

# The Archetype of the Hero and the Promethean Task of Education

## THE ARCHETYPE OF THE HERO AND THE PROMETHEAN TASK OF Education

By A.E. Schmid

America and the entire Western world are experiencing a crisis: vitality and meaning are seeping out of the existences of its peoples and no one knows what to do. Medicate? Yoga? Theosophy of some sort? What about a return to nature or to Western Religion? None of these answers seem satisfying, and the question and problem presented by this dwindling value and meaning is felt especially poignantly in our American classrooms. What is it that we really aim to teach? Is measuring students and teachers by objective and calculated standardized tests truly the full extent of the goal of education? Or is the goal something more, something nobler, both a return and departure from what is and what has been? I propose that the goal of education is to teach one "how she should then live" in the wake of a country that has lost its connection to its mythological roots.

How, though, does this relate to mythology and particularly to mythology in contemporary culture? The current conception of mythology by the lay-person or typical student in secondary education is that mythology and its motifs are human fabrications first conceived of to explain and deal with the modern world. This paper, however, in adopting more of a Jungian and Campbell-esque perspective suggests that a particularly American mythology must be pursued by a confrontation with a varying world, and in particular Western mythologies, during one's education in order to re-connect an individual with the roots of his conscious and unconscious mind. In so doing, one observes the function of mythology not to be for amusement nor even explanation of physical phenomena, but rather as a necessary part of the psychic health of an individual and a culture. The goal then of education is to provide students, people, with the tools necessary to confront these realities, and to prepare them for the grueling task of aiming towards meaning in their lives. Naturally, this sentiment was expressed wonderfully well 91 years ago by the Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung:

"I thought: "Now you have the key to mythology and you have the power to unlock all doors." But then something within me said: "Why unlock all these doors?" And then I found myself asking what I had done after all. I had written a book about the hero, I had explained the myths of past peoples, but what about my own myth? I had to admit I had none; I knew theirs but none of my own, nor did anyone else have one today." (Carl Jung, *Introduction to Jungian Psychology: Notes of the Seminar on Analytical Psychology* Given in 1925, P. 26)

In the century between that time and this one, the sentiment that rang through in the statement above rings more true than ever: the West, and particularly America, lacks a cohesive mythology, a governing set of values springing from the unconscious, and this has led to a "stopping up" and perhaps even a severing of the necessary connection between a society and its governing myth—its very essence and life-blood. This happens not only on a social level, but in strange mimicry of Plato's notion of the city and the soul of man, on the individual level as well.

"From the psychological point of view the ceremony has the significance of a meaningful institution, inasmuch as it represents a clearly defined procedure for canalizing the libido\*. It has, in fact, the functional value of a paradigm, and its purpose is to show us how we should act

when the libido gets blocked. What we call the “blocking of the libido” is, for the primitive, a hard and concrete fact: *his life ceases to flow, things lose their glamour, plants, animals, and men no longer prosper*[my italics]. The Ancient Chinese philosophy of the *I Ching* devised some brilliant images for this state of affairs. Modern man, in the same situation, experiences a standstill (“I am stuck”), a loss of energy and enjoyment (“the zest”–libido–has gone out of life”), or a depression.” (C.G Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, P. 170. First Bollingen/Princeton Printing, 1976)

In the words above, one reads the modern state of man: listless, stuck, depressed–deprived of his vital energy, and in his listless depression, he strives for and fails to find meaning. In the article which follows, we will examine how such “zest” or energy can re-enter into one’s life and culture and the effect that such a transformation has on education, and therefore, what the true purpose of education is. Jung continues:

“One frequently has to tell the patient what is happening to him, for modern man’s powers of introspection leave much to be desired. If, even today, the new fire is kindled at Eastertide, it is in commemoration of the redemptive and saving significance of the first fire-boring. In this way man wrested a secret from nature–the Promethean theft of fire. He made himself guilty of an unlawful intervention, *incorporating a fragment of the age-old unconscious into the darkness of his mind* [my italics]. With this theft he appropriated something precious and offended against the gods. Anyone who knows the primitive’s fear of innovations and their unforeseen consequences can imagine the uncertainty and uneasy conscience which such a discovery would arouse.” (*Ibid*, 170)

Jung here briefly mentions the myth of Prometheus and its significance–it involves wresting consciousness out from the grip of the unconscious–but at great price to him. Just as the first humans were banished from Eden for eating of the *arbor scientiae*, so was Prometheus suspended on a rock forever having his liver eaten by the eagle of Zeus.\*\*So, what one is to learn from this mythological reference, is that the act of becoming more conscious involves a “robbery” or a “wresting” from the creative unconscious–a taking from potentiality into actuality something that could be into something that is. Jung finishes his quote in the following lines.

“This primordial experience finds an echo in the widespread motif of robbery (sun-cattle of Geryon, apples of the Hesperides, herb of immortality). And it is worth remembering that in the cult of Diana at Aricia only he could become her priest who plucked the golden bough from the sacred grove of the goddess.” (*Ibid*, 170)

We might add to that the account of the Garden of Eden, Odysseus’ taking the veil of Ino (or stealing the Palladium with Diomedes), Aeneas taking the golden bough to go to the underworld, *et alia*, but the basic point is that mythology, throughout the Western tradition, sends image after image to its people indicating both the danger and the need of expanding its consciousness–lest it become dessicated and lowly–and therefore be so mean as to require a divine flood as found in: the *Enuma Elish*, *Works and Days*, *Genesis*, *Metamorphoses*, or even just have it hinted at as in the *Gilgamesh* epic, *et alia*. But what, exactly, is being “brought to consciousness” by this Promethean fire? What is it that reconnects humanity with the creative unconscious and reinvigorates its vitality or libido? Richard Tarnas provides a colorful account in his *Cosmos and Psyche*:

“Prometheus, the Titan who rebelled against the gods, helped Zeus overthrow the tyrannical Kronos, then tricked the new sovereign authority Zeus and stole fire from the heavens to liberate humanity from the gods’ power. Prometheus was considered the wisest of his race and taught humankind all the arts and sciences; in a later tradition, Prometheus was the creator of humankind and thus held a special relationship to humanity’s fate from the beginning. Every major theme and quality that astrologers associate with the planet Uranus seems to be reflected in the myth of Prometheus with striking poetic exactitude: *the initiation of radical change*[my italics], the passion for freedom, the defiance of authority, the act of cosmic *rebellion against a*

*universal structure to free humanity of bondage*[my italics], the urge to transcend limitation, the creative impulse, the intellectual brilliance and genius, the element of excitement and risk.” (Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche*, P. 94)

What Prometheus represents, and what an educator is meant to embody in this mythless time—in contrast to the negative aspect of this archetype, the tyrannical demagogue, then, is the need for radical change and realignment of values—or in the case of America, the search for values themselves at an individual or “grassroots” level. In a wave of testing methods and techniques holding teachers accountable in order to receive federal funding, the core purpose of education is lost: the need to pursue liberty of thought (ripping insight from the unconscious into consciousness) and to “free humanity from [intellectual] bondage.” There is no higher goal in education than to teach students the art of inquiry and skills necessary to question an old, esteemed, but ultimately failing cultural mythology. Only in pursuing what is new and yet radical can what was ancient and lost be regained. Tarnas continues:

“The resonant symbol of Prometheus’ fire conveys at once a rich cluster of meanings—the *creative spark, the catalyst of the new, cultural and technological breakthrough*[my italics], brilliance and innovation, the enhancement of human autonomy, sudden inspiration from above, the liberating gift from the heavens, the solar fire and light, lightning and electricity both literal and metaphoric, speed and instantaneousness, incandescence, sudden enlightenment, intellectual and spiritual awakening...” (*Ibid*, P.94)

Although Tarnas gets a bit excited with his amplifications (how do we become more incandescent, really?), his point about the need for new cultural breakthroughs in order to keep pace without god-like technological ones seems not only apt, but necessary. So, what does it mean to accept the Promethean fire or a bite from the apple of the *arbor scientiae* rather than the *arbor vitae*? Nothing more than accepting a finite, but definite place in the world, while expanding one’s consciousness (or one’s people’s) through knowledge, insight, and creativity rather than remaining in a perpetual state of identity with the collective unconscious, which is, like the fruit of the *arbor vitae* promises, as immortal as the race of man. This means overthrowing the old dying king, or lifeless and blocking state of consciousness, in order to rejuvenate and revitalize life, culture, and ultimately to bring harmony and meaning to the people of a society. This is the goal of education, and it is far more important and far more serious an issue than it is treated as in American today.

This does not mean, however, that humans, and especially Americans, are to become identified with their insight and advances and in some way think themselves “more than human” or “less subject to natural laws”. No, in attaining new perspective and cultural breakthroughs, the goal is not to go *beyond* being human (or good and evil), but to become rooted and *more* human in the wake of tremendous technological advances. The proper perspective is here elucidated by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his exposition of the function of Ancient Greek sacrifice:

“Greek sacrifice differs from Vedic sacrifice in that the latter is a prototype for the act of creation, which brings forth and binds the universe together in its totality. Much more modest, Greek sacrifice recalls Prometheus’ act, which alienated man from the gods. *In a ritual that seeks to join the mortal with the immortal it consecrates the unattainable distance that henceforth separates them*[my italics].” (Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, P. 280)

The proper relationship to the unconscious, or to “immortals” as Vernant describes it is to join to some part of it, but to maintain one’s recognition (ostensibly because of observing its utter difference in magnitude during the connection) of the difference between mortal and immortal, conscious and unconscious. Clearly, according to the thinkers above, the difference is substantial. The goal, though, in attaining “more consciousness” is to liberate one’s self from a conscious attitude (culturally or personally) which no longer represents reality as it is and has cut off the “libido” of a person or culture. Finally, though, how does this relate to the archetype of the hero? Joseph Campbell will help us here.

“The composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts. Frequently he is honored by his society, *frequently unrecognized or disdained*. He and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency. In fairy tales this may be as slight as the lack of a certain golden ring, whereas in his apocalyptic vision the physical or spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling, into ruin.” (Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, P. 37. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bollingen/Princeton)

There are clearly several examples in the world today of cultures ([http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/business/international/greece-debt-crisis-euro.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/business/international/greece-debt-crisis-euro.html?_r=0)) or people (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting-suspect/>) falling into ruin (this paper was first written during the crescendo of the Greek economic crisis), And yet examples from America’s political drama might well fit here now as well. Many of the failings, however, in America find their root in blaming education (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/06/the-failure-of-american-schools/308497/>) or teachers ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randy-turner/public-school-teachers-fail\\_b\\_835174.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/randy-turner/public-school-teachers-fail_b_835174.html)). And perhaps to some degree this is right, but to use a term borrowed from the psychologists, is not our *projecting* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological\\_projection](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_projection)) the unconscious failings of our culture onto our education system and the teachers that embody it, itself creating the necessary pre-conditions for the activating of the hero-archetype in our culture? The inferior, humble, people “unrecognized or disdained”, shall be the ones, if they accept the call, to bring forth new contents from the collective unconscious and replace the dying prevailing conscious attitude (all hail economics) with a richer, more vital, and deeper rooted one. This is but chapter one of this discussion.

I will leave you today with this short and poignant quote by Jung—an admonishment at best, and a warning at worst:

“Collectivity in itself is an evil, a collectivity without evil is impossible; even the best collectivity one could imagine is vicious—at all events a most horrible bore, and to be boring is equal to evil.” (C.G. Jung, *Lectures on Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* V.2, P. 583. Ed. James Jarrett. Princeton. 1988)

We must wrest ourselves from the unconscious forces which begin to surge our unsure shores lest the tidal flood of collective forces, now mounting power, wash away all we have sought to become.

\*The meaning of the term *libido* is used to mean one’s store of vital energy. For Jung, It does not carry the sexual denotations of the Freudian concept of the same name.

\*\*For those, who are unfamiliar with the Prometheus myth, the major and oldest accounts of it come from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm>) (42-105) and his *Theogony* (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm>) (507-583) (though, curiously, Prometheus is not credited with creating man from mud and earth, as he is known to have in the tradition in these texts) and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. What one learns is that Prometheus or Zeus first created the several generations of man, after Kronos made the first “golden race”, and that Prometheus earns the ire of Zeus by first portioning out the “good parts” of meat to humans by tricking Zeus and by giving fire to man (and various contrivances) in direct opposition to the will of Zeus.

*Posted in Carl Jung, Creation Myths, Education, Education Reform, Flood Myths, Hero with a Thousand Faces, Prometheus · Tagged america, Ancient Greece, Campbell, Carl Jung, Culture, Education, Education Reform, Educators, Hero with a Thousand Faces, Heroes, Prometheus, Society, Teachers, Teaching, Technology, Unconscious, Vernant*