Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth

with Bill Moyers

5. Love and the Goddess

[Tease]

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: “So through the eyes love attains the heart, for the eyes are the scouts of the heart. And the eyes go reconnoitering for what it would please the heart to possess. And when they are in full accord and firm, all three in one resolve, at that time perfect love is born from what the eyes have made welcome, to the heart. For as all true loves know, love is perfect kindness, which is born, there is no doubt, from the heart and the eyes.”

[Titles]

BILL MOYERS: One of Joseph Campbell’s most eloquent essays was called simply, The Mythology of Love. “What a wonderful theme, he wrote,” and what a wonderful world of myth one finds in celebration of this universal mystery.” Stories of love fascinated the human race, and Campbell made their interpretation one of the great passions of his life as a scholar, teacher and philosopher. Like a weaver of fine cloth, he spun the tales and legends of love into an amazing tapestry of the human psyche.

He gathered his materials everywhere, from the erotic mysticism of India to the Old Testament Song of Songs; from the life of Christ and the teachings of the Ramakrishna, to Saint Paul and Bernard of Clairvaux, and William Blake, Thomas Mann and many others, for whom love was the controlling principle of art.

Campbell thought the greatest love stories were told in the Middle Ages, when “noble and gentle hearts,” as he called them, produced the romantic love that transcended lust. This love between individual men and women, Amor, was celebrated by wandering minstrels, who sang of “what the eyes have made welcome to the heart.” It helped create a distinctive Western consciousness that exalted the individual experience of men and women over the authority and traditions of the church and state.

[interviewing] Let’s talk about love.

CAMPBELL: Let’s talk about love, fine.

MOYERS: But it’s such a vast subject, that if—in mythology, that if I had come to you and said, “Let’s talk about love, but where should we begin?” what would your answer have been?

CAMPBELL: I think my answer would have been that the troubadours in the 12th century, let’s begin there.

MOYERS: Why the troubadours?

CAMPBELL: Well, because they’re the first ones in the West that really considered love in the sense that we think of it now, as a person-to-person relationship.

MOYERS: You’re talking about romantic love?

CAMPBELL: Yes. It’s the seizure that comes in recognizing as a—as where your soul’s counterpart in the other person, and that’s what the troubadours stood for, and that has become the ideal in our lives today.

MOYERS: What had it been before that?

CAMPBELL: Well, the idea of love as Eros, the god who excites you to sexual desire, this is the non-person-to-person thing, of the falling in love in the way the troubadours understood it. I have a definition for Eros, the erotic biological urge, as the zeal of the organs for each other, and the personal factor doesn’t matter.

MOYERS: Where did Eros come from?

CAMPBELL: Well, Eros is Cupid, and in India the god of love is Kama, and he’s no Cupid, he’s a big, vigorous youth with a bow and a quiver of arrows, and the names of the arrows are such things as “Death-Bringing Agony,” and “open up,” and really, he just drives this thing into you, so that it’s a total physiological, psychological explosion that takes place. Then the other love, the Christian love of Agape, spiritual love, in love thy neighbor as thyself, again it doesn’t matter who the person is, I mean, it’s your neighbor, you must have that kind of love.

But the kind of seizure that comes from the meeting of the eyes, as they say in the troubadour tradition, and the purely personal, person-to-person thing, as far as I know it originates as an ideal to be lived for, with the troubadours.

MOYERS: You’ve said that what happened in the 12th and 13th centuries “was one of the most important mutations of human feeling and spiritual consciousness, that a new way of experiencing love came to expression.”

CAMPBELL: Yes.

MOYERS: And it was in opposition to that ecclesiastical despotism of the heart.

CAMPBELL: Yes.

MOYERS: Which required people, particularly young girls barely out of adolescence to marry whomever the Church or their parents wanted them to marry.

CAMPBELL: That’s right.

MOYERS: And what had this done to the passion of the heart?

CAMPBELL: Well, the— to say a word for the other before I do this, the usual marriage in traditional cultures is arranged for by the families. It’s not a person-to-person decision at all, and this is true to this day in many parts of the world. This is not to say that in arranged marriages of this kind there is no love; there is a lot of love, there’s family love and a rich love life on that level. So in the Middle Ages, of course, that was the kind of marriage that was sanctified by the Church. And so the idea of a real person-to-person marriage was very dangerous.

MOYERS: Dangerous because it was heresy.

CAMPBELL: It was not only heresy, it was adultery, and that was punishable by death. For instance, in the Tristan romance, that’s the crucial romance, of—

MOYERS: Tristan and Isolde?

CAMPBELL: Yes. Isolde was engaged to marry King Mark. They had never seen each other. And Tristan was sent over to fetch Isolde to Mark. And Isolde’s mother prepares a love potion, so that the two who are to be married will have real love for each other. And these two youngsters, they think the love potion is wine, and they drink it and then they’re overtaken with this love. But Brangene, the nurse of Isolde, realized what had happened. She went to Tristan and said, “You have drunk your death.” And Tristan said, “If by my death you mean this agony of love, that is my life. If by my death you mean the punishment that we are to suffer if discovered, which is namely execution, I accept that. But if by my death you mean eternal punishment in the fires of hell,” in which these people believed, “I accept that, too.”

MOYERS: That was quite—

MOYERS: That was quite big.

MOYERS: For a medieval Catholic, because they believed in a literal hell and—

CAMPBELL: Well, these people did.

MOYERS: Yes. So what’s the significance of what he was saying?

CAMPBELL: What he was saying is that this love is bigger even than death, than pain, than anything. This is the affirmation of the pain of life in a big way.

MOYERS: And I would choose this pain for love now, even though it might mean everlasting pain and damnation in hell.

CAMPBELL: That’s right.

MOYERS: And that was a marked change in how people—

CAMPBELL: Well, that is an— any life career that you choose in following your bliss should be chosen with that sense, nobody can frighten me off from this thing.

MOYERS: This is the sort of the beginning of the romantic idea of the Western individual taking matters into his or her own hands.

CAMPBELL: Well, absolutely. I mean, you can see, there are examples in Oriental stories of this kind of thing, but it did not become a social system. It has now become the ideal, at any rate, of love in the Western world.

MOYERS: Love from one’s own experience.

CAMPBELL: Right. That’s a very mysterious thing, that electric thing that happens. And then the agony that can follow, which is that which the troubadours celebrate, you know, the agony of the love, the sickness that the doctors cannot cure; the wounds that can be healed only by the weapon that delivered the wound.

MOYERS: Meaning?
MOYERS: And the Grail that these romantic legends were searching for is the union once envisioned of what had been divided? The peace that comes from joining?

CAMPBELL: The Grail becomes symbolic of an authentic life that has lived in terms of its own vision, in terms of its own impulse system, which carries it between the pairs of opposites, of good and evil, light and dark. Wolfram starts his epic with a short poem saying, "Every act has both good and evil results." Every act in life yields pairs of opposites in its results. The best we can do is lean toward the light, that is to say, incline the light, and what the light is, is that of the harmonious relationships that come from compassion, with suffering, understanding of the other person. This is what the Grail is about.

MOYERS: When we say God is love, does that have anything to do with romantic love? Does mythology ever link romantic love and God?

CAMPBELL: Well, that's what it did do. Love was a divine visitation, and that's why it was superior to marriage. That was the troubadour idea. If God is love, well, then, love is God, okay.

MOYERS: There's that wonderful passage in Corinthians by Paul, where he says "Love beareth all things, endureth all things."

CAMPBELL: Well, that's the same business. Love knows no pain.

MOYERS: And yet, one of my favorite stories of mythology is out of Persia, where there is the idea that Lucifer was condemned to hell because he loved God so much.

CAMPBELL: Yeah, and that's a basic Muslim idea, about Iblis, that's the Muslim name for Satan, being God's greatest lover. Why was Satan thrown into hell? Well, the standard story is that when God created the angels, he told them to bow to none but himself. Then he created man, whom he regarded as a higher form than the angels, and he asked the angels then to serve man. And Satan would not bow to man. Now, this is interpreted in the Christian tradition, as I recall from my boyhood instruction, as being the egoism of Satan, he would not bow to man. But in this view, he could not bow to man, because of his love for God, he could bow only to God. And then God says, "Get out of my sight." Well, the worst of the pains of hell insofar as hell has been described is the absence of the beloved, which is God. So how does Iblis sustain the situation in hell? By the memory of the echo of God's voice when God said, "Go to hell." And I think that's a great sign of love, do you agree?

MOYERS: Well, it's certainly true in life that the greatest hell one can know is to be separated from the one you love.

CAMPBELL: Yeah.

MOYERS: That's why I've liked the Persian myth for so long. Satan as God's lover.

CAMPBELL: Yeah. And he is separated from God, and that's the real pain of Satan.

MOYERS: You once took the saying of Jesus, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven, for he makes the sun to rise on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust." You once took that to be the highest, the noblest, the boldest of the Christian teachings. Do you still feel that way?

CAMPBELL: Well, I think the main teaching of Christianity is, "Love your enemies."

MOYERS: Hard to do.

CAMPBELL: I know, well, that's it. I mean, when Peter drew his sword and cut off the servant's ear, in the Gethsemane affair, and Jesus said, "Put up your sword, Peter," and put the ear back on, Peter has been drawing his sword ever since. And one can speak about Petrine or Christian Christianity in that sense. And I would say that the main doctrine of Christianity is the doctrine of Agape, of true love for he who is your—him who is your enemy.

MOYERS: How does one love one's enemy without condoning what the enemy does, accepting his aggression?

CAMPBELL: Well. I'll tell you how to do that. "Do not pluck the mote from your enemy's eye, but pluck the beam from your own." do you know?

Now, I have a friend whom I met by chance, a young Buddhist monk from Tibet. You know, in 1959 the Communists crushed down and bombed the palace of the Dalai Lama, bombed Lhasa, and people murdered and all that kind of thing. And he escaped, he escaped at the time, out of the Dalai Lama. And those monasteries, I mean, there were monasteries with 5,000 monks, 6,000 monks, all wiped out, tortured and everything else. I haven't heard one word of in-crimination of the Chinese from that young man. There is absolutely no condemnation of the Chinese here. And you hear this from the Dalai Lama himself. You will not hear a word of con-
Moyers: But if that's true, why are we still suffering?

Campbell: Our natural state is one of bliss, without suffering. But when we're born, we bring suffering into our lives. You see, suffering is not something that we have to accept as a fact of life. It's something that we create for ourselves by our actions and choices. We can choose to live in bliss, or we can choose to create suffering for ourselves. It's all a matter of choice.

Moyers: So you're saying that suffering is a choice?

Campbell: Exactly. We have the power to make our lives blissful or we can make them miserable. It's all up to us.

Moyers: But what about those who are born into poverty or who are victimized by natural disasters? Is it fair to say that they have the choice to create bliss?

Campbell: Yes, it is. Even in the most challenging circumstances, we still have the power to create our own inner bliss. We can choose to focus on the positive aspects of our lives, to see the good in every situation, and to cultivate inner peace and happiness. It's not easy, but it is possible.

Moyers: So, how do we go about creating bliss in our lives?

Campbell: We start by changing our perspective. We learn to see the world from a different angle, to find the beauty in the ordinary, to appreciate the simple things in life. We cultivate a sense of gratitude and appreciation, and we free ourselves from negative thought patterns and beliefs. We practice mindfulness and meditation, and we develop our intuition and inner wisdom. We learn to love ourselves and others, and we open our hearts to the world.

Moyers: And what about those who are burdened by past traumas or who have been through difficult experiences? Can they create bliss in their lives?

Campbell: Absolutely. We all have our challenges and struggles, but we can transform them into opportunities for growth and learning. We can use our hardships as a catalyst for change, to inspire us to become better versions of ourselves. We can find the lessons in our experiences, and we can use those lessons to guide us on our path to bliss.

Moyers: So, is it possible to create bliss in our lives?

Campbell: Yes, it is. The key is to learn how to create a positive mindset, to cultivate inner peace and happiness, and to stay focused on the present moment. It's not easy, but it is possible. We all have the power to create our own inner bliss, and we can do it if we choose to.
with the other person. That's the beginning of humanity. And the meditations of religion properly are on that level, the heart level.

MYERS: You say it's the beginning of humanity, but in these stories, that's the moment when gods are born, the virgin birth, it's a god who emerges from that chemistry.

CAMPBELL: Yeah, and you know who that god is? It's you. All of these symbols in mythology refer to you. You can get stuck out there and think it's all out there, and so you're thinking of Jesus and all the sentiments about how he suffered and all; what that suffering is, is what ought to be going on in you. Have you been reborn? Have you died to your animal nature and come to life as a human incarnation?

MYERS: Why is it significant that this is of a virgin?

CAMPBELL: Well, it is that the begetter is the spirit. It is a spiritual birth. The virgin conceived of the Word, through the ear.

MYERS: The Word came like a shaft of light.

CAMPBELL: Yes. And now, the Buddha was born from his mother's side, at the level of the heart chakra. That's a symbolic birth; he wasn't born from his mother's side, but symbolically he was.

MYERS: But the Christ came the way you and I come.

CAMPBELL: Yes, but of a virgin.

MYERS: Which is a power greater than—

CAMPBELL: And then, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, her virginity was restored. So nothing happened physically, you might say. It's not a physical birth. It's symbolic of a spiritual transformation, that's what the virgin birth is about. And so deities are born that way who represent beings who act in terms of compassion, and not in terms of the lower three centers.

MYERS: If you go back into antiquity, do you find images of the Madonna as the mother of the savior child?

CAMPBELL: Well, what you have as the model for the Madonna actually is Isis, with her child Horus at her breast. This was the actual model for the Madonna symbol.

MYERS: Isis? Tell me that story.

CAMPBELL: This is a prime myth in this period of the Goddess as the redeemer, the one who goes in quest of the lost spouse or lover, and through her loyalty and descent into the realm of death, recovers him. Isis and her husband Osiris were twins who were born of the goddess Nut. And their younger relatives were Seth and Nephthys, who were also twins born from Nut. Seth planned to kill his brother Osiris, and he took Osiris measurements secretly and had a wonderful sarcophagus built that would exactly fit Osiris. So there was a hilaire party in progress one time among the gods, and Seth trots in this sarcophagus, and he says, "Anyone whom this perfectly fits can have it as his sarcophagus." And everybody at the party tried, and when Osiris got in, of course he perfectly fit. Just at that time, 72 accomplices come rushing out and they clap the lid on, strap it together and throw it in the Nile.

Now, this is the death of the god. When you have a death of an incarnation, a god like this, you're going to have a resurrection, you can wait for that. So he goes floating down the Nile and is found ashore in Syria. And a beautiful tree grows up and incorporates the sarcophagus in its own trunk. So this is this wonderful tree with a glorious aroma. And the local king has just had a son born to him, and he is also at the same time going to build a palace. The aroma of this tree is so wonderful, he cuts it down and brings it in to be a central pillar in the main room of the palace.

Poor little Isis, whose husband has been thrown into the Nile, starts this wonderful quest for Osiris. So she comes to the place where the palace is, and learns of the wonderful aroma and she suspects this is Osiris. And she gets a job as nurse to the just-born little child. Well, she lets the child nurse from her finger. And she loves the little child, and she decides to give it immortality. So she does this by placing him in the fireplace in the fire, to burn away gradually his mortal body. But being a goddess she could keep that from killing him, you understand. And when that would happen, she would convert herself into a swallow, and fly mournfully around the pillar where his husband is.

Well, one evening the child's mother came in to this room while this scene was in progress, saw her child in the fireplace, let out a scream, and that broke the spell, and they had to rescue the child from incineration. Meanwhile the swallow had turned into this gorgeous nurse, Isis,
and the nurse gave an explanation of the situation, and she said, "By the way, it's my husband that's in that pillar there, and I'd be grateful if you could just let me take it home." So the king came in and he said, "Certainly." So he removes the pillar, gives it to Isis and it's put on a barge. So on the way back to the Nile, she removes the lid, the cover of the sarcophagus and lies on top of her dead spouse and conceives of her dead spouse — this is an image that occurs in Egyptian art all the time, out of death comes life and all this kind of business — and when they land she in the papyrus swamp gives birth to her child Horus with the dead Osiris beside her.

This is the motif for the Madonna, actually, it becomes the Madonna. In Egyptian symbolism, Isis represents the throne, the Pharaoh sits on the throne of Isis, as the child sits on the mother lap. And when you look in the cathedral of Chartres in the west portal, you will see the Madonna as the throne with the little child Jesus as the world emperor on her lap. That is the same image that's come over.

MOYERS: And you say the Christian fathers took this image?

CAMPBELL: Definitely, and they really say so. You read the second letter of Peter, and he says those forms which were merely mythological forms in the past, are now incarnate and actual in our savior. They were — there was a mythology of the savior, the dead and resurrected god, and it's associated with the moon, which dies and is resurrected every month. And you have the three nights dark, and you have Christ three nights in the tomb, and three days in the tomb, and all this kind of thing. It's an intentional saying, that which was merely talked about is now fact. And no one knows what the date of Christmas ought to be, but it's put on the date of the winter solstice, when the nights begin to be shorter and the days longer, the birth of light. And so there is an idea of death to the past and birth to the future in our lives and in our thinking all the time. Death to the animal nature, birth to the spiritual, and these symbols are talking about it one way or another.

MOYERS: So when the —

CAMPBELL: And the goddess is the one who brings it about. The second birth is through the second mother. Notre Dame de Paris, Notre Dame de Chartres, our mother church, we are reborn by entering and leaving a church.

MOYERS: And it doesn't mean physically, it means —

CAMPBELL: Spiritually.

MOYERS: That there's a power that's quite different from the feminine principle.

CAMPBELL: It can be put that way. You can — it's not necessarily unique to her, you can have rebirth throughout the male, also. But using this system of symbols, the woman becomes the regenerator.

MOYERS: There's that wonderful saying in the New Testament of Jesus. "In Jesus there is no male or female." In the ultimate sense of things there is neither.

CAMPBELL: That would have to be. I mean, if Jesus represents the source of our being, we are all as it were thoughts in the mind of Jesus, He is the word that has become flesh in us, too.

MOYERS: You and I would possess characteristics that are both male and female.

CAMPBELL: Well, actually the body does. And in that Yin-Yang figure from China, you know, in the dark fish or whatever you want to call it, there's a light spot and in the light one there's a dark spot. That's how they can relate; you couldn't relate at all to something that — of which you did not participate — into which you did not participate at all. That's why the idea of God as the absolute other is a ridiculous idea, there could be no relationship to that which is absolute other.

MOYERS: The question arises, in discussing the male-female principle, the virgin birth, the spiritual power that gives us the second birth. The wise people of all time have said that we can live the good life if we learn to live spiritually. But how does one learn to live spiritually when one is of the flesh? Remember, Paul said, "the desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh." How do we learn to live spiritually?

CAMPBELL: Well, that was the — in ancient times and in primitive times, the business of the teacher. He was to give you the clues to a spiritual life, that was what the priest was for. Also, that was what the ritual was for. Ritual can be defined as an enactment of a myth, by participating in a good, sound ritual, you are actually experiencing a mythological life. And it's out of that that one can learn to live spiritually.

MOYERS: These stories of mythology actually point the way to the spiritual life.