

THE FOUR FUNCTIONS OF MYTH

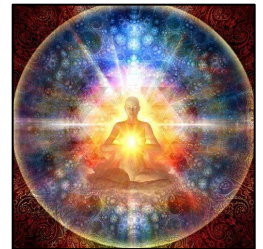
Mythologist Joseph Campbell, a professor of comparative religions and mythology until his death in 1987, set forth the basic concepts allowing us to interpret mythologies beyond their apparent surface story line. There are, he said, four basic functions which all mythological structures serve in any community, in any place, in any time. These are:

- **mystical**, which relates to one's sense of wonder about the world,
- **cosmological**, by which a culture gives physical shape to its mystical ideas in the form of stories and rituals,
- **sociological** which uses the mythology as a basis for social order and morality, and
- **psychological** through which the individual reaches an understanding of his relationship with his community and the world.



Mystical Function

This function is about experiencing the awe of the universe. Scientist Albert Einstein observed that the greatest encounter one can experience is with that of the mysterious. That is the concern of the mystical function. It is the “awe factor” which contains and awakens within us a sense of wonder about the world around us and our connection with the indescribable higher order of the cosmos which we may call God or the gods – that which is unexplainable. It points to what is beyond our physical world.



Cosmological Function

This function is about formulating and rendering an image of the universe. From this mystical function springs a cosmological function of myth that embodies basic ideas and truths about the nature of the universe. Some of these ideas, such as the reason for the seasons, are common to all civilizations, even though each has given its own particular variation that reflects the culture's surroundings. An attempt, for instance, to answer a question regarding the capricious nature of the weather might receive one interpretation from the peoples of the desert region of Egypt, where crocodiles are a common sight, and an entirely different explanation from the native peoples of the lush, buffalo-filled North American plains.



The same holds true for the mysterious changes of seasons. The Pueblo Indians of the Southwestern mesas believed that winter was caused by the trickster figure called Coyote, whose curiosity about the contents of the Eagle's box which contained the sun and the moon allowed these bodies to escape far away into the sky. In ancient Greece, winter was caused by a fertility goddess, Demeter, despondent over the abduction of and search for her daughter, Persephone. Demeter caused the earth's fertility to wane; things began to die and the earth turned cold. When Hades returned her daughter to the surface for six months, Demeter permitted fertility to resume and Spring came. In the scientific world view, winter is caused by an incline of the earth's axis as it revolves around the sun. In each of these examples, the mysterious and awesome event of the seasons has been explained in a manner accepted by

each culture as true – even though none of the three can be readily proved by firsthand experience. Essentially, the cosmological function explains to us why things are the way they are in the universe (generally before the enlightenment idea of scientific fact – although that's completely besides the point here).

Rituals reflecting each story may also be created. The celebrations which revolve around the observance of equinoxes and solstices which mark the change of seasons may be found in nearly every culture, in spite of their divergent explanations for why the seasons change. The cosmological function of myth, then, is the source of the stories and rituals created to express the culture's truths and understanding about the nature of the universe.

The Sociological Function

This function is about supporting and validating a certain social order. This third function of mythology, which occurs after the first two have been established, is the sociological function. The first two functions concern themselves more specifically with the place of humans within the web of life. On the sociological level, myths do more than just explain things. They begin to give clear structure to the community by reinforcing moral order and validating the community's standards as true and correct. Essentially they help bind people to certain social order/group and moral code. Such rules may be viewed as having been ordained by God or the gods. For instance, the Ten Commandments – revered by Judaism and Christianity – are considered to have been given by God, who created the world, to Moses, who was the leader of the chosen people (the Hebrews) during a meeting between them on Mount Sinai. The Commandments are basic rules for living with others, rules such as honoring the elders, refraining from injury to neighbors, living in accordance with God's will, and honoring this one God above all others. Through this sociological function of myth, a community structure and its hierarchy have been clearly outlined.

In the sociological function, stories are formed apart from the purely religious aspect of the cosmological function. These tales have their basis in the moral codes and stories of the culture. Arthurian legends, such as the search for the Holy Grail, for example, taught Christian ideas of humility, purity, and faith. Even a person's place within society is addressed in sociological myths. Take for instance the stories of Pandora (Ancient Greek) and Eve (Judeo-Christian). Each of these stories tells of the folly of woman: Pandora opens the box to all of the world's evil and Eve is the first to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge. Both stories are incredibly similar in nature, and both place women at the forefront of the problems that exist for human-kind, leaving men in charge of fixing it. Of course, both also come from incredibly patriarchal cultures and the stories reflect that.



The Psychological (or Pedagogical) Function



The last of the four functions of myth, called the psychological or pedagogical function, is the most personal of the four. This may best be described as the “a-ha” factor, for it is here that the individual synthesizes and understands the preceding three functions of myth and is then able to apply them to his or her own life. This realization clearly establishes a personal relationship between the human being, the collective community, the world, and the universe. These are the myths that teach, shape, teach, and guide us through the course of human life. They are stories of others who have gone through similar challenges and have learned from them. These myths are viewed no longer as simply stories that explain a variety of phenomena, but instead are recognized as having a deeper meaning regarding the very nature of universe and the mystery of life. Often this understanding cannot be totally explained, for it is beyond words. It is rather a flash of insight – an epiphany – for the individual who grasps it. At the end of the day, the most powerful function of myth is the self-created kind.