

# Introduction

*I have lived on the lip of insanity wanting to know reasons, knocking on a door. It opens.  
I've been knocking from the inside!*

“Living on the lip of insanity” is Jelaluddin Rumi’s thirteenth-century description of a state of mind, a desperate longing for meaning, when old explanations no longer make sense and all the signposts of convention and morality have been obliterated.

It also describes the madness of American public life in our time of diminished imagination. We have constructed walls, both physical and emotional, to protect against the terror outside. Inside, while we distract ourselves with consumerism and fundamentalism, the anxiety drains our vitality. If we accidentally lift the veil of denial, we view the madness on *this* side of the wall. Shocked by the implications, we quickly drop it.

Long before 9/11 our noblest intentions were corrupted into their opposites. The America that once symbolized to the entire world a place of opportunity, where people could overcome the past and begin anew, evolved into a symbol of willful ignorance and exclusion and a purveyor of innocent violence and violent innocence. Americans came to believe in a story that all capacity for goodness resides *here*, within the walls, while absolute evil stalks us from out *there*.

Introduction means “leading inward.” This book invites you inside our mythic walls and asks you to examine your own ideas of freedom, community and individualism. When we acknowledge that we’ve dug ourselves into a hole, we must first stop digging and then realize how we have colluded with stories that no longer work. Only then we can begin – initiate – something new, drop our innocence, create new myths and rejoin the human and natural communities.

Myths are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. They organize and justify existence and speak to our unresolved conflicts, needs and fantasies. The world’s oldest stories appear in our dreams, our relationships – and our politics. Caught in these mythic patterns, we are likely to encounter grimly predictable results, but only when we live our lives unconscious of them. Indeed, awareness of our myths is critical to imagining new – or extremely old – solutions to our terrible contemporary problems. To

knock down the walls of our mental incarceration, we need to start asking ourselves what myths do *all* Americans share? What myths are our leaders enacting for us all?

As the post-modern world lurches toward the disasters and bereavements that signal the end of an age, we turn to myth to comprehend the elemental forces that move through our lives, to know who we are, to understand which stories inform our consciousness. For much too long, we've been telling ourselves stories that hatred is inevitable and that violence is the only way to resolve disputes. We've been telling them for so long and so insistently that they have become our myths.

Desperate to stay on this side of the "lip of insanity," we have become actors in stories that have played out countless times. *The myths are not in us; we are in the myths.* Indeed, we each live at the intersections of several myths. But the most profound myths don't provide answers; they provoke the imagination, inviting us to plunge deeper into life. The characters in myths may change, but myths themselves never die. "They are only sleeping at the bottom of our minds," wrote poet Stanley Kunitz, "waiting for our call."

Despite the passage of time, Greek myths still remain vital because each generation, and at each stage of life – adolescence, productive adulthood, elderhood – we can perceive new meanings. We gain insight when we consider myths from the perspectives of different characters. No single version can completely encapsulate a myth. Myths are always multiple in meaning, reflecting our own multiple "selves." Yet one thing is certain: these fundamental themes can still move us as deeply as they affected ancient Greeks.

## **Greek Myth**

Why should we care about ancient Greece? The reasons have changed often over the 500 years since Europe rediscovered Plato and the Parthenon. Renaissance artists, after 1,500 years of Church restriction, learned of people like themselves who had valued the individual and praised the beauty of the human body. Eighteenth century revolutionaries studied Greek ideas of democracy, which influenced social change movements everywhere. Romantic artists and poets employed images from the old stories that conveyed relational and feminine values. Nineteenth century researchers used the Greek foundations of rational thought to replace old religious dogmas with individualism and science as modernity's highest ideals.

The Renaissance, however, also saw decades of savage religious wars and thousands of witch burnings. Eighteenth century colonialism ravaged tribal culture, and nineteenth century imperialism raped the Earth itself. In the twentieth century, humanity endured *world wars*, unspeakable genocides, nuclear devastation, environmental decline and frenzies of conspicuous yet unsatisfying consumption. Glorification of the individual brought narcissism, loneliness and *alienation* – the condition of the outsider, estranged from both society and his own body.

Careless inattention to democracy resulted in the tyranny of corporations and religious fundamentalists, a state of constant fear and perpetual war. Science birthed the most powerful god of our age, materialism, which mocks our creative and spiritual lives. Reduced to the category of environmental rapists, we joke nervously about spending our children's inheritance. Still, despite the dissatisfaction and complaints that life was better in the "old days," few of us have any sense of just *how much* we have lost, how deeply diminished our lives actually are. We literally cannot imagine it. Who can remember how much they have forgotten? Meanwhile, attempting to address our spiritual vacuum, religious institutions merely leave us malnourished.

We fear – *perhaps we wish* – that we are at the edge of catastrophe ("to turn downward"). We veil our anxieties but know we must ultimately face a vast, ancestral grief that edges closer with each headline.

Yet underneath the masks of believer, consumer, alcoholic or normal neurotic lives something older – an *indigenous soul*. Searching for it, millions have sampled Asian spirituality and discovered contemplative practices that ground their lives in authentic values. Others, however, found that forms that evolved on ground not of their ancestors are too alien. Now, when we look to Greek myth, it is because we seek nourishment in modes of meaning that fit our own consciousness. The American soul may well need the images that Europe created before Christianity.

The Greek deities were the dream-creations of *poets*, not of priests; and other poets kept their stories alive by re-imagining them. Even if we aren't Greek, as psychologist James Hillman writes, these stories "...work in our psyches whether we like it or not...unless we understand that these tales depict the basic motifs of the Western psyche, we remain unaware of... our psychological dynamics."<sup>ii</sup> Here is the danger of not knowing our myths: if we remain unaware – or *innocent* – of trauma, we continuously re-enact it.

Women in the 1970s were the first in our time to re-imagine Greek images. Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone and Artemis are some of the guiding deities of feminism. Still older goddesses (Demeter and

Gaia) are the Earth Mothers who inspire environmentalism. Behind them all stands *Mnemosyne*, memory herself, mother of the Muses who serve her by rendering her essence – history – into art. The memory of more natural ways has never completely left our indigenous bones. The ancients knew that it was only Memory, giving birth to art, who could defeat Time.

Men, however, have been privileged to assume masculine images of God, which, sadly, are the models for tyrannical rule at every level of organization. Men must confront the entire history of patriarchy and understand how divine figures like Zeus and Apollo – and Christ – were constructed to oppress women. But they are much more than symbols of male control. They model the human psyche’s astonishing diversity. Though dormant, they can still feed us. However, they demand attention, respect and active, collective *participation* in the difficult process of renewal. The psyche has infinite depth, and it can be transformed. *Psyche*, or soul, was also the Greek word for butterfly, the beautiful creature that grew miraculously from a caterpillar. If psyches can transform, then so can nations.

This book uses an old myth to look at America. Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* was first presented in 406 B.C.E., near the end of the long Peloponnesian War that destroyed Greek democracy. Highly controversial then, it still has surprising appeal to modern readers, with its startling parallels to the events of 9/11.

In this play, the god Dionysus drives the women of Thebes mad, leading them beyond its walls in ecstatic celebration. King Pentheus imprisons Dionysus, but the god escapes, causing an earthquake that destroys the palace. Pentheus responds by threatening to call out his army. By analogy, we are like Pentheus at this point halfway through the play. Several years after 9/11, America stands arrogant and alone, projecting our darkness onto dark-skinned people, denying the presence of an immense force that grows more destructive because we never heed its warnings.

Throughout the book, I will be stressing the power of imagination, which Albert Einstein declared is more important than knowledge, which J.K. Rowling says “...enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.”<sup>26</sup> We must learn to stretch our imagination backward – past our more recent Judeo-Christian mythologies of misogyny and violent redemption – before we can stretch it forward.

We need to comprehend our myth of innocence, to understand the American stories we have inhabited – fully, painfully – before we can re-imagine them or tell new ones. More than any people in history, we suffer from a queasy rootlessness at the foundation of our identity. Its source is the bedrock o

unexpressed grief for the incomprehensibly massive suffering that Europeans have inflicted on this continent.

While bombarding us with images of happy kitchens, pristine coastlines and family reunions, TV commercials actually give us peeks at the despair we struggle to veil. What is it we long for, and why do we feel so manipulated?

“Nostalgia” (Greek: “return”) refers not to another time, but to another *place*. Even after four centuries of white (and black) residence on this land, we tread uncomfortably – and disrespectfully – upon it. We remain exiles, uninvited guests longing to be welcomed, to call it home. It will be lengthy and painful, but the way through is by re-awakening our indigenous souls. Learning *who* we are, below the easy identifications with nation, ethnicity and brand names, will lead us to love *where* we are. Myth implies that our troubles have happened before, and that there is still time to change, to awaken from this dream of innocence and return home.

Why emphasize politics in a book on mythology? Or why dwell on mythological themes in a book on history? Does it help to view history through a mythological lens? Can we find deeper meaning in the tragedy of 9/11? Indeed, haven’t our conventional economic, political, psychological and theological explanations for this madness failed us? What does the madness itself want from us?

Mythology connects psychology and history, inviting them both to deeper truths. As a student of myth, I am a generalist, working – like Dionysus – at the boundaries. With apologies to academics in Classics, History, Psychology, Literature, Religion, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, American Studies and Popular Culture, I prefer to seek out the mythic patterns that underlie events and ideas in all these areas.

I hope to convince the reader to *think* mythologically, to muse on the archetypal images that can help us understand our situation. Knowing the stories that arise in the mind (as dream and poetry) and in the nation (as myth) will help us penetrate the unique narratives that make up “America.” This book traces several themes through history, always with one eye on the mythic issues. I will compare America to ancient Greece, but I will also consider even older perspectives, the bone-memory of so-called “primitive” people.

If we cannot imagine – and mourn – how much we have lost, then we lack the capacity to imagine real alternatives. We must unveil an immensely old double amnesia; we’ve *forgotten that we have forgotten* how to live in harmony. All this will be necessary before we can begin to tell new stories, to deepen the American Dream by first awakening from it.

Keep in mind this question of innocence. Why did commentators speak – very briefly – of losing our innocence on 9/11? Why do we continue to define ourselves this way? If America is innocent – despite 250 years of slavery, the native genocide, Hiroshima, Viet Nam, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, despite our malicious intervention in literally dozens of countries – then every time we “lose” our innocence, aren’t we compelled to rebuild it? Not everyone, of course, has slept through history: Novelist Walter Mosely writes, “*I have never met an African-American who was surprised by the attack on the World Trade Center.*”<sup>iv</sup>

Like actors in an annual religious drama, other forces are determined to help America lose that innocence. And the cycle continues. Who remains innocent in this world? What does our fascination with innocence force *others* to bear? How long can they bear it?

But I want to go deeper. “What is madness,” asked another poet, Theodore Roethke, “but nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?” I want to pursue the myth of innocence to its core; perhaps there, only there, will we re-discover America’s nobility. So this book has some very specific intentions:

- 1 – To clarify the mythic themes in American history.
- 2 – To encourage mythological thinking.
- 3 – To support the re-emergence of initiation, authentic ritual, the oral tradition, deep memory and the imagination.
- 4 – To confront readers with the hidden bedrock of their value systems.
- 5 – To avoid muddling things with academic jargon.
- 6 – To circle around these themes in a Hermetic, Dionysian, soulful, non-linear manner, showing more interest in surprising connections and brief liftings of the veil than in logical proof.
- 7 – To re-imagine America’s purpose in the world.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> --Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher, "Stanley Kunitz, Poet Laureate, Dies at 100," *New York Times*, 5/16/06

<sup>2</sup> --*Loose Ends*, p. 3

<sup>iii</sup> --*Harvard University Gazette Online*, 6/5/08

([www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2008/06.12/99-rowling.html](http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2008/06.12/99-rowling.html))

<sup>iv</sup> --*New York Times Magazine*, 2/8/2004