

# PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

## *After the Deluge*

*Then by the will of Hurakan, the Heart of Heaven, the waters were swollen, and a great flood came upon the mannikins of wood. They were drowned and a thick resin fell from heaven...*

*Because they had not thought on Hurakan, therefore the face of the earth grew dark, and a pouring rain commenced, raining by day and by night ...*

*Then ran the mannikins hither and thither in despair. They climbed to the roofs of the houses, but the houses crumbled under their feet; they tried to mount to the tops of the trees, but the trees hurled them from them; they sought refuge in the caverns, but the caverns closed before them. Thus was accomplished the ruin of this race, destined to be overthrown.*

*- Popol Vuh, First Book (tr. Lewis Spence)*

I pen these words barely a week after Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, uprooting over a million people, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless, tens of thousands stranded, and unknown hundreds dead. Most Americans, cast involuntarily in the role of passive participants, watched this tragedy unfold with the same sense of slow-mo horror, helplessness, and fatalistic fascination we experience in that instant before cars collide, transfixed by the seemingly endless stream of devastation, suffering, and death broadcast twenty-four hours a day.

For those of us outside the affected area, the images of anguish, grief, and loss are surreal and almost unfathomable in their magnitude, evoking empathy, compassion, and grief of our own.

But for those in Katrina's path, particularly residents of New Orleans and the Mississippi delta, those who have lost family, friends, homes, and livelihood, it's the apocalypse.

*The only word I have to describe this is biblical.*

*Unidentified rescue worker, CNN, August 30.*

No need to rehash this recent sequence of events, the details and images of which remain fresh in our minds. We are still trying to process the who, what, where, when, and why of it all – but I do notice that when words fail to convey the impact and aftermath of a violent manifestation of nature, we tend to turn to myth. Not just reporters, in print and on the air, but also friends, neighbors, and relatives have echoed the reaction of the relief worker in the CNN sound byte above: this is a catastrophe of biblical proportions!

Though we have weather charts, satellite photos, and twenty-four hour televised images unfolding in real time, myth still speaks to us, compressing the near-total, destructive power of this elemental force of nature into one motif, out of the distant past, an image embedded in the human psyche:

the Great Flood.

Yes, it's a metaphor – which doesn't mean it didn't happen – or rather, that it doesn't keep happening. While waiting for the waters to relinquish their grip on New Orleans, I find my thoughts turning again and again to this mytheme.

Whence the origin of the Flood motif? Is it local history misremembered, a tale that grew in the telling? Is one Flood myth the same as the next? Or is the Flood merely an archetype, metaphor for movement in the individual psyche? What, in myth, is the purpose of the deluge – and what insight, if any, might such myths offer in the wake of Hurricane Katrina?

## **THE STUFF OF MYTH**

The motif of a universal deluge enjoys near universal distribution, rare only in Africa - and even on that dry continent are found notable exceptions, such as an Efik Ibibio tale from Nigeria of the Sun and Moon, living as man and wife on earth, inviting their friend, Flood, into their house – then having to retreat to the attic, then the roof, as the waters rise higher and higher - until eventually they reach the place in the heavens where we find them today.

The Old Testament story of Noah in the Ark, escaping the flood a vengeful God sends upon the world, shares the same roots as an earlier version, of the Mesopotamian Utnapishtim who, in a similar vessel, escapes a worldwide flood sent by the angry Enlil, as recounted in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Graeco-Roman mythology describes Deucalion and Pyrrha, their children, and the animals they've gathered aboard a box-shaped boat, as all that are saved alive in the flood; on the Aztec Calendar Stone, the last of four prehistoric ages ends with a flood that lingers fifty-two years; in China, the tenth and last of the prehistoric emperors, the Great Yu, battles the flood waters; the natives of Papua New Guinea believe there was once a global deluge when only the peak of Mount Tauga breached the surface of the water; the Blackfoot Indians of North America tell of Old Man, in a boat on the waters, sending down two or three animals - only the last of which succeeds - to bring up a bit of mud, from which he creates the earth.

Given the worldwide proliferation of flood myths, it's no surprise some wonder if they might have a common source. Those who believe in the inerrancy of scripture claim that God really did send a flood that covered the earth, nearly wiping out all life; the deluge stories of other cultures are then merely corruptions of the Genesis account. This literal interpretation, however, is not borne out by the geological record.

Others suggest the story of Noah's ark is but one echo of a vast flood that covered the plain stretching between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, inundating cities throughout the heart of the Fertile Crescent, affecting the entire region long recognized as the cradle of civilization. The devastation, displacement, and disruption experienced throughout the region is remembered in local myths of a universal flood (Abraham, the father of the Hebrew peoples, in the biblical tradition claims the city of Ur, along the course of the Euphrates, as his birthplace – which hints at a possible path through which memories of the great Tigris/Euphrates flood entered the Bible). This memory is then thought to have survived as part of the intricate mythological complex that accompanied the diffusion of civilization from the Fertile Crescent throughout Egypt, India, China, and across Oceania into the Americas.

Joseph Campbell takes issue with the initial assumption:

*A number of scholars have thought that actually there may have been some devastating flood that all but annihilated civilization in the area of the early cities, and some have even thought that in their excavations they had discovered the evidence. However, the flood strata unearthed in the various Mesopotamian city sites do not correspond to one another in date. Those at Shuruppuk and Uruk were laid down at the close of the Jemdet Nasr period, c. 3000 B.C., while that of Ur occurred at the close of the Obeid period, half a millennium before, and that of Kish two or three centuries later; so that each can be interpreted only as a local, not as a general Mesopotamian (let alone universal) catastrophe. It is of course possible that in each little city state itself the local flood was overinterpreted as a cosmic event, rendering present the mythological Deluge. However, as modern students of this subject, we cannot allow ourselves to go along with such obvious misjudgments, crying like the little hen when the pea fell on her tail, "Run, run, the sky is falling!"*

*Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God, Vol. II: Oriental Mythology, p. 121-122*

No region-wide flood, true – but, much as I appreciate Campbell's caution against conflating a variety of devastating local floods occurring centuries apart into the one cosmic flood of myth, after watching the coverage of Katrina's effect on those living in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast I can't help but wonder if there wasn't some blurring of myth and experience in the perceptions of those residents of Sumer and Akkad who did suffer through floods.

Nevertheless, we can't trace the origin of the biblical flood back to a specific occurrence.

Or can we?

## **ICE AGE RESIDUE**

Two Columbia University geologists, William Ryan and Walter Pittman, have proposed a novel theory, first published in 1998 in Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries

About the Event That Changed History – a provocative title, but one complemented by sound science. An outline of their argument is as follows:

Between 120,000 B.C. and 18,000 B.C, sheets of ice up to two miles thick blanketed much of the northern hemisphere, locking up so much water that sea levels were roughly 400 feet lower than they are today. This was followed by a period of rising temperatures, from 18,000 B.C. to 13,000 B.C., which triggered the glacial retreat. Melting ice fed what is now called “the New Euxine Lake,” a freshwater body located within the bed of today’s Black Sea. Starting around 9400 B.C. the Near East experienced a lengthy period of drought, which would have drawn a variety of peoples to the shore of this huge lake over the next few millennia.

By 6200 B.C. another “mini-”ice age had kicked in, followed by a significant drop in rainfall throughout the region – again motivating people to locate near a reliable freshwater source – hence another surge in population along the shores of the New Euxine Lake.

The final act of this geological drama occurred between 5650 and 5500 B.C., as temperatures rose and rains increased once more. During this period the level of the Mediterranean Sea (and the adjacent Sea of Marmara) rose to a height of 426 feet above that of the New Euxine Lake, finally spilling over a small barrier of land near what is now the Bosphorus Strait. The coursing water slashed a channel direct to the lake in short order. Ryan and Pittman point out the daily rate of flow down this flume would have quickly reached 200 times that of Niagara Falls, moving at a speed of fifty miles an hour, generating a roar heard over a hundred miles away! This surge would have continued at least 300 days, the shoreline expanding roughly a mile a day, ultimately swallowing over 60,000 square miles of land! Villages and fields along the lakeshore would have turned to sea bottom as peoples from a variety of cultures and language groups scattered in all directions.

In 1999 (A.D., that is), following up on Pittman and Ryan’s research, a National Geographic team, led by undersea explorer Robert Ballard, located the shoreline of the New Euxine Lake; surveys of the Black Sea’s floor show that the beds of the Danube, Dnieper, Dniester, Don, Volga, and other rivers extend along the sea bottom as far as a hundred miles beyond the Black Sea’s shore, all ending at the coast of the New Euxine Lake. A number of what appear to be *tells* (which often mark the site of buried ruins) have been observed along the ancient shoreline, along with well-preserved, recoverable artifacts, including stone tools and carved beams. Archaeological excavations at nearby sites show an abrupt change in pottery patterns about 5500 B.C., indicating the collision of cultures that would be expected as refugees fled the advancing water.

Pittman and Ryan suggest that this major geological event pushed the ancestors of the Sumerians, as well as proto-Semitic speakers, to the south, proto-Indo-European speakers to the north, and so on. They speculate the drowning of the New Euxine Lake might well be the source of cataclysmic flood stories that stretch in a swath from India to Greece.

Could be – certainly, the sudden expansion of the New Euxine Lake into the Black Sea is a geological fact – and further exploration is expected to uncover ancient communities long consigned to a watery tomb – but even if confirmed in most particulars, this event hardly accounts for flood cycles in Mesoamerican cultures, or among the tribes of the Great Plains.

I wonder if the flood motif might be a universal archetype because floods are essentially a universal experience?

The recent catastrophe in New Orleans provides some insight. Whether we are talking Cahokia (outside present day St. Louis, near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers), or the town of Ur in ancient Mesopotamia, the immediate experience wouldn't be all that different from that of those who stayed in the Big Easy as Katrina passed over: raging winds; rising waters; collapsed homes; drowned, injured, hungry friends, relatives, and neighbors; widespread panic; threat of contagion; loss of cropland; and surreal chaos and uncertainty replacing the order and routine of daily life.

Of course, the residents of Ur did not have the weather bureau to track the storm with Doppler radar, no hotels and motels to evacuate to outside the area, no sports stadiums to shelter in, no advance warning, no heavy equipment to repair levees and pump out flood waters, no National Guard or FEMA to supply aid and manage the crisis. Most people of the period would have traveled their entire life no farther than a five to ten mile radius beyond their birthplace; as far as they were concerned, a major flood would indeed be the end of the whole world – of *their* whole world. In an age where everything, from birth to planting, irrigating, harvesting, dying, and everything in between, echoes a mythological event, would it be so unusual to experience this crisis as a manifestation of myth? We can observe this happening today, when individuals vested in a literal interpretation of scripture see in current events the end of the world – so, Campbell's caution notwithstanding, a devastating local flood might well become identified with the cosmic myth.

But even were that so, mythologizing an event moves it from the literal to a liminal (“in-between”) realm. Stepping beyond history into myth, I have to ask what purpose, in mythological terms, the Deluge serves, and what associations and projections of the individual and collective psyche have become attached to this image?

## **FLOOD STAGES**

*Two mythologies are found in the story of the Flood. One is that of the planting culture, the old-city mythology of cyclic karma – of the ages of gold, silver, bronze, iron, during which the world's moral condition deteriorated. The Flood then came and wiped it out to bring about a fresh start. India abounds in stories of this kind, for the flood is a basic story associated with this cyclic experience through what we might term a year of years.*

*The second mythology is that of a God who created people, some of whom misbehave. He then said, "I regret that I have created these people. Look at what I've done! I am going to wipe them all out." That is another God, and certainly not the same God as in the first mythology. I emphasize this observation because two totally different ideas of God are involved in the word "God."*

*The latter God is one who creates. One thinks of that God as a fact. **That** we say, is the Creator. We conceptualize that God as IT. On the other hand, in the impersonal dynamism of the cycles of time the gods are simply the agents of the cycle. The Hindu gods are not, therefore, creators in the way that Yahweh is a creator. This Yahweh creator is, one might say, a metaphysical fact. When he makes up his mind to do something, it is promptly accomplished.*

*Joseph Campbell, Thou Art That, p. 43-44*

Often the flood represents the gulf between the vague, dreamlike mythic age situated somewhere in a dim and distant prehistoric past, and that of the current historic age – times that are better known and better recorded. This is suggested by the unrealistic ages in the Bible of the patriarchs before the Flood, who live for centuries – which parallels the mythic lengths of the reigns of the ten pre-Flood Mesopotamian monarchs in the king lists of the Babylonian priest, Berossos, that together total 432,000 years! And then the fifty-two year flood depicted on the Great Calendar Stone of the Aztecs, c. A.D. 1479, marks the end of four prehistoric ages of descending duration ("4 Jaguar," "4 Wind," "4 Rain," and "4 Water") that precede the dawn of our own world age. These waters serve to divide a dreamlike, imaginal, mythic reality from the day-to-day waking world.

Campbell notes a shift in roles, from the flood marking the end of an age, into the flood as an instrument of divine retribution, already apparent in the tale of King Ziusudra of Shuruppak, the tenth king of that ancient city-state, who plays the local Noah in a version recorded c. 1750 B.C.:

*[W]e cannot rule out the probability that in our tale of the Deluge of Ziusudra, Semitic influences already were at work. The sudden stress given to the role of Utu, Sumerian counterpart of the great Semitic sun-god Shumash, points to a bit of such doctoring as priestly hands always allow themselves. And the whole idea of the Flood as the work of a god of wrath than as the natural punctuation of an eon of say 432,000 years seems, indeed, to be an effect of later, secondary, comparatively simple cerebration.*

*Campbell, Oriental Mythology, p. 127*

This marks the transition noted in Thou Art That, from the gods as agents of a cosmic order that is reflected in the regular movements of the celestial bodies, to god as an active, creative personality, one who travels with – and is in relationship to – his people. We observe this change most clearly in the encounter between the invading, Semitic-

speaking nomads, and the agricultural Sumerian civilization long-settled in the Fertile Crescent.

(As an aside, Joseph Campbell is not expressing an anti-Semitic sentiment here, posthumous criticism notwithstanding. In this context, the term *Semitic* refers to a language group: Campbell is referring to Semitic speakers, which include a number of different peoples, mostly-polytheistic nomads with a primary tribal deity - a sky god - who emerge from the steppes of Arabia over a period stretching from the Akkadians, in the third millennium B.C., to the Arabs, circa 200 B.C. . In common with other scholars of his day – Toynbee, for instance - even when speaking of the Hebrews Campbell generally isn't referring exclusively to the twelve tribes of Israel, but also to the Ammonites, Edomites, Midianites, Moabites, and to the Canaanites already parked in Palestine before the Exodus.

Campbell observes the same dynamic among the nomadic Indo-Europeans, who invaded the Balkans under the aegis of their patriarchal sky-god, in what are called the *Kurgan* (or barrow-people) incursions, and who then also settled along the shores of the Aegean, overwhelming the agrarian, goddess-oriented cultures already in place. Of course, critics somehow manage to refrain from tarring Joe with charges of “anti-Indo-Europeanism” for making this observation ... ).

The passage from the *Popol Vuh* quoted earlier blends both types of flood myths together: Hurakan and his colleagues are disappointed in their creation and so wipe away this failed version of humanity, replacing them with us - marking the end of the mythic age and the dawn of our current era.

Ironically, some of those who declare Noah's Flood to be concrete, historical fact are already claiming Katrina is the punishment of a vengeful god. An “analysis” on the website of the Restored Church of God, a strict fringe sect of a few thousand found on the web at

<http://www.realtruthmag.org/articles/0305-wawucgu.html> , declares the following:

*As residents and tourists sought shelter or fled the city, a giant hand-painted sign was left behind, which read, “Please Pray for New Orleans.” Praying for New Orleans—“The Big Easy,” known around the world for its “anything goes” party atmosphere, and countless stories of debauchery and lewdness—to be spared means that a God must exist to answer. How would the God of the Bible answer such a prayer—what would be His reaction? Would He turn a blind eye to the indescribable excesses that have run rampant throughout New Orleans' history? There is a reason why “The Big Easy” was struck—and why the rest of the United States will feel its rippling effects.*

This isn't just a rightwing phenomenon: some ecological activists hurry to suggest a perceived increase in the frequency and intensity of hurricanes is due to global warming, implying New Orleans's destruction is the penalty exacted for environmental misdeeds - reaping the results of our collective sins against the Earth. I'm not arguing that no

scientific correlation will be found (though belief in a direct cause-and-effect relationship is, at the moment, an act of faith) - and proponents of the Gaia hypothesis do seem more willing to embrace metaphor than literal-minded fundamentalists – but the parallels do intrigue me. Perhaps myths reflect the patterns of the universe we perceive, the shape of our thoughts – a pre-conscious context not easy to transcend?

*“Natural disasters” never seem quite natural to the people who must undergo them. Numberless myths explain such happenings as being chastisements for human impiety or disobedience.*

Alexander Eliot, *Myths* (with Joseph Campbell & Mircea Eliade), p.284

## **STORM SURGE**

What might this archetype signify in the human psyche?

*[W]e know that there was no Universal Flood. So we have to ask ... [w]hat is the spiritual meaning of the Flood? Interpreting Biblical texts literally reduces their value; it turns them into newspaper reports. So there was a flood thousands of years ago. So what? But if you can understand what the Flood means in terms of a reference to spiritual circumstances – the coming of chaos, the loss of balance, the end of an age, the end of a psychological posture – then it begins to talk to you again.*

Campbell, *An Open Life*, p. 67-68

The coming of chaos, the loss of balance – no great mystery that this dynamic is associated in the human psyche with the image of a flood, for that is exactly what we’ve witnessed in New Orleans in recent days. The psyche doesn’t arbitrarily construct abstract symbols that can be understood only through the study of elaborate, arcane, esoteric traditions; rather it uses images that convey a powerful and appropriate emotional charge.

In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (footnote on p.37), Campbell points out that “[t]his circular adventure of the hero appears in negative form in stories of the deluge type, where it is not the hero that goes to the power, but the power that rises against the hero, and again subsides.” Often, in dream, this motif assumes a seemingly mundane form. How many of us, for example, have had dreams where there is flooding, whether rising water in a dark cave, or some unstoppable, overflowing toilet - without having ever been through an actual flood ourselves?

*Here is the deluge motif: annihilation of the ego system. His conscious programs are breaking up. He is being overwhelmed by the surges of his own nature, which does not run in the channels designated by his strongly disciplinary society.*

Campbell, *Mythic Worlds, Modern Words*, p.33



Of course, the best we can do is paint with a broad brush, for there is no universal key, no rigid definition that can be assigned to a specific dream image. The significance of a dream motif is a function of that image in relation to the circumstances and psychology of the individual dreamer. Generally, though, floodwaters in dream can symbolize undifferentiated emotions and passions - everything from anxiety to lust to anger to grief – unconscious aspects of our psyche that can no longer be suppressed or denied, so threaten to swamp our conscious awareness.

Again, it's not difficult to understand why the psyche provides such associations to this image, given the raw emotions erupting from thousands of New Orleans residents - and officials - at the height of the flooding ...

### **THE WAKE OF THE FLOOD**

Interiorizing and psychologizing the Flood, while a valuable exercise, does nothing to address the suffering and loss experienced by the victims of Katrina, who lived through a real flood, and have real and immediate needs. What comfort, if any, might flood myths offer in the current moment?

One thought that comes to mind is our human resilience. The myths tell us this has happened before, and it will happen again – but we will endure. The cycle endlessly repeats itself, or some remnant survives to repopulate the world. Yes, there is death and destruction, chaos and confusion – but this, too, shall pass.

Joe shares an image with Bill Moyers that seems relevant:

*I think of grass – you know, every two weeks a chap comes out with a lawnmower and cuts it down. Suppose the grass were to say, “Well, for Pete’s sake, what’s the use if you keep getting cut down this way?” Instead, it keeps growing.*

*Campbell/Moyers, The Power of Myth, p. 274 (pocketsize paperback edition)*

The flood myths that appear over and over document the power of the human spirit to persist in the face of adversity. This same drive is already apparent among those who have survived Katrina, whether deciding to start a new life elsewhere, or focused on returning to and rebuilding New Orleans.

A related theme is the end of one age, and the creation of something new. A sense of renewal and rebirth always follows in the Wake of the Flood.

Campbell speaks of “the end of an age, the end of a psychological posture” – and we see this too, as the aftermath of Katrina sparks a nationwide discussion of issues largely ignored before – discussions of everything from our collective responsibilities to those trapped on the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, to the realities of race, the value of ecological restoration and preservation of wetlands, the role and responsibilities

of federal, state, and local governments, and a host of other concerns brought into focus by catastrophic forces of nature.

Where this will lead, I cannot say – but it's difficult to deny we live in a different world than existed before Katrina. As the floodwaters subside, a new world emerges.

*The deluge hero is a symbol of the germinal vitality of man surviving even the worst tides of catastrophe ... ”*

*Joseph Campbell, in the The Hero With A Thousand Faces, p. 37*

After the Deluge comes optimism, and hope.

Our hearts go out to those who have suffered and lost so much as a result of Hurricane Katrina – including the many associates of the Joseph Campbell Foundation who live in the afflicted area. The recovery of the region and the rebuilding of lives will take a lengthy and sustained effort. We encourage all who can to give generously, and offer the following sites as a place to begin:

The American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org/>

The Salvation Army: <http://www.salvationarmyusa.org>

The United Way: <http://www.unitedway.org>

NAACP Disaster Relief Fund: <http://www.naacp.org>

Housing Assistance: <http://www.HurricaneHousing.org>