

## **24 January - Mythos vs. Logos**

Unitarian Universalists promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Even with this stated focus on individual search, we sometimes focus on truth from facts and reason while diminishing the truths to be found in fictional stories or mythology. Some of our deepest personal and communal truths, however, cannot be expressed only with logic and facts. This Sunday we look at truths gleaned through both logic (logos) and stories (mythos) and how to be open to both types of learning.

### **Reading 1 - from The DaVinci Code by Dan Brown:**

“Sophie, every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith--acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday school. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors.”

### **Reading 2 - from Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights by Salman Rushdie”**

This is a story from our past, from a time so remote that we that we argue, sometimes, about whether we should call it history or mythology. Some of us call it a fairy tale. But on this we agree: that to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present. To recount a fantasy, a story of the imaginary, is also a way of recounting a tale of the actual. If this were not true then the deed would be pointless, and we try in our daily lives to eschew pointlessness whenever possible.

This is the question we ask ourselves as we explore and narrate our history: how did we get here from there?

### **Sermon:**

History, mythology, fairy tales... The stories I could have used to illustrate the topic today are numerous. Just think of any mythological or fanciful tale you can think of: all of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, Disney movies, also Marvel movies, holy texts such as the Christian Bible, Jewish Torah or Hindu Upanishads, Aesop's Fables, oral folk tales and even tales passed down or told in our families. There is actually no reason to stop there, a list of fanciful tales would span the library from fiction to mythology, spirituality to science fiction to mystery. The one thing that these stories have in common is that they are not facts as historians or journalists try to capture. When I read a fairy tale about a tailor besting a giant or watch a movie about a woman who can shoot ice from her hands I know that these events didn't actually happen. Just as when I read about Jesus healing a leper or how a fox gave up trying to eat grapes when they were out of reach, I know these are not factual accounts of history.

I'm betting that you are all with me right now - fiction isn't fact. That's the definition of fiction, it isn't fact, so I'm not going to belabor the point. The amazing part - the part that we sometimes miss - is that there is truth to be had in myths, even in fiction and stories and fairy tales. The reason that some of these tales hold so much power and keep getting retold and remembered is the truth they hold, truth that isn't *despite* the fiction but truth that is *heightened* by the fiction and mythology. In ancient Greek there were two words which spoke to the types of truth I am talking about, mythos and logos. Mythos includes what we would call myths, stories about the fanciful and not real. Logos is the logical, factual data with evidence and reason. Mythos as stores and fantasy, logos as fact and reality - both hold truth.

In our culture and in our religion, which is born of this culture, we tend to stress logos for truth telling. We want to know the facts, the data and we want to have reason and evidence to back up the facts. That is all fine and good, but logos has some limitations and can't express all truth. Sure, logos and facts are necessary in creating airplanes, vaccines and much of mathematics. But there is a whole other aspect of the world in which logos falls short. Science tells me that I am born, I live and I will die. But it says nothing about falling in love, being heartbroken or what it means to die. Logos has nothing to say about the meaning of life. Logos can express the contents of a cup of warm tea, but only mythos can express how drinking that tea makes me feel after a nice cool hike in the woods. Mythos is the language of the truth that goes beyond facts, beyond logos.

Some say that mythological thinking was the prehistorical way of thinking, that it only existed to explain what our ancestors could not explain through science and modern problem solving. Mythos is something of the past which has been left behind. Aesop's Fables and religious texts only existed to explain a world which was at the time of writing unexplainable. Currently we are in a modern, fact filled age of reason without need of myths. Well, not so fast there scientists! It was on purpose that I said mythos is about going beyond the truth of logos; mythos isn't subservient to logos, but transcendent of it. There are truths which logos cannot ever speak to, no matter how rational and fact based we are.

I mentioned some tales earlier, let's look at them again. From the brave tailor - What does it feel like to achieve something you are proud of? How does that feeling help you tackle a more difficult problem? I can try to explain the feeling, but the story does it more eloquently. / The movie Frozen is not about people who actually lived. But the story shows us that an act of true love can save someone's life - an act of love can save the person who is acting out of love and selflessness. / Jesus might not have actually placed hands

on people to heal them of physical ailments. But he brought calm and peace to distraught people, those people were uplifted, healed and loved. / A fox didn't actually try to get grapes and then change his mind about his desire. And yet, the tale speaks to all of us and the feeling of changing our outlook or our expectations when something we desire is out of hand. Each of the stories hold truths, truths which are at once deeper and also beyond the truth of facts and reason.

This is religion at its finest and most confusing. From Dan Brown, " 'Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday school. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable.' " Mythological truth is a way to process the unprocessable, a way to think about those questions which facts cannot answer. But remember that there is a problem. " 'The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors.' " Difficulties arise when myth is taken literally, when mythos and logos are conflated. It goes both ways, this conflation. Difficulties also arise when logic is taken emotionally. I cannot explain my love for my children or my apprehension of death through diagrams and facts. Logical facts minimize my feelings and although science can tell me some of why I feel what I feel, it falls drastically short of the entire truth. I also cannot explain the healing of a sick person through a story of miracles. Mythology misses germs and medicine; although a story can tell me some of what it feels like to be healed, it also falls drastically short of the entire truth.

The point is that we don't discount either type of truth and we also don't try to equate them. The Bible is full of truth as mythos, with some logos sprinkled in. A nonfiction history book is full of truth as logos, with some mythos sprinkled in. It is wise for us to not ignore one or the other truth and not to conflate them. It can be easy to throw out an entire story since, well, it is not true. When we do that we miss out on the truth which is held in myth, the truth in fantasy. It is especially important to listen to truths in mythos when looking at religious text and even more so when speaking with others about matters of faith. If I read the Upanishads or the Bible with only an interest in logos I would miss the vast majority of the truths to be had. And if I conflate the truths in those texts with facts I miss the truths and I get confused about fact and fiction.

Let us think about faith discussions with someone else. It is often that disagreements are not only about facts, not only about truth, but also about the type of truth we are listening to. My faith in the goodness of humanity can't be dissuaded by facts. Your belief in the divinity of all can't be unproven through experiment and reason. The whole evolution vs. creation debate is a conflation of mythos and logos.

Mythos tells that there is a mystery in the creation of life. Logos tells that there is an ongoing changing of one creature into another. Those are both true, and they are different sets of truth which don't conflict with each other unless you take the mystery to be fact.

In matters of faith, in all things, when we talk with others it is helpful to remember mythos and logos. When someone is coming from a place of emotion and feelings, responding with facts is less than helpful. Just as responding to a logical argument with emotions can be less than helpful.

And, and there is more. From Salmon Rushdie, "...on this we agree: that to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present. To recount a fantasy, a story of the imaginary, is also a way of recounting a tale of the actual. ... This is the question we ask ourselves as we explore and narrate our history: how did we get here from there?" When we tell a story about the past we are telling a story about the present, not only is our telling shaped by our present understanding but we also can create the past. Yes, we create the present and future, but we also create the past. I recently read the book 1984 by George Orwell. In the book, the ruling party continues to change history books and edit written accounts. The story is fiction, but there exists a truth about the mutability of the past. The saying goes that history is written by the victors; whoever has the power is able to write what happened. And those who come later only have that account from the victors to believe in. The past does indeed seem editable.

I find it unsettling saying that the past can change, but I get it. Look at how we currently view Thanksgiving or Columbus Day. Both holidays have come under scrutiny for white-washing, both in a metaphorical and racial sense, white-washing our history. Was Columbus a brave founder of a new land, or a heartless egoist committing genocide? Was the First Thanksgiving a beautiful coming together of two cultures in peace and harmony, or an early foreboding of the litany of subjugation, oppression and cruelty to follow? There may be a factual answer to both of these questions, but the histories we have are a mix of logos and mythos, of logic and emotion, of fact and fiction. Maybe the past itself isn't mutable, but how we understand it and how we know it certainly is.

We have power in this mythos of history, the power of telling stories about our past and about our present that morph from historical fact into semi-historical tales. We can't help but do it, we can't help but tell stories about what happened in both factual and fanciful ways - who tells the story, what words are used, what is remembered or forgotten... By speaking we create our past, we create our reality and we create the

future. The reason I picked the brave tailor tale this morning was that it is “meta” in its construction. Not only does it speak mythos to the truth of accomplishment and feeling brave, but look closer. The tailor tells a story himself, which then comes true. He wasn’t especially brave at the beginning, but by the end he is ready to take on an unimaginable task of bravery. He told himself he was brave, he believed himself brave, others believed him to be brave, and thus he became brave.

Now I switch to our communal stories. Look at the differences between how gatherings are explained in our very recent history. Black Lives Matters protests, Insurrection at the Capitol, people protesting, people rioting, mobs, thugs... The media and some politicians tend to talk about some groups in a positive lens, others in a negative way, with people of color very often portrayed negatively. The words used in description create a reality on their own. A group described as a mob of thugs will be remembered as a mob of thugs. A group described as patriotic protesters will be remembered as patriotic protesters. Thankfully the media and politicians are beginning to see the power of their words and the slant with which they have been speaking.

If I keep telling someone that they are worthless, they will start to believe that they are worthless and they will act it and embody that worthlessness. If, on the other hand, I continually tell someone that they are powerful and beautiful and loved, they will start to believe that they are powerful and beautiful and loved and they will act it and embody that power, beauty and love. What we do and what we say helps to create reality, our power is in our story telling about the world, about history and about the future. When we talk about each other, when we talk about ourselves, when we talk about what is happening in the world... we are using the powerful truth of mythos and the powerful act of creating truth.

The point of all of this is twofold. *First*, listen to truth from both facts and myths. Mythos often holds a truth more powerful and deeper than factual accounts. Don’t discount mythology as lacking truth, and be open to hearing someone else’s truth. Also be careful about conflating myth and fact, in either direction it is dangerous. *Secondly*, we all tell stories and create reality with our myths. Our past, present and future can all be changed through how we remember, how we construct the truths of myth and fact. Be careful what reality you are creating and use your power of story telling, use your power of creation, for good.

Myths speaks to a deeper and higher truth than facts, it is speaking to the truth of the soul. Hear that truth of the soul and when you create truth of the soul, for you do, do so in a loving way. Amen.

**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington**  
**Order of Service**

**January 24, 2021 @ 10:30 am**  
**Mythos vs. Logos**  
**Rev. Andrew L. Weber**

<b>Welcome and Announcements</b>		Carmen Bell-Delgado
<b>Prelude</b>	“Meditation” by Frank Bridge	Sue Lerner & Linda Henderson
<b>Call to Worship</b>	#436, by David C. Pole	Rev. Andrew L. Weber
<b>Chalice Lighting</b>		Carmen
<b>Hymn</b>	#343 - “A Firemist and a Planet”	Cindy Cohen & Linda
<b>Unison Affirmation</b>	First Unitarian Church of Wilmington is a beloved community that nourishes minds and spirits, fights injustice, and transforms the world through loving action.	Carmen
<b>Time for All Ages</b>	“The Brave Tailor”	Rev. Andrew
<b>Prayer/Meditation</b>	“Dreams” by Langston Hughes (#488)	
<b>Shared Silence</b>		
<b>Prayers of the People</b>		
<b>Musical Mediation</b>	“Lovely on the Water” by Ralph Vaughan Williams	Sue & Linda
<b>Reading 1</b>	from <u>The DaVinci Code</u> by Dan Brown	
<b>Reading 2</b>	from <u>Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights</u> by Salman Rushdie	
<b>Sermon</b>	Mythos vs. Logos	Rev. Andrew
<b>Hymn</b>	#301 - “Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky!”	Cindy & Linda
<b>Stewardship Moment</b>		Carmen
<b>Offertory</b>	“Spring Song” by Frank Bridge	Sue & Linda
<b>Closing Words</b>	from “Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights” by Salman Rushdie	
<b>Extinguishing the Chalice</b>		Carmen
<b>Postlude</b>	“Sabre Dance” by James MacMillan	Sue & Linda