

# Power of Myth

## Lesson 5: Animal storytellers

10.17.2021

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**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 for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

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### 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:
  - ▶ Is there a pet or kind of animal you feel close to? Draw or write which animal/s.
  - ▶ Can you think of examples of animal guides in modern books or movies?  
(*Hint: Harry Potter and the idea of a patronus or the wizard's animal companion of cat, rat, toad, or owl; Golden Compass and the idea of souls in the form of animals.*)
- 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. Animals: The first storytellers** (20 minutes)

**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.

- Watch segment from *The Power of Myth: The First Storytellers/ The Hunters* (starts at 12:00) 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.
- 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.

- Stop film at **26:40 minutes**, after Campbell speaks of Native Americans losing the land and buffalo, “the central object of their ritual life.”

## 5. Discussion Questions (15 minutes)

- What can we learn about the Blackfoot people from the Minnehaha myth?
- When you hear the word master, what do you think of? Is there an “animal master” in our lives? If not, who/what is the master in our lives? What greatly influences us that we are wary of? Is there a person or force that has great influence over us for which we are grateful?

*(Hint: Master comes from the root word “meg” meaning “great” and usually refers to someone with great influence or authority. Master can refer to slave masters or a servant-like relationship with God, but master can also refer to a skillful teacher/mentor, or someone who has achieved excellence in their craft, for example, Zen masters, Hasidic Rebbe/Grand Rabbi, martial art master, master woodworker.)*

- 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”?

*(Hint: Thou means “you,” signifying intimate relationship and mutuality. “I-thou” language versus “I-it” rejects othering/objectification, instead emphasizing mutual subjecthood.)*

- How does thinking about animals as interconnected with us, change the way we view the world, especially in the face of climate change and mass extinctions?

*(Hint: Human extinction is directly linked to animal and species extinction.)*

- Thanksgiving and the winter holiday season are coming. Do we have rituals that offer gratitude for the turkey (or any other living food source) for its life? If not, should there be? And what acts of thanks would be appropriate?

## 6. Roles of Animals in Myths (10 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 kidnappers 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.

**7. Announcement:**

No RE next Sunday—happy MEA weekend. The following Sunday, Oct. 31/Halloween, we will have our first Story Sunday of the year. As per our class agreements, please go to the worship service with family and/or friends.

**8. 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.”*

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

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