

## The Practice of Finding a Fit in the World: Mythology and Bowen Theory

By Thomas J. Schur

Copyright 2003

### Thesis:

Universal principles allow humans to find a fit with humans and other living systems through language. The more universal the principle is, the higher the level of functioning is, as actions are more flexible and adaptive.

### Science and Art:

- This can happen in science through the discovery of laws that confirm hypotheses by predicting results of experiments.

- This can happen in art as a wide variety of people share a deep and common human experience stimulated by a piece of art.

Both science and art can provide a perspective for one's place in the universe and serve as a guide for more effective action.

### Language and Belonging:

It is language that allows orientation and a sense of reality through consciousness with the notion of a self (Schur, 2003, assumption # 3). In this way humans have a sense of belonging, as they continually act in the world. This sense of belonging or having a fit, is critical because of the existential anxiety created by the awareness of mortality that language generates (Schur, 2003, assumption # 4).

### Mythology:

In a recent re-reading of Joseph Campbell's work on mythology, I realized that my practice of therapy operating from Bowen theory is remarkably consistent with how Campbell works with myths. A few examples of this are:

- Campbell's notion of "follow your bliss" seems equivalent to my aphorism of "following the lead" of the client or supervisee;
- his working with human themes expressed in myths, is working with patterns in systems;
- his modus operandi as the story, is equivalent to my thinking of therapy or supervision as an ongoing conversation.

What is important here is that Bowen theory and science explicitly informs how I work in therapy, while the consistency with Campbell's framework about mythology, is entirely unintentional.

My hunch about this realization is that it occurs because my working in language in Bowen theory to control reactivity and think more clearly, helps me get to more universal experiences for my clients and myself. These universal experiences are the same as those presented by myths across many centuries and many cultures. Then Campbell's ways of working with myths end up being similar to what I do working with my clients in therapy. In both realms people gain a more effective perspective for operating as a living system, as they find a better fit of self in the world.

Campbell himself says: "Is the conscientious teacher—concerned for the moral character as well as for the book-learning of his students—to be loyal first to the supporting myths of our civilization or to the

'factualized' truths of his science? Are the two, on every level, at odds? Or is there not some point of wisdom beyond the conflicts of illusion and truth by which lives can be put back together again? (1972, p. 11).

#### Brain function:

Further speculation leads to questions about brain function. If one accepts the crude distinction of right and left brain function, where the left relates more to the scientific and the right more to the art, can one think about how both types of brain function operate at a higher level as they are less reactive, as they get to more universal abstractions, both through language. For example, scientific laws that are too contextual to the person of the scientist and the culture of that period, may not predict outcomes as often and in as many situations as those that have thinking and feeling better distinguished and better coordinated. In the same way, art that is too personal and idiosyncratic to the artist, will not appeal to as wide an audience over as long a time, as a piece where the artist uses his/her personal experience to transcend it.

#### Importance:

Why is any of this important?

1. It validates my work. For years my clients, my supervisees and my students have validated the work we do as they have made important changes in their lives, and as they have an understanding of what they are doing that enables them to continue to adapt and change. Most of that understanding has been framed in systems theory, using science and Bowen theory. This experiential validation extends to the possibility of scientific validation from neuroscience, as this work could be understood from the 'other side of the brain', here in mythology. As my clients, supervisees and students get through an impasse, they almost always say 'That makes sense,' and they don't mean just logically. In this way our conversations are very practical because they develop an increasingly better basis for experimenting with what works in their lives.
2. Through language it broadens and strengthens the conceptual foundation for my work and how I live my life. Campbell's idea about mythology as ancient stories played out in the personal lives of people today, provides a powerful perspective about the self. "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change." (1949, p. 4). This perspective of a universal narrative, active in our everyday lives, parallels Bowen's concept of Multigenerational Transmission Process which Bowen embedded in science. In using language as the bridge here between science and art, between Bowen theory and Campbell's model of mythology, one can address the self in the flow of life over the generations, especially as one looks to the future.
3. It provides a practical focus for my current stage in life. My particular interests now are in the dynamic of succession, in the next generation of my children, of my students and supervisees, of Bowen theorists and systems thinkers, and of leaders in society. This foundation of integrating Campbell's work with Bowen theory through language, provides a framework for managing the anxiety in the generational flow of the emotional system in all these domains through access to what is universal. With this as a base, I can listen to the stories from my own family and from the human family throughout history, as one narrative within which I continue to differentiate a self as I grow older.

#### References:

Campbell, J. (1949). The hero with a thousand faces. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Campbell, J. (1972). Myths to live by. New York: Viking.

Schur, T. (2003). Language, systems theory and the self: Four assumptions. Emergent Ideas website, Essays, @[www.tschur.com](http://www.tschur.com).