**Life Lessons from the Great Myths and Legends**

Myths, legends (which includes hero stories), folk stories and fairy tales are the means by which all societies, in all times, have conveyed their highest truths. There can be myths that do not convey higher truths, but higher lies. Myths are a means by which each society, in each age, conveys it values, its hopes, it aspirations, and its disappointments. Myths convey the highest truths, values and life’s lessons of a society. Each age may modify a myth to reflect the society’s growth and development (as seen with the legends of Arthur).

Myths also show us that there is a universal set of values common in all places and in all times based upon the idea of absolute right and absolute wrong. There are a set of values that would not offend anyone and these should be taught to all students. All myths, all around the world, the Native American, the myths of Indian, China, Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, all center upon our relationship to God, the divine is at the center of all of these myths and some of them tried to explain the ways of God, or the ways the divine interacts with humans.

We are accustomed to separating mythology from history. Historic events often take on mythic proportions. There is no hard and fast line between history and myth (or legend). In our ordinary language, we say, “That’s a myth” and we mean it’s not true, or it’s a lie. Today we use the word “myth” to describe a false story. We’re accustomed to think of history as the facts, the way things really were. But in an absolute sense, there is no difference between mythology and history. Almost all history is told through the lens of the writer. And even if the writer produces letters or documents (facts), those ‘facts’ are interpreted by the reader and writer.

The life stories of history’s greatest heroes contain both of myth and history. Consider Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, George Washington, Davy Crockett, George Armstrong Custer, or the marines on the beaches of Iwo Jima. Even when we see them in the full light of history, certain events around them become shrouded in myth. Many of the great myths of the world have a historical kernel. Tracing the historical kernel of myths may be tricky and historical events often take on mythological overtones. Every individual story may not have to be factual to be “true” and a myth – a story that cannot be documented – may be a valid way to understand the greatness of a hero and great truths that are passed from generation to generation.

Many of the greatest myths are transformed into great books by creative artists. Many of the greatest heroes partake both of myth and history. Not every individual story has to be true about a historical individual for us to understand the greatness of the hero. Myths are used to explain why the world came into being, how writing was invented, and why a nation has been destined by God to be a light to the world.

The legend of King Arthur will take upon itself the story of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail itself is a means by which Christianity and the great age of faith conveyed the highest truths about how the body and blood of Christ could be transmitted through bread and the wine.

Mythologies relate to us the values of a society. The Greek and Roman myths are the legacy of the Western world to which we belong. While the Greek and Roman (and Norse) myths may or may not be about Gods, they do tell us about their highest values. Contrast the Greeks and Romans with the Hebrews. Even taken as a mythology, Hebrew stories tell us a different story. The underlying themes of Hebrew mythology and legends are ‘love your neighbor’ and the importance of family, tribal and cultural connections. If you do not understand these purposes of the Hebrew God, He may come across as an angry God. One who punishes His people into righteousness. We should note that the angry God emphasis comes through translation (traditions, myths, legends) of the cultural values of the Jewish Rabbis and the early Christians.

Mythology as a Path to Wisdom

Everyday grow older and everyday learn something new. ~ Solon, 594 B.C.

When we talk about learning we distinguish the three stages of learning:

1. **Information** is all about facts, or frequently so-called facts; information is what we find on the internet today.

2. **Knowledge** is facts or information woven into a coherent whole; taking facts and creating a broader interpretation from them.

3. **Wisdom** is applying that knowledge to how we live our life.

Socrates was a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. Through the study of history and myth, our purpose is to learn wisdom. While we may not always attain wisdom or we may know the lessons we should apply, but fail to apply them, through the study of myths and legends we learn facts, gain knowledge and wisdom.

Like great book, a great myth:

must have a great theme,

is written or told in noble language, language that elevates your spirit,

speak to the reader personally, and

conveys higher truths.

Great themes include such as ideas as: the meaning of human life, the relationship of the gods to humans and do we have free will or are our lives driven by fate. These themes are still with us today.

Strings of profanity or references to deity spoken unthoughtfully (in vain) and vulgarity cannot help but depress your soul, to encrust your soul with a sort of malaise of evil thoughts about some of the finest things in human nature. Noble language elevates your soul. Noble language may include beautiful poetry as well as magnificent metaphors and similes.

Many great books have been part of a good education conveying the great themes and asking the important questions, but now old and young alike believe they are too hard and have to many references to things they do not know.

Why do people have to suffer? That is the central mystery of Christianity. God has a plan and we do not have the wisdom to know all of it. We can only trust and believe. Thus, it was only the most trusting, the most chaste of the knights of the Round Table, Sir Galahad, along with his friend Sir Percival, also chaste, would see the Grail and understand that the body and blood of Christ were truly there in the ceremony of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper. The highest truths of Christianity are conveyed are through the story of King Arthur.

The legend of George Washington praying at Valley Forge (which can only be documented by third hand accounts) conveys the higher truth that George Washington was deeply religious. Whether he prayed at Valley Forge cannot be proven, but, what is important is that is the image the people of the time had of George Washington. George Washington, in his farewell address, said that those who tell you that you can separate freedom from morality and morality from religion wish to lead you down the road of despotism. Freedom, religion, morality, they are utterly entwined in Washington’s words. No nation can remain free unless the citizens as individuals are moral and no one can be moral without religion—morality, liberty, religion. That was Washington’s belief.

Myths of our own American frontier heroes (Davy Crockett, General Custer, Jesse James) convey the values of a nation that is self-reliant, that has been uniquely chosen to bring liberty to the world, a nation that fights for justice, and never seeks a war, but when it comes it will fight for the right and it will win through to the inevitable victory so help us God.

Our ultimate lesson from studying the heroes of mythology is that we have free will. We can determine our destiny and we can determine how we’ll respond to all of the troubles and sorrows and to all of the good things that life brings us in this world. We are the masters of our fate. We are the captains of our soul. That is the ultimate wisdom from the great myths.

Every one of us ultimately goes on a quest. Heroes go on quests. So, understand that your life is a quest and you will eventually die, at least a physical death. What will you leave behind? Will it be a legacy of great wealth, a legacy of much hard work done, and a little plaque at the end of your days of service to a company, or will you really leave the world a better place?

**Reference**

*Life Lessons from the Great Myths*, J. Rufus Fears, The Great Courses.