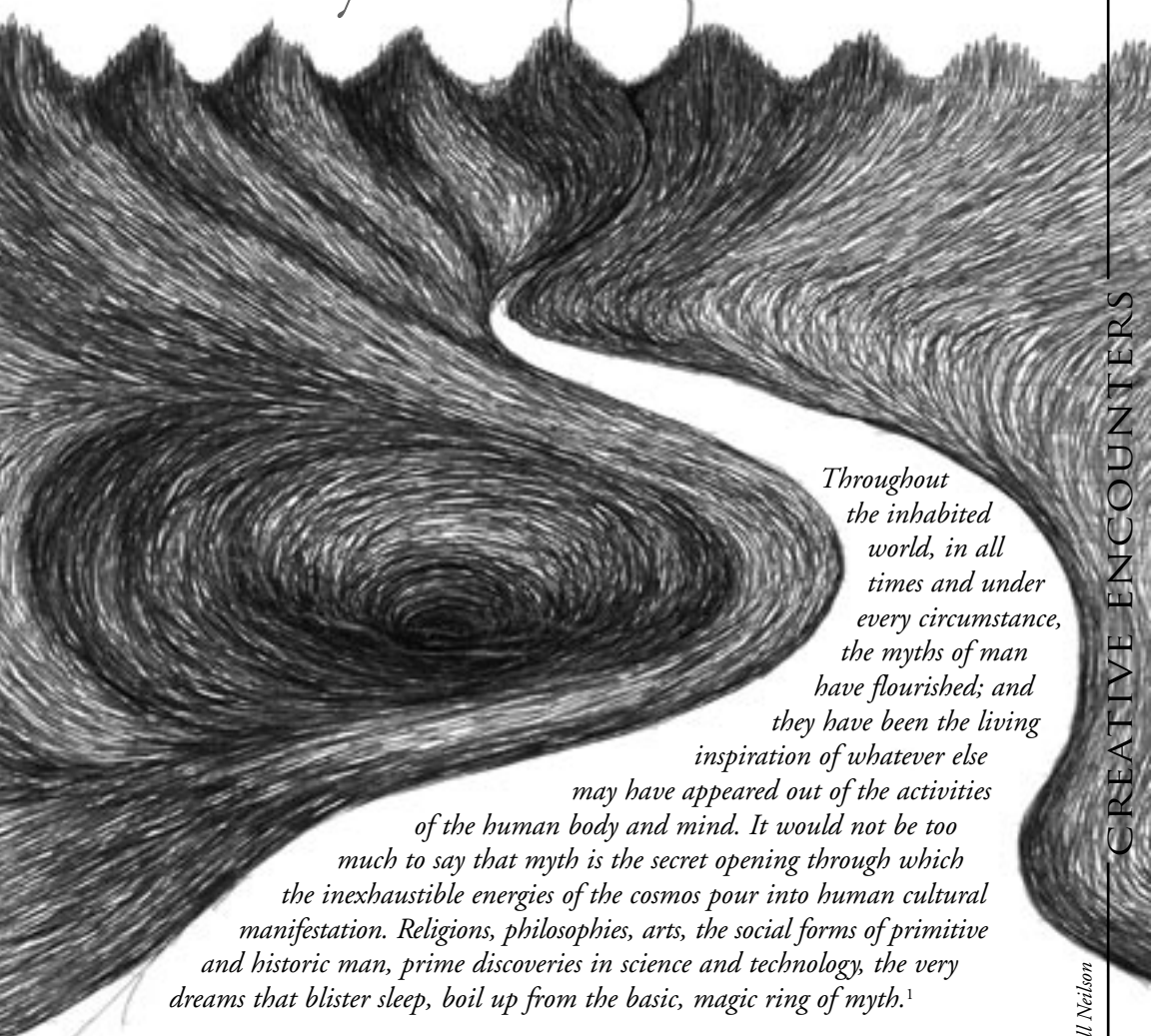


The Hero's Quest & the Holy Grail

JIM KENNEY



Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.¹

Why do we tell hero tales? Why do Gilgamesh, Herakles, Beowulf, Perceval or – for that matter – Shane or Frodo or Luke Skywalker mean anything at all in the early 21st century? Who needs their stories? More to the point, who needs any “old” or “big” story? After all, we have – as our postmodern academic

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colleagues inform us – moved beyond the need for grand narratives. In this view, the big stories – about religion, eternal verities, truth, democracy, politics, and so on – tell no tales worth hearing. Instead they merely re-chant the hypnotic rhythms of domination, in cadences dictated by power elites. No more grand narratives!

Occasionally, however, we may feel the cultural tug of one of those narratives. Now and again we may yield to the elusive but seductive power of myth. In his first book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, published nearly sixty years ago, Joseph Campbell offered an explanation. He outlined what he believed to be the enduring structure of all “hero’s journey” tales and he wove an unforgettable tapestry of convergent cultural variations on that heroic motif.

There’s a certain type of myth, which one might call the vision quest, going in quest of a boon, a vision, which has the same form in every mythology. That is the thing that I tried to present in the first book I wrote, The Hero with a Thousand Faces. All these different mythologies give us the same essential quest. You leave the world that you’re in and go into a depth or into a distance or up to a height. There you come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world you formerly inhabited. Then comes the problem either of

staying with that, and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again. That’s not an easy thing to do.²

Campbell borrowed an evocative word from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* to identify this essential pattern of exit and return. He called it the “monomyth”.

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation–initiation–return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.

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.³

The monomyth is the journey of the hero in quest of healing, transformative magic, powerful weapons, the removal of a curse or the conquest of a great evil. At the same time, however, it evokes the interior journey to authentic selfhood, individuation, sanctity, and/or enlightenment. Campbell’s inquiry into this dynamic theme shaped *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and

continued as the most important frame for his life's work. Considered in a religious-spiritual context, the monomyth is an expression of the movement from transcendence to immanence: from the belief that the divine or the ultimate exists beyond the experienced world to the certainty that ultimacy pervades the universe and must be sought deep within – in experience, consciousness, relationship and personhood. In this quest, transcendence is not lost; it is

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instead discovered in reality's most secret interior corridors.

Campbell often described the journey of the shaman (the religious “voyager between worlds”) in monomythic terms. Fraught with peril (as any excursion into non-ordinary consciousness must be), the shaman's journey holds the key to discovering the mystery of life through the encounter with the invisible world that informs the visible. This, of course, is the stuff of myth and – Campbell insisted – of life. And so he directed our attention to the Arthurian cycle and the legends of the Grail. Here English-speakers might most closely encounter the shamanic subtext and most easily discern the monomyth – the greatest of the grand narratives.



The Shaman; original art, Lonnie Hamzon

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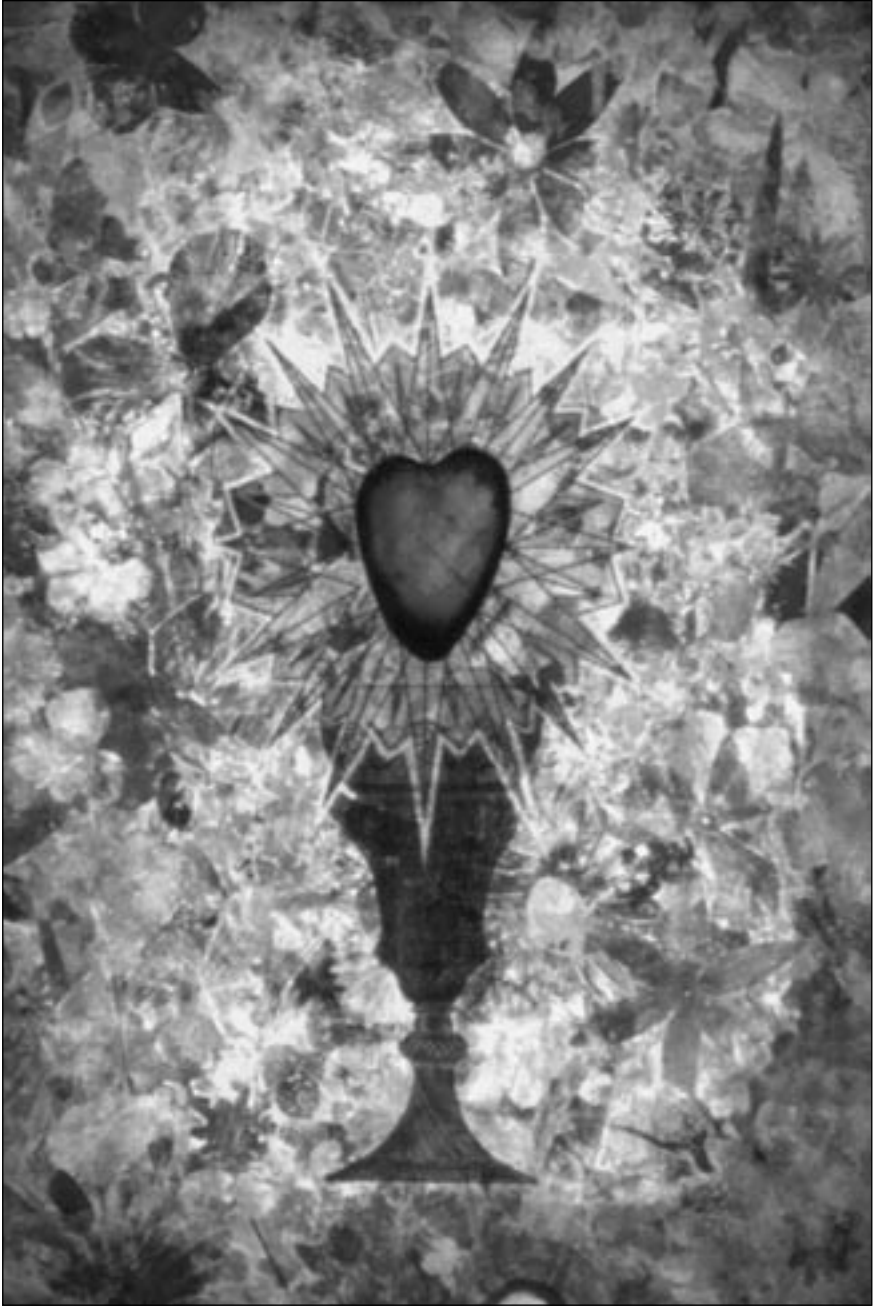
THE LEGEND OF THE HOLY GRAIL

A powerful King and his beautiful Queen, knights in armor, the departure from Camelot, the perils of the road, mysterious forests, magical swords, wizards and enchantresses, a wounded and wasting King, the discovery of the great boon, the return journey home to a world in transformation: these are the familiar elements of the most enduring exemplar of the Western monomythic cycle: the tales of the quest for the Holy Grail. Like all great variations on the theme, the collected songs and stories that shaped Arthur's legend revolve around the figure of the hero, the ancient (and even prehistoric) symbol of the human spiritual search. The questing knights are – like the shamans, the enlightened ones, the healers, the saviors, the bodhisattvas and the other paradigmatic religious voyagers – symbolic embodiments of the possibility of spiritual transformation. Campbell calls it “apotheosis” (from the Greek for “deification”, “exaltation”, “divinization”) and insists that it finds its moment in nearly every version of the heroic parable. It is the moment of the transformative expansion of consciousness, the “aha!”, the instant of *satori*.

The long development of the medieval hero cycle – from the romances of the French poet Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Joseph de Borron to Sir Thomas Malory's classic *Morte d'Arthur* – brought together Christian symbolism, elements of pagan Celtic spirituality, Oriental mythology, the 12th-century rediscovery of the timeless motif of woman as custodian of the spiritual mysteries, Hermetic alchemical lore, and the ancient mythic theme of the quest. At the center of this extraordinary complex reposed the Sangréal, the Holy Grail.

In its earliest appearances as the object of the heroic adventure, the Grail is a mysterious and powerful vessel symbolizing the fulfillment of physical and spiritual needs. It is almost certainly related to the ancient Celtic “horn of plenty” or cornucopia. (The Old French *grail* suggests a bowl or dish from the banquet table.) As the cycle of tales develops, the Grail comes to be identified with the cup from the Last Supper, the vessel from which Jesus fed the Apostles and which later caught the last drops of blood falling from the wound inflicted in his side by the Roman soldier Longinus at the climax of the crucifixion. The cup, entrusted to the care of Joseph of Arimathea, eventually travels to Britain where it is concealed in the castle of the Fisher King.

This latter figure, sometimes identified with a grandson or nephew of Joseph, is usually depicted as having suffered a wound as a result of which he and the lands surrounding his castle are slowly wasting away. (This familiar mythic motif provided the inspiration for T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.) If a knight should survive



The Grail; original art, Lonnie Hanson

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the road of trials and venture into the Fisher King's castle, he must then ask the correct question of the wounded monarch. In some versions of the story, the question that must be posed is disarmingly simple, "Whom does the Grail serve?" When the question is uttered the quest is achieved: the Grail is revealed, the King is made whole, the wasteland flowers, the hero is transfigured, and only the return journey remains. The key, of course, is in the question. "What validates the quest?" Why am I doing this?

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From the point of view of the comparative study of myth, symbol, and religion, the stories of the Grail Quest embody a universal theme: the human search and struggle for spiritual transformation. The hero's journey is the familiar stuff of myth and dream alike. It finds expression in the ritual, scripture, legend and literature of all times and cultures. As already noted, the quest itself embodies the spiritual shift from the search for transcendent meaning to the deep diving and surfacing that marks the journey into immanence – indwellingness.

P. L. Travers, long a student of the mythic and symbolic dimensions of the human search and the author of the

wonderful "Mary Poppins" stories, gives us a glimpse of one of the heroes of the Arthurian cycle, the young Perceval, as he learns for the first time of the final stage of the knight's quest. In her powerful story, "Le Chevalier Perdu", Perceval meets a mysterious cowed figure that describes the three stages of Knighthood. The stages of Induction and Action hold no mystery even for the simpleton. But Perceval has not yet understood the last phase of the journey.

Inwards. Into the heart of yourself. This is the third degree of Knighthood. It is known as Contemplation. This does not mean retreat from the world... rather that in undertaking his worldly adventures he encounters them also inwardly. "Who am I?" he will enquire of himself, 'this man who goes about righting wrongs?' Echo alone will make reply.... So it is with the dragons, the ill-famed knights, the distressed damsels, the fiends. They have their reflections in the inner selves that need to be struggled with, exorcised, and, indeed, accepted. The quest from the very beginning has had as its aim the knight's self-transformation. Only one made new by grace or made anew by his own efforts will find what he has sworn to find, a glimpse of the Sangreal.⁴

The great majority of surviving myths reflect the patriarchal worldview that produced them. The Arthurian cycle is

no exception. The hero is virtually always a male and, in fact, many of the dangers that he encounters along the path hint at a distant time when the newer patriarchal theme might have displaced an earlier symbol complex, centered on the worship of the Goddess and the celebration of nature. The temptresses, enchantresses, and crones of the stories – nearly always dispensers of wisdom – represent the now dimly-understood and yet still powerfully present feminine dimension. Dragon-slaying – a persistent Western mythic element – may well hark back to the encounter of the “new gods” of the Indo-European pantheon with the goddesses of prehistory, who were often symbolically linked with the dragon or the serpent. Even Padraic’s driving of the snakes from Ireland may echo the archaic conflict and symbolize the triumph of the new religion, Christianity, over the ancient rites of the pagan Goddess.

The Grail stories, however, possess a unique flavor, for they evolved in a time of astonishing florescence of the feminine principle. The 12th century in the Christian West saw the flowering of chivalry and the romantic ideal, the reemergence of esoteric spirituality in a variety of forms, and the rise of the troubadours’ celebration of the Virgin Mary and her emergence as the focus of an unparalleled outpouring of popular devotion. Each of these developments was an expression of a culture-wide resurgence of awareness of the power of woman.

When one reads the Grail stories with a view to the mythic elements of the hero’s journey and sensitivity to the dynamic encounter of feminine spirituality with the

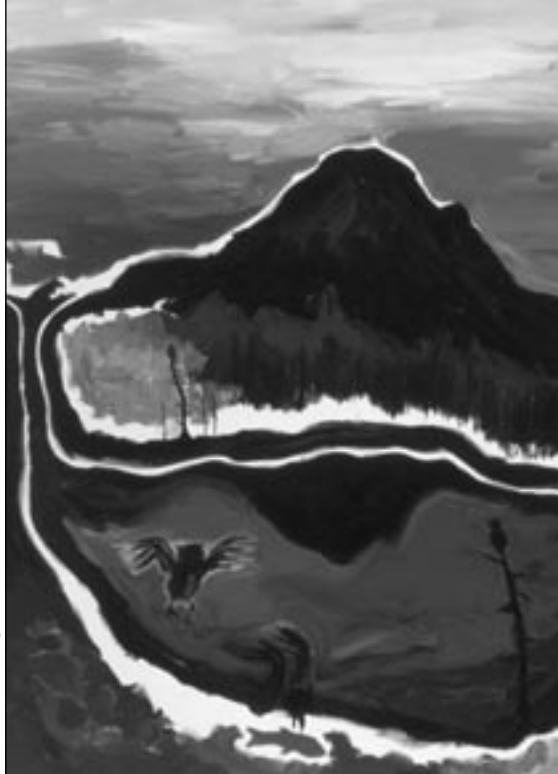
prevailing spiritual rhythms of a masculine world, a compelling dreamscape begins to unfold. Guinivere, as Queen, emerges as a symbol of the feminine, intimately linked to the life-giving and nourishing powers of Nature. She is at once Virgin and Temptress, Mother and Lover, Wise Woman and Witch. As a spiritual symbol, the Queen represents the intuitive, meditative faculty as well as the occult powers (for good or ill) of consciousness. She is a symbol of the transformative powers of the unconscious. In Jungian terms, the Queen is a classic anima archetype (a symbol of the female complement to the masculine psyche), as the King is an archetypal animus. Since she is a symbol of life, her abduction and imprisonment in the kingdom of death represents the hold of death on the human soul. Lancelot, in the story of her rescue, is a savior figure whose victory restores the human birthright of immortality. In fact, the challenge of the mysterious knight who carries off the Queen includes the promise that if he is vanquished, all the prisoners from the land of Arthur will be released, i.e., restored to eternal life. The abduction of the Queen echoes the wasting sickness of the Fisher King. Chrétien de Troyes’ tale of Guinivere’s abduction to the kingdom of death resonates with numerous other mythic tales, among them the classic legend of Persephone.

In myth, the King is a symbol of supernatural power, magic, consciousness, virtue, and the ruling principle. His coronation represents victory, spiritual accomplishment, and completion. The aging King, Arthur (at the end of the tale) or Lear, represents the collective

unconscious, the world-memory. The King is hero, father, and (at times) Messiah. In this latter connection, we encounter the dead king whose return is eagerly awaited by his subjects. Arthur himself is the most familiar of the mythic "sleeping kings," in Malory's famous phrase, "Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus," ("Arthur, the once and future king"). The King and Queen together represent the spiritual and alchemical hieros gamos, the "supernatural marriage" of heaven and earth, sun and moon, gold and silver.

The attainment of the long-sought goal, the reunion of the masculine and the feminine, the drama of death and rebirth... all are reflections of the essential intuition. And all refract the essential illumination. As one becomes familiar with the basic stages of the mythic adventure and the hero's archetypal encounters, her/his experience of the world undergoes a genuine transformation. The hero theme is suddenly everywhere. Literature, ballads, movies, television, dreams, and video games all resonate with the archaic rhythm of the shamanic journey. While it has been suggested that ours is an age of mythlessness, there is no denying the ubiquitousness of the primal pattern: *departure, initiation, and return*. Perhaps we do suffer from mythlessness of a sort in the sense that so many of our stories seem borrowed, wrenched from another space-time context and forced to do duty in our own. It is reasonable to ask, as the great ecological visionary Thomas Berry does, in his *The Dream of the Earth* and his *The Great Work*, whether or not we are capable of summoning up and sharing a new story, a myth for an age of renewal,

Maiden Peak: original art, Liz Gill Neilson



a vision of a new quest for the Grail of personal, spiritual and planetary renewal and wholeness.

What the hero's tale – echoed in countless cultures – may most powerfully suggest is that we all stand at the threshold, having heard the call. Still reluctant, we know at the deepest level that the journey beckons and that we must set out.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton University Press: NY, 1949), p. 3.

² Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 129.

³ *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 30.

⁴ P.L. Travers, "Le Chevalier Perdu", *Parabola*, XII, N1, 1986, p. 17.