

Messages in Myths

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Thor the Thunderer. Maui the Great. Athena the Wise. All over the world, people tell stories about the mighty deeds of gods and heroes like these. Such stories are called myths—but what, really, is a myth?

Our English word “myth” comes from the ancient Greek word *mythos*, which means “a spoken or written story.” Myths aren’t just any stories, though. They may be entertaining, but they also carry messages. Unlike legends, which often have some link to historical fact, myths belong to the timeless world of “once-was-and-always-is.” They are stories that try to answer questions people have asked themselves from the beginning of time: What is the nature of the world? Where did people come from? What should I do to live a good life?

Creation Myths

Around the world, myths give many different explanations of how the world was created. Ancient Egyptian myths tell how Nun, the Sleeping Ocean, was surrounded by Chaos. From Nun was born Ra-Atum, the Complete One, who created the world as we know it. On the west coast of North America, Haida myths tell how Raven was thrown out of heaven and made land rise from the sea by flapping his wings. In Japanese myth, the god Izanagi and the goddess Izanami brought land up out of the sea by stirring it with a spear.

How, then, did people come to be? A myth from Papua-New Guinea says that Kambel, the sky god, heard voices inside a great tree trunk and opened it, releasing the first people. In Peruvian myth, the Creator god Viracocha first modelled human beings out of stone, and painted them just as they would appear in life—

men, women, and children. A Yoruba myth from Africa tells how the first people were formed out of clay before Olorun, the Creator, breathed life into them.

Where did other living things come from? A myth of the Aboriginal People of Australia tells how Yulunggur, the Rainbow Serpent, came to Earth and went on a rampage. He scared the first people so badly that some stood stock-still and turned into trees. Others hid under rocks and became tortoises, or bounded off as kangaroos, or fluttered away as birds. As Yulunggur thrashed about on the ground, he shaped the landscape into hills and valleys, then he rose into the sky again where he can still be seen as the rainbow.

Myths That Explain the Nature of the World

Many myths explain natural events in beautiful and powerful ways. A Siberian myth explains day and night by telling how a giant elk captures the sun each day and carries it off in its antlers. In the old Norse myths of Scandinavia, Thor’s mighty hammer caused lightning, and the rumbling of his chariot was thunder. In North America, the Kiowa People told how tornadoes came from the flapping of the wings of a giant sky horse.

Other myths are “why” stories that explain animal characteristics. For example, a myth of the Galla People in Ethiopia tells how the Maker once wished to give a gift to human beings. He sent them the power to exchange their old skins for new youthful ones, but a snake



got the present by mistake. To this day, all snakes can shed their skins, but people can't.

Myths That Explain Folkways

Other myths give specific information about the culture in which they are told. Some explain how a particular people came to live in a particular place. For instance, a Tukano myth from the Amazon explains how Pahmuri-Mahse brought people up the Amazon River in a canoe shaped like a giant anaconda snake. Wherever the canoe stopped along the way, communities of the Tukano People settled down.

Other myths explain how human beings got the different foods they eat. One Iroquois myth tells how a warrior named Two-Feather met a mysterious green-skinned woman with silky golden hair, and was given the gift of corn to share with his people. In Japan, myths tell of Uke Mochi, the food goddess, from whose body came rice, corn, and beans. In Greece, it was the goddess Demeter who taught people how to gather kernels of wild wheat and plant them to produce crops. In Bali, Wisnu, the water god, forces the Lord of Heaven to teach people how to sow, care for, and harvest rice.

Myths That Teach Lessons

Myths also teach values. Sometimes they deal with good and evil. In ancient Persian myth, the good spirit Ahura Mazda must struggle forever against the evil Angra Mainyu, for both good and evil are part of the world. Norse myths say that evil can never be completely removed from the world. In the shape of the great wolf Fenris, it lies bound until the final day when the gods will battle the giants and the world as we know it will end.

Myths can also teach more personal values. A myth of the Bella Coola People tells how Eagle Man punished the cruelty and selfishness of certain villagers by dropping them into the sea where they became the islands of the Pacific Coast. A myth from Nigeria tells how the sky once was close above the ground and provided a delicious and plentiful food. When people grew greedy and wasted it, the sky moved far away. Ever since, people have had to grow their own food and learn not to waste it.

Laziness is often punished in myths. When the people of Thebes, in ancient Greece, became lazy and didn't make proper sacrifices, the god Apollo punished them by sending an evil creature called the Sphinx. The Sphinx asked a riddle of all passersby and destroyed them when they couldn't answer. The Anishinabe People of North America tell how maple trees once gave pure syrup all year round until the people became so lazy that they did no work at all. So, Gitchee Manitou, the Creator, made the sap in the maple tree thin. Now people have to work hard to get their maple syrup. The sap only

flows once a year, too!

Myths often teach generosity and self-sacrifice. One myth from India tells how a prince saved a dove from an eagle by cutting off bits of his own flesh to feed the hungry eagle. Pleased by his virtue, the gods healed him and blessed him. A myth from Sri Lanka tells of a Hare who sacrificed its life to feed a holy man and was rewarded by going to live on the moon where you can see it still.

Respect for the natural world and the balance of nature is another value taught in myths. A Cheyenne story warns of a great beaver that gnaws at the Tree of the World, which it will someday bring down. When the balance of the world is upset, the beaver gnaws faster. So it's wise not to annoy that beaver!

Myths About Heroes

Myths also teach values through the adventures of heroes who perform great deeds or undertake difficult quests. These heroes are often the children of the gods and many have special powers. Though brave, many heroes are not wise, and they always pay for their mistakes.

Yi was a mighty Chinese archer. He had once been a god, but lived on Earth as a mortal hero. Yi became very much afraid of death though. So after many heroic deeds, he demanded and got from the gods a potion to let him live forever. Things didn't work out as he planned, however, because Chang-Er, his wife, couldn't resist drinking the potion. She flew away to the moon and Yi was left lamenting.

Another unfortunate hero was Achilles, a famous Greek warrior who fought at the siege of Troy. Proud of his great deeds, he quarrelled with Agamemnon, the Greek king. Then he sulked in his tent, refusing to fight, and the Greeks began to lose the war. Achilles' best friend pleaded with him, then stole his armor and went out to fight in his place. He was killed. Too late, Achilles repented. He defeated the warrior who had slain his friend, but soon after, the warrior's brother shot him with a poisoned arrow and Achilles died.

Do Myths Matter?

Myths are wonderful stories and people all over the world have listened to them for thousands of years. The messages they carry still matter today because many myths around the world have similar themes. Maybe that's because people are amazingly similar across time and space. So, a myth is like a telescope that lets us see distant times and places in order to understand them better. It's also like a microscope that helps us put our own values into focus. The real magic of myths is that in telling us about other peoples, they tell us most of all about ourselves.

