

The Visionary Joseph Campbell

Joseph Campbell was an American professor, anthropologist, mythologist and controversial modern day philosopher best known for his elucidation of the “hero’s journey.” His philosophy can best be summed up by a phrase with which you are probably familiar—“Follow your bliss.” Campbell, himself, followed his bliss, letting his personal interests guide his career path, enabling him to bring new ideas into the world that offer an alternative way of looking at ourselves as humans.

Campbell grew up in New York City, where he frequented the American Museum of Natural History with his father. He read a great deal about American Indian culture, and developed a special interest in their mythology. His interests branched out into folk stories, legends, fables, etc. and he began to see similarities in the stories that surpassed cultural divides. Though he first studied biology and mathematics at Dartmouth College, he soon changed his focus and left to study humanities at Columbia University. He earned a BA in English literature in 1925 and an MA in medieval literature in 1927. Campbell moved on to study French, Old French, German, Japanese and Sanskrit, all for the purpose of being able to read stories, legends and fables in their original languages. His interest in Eastern thought was kindled when he met the religious philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti on a steamboat when they were both travelling from Europe to the U.S.

Rather than pursuing a doctorate, Campbell sequestered himself into a house in the woods outside of New York City and embarked on what he would later consider to be his “real” education: reading nine hours a day, for five years. It is during this time that he began developing his unique vision about the nature of life.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT: On a separate sheet, identify the main ideas in the article and how each is developed. Then briefly summarize the article.

Campbell’s co-wrote *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1944) with Henry Morton Robinson. It was from this book that Campbell learned the term “monomyth,” which he would later develop as a concept in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), in which he asserted that all myths follow an archetypal pattern called “the hero’s journey,” in which an individual receives a “call to adventure” and after (usually) attempting to reject the call, leaves home on a journey. The hero is almost always assisted by a mentor or a spiritual guide who ushers the hero into a new environment where he must overcome a series of obstacles in order to complete his quest. The hero, transformed by his journey, then returns to his home in a sort of rebirth, where his new-found knowledge can benefit his people. Campbell maintained that the stories of almost all mythical heroes, across history and cultures, follow this same narrative arc.

Campbell also studied the ideas of rival psychiatrists Carl Jung and his former teacher, Sigmund Freud, seeking to find reconciliation for their disparate theories about dreams, fantasies and the human unconscious in his own fields of anthropology, mythology and literature.

Joseph Campbell’s work was radical and heretical to fundamentalists of many different religions, in that he sought to find the unifying theory in all religions, believing them all to be only “masks” of a single, transcendent truth that was ultimately unknowable. He tried to show that Eastern and Western religions were at their core the same, neither entirely right nor entirely wrong, but both seeking the same elusive answer to life’s questions. His book *The Masks of God* is his attempt to summarize the primary spiritual stories of the world, in order to demonstrate the unity of the human species.

