of a myth's ability to persuade is the use of a rich symbolism in one form or another. It can take the form of a variety of rhetorical devices, including metaphor, simile, allegory and irony. It can operate in any genre that permits the use of meaning at more than one level and is not limited to written or spoken language but can be found in all symbolic structures such as poetry, dance, sculpture, painting and mime. The symbolism in myth is connotative rather than denotative; it promotes meaning rather than labelling. It is analogical wherein the sign and signified seem to have a physical or iconic relationship as opposed to the digital language of technology and science in which the relationship between science and signified is abstract and arbitrary. To replace one mathematical sign with another is a matter of convention; to replace the Cross with the Crescent is unthinkable. As Labouvie-Vief (1994: 39-41) suggests, *logos*, with its denotative function, refers to that part of knowledge that can be demonstrated and is strongly linked to the need for the provision of proof and evidence. Consequently it is more tangible than *mythos* in so far as it can be connected to the 'real' world through precise definitions and consensual agreements on truth. Yet, on the other hand, the digital and abstract nature of *logos* results in a less concrete relationship to the world. Myth produces a form of knowledge that is best described as *wisdom* rather than *science*. It is more concerned with the

psychological effect of a symbol than its ability to represent something. It deals in the complex, organic and the whole picture. It is concerned with the significance that symbol carries rather than its accuracy. As McGilchrist (2009) brilliantly describes, in his analysis of the different roles taken by the two hemispheres of the brain, the symbolism of mythology is produced by the right hemisphere with its interest in a holistic view of the world, and the abstract symbolism of science comes from the left hemisphere which produces a world of precisely differentiated parts connected by rules. Just as we need both sides of the brain to work together we need logos and mythos to cooperate. Without precision, rule and differentiation we would not be able to analyse and map a world; without mythos we would not care

The second aspect of the power of myths to persuade and motivate is their ability to attract people to them and create involvement and identification. This idea is developed further in the article on *erotic identification*. For now, let us note that myths have their historical roots in an oral tradition wherein recitation was an interpersonal event whereby the transmission of knowledge and information was based on a sense of participation and emotional proximity. The mythic mode is organic. 'We participate in an event; our attitude is performative. We are embedded in an interaction. ... There is a merging, thus, between the experiencing subject and the object experience.' (Labouvie-Vief: 34)

When enthralled by a myth we 'sacrifice' our analytical distance and scientific objectivity in order to feel the connection and emotional resonance with the mythic characters and narrative. We surrender and lose ourselves so that the individual can feel that her life attracts a meaning to itself from her identification with characters who are larger than life and with an understandable cosmos. It would be a mistake to dismiss this need for such an identification as either childish for an individual adult or primitive in terms of whole cultures. Whilst it does need to be put on a reflexive footing, once this transformation has been achieved it represents the achievement of a level of maturity and wisdom wherein we accept our need for emotional sustenance in our endeavour to act morally and are able to manage the negative consequences of this state of affairs.

A narrative that lacks credibility and authority will not be able to generate sufficient psychological identification and, as a consequence, will not be persuasive. Lincoln (1992: 24) outlines a four stage classification of narratives in terms of their truth claims, their credibility

and their authority. At the first stage, we have fables which make no claims to truth and are accepted as pure fictions. Legends do claim to offer accurate accounts of past events, but they cannot supply suitable evidence so their claim to truth lacks credibility. History, on the other hand, can offer credible claims to truth because it provides arguments and evidence through discourse. At the fourth stage, myths are more compelling than history for two reasons. In the first case, rather than promoting identification with real characters from history, who will inevitably have feet of clay, myths create larger than life heroes who represent the people that we admire and with whom we identify. In myth the claim to truth is not a claim to accurately describe a series of facts. It is more the case that the truth being represented is linked to the validity claim of authenticity whereby the hero is true to himself and, in so far as the hero is displaying universal aspects of human behaviour, he is true for us at the same time. It is this aspect of truth that is being claimed and which gives the mythic narrative greater credibility than other types of stories. Myths gain an authority that is derived from the credibility of their claim to represent a psychological truth. Myths are also more compelling than history because their authority is enhanced because, when considered reflexively, such a myth knows itself to be based within the parameters of communicative rationality and thereby gains an extra authority by being able to display its ability to conform with, and simultaneously express, the secular sacred. The persuasiveness of a myth is related to the success of its claim to be genuinely authentic which in turn lends it credibility. At the same time, the claim to authenticity connects the myth to the immanent transcendentals in communicative rationality which lends a sacred authority to this form of narrative.

We are familiar with the concept of the 'shock of the new' in the realm of aesthetics. Something similar happens with myths. The ability of myths to motivate us is facilitated not so much by their capacity to shock us by revealing new ways of seeing the world, it is more a case of shocking us by introducing us to the universal and the ancient. Initial contact with a myth can be a process of unlearning in which familiar emotional and cognitive patterns are challenged. We are thrown off balance and invited to experience the world differently. The new metaphors, stories and concepts that the myth offers stimulate us to: consider new ways of perception; reappraise our conceptions and come to terms with some new feelings. The impact on the person is more a matter of *ethics than aesthetics*. The psychological transformation we experience when we respond creatively to a myth involves changing our moral and ethical orientation. It is an *awakening to a new sense of the universal* and the realisation that, as with anamnesis, we share common ground and common values with all

who are in the human fellowship. Myth, therefore, has persuasiveness because it re-educates our moral outlook and invites us to perceive and understand a new moral cosmos. Moreover, the ritualistic aspect of a myth reinforces this process of change by anchoring us into a community of like-minded people by means of a number of ceremonial practices that bond and bind us.

This process of individual psychological transformation can also operate at the group and social level. Through myths we can find a common outlook and moral perspective from which to challenge dogmas and ideologies such as racism and sexism. Indeed we can create new myths that respond to social changes that reveal previously unrecognised forms of repression and facilitate new moral responses to the disadvantages that have been experienced by women, homosexuals and people with a disability. By contesting the credibility and authority of existing worldviews mythological narratives not only assist us at the level of our individual character to find new connections with the moral universe, they also persuade and motivate us to act morally by revealing our common ground with others and by expressing the need for solidarity.

In order to effect change myths must be locally and individually relevant. The themes of myths are universal but, if they are to succeed in stimulating our identification with them, they must be relevant to us in our everyday lives. Their persuasiveness is dependent upon their ability to retain their universal appeal and yet be translatable into a variety of local cultures and contexts. They must enable us to identify with the hero and her quest not only in the world of gods, demons and dragons but they must also help us to see ourselves as Everyman so that each person can find that heroic part of themselves and live a moral life through everyday acts of kindness, understanding and compassion and be receptive to the moral actions of others.

References

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See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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