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## **Myth as Transformation of Conflict**

Donald Cowan

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# Myth As Transformation of Conflict

Donald Cowan

Those of you who are veterans of this institute from last year are familiar with the weird use of terms tossed around by the initiates and the faculty. Many of the words that sound like Greek to you are indeed Greek; they are used not to impress you with the erudition of the faculty but to have handy some designators of familiar concepts stripped of the encrustation with which usage has sheathed them. Polis, for example, means city; it is a community of people who come together and organize to promote the good life, a political community, yes, but of a higher order than we generally think of when we say politics. Oikos means the household in its extended sense, the domestic life, the family, the servants, the property, including its political and economic aspects. (Our word economics comes from this stem--meaning Household management. We are, then, making an analogy of this great organized world to a household.) I myself am just a poor physicist and one of those dread administrators caught up in the toils of the literati; I am ignorant of what anagnorisis means--and yet, in its context, I do know and have a sensation of agony, of suffering, in the discovery that follows a peripeteia, a turning point in the drama. Very quickly one becomes attuned to this sort of word usage. The

term Myth already, in one morning's time, I suspect, has been freed for you of accumulated connotations such as false, ancient, made-up, fairy tale.

One might suppose that we use these arcane terms for precision, for exactness; but quite to the contrary, we use them to cast a little aura about the subject--a little "fuzziness" as your speaker this morning noted. This long-standing inexactness of literary criticism is what is now bringing it back to the forefront of analytical thinking. Fuzziness turns out to be much more useful than precision in applications of technology; if American industrial scientists have indeed fallen behind Japanese, it is because the Japanese moved into this field about five years ago and over here we're just beginning. While we were setting up a combined industry and government research center to develop new chips for computers, High Density television, and various control devices for complex operations, the Japanese were setting up a comparable combination to develop such devices by fuzzy logic. They have made hundreds of devices now for such tasks--simpler, more reliable, less expensive. Now we have to play "catch up". So if you have been a little embarrassed about studying the classics, thinking them to be old-fashioned and out of date, be comforted: it's really the latest thing. In a subsequent talk with you I hope to expound in a little more detail on chaos theory, fuzzy logic, and the myth of fact, not only attacking

rationality but also entering a defense of it.

The story of Prometheus is one of the most persistent myths of education; just a week ago, the German journal Die Zeit featured this ancient tale in a review of the History of Technology, a multi-volume work whose fifth and last number has just been released. Prometheus, as you now know, is the god who gave us techne, the art, craft, and imagination that equips us to make useful things.

Because, as he says, out of concern for the pitiable state of mortal mankind, he taught man all the arts, thereby becoming the originator and patron god of education. It is not so much that Prometheus himself, the Titanic stealer of the divine fire, is an image of the teacher (like, say, an Athena, who inspires), as that he is an image of the whole force in the destiny of mankind that we call education. He is an embodiment of what we believe in when we place our faith in the transformation of the human race by the act of learning; he is the large cause we serve when we decide to devote our lives to education. And we still feel some guilt attached to this calling; it attempts to change the way things are; it is radically disruptive. What we see in Prometheus, as he catalogs the skills with which he has equipped this forlorn figure of humanity, is much more than a competent technician programming a computer for a versatile robot whose utility constitutes its value; what we see, on the contrary, is a god in love with a seemingly insensate lump of being,

making use of mundane materials as instruction to awaken in that lump the glory of the intellect hidden within. And we recognize in his motives that it was the possibility of instigating this awakening in others that got us all into this game in the first place; the choice means that not our own shining accomplishments but our multiplication of these students, our surrogates, becomes our contribution to this mighty enterprise of history.

This awakening of the intellect in the human kind gets us into Zeus's territory.

Zeus the intellect is the portion of the godhead to whom earthly events have meaning and beauty. His is the clear intelligence that the Greeks speak of as nous. Kerenyi (The Religion of the Greeks and Romans) notes: "With Zeus, the Nous shows itself pure and perfect . . . it discovers everything without seeking, indeed everything discovers itself to it. . . . the object of nous is what really is." Zeus' mind, it seems, is a mirror of metaphysical reality. He is attuned to the truth of being; he has an aesthetic love of the clear, hard reality that works itself out in the design of the universe. But it is the "vision" of Zeus that seems most characteristic of his mind: what the ancients spoke of as his "will," his "plan." The plan of Zeus, encountered obliquely in the mythological fables and mentioned overtly throughout the Iliad and the Odyssey, is a constant mental construction in an attempt to fulfill what is, for Zeus, an essentially eschatological sense--of how things

must turn out. He does not know the plan, that is, he is not able to formulate it in words. He sees the end but not the means.

The Zeusian mind is clear and unhampered in its view of essences: it has in its purview the good, the true, and the beautiful, and it is little willing to compromise in the achievement of these goals. It sees beyond the present scene and so can seem cold in its lack of concern for the immediate. It broods upon the total scene, not taking sides, impassive and meditative. Zeus's sense of history dictates, however, from time to time intervention in the affairs of mortals, primarily in the engendering and protection of heroes. For Zeus loves the hero, that singular individual that stands out above others, who excels. Prometheus, in contrast, sheds his concern on ordinary beings, equipping them with traits of value and stirring within them a spark of intelligence that relates them, however remotely, to the clear intellect of Zeus.

Why do we concern ourselves so with these mythological beings? The various Greek divinities--and, as you have found, there are many of them--could be said to represent aspects of humanity, if we are willing to reduce them to psychology. But if we leave them in their mythic form we could speak of them as elements of being. Different cultures have called them by different names: but whether we consider them aspects of the one God, embodiments of the Platonic Ideas, angelic powers, ontological splendors, or psychic

manifestations, they are presences that lurk about, chiding, chastising, guiding, punishing, comforting. They are in charge of our intuitions; they govern feeling, which is much more the arbiter of our decisions than is the rationality of argument. They oversee not so much what happens to us as what we make of what happens to us.

In the scheme of things that we in this institute believe to be relevant, we are convinced that the concept of myth is necessary to education. It may even be that a deepened concept of myth will be the most important contribution this institute can make, for we do all of us, moderns though we are, live still in myth and need to understand its workings. It is not the actual content of a myth that is our concern in this theory of education; rather it is an acknowledgement that myth exists and serves to bind communities and guide cultures. Myth governs the mental and emotional world in which we dwell; it gives shape to the information and skills a young person learns. Since facts remain unrelated and knowledge is rendered neutral without such a pattern, a child growing up without myth tends to lack purpose and direction.

Mythic thought cuts more deeply into the heart of reality than does any other kind of thinking. In conflict with neither religious faith nor with science, it serves quite different functions from both, attempting to perform the role of neither. For it is neither about the truly numinous--the Holy--nor about the functional reality of a measurable and empirically experienced universe.

Nor is it about morals or ethics--not about what ought to be so much as what is, permanently and irrevocably, within the mystery of being--seen from the human point of view. Myth is an alternative way of knowing, of seeing a solution without solving the problem. It bypasses logic and hence enables the human mind to surmount impossibility. It is symbolic thinking, a capacity which may be more representative of the glory and the span of human thought than even reason, since it is able to construct an entire web of signification, built up of observations, inferences, communal memories, and sentiments. And this mythic symbolic thinking gives form to intuitions within the human psyche, as well as to invisible signs from without, the process enhancing the perception of both depth and transcendence.

Myths express themselves in actions and artifacts that have symbolic significance. Ceremonies, rituals, celebrations, festivals, games, customs, manners--virtually every interaction between people express the dominant myth of a people, as do the deliberate constructions of artists and story tellers. Narratives have a peculiar power on the imagination, tending to hold together in a persistent form events and images that can be shared in a community so that the gods and heroes that people our legends actually come into trans-personal existence. To various degrees we vest these figures with belief; but as we become

enlightened, we turn belief into skepticism, supposing such a stance to be more intellectually respectable. Then as we mature further, we come to realize, somewhat ruefully, that disbelief is a far more artificial action than is belief in the first place; and, if we are fortunate, we assume Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith." Belief then comes as a gift, as a grace, not as an attainment. The cosmos thereafter becomes a much more comfortable place in which to exist. And we are open again to transcendent guidance.

In the West, our two large mythic structures come from the Greeks and the Hebrews, though both, of course, include elements from Africa and the Middle East. The Greek and Roman gods themselves migrated down from northern Europe, branching along either side of the Adriatic--very much the same gods but with different names: Jupiter, Zeus; Juno, Hera; Minerva, Athena; Mercury, Hermes; and so on. In America, particularly in the American South, the Roman gods prevailed, partly because of the influence of Virgil's Aeneid and perhaps mostly because the Latin language persisted in schools until well into the 1930's. Americans tended to think of the nation as the New Troy--the "Novus Ordo Seclorum," as our dollar bills proclaim. As classical languages died out in required studies, the Greeks and Romans emerged in tales, though not in language.

As important as it is theological observances, in terms of mythic thought it is irrelevant that the Hebrew strain is for most of us--Christians, Jews, Muslims--a matter of religious, not only poetic, faith. Just as the imagination works in the same way with the material of Moses or of Odysseus, so the myth-making propensity of the human mind--when it is uninjured and unhampered--grasps the power and beauty of an entire cosmos, whole and entire, what some scholars have spoken of as a weltanschauung, a showing forth of a world. I am saying that a myth is much more than a catalog of gods and goddesses, much more than an anthology of legends and hero tales. The two dominant world views of the West--Matthew Arnold designated them as "Hebraism" and "Hellenism"--are quite different in their emphases and yet the two have come together, along with Roman law and Christian love, to make the dominant Western composite myth of the past two thousand years. Throughout this period, we have been living in versions of the same large myth, though the last four hundred years of its epoch--the age of modernity--represent something of an anomaly in its development.

There are other great myths, of course, from other traditions. Africa is a treasury we have only begun to explore, and many roots of the Greek myth run back to Egypt and North Africa. The Orient we have dipped into mythically only superficially, although we are attracted to many of their practices. On

this hemisphere, the Mayan. Aztec, "native American," (actually, none of us is native: we are all intruders) each has its culture guided by a myth--all different and yet curiously similar as if all issued from some common source.

For our purposes, we need not know the various myths. It is a help to know one fairly well as a sort of model of completeness--and the Greeks will do nicely. Their artifices that document the myth are finite and adequate, so it is quite possible for any one of you--or more--to be acquainted with them all. And, as one of our faculty commented, there are no ancient Greeks around to object. If you try it, do it for fun, not for prestige. In truth it is not important that you know the myths; it is important that you know myths exist, that there, is one hovering over you right now; we live in a nest of myths that govern the way we view the world, what we think valuable, and what we give final authority to.

A question that educators must consider is what and how much should be taught--the minimum needed? or the maximum time will allow? Do we pace our teaching to the slow student or to the brightest? The question "Can we be excellent and equal, too?" has vexed educators since universal education became feasible--a century or so ago. The question is an oxymoron on the face of it--a

self-contradiction: one cannot both excel others and be equal to them. Logic compels us to educate for one or the other--if we grant that excellence requires education and democracy requires equality. Of course, there are many stratagems for dodging the question: tracking, magnet schools, talented and gifted programs, "choice"--all devices of stratification aimed at excellence at the expense of equality--that is, of democracy. But the problem is not peculiarly modern; it has been present to challenge educators apparently from the beginning of history. For the question it poses is at the heart of the mortal enterprise: is the human purpose served best by protecting truth from unworthy hands or by throwing it open to all who come? It is unlikely that we shall find a suitable solution to this age-long dilemma in our deliberations during the next few days, but we may be able to cast it in a different light. And, as one might suppose from this morning's lecture, that light is one of myth.

The drama we study today is about this troubling question; for Prometheus Bound, the drama by Aeschylus based on ancient myth, indicates that, as the Greeks thought of it, the conflict between the exclusive Zeusian mind and the inclusive Promethean imagination lies at the basis of culture. It is an apparently unresolvable antinomy, but, as Aeschylus' drama prophesies, mutual need, in the far distant future, will dictate a reconciliation. What one wonders is

whether that far distant future has now arrived. After all, we know the telling of the story was 2500 years ago and the thirteen generations Aeschylus has Prometheus "foresee" is long since up, but in the nature of mythic time--maybe, just maybe the pinning of Prometheus to the rock may have occurred three times further back and the ten thousand years some say Zeus specified is up. The gift of technology was given to man back at the beginning, but it did not have Prometheus's guidance. Man went off on his own, ingeniously inventing devices for his own advantage. And he kept getting into trouble. But now Heracles has cut the bonds and set the god free to resume his work of raising the condition of all of mankind, not just of heroes. That at least is the "fiction" that presented itself to me a score of years ago when I began to marshal the benign effects of technology, not the malignant ones, and found that technology does indeed work toward equalizing the capabilities of ordinary folk with those of the gifted, the demos joining the aristoi. To the figure of Athena as inspiring teacher of heroic individuals we now add the "blind hopes" of Prometheus for the education of all.

Both of these aspects are clearly on the side of equality in the dichotomy set up with excellence. The Promethean mind selects the curriculum and proffers it to all; the Athenian

imagination awakens the individual student--from within--to the possibility of grasping the curriculum. Both principal and teacher share in these essentially democratic tasks, and the principal has the responsibility to see that the two actions are understood. When we mixed teachers and principals together two years ago in a version of an institute such as we are experiencing here, we had expected that the principals would gain an increased respect for teachers, seeing how bright they were and how hard they had to work; that may have happened, but the surprise was that the teachers began to look on principals with sympathy and appreciation, seeing that they were much more intelligent than they appeared under their administrative guise and that they bore a heavy burden without the daily rewards of the classroom, such as teachers have. Of course I am suggesting to you that you too look on your principal with sympathy and a hint of admiration. Expect of her or him not only practical guidance but inspiration and vision, and your expectation will have its effect. Principals are thrust into a position of having a further duty: if education is to have a mission beyond the improvement of individuals--the initiation of a communal movement toward that ideal state envisioned in this country's founding, say--that mission enters into schooling through something like the Zeusian mind, through a large, far-reaching vision of the future. Certainly teachers will share in it, principals are the ones

in the educational venture who have the obligation of assuming the outlook of a Zeus. Of course only through the agency of teachers can the vision then granted them be conveyed to the community. And yet the Zeusian mind is inevitably in conflict with the Promethean mind. The great conciliation envisioned at the beginning of history must come about in the halls of your very schools.

What is accomplished by introducing the gods into the problem we are here assaying--of resolving the excellence\ equality dichotomy? It amounts to something like a Fourier Transform in mathematics, a frequently used stratagem in physics and other disciplines; an unsolvable problem is "transformed" into a form that can be solved and the solution so obtained is then transformed back. So here the problem--insoluble in terms of educational statistics--becomes a contest between Prometheus and Zeus, something that can indeed be solved by a change of attitude. Prometheus drops his rebellious egalitarian demands and Zeus, in turn, drops his insistence on ranking, on competition. The two are reconciled in their concern for the human race; power and high aspiration unite with compassion and imagination.

To examine the myth more deeply is to see that every educator is both Prometheus and Zeus, ceaselessly tutoring, ceaselessly inviting, constantly upholding quality and defending rigor.

The Promethean in us wants all children to learn; the Zeusian envisions the high and noble values to which each is called to aspire. An educator must be of both minds. And the American school system will come into its full flowering when the two powers join in a common enterprise.

When I said that during the past four centuries we have been living under a variant of the dominant myth, I was implying that the dominant myth was an interplay of intellect and spirit but that in the sixteenth century the intellect set out to go it on its own. The idea of the rational universe was engendered and would flower in the enlightenment two centuries later--the idea that the processes of existence could be accounted for by reasoning from logical principles starting from a few points that were obviously true --points called facts. The term "fact" came into our language first in 1545, according to the OED, And our schools have been dominated by fact from the beginning; but their obsession with it has increased a hundredfold in the past half century.

Standardized testing, measurements of accountability, curriculum guidelines, great structures of statistics--these are the marks of a system that has lost belief in its own powers of judgment. It will be teachers who, once more, steal the divine fire for their students, despite the iron chains of fact. Our age is an age that will demand heroes; we can only hope that it doesn't

have to make of them martyrs.

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