

# It is just a myth

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*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too*

*Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace*

From 'Imagine', John Lennon, 1971

### **The queen is dead, and long live the king**

When Queen Elisabeth died on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September in 2022, we were once again shown to what extent some people embody a mythical status and, by doing so, manage to trigger the imagination of many people who acknowledge and confirm their mythical status. Besides public figures like football players and popstars, royalty can still fulfil this mythical role in our modern world.

Queen Elisabeth had reached the wonderful age of 96 years, and therefore many English people had not known a time preceding her reign. Because she had always been there, they could hardly believe that she could actually die. For many she had become the symbol of transcending conflicts between people, of keeping the nation together. For this she had not done much more than keeping a fair distance from the human world and from her own individual life as a mortal human being – never giving her opinion on any matter, always living her life within the well-secured areas of palaces, castles and privately owned land. For many British people she had been a mother to everyone.

Of course, rationally people knew very well that someday Queen Elisabeth would die, just like every other mortal human being. Yet the moment still came quite unexpected, and somehow they had not yet realized what the change from a queen to a king would entail. There were serious

doubts whether a man like Charles would be able to continue the – mythically charged – protective and unifying role of his mother. Would this role not be too feminine for him? People started realizing that his style would be different anyway. I think there is definitely an important role for him to play, perhaps with an even more important mythical dimension than Queen Elisabeth has ever had managed to embody – and very suitable for the time we are living in. Before I go deeper into this, let me first say something about the way we experience myth in the modern world.

### **The double meaning of myth**

I am fascinated by the concept of *myth*. It has a double meaning that points in two completely opposite directions: myths can either be stories expressing the fundamental truths of life that need to be cherished, and need to be retold regularly and ritually enacted, or they can be expressions of obvious lies and fantasies that need to be corrected and to be gotten rid of. According to David Leeming ‘we commonly use the word ‘myth’ to mean a generally held belief or concept that is clearly untrue or merely fanciful. (...) This definition of myth as false belief or superstition develops naturally enough from the more accurate understanding of the word as a fabulous and obviously untrue narrative of the deeds of heroes and gods.’<sup>1</sup> But before myths were considered expressions of something untrue and superstitious in the context of a secular world, they began as reflections of deep truths within a religious or spiritual context. As Leeming has pointed out, in our modern world considering myths false and superstitious is part of our education: ‘From an early age the individual learns the importance of being rational. Yet the very essence of myth and ritual is anti-rational.’<sup>2</sup> Of course, today we use the word *myth* also to disqualify false beliefs or concepts straight away, without them ever having been part of a religious or spiritual context.

It is clear that myths as expressions of fundamental truths represent the much older meaning. This conception might be going back to the dawn of humanity. In comparison, myths as expressions of lies and fantasies represent a relatively recent version. The change from the first to the second meaning didn’t manifest itself only in the last centuries: it was already generated by a cultural change that has taken place in human society a few

thousand years ago – a change that manifested itself when the cyclical view of life was gradually replaced by a linear historical view of life; a change in which we also increasingly started to feel separated from the natural world. These two kinds of changes are interrelated with each other. When our ancestors started to feel separated from the natural world, they simultaneously began to focus on the linear developments of history and began to disqualify the mythical views of life as representations of the fundamental truths about life. This change manifested itself in the first city states of Sumer, in an urban environment, in which the rulers, the people who had put themselves hierarchically in a top position, had given themselves a central role to play in the historical developments. They were the first to show that history is always written by the ‘winners’ – a reality in which a large part, probably by far the largest part, of human experiences and cultural developments have remained unwritten and therefore also have been neglected.

It was this change to the linear historical view of life that has become the basis of Western ‘civilization’. In the Christian religion, life had once begun with the Creation by God, developed further in a linear way towards the present time and will finally end with the Apocalypse; in a secular historical sense, humanity has linearly evolved from a ‘savage state’ to a ‘civilized state’, a one-way development with the continuous threat of falling back into untamed ‘savagery’ – and it is unclear how this development will continue and to what this will lead in the end. When we look at the scientific worldviews, we can see, for instance, that according to evolutionary theory as a species we have gradually ascended above all the other living beings in the natural world, another one-way development with the threat of falling back into ‘bestial’ behaviour – and here it is also not clear how this evolutionary process will continue and whether it is going to end. Cosmological research has made it clear, however, that at some future moment life on earth will come to an end anyway, but it has increasingly extended the time line: with the Big Bang it added not only a long period of billions of years that has preceded the evolution of life on earth; but also after our planet has collapsed into the sun, cosmologically the universe is believed to continue for trillions of years. On a much smaller scale, in this context we should not forget, of course, the view of capitalists and market

economists who assume that the budgets of companies and the economy in general must always keep growing further in a linear sense and that financial declines must always be avoided at all costs.

What has been lost in all these Western worldviews is the idea that life has essentially always been a cyclical process. And of course, at this very moment in time life is still cyclical. The linear worldviews have only managed to alienate themselves from life. And by doing this, they have alienated themselves also from the mythical stories and images that have given it a voice.

### **The original mythical worldview**

Originally – that is, long before the rise of the anthropocentric and anthropomorphic worldview of the organized religions – we experienced the natural world around us, and all the living non-human being in it, in a mythical way. We felt completely embedded in the surrounding landscape, an inextricable part of it. It was not conceivable yet that we might be able to step outside this context, to observe and analyze it from a position without it. This was essentially a spiritual world in which everything was considered Sacred.

The American researcher and writer Clark Strand has given a good description of the mythical worldview in his book *Waking up to the Dark*: ‘The belief that everything in the universe, animate and inanimate, possesses an imperishable spiritual essence was once the global norm. People couldn’t understand those imperishable essences then any better than they can now, but there was something very intimate in the way they chose to relate to them – through story, myth and song. Mountains were mountains, the rivers rivers, but they were also goddesses and gods. (...) It situated us in the immediately felt subjective experience of life itself, and that meant relating to nature first and to human culture second.’<sup>3</sup> In this original mythical worldview, our ancestors related to the surrounding natural world in a reciprocal way – and the various relationships that they considered important, were reflected in their mythical stories. It is important to realize that for millennia these myths have been handed down orally from one generation to the next, until after the invention of writing eventually

they were written down. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how old mythical beings and stories exactly are.

Anyway, I think the mythical beings began as non-anthropomorphic beings – being that did not yet appear in human shape. As Strand indicated, mountains and rivers were identified as Goddesses and Gods, but also other natural phenomena, like forests, specific trees, hills, valleys, lakes, wells, the sea or the sky, the stars, moon and the sun were considered Sacred, identified as mythical beings. The Goddesses and Gods only gradually got their human form – like we know them, for instance, from Greek and Roman mythology. In Christianity the Sacred in human form became even more prominent in the Saints – human being who first had to live an exemplary earthly life, before they got their Sacred statuses as Saints.

But if we go back in time, we can see that the Goddesses and Gods were originally spiritual forces embodied in natural phenomena. Many mountains and rivers still carry names that can be traced back to their mythical origin. In Ireland, for instance, rivers like the Shannon and the Boyne were embodiments of Goddesses – the Goddesses Sinann and Boann. Also, in France rivers were called after Goddesses: the Seine, was called after the Goddess Sequana, and the Marne was called after the Gallo-Roman Dea Matrona. On the west coast of Ireland two mountains are called the Paps of Danu, the breasts of the Goddess Danu – implying that the rest of her body was manifested in other features of the landscape. The Scottish islands of the Hebrides were called after the Goddess Brigid who was later Christianized to Saint Brigid of Saint Bride. The winter version of Brigid was the Cailleach (sometimes added by ‘Béara’, translated as ‘the Hag of Béara’), whose name has also survived in many places Ireland and Scotland. Through the process of Christianization, the Sacred landscape association often continued to exist and was included in the Christian faith. In Ireland, for instance, mountains that were already considered Sacred in the existing pre-Christian culture, were connected to worship of Saints by Christians, as has been the case with the famous mountains Croagh Patrick and Mount Brendan, which have been renamed after Saint Patrick and Saint Brendan.

The connection between the mythical worldview and the surrounding landscape is the central theme of the so-called *landscape mythology*. This

term has been introduced by the Swiss cultural anthropologist Kurt Derungs, who has researched the relationship between landscape, archaeological finds, mythology and folklore in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. In his many books (mostly in German) he has shown that these links between landscape and mythological beings, and the stories connected to them, are ancient and have existed everywhere.<sup>4</sup> Also in England and Ireland there has been a lot of research into the relationship between mythology and landscape, for instance by Michael Dames, Sharon Blackie, Terence Meaden and Manchan Magan.<sup>5</sup> The feminist writer Rachel Pollack has shown, in her book *The Body of the Goddess*, that many megalithic temples from the Neolithic period have been shaped after the body or womb of the Goddess. These temples were again reflections of the presence of the Goddess in the surrounding landscape.<sup>6</sup> What all these researches have made clear is that our prehistoric ancestor tended to associate the landscape with the feminine part of life – as expressions of the Divine Feminine, as local manifestations of Mother Earth.

### **The mythical status of human beings**

When the historical linear worldview started to dominate, myths lost their original power of expressing the fundamental truths of life. But the degradation of myth did not only generate the new meaning of myths as expressions of lies and fantasies that we need to get rid of: from now on the mythical world continued in a new, distorted and reduced, way in the human world. And within our human world mythical statuses were only connected to a small, selected group of people: in particular to the rulers, to the people in supposedly powerful positions. So, even though in general the original mythical worldviews were degraded to lies and fantasies, the rulers – first the kings, and later followed by the Caesars, Emperors, Tsars, Presidents and Dictators – started to identify themselves with a role of a mythical, superhuman dimension. It is a fact, however, that they could only realize this, when their ‘subjects’ regularly acknowledged and confirmed their mythical status. So, their mythical status – and their position in power – was thus kept alive from two directions. For millennia the rulers of the Western countries appropriated the mythical world exclusively for themselves and added this invisible, immaterial dimension to their ever-

growing collection of material possessions. By doing this, they have narrowed the meaning of myth down to an exceptional human quality that, for some reason, only they seemed to possess and gave them a kind of superhuman and almost immortal aura. Until the day the ruler actually died, of course, and turned out to be very human after all – like what recently has happened to Queen Elisabeth.

We can witness regularly that the distorted version of myth has remained dominant in our society up to the present. Whenever we think we are confronted with ideas or convictions that we consider false and dangerous, we almost automatically identify them as myths, but we also continue to attribute mythical statuses to people who seem to have superhuman qualities. Nowadays we give a mythical status to football players like Maradona, Johan Cruyff, Ronaldo or Messi; to ‘popstars’ like Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Michael Jackson, David Bowie, Madonna or Beyoncé; to ‘film stars’ like Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne and more recently, Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio; and, of course, to members of Royal Families like Queen Elisabeth and, before her, Princess Diana or Lady Di.

They are all people that we usually only observe from a distance or from a screen, and so will probably never be in face-to-face contact with as real flesh-and blood human beings. This distance is essential in keeping their mythical status intact. It shows that apparently the equations of myths with lies and fantasies, goes well together with assigning a mythical role exclusively to people who are considered exceptional. It is important to emphasize here once again that with the distortion of myth also a major shift has taken place: although originally the mythic dimension had been experienced all over the surrounding natural world, being a hidden quality of all cyclical life that was forever changing, it had now been reduced to a specific, static human quality and even further reduced to an exceptional status that only few people will ever possess.

Let me add here that many people will probably not openly admit that they give a mythical status to some of the people that they consider exceptional. When we talk about the mythical status of Queen Elisabeth or King Charles, I think rationally a lot of people will be inclined to say: ah, come on, we just love them, they are lovely people, that has nothing to do

with mythology. After all, we do not like to be associated with a childish belief in ‘fairy stories’. We like to see ourselves as grown-up human beings and have convinced ourselves that we are very ‘down to earth’ people, who are standing with both of our feet firmly on the ground and are living a life in the ‘real world’. This kind of reaction only confirms that our connection to this true mythical dimension of life has degenerated a lot. It shows that the meaning of myths as obvious and even dangerous lies dominates in the discussion, that we try very hard to give no mythical statuses to the people we admire a lot. Yet, as long as we keep suppressing the original meaning of myth, somehow we cannot get ourselves rid of the urge to give them this mythical status anyway.

### **Mythic inflation**

From the moment we have stopped associating the mythical realm with the natural world and the concept of myth degenerated both to the association with untrue stories and with high statuses of specific human beings, this has also given rise to the danger of what the American mythologist Joseph Campbell has called *mythic inflation*. Through their mythically charged status people feel elevated to an artificial, superhuman level that might give them a sense of being immortal. As long as they are aware that they are still essentially a mortal being just like anybody else, that the mythical status is always artificial and temporary – and manage to keep returning to their human level on a regular basis –, it probably remains quite harmless. But that is, of course, far from easy. When they get addicted to the power that is generated by this mythical status and start identifying with it very strongly, they become a victim of mythic inflation. They start believing they are more or less a God, much more important than the other human beings, and thereby lose touch with their own humanity. Jungians have called this mental state *ego inflation*, which puts more emphasis on what happens in human consciousness: the human ego gets blown up to enormous proportions, sucks up all the energy, and makes its victims forget that they actually also possess another empathic side that feels deeply connected to the natural world and to other people.

There are many examples of mythically inflated human beings: we can witness them in the world of politics, the media, sports, classical music, pop

music, and so on. In fact, no one is really free from its danger. By observing the victims of mythic inflation that we can see in the society around us, including the enormous damage they are causing to the human and natural environment, and of course to themselves in the first place, we can become more aware of the danger. They can make us aware that myth originally was never connected to static but expanding statuses of human beings; that the mythical statuses of human beings are mere distorted manifestations of the original meaning and power of myth.

### **Cycles and straight lines, symbols and facts**

As said earlier, the original meaning and power of myth has always kept manifesting itself, up to the present time, through the ever-moving and ever-changing cycles of the surrounding natural world. She always keeps embracing us as a loving mother, providing us with a sense of being at home on Mother Earth. Or perhaps we'd better talk about *being at home IN Mother Earth*, as for example the atmosphere providing us with the air to breathe is an inextricable part of Her being as well. In this respect the American cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram has suggested, in his book *Becoming Animal*, a new concept for planet earth: *Eairth*. He has pointed out, that for our ancestors the outdoor world was essentially a world *in* which they lived, an 'ancient interiority that was once our common birthright – the ancestral sense of the surrounding earthly cosmos as the voluminous *inside* of an immense Body, or Tent, or Temple.'<sup>7</sup>

We should not forget that we are 100 percent part of the cyclical natural world Outwardly, it moves perpetually between night and day, between winter and summer, and inwardly it moves between the unconscious and conscious mind, between going through sleep and being awake. And we keep on breathing in and breathing out. You could add to this that there is also a continuous cyclical interaction between the outer and inner world, which in fact together also form a natural whole. The myths that are told and are ritually enacted on a regular basis, help to empower our sense of belonging in a natural world that always keeps moving and changing, and has no clear beginning or end. In this worldview, there is life before birth, in the sense of individual reincarnation and the presence of the ancestors, and death is always followed by another rebirth – just like the leaves reappear

on the trees every spring and we wake up every morning from a period of sleep.

In the original mythical worldview, the events in the myths are always symbolically charged: they are born from the power of our imagination and they are supposed to simulate this imagination once again. That is why the story has meaning on several different levels, which might not be obvious from the start. In this worldview, the mythical stories show that life is basically a mysterious affair, and will always remain mysterious. We can be in touch with this mystery by surrendering ourselves fully to life, and trusting that it will take us in the right direction. It is also interesting to mention here that the original mythical worldview was born in an oral culture and the mythical images have had this oral basis as well. David Abram has argued that, before our culture had become literate and we started writing words and reading books, we had lived for a few hundred thousand years in an oral culture in which people ‘read’ the surrounding natural world.<sup>8</sup> From this ongoing process of reading nature – which was of course not just a material but basically an animated world – the mythical images and stories had come to life. In this respect, the American surgeon and researcher Leonard Shlain has argued, that images are primarily reproductions of the sensual, visual world and are perceived by our brain as a whole at once.<sup>9</sup>

In the distorted mythical worldview, the mysterious and cyclical element has disappeared. It needs definite beginnings and endings, movements from A to B, straight lines from birth to death. The lines might be continued a little further, when, in case of a monotheistic religious belief, it is believed that after death there is a Heaven of a Hell waiting for us to which we go after death and in which we will remain forever – or, in case of a secular atheistic belief, the line might stop immediately at death with a complete disappearance into everlasting nothingness. It is not a coincidence that in the distorted mythical worldview the prominence of linearity was confirmed by the lines of written words. In this sense, written words are different from images. As Leonard Shlain has argued, we do not take in words all at once but read words in a certain linear order by which the meaning is gradually unfolding.<sup>10</sup>

In this distorted mythical worldview, which is powered by our faculty of reason, we strive to get full control of life, to hold on tight to this control. We want to unravel everything about life that we do not understand, to analyze it, to demythologize it – but thereby we also take away its mysterious quality, its meaning. In this worldview, whatever we are confronted with in life is to be taken very literal, to be considered as a quantifiable ‘fact’. We want to clarify the meaning of all the events and do not want to miss hidden layers of meaning that at a later moment might surprise us unexpectedly. The rulers and other ‘successful’ people, who have kept the distorted idea of myth alive through their mythical status, might experience their short moments of surrender, but generally they also remain people who are primarily driven by their faculty of reason and the urge of control that accompanies it.

### **The Sacred Landscape and the Sacred Marriage**

Fortunately, the original ancient mythical worldview, connected to the experience of the mysterious, invisible dimension of life, has never left us completely. It can easily be awakened in us: with every experience of *awe* that takes us by surprise and overwhelms us completely, we are again humbled. For a moment we return then to our authentic state, a ‘human being’ who is deeply connected to the humus under his or her feet. In short, we become again true earthly beings. Then we are reminded that we have always remained an inextricable part of something incredibly large that we can never fully understand.

In the original mythical worldview, central elements of the myths were always reflected in features of the surrounding landscape. The mythical events in the stories took place in a natural environment and were deeply connected to it. The intimate and ongoing interaction between the human community and the natural world turned the landscape into a *Sacred Landscape*, into potential locations for experiencing an ‘outdoor spirituality’. Parts of the natural world like rivers, lakes, forests, hills and mountains were experienced as embodiments of mythical beings that need to be venerated and protected. Because these parts had a Sacred quality, they could never be turned into an object of personal possession, of private ownership. I return to that theme below.

Central in the original mythical worldview has also been the concept of *Sacred Marriage*, the marriage between the earthly and heavenly regions, which was confirmed everyday when the sunbeams touched the earthly surface. It expressed the reality of the rulers and all the other people for whom their daily life was still experienced as being inextricably connected to and embedded in the surrounding natural world. We can still witness today this reality of our prehistoric ancestors: in the Neolithic they expressed it through their megalithic monuments.<sup>11</sup> For our ancestors the living landscape extended from their local environment to the planet earth and further to the entire cosmos – a landscape in which the connection between the local, the global and the cosmic was always present, but which always began in the direct environment. When we changed to a linear historical worldview, projected our lives and developments outside the natural world, imagining ourselves to be largely independent from it, we lost touch with this concept of the Sacred Marriage and forgot what it had originally been about.

Throughout Western culture we were first schooled in an anti-natural form of ‘indoor religion’ and later in materialist science, which both reduced the natural world to something that exists separately from us, outside of us. In the ‘indoor religions’, the Sacred dimension was moved to the space within the building, which itself was now considered Sacred. The natural world was kept on a safe distance from the people, because it was considered a threat, the potential realm of evil forces, of the Devil. Materialist scientists shifted their focus to matter, but still considered it in a negative way merely as dead matter, ‘a collection of objects’ (in the words of the American theologian and cultural historian Thomas Berry, who believed it represented a degeneration from the original state of ‘a communion of subjects’).<sup>12</sup> Both the indoor religions and materialist science subscribed to the idea that a *reciprocal relationship* with the surrounding natural world – which is what a Sacred Marriage is about – has no meaning or value. In the view of both we can take from the natural world what we like and as the private owners of the land have a right to fully exploit its resources. We can take one-sidedly from it, without needing to give anything back.

In the distorted concept of myth, the focus had been replaced from the borderless matrix of the surrounding natural world to the humanly created spaces bordered by four walls and a roof. In the religious worldview, the experience of the Sacred was now centered within the context of the building: in temples, churches, or mosques. The detachment of the experience of the Sacred from the living natural world, from the more-than-human world, was a serious limitation of this experience: it had been reduced to a direct connection between the human world and God who resided above in Heaven, far away from the natural world He once had created. With the rise of the secular materialist worldview, the Sacred dimension of the natural world was thrown out altogether: there was no place left where this dimension could still be experienced – it was considered to be non-existent, a delusion. Although the individual materialist scientist might at times go outdoors, in particular during weekends and the holidays, his basic worldview remains dominated by his indoor life: in the study room, the classroom, the library, or the laboratory.

### **Losing our sense of being embedded in nature**

As indicated above, the change from a cyclical mythical worldview to a linear historical worldview began a few thousand years ago, with the rise of the first city states in Sumer. From there it gradually spread across the world, primarily in a top-down way by the rulers. This was also the time we began to identify with our egocentric sense of existing as separate beings. This sense of separation began in two places. Firstly, we began to experience ourselves as separate from the surrounding natural world – from all the (other) animals and plants in it but also from the larger living entities like rivers, lakes, forests, mountains and valleys. Secondly, this sense of separation also increasingly manifested itself in the human world itself, between human beings. Another way of saying this is that we lost our sense of being embedded in the natural world, to be inextricably interconnected with all the other lifeforms.

The English psychologist Steve Taylor has argued convincingly, in his book *The Fall*, that in this period collectively an *ego explosion* has been generated in the human world.<sup>13</sup> This egocentric way of dealing with life expressed itself in a dualistic way of thinking and acting, and gradually also

spread a Patriarchal Shift across the world. It meant a dominator culture could be established, in which men occupied all the powerful positions and man was naturally considered superior to woman. This not only resulted in the collective suppression of women, but also of the so-called ‘feminine’ values, that actually represented the deepest human values – of both women and men. Yet within a dominator culture the ‘feminine’ values are not considered as human values that everyone possesses and should treasure. It has given all the major governments and organizations in the Western world their essential patriarchal and hierarchical structure, which has managed to survive until today.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, this Patriarchal shift with its rise of a dominator culture was also accompanied by the invention of writing. Earlier I have referred to Leonard Shlain’s argument about the difference between images and written words. According to him, this also reflected a difference between the feminine and masculine view of life: ‘(...) a *holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete* view of the world are the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook; *linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract* thinking defines the masculine.’ He was aware of the fact that these masculine and feminine characteristics are not restricted to a specific sex and are present in every individual.<sup>15</sup>

Fortunately, not everything got lost in the process of this cultural shift, as some indigenous cultures have managed to keep their sense of being embedded in the natural world alive into the present time, and to keep a balance between the feminine and masculine. And everyone – without exception – has experienced this sense of being embedded in nature when we were little children, and this balance between the feminine and masculine. It is the way we all begin our lives – deeply connected, sensitive and vulnerable. So, there are still ways available to us to revive it. And – when we manage to dig under the surface of the media reports about increasing crises, conflicts, struggle and misery – we can witness that already there are hopeful developments that point to a collective healing our sense of separation.

### **A revaluation of the true mythical dimension**

As said, true myths have never been connected exclusively to the world of human rulers or other so-called ‘successful’ people who were considered important: originally, they were an expression of our deep connection to the entire living natural world. These myths reminded us of the fact that we humans are not in control of life on Earth, and in the wider Universe – and never have been. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century we are gradually rediscovering the older, original meaning of myth – through the depth psychology of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, James Hillman and others; through the mythological and folklore research of people like Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Riane Eisler, Anne Baring, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Martin Shaw, Sharon Blackie, and many others; and, of course, through anthropological research into the worldviews of indigenous cultures.

According to the American mythologist Joseph Campbell, mythology has four basic functions: a mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological function. The mystical function is that of ‘eliciting and supporting a sense of awe before the mystery of being.’; the cosmological function of myth is to render ‘a cosmology, an image of the universe that will support and be supported by this sense of awe before the mystery of a presence and the presence of a mystery’, which in Campbell’s view is the focus of science. The sociological function of myth is ‘to support the current social order, to integrate the individual organically with his group’; and the psychological function of myth is ‘to initiate the individual into the order of realities of his own psyche, guiding him toward his own spiritual enrichment and realization.’<sup>16</sup>

I think it is no coincidence that the attempts of these researchers to revive the original meaning of mythology happen in a time when we are also faced worldwide with the results of our exploitative and damaging treatment of the natural world in the form of a climate crisis – which happens all around us together with the suffering we consciously have inflicted on animals and on our fellow human beings. In our rather exclusive focus on reason and materialism, we have forgotten the deep and transformative power that myth originally possessed, as expressed by Campbell’s four functions. Apparently, thereby we have thrown away our protection to be able to stop these damaging behaviours in their tracks. I can

see a clear connection between the way we value myth and the way we value the natural world. A distortion of our ideas about myth goes together with a distortion of our ideas about of the natural world. The distorted idea of myth, in which it is considered an expression of lies and is exclusively connected to rulers with superhuman qualities, appear to go well together with the materialistic view on nature – a natural world that we think we can observe from without and to be in control of, a natural world that we consider as a mere collection of resources to be exploited for our own benefit. As long as we can continue on the road of damaging the natural world, by which we obviously damage our own nature as well, we very likely keep considering myths to be mere lies and keep granting a distorted idea of mythical power to human rulers.

It is worth repeating here that true myths are deep reflections and expressions of the inherent Sacred quality and dimension of nature. This is never a static state but is always changing in a cyclical way – a process that is largely invisible to the senses. It often happens too slow to notice through our senses. At dawn and twilight, we might notice it a little bit. But the change from summer to winter van back to summer is already much harder to notice. And in our own body, for instance, the trillions of cells are continually being renewed, without us being aware of it at all.

It is also important to emphasize here again that a Sacred landscape cannot be owned by anyone – that it cannot become subject of land ownership. Land ownership can only exist after the Sacred quality of the landscape has disappeared. To make it disappear, we have to distance ourselves from the surrounding landscape, place ourselves outside it and experience it as a collection of objects. So, in order to regain access to the Sacred dimension of the landscape, we must first become deeply aware again that we cannot own a living thing in which we are completely included. Like a fetus cannot own the womb in which it is growing. We can only rediscover this Sacred quality of nature by completely reversing our roles again, and put the emphasis again on the landscape, on the larger entity, which is omnipresent all around us, on which we fully depend and to which we also belong. It a reality in which we experience the surrounding natural world as *a more-than-human world*, (in the words of David Abram),

reminding us of the fact that the human world is but a small part of this much larger more-than-human context.<sup>17</sup>

Only when we manage to rediscover the true power of myth, we can stop degrading the natural world to mere clumps of matter, to a collection of objects, and we can reawaken ourselves to its deeper Sacred quality – the Sacred quality of the body of the surrounding landscape, of all the plant and animal bodies in it, and thereby also of our own body, between which there exists a continuous communion of subjects. When we have rediscovered our place within this Sacred dimension, and feel deeply connected to it again, bringing all our different exploitative and damaging behaviours in the natural and the human world to an end becomes a realistic option.

### **King Charles as the embodiment of the Green Man**

This was perhaps quite a long detour from discussing the death of Queen Elisabeth and her successor King Charles, with which I started this article. But it bears more on the mythical theme outlined above than you perhaps might think. The change of reign might be beneficial to reviving the ancient forgotten meaning of myth.

As said, after the death of Queen Elisabeth, there has been doubt about King Charles being able to continue the mythically charged, protective and unifying motherly role of his mother. Interestingly, I saw that he was referred to in the media as the Green King, due to his lifelong interest and engagement in environmental matters. By this association a new promising way to the future of his reign has been opened. In this way he is connected to the strong folklore in European culture, including Britain, about the Green Man. The English poet and writer William Anderson has written a wonderful book about the meaning of the archetype of the Green Man: ‘The Green Man, a composite of green leaves and a man’s head, symbolizes the union of humanity and the vegetable world. He knows and utters the secret law of Nature. When an image of great power as the Green Man returns as he does now in a new aspect after a long absence, the purpose of this return is not only to revive forgotten memories but to present fresh truths and emotions necessary to fulfilling the potentialities of the future.’<sup>18</sup> Will King Charles be able to take on this role?

Interestingly, Anderson has pointed out that the Green Man is closely associated with the Divine Feminine. According to him, the Green Man is the archetype of our oneness with the earth – ‘the son, the lover and the guardian of the Great Goddess’. And as ‘Mother, *mater*, matter and matrix all have the same root’, the Great Goddess is also a symbol of matter. According to Anderson, ‘she plays a dominant role in all the myths involving the precursors of the Green Man, and if the rise of Mariolatry in the eleventh and twelfth century is an instance of the Great Goddess returning in a new guise, then the return of the Green Man into sculpture at the same time shows a repetition of the same pattern.’<sup>19</sup>

It can be argued that the English people have given Queen Elisabeth the mythical status of a Goddess, just like they had done a few decades ago with Lady Diana. If we look at the way that Queen Elisabeth has given content to her mythical role and King Charles potentially can give content to it, I think it is likely that King Charles will become a better contemporary representative of the mythical Green Man, than Queen Elisabeth has ever been able to represent the Great Goddess. As far as I know, Queen Elisabeth has never shown much genuine interest in or concern for the natural world – has never represented Mother Earth, or embodied Her power –, whereas Charles will find that involvement with environmental matters, which extend beyond the human world, will not conflict with his role as a king.

### **Breathing new life into the story about the Fisher King**

Perhaps King Charles can help to revive the original mythical dimension of life in other ways as well. He might, for instance, also reconnect with the old mythical story of the Fisher king – the Celtic story about the importance of a good relationship of the King with ‘his’ land and ‘his’ people. Central in this story is the interesting image of the wounded Fisher King: he appears to be wounded in his groin, his legs or his thigh (depending of the version of the myth), caused by his own spear, which has made him infertile. His infertility is reflected in the barrenness and infertility of the land and in the suffering of the people over which he reigns. Because of this situation the land has turned into a Wasteland. The importance of the story lies in finding a way to cure the Fisher King and thereby to end the Wasteland, so that the land turns fertile again and an end comes to the suffering of the people and

they become prosperous again. Finding the way to this healing process lies at the heart of finding the Grail. To realize this, one has to ask the right question about what the king is ailing from.<sup>20</sup>

Only when the wound of the Fisher king is healed, is he fit again to reign according to the principle of the Sacred Marriage – which is imagined in Celtic mythology as the marriage between the king and the Goddess of the Land. Only when this marriage with the Goddess – representing the Sovereignty – is realized, can the king begin to serve the country and the people. The story of the wounded Fisher King shows that this Sacred Marriage does not necessarily remain valid forever and that it also includes the responsibility to continue to serve the land and the people. That is something that the Fisher King appears to have left behind. The phenomenon of the Sacred Marriage is not something specifically Celtic and can also be found in other cultures. As we have seen above, in Europe the phenomenon of the Sacred Marriage goes back all the way the Neolithic, and is closely related to experience of the Sacred Landscape. So, in Celtic mythology a very old tradition is continued.

This myth is still meaningful and also very appropriate for our time. *Serving* the land and the people does not just lie at the heart of kingship, but at the heart of any kind of rulership or leadership. We can all see that our modern world in many places has turned into a Wasteland, due to the failure of rulers or leaders to be of service. We are literally surrounded everywhere by ‘waste’, visible of course in the form of dumped material waste, but we are also confronted by various invisible forms of immaterial damage. We badly need rulers or leaders who, first, acknowledge that they are wounded, second, allow their wound to be healed, and third, realize that the state of own – bodily, mental and spiritual – health has direct effects on the world around them. They are truly an example for everyone.

The concept of a Sacred Marriage between the king, or any other kind of ruler, and the Goddess of the Land, can help make us all aware that the patriarchal notion of limitless ‘power over’ always has destructive consequences. It can make rulers in particular aware that all the rules that they make are really meant for everybody, so including themselves. King Charles – and indeed any ruler in power today – would do well to consider for himself to what extent he finds himself in the position of the wounded

Fisher King who has failed to keep serving the land and the people. And when he manages to consciously use all his power in service to the land and the people, he will experience himself being transformed into a contemporary embodiment of the healed Fisher King – a ruler with real authority. But as the Grail stories tell us, the king can't do it on his own: he needs a lot of people to work along with him to heal the Wasteland. Healing the Wasteland is a matter of concern for us all.

### **The revaluation of our power of imagination**

It is true that these days many people cannot take stories about the Green Man of the Fisher King no longer very serious. They probably consider themselves to be grown-up, rational and scientifically oriented, beings, who are proud to have left the childish world of fantasy behind them. But by doing this, they have also devalued their inner power of the imagination. We should not forget that historically the mythical worldview has always been powered by our imagination. The increasing disrespect and distortion of the mythical worldview in the Western world has also been accompanied by a devaluation of our imaginative power. The revaluation of the mythical dimension of life that I discussed above also implies a revaluation of our imaginative power.

The English writer Rob Hopkins has written a very interesting book about the importance of the imagination in our lives, entitled *From What Is to What If*.<sup>21</sup> He argues that the imagination is resilient in us: we can only suppress it, but as it is our natural state, a fundamental part of being human, it will re-emerge as soon as we stop suppressing it. He compares it to land that if it isn't 'mowed, sprayed or grazed' will return to forest.<sup>22</sup> In other words, as long as we don't allow others to control us or are not continually controlling ourselves, our imagination will remain alive; and the moment this control disappears, our imagination immediately comes back to life. The imagination is what has always inspired children to start playing, and according to Hopkins it is very important that we as grown-up, adult people do not lose this sense of play and keep practicing it: 'free, unstructured, cheeky, loud, reflective, spontaneous, crazy, attentive, wild play is vital to the health of children, and also to our ability to reimagine the world.'<sup>23</sup> Because our imagination is rooted in the natural world, and takes its

metaphors from it, we need a rich biodiversity, because this will provide us with a great variety of ideas to choose from to be able to reimagine a better world. The loss of this biodiversity that we witness in our time, is referred to as *the Great Thinning*, which according to Robert MacFarlane is not just a thinning of biodiversity, but also ‘a thinning of language, and a thinning of possibility.’<sup>24</sup>

It is well-known that King Charles, when he was still Prince Charles, has put a lot of effort and time into warning the people about the dangers of climate change and has always advocated passionately for a more ecologically healthy world – which of course is an abundant, biodiverse world, which keeps offering the necessary spiritual food for our imagination. With this King Charles has set a great example that hopefully he will be able to continue during his reign as a king. And indeed, let it really be an example to all of us, because – as pointed out earlier – we cannot leave the future of our civilization just in the hands of a few people who reside hierarchically ‘at the top’. We must all put an effort into helping to heal the wound of the Fisher King, and thereby in offering a contribution to leaving the Wasteland behind us. We can only realize that when we all – wherever you happen to live on the planet (yes, the crisis is that big) – start recognizing the Green Man or the Green Woman in ourselves, and potentially in everyone around us. In this way, we can start to experience again how wonderful and magical it is – wherever we are – to be always fully embedded in our natural environment. Thereby it also regains its Sacred quality – its protection from further unnecessary damage.

In 1970 John Lennon confessed, in his song *God*, that he did not believe in the myth of the Beatles anymore – that ‘the dream is over’. Thereby he also managed to revive the original mythical power by using his imagination. By his song *Imagine* he touched many people deep in their heart. And he was so right: we all have to put some effort in imagining a better world first, before we can actually create one.

Leiden, January 2023

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> David Leeming, *Myth A Biography of Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 8.
- <sup>2</sup> David Leeming, *Myth A Biography of Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Clark Strand, *Waking up to the Dark. The Black Madonna's Gospel for an Age of Extinction and Collapse*, Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2015/2022, p. 82.
- <sup>4</sup> Dit is de website van Kurt Derungs: <http://www.kurtderungs.org/landschapsmythologie>. Alle informatie daarop is in het Duits. Slechts een enkel boek van hem is vertaald in het Nederlands. Op Wikipedia is in het Engels wat meer informatie te vinden over 'Landscape mythology'.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Dames, *Silbury. Resolving the Enigma*, The History Press, 2010; Michael Dames, *The Avebury Cycle*, Thames & Hudson, 1996; Michael Dames, *The Silbury Treasure. The Great Goddess Rediscovered*, Thames & Hudson, 1992; Sharon Blackie, *If Women Rose Rooted. The Journey to Authenticity and Belonging*, September Publishing, 2016; Sharon Blackie, *The Enchanted Life. Unlocking the Magic of Everyday Life*, September Publishing, 2018; George Terence Meaden, *The Goddess of the Stones. The Language of the Megaliths*, Souvenir Press, 1991; George Terence Meaden, *The Stonehenge Solution. Sacred Marriage and the Goddess*, Souvenir Press, 1992; Terence Meaden, *Stonehenge. The Secret of the Solstice*, Souvenir Press, 1997; Terence Meaden, *The Secrets of the Avebury Stones. Britain's Greatest Megalithic Temple*, Souvenir Press 1999; Manchán Magan, *Listen to the Land Speak, A journey into the wisdom of what lies beneath us*, Gill Books, 2022
- <sup>6</sup> Rachel Pollack, *The Body of the Goddess. Sacred Wisdom in Myth, Landscape and Culture*, Vega, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> David Abram, *Becoming Animal. An Earthly Cosmology*, Pantheon Books, 2010, p 154.
- <sup>8</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 254.
- <sup>9</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. Male Words and Female Images*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998, p. 1-2.
- <sup>10</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. Male Words and Female Images*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998, p. 4-5.
- <sup>11</sup> I have written about this in my article about 'Sacred Marriage in the Stone Age', which can be downloaded from my website: <https://eng.wimbons.nl>
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, Sierra Books Club, 1990; Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, Random House, 2000.
- <sup>13</sup> Steve Taylor, *The Fall. The Insanity of The Ego in Human History and The Dawning of A New Era*, O Books, 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> I have written elsewhere about the Patriarchal Shift, in articles on my website: <https://eng.wimbons.nl>. Riane Eisler has written extensively about the partnership and dominator culture in her book 'The Chalice and the Blade', and deepened her research in her later books.
- <sup>15</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. Male Words and Female Images*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998, p. 1-2.
- <sup>16</sup> Joseph Campbell outlined the four functions of mythology in several of his books, for instance in his book *Occidental Mythology*. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin 1984, p. 518-523.
- <sup>17</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, 1997.
- <sup>18</sup> William Anderson, *Green Man. The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth*, Compass Books, 2002.p. 14
- <sup>19</sup> William Anderson, *Green Man. The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth*, Compass Books, 2002.p. 21-23.

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<sup>20</sup> The story of the Fisher King is part of the stories about King Arthur and the Holy Grail. The Fisher King is the last in a long line of kings charged with the protection of the Holy Grail. See for instance: *Perceval*, Chretien de Troyes.

<sup>21</sup> Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If. Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If. Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019, p 23 and further.

<sup>23</sup> Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If. Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If. Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2019, p. 59.