

Power of Myth

Lesson 7: Animal storytellers

3.25.2018

Objectives: Explore animals as first characters in many cultures' mythologies, and explore how they appear in our film texts.

Materials: Tape, laptop/DVD, lesson attachments.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What is your favorite animal character from book or film?
 - ▶ If you could have some animal attribute or skill, what would it be?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Recipes for Movie Critter Characters (5 minutes max)

- a. Pass out printouts with names of animals on them, including: bear, wolf, lizard, elephant, cat, gorilla, stag, insect, horse, bird, bat, snake, lion, and human being (as well as some blank sheets for write-ins). Each youth should tape at least one animal name onto their chest, before taping a second name if there are leftovers.
- b. Review the attachment listing creatures youth will mostly recognize—characters that are a composite of various animals. (*For example: Chewbacca = gorilla + bear + human being and whatever else youth determine*). Begin by calling out a name of a character youth will likely know.
- c. Youth have 20 seconds (feel free to set length) to group youth-animal “ingredients” together that they think make up the character. Some blank sheets are provided in case youth need to create their own animal ingredient.
- d. The whole group determines if each team’s “recipe” of animal ingredients is a good one or not.

(*The film source for each animal character is coded: HP = Harry Potter, SW = Star Wars, and LOTR = Lord of the Rings.)

3. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: “*We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.*”

Teacher reads: (from cultural ecologist and author, David Abram)

“What is magic? In the deepest sense, magic is an experience. It’s the experience of finding oneself alive within a world that is itself alive. It is the experience of contact and communication between oneself and something that is profoundly different from oneself: a swallow, a frog, a spider weaving its web...”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation’s *Embracing Meditation* will be made available to your class. Share this information, putting in stones for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Animals: The first storytellers** (10 minutes)

Teacher inquires: Which pet animals do youths have among them? Why did they choose those animals as pets?

Teacher introduces: Joseph Campbell points out that in early human civilizations, human beings were newcomers to a world governed by animals. Ancient cave paintings portray more animals than human beings. When early cultures were shaping myths foundational to their sacred storytelling, animals, not people, were their nearest neighbors, enemies, foods, and gods. People followed after and migrated with animals, and the animals’ story became the people’s story.

There are still cultures today so closely linked with animals that the people see themselves *as* the animals: In Siberia, nomadic tribes live symbiotically with elk, with food, clothing, tools, and everything that keep them alive coming from the sacred elk. The people essentially see themselves *as* elk, for without elk, they would cease to exist. Hence, every story in Siberia contains an elk character, for there is no story without elk.

In our society today, we are far more distant and removed from animals. As the dominant species, we view animals as posing no significant threat or intrusion on our lives. We typically don’t even witness how they are processed as our food source, and whatever wild animals we do encounter are at the zoo. Still, we sense a deep memory of animal-like power sleeping inside us, seeking out their company, even if only as pets. We are curious about their capacities that exceed our own: an eagle’s vision, a cat’s sense of an approaching storm, a bloodhound’s sense of smell, a salmon’s instinctive return to its place of birth, wild geese which navigate by stars. Animals are still sacred to us, but we often forget this until we find them again in our myths.

6. Film Clip: Moyers and Campbell Talk About Animals (15 minutes)

- Note for youth that film segment includes hunting scenes. Note also that Campbell comes from an era when people referred to all Native Americans as “Indians” collectively. Our language and understanding has shifted since then.
- View segment from *The Power of Myth: The First Storytellers/ The Hunters* where Campbell talks about rituals of the hunt and shares the Blackfoot myth of Minnehaha, a maiden who marries a buffalo to save her people:
- Stop film [at **26:12 minutes**] where Campbell speaks of Native Americans addressing everything as “thou” instead of objectifying them as an “it.”

7. Discussion Questions (20 minutes)

- What can we learn about the Blackfoot people from the Minnehaha myth?
- Is there an animal master in our lives? If not, what/who is our master? What do we hold sacred and offer gratitude for our being alive?
- What does “thou” mean? Where do you usually hear “thee” and “thy” and “thou”?
- What is the difference between calling an animal “thou” and calling an animal “it”?
- Spring is here and Easter is coming. Do we have rituals and celebrations that offer gratitude for the return of animals? If not, should there be? And what acts of celebration would be appropriate?

8. Roles of Animals in Myths (15 minutes)

Read aloud categories below, asking youth if they can think of mythic examples from films or traditional myths:

- Animals that stand in for people throughout the whole myth and have human characteristics.
- Animals that are companions to people, giving them advice and guiding the way.
- Animals that are fierce enemies to be conquered.
- Animals that transform into people or people transform into animals.
- Animals that are gods/goddesses in disguise.
- Animals that are beings who bring sacred power or special gifts to help people accomplish tasks.
- Animals that are kidnapers who take human beings away from their people.
- Animals that are tricksters that create obstacles or trouble for people.
- Animals that are symbols for entire groups of people.

9. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

10. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets