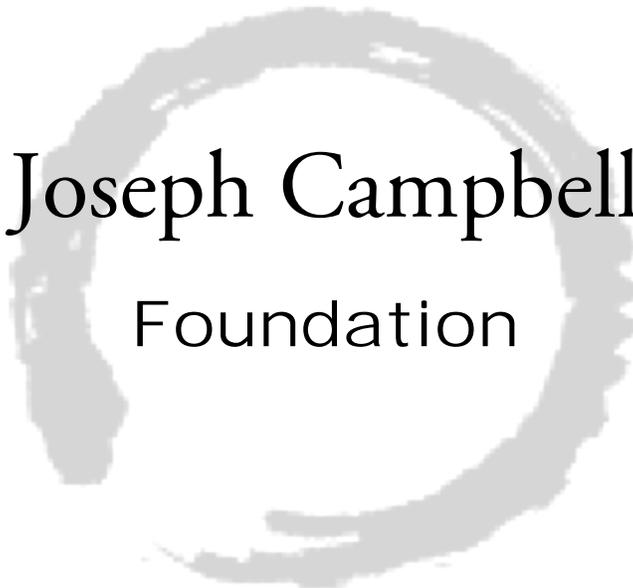


# Practical Campbell

## *The King & "I"*

*In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerringer (bodhi\_bliss) tackles the archaic practice of human sacrifice, focusing on the role ritual regicide may have played in the evolution of the self-aware ego, and the symbolic significance this ancient rite holds for our lives today.*



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# PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

## *The King & “I”*

*[T]he appearance c.4500-2500 B.C. of an unprecedented constellation of sacra – sacred acts and sacred things – points not to a new theory about how to make the beans grow, but to an actual experience in depth of that mysterium tremendum that would break upon us all even now were it not so wonderfully masked.*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God, Vol. II: Oriental Mythology, p. 47)*

Human sacrifice a sacred act?

That’s a concept difficult to absorb.

We’re all familiar with the typical Hollywood scenario: either a band of primitive, bloodthirsty, drum-pounding savages bearing a fair, unspoiled maiden, sometimes drugged, sometimes bound, to the edge of a volcano, her sacrifice a means of appeasing an angry god - or a variation of the same powerless victim lashed to an altar in some sort of wild, orgiastic, black magic ritual.

Of course our sympathies lie with the hero who inevitably rescues the maiden from her fate – and condemns the collective celebrants to theirs. We’re on his team, for his character reflects our own cultural perspective. I’ve yet to find myself rooting for the sinister, knife-wielding, maniacal fanatic usually depicted in the role of the officiating priest...

But then, it’s just a movie, a far cry from reality.

Popular belief often assumes those sacrificed were either bred to the role and kept ignorant of their fate, or were slaves, criminals, or captives of war forced to the altar. There is certainly evidence of this in several cultures (e.g., the “Flower Wars” between Mayan cities to secure captives for sacrifice).

However, in the period that marks the birth of civilization - focusing on the two thousand years between 4500 and 2500 B.C. – the sacrificial ritual claimed not the dregs, but the cream of society – the best the community had to offer.

Nor were members of these societies “primitive” savages barely removed from the beasts. Joseph Campbell points out that the practice of human sacrifice is found in the early stages of every literate high culture.

Why would a people do this? *What* could they be thinking – or were they thinking at all? Does our automatic condemnation of ritual murder preclude all possibility of comprehending their mindset?

*[W]e should certainly not think of the mental state and experience of these individuals after any model of our own more or less imaginable reactions to such a fate. For these sacrifices were not properly, in fact, individuals at all; that is to say, they were not particularly beings, distinguished from a class or group by virtue of any sense or realization of a personal, individual destiny and responsibility to be worked out in the way of an individual life. They were parts, only, of a larger whole; and it was*

*only by virtue of their absolute submission to that in its unalterable categorical imperative that they were anything at all.*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God, Vol. II: Oriental Mythology, p.65)*

While decrying the brutality and loss of life, Campbell nevertheless uncovers the elaborate and often elegant mythological themes that structured these rites. Those participating in lethal rituals in fact surrendered themselves completely to myth, acting out a cosmic realization on the physical plane – with the usual bloody consequences that come of reading a myth literally.

It's no simple task to fathom the mindset of entire cultures centered on human sacrifice – and even harder to accept that our own ancestors indulged in such rites. (This is somewhat ironic, given that such a sacrifice remains central to the prevailing religious tradition in the West – though fortunately, for us, the act has become spiritualized in modern practice.)

Is it coincidence that the development of this mythological motif parallels the evolution of human consciousness? Indeed, changes in one specific form of human sacrifice, that of ritual regicide, echo changes in human consciousness – changes that birth the self-aware, self-directed waking ego through which we filter our experience of the universe.

Though we no longer kill our kings, the forces that compelled this archaic ritual move us still – and so the myth remains relevant today. Exploring this archetype opens a window on ways to effectively engage this omnipresent pattern without shattering one's life in the process.

## ***ANIMAL OR VEGETABLE?***

Joseph Campbell identifies two orders of sacrifice in the pre-historic world.

The hunting cultures of Paleolithic and Neolithic eras centered around a shamanic “animal master” – most often the primary food animal - who is hunted and killed, but then reborn through rites the hunters perform. Life lives off life - "first you eat me, then I eat you" - a mythological pattern still alive in the Lakota, Dakota and Blackfoot tribes hunting buffalo on the North American plains in the late nineteenth century.

It's as if there's an uneasy, unspoken sense of guilt that accompanies taking a life for personal gain – so that guilt is assuaged by participating in the animal's rebirth.

Campbell contrasts this mythic view with that of the tropics, where the mythos is rooted in the life that springs from what is rotting. Given the relentless humid heat, decay occurs rapidly - but out of the dark, dank, rotting and decaying vegetation sprouts new life. Life comes from death – so, to propagate life, ensure this renewal, comes the oddly perverse idea of increasing death – a concept that triggers “a frenzy of sacrifice.”

In planting cultures what develops is the myth of the dead-and-resurrected god: a man (or sometimes a woman) is told to kill the god and bury his corpse, out of which grows the primary food plant that feeds the region - from the coconut in the South Pacific, to the corn in Longfellow's treatment of a Native American version of this myth in “Hiawatha” – and we find echoes sounding through the myths of Osiris, Dionysus, and the Christ, among others – Osiris, the sprout springing from the

grain when the seed germinates and dies, or Dionysus, the fruit of the vine, or Jesus, who was the bread and the wine together.

There is much overlap between the two approaches, but with a significant difference in perspective:

For the hunters, the accent is on atoning for a regrettable yet necessary death by participating in bringing about the victim's rebirth (who voluntarily submits to death, a sacrifice to feed the tribe). The offering is generally an animal, sacrificed to a deity (the "Animal Master"), and the sense is what Campbell calls, from the Latin, *do ut des*: "I give that thou mayest give."

*In the hunting cultures, when a sacrifice is made, it is, as it were, a gift or bribe to the deity that is being invited to do something for us or to give us something. But when a figure is sacrificed in the planting cultures, that figure itself is the god. The person who dies is buried and becomes the food.*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers, p. 132-133, small paperback edition)*

In the planting cultures the emphasis is on taking life – no reluctance here, but human sacrifice - with the added strange twist that increasing this ritual dealing of death ensures and enhances life for the entire community. The one who is killed gives life to the community, and, indeed, to all Creation – and the sense is what Campbell terms *tat tvam asi* – "Thou art that."

*[T]he dominating idea of the sacrifice is that already noted, of a reciprocal dual offering: an eternal being is given life in this world, and temporal lives are returned to an eternal being. Through various modulations it is thereby suggested that an original downcoming or self-emptying of this kind produced the universe and that through properly conducted ceremonials reproducing that original act, life in this world is renewed.*

*...[I]n every sacrifice of this kind, the victim is understood to be an incarnation of the God, transubstantiation having taken place when the ceremonial costume was assumed. Furthermore, as in every celebration of the mass the sacrifice of Calvary is not simply symbolized but repeated, so likewise in all sacrifices of this order, both space and time are annihilate in an eviternal act.*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. II: The Way of the Seeded Earth, Part 1: The Sacrifice, p. 75-76)*

Sacrifice is metaphor for the nature of the cosmos in which we live: transcendent eternity, pouring into the field of time and space (which can be represented as a cross). This Eternity (which is itself a metaphor) is thus immanent in all of creation – fragmented into the multitude of forms that comprise the material universe, with each of us one of those fragments, containing our own little drop of Eternity.

Life lives off of Life, a dynamic portrayed by the Deity sacrificing him/herself to feed us and give us life. This is an image that recurs throughout the world, particularly in planting cultures - but the reference of the myth is to our experience in the here and now: life does live off of life, and out of death comes new life. We live the myth every day of our lives, and so, for example, partake of the holy communion, eat the divine flesh, every time we sit at table and sup – a sacred act.

## “THE KING IS DEAD ...”

As early as 7500 B.C. the agricultural centers of the Near East gave rise to our first cities - and by the middle of the third millennium B.C. literate civilizations had materialized in Mesopotamia and then in Egypt, each retaining many mythological forms that carried over from the earlier planting cultures.

With the emergence of civilization, attention turned from the earth to the heavens. Priestly observers, charting the regular movement of celestial bodies in the night sky, noted pattern and order above – a pattern and order they attempted to replicate here on earth. Civilization was thus structured in imitation of this perceived cosmic order – which included everything from the physical configuration of temples and cities, to assigned social roles and supporting myths.

It's not unusual for us today to project our concept of kingship backwards in time and so automatically assume early kings “ruled” the realm, imposing their whims upon their subjects with the autocratic caprice of an Alexander or a Nero, backed up at spear point, if needed. It does not occur to us that early kings and queens were locked into playing their prescribed part, as much prisoners of their role as the lowliest slave.

These were not autonomous, independent individuals bending the world to their will, but agents of the divine order, as were the gods themselves. Early rulers were god-kings incarnate - more on the order of the Dalai Lama than Henry VIII – and, like the Dalai Lama, merely the outward manifestation of an eternal being.

Campbell speaks of the king as representing “the central coordinating factor of a differentiated society” (or, as Julian Jaynes might say, the voice of God). As such, the king personified either the lunar or solar deity, depending on the local mythology – and just as the king personified a heavenly god, so did his court:

*The king and his queen or queens, as well as the members of his high council, were identified with the sun, moon, and one or another of the planets: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn – the names of which suggest to this day some of the roles that they may already have represented: as Treasurer, Queen Consort, Troop Commander, Civil Magistrate, and Executioner. The comings and goings of the king and his queens, in particular, were regulated by the movements, appearances, and disappearances, of the celestial spheres to which they were assigned, so that at certain critical junctures, interpreted as representing the termination of an eon, the king and his entire court were killed.*

*This was the form of sacrifice known as “Sacred Regicide” ... It is a form of total sacrifice that can be identified in modified forms in evidences from every one of the archaic high civilizations, all of which had already received seminal influences from Sumerian Mesopotamia; namely Egypt, Crete and early Greece, India and China – with an extension to Mesoamerica.*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. II, Pt.1, p. 78)*

Talk about strict term limits!

Of course, the king-priest is in the ritual role of the deity – ego's interest in its own self-preservation

wields little power here. Sacrifice at the end of a reign of set span was no secret – each god-king knew how his story would end, and willingly subsumed his identity in that of the deity. Hardly ego run amok - a trait more common to Caesars, Kaisers, and Czars (and the occasional elected official). In fact, there may be a question as to whether ego is present at all in this period - at least in the form we know it today.

Campbell offers example after example of ritual regicide, even finding lingering traces in recent centuries – from mass royal burials in ancient Sumer and Nubia, or its depiction on two Sumerian seals c. 2300 B.C., to Malabar, in the sixteenth century, where a king was observed on a platform slicing away bits of flesh and body parts before finally slitting his own throat, or Zimbabwe, as recently as 1810, where priests ordered the strangulation of the king every four years.

Usually the king's sacrifice was linked to the orbit of the planets - often Venus, which returns to the same spot every eight years, or Jupiter, on its twelve-year cycle. Stargazing priests set the date for this morbid ritual. In surviving historical records the king was dispatched by either a trusted member of his council, or a close relative. For example, among the Shilluk in the Sudan the priests notified the nobles, who then notified the king. The act, performed by the chief noble, had to fall on a dark night between the last and first quarter of the moon in the dry season before first sowing and first rain; in Rhodesia, the king's chief wife strangled him, on the night of the new moon, with a cord made of the foot-sinew of a bull.

Nor did these god-kings enter death alone:

*The astounding burials discovered by Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur, the Sumerian city sacred to the moon god, Nanna, have left an image of a Bronze Age ritual in all its splendour and barbarity. Here lay the bodies of priest-kings, or their substitutes, together with those of priestess-queens and many court or temple servants, including charioteers, musicians, and soldiers. In the most elaborate of these graves the king, whose name was A-bar-gi, had sixty-five people who died with, or soon after, him, and the queen, whose name was Shub-ad, had twenty-five ...*

*Woolley writes that human sacrifice was confined to the funerals of royal personages. There was no sign of anything similar in the graves of commoners, however rich. Neither the kings, queens nor the courtiers appear to have suffered in these royal graves, or have gone unwillingly to their death. They must have been given a soporific drink before being buried alive.*

*(Anne Baring & Jules Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image, p. 166-167)*

The burials of sixteen distinct royal courts that Woolley found at Ur mirror the royal burials of groups of up to five hundred individuals, all buried on one day, excavated in numerous mass entombments spread over several centuries (c. 2000-1700 B.C.) in a Nubian necropolis at Kerma, by Professor George Reisner.

*As in India to this day, therefore, so also in the deep Egyptian past, we find this appalling, apparently senseless, certainly very cruel, rite of suttee – and we shall discover it again in earliest China. The royal tombs of Ur show it in Mesopotamia and there is evidence in Europe as well. What can it mean, that man, precisely at the moment of the first flowering of his greatest civilizations, should have offered his*

*humanity and common sense (even, indeed, one can say, his fundamental biological will to live) on the altar of a dream?*

*Were these willing victims, or were they forced, whom we have broken in upon in the cities of their sleep?*

*(Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God, Vol. II: Oriental Mythology, p. 64)*

Campbell answers these questions with pages of physical, circumstantial, and historical evidence supporting the claim that the participants voluntarily embraced their sacrifice.

It seems inconceivable to us today that a human could willingly consent to such a fate – but again, that is projecting our twenty-first century mindset, shaped by a sharply defined ego, into people who appear to have experienced the world far differently than we do today.

## THE EMERGENCE OF EGO & THE SELF-CONSCIOUS HERO

Ultimately, we are talking about mythology, which operates out of a dynamic more of dream than of logic. Often our behaviors in dream are very much at odds with what we expect of ourselves when awake and rational - and myth is of the same order as dream.

As Campbell points out in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, dreams are private myths, and myths are public (collective) dreams, and so a culture's mythology of sacrifice offers a window into the collective psyche of that culture.

On the other hand, the analogy of dream logic might be more than mere metaphor. This playworld/dreamworld is very real for the participants – all the more so because the elements of an effective, living ritual mirror the world in which one lives – and these were indeed, for a span, effective rituals.

The rational, differentiated ego is a relatively recent development among humans. That self-conscious sense appears to distinguish us from our animal cousins. A primary question - unless one believes man was created complete, conscious and self-aware from day one – is *when* in our past did ego consciousness arise from the unconscious psyche?

Jamake Highwater points out that Campbell “thought that very early on humankind was actually in a perpetual dream state,” before the ego emerged. This needn't mean that we were once pre-historic zombies, but that our sense of individuality and of a separate, distinct consciousness proved porous and diffuse – just as it does for the dream ego in our nocturnal dramas.

Even today, members of the few primal cultures still active on the planet exhibit a far less sharply differentiated ego-consciousness than in the west, along with greater openness and receptivity to the group mind (evident even among the aborigines in Australia, who always seem to have part of their consciousness back in “Dreamtime,” the mythic *alcheringa* of the ancestors that permeates and supports the physical, waking world).

The late Harvard psychologist, Julian Jaynes, in his classic study, The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bi-cameral Mind, draws on myth, archaeology, and linguistic, literary, and historical evidence to argue that humanity was largely “pre-conscious” into the early years of the high

cultures, with the subjective ego taking shape somewhere between 2500 and 700 B.C. (of course, this wouldn't have happened overnight, but might have taken centuries to unfold).

Jaynes isn't suggesting that the people who built Catal Hüyük 9,000 years ago were mindless automatons; he does, though, make a strong case that they did not own their own thoughts, but heard in their thoughts the voices of the gods.

Jaynes attributes this to a dissociation between the right and left hemispheres of the brain (specifically, thoughts originating in "Wernicke's area" in the right hemisphere of the brain, "heard" in the auditory areas of the left temporal lobe), a consequence of the development of language. Originally images would have formed the content of thought, but, with the advent of language, humans started thinking in words.

I experience the "voices" in my head as my own thoughts, originating within my own mind – a recognition that makes modern consciousness possible. Archaic man, however, did not experience an internal monologue, but rather took divine dictation. What we might experience as a creative inspiration, he took as direction from the gods.

Julian Jaynes even finds traces of this perspective in Homer's *Iliad*, and in the biblical prophets - late examples of a fading mode of consciousness that heard the voice of the gods. This theory, while controversial, is nevertheless fascinating and not easily dismissed.

What isn't controversial is Jaynes's recognition that the beginnings of a major change are apparent by the end of the third millennium B.C. – in tandem with the shift from hieratic city-states to dynastic kingdoms.

Independent of Jaynes and his bicameral theory, Baring and Cashford note evidence of this same change:

*In the Bronze Age, for the first time, we learn the names of individual men and women, what they say and do ... all these differentiations reflect the growing awareness of the individual's power to shape events. The challenges of many different kinds of activity give rise to the myth of the "hero" – the person of greater wisdom, power, or strength who will be able to respond to a whole new dimension of endeavor, and who offers a model for the rest of the tribe to emulate: how, for example, to stop a mighty river flooding the land, how to govern a city with many thousands of people, how to defend against a barbarous enemy.*

*(Baring & Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess, p.154)*

Baring and Cashford locate the origins of the hero's quest in the sun's transit of the heavens. Similarly Joseph Campbell notes "heroic mythology" appearing by 2500 B.C., with the Fifth Dynasty in Egypt - a "solar" Bronze Age mythology replacing the "lunar" mythology of the earlier tradition. (Ritual regicide is closely tied to lunar mythology, as, in Campbell's words, "the moon, symbol of life's death and resurrection, carries its own shadow within itself – as we all do." We find traces of this lunar motif in the celebration of the death-and-resurrection of Christ – "the King of Kings" - with the date of Easter pegged to the Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox.)

The motif of the hero is closely allied to the experience of waking consciousness – James Hillman, among others, refers to the "heroic ego" – so it's no surprise this mytheme surfaces at such a critical juncture.

Jaynes attributes the breakdown of the bicameral mind and the emergence of a dynamic, self-conscious ego to a variety of factors, including trade, technological innovation, and, in particular, the development of writing. Other scholars as well tie writing to an emerging reflexive consciousness:

*The scribe, or author, could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down. A new power of reflexivity was thus coming into existence, borne by the relation between the scribe and his scripted text.*

*(David Abrams, The Spell of the Sensuous, p. 107)*

As intriguing as is Jaynes's theory of the bicameral brain or Campbell's discussion of the hero quest may be, it's impossible to isolate any specific trigger for this change in perception; nevertheless the myth of the hero's quest, the art of writing, and a number of other cultural markers clearly accompany this shift in human consciousness.

One such significant marker is the near universal re-visioning of ritual regicide that occurs over this period.

## “... LONG LIVE THE KING!”

As humanity made the transition from tribalism to civilization, Campbell describes the figure of the king as representing the central coordinating principle for that society – in essence, functioning as the ego for the group mind. No surprise, then, that kings were among the earliest to display a sense of individuality – and that stronger sense of ego moved them to step outside their assigned role, consciously tweaking the ritual and re-interpreting the myth of the royal sacrifice.

As the self-conscious ego evolved (perhaps as recently as 3,000 years ago), we find these god-kings waking up to their sacrifice as at odds with their ego's sense of self-preservation - so ceremonies were adopted that substituted a ritual re-enactment for the actual sacrifice of the ruler - ceremonies that symbolically represented the death-and-rebirth of the king and yet managed to keep those mythological term limits from being strictly and literally enforced.

*In the earliest centuries of the prehistoric hieratic city-states - for which we have ample circumstantial evidence, and which I am dating c. 3500 - 2500 B.C. - the kings in their mythic identification are to such an extent "open behind" (to use the apt phrase of Thomas Mann) that they gave their bodies to be slain or even slew themselves in the festival mime: as, indeed, kings in India continued to be slain as late as the sixteenth century and in Africa into the twentieth. In Egypt, however, already in the period of the Narmer palette (c. 2850 B.C.), their individualities had to a certain extent "closed," so that the holy death-and-resurrection scenes were no longer being played with all the empathy of yore – at least by the players of the leading part ... Somewhere, some time, at some point on the prehistoric map not yet brought into focus by research, the king had taken maat ["right order," akin to dharma or the Tao] unto himself ...*

*Instead of that old, dark, terrible drama of the king's death, which had formerly been played to the hilt, the audience now watched a symbolic mime, the Sed festival, in which the king renewed his pharaonic warrant without submitting to the personal inconvenience of a literal death ... the real hero of the great occasion was no longer the timeless Pharaoh (capital P) who puts on pharaohs, like clothes, and puts them off, but the living garment of flesh and bone, this particular Pharaoh So-and-so, who, instead of giving himself to the part, had found a way to keep the part to himself. And this he did by stepping down the mythological image one degree. Instead of Pharaoh changing pharaohs, it was the pharaoh who changed costumes.*

*(Campbell, Oriental Mythology, p. 73-74)*

This transition is subtle yet effective. In some cultures an animal is offered in sacrifice as substitute for the king (for instance, the Apis bull in Egypt), while elsewhere a human substitute is found. In most instances, mass suttee burials still marked the treasure tombs of these demoted deities (Jaynes notes that in Sumer the kings were now designated "the tenant-farmers of the gods").

Campbell terms the "mock-holiness" of the worshipped kings in these later dynastic states *mythic inflation* ("the god absorbed and lost in ego"), as opposed to "the actual holiness of the sacrificed kings of the earlier hieratic city-states," which he labels *mythic identification* ("ego absorbed and lost in god").

*Such obsequies cannot be interpreted, like those of the archaic ritual regicide, as giving evidence of any quenching of ego in the godly role of king. Indeed, on one level – let us say the merely personal – they would have been celebrated adequately and nobly enough in Tennyson's unexciting last stanza of Enoch Arden:*

*"So passed the strong heroic soul away./And when they buried him the little port/Had seldom seen a costlier funeral."*

*(ibid., p.79)*

Nevertheless, the Sed festival and other such substitution rituals, while removing risk to the central player, still managed to convey the mythic impact of the original rite.

How? Why would this work? Why would the people accept this significant rewrite?

No one can simply change a myth by fiat – not even the Pharaoh. Ikhnaton's revolution, replacing the gods of Egypt with monotheism, lasted but one generation before the people reverted to the old ways. Had the collective culture been ready for this change, the priests of the old order would not have found it so easy to restore Amun-re and the rest of the ancient pantheon. A mythology established by the point of a sword is bound to fail – unless the new myth strikes a resonant chord in the collective psyche, sounding familiar themes. A mythology must ring true in actual experience if it is to seize one's heart.

*This is a fact universally recognized among peoples familiar with the service of myth to meditation. The verbal discourse, the explanatory legend, is functionally a lure to conduct the mind to, and to*

*prepare it for, an experience of the image as an archetype of some aspect of one's own mystery. The image comes to one as though from afar, yet from within, as an opener of the way to release from the tension of separateness in space and time, the anguish of temporality, and one goes to it as a bridegroom to his bride or an infant to the breast.*

*(ibid., p.73)*

Campbell suggests that both the *Sed* festival and the sacrifice of the Apis bull fulfill this function – as does another variation on this motif, a further morphing of the mytheme common today:

*The question is appropriate and was, of course, to be expected. It brings up the delicate problem as to whether in a mythic image there may be an implicit meaning, for the mythological image that is rendered in this shocking rite is the same as that of the sacrifice of the mass. The archetype or elementary idea (Elementargedanke) is in both ceremonials the same: the sacrifice of an incarnate divinity and a communion meal of its flesh (Hoc est enim corpus meum). The secondary, local settings and interpretations (Völkergedanken) differ, but the psychological impact and therefore the transformative power of a myth derive from its image, not its explanation.*

*(ibid., p. 73)*

It is, however, ironic that the end of ritual regicide coincided with the inauguration of bloodshed on a massive scale. Prior to the middle of the third millennium, conflict had been mostly limited to local affairs as one community bumped into another – but Sargon of Akkad's invasion of Sumer, in 2350 B.C. marks the beginning of wars of conquest and total subjugation – the world in which we live yet today. The blood shed since far outweighs that lost through human sacrifice.\*

Odd that, as one form of ritual murder faded, a far more lethal form arose.

## MYSTERY RITES AND MYSTIC TRADITIONS

Substitution became the order of the day as lesser humans and/or sacred animals filled in for the king. In most high civilizations animals eventually replaced humans on the altar, though some forms of human sacrifice continued into the twentieth century, and traces occasionally surface today in isolated acts, such as the practice of *seppuku* or *sāti* – ritual suicide - in Japan or India.

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\* In Primitive Mythology Campbell puts this ritual in perspective by pointing out that “the number of lives offered up in such rites is far less, proportionately to the population, than that sacrificed in our cities in traffic accidents. However, among ourselves such deaths are thought of and experienced generally as a consequence of human fallibility, even though their incidence is statistically predictable. In the primitive ritual, on the other hand, which is based on the viewpoint of the species rather than the individual, what for us is ‘accident’ is placed at the center of the system – namely, sudden, monstrous death – and this becomes therewith a revelation of the inhumanity of the order of the universe.”

Sacrifice of any sort is rare today, thanks to the next great movement in this dance – the interiorization of the myth.

Again, the *Sed* festival of ancient Egypt points the way:

*Such then, or somewhat such, was the rite by which the literal killing of the old king and the transfer of power to the new had been transformed into an allegory. The king died not literally, but symbolically, in the earliest passion play of which we have record. And the plot of the sacred mime was the old, yet ever new formula of the Adventure of the Hero, which is known to the later arts and literatures all over the world ...*

*Thus in a marvelously subtle way the work commenced of Art, which in the course of the following long, cruel centuries was gradually to alleviate the force of the earlier, literally enacted mythic seizures, releasing man thereby from their inhumanity, while opening through the figures of their inspiration new ways to an understanding of humanity itself.*

*(ibid., p. 77)*

And so we come to two of Joseph Campbell's major themes: the centrality of both the Hero's Journey and the Way of Art to the human experience. Art – in this instance, through the medium of myth and ritual drama – presents an image that conveys to those assembled a sense of *participation mystique*, an experience with all the emotional impact and transformative power of the act portrayed. This dramatic dimension is an essential element of ritual – from coronations to the mass.

*One of the wonderful things in the Catholic ritual is going to communion. There you are taught this is the body and blood of the Savior. And you take it to you, and you turn inward, and there Christ is working within you. This is a way of inspiring a meditation on experiencing the spirit in you. You see people coming back from communion, and they are inward-turned, they really are.*

*(Campbell, The Power of Myth, p. 74, sm. pb. edition)*

I imagine the real surprise would be if the sacrificial motif were missing from Christian mythology - but that is clearly not the case. There is no denying the transformative power of the experience. The only *caveat* is that the Christian revelation is understood to be historical and unique – and so engenders the usual complications that accompany a literal reading of any myth.

Christianity, though, is not alone in rendering this theme. The mystery religions of ancient Greece and Asia Minor, those of Attis, of Orpheus or Dionysus, of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, and others, were influenced by ancient Egypt's mysteries of Isis and Osiris. They presented a passion play that places the initiate in the role of the dead-and-resurrected god, thus interiorizing the sacrifice.

*The fundamental experience of their Mysteries, enacted in an initiation ceremony that involved the "death" of the initiate, may have been that death was an illusion, and the soul immortal. The inner and symbolic "sacrifice" of the fear of death releases the initiate from the conception of life and death*

*as irreconcilable opposites, and opened his or her consciousness to the wonder of being. Here bios, the individual life in time, was reunited with zoe, the ground of all life, and the finite experience was transcended in a living experience.*

*(Baring and Cashford, p. 414)*

A parallel realization appears in the Upanishads:

*Brahman [the Being of beings] is the act of the offering. Brahman is the oblation poured by Brahman into the fire, which is Brahman. By anyone thus recognizing in all action only Brahman, Brahman is attained.*

*(Bhagavad Gita 4:23-24, cited by Campbell in The Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. II, Pt. I, p. 52)*

The sense I get is that when we read any of these myths metaphorically, surrendering to the power of the symbols rather than acting them out in literal, graphic and bloody detail, each of us, then, *is* the Sacrifice (from the Latin *sacer facere* – “to make whole or sacred”).

What I "make sacred," through sacrifice, is me.

Or, in the words Campbell borrows from the Indian tradition, *tat tvam asi* - "Thou Art That."

That seems to be the crux of the matter ...

## MAKING SACRED

I am glad most of these horrendous practices are in the past; though the symbolism remains sublime, the literal rendering of the myth is an example of old-time religion we could all probably do without.

Nevertheless, the symbolism of sacrifice retains its power to effect personal transformation.

These symbols can be explored in greater detail in Joseph Campbell's The Hero With a Thousand Faces, which follows the many variations on the motif of the hero's adventure, and relates the elements of this quest to our own life's journey.

The rendering of those symbols in art, and how they might be drawn upon to develop one's personal mythology, are investigated in Creative Mythology, the fourth and final volume of Campbell's The Masks of God tetralogy. And both the hero quest and the role of art are examined in several other Campbell books, particularly Pathways to Bliss and The Inner Reaches of Outer Space.

Of course, sacrifice is in itself a virtually inexhaustible topic. I'm walking through but one door here, royal sacrifice my portal into the subject. There are, though, many other doors to be opened, multiple levels of access and understanding. Campbell enjoys exploring these many layers; on the practical level, however, he arrives at the following insight:

*Why go to the Brahmins? You've got it in yourself. Turn in. All those gods that you are invited to worship through the public sacrifice are projections of the fire of your own energy ...*

*Deities are symbolic personifications of the very energies that are of yourself. These energies that are of yourself are the energies of the universe. And so the god out there is the god in here. The kingdom of heaven is within you, but it's also everywhere. This is perennial philosophy stuff.*

*So with that we come to the business of finding the fire in yourself. It's a psychological act of discrimination; discriminating between the physical, transforming aspect of your entity and that enduring flame of which youth and age, birth and death are but the inflections.*

*(Joseph Campbell, Transformations of Myth Through Time, p. 106)*

James Hillman depicts ego as thinking it is "the king of the soul" - so, in one sense, we do sacrifice the king - not by destroying the ego, but by relativizing it, placing it in context, in relationship to the Whole. In Hillman's formulation, my ego is not the King of my psyche so much as the Janitor of my soul - ego gets me from point A to point B, makes a peanut butter sandwich when I'm hungry, and tends to my being - but it's not the whole of my Being. I need my ego - "me," "I," "myself," the me I think myself to be - and it's "reality function" to survive - but I cannot experience the sacred and transcendent without to some extent surrendering ego - transcending "me."

It does seem ironic that ego, which in its current form coincided with the survival instinct of kings determined to escape the ritual knife, must be eclipsed if we intend to realize the transformation symbolized in that sacrifice.

So what form does sacrifice take today? We needn't act it out in the literal fashion of millennia past - instead, we participate in this act whenever we experience the transcendent pouring into the world of phenomenal forms.

Every act we do with intention and ritual - "making sacred" - achieves the same end. Gathering with friends and eating a meal is then experienced as a communion - indeed, every act becomes sacred with proper attention.

I can only speak for myself, for each is on her or his own path, and what works for me may not work for you.

When I carve space out of my busy day, take time away from ego pursuits - from working or eating or sleeping or playing or relaxing or watching TV - and spend that time meditating in front of an altar, I am sacrificing myself to my Self - "self" to "Self" - thus allowing the eternal portion of my being to Live and Breathe and Be. This is true of prayer, of a walk in the woods, or time for reflection, or journaling, or participating in any ritual, personal or collective, that speaks to soul.

At first, it certainly feels a sacrifice (in the popular sense of the word).

I noticed this when I first started meditating, and first started keeping a journal, and first began recording my dreams. It took effort and intention to resist the thought that there were other things I could be, and probably should be, doing with this time being frittered away on a task without obvious utilitarian value...

But over time I found I had no choice.

To skip meditation, fail to write, or not tend to dream seems a violation of my Being - it's no longer

a chore, but who I am—self sacrificed to Self, god sacrificed to God...

And so I am made sacred and enlarged, through a sacred re-apportionment — not the "I," the ego of the little self, but an identification with the larger Self.

*This is an essential experience of any mystical realization. You die to your flesh and are born into your spirit. You identify yourself with the consciousness and life of which your body is but the vehicle. You die to the vehicle and become identified in your consciousness with that of which the vehicle is but the carrier. That is the God.*

*[...] Behind all these manifestations is the one radiance, which shines through all things.*

*(Campbell, The Power of Myth, p.134 – sm. pb. edition)*

Meditation, music, ritual, art, and comparable activities offer portals into that realm. We experience the Sacrifice whenever that one radiance shines through what we do in the here and now.

That's a sacrifice I can embrace.

