JOSEPH CAMPBELL: There's a fine saying in India, with respect to these two orders of myths, you know, the folk idea and the elementary idea. The folk aspect is called desis, which means "provincial" — having to do with your society, and that is for young people. It's through that that the young person is deeply brought into the society, wants to go out and kill monsters. "Okay, here's a soldier suit, you know, we've got the job for you." So forth and so on. But then, the elementary idea, the Sanskrit name for that is marga, [?], and that word means "path." It means the trail of an animal, and it's the trail back in here. Because as I've said, the myth comes from the imagination, and it leads back to it. The society teaches you what the myths are or it used to, and then when it disengages you, you can follow in your meditations the path right in.

BILL MOYERS: Tonight, from the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the second part of a conversation with mythologist Joseph Campbell. I'm Bill Moyers.

MOYERS: Does this place bring back memories?

CAMPBELL: Well, I think it brings back the earliest memories I have. It started when I was a very little boy. Buffalo Bill used to bring his Indian show to Madison Square Garden every year, and, I mean for a little boy, what could I have been — five, six years old — it was utterly marvelous. They'd come in, and build the tepees, and do the war dance, and have a war, and then clear the field and all that kind of thing, and then the cowboys would come in and finally, Buffalo Bill would come in and take his hat off. And, Annie Oakley, I've seen her shoot things down. Well my father realized how excited I was about Indians, and he suggested one time we go up to this museum, this wonderful museum. And this was the room that hit me.

MOYERS: What hit you?

CAMPBELL: These totem poles, the presences all around. And very early, I became enthusiastic about the Indians' love for the land. And the notion of the universe as a divine thing, and the living with the animals, and living with space as though it were a person-to-person relationship, instead of a person-to-thing, you see. And this notion of the divinity of nature and the divinity of the world got into me out of these people, and stayed with me.

MOYERS: What do you mean, "divinity"? The divinity — most of us think of divinity in a sense of a personal God, but you mean it—

CAMPBELL: No, I mean, the personification of the divine is one way of the religions, do you know, but there is the transpersonal experience of the transcendent divine, which can be imminent in all things. There's this — the mystery of being, and all. There was a very great German anthropologist, Adolf Bastian, at the end of the last century, and he noticed this, that everywhere he went — and he traveled a great deal — the same motifs were recurring. The same
motifs—well, the virgin birth motif, deaths and resurrections, ascensions into heaven, dragon slayings, all this kind of thing. He called these “elementary ideas.” But he noticed also that the elementary idea appears in a different costume in this place, from the costume in that place. Also it will have a different application here from there. And he called these different applications and so forth, “folk ideas.”

MOYERS: What did he mean by that?

CAMPBELL: Ethnic ideas. The idea of this particular folk as opposed to the idea of the general human race. But it’s the general human idea that becomes expressed in the folk idea. And so there are differences and at the same time, universals that run through all of these.

MOYERS: Christianity talks about the Garden of Eden, and I think Buddha talks, or the Koran talks about the Garden of Bliss. You find this, don’t you, in many, many cultures? How do you explain it; and whom do you think invented that myth?

CAMPBELL: Well, the early documents are late, and these images appear. Writing first appears around 3200 B.C. in ancient Sumer. And it’s at that period in that place that we have these little stamped seals—little seals that were used for stamping manuscripts and things of this sort. And among these there are many that show a tree standing in a garden, you see, with the fruit from the tree, and usually there’s a goddess who is related to this, and frequently the serpent also. Because the serpent sheds its skin, to be born again, and so represents the power of life to throw off death. And the goddess there will be handing these fruits to the people who come. Now the curious thing in our tradition, in Chapter 3 of Genesis is, that in order that man should not eat of that tree, God expelled them from the garden. He had eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, let’s say, knowledge of pairs of opposites, so immediately he knew not only good and evil, but male and female, man and god, he was in a world of opposites. So he had thrown himself out of the garden, really. Getting back into that garden is the aim of many a religion, and there’s a very interesting point I can bring up here. When Jahweh threw man out of the garden, he put two cherubim at the gate, do you remember? With the flaming sword between. Now when you approach a Buddhist shrine with the Buddha seated under the tree of immortal life, you will find at the gate two guardians, frightening, terrifying. Those are the cherubim, and you’re going between to the tree of immortal life. Now, we say in the Christian tradition that Jesus on the cross is on that tree, the tree of immortal life is the cross, and he is the fruit of the tree. Jesus on the cross, the Buddha under the tree, these are the same figures. The cherubim at the gate, who are they? Now as the Buddhists mean them, you’ll see one has his mouth open, the other has his mouth closed—a pair of opposites. Fear and desire, a pair of opposites. If you’re approaching a thing like that, a garden like that, and those two figures there are real, alive figures, and they threaten you, if you have fear for your life, you are still outside the garden. It’s when you are no longer attached to your ego existence, but see the ego existence as a function of a larger, eternal totality, and you favor the larger against the smaller, then you won’t be afraid of those two figures, and you will go through.

MOYERS: Back into the garden from which once man was expelled.

CAMPBELL: So we’re kept out of the garden in this reading that I’m giving, by our own fear and desire in relation to what we think to be the goods of our life, do you see? In the Biblical reading, we are out of the garden because God has exiled us. But that’s practically the same thing. Depersonify God, and let him be that generating energy which generates the universe and is itself eternal life, and then you’ll see these two things as the same—practically the same story.

MOYERS: Have all men at all times felt some sense of exclusion from an ultimate reality, from bliss, from delight, from perfection, from God?

CAMPBELL: Well, yes, but then you also have moments of loss of that and a moment of ecstasy. And the difference between everyday living and living in those moments of ecstasy is the difference between being outside and inside the garden, you know? You feel as though you had broken through some kind of wall, and that’s the image that comes up. Then you have the image of the rocks that clash together, you know, what the Germans call the Klopfelds and the Symplegades, and the hero goes through. Now those Symplegades you’ve got to get through just at the moment they open. There’s a meaning to this—there’s a pair of opposites. You go past them, and the ultimate mystery is past all pairs of opposites.
MOYERS: Into harmony?

CAMPBELL: Into transcendence, let’s call it.

MOYERS: Would this explain this emphasis on parochial costumes of universal myths, explain why in the Bible the serpent in the garden represents evil, whereas in Buddhist tales it’s protective and therefore good?

CAMPBELL: Well, as far as my experiences have gone, the Bible is the only tradition where the serpent is condemned and regarded as absolutely evil. The serpent is a fluent creature, associated with water, and yet that fiery tongue is going all the time — you watch it, it looks as though it were aflame. Do you see, the fire in water, pairs of opposites. The serpent is, as I say, can shed its skin and be born again, as the moon sheds its shadow to be born again. So serpent and moon represent this power of life in the field of time to throw off death, as it does with every new generation.

MOYERS: But why would the Christian interpretation be of an evil serpent and—

CAMPBELL: Yes, I’m coming to that. This is a figure that is particularly strongly associated with the early agricultural civilizations. Now the Indo-European people and the Semitic people were not planting people, originally, they were herding and warrior people. And the Semitic people invade the river valley system and you bring two systems against each other. One where you have the goddess and her serpent, and eternal life, and fructified fields; and the other of a war deity, the thunder hurler, you get it from Zeus, you get it from Jahweh, you get it from Indra — these come in. Now in many traditions, in most of this there is finally an amalgamation of these two. Zeus marries the goddesses of the neighborhood. That’s why in the end he is found to have so many wives, or nymphs that he’s chasing all over the place. In the Biblical tradition there was no such marriage. Jahweh— the goddess was called the abomination—

MOYERS: Yes, in the Bible.

CAMPBELL: And with the abomination of the goddess goes the abomination of the serpent also, which is symbolic of her power to bring forth life. There is some kind of connection there between a very strictly patriarchal accent and a degradation or rejection of the imagery associated with the goddess world. And for some reason or other, and this would take a theologian such as I am not to explain, in the Biblical tradition there was a particularly ruthless patriarchal accent there. Of course the god is himself male and female — He creates man and woman in his own image in the first chapter and so forth, so He is male and female, and in the Cabala male and female principles are imminent in God — these are The Androgyne, the primal androgyne. But he appears in the aspect of male all the time and—

MOYERS: Particularly in the Old Testament.

CAMPBELL: Yes.

MOYERS: Not true in all cultures, but in the Old— in the Christian-Judeo Old Testament, God is always the patriarch.

CAMPBELL: Oh yes, and when you get to Islam, which comes out of that tradition also, there’s no goddess there. The daughter of Mohamed is the only one, Fatima, the only female in the whole system, really. Then in Christianity they brought the goddess back, the virgin, and—

MOYERS: And the mother church.

CAMPBELL: Back to the mother, back to the womb, back to the earth, the womb as tomb and the tomb as womb, you know, that’s the death and resurrection as one theme. Going past the pair of opposites of death and birth. Well, these are big themes.

MOYERS: One of the themes that has run through all of your work, as it indeed runs through mythology, is the theme of the hero.

CAMPBELL: Yes.

MOYERS: This figure going off in search of either his fulfillment or the boon, or whatever it is, and coming back
with it. I guess the most noted example of it would be Arthur’s knights in search of the Holy Grail.

CAMPBELL: Well, that’s one for the 12th century, but here you have the story of Gilgamesh. He had a friend, Enkidu a wild man from the hills and so forth. Ankedu dies, Gilgamesh’s friend is dead. He touches him, he’s cold. Suddenly Gilgamesh is overcome with the fear of death. He goes then in quest of the elixir of immortality, a plant that grows at the bottom of the cosmic sea. This is from the 18th century B.C., 1750 B.C. It’s one of the oldest that we have of that quest.

MOYERS: What does it say to you, that there runs through all cultures this quest, this pursuit?

CAMPBELL: Well, what it says to me is that man knows that there is an eternal life inside him, because the going into the depth, there is always the going down until he finds the thing in oneself.

MOYERS: The hero in all literature.

CAMPBELL: It’s symbolized as outside, but it really is an inward quest, and it’s a finding of something in here, and then coming back with it into the world. The life that lives in us is eternal life, there’s no doubt about it, and we are bubbles on top of it, and in our bubble existence, in our existence in the field of time and space, it’s possible to become so linked to the time-space aspect of the experience, that you never realize the depth of it. But it’s possible also to experience the depth. Now there are aspects of Christianity, old Christianity, that bring up this theme. In 1948 there was dug up in the Egyptian desert a big jar at a place called Nag’ Hammadi, not far from Karnak. And in it were a lot of Coptic manuscripts that had been buried at the time of Theodosius’ dictum that we shall have only one kind of Christianity, namely the Christianity of Byzantium. So these are buried to protect them. Now they come out, and the fifth gospel is there, the Gospel according to Thomas. There’s a fascinating statement at the end of that gospel. You know, in Mark 13, I think it is, the end of the world is predicted, and it says, “This generation will not pass away before these things will have come to pass.” Well, the generation passed away, and the church continues to interpret it historically, so the end of the world is going to come historically. In the Thomas gospel, “Oh master, when will the kingdom come?” Jesus said, “The kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth, and men do not see it.” That’s the son living behind the moon, you might say, you know? The radiance is present everywhere if you—

MOYERS: Now, not in the future.

CAMPBELL: Not in the future—

MOYERS: Not in some historical moment.

CAMPBELL: And that you can find it out there, or you can find it in here. That’s what these things are all about.

MOYERS: What about fairy tales. What purpose do they serve?

CAMPBELL: The fairy tales that we like to think about are mostly from about the 12th and 13th centuries. I mean in our tradition, in the Grimm tradition, for example. There are other ones that come later, in the 14th or 15th century, “Stupid Hans” and all that kind of thing, and the one who killed five with one swat with the flyswatter, and all that kind of thing, but the really pretty ones are from the 12th and 13th century. This is the high period of the Arthurian romances as well. But they’re for children, and do you know what they are, very often? The little girl that doesn’t want to grow up to be a woman. She wants to be a little girl. And the crisis of that threshold crossing she’s balking. And goes to sleep, until the prince comes through all these barriers and gives her a reason to think, oh, it might be nice that way after all. A great many of the Grimm tales are for little girls, and they represent the little girl who is stuck. And all of these dragon killings and threshold crossings have to do with getting stuck. The rituals of primitive initiation ceremonies are all mythologically grounded and they have to do with killing the infantile ego, and bringing forth an adult, whether it’s the girl or the boy. It’s harder for the boy than for the girl, because life overtakes the girl, she becomes a woman whether she knows she knows it or not, or intends it or not, but the little boy has to intend to be a man. The first menstruation, the little girl is a woman. The next things she knows she’s pregnant, she’s a mother. The boy has to first, to disengage himself from his mother, get his energy into himself, and then start forth. And that’s what the myths of “youth, go find your father.” In the Odyssey, Telemachus, there with his mother, and when he’s twenty-one years old, he goes to find his father. Athene comes and says, “Go find your father.” That is the theme all through the stories. Sometimes it’s a mystical father, but sometimes as here in the Odyssey, it’s the present father. There’s a fine saying in India with respect to these two orders of myths, you know, the folk idea and the elementary
idea. The folk aspect is called desì, which means “provincial,” having to do with your society, and that is for young people. It’s through that that the young person is deeply brought into the society, wants to go out and kill monsters. “Okay, here’s a soldier suit, you know, we’ve got the job for you.” So forth and so on. But then the elementary idea, the Sanskrit name for that is “marga,” and that word means “path.” It means the trail of an animal, and it’s the trail back in here. Because as I have said the myth comes from the imagination, and it leads back to it. The society teaches you what the myths are, or it used to, and then it disengages you, you can follow in your meditations the path right in.

MOYERS: Let me ask you about a possibly unfortunate side of fairy tales. You talked about them helping us through crises. When I read them, they all had happy endings, and it was a long time before I learned that life is fraught with plodding, indulgent and cruel realities. Sometimes I think I bought a ticket to Gilbert and Sullivan, and when I go into the theater, the play was written by Harold Pinter. And I’m wondering if fairy tales don’t make us misfits to reality.

CAMPBELL: No, I think we’re to read that as the child’s myth, you might say, and there are proper myths for proper times of life. As one grows older, you need a sturdier mythology, and of course, the whole image of the Crucifixion, which is a fundamental image in the Christian tradition, it speaks at the same time of the coming of eternity into the field of time and space, where there is dismemberment and fractioning and all of that. But it also speaks of the passage from the field of time and space into the field of eternal life. So we crucify our eternal — our temporal, and earthly bodies, so to say, let it be torn, and through that tearing we learn the spiritual trajectory which transcends all the pains of earth. That the other way, the god coming into the world. There’s a form of the crucifix known as “Christ Triumphant,” where he is not with head bowed and blood pouring from him, but head erect, eyes open, coming to the Crucifixion. And Saint Augustine says somewhere, Jesus went to the crucifix, or the cross, as a bridegroom to his bride.

MOYERS: So there are myths for older age, and myths for children.

CAMPBELL: There are myths for older age, and myths for children. I had a friend, Heinrich Zimmer, a very great Indologist? and a very great friend of mine. And he was lecturing at Columbia on the Hindu idea of all life is as a dream, it is as a bubble, it is maya. The word “maya” comes from the Sanskrit root maha, which means “to measure forth.” It’s the kind of measuring forth of an illusion that a hypnotist, or a magician, can achieve. And that’s all that life is. So after his lecture to these young women, one of the young women came up to him and said, “Doctor Zimmer, that was wonderful, a wonderful lecture on Indian philosophy! But,” she said, “maya — I don’t get it— it doesn’t speak to me.” “Oh,” he said, “it’s not for you yet, darling.” And so it is. And when you do get older, on in years, and everyone you’ve known and originally lived for has passed away, and the world is passing away, the maya myth comes in. But for young people the world is something to be met, and dealt with, and loved, and learned from, and fought with, and so another mythology.

MOYERS: There is this wonderful image in “King Arthur” where the knights of the Round Table are about to enter the search for the Grail in the Dark Forest, and the narrator says, “They thought it would be a disgrace to go forth in a group.” So each entered the forest at a separate point of his choice. And you’ve interpreted that to express the Western emphasis upon the unique phenomenon of a single human life — the individual confronting darkness.

CAMPBELL: When I read that, this is in “La Quest del Saint Graal” it’s about 1220. It’s a work written by a Cistercian monk, actually, and it’s one that is devoted, it’s the one in which Galahad appears. It’s one in which the monastic ideal is very strong. But what struck me when I read that was that this epitomizes the particular Western idea of living the life that is potential in you, and never was in anyone else as a possibility. And this is a truth. Each of us is a completely unique creature, and the thing that we are ever going to give to the world will have to come out of our experience of our own potentialities, not someone else’s. But typically in the East, and typically in traditionally grounded societies, the individual is cookie-molded, as it were, in India it’s called a sliadama, (?) your duty. Your duty is put upon you in exact terms, and there’s no real breaking out of it. And when you go to a guru to be guided on the spiritual life, he knows just where you are, just where you should go next, just what the next thing is. He’ll give you his picture to wear, so that you could be like him. You know what I mean? That wouldn’t be the Western thing, to give you his picture. You have to give him his own picture — give the student his own picture of himself, to find. Now this is particularly occidental, romantic theme. What you seek in your life never was, on land or sea. It is to
become something, out of your experience of what never was experienced before.

**MOYERS:** There’s that question that Hamlet asked, “Are you up to your destiny? Are you up to your—”

**CAMPBELL:** Up to your destiny — and that was Hamlet’s problem, he wasn’t. He was given a destiny too big for him to handle, and it blew him to pieces. That can happen, too.

**MOYERS:** You tell two or three stories in your book about experiences which attest to the different way the different religions see the world. There was this conference you attended in Japan, do you remember that?

**CAMPBELL:** Oh, well, this was a great time. It’s held every five years, the conference — International Congress for the History of Religions, and there are people from all over the world. And Japan, of course, when you’re in Japan, and Japan is the host, you are treated to things, you just can’t imagine. We had a glorious time there, went to every temple and Shinto shrine within sight, or within our reach. And one member of the congress was Prince Mikasa, who is the younger brother of the emperor, so that when you go to a Shinto shrine — that’s the religion of native Japan — several which we saw were just beautiful. Well, there was one member of the group who was from down here in New York, actually, and he went to one of the wonderful parties to one of the young Shinto priests, who was a member of the congress, and he said, “I’ve been to a number of your ceremonies, and I’ve been of course to a lot of the shrines now.” And he said, “I don’t get it, I don’t get the philosophy, I don’t get the theology.” Well, the Shinto priest, he rubbed his knees and tried to make believe this was a difficult, serious question, and he said, “I think we don’t have theology. I think we don’t have philosophy. We daren’t.” When you are in touch with the ineffable, or when you think you are, don’t talk. If it goes beyond words, don’t use words — they obscure it. That’s where art comes in, that’s the function of art — to render the ineffable through the field of time and space and phenomenality, to let the radiance shine through. And that radiance is the radiance that is transcendent, and is your own radiance. And so you say, “Ah-ha,” like that, that’s it. Well, the Prince Mekasa[?] gave a little lecture on Shinto, and he read a little poem. And it was a poem that was written by a simple person who had gone to one of the great shrines, the shrine at Ise. And the poem was something like this: “What abideth here, I know not, with gratitude my eyes fill with tears.” That’s religious mood. That’s when you’ve experienced it.

**MOYERS:** There’s a wonderful story, too, which you have told before, of the troubled woman who comes to the Hindu guru, and says, “I’m troubled because I don’t love God.”

**CAMPBELL:** Oh, yes, this guru, this was a wonderful man, Sri Ramakrishna. His dates curiously are almost the same as those of Charles Darwin, 1836—1886, and he was what is called a paramahamsa, a supreme swami, the swami of Wild Gander. He was a great teacher, and this woman comes and says, “I find I don’t love God. I have been trying to convince myself I love God, but in honesty, I don’t.” And he asks, “Is there nothing in the world that you love?” And she answered, “Yes. I love my nephew.” And he says, “There he is.” Now that’s the beauty of Hinduism.

**MOYERS:** There is God in your nephew.

**CAMPBELL:** In the nephew.

**MOYERS:** Yes, but Jesus said, “If you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me.”

**CAMPBELL:** Unto me. Jesus also says in the Thomas gospel, “Split the stick, you’ll find me there. Lift the stone and there am I.” And he says that “When you have heard my word, you are as I.” Now that’s been cut out of our more public doctrine, and we don’t realize the possibilities of living in Christ, what it means. Paul says, “I live now not I, but Christ in me.” He never saw Jesus, all he saw was that vision.

**MOYERS:** There is an old monk in a Buddhist story who says, “Visions are born and die in those who hold them.” And I wonder how many of the world’s wonderful visions we never know about because ordinary people have no canvas on which to display them.

**CAMPBELL:** That’s right, and how many of them are able as artists, or poets, or writers, to tell you the vision, so that the world could share it. But of course great visions are those of the religious traditions, and they come out of inspired minds.
MOYERS: I'm not a Catholic, but I believe something profoundly spiritual and vital has been lost from the Church, when the ritual, the liturgy, was changed in the name of reform. Do you have any sense of that?

CAMPBELL: Oh, I agree entirely. I just think they scrapped one of the great art works of the West, perhaps the greatest. Solemn high mass was a tremendous experience.

MOYERS: When I was a much younger and more naive man, I traveled through Catholic Europe, southern Europe, and it was my first exposure, coming out of the Protestant backwoods of east Texas, to the dominance of icons and rituals and symbols, and I was put off, absolutely put off. And I said so publicly, to my living regret, but I've changed my mind. I really find now something powerful in contemplating symbols, in communion, in Gregorian chant well sung, in Kyries and in consecrations. What about the role of ritual in speaking to us?

CAMPBELL: What about this room that we're in? Here they all are. Here's a support for meditation right here. All of the forms that you see around are spiritual forms that point past themselves. They speak of a power that's coming through from a transcendent, unknown source. And so you're in that field — not a field that you can name and deal with in a practical way at all. The earliest example of that kind of work is in the great caves of southern France and northern Spain. Lascaux, Pech Merle and Les Trois Frères and those caves. There you go into them, and I've been in a couple of them, and it is an enormous experience — the whole mystery of the world above. You're under the ground there — the world above, the cattle and all, and the herds that we're going to kill day after tomorrow — this is their seed place down here, and this is the world out of which they come. Similarly when you go into Chartres Cathedral, there is the whole pantheon, you might say, in human rather than in animal forms, representing the mystery. I think — well, I must tell you a story. This International Congress of History of Religions — I was looking with great sense of participation at one of the beautiful temples in Japan, and a great big tall Swedish gentleman was beside me. And he leaned down and he said, "Isn't it a shame, I'm a Protestant, I can't appreciate these things." It's too bad.

MOYERS: You've taught me, I think, the value of a ritual, of a rite, of a symbol, is that it leaves us to our own thoughts in the presence of eternity, in a way.

CAMPBELL: Oh I want, now that you're bringing that up, to say a word about Latin, and then translating it into English, do you see? As a friend of mine said, "Just when the church is translating everything into English, the kids are chanting Sanskrit." The problem with translating it into a current language is that the words have domestic associations. All of the associations are with things that you very well know, do you see what I mean, and these are clanging in your head. When the chant is however, the prayer, in a dead language, in a language that no longer has local associations for you, it elevates you to the elementary idea rather than the folk idea, do you see what I mean? So they lose that thing.

MOYERS: Rituals are important, not only religiously, but in other ways, too. I remember how you have described the televised ceremonies surrounding the funeral of John F. Kennedy. You called it "A ritualization of the greatest social necessity." Explain that.

CAMPBELL: Well, of course, recalling that moment, it was a shocker. And the nation was somehow unstrung. Then to turn this into an archetypal event, and let us meditate on death and mystery of death as epitomized in the death of the high presence in our national life, the ritual that was used is an old military ritual, with the gun carriage and all that, and the horses. And the one horse without the rider and the stirrups reversed, that rite goes back to the ancient Aryans. The ancient Indo-European people who were horse people — they were the ones who first domesticated and rode the horse. And gosh, I felt, this is a tremendous thing, and the horses' hoofs were black, and it was all silent with just a very dead drumbeat, and as I recall, there were six horses and the seventh, and the seventh, horses of the seven spheres, that were going through the seven spheres — all of that was in that ritual.

MOYERS: So what was the value of it to us at that particular time?

CAMPBELL: Well, I — rituals have a curious ability, if they are well presented, to speak not only to your intellect, but also to your heart and to, somehow, everything that is in you. And this amounted to a general meditation on death, and I think a resolution, a sense of resolution, came out of it. I might say also that I was enormously impressed by the way Jackie Kennedy handled the situation, with the little boy at the coffin, and so forth and so on. That was a — it was a splendid performance.
MOYERS: Impressed from a mythological sense, as well?

CAMPBELL: Yes, I mean, she was the widow of—this is a mythological theme— the, you know, Frazier’s Golden Bough, where the—

MOYERS: One of the first great studies of mythology.

CAMPBELL: The hero dies, and the woman survives who represents the land and the presence. Well, what she represented was ourselves.

MOYERS: So once again an ancient myth taking a contemporary costume and links us to the past.

CAMPBELL: Yes, and to ourselves and together, and whether one speaks it forth as I have here tried to say what I thought was behind it, it nevertheless works.

MOYERS: Oswald Spengler, in The Decline of the West, defines culture as “the condition of society in form,” in the sense of which an athlete is in form, and Spengler believed that the destruction of form will not produce a winner in the field of a mile race, or in the field of competitive culture, and this being finally a serious world, he says, it will be only where top form, ritual, is maintained that civilized life will survive. If that’s true—do you think it’s true?

CAMPBELL: I do.

MOYERS: Then what is the shape of our society today?

CAMPBELL: Why is Japan coming on so strongly? It’s in form. That was what hit me in Japan. This is a society in form, and look, here’s a little island culture without a single natural resource except mud and reeds, and it’s a major nation in the world, whereas those that are losing form are being overtaken by it.

MOYERS: Have you ever taken part in a Japanese tea ceremony?

CAMPBELL: Yes, I have.

MOYERS: Wonderful form.

CAMPBELL: Yes. Oh, these people understand form and style, and even these young Japanese here, the Nisei people, and Sansei, the ones who are over here and never were in Japan, some of them, they have it.

MOYERS: What happens to a society that loses its form?

CAMPBELL: Disintegrates.

MOYERS: Are you concerned about that in our society?

CAMPBELL: Yes. Here’s something I don’t like to say, but I’m going to. Years ago I was reading a work of Spengler, you quoted Spengler, called Jahre der Entscheidung. The Years of the Decision, which are the years that we have been in. And he discusses different nations, and he says, when he comes to the United States, he says, “an assortment of dollar trappers, no past, no future.”

MOYERS: And yet Yeats, in that period between the wars, felt that we were living in the last of a great Christian cycle.

CAMPBELL: Yes, well we may be.

MOYERS: Well, but he was excited nonetheless, he said that he thought he saw perhaps the second coming.

CAMPBELL: Right.

MOYERS: Some great revelation about to occur. What is it you see slouching toward Bethlehem? Yeats, its—

CAMPBELL: Well, I don’t know what it is that’s coming, anymore than Yeats knew what it was that was coming, but when you come to the end of a time, and the beginning of a new one, it’s a period of tremendous pain and turmoil, and it looks like that.
MOYERS: Who are making our myths today?

CAMPBELL: Oh, well, the makers of myths are poets and artists. Those are the only ones. And we have had artists and great writers. The ones who meant most to me in my days of trying to shape my world, were Joyce, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann, and Yeats, I'm feeling more and more. In the world of the arts, I must say I think Picasso and Klee were pulling our modern experience into statements for us. But it's got to be more than that to shape a people, and I don't know whether we have it in us. I don't know, I am not very optimistic about the situation.

MOYERS [voice-over]: From the American Museum of Natural History in New York, this has been a conversation with Joseph Campbell. I'm Bill Moyers.

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