Myths, Metaphors, and Mentors

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ABSTRACT: This article begins with a discussion of myths as visions that transform life. The primary myth is that of death and rebirth. Metaphors are images which illumine our myths. Therapists are thus both scientists and poets. The process of being a mentor occurs in a variety of relationships. Our search is for an understanding of this process which then transcends the positions of master and disciple. Mentors need to have a sufficient degree of self-transcendence to enable the focus to be on the person's own unique vision. Mentors light sparks which ignite our myths and metaphors and thereby expand our understanding of ourselves. Mentors become catalysts for our growth and thereby facilitate the process of transformation.

Myths

Myths are basic stories about human dramas and our recurring struggles, as with life and death, good and evil, and coping with adversity, to name a few. Yet the most frequent association with the word "myth" is "not true." This exists both in popular culture and within the scholarly community. Thomas Szasz, for example, uses the concept of myth in precisely this way in The Myth of Psychotherapy. From the perspective of the history of religions school comes a deeper understanding of myths. Not only does the history of religions approach provide a more adequate understanding of myth, but also other thinkers (Carl Jung and Milton Erickson, for example) attempt to understand the complex levels of meaning involved in an examination of myths and their functions in human life. Bruno Bettelheim in The Meaning and Uses of Enchantment analyzes the recurring themes of a particular time of myth—the fairy tale. The basic question of myth is not that of literal truth (that is, was there once a man who had two sons?) but rather an examination of stories that illumine the issues of human life. Myths are truer than true; that is, their truth lies at a deeper level than that of facticity. Myths can be more appropriately defined as fundamental visions which enable us to understand, cope with, and transform ourselves and our worlds. In this article, our focus will be on one fundamental myth—that of death and rebirth (resurrection). We will concentrate on a central theme in myths—transformation. For Heidegger, death is the source of our most basic anxiety. It cannot be removed by any
therapeutic process. For Heidegger this anxiety is not entirely negative but has a positive dimension in that it faces each one of us with the possibilities of our own unique life. Thus, anxiety opens the possibility of authentic existence.\(^3\) Heidegger's concept of authenticity is the way in which he describes the transforming power that death has in the midst of life.

Death is present in “loss” issues (graduation, divorce, moving, change of jobs). Dying occurs within life and not just at the end. Jerome Frank points out that there are three basic fears in life that are related to death.\(^4\) The first is the loss of health, actual or potential. This loss touches directly feelings about our own mortality. The second is the experience of alienation from others—the death and dying of relationships. Finally, there is the experience of meaninglessness in life. Here dying occurs on emotional and spiritual levels and often precedes physical death. Suicide is one of the primary expressions of meaninglessness.

Therapeutically, the focal questions are: “In what ways am I dying? In what ways am I being reborn?” Death and resurrection occur over and over again within our lives.

Myths function in and through people. The “healer” is a person who assists in the process of death and resurrection. In this sense, the therapist is a midwife—not doing the “birthing” but assisting in the process. Therapists frequently argue about the efficacy of their myth—beginning with Freud, Jung, and Adler and continuing to this day.

Freud was possessed by a strong need to have disciples and to surround himself with devoted followers. He did not use his knowledge of transference in his relationships with those in the psychoanalytic movement. Hans Sachs clearly points out Freud's error:

It was Freud's enduring wish to be relieved from wearing the insignia of power. He went out of his way in his search for the right man to whom he could entrust the leadership of the psychoanalytic movement; when he thought he had found him he tried to invest the man of his choice—Adler, Jung, Rank—with full authority. This was a tactical error since it is a well-known historical fact that of all persons who are likely to get into sharp opposition to the reigning monarch, the likeliest is the crown prince.\(^5\)

Thus the arguments about the rightness of the “content” miss the basic issue of inheritance. The arguments can be summarized: “My approach is better than yours.” These arguments about “theory” do not deal with the fundamental issue of therapy—the transformation (healing) of life. François Roustang describes the basic paradox of psychoanalysis, “The aim of psychoanalysis is, on the contrary, to put an end to the transference. Its goal is the dissolution of transference, which is why it cannot lead to socialization.”\(^6\) Edwin Friedman observes that there are great systems of salvation in human life: politics, religion, and therapy.\(^7\) Each of these systems diagnoses what is wrong with the human condition and describes the means by which it can be corrected. Often the focus remains on what is wrong (pathology). The issues at this point are twofold. First, what is the basis of our myths? Second, how do myths create their visions and bring about transformation?