

Between Eden and Sky Land: The Sociological and Pedagogical Function of Creation Myths in Shaping Reproductive Rights.

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Every culture, in every corner of the world, is held together by a series of collectively held stories or ‘myths.’ Mythologies shape who we are, both individually and collectively. When gross social injustices are evident within a society, we must turn to the underlying mythologies that form its cultural template. The present day struggle for reproductive rights in the United States is one such injustice that is clearly mirrored in the Judeo-Christian creation story. In order to enact meaningful social change, the core mythos of a culture must be closely examined and reimaged.

Joseph Campbell, in his (1988) lecture series *The Power of Myth*, discusses four major functions of myth within a culture. First is that of the mystical, which gives us the ability to experience awe and wonder before the great mystery of life. The second is the cosmological, which is used to explain the phenomenon we see happening in our environment. Science is arguably a modern day form of cosmological mythology. The third function of mythology is where, according to Campbell, we often go wrong. This third function is what he terms the sociological, and is used for “supporting and validating a certain social order” (Campbell, 1988, p. 31). Interpreting mythologies, such

as creation stories, through the sociological lens allows a set of social rules and frameworks to be extracted and reinforced, such as gender roles and their power relations. The fourth function of mythology that Campbell outlines is pedagogical, which is to use myths as instruction for how to live a good life. This fourth function overlaps with the third in that the constraints placed on mythology by a sociological interpretation limit its pedagogical usefulness.

With the aim of liberating Judeo-Christian pedagogy from its misogynistic sociological constraints, in the following paragraphs I will compare and contrast the story of Adam and Eve with a similar First Nations creation story. I will then discuss the ways in which the current sociological framework creates suffering and reproductive injustice for women. To conclude, I will offer an alternative interpretation of the founding myth of Western culture through the archetypal lens of Campbell’s ‘Hero’s Journey,’ which may provide greater scope for pedagogical interpretation, one that is based on sexual equality and basic human dignity.

The Onondaga Nation, part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, have as their

cultural creation myth the story of Sky Woman. When the story begins, the earth is covered in water, with Sky Land high above in the clouds. In Sky Land there is a great tree, with branches spreading out in all four cardinal directions. Sky woman lives in Sky Land with her husband, the tribe's chief, and is pregnant with the couple's first child. One night, Sky woman has a dream that the great tree has been uprooted. Upon telling her husband, the chief sets to work uprooting the tree. With great effort, he finally succeeds. Peering through the branches of the fallen tree, Sky Woman sees glimmering water down through the hole made by the tree. She is so curious that she leans down to look, but the branches break under her weight and she falls through. As she tumbles down through the sky, two swans see her and fly up to slow her fall. They realize that Sky Woman is not equipped to live on the water, and so all the water animals attempt to dive to the depths of the ocean to pull up a handful of earth for her to live on. Eventually, it is Muskrat who succeeds in returning to the surface with a handful of dirt. Turtle volunteers to carry the dirt on her back, and Sky Woman is brought gently to land there. She then releases the leaves and seeds from the great Sky Tree which she had clutched in her hands. The seeds germinate and grow, making trees and plants. Sky Woman has her children in this new world – twins, a boy and a girl – marking the beginning of the human race. Together with the animals, they shape the earth into a beautiful place for all to enjoy (Illusion Artisan, 2010).

There are some striking parallels in the symbols used in this First Nations creation story and the story of Adam and Eve. The Genesis story also involves a woman, a man, a tree, and a fall. In both stories, it is the female counterpart who instigates 'The Fall' through their preoccupation with the tree. For Eve, her partaking of the fruit of "the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis, 2:16 NRSV) and offering it to Adam is viewed as a betrayal of God's word – original sin – and they are cast out of the Garden of Eden forever. For Sky Woman, there is no such morally controlling overlord who pushes her out of Sky Land. She is simply following the guidance of her dream, which many Indigenous cultures believe to have prophetic qualities. It is her curiosity about the shimmering water which she can see through the hole that causes her to fall through. Her fall is like a playful '*whoops*,' or happy accident, instigated by a mysterious intuitive impulse, while Eve's fall is viewed as a punishment for disobedience and coloured by shame.

These two origin stories, while similar in fact, set up very different frameworks for relating to the world through their narrative quality. As storyteller Thomas King (2003) points out, that after all the animals and the twins create the earth, "the world is at peace, and our main concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil, but with the issue of balance" (38:47). In Genesis, "the post-garden world [...] is decidedly marshal in nature. A world at war. God versus the Devil, humans versus the elements" (King, 2003, 38:40). For Sky Woman and her children, there are simply a series of problems to be solved in order to create a world that will work for everyone. For Adam and Eve, there are a series of punishments to be endured and sins to be avoided. Adam and Eve are meant to earn their way back into Paradise through following God's word on earth, while in the story of Sky Woman, there is no discussion of her trying to find a way back to Sky Land. The story instead centers around making the new world of Earth as beautiful and harmonious as possible.

Campbell (1988) calls the Genesis version of creation "a refusal to affirm life"

(p. 47), in the way it views nature as something corrupt that needs to be overcome. Women, in their ability to carry and birth life, have long been associated with nature and the creative powers of the universe in mythologies the world over. It makes sense that if in the Christian worldview, nature is something to be controlled, dominated and used, then women would be viewed in the same light. This damning of women's life-affirming power is expressed in God's specific punishments for Eve, which includes the proclamation that she will suffer pain in childbirth. This statement not only casts a woman's primordial and divine power of creation (as it is seen in many other mythologies) into a diminished state of shame, it also lays a sociological prescription upon her.

To the woman he said,

"I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;

in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

And to the man he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice
of your wife,

and have eaten of the tree

about which I commanded you,

'You shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you;

in toil you shall eat of it all the days of
your life;

(Genesis, 3:16 NRSV)

Here, Adam's burden is to toil in the fields for his food - in other words, to work. For Eve, her burden is to bear children in pain, have her sexual desire controlled by her husband, and be subservient to him in every way. This commandment from God sets up the justification for a patriarchal power structure of man over woman. It dictates that women's primary role on earth is the procreation of children. Indeed, the

suffering of women in childbirth is often seen in theology as spiritually necessary for women to undergo, as an act of atonement for Eve's sin (Delaporte, 2018). This, I speculate, may be part of why right-wing Christians are suspicious and distrusting of childless women.

And then came feminism. After thousands of years of subservience in the Judeo-Christian world, women sought to cast off the curse of Eve and enjoy the same freedoms and privileges of their Adam-descended counterparts. Men were no longer 'toiling in the field,' but were forming multinational corporations and running entire countries, and women wanted a seat at the table. The first major gathering of Western feminism – the 1848 Women's Rights Conference in Seneca Falls, NY – took place within the boundary of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's traditional territory. This was the birthplace of the story of Sky Woman, and consequently, Haudenosaunee women had already been enjoying equal rights and status within their community since time immemorial (Saini, 2023). Tribes like the Onondaga were, and are still, matrilineal in nature, which seems only natural given their belief that the lineage of humanity traces back to Sky Woman – the original Mother. The irony of this juxtaposition was unfortunately missed by suffragists as a result of colonial attitudes of white supremacy, which coloured much of feminism's early movement (Saini, 2023).

As Western feminism continued to develop, its leaders soon realized that the key to their emancipation was to gain control over their own reproduction. In the early 20th century, Margaret Sanger, a public health nurse who spent her career fighting to make birth control widely available, affirmed that "enforced motherhood is the most complete denial of a woman's right to life and liberty" (Our

Bodies Ourselves Today, 2024). This stance was made possible by the creation of a new secular society that prioritized a rational, scientific orientation (Tonks, 2024).

From this more objective and scientific perspective, feminism made perfect sense given that all available evidence showed that women's basic capabilities were equal to men's, exposing the injustice of restricting their goals and rights based on an ancient and morally biased creation myth. When faced with change, however, humans are disposed to take one of two approaches: either step bravely into the unknown and forge a new path, or cling more fervently to past ideals that are known and comfortable. When it comes to reproductive rights, the battle between these two stratagems wages to this day.

The United States has, as of November 5th, 2024, re-elected a president who is responsible for the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which decriminalized abortion nationally in 1973 (Bixby et al., 2022). Many states have now made abortion fully illegal, which has had deadly consequences for women. Nevaeh Crain, an 18-year-old Texas resident, died from sepsis on October 29th, 2023 after 3 emergency room visits in 20 hours where she was denied care by doctors who feared legal ramifications if a life-saving abortion were performed (Presser & Surana, 2024). Not only did she die due to avoidable complications with her pregnancy, but she suffered needlessly in hours of pain along with her mother, who reportedly screamed at hospital staff to “do something!” while watching her daughter bleed out (Presser & Surana, 2024). Feminist writer Jessica Valenti (2024), commenting on this story, stated that “abortion bans don't just kill women, they torture us.”

The evangelical Christian right and other traditionalist groups seem to have decided

that the best way to push back against the progressive change that feminism brings is to put modern women back in Eve's shoes (though she was likely barefoot, as the saying goes). Their way of understanding how society should be ordered is through the sociological interpretation of the moral hierarchy within their creation myth. In this version of reality, women are meant to suffer in childbirth – as if it is spiritually what they deserve. With more women struggling in pregnancy and child rearing, men will be free to have full control over ‘the fields’ and all of its fruits once again.

The pedagogy of this creation story, in the way it has been framed, teaches men to hate women, and women to hate themselves. Alongside the suffering and destruction of female bodies through their extreme devaluation is the destruction of nature through climate change, chemical pollution, and endless resource extraction. Where the story of Sky Woman teaches about cooperation, care, and balance, Genesis teaches how to overcome the ‘shame’ of earthly life through suffering and obedience to male authority. If any attempt to completely reject a deeply held mythology is met with the dangerous doubling down of people who know no other way, then perhaps a middle way can be defined through the reinterpretation of our founding story. If Adam and Eve could be treated with a similar kindness and respect as the characters in the Sky Woman tale, perhaps new sociological and pedagogical conclusions could be drawn.

A powerful way that Eve and Adam's story can be recontextualised for a kinder, wiser telling is through using the framework of Campbell's (2008) archetypal ‘Hero's Journey’ (see appendix A). Through this lens, perhaps Eve was attracted to ‘the tree’ out of an intuitive sense that there was more than just the passive, small, uninitiated

existence that she and Adam had been living. As Campbell (1988) says, “without that knowledge [of good and evil], we’d all be a bunch of babies, still in Eden, without any participation in life. Woman brings life into the world” (p. 47). This desire within Eve to enter life fully represents the first stage of the hero’s transformational journey – “the call to adventure” (Campbell, 2008).

The snake, instead of being cast as a villain, could be viewed as the wise teacher that a hero meets at the start of their journey. Snake, as Campbell (1988) points out, represents the cycle of life and death in its ability to shed its skin (p. 45). Perhaps instead of tempting Eve, Snake wisely recognized her readiness, and pointed her towards the gateway of initiation – which was to eat the fruit and become awake to duality. The moment of biting the apple was, for Eve and Adam, the point of no return. In the spiral of a hero’s journey, their fall represents their descent from the known world of naive babyhood into the great unknown of adulthood, where important lessons are to be learned in the development of greater selves.

In reframing this story in a way that honors Eve for the heroic part she played in initiating the beginning of life on earth and all of its creative opportunities, we can feel more comforted drawing pedagogy from it. If the characters in these mythologies are, as Carl Jung would say, archetypal reflections of aspects of our own consciousness (Tonks, 2024), then perhaps Eve and Adam represent the heroine and hero within us all. Their story is still playing out as we continue to learn about this world of form that continues to hold so many questions and uncertainties. On the question of how to address the battle for reproductive rights, what might we have to learn from Adam and Eve today?

While the Genesis telling of Adam and Eve’s story views the pain women

experience in childbirth as a necessary punishment and a path to atonement, in the interpretation that I have offered here, a different understanding can be drawn. In eating ‘the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,’ Eve and Adam consented to participate in the world of duality and its cycles – birth and death, dark and light, pain and pleasure, love and loss. Without a deep and direct understanding of pain, fear and loss, the lighter aspects of life such as love, beauty and pleasure can not be experientially appreciated. By this mythos, the pain and sacrifice that a mother experiences in childbirth is not a punishment, but an alchemical process that allows greater love and devotion to be realized in her. Many women report childbirth to be the most spiritually profound and rewarding experience of their lives. Campbell (1988) acknowledges that the process of carrying a baby and giving birth is, in itself, a hero’s journey. A woman doesn’t just have a baby, but goes through a fundamental change on a physical, psychological and spiritual level. She becomes a Mother. In honoring motherhood and the mystical initiation of giving birth, right-wing misogynistic arguments about forced pregnancy and the necessity of women’s suffering lose their power.

The flip side of giving mothers elevated acknowledgment in our culture is to equally honor women who choose to remain childless. The decision to go against society’s gendered expectations and turn towards another calling is also a hero’s journey that requires courage. There are many ways to ‘give birth’ in life, and a woman (or person) can experience deep initiation into greater self-development through bringing a meaningful business into the world, by creating art, or by bringing about social change as an activist. While in Eden, Eve was one-dimensional, but

journeying into the world of form allows her to explore multidimensionality, and the full range of her expression should be appreciated and her choice fully allowed.

In terms of gender relations, where the anti-abortion movement is clearly meant to degrade the status of women, an understanding of the mystical symbolism of the masculine and feminine aspects of self can be used to establish a sense of sacredness and partnership between gender polarities. Jung identified that both masculine and feminine aspects exist within our psyche as *Anima and Animus* (Tonks, 2024). Many eastern traditions also acknowledge a synergy between these two inner aspects as being necessary for enlightenment. In the Tantric tradition of Tibet, female practitioners are called *Dakinis*, which translates as “Sky Walker” (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2017, p. 63). These women are said to become enlightened through their ability to travel in ‘the void,’ and are known to initiate men through their deep wisdom (Simpkins & Simpkins, 2017). The striking similarity in this eastern tradition to the story of Sky Woman and the fall of Eve sheds light on the underlying esoteric nature of the feminine. Perhaps these female figures were not simply falling through the sky, but traveling in the void, thus on a journey of self-actualisation. From a Tantric perspective, Adam figuratively needs the wisdom and soulful nourishment that Eve brings from her forays into the dark, mysterious unknown, just as Eve needs the guidance of Adam, with his solar-based yang energy that is rational and action-oriented. With this appreciation of the equally important gifts of each polarity, external power relations between men and women could be re-built on a foundation of mutual respect and love.

Through radically reimagining the founding myth of our Judeo-Christian

culture, the place that I hope we can arrive sociologically is somewhere close to the social order of the pre-contact Haudenosaunee peoples. The core pedagogy of the story of Sky Woman, even without additional esoteric embellishment, is to cooperate with one another, with respect and care. It assumes that we are one human family, descended from the same Mother, floating on Turtle’s back. If the elements of shame, hierarchy, and suffering could be removed from our own cultural creation story as settler peoples, then perhaps we could embrace this more Indigenous sense of holism and unity in our society. With such a fundamental ideological shift, the battle for reproductive rights could, instead, become channeled into efforts to provide greater health care and social support for women of all ages and stages of life. This redirection of energy and resources would also allow greater support and acceptance for sexually diverse individuals. Perhaps one day the Adam and Eve story will evolve and become unbound from such strict gender binaries, with each character, instead, representing multifaceted ends of a multidimensional gender spectrum, with infinite possibilities for individual identity and expression.

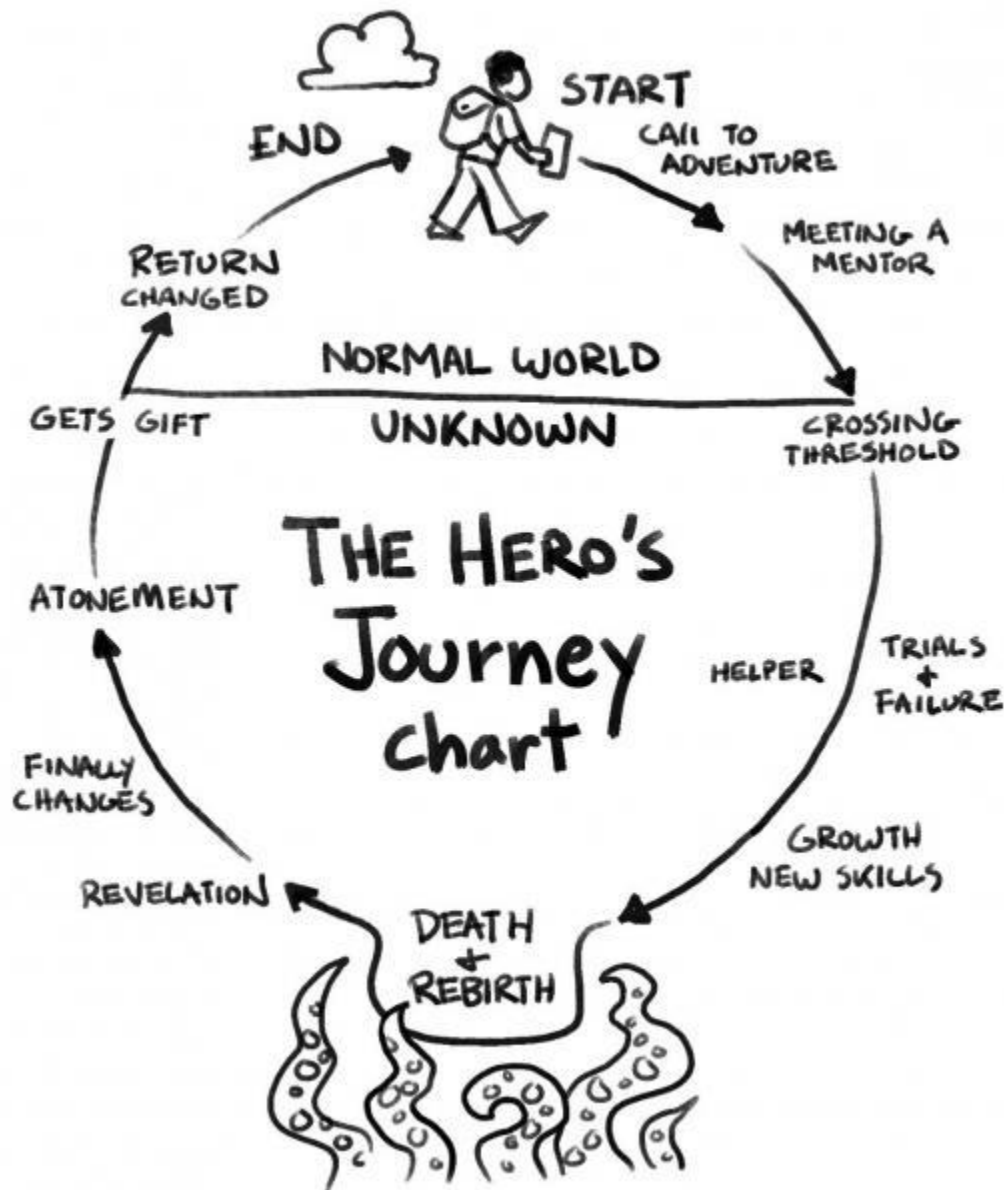
In our collective ‘Hero’s Journey’ here on earth/Turtle Island, I propose that we are deep in the “death and rebirth” stage of the cycle (Campbell, 2008). With radical right-wing fascism and misogyny on the rise, against the backdrop of an unprecedented global climate emergency, it does indeed seem like our world has reached a new depth of darkness, danger, destruction and uncertainty. Cultural myths are meant to guide us in times like these in how to be brave and wise in embracing difficult, but necessary change. For those of us of settler descent, which myths best serve this purpose? Campbell (1988) says that “we

can't have a mythology for a long, long time to come. Things are changing too fast to become mythologized. [...] The individual has to find an aspect of myth that relates to his [her/their] own life" (p. 31). This essay has been my personal attempt at reworking a mythology that I grew up with into something that makes sense for me, in the full knowledge that the story will continue to develop along with my understanding and need. Perhaps this dark phase of our collective journey requires each of us to find the threads of truth that pull us into a greater sense of self, and from that place, weave our individual threads together into a new collective mythological tapestry. May we make our rebirth journey together out of the darkness and into a world that supports us all, through our willingness to honor and embrace each other.

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Appendix A



Joseph Campbell's The Hero's Journey.

Source: USC University of Southern California

<https://viterbigradadmission.usc.edu/2017/07/heros-journey-joseph-campbell/>