

JOSEPH CAMPBELL
and
THE POWER
OF MYTH

with Bill Moyers



STUDY GUIDE

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BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL:

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THE MYTHOLOGY OF STAR WARS WITH BILL MOYERS AND GEORGE LUCAS

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BELIEF AND THE POWER OF MYTH

Joseph Campbell

This unpublished essay from the Joseph Campbell archives is believed to have been originally written as the foreword for Heinrich Zimmer's *The King and the Corpse* and edited after Zimmer's death.

The question of belief is of less moment in the mythological sphere than the question of the power of the imagery to evoke and organize spiritual energy and thus to render, not an ideology, but a sense of being. Belief in this sphere – positive, literal belief – follows spiritual experience, not vice versa. Rather, a peculiar, provisional type of belief (like the willing suspension of disbelief undertaken in watching a play) precedes and facilitates an intended experience, by which the pro tem belief will then be confirmed. This belief may even be maintained in the face of proven facts (blindly, as we say) as a necessary catalyst; for without it the organization of experience on which the individual life and the society depend may be shattered.

In a culture such as ours, then, where for centuries the mythological images were thought to correspond to the structure of the universe, the conflict of the archaic catalytic imagery with the newer, scientifically demonstrated cosmology – one that is better demonstrated and proven every day in secular experience – may cause considerable psychological damage and spiritual agony. This should not blind us, however, to the fact that in the archaic world from which our current, vestigial mythologies derive, the gods and the heavens were not conceived in quite the way of hard and fast realities, such as we might expect of men and women in their right mind. They were to be seen as metaphors, symbols of truths that were otherwise inexpressible, outside of the realm of direct experience.

Mythology is thus of a kind with the formal arts; music, architecture, and the dance; poetry and the visual arts. For the arts, when properly turned, yield an impact of experience – not logical reference to known or unknown facts or ideas. The art of art consists, in fact, in the presentation of forms, images, or ideas in such a way that they will constitute an order of spiritual stimulation. And its works are judged, therefore, not as true or false, but as perfectly apt or merely correct, as living or dead. The primitive function of art, judging from the evidences of its earliest appearance, was to serve as the incarnating vehicle of myth, whether in drama, dance or poetry, in visual ornament and representation or in the rhythms and melodies of song. Mythology –

if we may offer a preliminary definition at this early phase of our study – is the sum and focus, the circumference, order, and center of all that is dynamic, that is moving or is to be permitted to be moving, in the given cultural province.

Yet since the whole field and context of local experience is therefore incorporated in its organization, a considerable complex of references radiates from the rites and arts to every corner and detail of the known world, incorporating that experience – literally giving it body. Hence, necessarily, a web of proto-scientific implications has always enwrapped mythologies, a context of local why-stories, referring to the origins of mankind, the various phenomena of the natural environment, and the customs, institutions, crafts and technologies of the group. Mythology is the validation of all these: a validation, however, not by logical demonstration, but through art – art, that is to say, that translates the world into experience.

Any fact that is not experienced as dynamic, as moving (that is to say, as myth) is of no interest. This is so even though such a fact may become of considerable political or economic moment. The facts of science, economics, or politics may actually so disintegrate the web of references that the whole structure of a mythology may fall apart – and the culture with it. For a mere fact is not a moving experience; nor is a logical order necessarily so. We have seen too many cultures dissolve throughout the world at the first touch of the science and technology that we should have thought would have saved them having to believe any longer that science without poetry is life. Our own poor poets, I am afraid, have been so intimidated by our clinics and laboratories that they have abandoned the first principles of beginning, that of the festival; and the heart of the festival has always been the atmosphere of myth, of delight.

Delight, the attitude of the dilettante – the one who takes delight (Italian: *diletto*) in something – sets free in us the creative intuition, permits it to be stirred to life by contact with the fascinating script of the old symbolic tales and figures, and opens us to the quickening contact, the dæmonic and inspiring assault that is the effect of their intrinsic virtue. The moment we abandon this dilettante attitude toward the images of folklore and myth and begin to feel certain about their proper interpretation – the minute we look in them for facts rather than truth – we forfeit our proper humility and open-mindedness before the unknown, and refuse to be instructed, refuse to be shown what has never yet quite been told either to us or to anybody else. And we attempt, instead, to classify the contents of the dark message under heads and categories already known.



THE HERO'S JOURNEY & JOSEPH CAMPBELL

— Stephen Gerring

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 23

Joseph Campbell's first full-length solo book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Bollingen Series XVII: 1949), earned the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Contributions to Creative Literature. In this study of the myth of the archetypal hero, Campbell posits the existence of a "monomyth" (a word he borrows from James Joyce), a universal pattern that is the essence of, and common to, heroic tales in every culture.

While outlining the basic stages of this mythic cycle, Campbell explores common variations in the hero's journey, which he observes is an operative metaphor not only for an individual, but for a culture as well. This widely recognized classic has exerted a major influence on generations of creative artists, from the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s to contemporary filmmakers today.

THE ORIGINS OF HERO

The genesis of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* served as Campbell's own call to adventure. After the success of *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (with co-author Henry Morton Robinson), an editor from Simon & Schuster approached Campbell with a proposal to write a book on mythology – "a modern Bulfinch," he called it, referring to the 19th century popularization of Greek myths.

Campbell instead offered to write a book on "how to read a myth." Though Simon & Schuster agreed, they ultimately declined the finished manuscript, which is how Bollingen ended up publishing it.

Campbell traces the inspiration for his recognition of the hero's journey to German ethnologist and archaeologist Leo Frobenius, whose 1904 *Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes* (*The Age of the Sun God*) pointed to a motif of descent into the

underworld (“going into the belly of the whale and coming out again”) that appears in myths of many cultures.

Campbell, following up with his own study of hero myths, quickly recognized that movements key to the hero cycle corresponded exactly with those described by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep as central to all initiation rites.

That was when I started teaching my course at Sarah Lawrence College in Comparative Mythology, using this as my core structuring theme, and studying and always looking for some refutation of this, some way to blow it up. I found I couldn't blow it up.

Bruckner, D.J.R.: “Joseph Campbell: 70 Years of Making Connections,”
New York Times Book Review, 12/18/83

Interestingly, the phrase “the hero’s journey” appears nowhere in the original text, though the book often refers to the “hero-quest” and the “hero-deed,” and describes how “the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces.” Over time, Campbell adopted the phrasing we’re familiar with today.

WHAT IS THE HERO’S JOURNEY?

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 23



Discussing the trajectory of the journey as depicted in the diagram, Campbell summarizes the many possible variations within each stage as follows:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his common-day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again – if the powers have remained unfriendly to him – his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 211

We recognize this pattern in tales of Raven's theft of fire from the House of the Sun, Isis' search for Osiris, Ulysses' long voyage home from the Trojan War, the sojourn of the children of Israel in the land of Egypt, and even the adventures of Luke Skywalker "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."

UNPACKING THE JOURNEY

Campbell emphasizes three stages which he deems essential to the hero's journey: separation (sometimes called departure), initiation, and return. Each of these stages must be present to make a hero's journey, but the same doesn't apply to all the possible variations within each stage. Much critical analysis gets bogged down in mistaking Campbell's discussion of the most common elements of these stages as setting forth

rigid, sequential steps found in all hero myths, which is not what Campbell was suggesting in his work.

Campbell highlights four possible climaxes to the adventure: the Sacred Marriage, Atonement with the Father, Apotheosis, or the Elixir Theft, but which one arises depends on the story:

One finds different orders of story. For example, in fairy tales it's usually the finding of the bride – or sometimes stealing the bride – and the sacred marriage motif. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it's the atonement with the father motif – and there the woman becomes either the guide to the father in the form of Mary, or seductress in the form of Eve and her children. In the Christian tradition one is not to experience the apotheosis. You are not to think of yourself as the Christ, whereas in the Buddhist tradition that's the way.

Archive audio L1184, Big Sur, CA, 11/8/83

A tale containing every possible alternative can become clumsy and bloated; rather than “steps,” it helps to think of these as variations that are either included, or omitted, depending on the choices the hero makes.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY TODAY

The hero's journey is a simple yet powerfully creative concept, found not just in myths and fairy tales but also novels, films, interactive video games, or anywhere stories are told.

The influence of the hero's journey in popular culture is especially apparent in film, as in George Lucas' acknowledgment that *Star Wars* might never have become the phenomenon it has if it weren't for Joseph Campbell:

*I wrote many drafts of this work and then I stumbled across *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It was the first time that I really began to focus... I went around in circles for a long time trying to come up with stories, and the script rambled all over and I ended up with hundreds of pages. It was *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that just took what was about 500 pages and said, here is the story. Here's the end; here's the focus; here's the way it's all laid out. It was all there and had been there for thousands and thousands of years, as Mr. Campbell pointed out. And I said, "This is it." After reading more of Joe's books I began to understand how I could do this.*

George Lucas at the National Arts Club in 1985, cited in *The Hero's Journey*, 215

A ROADMAP FOR LIFE

But this mythological motif is more than just a plot device. There's an argument to be made that the hero's journey is germane to the human experience. Though the giants in the field who preceded Joseph Campbell studied myth to understand other cultures and add to human knowledge, he was one of the first to grasp that mythology has relevance in the real world.

Campbell acknowledges the influence of his predecessors, but goes beyond them in asserting the motif of the hero's journey can be understood metaphorically as a model for the living of life, which itself is a series of initiations. Campbell's understanding of this aspect of the hero quest thus reflects what he terms the psychological (or pedagogical) function of mythology: "to carry the individual through the stages of one's life."

This is what Joyce called the monomyth: an archetypal story that springs from the collective unconscious. Its motifs can appear not only in myth and literature, but, if you are sensitive to it, in the working out of the plot of your own life. The basic story of the hero journey involves giving up where you are, going into the realm of adventure, coming to some kind of symbolically rendered realization, and then returning to the field of normal life.

Pathways to Bliss, 112

THE FEMALE HERO

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell looks at multiple myths, including what may be the earliest hero journey on record: the goddess Inanna's Descent into the Underworld (the Sumerian version dates to c. 2112 BCE). Nevertheless, most examples in the book are of male heroes. As to why, Campbell observes that most of the world's myths were recorded by men.

*All of the great mythologies and much of the mythic story-telling of the world are from the male point of view. When I was writing *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and wanted to bring female heroes in, I had to go to the fairy tales. These were told by women to children, you know, and you get a different perspective.*

Pathways to Bliss, 145

FOLLOW YOUR BLISS

Stephen Gerringer

BILL MOYERS: *Do you ever have the sense of... being helped by hidden hands?*

JOSEPH CAMPBELL: *All the time. It is miraculous. I even have a superstition that has grown on me as a result of invisible hands coming all the time – namely, that if you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in your field of bliss, and they open doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be.*

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

When Joseph Campbell died just months after recording the interviews with Bill Moyers that would become *The Power of Myth*, he had no idea how these interviews, in particular the idea of following one's bliss, would resonate with the public. Within months of airing, "Follow your bliss" became a popular catchphrase.

It's an aphorism Campbell shared in multiple interviews the last fifteen years of his life: wisdom grounded in personal experience and a lifetime spent studying myth, distilled into a single phrase.

Yet, oddly enough, this expression does not occur in any of the books Campbell completed during his lifetime. Its first appearance in print is in an interview for *Psychology Today* the year Campbell retired from teaching.

Prior to that, this bit of advice was reserved primarily for his students.

My general formula for my students is "Follow your bliss." Find where it is, and don't be afraid to follow it.

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

BLISS CRITICS

Though this maxim clearly strikes a chord in the popular imagination, many new to Campbell's work find the phrase elusive. A few critics have said that "following one's bliss" is a reckless and hedonistic prescription, code for doing whatever the heck you want. Countless others who never heard of Joseph Campbell embrace the phrase as a sort of magic mantra.

A closer read suggests something deeper:

If your bliss is just your fun and your excitement, you're on the wrong track. I mean, you need instruction. Know where your bliss is. And that involves coming down to a deep place in yourself.

The Hero's Journey, 253

WHAT DID JOSEPH CAMPBELL MEAN BY "FOLLOW YOUR BLISS"?

What makes you enthusiastic? Follow it.

That's been my advice to young people who ask me, "What shall I do?" I taught once in a boys' prep school. That's the moment for young boys (or it used to be; I don't know what's going on now) when they had to decide their life courses. You know, where are they going? And they're caught with excitement. This one wants to study art, this one poetry, this one anthropology. But Dad says study law; that's where the money is. Okay, that's the decision. And you know what my answer would be – where your enthusiasm is. So I have a little word: "Follow your bliss." The bliss is the message of God to yourself. That's where your life is.

Thinking Allowed with Jeffrey Mishlove: "Understanding Mythology": Thinking Allowed Productions, 1988

Determining what one's bliss might be isn't simply a matter of choosing whatever one wants and then waiting for the universe to hand it over. We don't "will" our bliss; we discover our bliss.

HOW DO YOU DISCOVER YOUR OWN BLISS?

Socrates' dictum is relevant here: "Know thyself."

To find your own way is to follow your own bliss. This involves analysis, watching yourself and seeing where the real deep bliss is – not the quick little excitement, but the real, deep, life-filling bliss.

"Man and Myth: A Conversation with Joseph Campbell," *Psychology Today*, July 1971

We are having experiences all the time which may on occasion render some sense of this, a little intuition of where your bliss is. Grab it. No one can tell you what it is going to be. You have to learn to recognize your own depth.

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

It's not just what you want ("I'd like to be the next Hemingway"), but a matter of your passion. What do you keep coming back to? What catches your soul and will not let you go? There is a world of difference between wanting to play the guitar like a rock star, and always having a guitar in your hand, practicing six or eight hours a day, because you love making music. Because this is what you would rather be doing more than anything else in the world, even if there's no money in it, no fame – because THIS is your bliss.

BLISS AND RAPTURE

Campbell sometimes describes bliss as "rapture," which is likely to be very different from one's will. You might consciously will to become a lawyer or computer programmer or news anchor, but if your bliss, your passion, your calling, is music or preaching or teaching or building or writing, then by all means follow the Call. This is the path out of the Wasteland.

Our bliss is the what, where, and when we feel most authentic, most ourselves. It is what we are doing when time drops away and we reside in an eternal now. *Eternal* means more than "forever." From the Latin *e* or outside, and *ternum* or time, that which is eternal exists outside time. It transcends time.

When you are in your bliss, ego concerns dissolve: you aren't thinking about that misunderstanding with your sister, or what you should do for dinner, how you're

going to pay the light bill next Tuesday, or what's on television tonight. When you are in your bliss, whether that bliss is sculpting clay or crunching numbers, time ceases to exist.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU FOLLOW YOUR BLISS?

Following your bliss is metaphor for a process that begins with a journey, a quest, to uncover what you find most fulfilling in your life: the quest for the Holy Grail, that which gives life meaning and purpose. My bliss is not your bliss; I have to discover my bliss on my own, by listening to myself, following clues dropped by the greater part of my being.

You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there's a way or path, it is someone else's path; each human being is a unique phenomenon. The idea is to find your own pathway to bliss.

Pathways to Bliss, xxvi

Campbell points out that myths won't tell you what your bliss is, but they will "tell you what happens when you begin to follow your happiness, what the obstacles are you're going to run into."

Following one's bliss takes commitment and perseverance. It's not the easiest of paths, a point that Joseph Campbell stressed:

A boy would come to me and ask, "Do you think I can do this? Do you think I can do that? Do you think I can be a writer?"

"Oh," I would say, "I don't know. Can you endure ten years of disappointment with nobody responding to you, or are you thinking that you are going to write a best seller the first crack? If you have the guts to stay with the thing you really want, no matter what happens, well, go ahead."

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

HOW JOSEPH CAMPBELL FOLLOWED HIS BLISS

Joseph Campbell isn't just speaking in the abstract; he lived his philosophy. Long before arriving at this particular phrasing, young Joe Campbell was following his bliss. Whenever he was pulled off that bliss, he eventually took steps to return to his path. This included dropping his Ph.D. studies rather than embark on a career confined to a very narrow field of academic specialization, and giving up a position that did not feed his soul during the Depression even though there were no other jobs to be had.

Meanwhile, a mythic journey that began with a childhood fascination with Indigenous cultures continued to expand as one door opened after another. He had no idea where he would end up as he followed the clues provided by his own varied interests.

It wasn't until the age of 50, on a year-long sabbatical from Sarah Lawrence in Asia, after years of teaching, having published several books and edited more, that Joseph Campbell put the pieces together and experienced a major epiphany (one that might have seemed obvious to anyone who knew him):

Resolution: Comparative mythology...is indeed my field.

Asian Journals, 595

Following one's bliss would seem to be more about the journey than the destination.

FOLLOWING BLISS LATER IN LIFE

Though Campbell considered this advice especially appropriate for young people just setting out in life, before taking on family responsibilities and financial commitments, he believed this maxim relevant as well for those at midlife and beyond – with an important caveat.

During *The Power of Myth* interviews, Bill Moyers asked Joe what would happen if we all just ran off to follow our love:

MOYERS: *Are you really saying that we should follow our bliss, follow our love, wherever it leads?*

CAMPBELL: *Well, you've got to use your head. They say, you know, a narrow path is a very dangerous path – the razor's edge.*

MOYERS: *So the head and the heart should not be at war?*

CAMPBELL: *No, they should not. They should be in cooperation. The head should be present, and the heart should listen to it now and then.*

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers

As an example, Joseph Campbell sometimes shared the story of a gentleman who sought his advice at midlife, certain that India was calling to him.

I asked, "Well, do you have any responsibilities here? Are you married?" "Yes." "Do you have any children?" "Yes." "Then you can't go to India. You've got to make India come to you."

ZBS Media Interview with Joseph Campbell, 1971

THE TERMINOLOGY OF BLISS

Throughout his life, Joseph Campbell spoke about following his zeal, following his enthusiasms, his interests, his passion, but over time his study of mythology supplied the wording we're familiar with today:

Now, I came to this idea of bliss because in Sanskrit, which is the great spiritual language of the world, there are three terms that represent the brink, the jumping-off place to the ocean of transcendence: sat-chit-ananda. The word "Sat" means being. "Chit" means consciousness. "Ananda" means bliss or rapture. I thought, "I don't know whether my consciousness is proper consciousness or not; I don't know whether what I know of my being is my proper being or not; but I do know where my rapture is. So let me hang on to rapture, and that will bring me both my consciousness and my being. I think it worked.

The Power of Myth, 120

Many who have heeded Campbell's advice would agree.



ABOUT STEPHEN GERRINGER

Stephen Geringer is the editor of *Myth and Meaning* by Joseph Campbell, and the author of *Myth and Modern Living: A Joseph Campbell Compendium*. He currently serves as Community Coordinator for the Joseph Campbell Foundation.

BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was an American author and teacher best known for his work in the field of comparative mythology.

EARLY LIFE

Joseph Campbell was born in New York City in 1904 and became interested in mythology in his childhood.

He loved to read books about Indigenous American cultures, and frequently visited the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where he was fascinated by the museum's collection of totem poles.

EDUCATION

Joseph Campbell majored in biology his freshman year at Dartmouth, then transferred to Columbia University, where he specialized in medieval literature. After earning a master's degree, he continued his studies at universities in Paris and Munich.

INFLUENCES

While in Europe, Campbell was influenced by the art of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, the novels of James Joyce and Thomas Mann, and the psychological studies of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

These encounters led to Campbell's theory that all myths and epics are linked in the human psyche, and that they are cultural manifestations of the need to explain social, cosmological, and spiritual realities.

TEACHING CAREER

After a period in California, where Campbell encountered John Steinbeck and the biologist Ed Ricketts, Campbell taught at the Canterbury School. In 1934, he joined the literature department at Sarah Lawrence College, where he taught until retiring in 1972.

PUBLICATIONS

During the 1940s and '50s, Joseph Campbell helped Swami Nikhilananda translate the *Upaniṣads* and *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. He also edited works by the German scholar Heinrich Zimmer on Indian art, myths, and philosophy.

In 1944, with Henry Morton Robinson, Campbell published *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*.

His first original work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, came out in 1949 and was immediately well received. In time, it became acclaimed as a classic. In this study of the “myth of the hero,” Campbell describes a pattern of a heroic journey and asserts that all cultures share this pattern in their heroic myths. This book also outlines the conditions, stages, and results of the archetypal hero’s journey.

THE POWER OF MYTH

Joseph Campbell died in 1987. In 1988, a series of television interviews with Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, introduced Campbell’s views to millions of people. The accompanying book remains in print today.

SARAH LAWRENCE READING LIST

From 1934–1972, Joseph Campbell taught an Introduction to Mythology class at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, NY. This reading list gives a sense of the material he covered in this class, and also an insight into the authors and books that most influenced Campbell's thinking.

Bill Moyers shares a story about receiving a letter from a former student of Campbell's who wrote, "While all of us listened spellbound, we did stagger under the weight of his weekly reading assignments." Eventually, one of her classmates complained, noting she had other classes, each with assigned reading, and asked how she was expected to complete the reading for his course every week.

CAMPBELL'S RESPONSE: *"I'm astonished you tried. You have the rest of your life to do the reading."*

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Though many of these are classics, keep in mind the language and ideas in some of these works are dated and superseded by more contemporary research. Where Campbell favored a particular edition, it is listed here, along with a modern edition if applicable. Otherwise, a modern edition is shown. This list is also published in *Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959–1987*, edited by Antony Van Couvering.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL
and
THE POWER
OF MYTH
with Bill Moyers

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