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Your Mythic Journey with Sam Keen and Bill Moyers

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Your Mythic Journey with Sam Keen

BILL MOYERS: [*voice-over*] When Sam Keen is asked by strangers to describe what he does in life, he answers, "I'm a homesteader, a husbandman of 60 acres, a companion to a horse, a spiritual gypsy, a lover of questions, a freelance thinker, a man rich in friendship and, in a former life, a professor. Therein lies a story, his story."

For Sam Keen, telling our stories may be the most human thing we do. By telling stories, we remember our past, invent our present and envision our future. Then, by sharing those stories with others, we overcome loneliness, discover compassion and create community with kindred souls.

Storytelling has been Sam Keen's life, from his childhood in a little southern town to graduate studies in divinity at Harvard and his doctorate in philosophy at Princeton. Stories are the theme of his books—*To a Dancing God*, *Life Maps*, *The Passionate Life*, *Faces of the Enemy*, *Your Mythic Journey*, a guide to helping others detect their story, and most recently, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*.

For 20 years, Sam Keen has conducted seminars around the country on personal mythology, often with his friend, the late Joseph Campbell. The people who come are encouraged to explore their lives as a narrative, to find out the story they've been living without knowing it and then to start shaping the drama of their lives as they want to live it, a story at once more personal and honest.

Home, for Sam Keen, is a ranch in Sonoma, California which he shares with his wife Jan, their daughter Jessie, a couple of dogs and some horses. I caught up with him there and at the Omega Institute in upstate New York, where he was conducting a workshop on The Mythic Journey.

SAM KEEN: [*in seminar*] Myth is cultural software. You all know about computers, so I'm going to use this analogy 'cause I think it's a very accurate analogy. Each of us is born into the world with certain biological hardware, but you know, something very strange happened. The minute we were born, people started shoving software disks in with programs.

Mama shoves a software disk in, the culture shoves one in. For instance, already, you're being shoved one in. They say, "Oh, she's a little girl. Look how nice she smiles. Oh, she's a little girl," you know and you get the—what is it, pink booties, isn't it? And you know, you hand her the doll and you're already getting—in other words, you're already getting a gender program get in. "Oh, she's a little girl. She's going to be sugar and spice and everything nice." "Oh, he's a boy. He's supposed to be rough and tough and hard to bluff."

Your family shoved in a software disk called "Keens don't do that." "The Smiths don't do that." "The Wileys take a little bit of a drink because it's the Irish way." Or, "The Joneses never succeed because we're always alcoholic." The family plugged in all kinds of myths. Then, somewhere, very early on, you begin to shove a soft-

were disk in yourself, called "My Story," and very often, if you notice, it conflicted with Mama and Daddy's story. Now, the problem is you and I grew up not knowing there was a difference between the hardware and the software. We didn't know that we could tell different stories.

And that's the problem because if we don't know that the story that we were brought up with is optional, then we live it out blindly and unconsciously. So what we're going to do in this time together is a formalization of what you do with your best friend and it's based upon the simplest of all ideas, that gab cures us — talk, sharing our story — and that we're all carrying around a wealth of stories, the treasure is right here and that what it means to live your life well is to go from living out a myth unconsciously to creating a conscious autobiography.

MOYERS: You've spent a lot of your time in the last few years, I know, leading seminars, trying to help people discover what you call your personal mythology. What do you mean by that?

Mr. KEEN: If you look at a mythology of a tribe, say, look at a mythology of Hopi Indians or of the Kwakiutl or of any tribe, you'll see that all mythologies give answers to certain primal and perennial human questions. "Where did I come from and where am I going" and "Who are my people," and "What is my place," and "What is the meaning of suffering?" And "What is the meaning of death?" And "What is sex about?" and "How close should I be to people?" And "For what am I guilty and what should I avoid?" "What's taboo," all those questions.

Well, when I began to examine my own experience at a very crucial and disturbed period of my life and I had to ask myself the question, "Well, what do you believe and how do you find any rock upon which to put your feet?" And for a long time, I was at a loss and suddenly, it occurred to me that if instead of looking at the answers that myth gave, if I looked at the questions and began to interrogate my own life, using those questions — well, who are my heroes? Who are my villains? What is my source? Where did I come from? Who are my people? — and begin to ask myself that, that I could find within my own autobiography, as it were, a complete but undeveloped mythology and that if I would begin to look at those stories and recover those stories for myself, that I had a mythology that gave me a story by which I lived.

MOYERS: Did you do that? Did you go back in your own memory?

Mr. KEEN: That's what I did. That's what I did.

MOYERS: How did you do that?

Mr. KEEN: Well, the particular point this came up for me was at the time of my father's death. You know, Freud says the death of the father is a signal event for a man's life because whether your father is good or bad, while he's alive, there are giants in the world. And when my father died — and I was very close to my father — I found my emotional underpinnings slid out from under me and I didn't know what I believed for a long time.

And I went back and I thought and I thought and I thought. And at the point where things changed, I remembered this story. When I was about six or seven years old, Dad was carving a monkey out of a

peach seed and I asked him, "Well, can I have it?" And he said, "No, this is for your mother," he said, "but I'll carve you one one day." Well, he didn't and the last year before his death, I went back to Arizona to see him and he was sick — he had emphysema — and he was reviewing his own life to see, you know, where he had failed and where he had succeeded.

And he talked about a sense of failure and, in an effort to reassure him, I said, "No, Dad, you know, for me you were always there. In every important thing, you were there for me. You supported me. You didn't have a lot of 'oughts.' You loved me without condition and you kept your promises to me." And you know, sort of to lighten up the situation, I said, "But the only thing you didn't do, you never carved me that peach-seed monkey."

And I said goodbye to him and I went home and about two months later, this came in the mail, this little peach-seed monkey. And he said, "Well, here it is," and if you notice, one leg on it has broken off and he glued it on and he said, "Well, I didn't have time to carve a perfect one." And that was the last communication I had before he died. And see, for me, it was a symbol in my life of going back to what was solid and finding within my own autobiography a sacred moment.

MOYERS: And what did it do for your personal mythic journey, as you call it?

Mr. KEEN: Well, it was the beginning of my personal mythic journey.

MOYERS: You hadn't really thought about this sort of relationship or these connections or these values until then?

Mr. KEEN: I'd thought about them, but I don't think that I cast them in that light. I didn't realize that I had to write my own story. I think I was still trying to find other people's stories to fit into.

MOYERS: You were how old at the time?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I was 33 or 34 — 33, but see, I was a young theological student at Harvard and so, like any good academic, I was reading people who were my heroes.

MOYERS: Who were they?

Mr. KEEN: Oh, they were Martin Buber, they were Paul Tillich, they were Gabriel Marcel, they were D.H. Lawrence.

MOYERS: Nothing wrong with those heroes.

Mr. KEEN: No, they're all good heroes, but it was as if I was taking their road maps of life and trying to go on my journey instead of saying, "Wait a minute, their road maps were good for them and I can learn a lot about mapmaking and I can hear about their pilgrimages, but I have to query the nature of my experience to find out what my journey is and my map is and my purpose and my vocation."

MOYERS: And the peach-seed monkey was the first step?

Mr. KEEN: The peach-seed monkey was the first step in that.

MOYERS: Because?

Mr. KEEN: Because it was foundational. Because I found out that the foundation of my values that I believed in — I believed in promises, first of all. I believed in the making and the keeping of promises.

MOYERS: And you had actually been hurt over the years because your father had never sent you the monkey he promised?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I don't know if I'd been hurt—

MOYERS: Well, you obviously thought about it. The promise had not been kept.

Mr. KEEN: I thought about it. It was minor, you know. It was—

MOYERS: It couldn't have been minor if it had this effect on you after his death. It had to be something down there in your story that you weren't telling yourself or otherwise, it would just have been an act of sentiment.

Mr. KEEN: Well, I suppose that—you know, our parents always fail us in some ways. They never give us adequate maps for our lives. I think Dad gave me—they gave me a pretty good start and a pretty good—certainly, his care was very unconditional. There were other ways in which he didn't equip me well. His own timidity about his sexuality and things of that kind, I think, I had to work through.

I had to say no to him as well as to say yes. But I think the peach-seed monkey was a symbol of the yes rather than of the no. The no was much later in coming and that came in the times when I had to really question that myth, when by going through a divorce, I had to break vows. And here, I was saying, the—you know, Nietzsche says, "Man is the only animal who can make promises." So when we make a promise, we bind ourselves over time. We say, "I'll be here for you tomorrow. You can count on me."

MOYERS: So you believe that, even though you disavow it, even though you break it?

Mr. KEEN: I believe that, even though it came [to] a point in my life when I had to break my vows in terms of getting a divorce. And I had to find a way to understand that divorce may not be ultimately the breaking of a vow, it may be the changing of it, 'cause there may be such a thing as creative divorce, that when you say, "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, till death do us part," we're speaking about the death of the spirit, not actual death. And there may be a time when your spirit involves you in having to change.

1st WOMAN: [at seminar] The whole concept of what this program is going to be really fit in with what I'm going through right now for myself, trying to back up and find out— you call them hardware and software, I call them tapes— things that I learned, patterns that I learned. My parents had been separated and then divorced and I was very concerned that if I were to get married that I would stay married.

And a year and a half ago, I got married, having already bought a house with my now-husband and it's gotten to the point— my husband has his own agenda, but it's gotten to the point where we have spent, really, the last few years distancing ourselves and getting to the point where having fun meant being apart and doing things that were separate. I had things that I liked, he had things that he liked and we got ourselves into a real crisis situation just in the last few months. And I don't find it very comfortable and I don't find it very fun, but I find it very necessary and it's actually very painful.

1st MAN: [at seminar] I'm very much a child of the 50's and I was raised by a good family that bought into the myths of the culture of the 50's. I had learned that men don't have relationships, they possess people. I had learned that men were not vulnerable. I had learned that we measure our success by our economic status and what we had accumulated. And of course, I found that so empty and I was so alone—I guess, in a sense, it's almost like finding all of a sudden that the religion that you were confirmed in and believed all of your life was an empty one and it's awfully, awfully hard to deal with, for me.

2nd WOMAN: [at seminar] This is very important to me personally. I have found that I've looked into my story and realized only over the years that no matter how far I went or no matter with the—you know, who I was with or what I was doing, that I was still carrying around the same things and I was repeating them over and over again. And it's like, "Let's uncover the myths," the real—the tapes, the scripts, whatever we want to call them. I need to uncover them because I can't—I don't want to repeat them anymore. I don't want to repeat them over and over again.

2nd MAN: [at seminar] After age nine, I grew up in a number of foster homes and it's created a sense of vulnerability that I think helps me to appreciate and understand people's struggle. So one of the things I'm interested in in myths is the positive aspect of validating someone's worth and someone's self-esteem. The other is I want to study the notion of myths—for someone like myself who's been in different families, how has that been a problem for me, how can I capitalize more on those experiences I had that a lot of people don't have?

3rd WOMAN: [at seminar] I'm here for very personal reasons, beginning with the fact that I took a lot of abuse as a child and my father was alcoholic, my mother was sadistic. And in consequence of that, the legacy was quite damaging and I've done a lot of work on that with a therapist. So I can see this is a continuing process of overcutting the damage and the isolation and rejoining the human race, as it were, but now getting out of the bad personal messages that I start with and on the other, that I'm bad, I'm not wanted. I don't want to opt into what other bad myths the culture is handing me and I find there's a lot of navigating to find other people who are also trying to find out who they are and also have the tolerance for themselves and for, as well, each other.

MOYERS: I've approached you and I've said, "Help me tell find my own mythic story, to tell my story, to write it down," 'cause you do urge people to write it down—

Mr. KEEN: Right, right.

MOYERS:—to discover our own mythology. Well, give me a few exercises. What would I do if I wanted to start to write—to discover and write down my own story?

Mr. KEEN: Well, what I would do is I would say, first of all, "Bill, I'd like for you to draw me a floor plan of this house where you used to live in Marshall, Texas before you were 10—" I forget when you moved to Marshall.

MOYERS: Eight-oh-one East Austin. I can see it, but I never thought

of the floor plan.

Mr. KEEN: Well, the floor plan because if you go into a house and draw a floor plan of the house and you draw all the furniture and you draw everything in that house and then you begin to take me on a trip through that the way a novelist would. Well, do it.

MOYERS: Well, I can see the little bedroom where I slept by the window, listening on Saturday nights to The Grand Ole Opry. Hadn't thought about that in a long time. I don't know what that says, but that's part of the floor plan. I can see myself working on my homework in the little tiny kitchen. I remember coming home from school with the smell of yeasts — my mother was baking rolls — coming from the kitchen. I can see that. I can recall these as I think of the floor plan. What does that tell you about my mythic journey?

Mr. KEEN: Well, in the first place, I guess, if we kept this on, it's not so much what it would tell me as that within an hour of our talking this way, we would have a sense of knowing each other. We would have a sense of comfort, we would have a sense of revelation. We would have a sense that — we would begin to build up intimacy and a community. One of these strange things is that I don't really know my story until I begin to tell it. I don't — it's takes a community to tell a story because it takes a teller and a listener. And the way that we actually form communities that we prize — what I would call "healing communities" — out of sharing our stories.

MOYERS: Does this have any kind of practical application, advising other people to take their mythic journey, write their own story? Does it have any practical application for people who are not writers and intellectuals?

Mr. KEEN: Oh, enormous, I think. For instance, every family has a mythology in which it assigns people in that family certain roles. My family, for instance — I have an older brother and he was always the mechanical one. Never finished college, mechanical genius and he and another guy invented this stuff that polishes computer circuits and they own 98% of the business of polishing computer circuit stuff in the United States. And so it was — Lawrence was always the mechanical one and I was always unmechanical.

So I was about 36 years old when I first took a test to determine — cause I had to go to work in Electric Hose and Rubber Company in Wilmington, Delaware to support my habit of going to graduate school — and I took a test to see how well I could see mechanical relationships between things to see where they were going to put me on the production line. So they called me in and they said, "Well, you're in the 5 percentile." And I said, "Yeah, that sounds about right. About 95% of the population is better than I am at seeing these things." They said, "No, you're in the top 5 percentile." I said, "No, that's my brother."

Well, every family has those scripts and one of the things that happens in families very is that, often, there is a script. There's the Cain and Abel script. One is good and the other is bad. So quite often, say, in prisons or in alcoholic families, alcoholic groups, you find the person who was designated as the bad son or the bad daughter or the rebellious one and they have quite faithfully lived out those scripts that their family have given them and gotten in trouble. And when

they finally bounced off the end, they said, "Wait a minute. This isn't who I am. That's not who I am," and so then, they have to start from scratch and they go back and the first thing they do is they recover the script itself. They recover those voices where they can hear their parents saying, again, "Well, Joan is the kind of girl who's going to end up in the gutter. You just watch out," you know. "I'll tell you, that girl's going to get pregnant by the time she's 16." And "Hell, you know, Johnny ain't never going to amount to anything anyway." You know, in southern towns, it was all built in.

So starting from scratch means going back and recovering those scripts and then beginning to write our own story.

MOYERS: It's not reliving your life. It's not changing the realities that you've experienced. It's putting your own understanding — it's drawing your own understanding from what happened to you, writing the script, not the life.

Mr. KEEN: One of the simplest exercises I do in trying to teach people to tell their own story is I have them write an outline of their autobiography. I say, "Just do me a chapter outline," and I will sometimes say to them, "All right, you've just written your autobiography and Harper & Row is going to publish it and they're going to give you 10 pictures." You know, all history books have pictures, George Washington crossing the Delaware. "What are the 10 pictures of the signal events in your life?" And what it does, it makes people have to think, "Well, what was important? When did it change? When was I on an up cycle? What were peak experiences in my life? What were valley experiences? What enemies have I had? What battles have I fought? Who were my allies?"

It's this process that very often old people go through naturally, in trying to recapitulate and come to terms with their lives, but I think we should begin that process much earlier.

MOYERS: What if you write your story, though, and no one reads it? **Mr. KEEN:** Oh, that's all right. You write it for yourself. You write it for yourself — that's not quite true. If you write your story only for yourself, there'll be important parts left out because audience shapes our story, too. Story-telling is a communal act. It requires community and it creates community. It's not isolated. It is not something an individual does.

MOYERS: That I can understand, but you stress the point that it's not just sharing stories. It's sharing our myth with each other. Why is myth so important to the story?

Mr. KEEN: I say that the task of a life is to exchange the unconscious myth with a conscious autobiography, see? So if I say the first 20 years of my life, I was shaped unconsciously by the Christian myth and by the myth of being a Keen and by the myth of being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant southerner, all quite heavy information systems — so at 25, I didn't know I'd been shaped that way. Now, at 35, when I began to reflect on that, I say, "Wait a minute. Something was shaping me." Now, when I do that, I begin to get a distance between myself and that shaping myth and I begin then to write my own story. "Wait a minute. There's some of that, things I don't like. I don't like that macho part of the male myth. I don't like that antiseptic, uptight part of the Protestant myth." I throw it out. See, I begin

then to weave it into my own story, using the myth, but still now trying to make it more conscious.

MOYERS: What have you got in your pockets right now?

Mr. KEEN: Oh, my pockets. Well, I got a lot in my pockets.

MOYERS: I ask this because you say in your book that you can tell a lot about a person's values by what he carries in his pockets or carries in her purse.

Mr. KEEN: Well, that's what I should show you is what I carry normally. Here's mythology, in other words. When you ask what mythology is, you know the first thing I say is it's unconscious, so it usually relates to those things that structure our lives that we don't notice structure our lives. So here, you know, see—oh, key. You say, "Oh, keys." But what do keys tell you about the way we structure our lives? They tell you, first of all, that we're private, that I have properly that I have to lock against you.

These keys — which is an automobile key — tell you an enormous amount. How would it be different if we didn't have these items? You know, you look at an American Indian and they carried around these little sacks of things, they were power objects. Well, these are like our power objects and think about how we would be if we didn't have one of these things, namely, if we didn't travel—if we didn't have these magic chariots that, as it were, abolished space for us. And so that we no longer live locally, we're not related, so we bring in food and everything comes because we have rapid transportation.

MOYERS: Independence, too.

Mr. KEEN: It's independence.

MOYERS: That represents—you can get away from Jan, you can get away from the house—

Mr. KEEN: Get away from Jan, right, right. And this, which is—

MOYERS: A little knife.

Mr. KEEN:—a little knife that you—I never trust a person who doesn't have a knife, you know, to—

MOYERS: Well, there goes our friendship.

Mr. KEEN: Well, you used to carry one—

MOYERS: No, I didn't.

Mr. KEEN:—to peel apples, didn't you?

MOYERS: No, I've never carried a knife. My father did, but I never carried a knife.

Mr. KEEN: Well, how do you peel apples and do things and—

MOYERS: You eat them without peeling them. Why would you want to peel an apple? My mythology says the skin is as good as the soul, the body is as good as the spirit.

Mr. KEEN: Well, that's a pre-DDT—that used to be true. The skin was where all the nutrients were.

MOYERS: All right. Go ahead and read your inventory for you—

Mr. KEEN: Read my inventory, OK.

MOYERS: Read my inventory.

Mr. KEEN: Mythologically speaking, all right.

MOYERS: I never thought of a credit card as mythological relic—

Mr. KEEN: Oh, you don't? Oh, mercy me.

MOYERS:—talisman.

Mr. KEEN: Listen. Do you realize that these things are the—first of all we almost all, it turns out, belong to the same secret societies or variations of this. I bet you that you belong to this secret society, do you not?

MOYERS: Not that particular one, but I'm—

Mr. KEEN: Do you belong to this one?

MOYERS: Yes, I'm—you're getting closer now.

Mr. KEEN: You're getting close to that?

MOYERS: Yeah.

Mr. KEEN: In other words, we are—first of all, we are linked by these abstract things that we don't notice, like credit cards and by things like that. But let me talk about the mythic aspect of this. For instance, did you ever notice that the sexual revolution happened at the same time that credit cards were introduced?

MOYERS: No, I didn't, Sam.

Mr. KEEN: Well—and that there's a—again, see, it was a mythic change. In our culture, the great mythic change is when we change from being a culture of production to a culture of consumption. And so, it used to be, in the old days, that you made money and you saved it up so—you had a desire, you made money and you saved it and then you went out and you bought it and purchased what it was that you wanted. And that was fine as long as we're in an economy of scarcity.

But suddenly, we're in an economy where we produced more than we could consume and so the sin became not to consume. So the credit card came out and the implicit message of that was, you know, "Buy it now, pay later. Buy now. Have no unfulfilled desires."

MOYERS: There was a lot of sex before you get to get it on credit, though, Sam.

Mr. KEEN: Well, but the—yeah, that's right, but I don't know how much sexual revolution changed except our rhetoric. But the rhetoric was, "Do it now," see? So, like in the 60's, do it now and don't have unfulfilled desires, just do it now, you know. And what we told ourselves in the 60's was you didn't have to pay anything.

MOYERS: And you belong to that society even though you question it. You have to belong to it in this world.

Mr. KEEN: You have to belong to it in this world, that's right. And so, it structures it that way or—you know, take something like—again, people usually pass through these things. Well, I have things like—we all have things like—well, I have one of these things—

MOYERS: Oh, yeah.

Mr. KEEN:—a driver's license.

MOYERS: A driver's license.

Mr. KEEN: Mythologically, it says to me somebody else has to give me permission to do things in my life, that there are authorities that have to give me permission. I can't go out and drive a car without asking somebody else's permission. I live in an intricate society. I live in a society where the superstructure is such that I have to conform to certain authorities. No, I mean—

MOYERS: And this. Here's a Sebastiani Theater discount card, four

admissions. You've used three. That tells me that you got to the movies a lot to find out what you ought to believe.

Mr. KEEN: I go to the dream machine. I go, exactly, to the great mythic machine to find out who the heroes are.

MOYERS: Probably the most powerful in the human journey.

Mr. KEEN: Exactly. Nobody sits down and holds your hand as in the old days and holds you in his lap and says, "I'm going to tell you a story, Bill." Now, let me tell you—like Jessie, our nine-year-old daughter, when she was little and I would hold her on my lap and she'd say, "Papa, tell me a story out of your mouth." And that meant, you know, make it up.

MOYERS: Well, that's why I like what you've suggested here about each of us writing our own mythic journey cause it's a way of fighting back against the culture creators, against it, who are often benevolent, but sometimes predatory. They want to steal my imagination or they want to supplant my imagination. What you're saying in the mythic journey is you don't have to get the meaning of life from a Hollywood movie. You could be entertained by it, but you don't have to take that mythology as your own. Is that right?

Mr. KEEN: That's right. In a very real way, it dis-identifies us from our own experience and—

MOYERS: It dis-identifies us?

Mr. KEEN: It replaces an image of the authentic life with our experience of what feels right to us, so we don't have to process it so much. We don't have to think for ourselves. And furthermore, I guess the difference is that it replaces remote heroes, people that we don't really know,— it replaces local and tacit heroes that I can touch, so that my father's a hero or my uncle was a hero or the kid next door was a hero for some reason — and I know them and I can touch them and they're real and I can see them — with these celluloid heroes.

[at seminar] The hardest myth, actually, to de-mythologize is the one that we are now living. And the way that you know that you're in the presence of a myth that's being lived and not being de-mythologized is when somebody says, "That's the bottom line. That's the way things really are." And the myths that bind us most are those that we don't recognize, that we don't think of as myths. We just think of, "That's the way it is."

And in the modern world, the myths that bind us most, the most binding, unconscious myth is the economic myth that we live out. So— now, whether I have one of these mythic—I do. *[Takes out a dollar bill]* I have mythic items with me. The essence of our mythic system is, of course, these. You ask, "Well, how much are you worth?" Isn't that a strange thing? "Worth," we say of this. And so, there's a very, very real sense in which, if we wanted to get at the myth, here's what the modern myth means, so you—the modern myth means that we don't look at these and say, "Well, you know, I guess I need probably 50 or 60 of these a day to survive," and you know, things like that. No. *[Cuts holes in dollar bill and places it over his eyes]* We look at the world this way, through the money. We don't see the money. How else do you explain something ridiculous like an Ivan Boesky or a—Milliken?

AUDIENCE: Milken.

Mr. KEEN:—Milken accumulating more of these than anybody could ever, ever use? Working ourselves to death for these, never asking the things, "Well, what, really, do we value?" We keep getting hooked on this, thinking it's somehow security. So the cultural myth, in order to begin to get—and the whole thing, the way that we organize our lives economically and around economics and around jobs. So there's a very real sense in what it means to get free from our myth is doing this. *[Tears up dollar bill into small pieces]* What happens when I do that? What's your first reaction? What? They're going to see it on TV? And so what? And what?

It's (a) against the law and (b) a sacrilege. I have actually committed an illegal act. It is illegal to say, "These aren't anything," and if I'd done it—I sometimes do this and I ask everybody to give one and then I burn them. And then, when I burn it, people—exactly, people go, "Oh!"

MOYERS: What did you learn about yourself in relationship to your money when you started out on this adult mythic journey? You obviously didn't want to destroy so many of those that you couldn't live here or drive that car or wear that nice shirt.

Mr. KEEN: Right. I guess the main thing that I discovered about these things was I discovered—when I quit my job—I was a tenured professor, you know, with a lifelong tenure and security and therefore, enough of these secured so I never had to worry about these again in my life. I'd be taken care of. And when I went on sabbatical in 1969, I found myself changing so rapidly that I didn't want to go back. And so, I called up and I resigned and I began to freelance and for 20-something years, I've freelanced. Well, that moment when I did that, I was saying, "I'm not going to let the assurance of the regular supply of these things determine my life."

MOYERS: There needs to be a practical—

Mr. KEEN: Practical aspect.

WOMAN:—aspect to this, you know, people out there watching us, saying, "Is Sam Keen saying to tell my own mythic story, I have to quit my job, I have to divorce my wife or my husband or—"

Mr. KEEN: Well, let's put it in priorities. See, young people coming into this society, one of the problems is that we ask them the practical questions first. "How are you going to make enough of these?" So we ask them, say, in vocational training, "Why kind of job are you going to get? Where are the jobs going to be?" Now, as you say, that's a necessary question. How am I going to get enough money and things to live? But it's a question of when we ask that. If we ask them the vocational question first, like "What do you want to do? What are your gifts? What do you think you have to offer the world?" Then ask that question first and ask "How are you going to make a living," second. Both questions are important, but the order of the question is crucial because if you ask this question first, then the tendency is you never get around to asking the question, "What are my real gifts and what is my life about?" You're always living on the survival level.

The question that we need to ask ourselves much more often is what do we really want rather than what do we have to do in order to survive. Half the world's population is stuck—and maybe, in a sense, see, that's the tragedy of the modern world. Half of the world is stuck

with having to ask the question, "What do I do to survive," and so half of the world goes to bed hungry and they don't have the luxury, in a sense, of asking a question about "What is my vocation?" And the other half of us have the luxury of asking it and all too frequently, we don't ask it.

MOYERS: Isn't that another reason for writing your own mythic journey, that you learn to substitute your priorities for those that are imposed upon you from outside? You find out what's important to you and it may have nothing to do with what society says is important—

Mr. KEEN: Is important.

MOYERS:—in this medium of commercials and advertising.

Mr. KEEN: That's right.

MOYERS: What did you find out is important to you?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I found that many of the things, actually, my parents had said were important to me, but I had to find them out for myself, that it wasn't, in a very real sense, until after I was divorced and begin to ask these questions that I begin to find out how terribly important family was to me, when I found my kids, you know, 1,000 miles away and seeing them only on weekends. And I said, "Oh, my God," you know, there's—I remember running across a sign over here in Oakland one day that said, "Nothing makes up for failure in the home." And I sort of talked back to that sign angrily for three weeks till I realized it's right. Nothing makes up for failure in the home. It doesn't matter how many books I've written. If my kids and I aren't bonded and loving with each other, I'm empty. So I found that out.

I found out, strangely, that philosophy was important for me. I was asking questions out of the native excitement in my own mind about being a questioner and a quester and that family script that had been given me by my parents was also my own passion. And so, it released me so that—it released me to put my own passions in an order. Family is a passion, my work is a passion. My friends are a passion and—

MOYERS: Telling stories.

Mr. KEEN: Telling stories, yes.

MOYERS: Getting other people to tell stories.

Mr. KEEN: Getting other people. Well, that's part of my work and my pleasure, too.

[at seminar] Most often—the most frequent problem I find when people come to seminars like this is that they're successful and it's killing them, that they've got credit cards, they've got money, they've got success, but they're living somebody else's story and all those items that you see there that represent an economically successful story are, for some people, the marks of a personally un-lived life. And so the question, how are you going to come to terms with that? How do you come to terms with the public myth, economic necessities and private desires?

4th WOMAN: Is it always necessary to discard these myths or is there some liberation in just being aware that you're living them and become playful with them?

Mr. KEEN: Exactly. The first step is to become aware that you're living them. The second step is to become aware of which ones

don't fit you, which ones are depressing you, burning you out, angering you, firing you, betraying you; then to figure out which ones you want to and then, many people can go right back into a three-piece suit, but wearing it now as a costume rather than as a piece of identity.

1st MAN: What about the personal risk and the risk for people that are a part of your own net, in the sense of exposing the lies and then not quite knowing where you're going to go and with what you're going to replace, both for yourself and for other people?

Mr. KEEN: Well, at the entrance to the mythic journey, it doesn't say, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." What it says is, "Warning: This May Be Profoundly Disturbing to You and to Those Around You." You very often find it in a marriage. When one person starts to move and wants to know who they are and the other person wants not to know. So you have one committed to trying to become aware and the other committed not to. Trouble in River City. To go on the mythic journey into your own self, it's not that you might meet conflict, it is that you will.

Mr. MOYERS: Underlying all of this is the power of the story in our lives. The story is crucial to our understanding of who we are, isn't it, even if it's a story we don't wholly understand, but to which we have to ascribe some meaning? That's where we find meaning. Joe Campbell said that life is in the experience, but I also think that life is in the meaning we give that experience. He and I differed on that.

Mr. KEEN: So we're like—when we begin to ask the mythic question, we're like a flying fish, the first flying fish that broke out of the waves, and when he first got out of the waves, he said, "Oh, my golly, I've been swimming in something all my life. I think I'll call it water." Because he knew there was another medium. So we become—you know, I knew this—I remember the minute that I found that out. I must have been eight years old and I was walking downtown in Court Street in Maryville, Tennessee and I realized that every time I questioned, say, about Christianity or questioned what was going on, that it upset people. It upset my mother and father, it upset other people. Actually, some of my playmates' parents had said, "Don't play with him," you know, "He disturbs you," because I was asking questions. And I had this sense that whenever I asked about my life, that it was as if I rose up and looked at it from a promontory and I saw more, but that it disturbed people. And I knew I had to make a decision. Was I going to go sort of toward consciousness and toward awareness or was I going to stay down there and not examine my life?

MOYERS: And so many people choose to stay down there.

Mr. KEEN: Yeah.

MOYERS: Why do you think you didn't?

Mr. KEEN: There are so many answers to that question. My destiny, my fate, my choice—

MOYERS: Well, I know all of that, but why didn't you? Why didn't you stay in Maryville, Tennessee and not question? Tell me a story.

Mr. KEEN: My mother tells a story that when I was four years old and we lived in the South and most of the kids didn't wear shoes—and I wanted to go barefoot, but they wouldn't let me. Being Yankees,

you know, they were afraid of ringworm and all these things. So Mother read me the story about Moses and the burning bush and I listened carefully to the story. And I said, "Mother, it says here, God said to Moses, "Take off your shoes, you're on holy ground.'" She says, "Yeah." I said, "Well, didn't God create the whole earth?" She says, "Yeah." I said, "Why do I have to wear shoes, then?" So I don't remember a time that I wasn't questioning.

MOYERS: Do you remember when you started questioning what it means, in our world, to be a man?

Mr. KEEN: Very early because, as I say—see, my brother—I'm one of those characters who's useless. I have no useful skills, so I became a philosopher. My brother had useful skills, so he became—

MOYERS: A wealthy man.

Mr. KEEN: He became a wealthy man and manufacturer. He flies airplanes and I fly in my dreams. And my brother knows how the world works out there and I was always interested here. So for me, I very early had a crisis. "Am I ever going to be able to do anything worthwhile?" You know, I was interested in birds, in watching birds and questions and going out by myself and being solitary and the sensuous thing of nature.

So in that sense, I—and I guess I got this from my father—I was abnormally sensitive as a child. And that made me feel that I was a sissy because, although I fought, I didn't like to fight. And so, I grew up and I didn't get my full growth until I was after 25. I grew an inch and a half after I was 25 years old, so I grew up sort of scrawny and then, suddenly, at 25 and 30, I was this man, you know. I looked good. I looked like I was really kind of an all-American man, but inside, I felt I was too sensitive, I was too "feminine." So there was a long period in which I sort of wrestled with this question, "What does it mean to be a man?" And I was working against that John-Wayne archetype which was put on us all, you know, whether we recognized it or not, that, you know, boys don't cry, boys aren't sensitive and all that.

MOYERS: When I started reading the introduction to your new book, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*, I thought, "Wait a minute. He's stolen my story. He's swiped it, he's a plagiarist." "The year I was 17, I received many messages from my classmates, my family and my culture about what was required to be a real man—join the fraternity; get a letter in football, basketball or baseball; do something with girls; a lot of girls; be tough; fight if anybody insults you or your girl; don't show your feelings, drink lots of beer; be nice; don't fight or drink; dress right, like everybody else; get a good job; work hard; make a lot of money; get your own car; be well-liked, popular." And I thought, "Wait a minute. That's not Sam Keen's story, that's my story." You've changed all of these now.

Mr. KEEN: I've changed them all. The things that I used to feel were a matter of shame, I now—and see, this is writing my own story. I said, "Wait a minute. That's who I am." And furthermore, that has nothing to do with discovering what the Jungians would say is the feminine side of myself. That is my masculinity, my manhood. Those things are inseparable from the way that I am a man. I refuse this cultural archetype that says a man is that way. No. I'm a man and

I'm that way.

MOYERS: What have you learned about being a good man from marriage?

Mr. KEEN: I have learned about being a good—I have learned half or more of what I learned about being a good man from marriage, both in the failure of my first marriage and from the success of my second.

MOYERS: What did the failure tell you?

Mr. KEEN: It taught me that—let me deal with the success first because it's the same story, in a way. Like most men, I unconsciously took much of my sense of success from the way in which I performed for women and in the eyes of women, from their applause. They were the audience before whom I dramatized my life and their applause and their approval was crucial for my sense of manhood.

My second wife, Jan—my second and last wife—Jan and I didn't fall into that relationship because we were so different. So one of the first things I learned from her is that a man is somebody who doesn't get his identity from a woman, not to make my wife into a surrogate mother, not make her into an audience before whom I perform but that I have to find my manhood on my own.

I learned the truth—Howard Thurman told me this and this is one of the most helpful things anybody ever told me. And Howard said to me, he said, "Sam, a man has to ask himself two questions—"Where am I going" and "Who will go with me?" He says, "If you ever get those questions in the wrong order, you're in big trouble."

MOYERS: You mean, if we ask who's going with us before we know where we're going? That's why a lot of marriages don't work, isn't it?

Mr. KEEN: Yeah. And it's also men's unconscious story.

MOYERS: Did you see the studies not long ago that said men fare better in marriage than they do singly?

Mr. KEEN: Yes.

MOYERS: Do you think that's so? Is that true in your own experience, that interlude between your two marriages? Was it as good as being married?

Mr. KEEN: Well, it was a very interesting interlude because, essentially, like this old Texan used to say, I could never remember either being single or wearing short pants prior to that. So I had an interesting six years as a bachelor in the mid-way, but I'd be some kind of a fool if I married except thinking it was better. For me, marriage is a natural state. I mean, the conflicts of marriage are the forge of the spirit for me.

MOYERS: Talk about that a minute.

Mr. KEEN: When we think about love, we think about being with somebody and we think about conflict as the antithesis of love. That's not my experience. My experience is that all love requires the ability to be with somebody, but also to stand against them, to enter into conflict with them, to be able to say no to them as well as yes. And it also involves a third thing, to be apart from them, to be solitary.

So to me, marriage is that place where—it's the ultimate crucible because we promise, in marriage, for better, for worse, for richer and poorer. What that means is the romantic myth essentially promises

"For better and as long as you're good and don't gain 30 pounds and everything's OK. But marriage says, "For worse," and it's going to get worse when you get married, you know. Marriage is designed, I say, so you can fall out of love into reality.

And that worst part of yourself is going to come out and the worst part of her is going to come out, too. So now, you got to deal with who you really are and that's when love gets interesting; when it moved down the state of the lovely romantic illusions into the reality of how do you learn to love a person who, you know, doesn't dust the house or leaves dishes in the sink, or something like that? You know, whatever it is that gets you.

MOYERS: That part of the program, he or she fails—

Mr. KEEN: That's right—

MOYERS: —the test.

Mr. KEEN: —because you got to face the fact you're married to a failure and so is your wife. She's married to a failure, too. So is my wife. I mean, we all fail each other in these important ways and we have to go on loving inspite of the way we fail. And that's why I think that real love has to do so much with finally letting loose of all that and just saying—you know, unconditional love doesn't come at the beginning of a marriage, it comes at the end. It comes right at that point where you're either going to murder 'em or commit suicide. You haven't been able to change 'em. You haven't been able to shape—I have failed to shape my wife up. you know, and she has failed to shape me up.

And it's only at that point where I not only fail, I say, "My God, I'm never going to get her to do the exact right thing." When she does the same thing, I say, "Now, am I going to be able to love this flawed creature?" Well, that's interesting because not until you can love a flawed creature and she can love you as a flawed creature can you get off-stage, can you stop performing. I mean, so I am. So there's this deep kind of relaxation when you finally learn to let them be who they are.

MOYERS: And vice-versa?

Mr. KEEN: Yeah, as well as to let yourself be who you are.

MOYERS: Let me turn the questions around. If you were going to write your autobiography at your tender young age of the present, what would your title be? That would tell me something about your mythic journey. What would it be?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I think probably now, it would be something like, "The Travels of a Mystic Cowboy," or something of the kind, integrating my sense of travel, of my life as an adventure and as a pilgrimage. And as that pilgrimage being, in some sense, a spiritual pilgrimage, I guess that would probably be the title, although, you see, I change my title every few years. I think when you write an autobiography, it should change every 10 years or so. Your memories change, your values change, your sense of importance changes.

MOYERS: I remember, in 1974, when a book you wrote that impressed me a great deal appeared, called *To a Dancing God*. Some critic said of it, "Sam Keen is obviously in transit." And as I sit and listen to you talk, I think "Sam Keen is always—"

Mr. KEEN: In transit.

MOYERS: —"in transit." And so, why not that as the title of your mythic journey, "In Transit"?

Mr. KEEN: "In Transit." That's a good one. I'll adopt that, "In Transit." Yeah.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Your Mythic Journey and *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* by Sam Keen, both available in book stores.

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