Greetings to the Hay House team!

Please find below my proposal for ***Myth Direction: How to Take Control of the Story of Your Life***. The accompanying short video requested in your guidelines is available on my website here: https://wanderingmythologist.com/hay-house-proposal-june-2022/

As a mythologist, I firmly believe the stories we tell ourselves about who we are make us who we are. This is true on so many levels, from the personal to the national and even increasingly to the global. However, even people who know their thoughts shape their lives may be unaware of the unconscious pressure of the tales they believe about themselves, because these stories lurk alongside their identities in the darkness far below the process of conscious thought.

Stories for children often work very hard to provide mythic guidance in an intentional way. But people of all ages would benefit from engaging more consciously with the stories they take in every day through all forms of media, because — whether acknowledged or not, *vocatus atque non vocatus* — stories are always present at the basis of who we think we are.

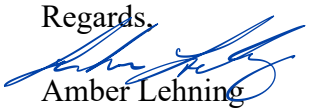
I have a PhD in mythological studies from Pacifica Graduate Institute. I have presented on this topic at academic conferences in the US and the UK, I have published chapters on fandoms as living myths in two research anthologies, and my academic book on the myth of wilderness in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth was published by the Kent State University Press earlier this year. Although academic studies rarely manage to escape the insular environment of the ivory tower, this powerful idea, that our stories create us and we in turn can shape our stories, is something that anyone can understand. My grandest hope for this book is that it will expose this concept to a wider audience than my previous scholarly work has been able to do.

To access the power of myth doesn't require a degree in religion or history or mythology. It doesn't require going to college to write papers on the *Odyssey* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, or a childhood spent at Sunday School listening to carefully-sanitized tales from the Bible. All it requires is that people come to recognize how the stories they believe about themselves create their identities. Our unconscious personal myth comes from many places — parents, teachers, friends and peers, popular culture of all kinds, from television and cinema to comics to the endless arguments of social media. We are bombarded by story in all its myriad forms every day. The way we take in, respond to, and integrate all that story with who we think we are has such a powerful impact on our lives.

Myth Direction is about the power of myth TODAY, not in long-ago cultures or faraway lands. It provides a detailed road map, illustrated with quizzes, checklists, and writing prompts, to help people to recognize and take control of that power.

I am grateful for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards,



Amber Lehning

A book proposal for

Myth Direction:
How to Take Control of the Story of Your Life

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Overview

The stories we tell ourselves about who we are make us who we are.

As a mythologist, I find myself saying these words A LOT. I open academic talks and lectures with them. I work them into the personal advice I give my family as we discuss our common frustrations with modern life. I ramble on about them at parties to my long-suffering friends, who are amused by their pet Myth Doctor (but would probably rather be talking about something else). When I speak these words, people usually nod, agreeing with the idea on the surface, but I often wonder if they really understand their important and far-reaching implications.

Myth Direction is a book about those implications.

We all have stories. Our stories come to us well before we have the capacity to understand a single word of them, first from our parents and our teachers, then from our larger culture and faith groups, and later from our favorite pop culture and social media entertainments. This process of story-ification is not something we can avoid; anyone who has ever interacted with children for more than five minutes knows just how desperate they are for story, and that need doesn't go away as we age. It just gets pushed underground, into the dark reaches of our unconscious minds. The truth is, for good or for ill, our lives and our identities are largely a composite of the stories we take in and accept about ourselves and who we are.

Part I of this book lays out in layman's terms the theoretical and scientific background of this myth-as-identity concept. Beginning with an overview of Joseph Campbell's ideas about the four functions of myth and the impact the triumph of the scientific paradigm has had on traditional myth cycles, it discusses in detail the ways we all use stories every day to make sense of the events in our lives, and goes on to summarize some exciting scientific research into how stories can have empirical, measurable effects on people's bodies and lives. Part II brings all the theory into the real world by providing some practical exercises (checklists, quizzes, and writing prompts) designed to help readers become aware of the religious, psychological, and lore-based ideas most important to their stories about themselves. It finishes with some actionable

techniques, drawn from both traditional affirmation-based self-help concepts and Jungian psychology, to help readers to take advantage of their new understanding of story.

Myth Direction is intended to appeal to people with an interest in self-help ideas based in mythology and popular culture. My ideal reader is a late-30s/early-40s college-educated adult, perhaps with children, who knows there is more to life but can't seem to break out of the expectations of the society she or he feels stuck within. While men and women can benefit equally from these ideas, my background as a female leader and academic has the potential to encourage women in particular to pick up the book.

I have a PhD in Mythological Studies with a concentration in Depth Psychology. Before I went to grad school in my 40s, I completed a successful military career that included more than twenty years of worldwide operational experience in both low- and high-intensity combat zones. My military specialty was Civil Affairs, which meant I was responsible for acting as the liaison between the military and civilian authorities in a region. Because of this work I ended up with quite a lot of personal experience of the deep cultural stories at the root of many long-running conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

A good chunk of my adult life has been spent thinking about the power of myth. Now, having retired from a career as a senior military officer and completed my advanced degree, I am in a position to share the insights I've come to over the years. I am passionate about how people's stories can make or break them. I want to spread this message as widely as I can.

In the end, *Myth Direction* is both a concept and a process. In bringing it to the world, I hope to help readers bring their unconscious stories into consciousness, and to give them the ability to take control of their choices about the stories that ultimately make them who they are.

About the Author

Amber Lehning is a mythologist and independent scholar. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy, she served a full career in the US Marine Corps before receiving her MA and PhD in the interdisciplinary field of mythological studies from Pacifica Graduate Institute and eventually retiring as a Colonel from the Marine Corps Reserve. Although she grew up in Western New York near Buffalo, she currently enjoys the considerably more hospitable weather of her California home in northern San Diego County.

Marketing

Competitive analysis

Myth Direction is a self-help book that accesses ideas derived from the study of mythology and depth psychology, sets them alongside the powerful arguments of affirmation-based New Thought teachings, and integrates both concepts into a practical, accessible process which harnesses the mythical energy of our favorite stories to drive the change in thinking necessary to improve our lives.

Mythological studies

"It is an open question, then, whether the true meaning of personal mythology is simply to discover that we are repeating a traditional mythic pattern, or...that we are in touch with a still-alive 'supernatural,' which requires us to create new mythologies with the very stuff our lives."

Stephen Larsen, *The Mythic Imagination* (1990)

"If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I *want to know* myself*, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story."*

Dan P. MacAdams, *The Stories We Live By* (1993)

"The question is not whether we have a mythology or not — everyone does, even rationalists for whom the Big Bang serves as a creation story. The question in whether the mythology still works or has become outdated, devalued, or unconscious."

Craig Chalquist, *Storied Lives* (2009)

These and other titles in the personal mythology branch of the mythological studies field are similar in theme (and in some cases have influenced the theory and arguments of) this book. Like them, I begin with the psychological work of Carl Jung and James Hillman and the comparative mythology of Joseph Campbell, and like them I firmly believe that gripping, well-told stories are

one of the best avenues for understanding our own personal myths. But the extant works in this subfield are often rather theoretical, and the ones which are presented in a more practical vein usually either focus heavily on impersonal archetypes, or restrict themselves to stories from the traditional mythic systems of the past.

Myth Direction presents a simple, easy-to-follow process that helps people become aware of the many powerful sources of story in our modern world. Alongside Athena or Odin (who are certainly worthy of reverence and study) I would place Frodo the hobbit, or Luke Skywalker, or even the larger-than-life stage presence of a pop star like Justin Bieber or a sports franchise that thrills millions of fans worldwide, as valid sources for deeply meaningful mythic guidance. My book, while standing solidly within the mythological studies tradition, expands the concept of personal myth to include lore beyond what is traditionally considered 'mythology.'

<u>New Thought</u>

"The first kind of labels come from other people. They were pinned on you as a child and you carry them around with you to this day. The other labels are the result of a choice you made to keep from having to do uncomfortable or difficult chores."

Wayne Dyer, *Your Erroneous Zones* (1977)

"Your experiences always reflect your inner beliefs. You can literally look at your experiences and determine what your beliefs are."

Louise Hay, *The Power is Within You* (1991)

"The same way the fearful stories block you from the flow of the Universe, your positive stories empower your life."

Gabrielle Bernstein, *The Universe Has Your Back* (2016)

These and other titles of the transformational self-help field are gratefully acknowledged as powerful influences on my work. The idea that our thoughts shape our lives, along with the

belief that changing those thoughts will change those lives, is integral to the concept and process of *Myth Direction*.

Wrangling thoughts can be a lot more challenging than we expect, however, and this book offers solid techniques to help overcome that challenge. Often the thoughts that need attention are precisely the ones that have an entire lifetime's worth of unconscious energy behind them. The positive lore that has inspired us in the past is usually an excellent clue to exactly the mythic guidance we need in the present to help us win the battle to create our future. If we can consciously enter into participation mystique with that lore, it is possible to access the same vast pool of mythic energy that underlies the stubborn negative patterns we are trying to change. Connecting with our personal myths can supercharge our affirmations, provide structure and coherence to our visualizations, and give us something to grab onto while we do the work to reshape our thoughts.

Myth Direction is a complement to rather than a replacement for works in both mythological studies and New Thought. By introducing techniques from the former and demonstrating how they can be used to support the latter, I hope to inspire readers to seek out, consciously choose, and take control of the stories of their lives.

Market analysis

The US self-improvement market contracted by 10% during the recent pandemic, but it is now expected to rebound with a modest 6% average annual growth through 2025. The market is overwhelmingly female; one 2017 report suggested that 70% of the customers in the industry are women, and the average purchaser is affluent, between 40 and 50, and living on the East or West Coast of the USA. Interestingly, despite the large female readership, the majority of self-help book authors are men. Although data are more difficult to uncover in their smaller niche, the vast majority of psychological and mythological books available also seem to be written by men. Baby Boomers have continued to yield their market dominance to their Millennial grandchildren in the last few years, but the self-improvement market has thus far been slow to adapt; in 2021, of the 17 most prominent names on the motivational speaker circuit, 12 were 60 or older.

Myth Direction, with its roots in both mythological studies and affirmation-based New Thought, is aligned with several of these trends. It is targeted at college-educated people, particularly women just on the cusp of middle age, who are looking for practical, actionable advice on understanding more about the stories that make them who they are.

Many of these readers are likely to be familiar with the self-inquiry and visualization processes typical of the transformational self-help industry. My book will draw on that familiarity, but it will provide a fresh take on how the external power of myth can be harnessed to support the internal work of changing negative thought patterns. For readers intrigued by the mythological and psychological theories of personal development in the work of Joseph Campbell or James Hillman, the clear resonance with common techniques in the New Thought movement will demonstrate some new and useful practical applications of all that interesting theory.

The fact that many authors in these fields are male does not prevent thinkers like Angela Duckworth in popular psychology or Clarissa Pinkola Estés in mythology or Gabrielle Bernstein in self-help from finding a wide audience for their ideas. Their success demonstrates that women with compelling ideas are welcome in these genres. As a female author with an advanced degree and a military background, my biography may prove intriguing to the educated women who comprise my ideal readership. As a Gen Xer, stuck in the forgotten space between the Boomers and the Millennials, I am old and experienced enough to have a bit of gravitas, and yet young enough to relatably communicate my message about the power of story, from the dusty texts of ancient history to the all the way up to the worldwide mythic phenomena of the twenty-first century.

Author promotion

My first book, *The Map of Wilderland: Ecocritical Reflections on J.R.R. Tolkien's Myth of Wilderness*, was released in May 2022 by the Kent State University Press. The platform I began to develop this past winter to support the release of that book is small, but it is growing.

My intent is to continue expanding that platform, through the email list on my website (wanderingmythologist.com) and my author Instagram and Facebook accounts (@wanderingmythologist on both services). I also plan to expand the content on my website with more (and more-regular) blog posts about myth theory and popular culture, to get my ideas out into the world and expand the reach of my message.

I routinely speak at academic conferences in the US and the UK. I am open to connecting with the podcast circuit, which seems to be growing by the hour to encompass all sorts of interesting niche audiences, and I would be pleased to expand my speaking engagements from academic conferences to more-general events in order to promote this book.

Annotated Table of Contents

Myth Direction: Taking Control of the Stories of your Life

Introduction: Your Story or Your Life

Describes the basic premise of the book (the stories we tell ourselves about who we are make us who we are) and outlines the theoretical and practical discussion to follow

Part I: Understanding the Power of Myth

Lays out the theoretical foundations of Myth Direction

Chapter 1: True Myths

The Myth of Truth and the Truth of Myth introduces concepts from the work of Joseph Campbell to establish some basic ideas about mythology in today's world, talks about what myths are (sources of true meaning) and aren't (things that are false), and describes the way religion, psychology, and lore work together in our minds to create our own personal myths

Death of a Framework (and Zombies) describes how our human minds need coherent ways of thinking (also known as frameworks) to make sense of the world, looks back on ways that traditional mythic systems used to serve this purpose, and argues that the modern scientific paradigm has undermined or destroyed the old cultural patterns but is unable to fully meet our mythic needs

Chapter 2: Metaphors be With You

Shopping for a Metaphor explains how people are constantly seeking to find meaning to fit the events of their lives into their ideas about who they are, and uses a concept from archetypal psychology to demonstrate the process and the impact it has on our lives

Pop Culture to the Rescue! considers how popular culture stories (especially ones which have gained worldwide popularity in the modern, flat, scientific world) are beginning to act as global myths, and discusses ways these new myths are beginning to provide real guidance on the ethical ways to interact with other human beings

Chapter 3: What Would Batman Do?

The Stories of Psychology considers several important psychological research studies from a mythological point of view, and examines how such research demonstrates the power of story to improve people's lives in an empirical, measurable way

The Mind-body Connection considers some important medical research from fields other than psychology into the relationships between patients' stories and beliefs and their physical health, and examines the mythic importance of the ultimate medical story: the Placebo Effect

Part II: Harnessing the Power of Myth

Building on the theoretical foundation of the first part, provides concrete exercises, including checklists, quizzes, and writing prompts, to help readers develop their skills in Myth Direction

Chapter 4: Know Thyself

Finding (and Losing) Your Religion examines ways that we derive mythic guidance from religious ideas, gives concrete examples of such guidance (both faith-based and humanistic), and provides both a detailed checklist and a quiz with open-ended questions to help readers become aware of the stories they have about how they interact with things they perceive as beyond human consciousness

Feeding (and Shrinking) Your Head examines ways that we discover mythic guidance through participation mystique, gives concrete examples of the way our interior pictures of our own identities are tied to our stories, and provides a checklist and an open-ended

quiz to help readers recognize the ways they habitually interact with concepts that reside within their own modes of consciousness

Learned in Old Lore examines several different levels of story in our lives, gives examples of how these stories are tied up in both the religious and psychological needs described above, and provides a creative assignment based on a social media phenomenon (the #3FictionalCharacters hashtag) to help readers understand the lore important to their own personal myth

Chapter 5: Avengers Assemble!

Gather your Squad references and updates the famous 'Invisible Counselors' technique popularized by Napoleon Hill and ties it into the Jungian psychological practice of active imagination, suggests ways to use the information gathered in Chapter 4 to fill the seats at the table with characters important in a personal myth, and provides a guided meditation script to encourage readers to enter into dialogue with the characters they believe would provide the kind of guidance that most closely fits their dreams

With Great Power... describes the responsibility postmodern people must accept for the stories of the events in our lives, addresses the controversial issue of 'blaming the victim' when bad things happen to good people whatever their stories, and provides some advice on how we can successfully gain and maintain control over our stories and our meaning in the face of terrible and senseless events

Conclusion: Your Story IS Your Life!

Reiterates and ties together the theory and practice of Myth Direction, and encourages readers to both consciously seek out stories to fill their metaphorical shelves and put those metaphors to use as tools to take control of the stories of their lives

Sample chapter: Working draft of Chapter 2: Metaphors be With You

Shopping for a metaphor

If the word 'metaphor' gives you terrible flashbacks to eight-grade English, please don't worry. I'll walk you through the way I use the word in a mythological context and help you understand it in a way that is helpful and not pedantic. Before we get into discussing metaphor, though, let's take a detour through a question we've all asked or answered at some point in our lives: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

The best answers to this kid-friendly question always come from those young enough not to censor their answers: astronaut, cowboy, movie star, ballerina, football player, doctor, hip-hop singer. A child obsessed with dinosaurs might show off a precocious vocabulary and go with paleontologist. One who loves animals might dream of being a veterinarian.

The lucky ones, those blessed with supportive parents who smile fondly rather than laugh harshly at their childish dreams, might say they want to be Spider-Man when they grow up. Or Robin Hood. Or Luke Skywalker. Or a Pokémon trainer. Or any of the vast cast of characters brought to life by the stunningly powerful Disney cultural juggernaut: from Cinderella to Elsa and Snow White to Ariel, Simba, Aladdin, Miguel from *Coco* — the list of cinematic heroines and heroes, many drawn from myths of the past and re-imagined for the modern world, is pretty much endless (as anyone with a toddler can attest). There's something to be learned from our children here; we adults may have forgotten this, but our children know exactly how valuable such stories are.

Unfortunately, adults in today's myth-starved world typcially ignore or belittle this childlike wisdom. Since it isn't physically possible to fly unaided or move things with our minds or have claws that sprout out of the backs of our hands, the argument goes, then it's foolish and wrong for kids to say they want to be Superman or Rey or Wolverine when they grow up.

I believe this attitude completely misses the point of the exercise. Such daydreams aren't supposed to define a career path. They're not meant to reflect economic opportunities or physical reality. They aren't supposed to give us empirical experiences.

What they do give us is far more important: they give us metaphors.

An editor of one of Joseph Campbell's posthumous collections points out that the origin of the word 'metaphor' makes an interesting metaphor in itself: "Metaphor comes from the Greek *meta*, a passing over, or a going from one place to another, and *phorein*, to move or to carry. Metaphors carry us from one place to another, they enable us to cross boundaries that would otherwise be closed to us."

Post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman argues that those boundaries are the ones between our inner experience and the events of our outer lives. He suggests that what is 'carried across' is meaning: "Because metaphor 'gives sense and passion to insensate things,' it is a manner of personifying and thus mythologizing.... Metaphors are more than ways of speaking; they are ways of perceiving, feeling, and existing." So, in making the connection between one thing and another in our stories — in crossing that boundary — we are literally being carried across into a world where the meaning of the story becomes our own meaning. This is the power of metaphor.

In a class I took early in my grad school career, one of my professors (Ginette Paris, an archetypal psychologist who had previously studied and worked with Hillman) introduced us

young budding mythologists to an interesting mental concept she called ‘shopping for a metaphor.’ Her basic idea was that, when something happens to us, our experience of it depends completely on the metaphor we use to interpret it. Therapists call it framing; as a mythologist, I call it a story. To take an event and carry it over into an experience, there must be a metaphor. We must have a story.

Here's a simple example. Imagine a rainy night. In the plain outlines of the physical world, rain is a basic meteorological phenomenon of liquid precipitation. It’s just water falling out of the sky. A gardener, curled up in a cozy house with a nice cup of tea, can enjoy the rain because she visualizes how her thirsty roses will drink it up and become healthier and happier. Her story for the rain, her metaphor, is a positive one. But to someone walking down empty city streets who just lost something, perhaps his job, or someone very close to him, the rain is not a positive thing at all. The torment of being wet and cold, the sky weeping for the terrible lot in his life, just another manifestation of a cruelly indifferent world — his experience of this same exact event is very different. His unconscious metaphors of the rain are negative, and they both reflect and support the story he is believing about his negative experience.

None of this has anything to do with the rain. The rain is in the most literal sense nothing more (or less) than water falling out of the sky. The positive or negative interpretation of the rain reflects completely the different human stories about it. It’s not the occurrence, it’s the story about the occurrence that makes an event important.

So, when events happen in the world that we believe are important, the first thing our unconscious mind does is duck into our mental metaphor shop and start rummaging around for something to bring meaning to the event. What we come up with on this shopping trip has

incredible influence on our experience — which means that the quality of metaphors on our shelves is far more important than people often recognize.

This still probably seems a bit theoretical, so let me give you a personal example of how this actually works in practice. I shall tell you a tale about something that happened to me one recent morning, while I was working on this book.

I have one of those single-serve espresso machines that uses recyclable aluminum pods. I keep a variety of pods on hand. That morning, when I looked in my nicely-organized drawer, I noted that one of my favorites had come up in the rotation. I smiled and felt my spirits lift.

My unconscious story went something like this: Hooray! My favorite. This will be delightful. Yum. It's going to be a good day.

My sleep-fogged brain was on autopilot. I put the pod in, drew the shot, added the sweetener, rinsed the machine. Then, as I reached to push the off switch, my hand brushed accidentally against my little cup and dumped the entire shot all over the counter. Lovely crema floated like clouds on a big puddle that spread under the machine, collected in pools around the breadbox, and dripped off the edge of the counter.

I felt like I'd been slapped in the face. My pleasure evaporated, to be replaced with anger, frustration, disappointment, resentment.

My fickle mind instantly came up with a different, and much less pleasant, story: I am such a klutz. This is why I can't have nice things. Why does this kind of thing always happen to me? Why am I being punished? This is clearly going to be an awful day.

Objectively, a spilled cup of coffee is no big deal. I knew this. I sighed heavily, said some words I won't repeat here, and took the five or so minutes necessary to clean up the mess. I pulled another shot and headed outside to do my journaling. But the fleeting pleasure I'd felt was

gone. I struggled to concentrate; I was swept up in an interior story of self-pity over the rather intense stress I'd been under recently, and that stupid little incident with the espresso just seemed to highlight how everything in my world was unfair. Why? What did it mean?

Now, on a practical level, I knew quite well it didn't have to mean anything. It was an accident, and accidents happen. I scolded myself for overreacting. I knew that it wasn't the event that was giving me trouble, that my unbalanced response was due to some other significant stresses in my life — but still, my brain would not let it go. In fact my treacherous thoughts piled on with all of the other little things that had gone wrong in recent days, and spun fantasies of how I was doomed to be miserable forever. What was WRONG with me?

Since I'm supposed to be in a position to know better, it took me longer than I like to admit to recognize what was happening. Eventually, as I scribbled furiously in my journal about the unfairness of the world, it hit me: I had seized on a bad story and was pouring all of my energy into it. I needed a new one, stat.

Myth Doctor to the OR! I sat back and took a deep breath. For several minutes I consciously brainstormed several ways to reframe this petty event in a way that was more satisfying than a true but useless repetition of 'these things happen.' I needed something more positive and productive than the 'I'm a useless git' that just wouldn't stop bubbling up from inside my unreliable mind.

Finally it occurred to me — I could use it as example in the book! I could demonstrate to readers how something as seemingly silly as a spilled shot of espresso could either completely spoil a day or prove a useful prompt for success, depending on the story I chose.

My unbalanced emotional state calmed and my unhappiness vanished. Yes, just like that. I know it probably sounds ridiculous, but this particular event really was a small thing in the end.

Had it been a deeper trauma, the meaning necessary to integrate it into my experience would naturally have been correspondingly greater, and required a much more-powerful metaphor, but the process would be more or less the same.

Once I had a meaning for the event, the unreasonable emotion that was spinning around my flailing confusion about why it had happened no longer had any purchase. I now had a metaphor. To move on all I had to do was follow through (and you've just read the result). Now the interesting thing here is that my conscious mind absolutely knew it wasn't a big deal, and that I was being foolish about the whole thing. But that didn't matter. I'm human, and human minds need meaning. When I tried to force myself into accepting the utter impersonality of an uncaring universe, I was miserable. But, right there on the metaphorical shelf where the story about my identity as the author of this book was stored, I found a meaning that let me fit the event into the experience of my life. The dissonance vanished and things were all right again.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this is the one of the greatest problems with the scientific paradigm — it refuses to engage with the question of meaning. Humans literally cannot function properly in an absence of meaning. In the pre-scientific world, when our shelves were comfortably full with the myths of our tribe, our faith groups, our families, meaning was less difficult to find. But these days, our available metaphorical systems are much less functional. We saw earlier how the triumph of the very powerful but mythically incomplete scientific paradigm has either destroyed the old frameworks outright or turned them into shambling zombies.

This has had a tremendous impact on what is available on today's metaphorical shelves. If we reject the old mythic frameworks completely, our shelves get swept bare. Then, when our unconscious minds go shopping, there's nothing to grab onto, and we end up trapped in that circle of meaninglessness. But, if we uncritically yoke ourselves to one of the zombie

frameworks, we can end up fiercely resisting or even rejecting anything outside of its narrow cultural field. Since those old cultural systems aren't always equipped to handle the challenges of a flatter, less-homogeneous, more-inclusive world, any events that were not imaginable in that old worldview have to be shoved in somehow, even if there's no place for them. It's the proverbial square peg in a round hole.

Or, to use a different metaphor, imagine a situation in which you absolutely must have a pair of shoes. Maybe you have to walk miles on a gravel road, or over hot pavement, or whatever reason you can come up with where you really need shoes. But then imagine that you only have access to a single small shop. When you go in, the selection is pretty limited, and there aren't any shoes in your size. You can't go without, so you'll either have to squeeze your feet into something too small, or you'll end up with something that's too large or the wrong shape. You'll wear those shoes. They'll pinch, or give you blisters, or make your back and neck hurt, or cause you to stumble, but you'll wear them because you must have shoes.

This is what happens when a person doesn't easily fit into the stories of their dominant cultural paradigm. We must have metaphors — but being forced into something that doesn't fit can really, really hurt. People whose gender expression or sexual orientation differ from what is traditional or accepted in their societies know this pain on the deepest level. Members of historically marginalized groups also struggle, both with finding metaphors that fit their experiences and with claiming their position in a society that was designed around a group of people that don't look, think, or act like they do. And even those who are served well enough by the dominant culture can find themselves bumping up against events that just aren't able to slot comfortably inside their framework.

There is some hope, however.

Pop Culture to the Rescue!

<This chapter section will consider how modern popular culture phenomena are beginning to step in and fill the gap left by the destruction or denaturing of the traditional mythic frameworks. People of very different traditional cultural groups are finding common ground through participating in the worldwide fandom communities growing up around the lore of popular media, music, and sports. These fan objects have long supported the psychological function of myth through participation mystique, and the way they act in religious ways have been noted by scholars of fan studies. Many such communities are even beginning to provide solid mythic guidance in the sociological realm, providing ethical examples of the right way for humans to treat each other. These ethics have been at the forefront of many positive societal shifts in the context of race, gender, queer, and ecological issues. I expect the discussion to run ~2500-3000 words.>

Sample chapter: Working draft of Chapter 3: What Would Batman Do?

The stories of psychology

At this point I expect pretty much everyone has heard about the famous Stanford marshmallow experiment. If you've somehow managed to avoid this hoary old chestnut, here's a short recap: researchers in the late sixties and early seventies tested children's willingness to delay gratification. Kids were offered the choice of one marshmallow to eat immediately or two marshmallows if they could wait to eat the first one until the researcher left the room and came back. Much hay has been made in self-help and inspirational social media circles of some follow-up studies using that Stanford data which found positive correlations between the children's willingness to delay gratification and everything from their SAT and BMI scores to their general competence later in life.

Admittedly, it's interesting research, and even if it is a little over-exposed it's still worth thinking about. There is no denying that delayed gratification and self-control are important. The children who had the skills to distract themselves from the tempting treat in front of them were the ones who were able to wait, and anything that encourages people to develop those skills is by no means a bad thing. As with most hoary chestnuts of the self-help world, though, the lessons to be distilled from complex research tend to get over-simplified. They also significantly depend on the point the self-help writers (usually laymen who are not researchers themselves) are laboring to make.

Someone teaching specifically about the importance of self-control and delayed gratification will, justifiably, point to the later life successes enjoyed by the children who were

able to control themselves long enough to get the second marshmallow. But someone who is focusing on spontaneity and freedom from outdated societal strictures will interpret things differently. Such a person is more likely to observe that the children who ate the marshmallow right away were enjoying themselves a lot more than the ones coming up with clever ways to be miserable, or at least distract themselves from the tasty treat in front of them. Perhaps such a teacher might even choose to question the importance of success within a failing paradigm. Are those two marshmallows we're working so hard for — or those two cars, or houses, or millions of dollars — really what make us happy, in the end?

An additional problem was uncovered when a 2018 study, trying to replicate the Stanford results, discovered that considering things like the mother's education level or the child's level of mental development erased nearly all of the correlation between delayed gratification and life success. As one reviewer of this later study pointed out, these results supported a "common criticism of the marshmallow test: that waiting out temptation for a later reward is largely a middle or upper class behavior. If you come from a place of shortages and broken promises, eating the treat in front of you now might be better than trusting there will be more later." It is probably worth mentioning the Stanford marshmallow experiment tested 98 children who were enrolled in the Bing Nursery School at Stanford University in 1972. (Stop and think about the sort of kids likely to be enrolled in an Ivy League university childcare program in 1972, and you'll probably recognize the point I'm trying to make here.)

Now, I have to admit in this situation that I am a layman myself. My PhD is in mythological studies, and while I find this kind of psychological research very important in my work, I have never attempted to design or execute any quantitative analyses of my own. But there is some empirical work out there that resonates pretty clearly with my ideas about personal

myths and stories, and I find many other studies at least as valuable as a thought experiment as I do the one about the marshmallows. So — in the time-honored self-help tradition of freely re-interpreting and simplifying complex psychological research to support the point I'm trying to make — please allow me to introduce another famous study: one that literally asked "What would Batman do?"

This study, published in 2015 (which, in passing, referenced a 1975 follow-up paper by the author of the original Stanford marshmallow experiment), described how researchers at the University of Pennsylvania gave 48 3-year-olds and 48 5-year-olds[*] a rule-based sorting test to measure their executive function, and then assigned them to one of three groups. Before being given a more-difficult sorting task, each of the three groups was given a different pep talk. All three pep talks started out the same, with the words "Sometimes this game can be tricky! Some kids like to..."

> Group 1 (self-immersed): "…focus on what they are thinking and how they feel when it gets hard. That's what I'd like you to do today. I want you to ask yourself, 'Where do I think this card should go?'"
>
> Group 2 (third person): "…talk to themselves using their own name when it gets hard. That's what I'd like you to do today. I want you to ask yourself, 'Where does [child's name] think this card should go?'"
>
> Group 3 (exemplar): "…pretend that they're somebody else who would be really good at this game when it gets hard. That's what I'd like you to do today. [Four character choices were then provided (Batman, Dora the Explorer, Bob the Builder, Rapunzel) and children put on costume props (e.g. Batman's cape, Dora's

[*] As their ethnicity and economic status were not considered important enough to be recorded, it is a safe but not completely certain assumption that these were children from white middle-class families.

backpack, Bob's tool belt, Rapunzel's crown) to facilitate adoption of the persona.] Now, you're [character's name]! In this game, I want you to ask yourself, 'Where does [character's name] think this card should go?'"

While the marshmallow experiment is wonderful for those interested in extolling the benefits of Stoic self-discipline, this one is tailor-made for a mythologist. The children were literally being encouraged to identify with a story and then directly compared with those who were not. Spoiler alert: identifying with an admirable character improved their performance on the next task in a measurable, empirical way. As the authors of the study summarized it: "the strongest effects of self-distancing were seen when taking the role of a fictional other, such as Batman: 5-year-olds in the exemplar condition performed at an impressive full level above controls, an improvement equal to an average of 12 months' development."

Of course, children naturally spend a great deal of time in fantasy worlds. It's how our brains develop the skills we'll need to navigate the world as an adult. But something I found especially interesting is that the younger (3-year-old) children did not see the same benefit from the fictional characters that the older ones did, despite the fact that 3-year-olds are usually perfectly capable of entering into and enjoying pretend play. This prompted the researchers to suggest that "children might need to reach a requisite level of social understanding before they can successfully self-distance by considering an outsider's perspective." Self-distancing is an extremely useful technique and usually considered a measure of mental resilience in adults. So, if the older children saw a benefit from using an admired exemplar in this way, isn't it possible adults would find it least as much (if not more) beneficial? What a shame our culture so quickly brushes us past this powerful idea, hurrying us along into a myth-poor adult world where it would be considered childish to ask ourselves 'What Would Batman Do?'

Although it is probably the most famous, this was not the first cleverly-titled research study in which Batman featured prominently. In another interesting one (published in 2012 but not referenced by the 2015 one mentioned above), children enrolled in a 2009 summer camp designed for children from lower socio-economic families* were primed with the question "What would Batman eat?" before having lunch at a fast-food restaurant. The priming had a measurable effect on the number of times they chose more-healthy food. As the researchers described it, "When children were asked what various admirable models would eat, they were temporarily more likely to make healthier food selections, presumably because their affective knowledge structure about healthy food (e.g. admirable people like healthy food) was activated. Activating their cognitive knowledge structure about healthy food (e.g. salad is healthy) did not influence their choice."

In plainer terms, emotional (affective) ideas activated by a story proved stronger than mental (cognitive) ones, even in children who were old enough to understand a value-based judgement like 'salad is healthy.' Again we see that the positive psychological effect of identifying with an admirable character is just as strong in children with higher cognitive development, and again I would ask: couldn't adults benefit as much as children from this story-based technique?

The Mind-body connection

Psychologists are not the researchers who have been studying this phenomenon. The amount of interest in what is being called the 'mind-body connection' has been increasing in

* Of the 22 children, eight were African-American, six were Hispanic and two were Asian. As the ethnicity of the other six is not mentioned, it is a safe assumption that they were white.

recent years, as studies of epigenetics expand our understanding of what our genes do and don't do in our bodies, especially in regards to inheritable risk factors for various diseases.

Indeed, nearly all medical research relies on comparison to something that is, at its heart, a story. In order for a drug or surgical intervention to be considered effective, it has to be shown to improve the patient's condition more than a placebo. But what about that placebo? People are told a story that they are taking a drug or having a procedure that will help their condition, but they are actually swallowing sugar pills or undergoing only sham surgery, and yet their conditions often improve just as much as those who actually take the drug or have the procedure. In our mythological perspective here, the control group of these experiments is essentially given a story they can believe, and they get better because of that story.

This is such an important point, and one that often gets buried. People's medical conditions can be so reliably improved based on story alone that the effect is routinely used as a measuring stick in medical research. The inverse effect, cleverly named 'nocebo,' is also something that can be proven; when people are told a placebo has harmful side effects, they often experience those effects after taking an inert pill.[*]

There are some researchers out there seeking to understand the way that the placebo effect and story are interrelated. As early as the 1970s, oncologist O. Carl Simonton and his psychotherapist wife Stephanie discovered in their work with cancer patients that positive visualization techniques used seemed to improve the outcomes of traditional cancer treatments. "A positive attitude toward treatment was a better predictor of response to treatment than was the severity of the disease," they wrote, and they also noted "expectancy can also work negatively."

[*] For a much more-comprehensive review of the medical science behind placebo healing, I highly recommend Dr. Joe Dispenza's wonderful book *You are the Placebo*.

The example they gave to support their nocebo assertion is particularly interesting in the context of the power of story we're talking about here.

The Simontons found that cancer patients of Japanese descent responded quite differently to radiation therapy than non-Japanese patients, experiencing "extensive unpleasant side effects that could not be explained in terms of the treatment alone." After some interviews with one of the Japanese men, they realized the patient, a retired military officer, had a deep fear of radiation dating back to Word War II. Eventually they came to realize that their Japanese patients' "beliefs about radiation were created, probably on an unconscious level, by the effects of the atomic bomb. To a middle-aged Japanese, who recalled the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, radiation was forever associated with destruction and death." The dosages and timing of radiation therapy being administered were identical for the Japanese and non-Japanese patients — the physical events were the same — but the patients' stories about those events differed dramatically, and this difference had an impact on the outcome of the therapy.

The meditative techniques still used at the Simonton Cancer Center today rely quite heavily on the use of metaphor and story. They instruct patients to "think of the cancer as consisting of very weak, confused cells. Remember that our bodies destroy cancerous cells thousands of times during a normal lifetime," and they explicitly encourage the creation of mental metaphors about the destruction of these weak cells:

> If you are now receiving treatment, picture your treatment coming into your body in a way that you understand. If you are receiving radiation treatment, picture it as a beam of millions of bullets of energy hitting any cells in its path. The normal cells are able to repair any damage that is done, but the cancerous cells cannot because they are weak…. If you are receiving chemotherapy, picture that drug

> coming into your body and entering the bloodstream. Picture the drug acting like a poison. The normal cells are intelligent and strong and don't take up the poison so readily. But the cancer cell is a weak cell so it takes very little to kill it.

As a mythologist, I find this so interesting. Using this kind of aggressive imagery engages the mythic center of our minds, and encourages us to think of ourselves as warriors fighting against the ruthless attackers ravaging our bodies. It is hard to imagine a more compelling argument for the power of story.

The Simontons' work was roundly criticized by the twentieth-century medical establishment; a report by the American Cancer Society in 1981 concluded that "although in its more positive aspects the Simonton technique may increase patient comfort and ability to deal with cancer, there is no scientific evidence that psychological and psychosomatic factors will alter the course of the disease." But more recent studies on the use of guided imagery have validated similar approaches to cancer treatment, and the existence of the fourth edition of *Psycho-Oncology* (published by the prestigious Oxford University Press) indicates that such treatment is much closer to the mainstream of medical science today.

The specific use of aggressive imagery in fighting cancer is something that has become more mainstream as well. A 2008 study published in *Pediatrics* conducted a randomized trial that tested the effect of playing a video game on adolescents and young adults undergoing cancer treatment. 371 participants[*] were given mini-computers with either a commercial game or the same game plus the study game, and asked to play for at least an hour per week.

The study game, cleverly titled *Re-Mission*, told the story of a nanobot named Roxxi. Players navigated Roxxi around a three-dimensional environment representing the bodies of

[*] 132 of which were male and 109 of which reported their ethnicity as "white."

young patients with commonly diagnosed cancers, and used various forms of ammunition — the Chemoblaster, Radiation Gun, and antibiotic rocket — to destroy cancer cells and manage treatment effects like nausea and infection. Players were also to asked to monitor patient health and report back to the in-game doctor as part of their mission.

Of course, I wouldn't be bringing up this research if it didn't support my argument here, so naturally I'm pleased to report the researchers deemed the study a success. While the outcomes of the treatment were not recorded, the participants who played the study game took their medications significantly more regularly (as measured with blood tests) and displayed more general knowledge of cancer and its treatment than the control group. In their dry scientific way, the researchers observed: "the findings in this study indicate than an easily distributed video-game-based intervention can have a positive impact on treatment-relevant behaviors and outcomes in a patient population with a serious life-threatening illness."

HopeLab, the nonprofit behind the game, used the results of this study (as well as a brain-imaging study from 2012 that demonstrated how players of *Re-Mission* activated areas of the brain linked to motivation and reward) to design a follow-up game which is available for free on the web. They have also expanded their story-based efforts to a solid handful of other games, including: *Nod*, which combats loneliness and depression in college students; *Quit the Hit*, designed to help young people quit vaping, *Zamzee*, to encourage increased physical activity in children, and *Mitra*, an app to inspire ethical leadership.

To translate all of this into our mythological context here, an engaging and interactive story in which sick patients were encouraged to take aggressive mental action against the cancer in their bodies had a positive impact on the course of their treatment. HopeLab has continued to partner with other cancer and behavioral science researchers to intentionally harness the power

of “drama, complex organic environments, lots of feedback, and clear, achievable goals” and “a sense of accomplishment and the feeling that it's possible to win” to develop this intentional deployment of the power of story.

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