

Don't Get Trapped by Literalism: The Beauty of Myths and Symbols

A myth is a narrative that often explains how the world or humankind came into being, or how customs, institutions or taboos were established. Characters in myths may include gods, supernatural heroes, and humans. Myths are often closely linked to religion or spirituality, but can refer to any traditional story.

Now I'm going to confuse things a bit by introducing some variations on a theme.

Legends are myths that feature humans, albeit often with superior strengths or abilities, rather than superhuman characters.

A fable is a story in which animals, creatures, or plants are anthropomorphized. It delivers a moral lesson.

A parable is a fable in which all the characters are human.

An allegory is a literary device in which characters or events represent ideas or concepts – an extended metaphor. Allegory generally involves a one-to-one symbolism. For example, in the Parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word of God. The stony ground represents those who hear the Word, but in whom it does not take root, the thorns are the cares of the world, and so on.

The lines between myth, legend, allegory, fable, and parable are a bit fuzzy. The distinction is generally important only to academics who need to differentiate among them in order to classify them. For our purposes, it will be sufficient simply to lump these genres together and call them myths.

A myth is generally described as a fabrication, completely without basis in fact. Something to be discarded as worthless. You hear people say, "Oh, that's just a myth."

There's the *Mythbusters* show on TV. We hear about urban myths. Myths need to be debunked, we're told.

That's too bad, because myths are true.

Myth is intended to be interpreted allegorically. A good myth transcends time and culture. However, as soon as you make a myth into an historical account of something that actually happened (and especially if you write it down), you lock it in to a particular time and culture, and it now becomes unable to speak to later generations and other societies, and you lose its eternal meaning.

Take scripture, especially the Old Testament. It contains all manner of good material, but often people take the whole thing literally. Like Noah's Ark, for example, or the scene in the Garden of Eden, or the Genesis accounts of creation. Then science comes along and demonstrates that the story couldn't have happened in the literal

sense. Now, people typically make one of two choices. They stick to the literal interpretation, which requires them either to ignore the scientific findings or to do a bunch of mental gymnastics to reconcile the two positions. These cause them to become defensive, and further entrenched in their literalism. Or, they dismiss the scriptural story as worthless, since it clearly isn't true. They throw the baby out with the bathwater, reject the entire canon, and they become atheists.

That's sad, because both groups completely miss out on the beauty and power of the myth. That's where allegorical interpretation comes in, and provides a third option.

Consider the ascension of Jesus. The account originated when the world was thought to be a big disk, with a dome separating it from heaven, which was "just up there". Jesus got sucked up through the clouds and disappeared into heaven. Of course, we know now that above the clouds are several layers of the atmosphere, and beyond that, outer space, so how could this have happened as it was described? Karl Jung pointed out that if Jesus had travelled upwards at the speed of light, starting two thousand years ago, he still wouldn't have reached the end of even our own puny little galaxy. Not even close. So if you literalize the story, it comes into conflict with science. They can't both be right. So do you just scrap it as a fabrication? No. You look beyond the literal aspect, and see it in terms of your own resurrected spirit returning to God. The story stops being about a guy in first century Palestine, and becomes about each of us, now.

Joseph Campbell, noted expert on mythology, said that a myth is something that never was, but always is. He insisted that instead of demythologizing these stories, we needed to remythologize them. In other words, don't debunk the myths, don't literalize them, don't discard them, but rather embrace them and learn to discern the truths that they contain.

Dr. Phineas Gurly, who preached the sermon at Abraham Lincoln's funeral, said that scripture was like a telescope. If you look at it, you just see the telescope. However, if you look through it, you can see all sorts of stuff. Myth is like that. You need to look through it, beyond it, to get the real meaning.

Myths explain the unexplainable in terms we can understand, and concepts that are difficult to put into words. They also communicate and teach social norms. We need myths in our lives. It's been suggested that kids join gangs because they don't have a societal-based myth repertoire to provide them structure and guidance. Gangs have initiation rituals, quests, modes of recognition, legends, likely, of past exploits performed by role models, and a well-developed a sense of community and identity. When we discard our myths, we lose the direction they once provided.

Ritual, incidentally, is myth acted out, which should be of interest to Masons.

Most myths, though, are a lot of work. They require personal study and interpretation. Nobody else can do this work for us. As in Eastern mystical systems, we are left to figure out the meaning for ourselves. When we receive a Masonic degree, it's not as

though we're magically endowed with enlightenment; that's just the starting point. We're given a system, some stories, and some figurative tools, and then it's up to us to sort out the truths to which they point.

There are myths all around us, although we just may not recognize them as such.

There are myths for children – Santa Claus, Aesop's fables, Dr. Seuss. They're used to teach good behaviour, manners, consideration, et cetera.

Take the story of the hare and the tortoise. We can all agree that this didn't happen. However, it contains lessons about haste not necessarily producing speed, or the dangers of overconfidence. If we try to literalize the story, then we might miss the message, because it becomes all about a talking rabbit and turtle. If we discard it because we know that animals can't talk, then we lose the magic of the story and its lesson.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, *Camelot*, *The Matrix* – these are all myths. Let's take a moment and look beyond the literal in a few modern cases.

Frankenstein is good example. It's about scientist who crosses a moral boundary and unleashes a power beyond his control. The monster, who is intelligent and kind, but ugly, and hence rejected and feared, represents everyone who is misunderstood and cannot fit in. It speaks to us about prejudice. And the dangers of using technology without proper ethical considerations.

Superman possesses extraordinary powers, but he keeps his identity a secret, and pretends to be ordinary guy. Maybe the message is that even we ordinary guys can have unsuspected power within. However, like Superman, we each have our own Achilles heel – our version of Kryptonite.

One of my favourites is *Star Wars*. In it, we have the classic struggle between good and evil, the heroes on a quest, Darth Vader as the fallen angel. Incidentally, the concept of "The Force" is, in my view, an excellent myth to explain the nature of God.

Unfortunately, we've historicized stories about God that appear in the Bible. We've demythologized descriptions of God and made them literal, and in the anthropomorphization that results, we've made Him in our own image: jealous, cranky, judgemental, xenophobic, narcissistic, nepotistic, and genocidal. Xenophanes (c. 500 BCE) commented that if horses and cattle had hands, they would paint gods that looked like horses and cattle, and that is precisely what we have done.

The Force, by comparison, just is. It transcends the universe. It is a cosmic power. You can train yourself to be in tune with it, to tap into its energy – I think this is what prayer does – although you don't become a Jedi knight without a lot of spiritual exercise. The Force doesn't play favourites. It doesn't really care if your favourite team makes the playoffs. It doesn't arbitrarily cure one child's cancer, but let another die. And while we

should recognize its existence and power, and establish an identity with it – “the Force is strong in that one” – we shouldn’t impose on it the limited bounds of our own imagination. Remember Moses and the burning bush? “I am that I am.” In other words, we can never name, classify, or characterize the Ground of all Being, so don’t try.

For Masons, *The Wizard of Oz* is a great myth.

Frank Baum may or may not have been a Mason, but his father and uncle were. *The Wizard of Oz* is an allegorical tale of the soul’s journey to enlightenment, in Buddhism, called the Golden Path. Thus we have the Yellow Brick Road. Kansas is Earth. Dorothy, in Kansas, has an awareness that there’s more to her existence than the physical life she can see, and yearns to discover it. It’s somewhere over the rainbow. So she sets off on her quest. Along the way, she meets travelling companions who are seeking a brain, courage, and a heart. Masons will recognize these as wisdom, strength, and beauty. During their journey, they encounter both helpful and malevolent influences, as we all do.

They finally have an audience with the Wizard, who can be seen as an indictment of organized religion. A mere mortal behind smoke and images that invoke fear, trying to manipulate others into doing his will through his perceived ability to be, represent, or control some supernatural power. Toto’s an interesting character. He’s our conscience. He says, “Something’s fishy here. Let’s look behind the curtain.” And so he pulls the curtain aside, and exposes the Wizard as a sham.

But the Wizard does redeem himself. He understands that ultimately, we all have within us that which we seek. His gifts to the scarecrow, the tin woodman, and the lion let them discern that latent power that was dwelling within them all the time, into which they hadn’t yet tapped.

Masons will note that the first thing that that the scarecrow does upon discovering his intelligence is to recite the 47th Problem of Euclid.

But the story doesn’t end there. Dorothy still hasn’t found what she’s been seeking, so the Wizard offers to give her a ride in his balloon. Toto steps in again, recognizing that nobody else can carry you on the journey home – you have to travel the road yourself – and so he chases after a cat, and the balloon lifts off without Dorothy. You have to listen to your conscience in these matters.

Then Glinda shows up and tells Dorothy the secret: that she can get what she wants by closing her eyes and thinking. It’s the same for us. Thoughts create reality, and we need to spend more time meditating, with our eyes shut, blocking out the distractions of the physical world. That’s the way to enlightenment. That’s the way to being one with the Great Architect.

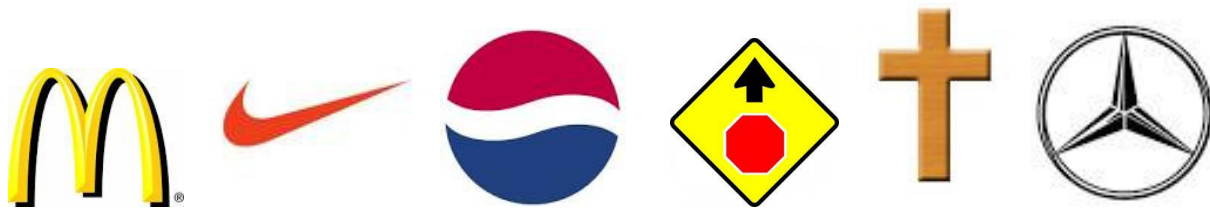
And at the end, Glinda explains to Dorothy that she couldn't have just told her the secret at the very beginning, because Dorothy wouldn't have believed her. She had to experience the journey first. That's why there is no book that describes in a nutshell what Masonry means. You have to pick up the tools and figure it out for yourself. And there's a different answer for everyone.

Hiram is the Masonic archetypal hero. But his story, too, is a myth. So let's not get excited about the dimensions of the temple, or whether Hiram was a brass worker or a stone mason. The Hiram story is about personal integrity. It's about treasuring and safeguarding the essential lessons of life – the secrets. It's a warning to those of us who, like the ruffians, want to take a shortcut to knowledge.

Myths are not true in the sense that they happened as described in the narrative. They are true in the sense that they communicate and explain concepts that are true.

So, brethren, when you see a myth, try to look through it to the truth to which it points. That, I guarantee, will be much more exciting than just taking the story at its face value. Embrace the meaning that lies beneath the myth, get inside it, and glean from it valuable lessons.

Enough of myths. Masonry, we know, is equally about symbols, so let's take a moment and talk about them. Symbols are all around us.



The images above are pretty simple. Their symbolism is straightforward. Most of us agree on what they denote. However, many symbols aren't so easy to characterize.



They represent ideas or concepts that are more subtle, or their accepted meaning has changed with time. They can mean different things to different people. So why use them? Why not just say what you want to communicate, and not bother using a symbol that can be misinterpreted?

It's probably because just as myth and allegory work on different levels, so too symbols can – and should – have multiple meanings, based on personal interpretation. They're all correct, which makes this whole subject fascinating, yet difficult and frustrating at the same time.

Let us consider a few examples of interpretations of Masonic symbols.

First, the sword and cable tow, and their role during an initiation. The sword is ostensibly to prevent the candidate from rushing forward faster than his guides might like. That seems a bit harsh. Why would we do this? There must be another interpretation. One is that our Masonic journey is one of personal development. It cannot be rushed; there are no shortcuts. That's why the sword can be seen as the death of the process if we dash forward indiscriminately.

Similarly, the cable tow and noose remind us that once having embarked on this journey, if we choose to retreat back out the door, we will experience a similar death of self, for we will have failed to realize the potential within ourselves.

Another interpretation of the cable tow is that initiation symbolizes our birth, and the rope represents the umbilical cord that connects us to our mother lodge. In this sense, it's benevolent, rather than an instrument of death.

Consider the Masonic apron. Operatives wore them to protect their clothing. We are told that we use them symbolically to protect ourselves from the spot and stain of vice and sin. Another interpretation is that the apron represents the body that clothes our soul during this life. Viewed in this light, the admonition never to disgrace that badge takes on a new meaning.

The ashlar represents our character. However, it's interesting to consider that the perfect ashlar lies within the rough. We chip away the exterior to reveal what was already there, as opposed to making good something that was formerly bad. I like the idea of original blessing, rather than original sin.

The Mosaic pavement, we are told, represents the juxtaposition of the prosperous and difficult times of our lives. Perhaps, though, it is also symbolic of our nature, good and evil, animal and divine, all blended together. The skirting and star might remind us that the Great Architect transcends everything, and is present in the centre of our very selves. Or maybe the whole symbolizes humanity in general, and the paradox that while we are all many, we are all one.

These are all possible understandings that I've either discovered or developed myself. They might be different from other explanations you may have heard, but they're all valid. That's the beauty of personal interpretation. If it works for you, and inspires you to become a better man, then it can't be wrong.

Other Masonic symbols include the tassels, the decorations on our aprons, the officers' jewels, the images on the tracing boards, and the working tools. One can spend a lifetime developing interpretations for these.

However, we are told in the Junior Warden's lecture that our ancient brethren hid their secrets and mysteries beneath symbols. Why hide them?

I think it's because people are at different points along their journey, and an interpretation that is suitable for one person might be totally wrong – even disturbing – for another. This isn't meant to be a judgement, but rather a basic truth. When we explain things to our children, we use concepts, images, and terminology that are appropriate to their age and development. When they're ready for something more advanced, they'll let us know. Similarly, we need to ensure that we don't try to explain our myths and symbols too rigorously, because they would then be limited in their ability to speak to people on whatever level they might occupy.

In this magical world of myth and symbol that we've created in our Craft, there are no right or wrong answers. My take on a particular narrative or image may be completely different from yours. And furthermore, the way that I view it today might have changed entirely a year from now.

So let's celebrate our myths and symbols. Contemplate their meaning for you. The best way to do this is to consider those lines in our ritual that tell a story or describe a symbol. If it doesn't make sense on a literal level, that's a sign that you should start looking for alternative meanings.

Take all of this seriously, but don't take it literally. That approach will lead you down an exciting road of discovery, understanding, and enlightenment.

And that is the essence of Masonry. A beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.