

THE STORIES WE TELL:  
THE MEANING OF MYTH  
(Version 2a)

A Sunday service led by the  
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on January 22, 2017, at the  
*Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Beth Casebolt)<sup>1</sup>

*The light of this chalice reminds us*

*That it is a symbol*

*Of all the world's religions.*

*This small light shines*

*As do the fires burned*

*To ward off the darkness*

*And welcome back the sun*

*In the Celtic and Native American faiths;*

*As do the Jewish Shabbat candles*

*And the Christian altar candles;*

*As do the oil lamps of the Hindu Divali*

*And the candles of Buddhism;*

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<sup>1</sup> Casebolt, Beth, in *Sources of Our Faith*. Kathleen Rolenz, ed. Boston: Skinner House, 2012. pp. 52-53.

*And it is a symbol of the light inside each of us, as*

*recognized by Muslims;*

*It is a symbol of the sun*

*And evolution as studied by Humanists.*

*As we light this chalice,*

*May we be reminded that this light*

*Is a symbol that ties us to many faiths,*

*Beliefs, traditions, and customs*

*From which we can learn and enrich our lives.*

- Beth Casebolt-

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

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MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

**[Silence]**

Thank you. Blessed be.

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OFFERING

This congregation offers a liberal spiritual home to seekers from all walks of life. We are proud of the work we do in the community, the classes we offer for children and adults, for the care and concern provided by this community and its staff, and for these two beautiful campuses that have each become a spiritual home for so many.

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is \_\_\_\_\_.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

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## THE STORIES WE TELL: THE MEANING OF MYTH Reverend Michael Walker

I've always found mythology and folklore to be a fascinating subject. As a child, I was captivated by the drama and magic of the old stories. All the heroes and villains; the quest or hero's journey; the discoveries, rewards and punishments; as well as the morals of the stories that actually said some truth about humanity. As an adult in college, I learned of the work of the great mythographer, Joseph Campbell, who used as the lens through which he studied cross-cultural myths, theories from the archetypal psychology work of Carl Jung. Psychology puts forth the idea that there is inherent truth

or wisdom to be gleaned from any story, from your dreams, and from other ways in which we understand the world around us – even if these stories are not literal or factual. Our minds are seething hotbeds of fantastical ideas that contain some inner truth about our own lives. These stories, these dreams, are part of our own personal mythologies. I have learned that in every myth, every story that we tell, there is a moral... some metaphorical meaning... a lesson to be taught and learned.

Sometime in the early years of Christianity becoming established in Rome, the Greek word for *story*, which is *myth*, began to take on the definition of *falsehood*. And so, it has become common to use the word *myth* when we are talking about something that is not real. However, as you may have heard me say

before, *myth* has always meant *story*, and stories serve some other purpose besides the rote recitation of historical facts.

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So, let me give you a little bit of background about the work of psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, in which he described *archetypes* as the missing link between the mind and myths. This was important to him, because he – like Joseph Campbell, after him – had noted the cross-cultural similarities in mythologies from peoples around the world. One theory for similarities for disparate myths that contain, for example, dark forests and great floods, the stealing of fire, and gifts from the gods, is *cultural diffusion*. For example, when one considers that proto-Celtic people walked from India to northern and western

Europe, over many generations, it makes sense that there may be similarities in stories from India and Ireland. And there are similarities! However, there was no known early interactions between cultures in, say, South Africa and Siberia, so how could their stories have any similarities? Carl Jung theorized about the *collective unconscious*, a cultural repository shared by all humanity. The concept is that we are all born and raised, enculturated with ideas and beliefs that come from this collective unconscious. And the templates for these ideas and beliefs that arise from our unconscious, these great ideas that show up in so many different stories across the world, were called by Jung: *archetypes*.

You may be familiar with many archetypes, even if you've never really been familiar with Jungian

Psychology. In Western culture, we find the Great Father or Sky-father, and the Blessed Son of the father. These archetypes loom quite large in our Western culture. The Norse had Odin and Thor, the Greeks had Zeus and Apollo. And, how about the Chinese god, Pan Gu, who created people out of clay. That sounds like another story you may be more familiar with...

And then, there are Earth Mother stories in almost every culture. And Greek, Japanese, and Middle Eastern myths all have a story about someone who made a journey to the underworld, the land of death, and then returned. Oh! Have you heard the story of the Andean peoples of South America, who repopulated the world after a great flood? Surely, they never heard of Noah!

A lot of myths, from various cultures, contain

images about the creation of the world, about a deluge or a great flood, and about death being an affliction given to us by some all-powerful being.

But I want to be sure to convey that the ancient stories of humanity are not the only myths. A few definitions might be helpful... *Theology* has been described as “making meaning in the world.” One can say that *mythopoesis*, which I will explain shortly, is another way of doing so – in the artful language of metaphor. *Myths* are stories with morals, symbolism and other culturally meaningful information. And, a *mythos* is “the inter-related set of beliefs, attitudes, and values held by a society or cultural group.”<sup>2</sup> *Mythography*, such as the work of Joseph Campbell, is the documentation of

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<sup>2</sup> Encarta World English Dictionary (2004), s.v. “Mythos.”

ancient mythologies – the stories that uphold a society’s mythos and ethos. *Mythopoesis*, and this is what I really wanted to get to today, is the active and creative development of a new mythos to fit the needs of a particular group.

We have our own personal creation myths, which may be more current than the ancient stories.

Individually, we often talk about where we came from and our families of origin. All of the stories we tell are, of course, filtered through the memories of the small children we once were. There are also stories we tell about our society, our nation, in regards to our local history, and even about our church. To talk about myths is not to say we are talking about falsehoods. I believe that stories contain a kernel of metaphorical truth that

have meaning for us. Sometimes, a person can get caught up in details – not seeing the forest through the trees, as the saying goes. But, if we step back and look at the story, at the creation or foundational myth in question, perhaps we can glean more than, simply, *once upon a time, so-and-so started something*.

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Some theologians and seminarians and ministers, including myself, are fans of something I might call *narrative theology*, and it fits well with the mythopoeic process. A literalist might define theology as the *study of God*, although quite a few theologians have put forth the idea that theology is *the process by which people make sense of life and the world around us*. Reinhold Niebuhr, in particular, expounded upon that definition of theology.

In the *narrative*, the *story* (dare we say the *myth*), is the account of the ideas that arise when we each try to make sense of life and the world around us.

The way in which I use narrative theology has far more to do with the journey, than the destination. When some major thing happens in my life, the entire process that I go through to make sense of that major thing is far more valuable to me, than simply the end conclusion by itself. And so, in making sense of something, we develop a narrative – a story; yes, a myth – about it. Another piece of narrative theology is that these narratives typically arise in community. I can tell a story, but it doesn't become part of the community's library unless a great many others in the community had a part in its formulation. This usually happens organically,

sometimes like a game of *Telephone*. Snippets of the story are passed around by various people in a community, until they end up with a narrative that everyone pretty much accepts as being a good explanation for what it is they were trying to understand.

The scientists here might point out the lack of objective analysis and empirical evidence in such stories, and they would be correct. Stories rarely have a basis in only solid facts, because they are filtered through the minds of many people, who interpret what they see and hear, assign meaning and intentions, and create a narrative that speaks to the *heart*, more than the *mind*. Oh, yes, and some might say that *heart* – which we imbue with emotional consciousness – is also an archetype. It certainly has no medical basis in fact. But,

we talk about our hearts, all the time.

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This entire process of developing a narrative, developing mythos, has a name: *mythopoesis*. It is a constructive, creative and metaphorical process by which any group develops the mythos, or collection of narratives – stories – that define that group’s place in their surrounding world. *One might think of the stories people in this church tell, about who we are and how we interact with our surrounding community.*

Several years ago, I was an adjunct professor at Starr King School for the Ministry for one semester, where I taught a course on this topic, but as it relates to Paganism in particular. It’s been my opinion for quite some time that the wider Pagan community has been a bit

more honest than the rest of the world about their relationship to myth. I think the Earth-based Spirituality community (that is, modern Pagans) have embraced this process of mythopoesis with open arms. The rest of us accept new stories developed in community as well, but we just don’t always recognize this process for what it is.

What about the mythos of Unitarian Universalism? Our spiritual community has a great many stories that we tell about ourselves. *“We are a social justice movement, working hard to make the world a better place.”* I think you’ve all heard me talk about that, once or twice... We also have an interesting story about the origin of our *Flaming Chalice* symbol. And, if we look back at our UU heroes – I can think of several – we have some interesting stories about them, as well.

All of the stories probably have some basis in fact, but some of it may be somewhat apocryphal. I think about Joseph Murray and John Potter and how Universalism was brought to America. This is the story about Murray's ship getting caught on a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey, and being stuck there for days. The story goes that Potter kept trying to get Murray to come and preach his Universalist message and Murray kept putting him off. But, finally, Murray said that if his ship was still stuck on the sandbar on Sunday, he would come and preach – and so Universalism was born in America and never left. We really don't know if the story is true or not, but I've heard it many times.

I also think of a person that has been called the *Apostle of Liberty*, the minister Thomas Starr King, about

whom Abraham Lincoln is believed to have said: *Starr saved California for the Union during the Civil War*. In the four years that Starr served the San Francisco church, he is said to have ridden up and down the state on horseback, preaching to miners and farmers and townspeople about the evils of slavery and the need for California to side with the Union.

Simultaneously, he was going to many different halls and speaking with rich socialites, raising money for the American Sanitary Commission (the predecessor of the American Red Cross) so that they could provide medical care on the Civil War battlefields. And, in between all of these horseback trips, Starr managed to preach every Sunday at church and provide pastoral care for his congregation. To accomplish all that is an awful

lot of responsibility to put on one guy's shoulders – not to mention his horse – so, it's no wonder he died young. There are quite a few more UU myths, but I think you get the point.

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Not all the stories we tell are about real life.

Mythopoesis is nowhere so obvious as in some works of fiction. Examples include *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle, *Dune* by Frank Herbert, and many more. In the case of many of these authors, they write not only to entertain, but also to generate thinking about major issues of the time.

Robert Heinlein was particularly known for this, writing novels that criticized governmental excesses, the ethics of war as a way of controlling society, and even about

social conventions around marriage and sexuality.

It seems to me that mythos has a place in our society, no matter how modern and rational we have become. The stories we tell are not always fantasy, they are not always completely devoid of fact, but they are always full of meaning. We often use metaphor as a way of explaining something indirectly, that we are not able to explain directly. The stories we tell are important – we feel them in our metaphorical hearts. They connect us with our community, since we share a common story.

In the writings of Joseph Campbell, he suggested that our myths, our communal narrative, is what drives us. We act on our beliefs, based on what we feel in our hearts, because of the story about ourselves that we all share. This is not a good or a bad thing – it simply is. I

find it wise, however, for us to be aware of it.

Have you ever experienced something, in which people talk about things that have happened? Have you thought about how those experiences are expressed through the filter of that person's interpretation or perception? If the story is not a good one, is it possible for the community to change that narrative? Change how we understand it, and how we choose to continue to be together as a community? These narratives show up everywhere in our lives. Yes, here in church; also, in our families and circles of friends, in our work or community, in our wider society and our nation. There are many ways of coming to understand the story and because mythopoesis is an active, creative process, the story is forever being written. It is not static; it is not

chiseled in stone. We can change it together.

We are each a prophet of our destinies. There are so many stories about what has happened to you, what has happened to me, what has happened to this congregation. Lately, many of us have been thinking of the story currently developing for our nation. We have in our power, that mythopoeic power, to take control of our narrative and create the story we wish to be living in. We need not be stuck with one way of thinking – if we allow ourselves to do so, we are continually able to develop our own stories in ways that bring us joy.

***May it ever be so and blessed be you all!***

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BENEDICTION (by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)<sup>3</sup>

In benediction, I'd like to end with a prayer by my  
colleague, the Rev. Kathleen Rolenz:

*Spirit of Life,*

*Revealed to us and all who companion our days*

*And share the work of our hands*

*We pause to give thanks.*

*We are grateful for communities of conscience*

*Which inspire us to step outside of ourselves*

*And make real those values and beliefs which*

*move us to action.*

*We give thanks for the truth tellers in our lives,*

*Prophets and poets whose passion for justice*

*Stir in us a renewed hope*

*Of a world made fair, and all her people one,*

*Turning us now into one more prophet.*

**May it ever be so and blessed be you all!**

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<sup>3</sup> Prayer by Kathleen Rolenz, in *Sources of Our Faith*, Kathleen Rolenz, ed. Boston, Skinner House, 2012. p. 40.