

I've been thinking a lot lately about what motivates peoples' choices. What makes us decide to do the things we do? Every day, we make hundreds, perhaps thousands of decisions that—while many are quite small—ultimately shape our lives. And we make most of these utterly unconsciously. While we might like to believe that it is our values that controls most of our decision-making, I see myself and those around me choosing things time and time again that just don't quite jibe with our proclaimed intentions. So why is that so?

For me, I know that there are a number of unconscious beliefs, expectations, and assumptions that quietly overshadow my best conscious intentions, and I suspect that is true for us humans in general. For me, it has been worthwhile to explore some of those unconscious beliefs, and where they come from, in order to understand what secretly motivates choices that may not be in what I myself consider my best interest. And at the bottom of these beliefs and behaviors, there are always stories: stories I was told by my family, or by my teachers at school. Stories I read in books, or saw played out on TV or in the movies. Stories that told me what it means to be a good person; what it means to live as a human, on earth; the reason I exist, or the basic rules of existence. And so many of these stories were told to me as absolute truth, that it wasn't until I was an adult that I began to question them. And when that happened, many of them lost their title as "truth" and earned the title of "myth." But of course that didn't necessarily stop them from unconsciously shaping me in ways I am still uncovering every day.

Myths can take on a few basic forms. There are creation myths—and remember, whether something is considered 'myth' or 'truth' by a person or group is highly subjective. So there's what some consider the myth of Biblical creation, and what others consider the myth of the Big Bang. There are creation myths that involve giant serpents arising from the ocean, and small creatures building the world out of mud.

A second type of story is what I'll call a "salvation myth." These are stories that tell us how to be saved or redeemed in some way from the human condition. The story of Jesus of Nazareth's resurrection is one of these, as is the story of Siddhartha's awakening under the bodhi tree.

There are also myths of dedication, or exemplification—stories that teach us a good way to live. These are closely interwoven with the salvation stories, and another kind of story that Joseph Campbell has described as the hero's journey. These stories show people overcoming difficulties, and exemplifying qualities we want to emulate: courage, patience, wisdom, adaptability, etc.

Societies need stories, particularly of the mythic variety, to teach individuals how to participate in the communal culture. They teach social norms, codify agreed-upon reality statements, and serve as reminders for persons, places and events we're expected to know about. For example, the story of Sir Isaac Newton and the apple. Here's a summary of that story:

*Legend has it that a young Isaac Newton was sitting under an apple tree when he was bonked on the head by a falling piece of fruit, a 17th-century "aha moment" that prompted him to suddenly come up with his law of gravity. In reality, things didn't go down quite like that. Newton, the son of a farmer, was born in 1642 near Grantham, England, and entered Cambridge University in 1661. Four years later, following an outbreak of the bubonic plague, the school temporarily closed, forcing Newton to move back to his childhood home, Woolsthorpe Manor. It was during this period at Woolsthorpe (Newton returned to Cambridge in 1667) that he was in the orchard there and witnessed an apple drop from a tree. There's no evidence to suggest the fruit actually landed on his head, but Newton's observation caused him to ponder why apples always fall straight to the ground*

*(rather than sideways or upward) and helped inspired him to eventually develop his law of universal gravitation.*

So this story contains a number of instructive elements:

First, we remember this important historical figure more vividly because we see him in a narrative that is colorful and engages our imagination. Second, we get the message that he had an “aha!” moment, which was significant. Third, the visual image of the apple falling captures nicely the actual principal of universal gravitation. So it’s a very handy story.

But what about some of our more unconscious myths and narratives, the ones that can shape our decision-making without us even realizing it. The ones I’m most interested in right now are these three:

First, the myth of the Garden of Eden, as described in traditional Abrahamic scriptures and involving the characters of Adam and Eve. Second, the myth of America—especially its founding, first by the Pilgrims and then by the so-called “founding fathers.” And third, the myth of the heroic journey, which always is played out in our media and various forms of popular entertainment. I believe that these core stories define an *enormous* portion of our collective unconscious motivation and behavior, even if we think we’re free from them.

The story of the Garden of Eden is of course one of the most formative stories in all of western civilization. It defines a number of central concepts, including making clear that the earth is condemned to be a place of suffering, that women are inferior to men, that nature is inferior to humans, and that the universe is ruled by an omnipotent, omniscient and somewhat punitive deity. Now, I gave up traditional Christianity when I was a teenager (though I still embrace many of its more radical values), and I *thought* I had gotten past being affected by those narratives. But I am realizing this is utterly untrue. The more I think about it, the more I have taken into my unconscious some of the messages it carries, which came to me from my family, from the stories I read in school, from the hidden assumptions behind television shows, and from the very way we operate as a society.

How many of you accept the basic assumption that we *do NOT* live in the Garden of Eden? This is simply a core assumption of the myth, which not all cultures or all people share. And the more I live connected to nature, the more I’m seeing the flaws in that basic assumption. How about the basic belief that humans are the superior species? That toads do not have equal intelligence to us? Again, this sort of core assumption is encoded in this western mythology, but is not shared by all people. And how about assumptions about gender that, while we proclaim we disagree with them, rear their ugly heads time and again in our personal relationships?

Now let’s look at a couple of the messages encoded in stories about America. My favorite myth about America is the story of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock. I actually learned recently that I had an ancestor who arrived with that group of 100 people in 1620, coming from England on the Mayflower. I have always loved this story, partly because I love early American history but also because I just love the sorts of values it implies. It is a story of courage in the face of great danger; it is a story of people risking it all for their spiritual values; it is a story of adventure and meeting new people and creatures in the wilderness. And it is a story that is supposed to teach us about the core identity of our nation.

We are to understand that we are adventurers. That we inhabit an amazing land mystery and intrigue, unlike boring old Europe, that the “New World” is special in almost indescribable ways. In other words, that the *land itself* is mythic. We are also to understand that Americans are innately courageous, independent, daring, and stalwart. We are also, as the Thanksgiving portion of the story goes, wonderful diplomats, experts at sharing the gifts of our culture with other cultures in ways that are downright homey and super-friendly. You can of course hear the irony here. This narrative is not historically true, of course, nor is it representative of the vast majority of colonial settlements from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, which were largely economic ventures, not religious ones. But we love to think

that we are a nation founded on religious freedom, don't we?

And how about the hero's journey? How many of you watch sports? And how many of you know the personal life story of at least one athlete who embodies all of the values that we expect from a mythic hero? There are stories of athletes who overcome poverty or difficult social conditions to become great role models of strength, courage, and idealism. In Tennessee—and I'm about to commit heresy here, so don't throw things at me—we have a mythic dynasty in the Manning family. Dad Archie, a football hero and father to Cooper, Peyton, and Eli, the group that have been frequently called "the first family of American football." Their story has all the essential components: Cooper's spinal health challenges which ended his football career; brother Peyton's commitment to be a football legend in honor of his stricken brother, as well as Peyton's own multiple surgeries and injuries that nearly ended his career before a heroic comeback; and youngest brother Eli's choice to return to his father's football roots at Ole Miss. It's got lineage, selfish heroism, physical prowess and moral integrity; family unity...it's chock-full of heroic values.

Now please do not mistake my meaning here: these sorts of values can be very, very good things. But in a mythic context, they are meant to direct and shape our decisions about our own lives *regardless of how well our circumstances or beliefs inherently match the circumstances of the characters in the stories*. And this has the effect of reproducing the stories over and over again in society. That's how it works.

So why would that be bad? Well, young athletes think nothing of getting multiple concussions, because that's what heroes do, isn't it? And exporting American policies and culture to other nations is of course a worthwhile thing, isn't it, because it worked so well when we first arrived in North America? And since we already know that this earth is inherently messed up, a place of suffering and trouble, for a lot of folks there's no reason to try very hard to save it.

Let's look at it another way: what if we had *different* myths at the core of our collective identity? How might that shape our choices differently?

What if, for example, the central message of the Garden of Eden story went like this: the Garden is a place of magic and wonder, designed for all species to interact in harmony. Woman, as the symbolic giver of life, is the central heroic figure, and the serpent is a giver of wisdom, courage, and life. By following the serpent's ways, ways that come naturally to women who are inherently creative, amazing creatures,—what if by following the serpents' ways, we remain forever in harmony with all of creation.

Actually, that *is* the story. That's the story that predated the version told in the Abrahamic scriptures. It's the story told in more ancient Mesopotamian and Sumerian myths, stories of the Goddess in the Garden with the Serpent, living in harmony around the tree of life. This older goddess appears in the Biblical texts as the "Asherah" that must be removed from worship, and which archeological evidence shows was considered the consort of the male god figure, in a world where divinity had both masculine and feminine qualities. One womanist scholar aptly comments that the crux of the Garden of Eden story *we all* learned is not about us all getting thrown out of the Garden, and earth being a bad place, but really about the Goddess and her matriarchal religion getting thrown out of society to make way for the patriarchy.

So you see myths are powerful. So how does something get codified into myth, then? And by whom? The process by which a person's life, an event, or a value, becomes mythic is called "apotheosis" and we're actually engaged in it all the time. Ever tell a family story from generations back that's meant to encode some core value or quality of your family? Or have you ever recounted a narrative of an important event to demonstrate a particular value or objective? *We* are the makers of myths. And what, I wonder, are we turning into myths right now?

We apotheosize people by choosing to put them on the evening news, for good or ill. For example, whether we like it or not, we have made mythic a number of shooters who have become role models to a generation of mentally and emotionally disturbed individuals. We apotheosize situations by repeating them over and over again on television shows and movies, teaching our children by the “reality shows” they watch what it means to be part of our society, to have a relationship, to be part of a ‘real’ family. And the whole point of doing this—of making something mythic—is really to *make it* unconscious. The whole point is for us to take it in in such a way that the story grabs us, becomes part of our way of perceiving and being, so that we stop questioning it. And then we create reality. Star Trek transponders for example. (*hold up cell phone*)

So pay attention to your unconscious assumptions about reality. Pay attention to the myths that you take for granted. And think twice or three times about the media you invite into your home, the stories you tell others, and the exemplars you hold for yourself. Make these choices consciously, and wisely, because they are one of the most powerful ways we are creating our future.