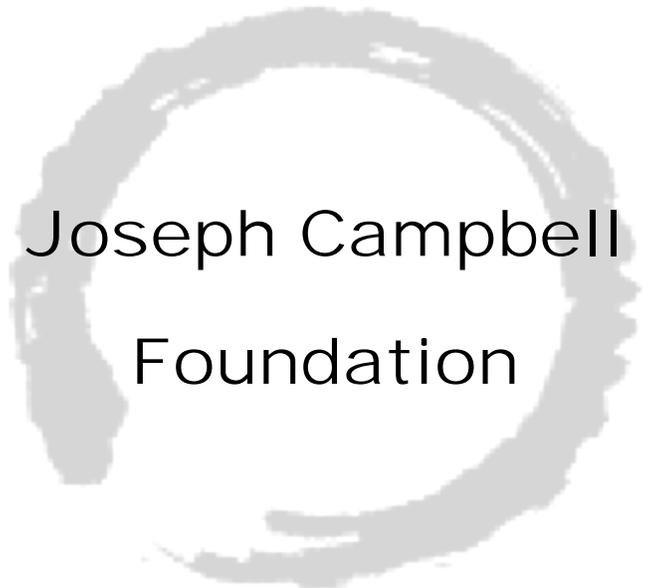


Practical Campbell

Here Be Dragons!

On Old World maps ancient cartographers marked unknown waters with the sign of the dragon – but do these dragons denote danger, or opportunity? In this Practical Campbell essay, Stephen Gerring (bodhi_bliss) pursues dragon and serpent across myth, history, and, finally, into the abyss of the individual psyche.



Joseph Campbell
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PRACTICAL CAMPBELL

HERE BE DRAGONS!

But are we justified in making such cross-cultural references? Or let us put the case the other way: Is it reasonable to maintain, in cases where identical motifs appear in identically structured compositions – with, in many instances, analogous myths and legends to support them – that the informing ideas must not be assumed to have been pretty much the same as well?

What, however, about that serpent of Eden, who was not worshipped as the lord of life, but humbled, cursed, and rejected?

Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, p. 292

Joseph Campbell sees myth as a language of sorts, a *picture-language of the soul*. Myth, like art, presents images that convey what Campbell refers to as a “feeling-tone,” thus evoking experiences and responses far beyond a limited, literal dictionary definition, offering glimpses of that which lies beneath the reality we experience.

Symbols can be interpreted and explained, but those explanations come *after* the fact (true for this essay as well). The immediate impact of a myth, especially when enacted in ritual, bypasses intellect; it’s felt in the heart and in the gut, not in the head. The difference between the impact of a mythic image and its secondary theological interpretation, no matter how relevant, matches the gap between getting a joke and having it explained.

Every myth contains multiple layers of embedded, often conflicting ideas and concepts, which is why these images and metaphors are so valuable — they add depth and dimension to flat, linear language. Certainly the literalness of an engineer’s vocabulary is welcome when hammering nails into wood or measuring angles for a bridge’s truss — but the rich, complex, often paradoxical picture-language of poetry speaks louder on questions of life and love and substance and soul.

As a result, we aren’t dealing here with an Aristotelian, “**A is not not-A**” world. The ability to embrace paradox is then essential to Campbell’s understanding of mythology, for in myth, like in dream, time and space prove fluid and images flow one into another. **A** certainly **can** be **not-A**: Man can walk on water, Coyote walks upright, Jesus is both God and Man, and the Triple Goddess is Mother, Maiden, and Crone at once.

Dragon is one such resplendent image, reaching back through faery tale and myth into the distant and barely discernable past. From the “lion-birds” at the portals of a shrine to the serpent-god Ningishzida whose image is engraved on the libation vase of King Gudea of Lagash in ancient Sumer, c. 2000 B.C., to Bilbo Baggins’s theft of the Arkenstone from the dragon Smaug in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (a span of some four thousand years), the dragon guards the way to Other-Worldly realms.

A dragon’s presence in a tale promises high adventure — but is this image ultimately malignant, or benign? Good, or evil? Does the Dragon nurture, or destroy? Does it only lay waste, or might it

inspire creativity and strength?

Where does this image come from? What are its origins, and what its ends? What role does the dragon play in the evolution of human civilization, and in our own personal evolution?

Definitive answers risk snares woven from the rigid meaning and dogmatic interpretation that come of concretizing a metaphor. Instead, we'll embrace paradox and flow with the image, following the dragon back to its earliest appearance in myth, and even further, watching as it emerges from its constituent parts, before returning to the present to find the dragon's lair hidden within ourselves.

These ruminations, while grounded in what is known, are not however to be mistaken for a set of Cartesian facts, nailed down and indisputable; instead, they echo the fluid, polymorphous multidimensionality of the mythic imagination, perhaps revealing more about ourselves than what we study.

Slaying the Dragon

Slaying the dragon describes the ubiquitous hero's task. In Egypt, Apophis — the snake enemy of the sun — and the Sun-God Ra stain the sky red with blood as they battle every dusk and dawn; in Greece, Zeus defeats the Titan Typhon, a hundred-headed dragon who is son of Gaia (the Earth Goddess), Apollo slays the sacred Python at Delphi, and Perseus rescues Andromeda from the sea dragon; in India, Indra impales the serpent-monster Vritra with a thunderbolt; in Christian tradition the archangel Michael casts down "the Dragon" from heaven; and Europe must have long suffered from a draconian epidemic, as heroes from Siegfried to Tristan to St. George seem to bump into the beasts at every turn of the corner.

Mircea Eliade points out that even historical figures are credited with such deeds. For example, Diedonne de Gozon, third Grand Master of the Knights of St. John at Rhodes, is famous for slaying the dragon of Malpasso (of course no mention is made in contemporary records — this feat only surfaced centuries later):

In other words, by the simple fact that he was a hero, de Gozon was identified with a category, an archetype, which, entirely disregarding his real exploits, equipped him with a mythical biography from which it was impossible to omit combat with a reptilian monster.

Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 39

Is it coincidence that this motif appears independently in so many different times and places?

Or might Campbell be right — isn't it at least reasonable to wonder if these expressions aren't variations on an underlying theme? If so, where does this image first appear, and what might it convey?

Eliade claims the image of this mythical beast is most often associated with what is "latent, preformal, undifferentiated":

[T]he dragon is the paradigmatic figure of the marine monster, of the primordial snake, symbol of the cosmic waters, of darkness, night, death — in short, of the amorphous and virtual, of everything that has not yet acquired a "form." The dragon must be conquered and cut to pieces by the gods, so that the cosmos may come to birth.

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 48

One of the earliest sources of this image is Tiamat, the dragon goddess of Chaos (the primal condition of the universe). Marduk, a sky-god of the Babylonian Amorites (one of the Semitic-speaking tribes who burst out of the southern deserts into the Fertile Crescent, overpowering the goddess-oriented Sumerian culture that formed humanity's earliest civilization), slays his great grandmother, the Dragon Tiamat, and fashions all that exists in the created universe — including humans — from her flesh and blood and bone.

Tiamat is the Babylonian avatar of Nammu, the Sumerian serpent goddess of the primordial ocean — the primal goddess of undifferentiated Nature whose substance infuses all creation — with all that exists sharing, as its core essence, the substance of the Goddess. (Many scholars compare Nammu to Ananta, the cosmic serpent in Hindu myth on whose back Viṣṇu sleeps, dreaming the dream of the universe).

The Amorites on the other hand feared in Tiamat the perils of an arbitrary, savage, cruel Nature, and welcomed Marduk's violent but necessary imposition of organization and order on this threatening, formless chaos. Such masculine, patriarchal deities acting on nature — rather than as agents of nature — mirror the trajectory of the developing ego-consciousness in humanity as it differentiates itself from the amorphous, mysterious workings of the unconscious psyche.

Indeed, many creation myths, including that of the Judeo-Christian tradition, open with a divine being creating order out of chaos.

Historically, the birth of this image reflects the collision of two radically different cultures, as nomadic herding peoples (Indo-European cattle herders from the north, and Semitic sheep and goat herders from the south) sweep into “the old cult sites of the ancient world.” There, in Campbell's words, they encounter

... an essentially organic, vegetal, non-heroic view of the nature and necessities of life that was completely repugnant to those lion hearts for whom not the patient toil of the earth but the battle spear and its plunder were the source of both wealth and joy. In the older mother myths and rites the light and dark aspects of the mixed thing that is life had been honored equally and together, whereas in the later, male-oriented, patriarchal myths, all that is good and noble was attributed to the new, heroic, master gods, leaving to the native nature powers the character only of darkness — to which, also, a negative moral judgment was now added. For, as a great body of evidence shows, the social as well as mythic orders of the two contrasting ways of life were opposed ...

Hence the early Iron Age literatures of both Aryan Greece and Rome and of the neighboring Semitic Levant are alive with variants of the conquest by a shining hero of the dark and — for one reason or another — disparaged monster of the earlier order of godhood, from whose coils some treasure was to be won: a fair land, a maid, a boon of gold, or simply freedom from the tyranny of the impugned monster itself.

Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God, Vol. III: Occidental Mythology*, p. 22-23

Note that, in contrast to claims leveled by some critics, there is no hidden anti-semitic agenda in this statement — Campbell merely accurately observes that the Semitic **and** the Indo-European peoples, pouring from the steppes in search of less harsh climes, carry this change virtually simultaneously into history.

(Nor does Campbell blame either Jews or Christians for the existence of patriarchy — Judaism and Christianity certainly exhibit this dynamic, having emerged from the same patriarchal cultural nexus, but are part of a pattern that precedes the founding of either religion).

These centuries of the third millennium B.C. are years of dramatic transformation. Hieratic city-states give way to dynastic states and high civilization; wars of subjugation become the norm; heroic mythology is born (of which the cosmic dragon-slayer motif is the prime example); and the human ego becomes more sharply defined as *individuals* play an ever greater role in shaping their universe (this last is explored in detail in the June *Practical Campbell* essay, “The King & ‘I’”).

Patriarchy & the Heroic Ego

Of course, patriarchal mythologies didn't begin with some power-mongering maniac sitting around the campfire one day, rubbing his hands together and chortling gleefully as he constructed a means to enslave and bend others to his selfish will.

No — it begins with a family's survival in a harsh, unforgiving environment.

In the matrifocal cultures that settled in the fecund river valleys, the landscape — nature — is mythologized: here a sacred peak, there a sacred spring, here a sacred grove; every element of the geography woven into the local mythology. These agrarian economies thrive on nature's bounty — so Nature becomes personified in the various forms of a goddess figure, supportive and nurturing — and the mythology mirrors the seasons of the year and the cycle of the heavens.

Nomadic peoples, however — again, specifically, the Indo-Europeans who overwhelmed “Old Europe” and the Semitic peoples who exploded out of the Arabian desert — developed a mythology centered not on any feature of landscape, which after all remains inflexible and hostile, but on elemental forces that are with them everywhere — powers of Sun and Sky and Storm and Wind and Fire. These are powerful male deities, sky gods such as Indra, Zeus, and Yahweh.

In goddess-oriented cultures the group mind prevails — all are agents of the divine, playing one's proper role, whether a peasant tilling the soil or a king who submits himself to sacrifice when Venus comes round once more. The nascent ego is not sharply defined, and the individual will is subordinate to the rhythms of nature and of society, submerged in the collective consciousness.

Out in the desert though, scrabbling among the hostile elements for scant resources, a strong decisive patriarchal ego, attuned to survival, keeps the tribe alive. Small wonder that the tribal god developed the same attributes... This shift in consciousness is apparent in the Hebrew deity, the great I AM. He identifies himself to Moses with the phrase “I Am That I Am.” Though generally understood as a profound theological statement, this description can also be read as the declaration of a powerful, self-conscious Ego.

(This shift in perception wasn't exclusive to nomadic patriarchs. By the end of the third millennium B.C. rulers in Sumer and Egypt were asserting their individual will, stepping outside the mythological demands of their roles to find ways around their mandatory sacrifice. Whether in the role of priest-king or patriarch, the exercise of independent ego anticipated a psychological readiness for the same on the part of the larger society. For more on this, see “The King and ‘I’”).

Nomadic tribes are often patriarchal in mythology and in structure — there is no time for consensus

to form when facing a sandstorm or raiding an enemy encampment, hence one ego must take precedence, one "father authority" who makes the decisions that all will obey — putting the "patri-" in "patriarchal."

Those groups in the deserts that didn't follow this pattern perished. Tribes whose patriarchal figures made wise decisions thrived — and those patriarchs were remembered by their descendents, who continued to worship the deity who had successfully guided their forefathers (e.g., "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob") and who commanded the same fealty from these tribal elders that the elders command from their people.

Patriarchy didn't emerge purely from greed for power, but from the basic drive for survival in a hostile world. As a result, patriarchy proved a successful strategy not just for survival, but also for conquest. Though matrifocal cultures enjoyed greater wealth, vaster resources, and more manpower, they crumbled in collision with the patriarchal Semites and Indo-Europeans.

What follows, in Sumer, is the birth of something new. The mythologies of conqueror and conquered merge, meld, and morph into an uneasy marriage. The primordial goddess lived on in multiple avatars, each representing specific aspects of her Being (e.g., Inanna and her dark sister, Ereshkigal), but the new belief system also recognized certain political realities — particularly the superiority of the masculine, patriarchal, herding structure of the invading peoples grafted onto the earlier matrifocal, agrarian society.

Though subservient to a patriarchal pantheon, the feminine, however grudgingly, was recognized and worshipped in the hybrid culture that emerged. We do see the beginnings of a taint — an association of the wild, uncontrolled, chaotic realm of the unconscious psyche with the realm of nature and of the feminine powers (whether in the form of goddess or dragon); nevertheless, even though the Goddess is subdued, she remains present in Nature — which is still fashioned, however violently, from the substance of the primordial goddess.

The violence of this clash of cultures is just as evident in Greek myth, where masculine gods repeatedly defeat serpentine monsters associated with female deities (from the previously cited examples of Zeus and Apollo, to baby Herakles strangling twin serpents sent by Hera to kill him in his crib, or Perseus beheading the snake-coiffed Medusa); and the same uneasy truce between masculine and feminine powers can be found.

In these cultures, however, the goddess is not completely denied.

MYTHIC DISPLACEMENT: WHY IS THE BIBLE DIFFERENT – OR IS IT?

In Canaan, when invading Semites install their patriarchal sky-god, the goddess in her several incarnations is violently opposed: her sacred "groves and high places" are razed, her priests burned alive, and her very existence denied.

This is a radical solution.

Archaeological and scriptural evidence suggest this exclusive monotheism is a late development, with polytheism prevailing from the migrations of the Hebrews into Canaan on throughout the span of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The goddesses and gods of the Semitic Canaanites took up residence in Solomon's temple alongside Yahweh, served by sacred priestess-prostitutes during the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah - save for a handful of years when the Yahwist party controlled both the monarchy and high priesthood. It's only after the encounter with Zoroastrianism during the

Babylonian exile and Persian restoration that the patriarchal monotheism manages to eliminate the competition.

(Joseph Campbell offers supporting evidence in *Occidental Mythology*, and anthropologist Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess* remains the pioneering study in this field.)

We find traces of Sumero-Akkadian myths not only in the tales of the Old Testament, but embedded in the language of the *Torah* itself.

Perhaps most significant, the battle between Tiamat and Marduk, appears, albeit cloaked, in the opening chapter of Genesis: "And the earth was *without form, and void*; and darkness was upon the face of *the deep*..."

Tiamat, her deity veiled, is etymologically the source of both *tehom* and *tohu* [in Hebrew, *tehom* = "the face of the deep," and *tohu wa bohu* = "without form, and void"], out of which God [*elohim*] shapes the physical world, creating order out of chaos as did the earlier Marduk – but with one major difference.

In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, creation is *devoid of and separate from* the Divine - which presents an unbridgeable gulf between our contemporary patriarchal faiths and mythologies that embrace nature

(examples of the latter include shamanic practices and aboriginal beliefs, the "high religions" of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and even contemporary neo-pagan movements such as Wicca – all of which, from a strictly literal biblical interpretation, are identified with Satan

... hence the gulf).

Thus the ancient goddess does appear in the Old Testament, but depersonalized. In the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, nature has been given a hysterectomy; no longer sacred, no longer the body of the goddess – Created and Creator exist apart.

Similarly, the serpent - mythologically interchangeable with the dragon and long a companion to the goddess in the garden, as evidenced in Sumerian seals that date back to 3500 BC - does not fare so well in Eden.

Why this reversal?

[I]n the context of the Patriarchy of the Iron Age Hebrews of the first millennium B.C., the mythology adopted from the earlier Neolithic and Bronze Age civilizations of the lands they occupied and for a brief time ruled became inverted, to render an argument just the opposite of its origin. And a second point, corollary to the first, is that there is consequently an ambivalence inherent in many of the symbols of the Bible that no amount of rhetorical stress on the patriarchal interpretation can express. They address a pictorial message to the heart that exactly reverses the verbal message addressed to the brain; and this nervous discord inhabits both Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism, since they too share in the legacy of the Old Testament.

However, the Bible is not the only source in the West of such ambivalence of teaching. There is a like inversion of sense in the legacy of Greece.

Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology*, p. 17

This "inversion," though, has never been so complete as in the biblical faiths. Why such a drastic difference between the creation stories in the Bible and what Campbell terms "the general fund of Sumero-Semitic myth, of which the Babylonian account of creation is an example?"

The Bible represents a later stage in the patriarchal development, wherein the female principle, represented in the earlier Bronze Age by the great goddess-mother of all things and in this epic by a monstrous demoness, is reduced to its elemental state, *tehom*, and the male deity alone creates out of himself, as the mother alone had created in the past. The Babylonian epic stands between, along a line that may be logically schematized in four steps:

1. the world born of a goddess without consort;
2. the world born of a goddess fecunded by a consort
3. the world fashioned from the body of a goddess by a male warrior-god alone; and
4. the world created by the unaided power of a male god alone.

Campbell, *ibid.*, p.85-86

The absence of the feminine isn't simply an aberration of Judaism and Christianity, but part of an evolving continuum that reflects not only historical changes, but changes in the collective psyche. The evolution of this mythic perspective marks the origin of our contemporary Cartesian outlook. Ours is no longer a world ensouled, and subject ("me," "I" – or "ego") remains separate and distinct from everything else – the trees, the mountains, the clouds, the chair on which I sit – none of these are experienced as conscious and alive in the sense they are in primal cultures. The Earth and all that's on it is conceived as composed of soul-less matter, created for our use.

Hence the Serpent is theologically identified with Woman, Sex, and Nature – all of which carry the taint of evil and corruption in Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions.

Nevertheless, despite the New Testament identification of the Dragon and Serpent with the Christian Satan as the embodiment of evil ("And the great Dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil, and Satan," Revelation 12:9), more favorable depictions of this image can be found in Hebrew mythology.

For example, Moses lets Pharaoh know he is Yahweh's messenger by miraculously transforming his staff – the dead branch of a tree - into a living serpent. Similarly, when a plague of poisonous "fiery serpents" descends on the Israelites, Yahweh commands "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." It's difficult not to associate this healing image – a snake on a pole – with the serpent-entwined caduceus of Asklepius, Greek god of healing, or with the coiled serpent snaking up the spine and bringing in *kundalini* yoga, or even the serpent at the tree in the garden - and, indeed, this Mosaic caduceus remains as an object of worship for centuries:

Serpent gods, however, do not die, and history records that the subtle old master of the garden, recovering, took upon the newcomer an amusing and ironical revenge. For as we are told in II Kings 18: there was a brazen serpent worshipped in the very temple of Jerusalem along with the image of his spouse, the mighty goddess, known there as the Asherah. And the brazen serpent's name was Nehushtan. King Hezekiah (719-691 BC) had them both broken up and burned, but even that was not the end; for by the period of the Maccabees (second century BC) the serpent had become attached to the image of Yahweh himself, and with that embarrassing development the question naturally arose as who, after all, was Satan, and who, or what, was God.

Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, p.294

On the same page Campbell includes drawings of seven different "Snake-footed Forms of Yahweh" that appear on coins from the Maccabee period, 2nd to 1st century BC, in Judea.

Yes, the goddess is devalued in Hebrew culture, much as elsewhere in the Mediterranean world – but the exclusive and relentless monotheism associated with the nations of Israel and Judah seems a late development, projected back in time by those who compiled the Hebrew scriptures, stitching together multiple, often contrasting and competing accounts into one monolithic, mythic narrative that, to no surprise, supported their convictions.

However the editors of scripture were unable to erase all traces of earlier mythologies their ancestors embraced – and it's not difficult, with a little attention, to suss out these traces.

Clearly the mythological beliefs and actual practices of ancient Israelites and Jews prove far more varied, fluid, and colorful than orthodox accounts would indicate.

That Old Serpent

All dragon slayers echo that primordial heroic act. But why no dragon prior to this moment in time? Dragons aren't depicted in art prior to about 4000 years ago.

Ahh — but serpents are ...

In most mythologies dragons and serpents are congruent symbols (even the New Testament recognizes this association in Revelations 12:9, where “the great Dragon” and “that old Serpent” are epithets for Satan, the Devil; and then, in Estonia, on St. George's Day, it's a tradition to celebrate the famous dragon killer by killing snakes).

What characteristics are commonly ascribed to mythological serpents?

The wonderful ability of the serpent to slough its skin and so renew its youth has earned for it throughout the world the character of the master of the mystery of rebirth ...

But the serpent, too, is a lord of waters. Dwelling in the roots of trees, frequenting springs, marshes, and water courses, it glides with a motion of waves; or it ascends like a liana into branches, there to hang like some fruit of death. The phallic suggestion is immediate, and, as swallower, the female organ is also suggested; so that a dual association of fire and water attaches to the lightning of the strike, the forked darting of its active tongue, and the lethal burning of its poison. When imagined as biting its tail, as the mythological uroboros, it suggests the waters that in all archaic cosmologies surround — as well as lie beneath and permeate — the floating circular island Earth.

Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology*, p. 9-10

The universal opposites — of masculine and feminine, fire and water, death and rebirth — are united in this image — and the resonance between the primordial Dragon, from whose corpse the world is born, and the cosmic Serpent, identified with the waters that circle the earth, rings true.

The primary difference between the pre-heroic serpent and the dragon that appears in later heroic mythologies is the act of extreme violence on the part of a masculine deity who slays the cosmic monster.

Joseph Campbell suggests that there must be a psychological readiness before a mythic image can take hold in the collective psyche. The dragon emerges in tandem with the dragon slayer — there was no place for either in the pre-patriarchal, pre-heroic mythologies of earlier periods — this image did not penetrate the collective experience of the time, and so we find no dragons portrayed in Paleolithic, Neolithic, or early Bronze Age art.

The image of the serpent, on the other hand, appears as far back as the Upper Paleolithic. Marijas Gimbutas, in *The Language of the Goddess*, presents an image of a snake, along with bird heads and branches, carved on an antler horn, c. 12,000 B.C.

There's no way to know for sure the significance of this artifact. Anthropologist Alexander Marshack offers a plausible argument this is a ritual object related to the celebration of spring — but since we can't email anyone from the Middle Magdalenian era to settle the question, this must remain intelligent conjecture. Nevertheless, I can't help but wonder if this image doesn't point to one of the most persistent mythic patterns over time — that of the World Tree, with snake or dragon nesting among its roots, and a raptor — often eagle, hawk, or owl — perched in the uppermost branches.

Around 2000 B.C. we have the tale of Gilgamesh at the Huluppa tree, with the Anzu bird in the branches, and the “serpent who could not be charmed” nestled in its roots; an even earlier version has the god Shamash siding with the bird as it battles the same serpent at the base of the same tree; three thousand years later the same motif is recorded in the Norse myths of the *Prose Edda*, where an eagle nests atop Yggdrasil — the immense World Tree — while a dragon gnaws at its roots — and a squirrel races up and down the trunk carrying insults between the two; meanwhile, half a world away from Europe and the Near East, the sight of an eagle battling a snake atop a cactus in Mesoamerica prompts the nomadic Aztecs to settle down and found a civilization (a mythic image that graces Mexico's flag).

Might there be a relationship between the image of the dragon, and the motif of eagle and serpent occupying opposite poles of the World Axis?

The Winged Snake

The moon hero is the tragic hero in whom darkness rests, he has his own death in him, and he sheds death as a serpent sheds its skin. The moon is therefore associated with the serpent, lord of the energies of the earth, who sheds his skin to be reborn: the reborn serpent, the reborn moon.

Now the creature that pounces on the serpent is the high-flying eagle, and the bird-and-serpent conflict is a basic mythological motif. In certain mythologies they stand as enemies — as they do, for example, in biblical mythology, where serpent is cursed by the winged powers, the powers of the upper atmosphere. The bird represents the free-flying spirit (it is released from the earth) and flight ... The serpent, however, represents the bound-to-the-earth spirit ...

In certain mythologies where the bird and serpent symbols are mythologized, you have the image of the dragon as a winged serpent. The winged lizard is the synthesis of the two. You can have either the attack and the separation, or the synthesis; but to arrive at the synthesis, one has to go through the separation.

Joseph Campbell, *Mythic World, Modern Words*, p. 31-32

Campbell points out that an eagle pouncing on a snake would not be an unusual sight in the ancient world. Nor would it be unusual for a sensitive, creative individual to empathize with and internalize this battle, and create a work of art that reflects the struggle in the universe and in oneself (as Joe asks of Bill Moyers, “The serpent bound to the earth, the eagle in spiritual flight — isn't that conflict something we all experience?”).

But, in fact, then, why do we not find in the Paleolithic temple caves any painting of a raptorial bird killing a serpent? Might there be required some sort of psychological readiness for the insight? And would the readiness, then, be somehow a function of the local condition?

Joseph Campbell, The Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Volume II: The Way of the Seeded Earth, Pt.3: Mythologies of the Primitive Planters — The Middle and Southern Americas, p. 378

Campbell implies that the image of birds of prey attacking serpents strikes no chords in the collective psyche prior to the Bronze Age (which is about the same time that Dragon and Slayer first appear).

Indeed, though there are plenty of images of snake-goddesses in the Neolithic periods, there is no sign of hostility between serpent and bird. Marijas Gimbutas (the late professor of archaeology at UCLA who excavated Çatal Hüyük and several “Old Europe” sites in the Balkans) states that the Bird Goddess and the Snake Goddess are the two primary representations of what she terms the “stiff white goddess” figurines found in graves throughout Old Europe, dating from roughly five to seven thousand years ago. According to Gimbutas, the symbols surrounding the Snake Goddess are the same as those associated with the Bird Goddess.

No enmity here.

Gimbutas tracks this theme into the classical period, where certain goddesses — all differentiated incarnations of the primordial goddess — continue to combine the same motifs (for example, Athena’s attributes include the snake and the owl).

Nevertheless, by the end of the third millennium B.C. — as reflected in the tale of the Huluppa Tree — earthbound serpent and winged raptor, who in the legend were once the closest of friends, now fight to the death — a struggle that rages as well between dragon goddess and hero god (again, hero and dragon motifs emerging together from the mythic imagination).

I have to wonder what comes first. Does a change in the collective psyche (that readiness which Campbell speaks of) open the door to thinking, being, and perceiving reality differently? Did that shift in perspective prompt the revolutionary changes that forever altered the world — including the development of writing, astronomy, mathematics, statecraft — and is the price of civilization the perpetual warfare that plagues us to this day?

Or did the change in psyche reflect societal changes already taking place — the myths of Marduk dismembering Tiamat, for example, an inner response to harsh realities in the outer world?

Many today seek to turn back the clock, return to that pre-patriarchal Eden when all lived in harmony with nature, and with each other. A laudable goal, one that speaks to my heart — though this idyllic vision strikes me as somewhat naïve, utopian, and way out of touch with the reality of Neolithic life. Yes, the oppression and devastation wrought by our patriarchal society has wreaked havoc on the planet and on each of us — but I’m not sure there’s a re-set button for four thousand years of human history.

When we talk about settling the world’s problems, we’re barking up the wrong tree. The world is perfect. It’s a mess. It’s always been a mess. We are not going to change it.

Our job is to straighten out our own lives.

Joseph Campbell, A Joseph Campbell Companion, ed. Diane K. Osbon, p. 17

If either eagle or serpent defeats its enemy, then life is out of balance. Eliminating/ignoring the masculine energies would be as devastating and oppressive as has been the suppression of the feminine — just in a different way. Restoring the balance is what’s called for — and we do that by finding the balance in ourselves. To me, this suggests enhancing the feminine aspects of the image — accord with nature, partnering with the wild, irrational energies informing the unconscious psyche

Stepping back from the world stage, how do we engage this image?

We live heroic lives. We follow the heroic pattern when we exercise our individual will; there's no escaping that, apart from withdrawing into convent or monastery — and even then, we're still seekers, still on a quest.

We live individual lives in a heroic culture — it's hard to step outside that context and imagine pre-heroic mythologies. Peter, Paul and Mary notwithstanding, heroes don't generally make friends with the dragons they meet; they slay them — that's what makes them heroes.

But maybe there's a way *through* our hero mythology.

The battle between the serpent and eagle — the separate parts of the dragon — seems congruent to the act of slaying the dragon.

As Campbell points out above, “You can have either the attack and separation, or the synthesis; but to arrive at the synthesis, one has to go through the separation.”

Hmm ... looks like we'll have to slay the dragon after all.

That's life!

What's a Hero Without a Dragon?

There are so many trails one could follow from the image of the serpent-dragon — for example, a discussion of the various inflections of this image in Mesoamerica, from Quetzalcoatl (the Feathered Serpent-God), who with his brother Tezcatlipoca, in the form of twin serpents (*coatl* meaning “twin” as well as serpent) rips asunder the fair Tlatleutli and fashions the earth, seas, animals, fruit, and people from her body, blood, and bones (sound familiar?), to the serpents and dragons encountered in *peyote*, *amanitas*, and *ayahuasca* visions by indigenous shamans and the occasional anthropologist.

But I am captured by the associations between the origins of this image and the developing ego, a relationship that not only sheds light on the past but also has practical implications for our lives today.

Shifting from macrocosm to microcosm, Campbell focuses on the significance of slaying the dragon in one's own life. We slay dragons every day — but this image points to more than just a metaphor for difficult tasks we face at work or home.

If you have someone who can help you, that's fine too. But, ultimately, the last deed has to be done by oneself. Psychologically, the dragon is one's own binding of oneself to one's ego. We're captured in our own dragon cage. The problem of the psychiatrist is to disintegrate that dragon, break him up, so that you may expand to a larger field of relationships. The ultimate dragon is within you, it is your ego clamping you down.

Joseph Campbell (with Bill Moyers), *The Power of Myth*, p. 184 (small paperback edition)

A personal encounter with this archetype can be shattering to the Ego — and Ego is simply Latin for “I” (me; my sense of myself). Anything that can smash the powerful self-image of ego as “in control” is likely to be felt as threatening and painful.

In other cultures the Dragon is a benign or even boon-bestowing image, as in China (and, ultimately,

it's all the same, multi-faceted image — just have to embrace the paradox)... but Joseph Campbell frames this conversation in the context of dragons as they appear in European myth and faery tale, the mythic matrix out of which western culture has emerged.

What does the Dragon do in these tales?

There are differences, individual variations — but generally, dragons have a lair — a Cave — and in this cave they guard one of two things: a virgin — the traditional Damsel-in-Distress — and/or a priceless treasure.

And usually, as they guard it, they sleep, faint tendrils of smoke unfurling from their nostrils as they snore, blissfully unconscious...

(Cave? Unconscious? *Hello!* Jung alert!)

Sleeping, that is, until our Hero arrives, waking the ill-tempered beast from slumber with a challenge. In most tales he frees the Maiden and makes off with the treasure by slaying the dragon (shades of Marduk, by St. George!).

Joe asks "Why?"

Why does the dragon guard the girl and the gold? Neither one is of any use to him — he can't spend the cash, nor deflower the maiden (though sometimes the beast substitutes "devour" for deflower).

Campbell equates the Dragon with a related image from yet another culture — that of the Serpent Power, asleep at the base of the spine, in *kundalini* yoga. Up the spine are seven chakras, or stations, through which the kundalini serpent rises once awakened — if fed and nurtured through attentive awareness. The chakras represent the different centers of consciousness out of which we live our lives.

Campbell suggests the three lowest chakras are congruent with the Dragon slumbering in the cave, hoarding the gold and imprisoning the maiden:

The first — the slumbering dragon — is at the base of the spine, where the coiled serpent sleeps — the level of mere survival, that of reptilian instincts (feed, digest, defecate, sleep, feed, etc.). We all know people whose lives are ruled by this couch potato chakra — and more than a few have been there ourselves.

Eventually, though, the serpent stirs, wakes, and is moved to do something, to attain something — inspired to get laid, so to speak — so the second chakra (the fair maiden) relates to sexual energies. The third chakra touches on economic and material realities (treasure chests of gold and jewels), or, as Campbell says, "organizing a life, building a business, learning how to master the world in terms appropriate to your condition and place"

These three chakras are of functions that we share with the other animals. They are also clinging to life, begetting, building nests, making their way. Popular religion works on these levels, and the individual living on these levels is ego-oriented and his action must be controlled by social law.

- Campbell, *A Joseph Campbell Companion*, p. 112

But at the fourth chakra — the Heart Chakra (called *anahata* — "no hit" — the sound that is not made by any two things striking together — "the sound of which universe is a manifestation"), we find "the opening of the spiritual dimension: all is metaphoric of the mystery."

Campbell suggests that the purpose of the slumbering Dragon is to Call the Hero forth. In our

culture, the Hero goes forward to Wake/Slay the Dragon — which doesn't mean destroying it (here Campbell alludes to the ability of serpents to shed their skin — renewal.)

We tend to think of the Dragon as evil, to be overcome — whereas in India and points east, they partner with this Serpent. This is all part of a cosmic passion play, repeated on the stages of our individual lives — might as well dance that dance with enthusiasm.

In Campbell's words,

When you reach the upper chakras, you don't do without the first three: survival, sex, power. You don't destroy the first three floors of the building when you get to the fourth.

ibid., p. 113

Facing the Dragon is intense, often painful and overwhelming — but that needn't mean evil — might be our stance towards it which lends the negative power. In other cultures the experience, though shattering, is viewed as positive — extinguishing ego's hold a threshold ordeal...

Bill Moyers asked Joe, "What is ego?"

What you think you want, what you will to believe, what you decide to love, what you regard yourself as bound to. It may all be much too small, in which case it will nail you down. And if you simply do what your neighbors tell you to do, you're certainly going to be nailed down. Your neighbors are then your dragon as it reflects from within yourself.

Campbell, The Power of Myth, p. 184

The dragons we face outside are but reflections of the dragon inside. Facing the dragon, then, is more than just putting one foot in front of the other and getting on with the tasks of life — it requires a journey of self-reflection and inner exploration.

You can't slay what you don't seek.

"The ultimate dragon is within you."

That, indeed, is a hero's quest.