Excerpts from *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers by Joseph Campbell

*Questions asked by Moyers are italicized within the excerpts.*

**The Journey Inward**

The serpent bound to the earth, the eagle in spiritual flight—isn’t that conflict something we all experience? And then when the two amalgamate, we get a wonderful dragon, a serpent with wings. All over the earth people recognize these images. Whether I’m reading Polynesian or Iroquois or Egyptian myths, the images are the same, and they are talking about the same problem.

*What do you make of it that in these two stories the principal actors point to someone else as the initiator of the Fall?*

Yes, but it turns out to be the snake. In both of these stories the snake is the symbol of life throwing off the past and continuing to live.

*Why?*

The power of life causes the snake to shed its skin, just as the moon sheds its shadow. The serpent sheds its sin to be born again, as the moon its shadow to be born again. They are equivalent symbols. Sometimes the serpent is represented as a circle eating its own tail. That’s an image of life. Life sheds one generation after another, to be born again. The serpent represents immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again. There is something tremendously terrifying about life when you look at it that way. And so the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and the terror of life.

Now the snake in most cultures is given a positive interpretation. In India, even the most poisonous snake, the cobra, is a sacred animal, and the mythological Serpent King is the next thing to the Buddha. The serpent represents the power of life engaged in the field of time, and of death, yet eternally alive. The world is but its shadow—the falling skin.

That amounts to a refusal to affirm life. In the biblical tradition we have inherited, life is corrupt, and every natural impulse is sinful unless it has been circumcised or baptized. The serpent was the one who brought sin into the world. and the woman was the one who handed the apple to the man. This identification of the woman with sin, of the serpent with sin, and thus of life with sin is the twist that has been given to the whole story in the biblical myth and doctrine of the Fall.

*It does seem that this story has done women a great disservice by casting Eve as responsible for the Fall. Why are women the ones held responsible for the downfall?*
They represent life. Man doesn’t enter life except by woman, and so it is woman who brings us into this world of pairs of opposites and suffering.

Do you think there was such a place as the Garden of Eden?

Of course not. The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for that innocence that is innocent of time, innocent of opposites, and that is the prime center out of which consciousness then becomes aware of the changes.

What do our souls owe to ancient myths?

The ancient myths were designed to harmonize the mind and the body. The mind can ramble off in strange ways and want things that the body does not want. The myths and rites were means of putting the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way that nature dictates.

And these myths tell me how others have made the passage, and how I can make the passage?

Well, that is no problem at all. The problem in middle life, when the body has reached its climax of power and begins to decline, is to identify yourself not with the body, which is falling away, but with the consciousness of which it is a vehicle. This is something I learned from myths. What am I? Am I the bulb that carries the light, or am I the light of which the bulb is a vehicle?

These early myths help the psyche to participate without a sense of guilt or fright in the necessary act of life.