Discussed: "Jimmy and the Jam Jars," wild horse, Homer's epics, sacrifices, libations, *Our Little Friend*, Pip Pip, Abraham and Isaac, respect, loyalty, war movies

# Cherishing the Myths Among Us

*By Marilyn Glaim*

I grew up in a home where we had family worship every day, and at every family worship my father prayed aloud for his church and his family. He asked God's blessings on each one of us by name while he prayed for our extended family members as a group of loved ones who had "not yet accepted this truth." These relatives were strict, church-going Protestants, but they did not belong to the church in which my father and mother had raised their children "in the truth." Thus, my earliest and most long-lasting memories are those that divided us from people who worshiped God but who lived in error.

In Sabbath School and at church each week, I heard the same message. We possessed the truth. We owed it to ourselves and those not "in this truth" to share it with anyone who would listen, and if they didn't want to listen, we were to try to find a way to make them do so. This seemed like an awesome responsibility to me; in fact, I remember sometimes thinking that I wished I hadn't been born into such a demanding legacy, and then I wouldn't have to try to convert those relatives who saw us as merely strange for having departed from their perfectly satisfactory religion.

Because my parents were so concerned about keeping us safely within the true church, they made sure that we learned the stories that would keep us there. Though we were a working-class family without money to spend on extras, Mom and Dad subscribed to all the church papers, bought any

new Adventist story books available at each year's local camp meeting, and made sure we stayed in church school, where we would hear only the true stories of the Church.

My parents fully subscribed to the importance of having us hear, read, and study the truth every moment of every day. Had they been aware of such stories as C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* books or Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings Trilogy,* they would have looked at them as, at best, distortions of the truth and, at worst, outright lies.

And so the Adventist stories were impressed on my mind through *Our Little Friend*; Arthur S. Maxwell's *Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories*; his series, *The Children's Hour*; and through the many mission stories by Adventist greats such as Josephine Cunnington Edwards and Eric B. Hare. I heard and read the stories again and again as I waited for new books, and some of them remain in my mind almost as the echo of old friends talking with me.

The Uncle Arthur books, which came complete with a "Lesson Index," have become a permanent part of my psyche. Winnie is the little girl who played darts with her brothers on Sabbath, and as a result fell down a well. She spent weeks in a hospital recovering from her injuries, all the while absorbing the lesson of Sabbath keeping (Maxwell, *Children's Hour* 2:31–35).

Jimmy, of "Jimmy and the Jam Jars," is forever fixed in my mind as the little boy who climbed up on the cupboards to get some of the fresh strawberry jam his mother had told him to stay away from, and he pulled both cupboard and jam down on top of himself. I knew for sure that disobedience was a sin to be punished instantly. And I learned that Mother was always right, even when she was a little bit wrong. After all, Mother had left Jimmy alone for much longer than she had promised, but she was the one who came home to punish him for getting into her freshly made jam (Maxwell, *Bedtime Stories*, 18:15–18).

If these stories weren't enough to demonstrate the importance of perfect obedience, Eric B. Hare's "Pip Pip," told on a recording complete with sound effects, warned of imminent death for wrongdoing. Pip Pip was the tiny chick who willfully strayed away from Mama Hen. The big bad snake had been watching Pip Pip, and one day Snake swallowed him whole.

As Pip Pip disappears into the mouth of the snake and goes down his throat, the ever-fainter sound of "pip, pip, pip, pip," imitated perfectly by Hare, sends shivers of dread down the spine of every listening child.

In my childhood, I had seen Hare in person on the camp meeting circuit. My children heard his mesmerizing voice on records, and for children today, Pacific Press has released a new CD version of his stories. Pip Pip can terrify another generation of would-be miscreants (Story 8).

We also heard reverently told stories about Ellen G. White—about how she alone had held up a huge family Bible with one hand while she preached in vision to her astonished listeners. To impress the impossibility of humans doing such a thing on their own, we were sometimes invited in Sabbath School to pick up such a Bible with two hands and hold it aloft for one short minute—ah the deliciousness of failure—as the point of the story was driven home: only a prophet whose hand was held aloft by God could accomplish such a feat.

In the 1970s, when my husband and I had children in Kindergarten Sabbath School and we dutifully took our turn leading the class, we received in the mail a large lesson plan with felts to be used with these four- and five-year-olds. The large sheets of felts contained dozens of stamped-on pictures that featured the life of Ellen White.

I remember the long hours we spent cutting out pictures, but the one I most clearly remember is the buggy pulled by a wildly prancing horse. In the accompanying story, the horse is quieted by a single touch from White as she steps safely into the carriage she had been warned not to go near.

The Adventist version of the Old Testament tales blends in with those other stories, partly because they also appeared in the same sets of books. Four books in the five-volume set of the original *Children's Hour* ended with a series of Bible stories told in a way that convinced me these people were just like me except that they happened to sleep in tents and wear robes. I was well into my adult years before I understood the violent tribalism of the Old Testament stories.

The story most deeply etched into my mind is the story of Abraham and Isaac. I never associate it with reading the Bible. To me, it is pure Uncle Arthur, complete with its brightly colored, full-page picture of a very Anglo Isaac with sandy hair and a sparkling white robe patiently standing near a large pile of stones and sticks. He holds his father's hands while the white-haired man tells him that the pile will be his place of death because the Lord has commanded it to be so.

The story horrified and obsessed me, and whenev-

er my father asked what I wanted to hear at bedtime, I demanded the story of Isaac. As small as I was, I could see the pained expression on his face, but I had to hear the story again and again as I tried to absorb its horrible significance: children must attain perfect obedience even if it meant submitting to being sacrificed by their father (Maxwell, *Children's Hour* 2:15–23).

As a teacher of literature, including the mythology of the Greeks and Romans, I have spent years pondering the importance of stories and the significance of mythology. Every cultural group through the ages has had its stories—its mythology—that help to teach the culture and the ways of thinking and behaving within that culture, and it is stories, much more than theology or doctrine, that hold the culture together, or that, once the culture has passed into history, help us understand the culture.

As Philip Pullman, British author of the wildly popular fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, points out, "'Thou shalt not' might reach the head, but it takes 'Once upon a time' to reach the heart" (quoted in Miller, 54). I know from the stories I learned as a child and from the literature I teach today, that this statement has been true down through the ages.

The ancient Greeks used stories to inculcate beliefs and behavior while they passed the long evenings around the campfire. By the fifth-century classical era, they attended outdoor theaters during the winter and spring festivals that honored the gods and goddesses. These festivals featured several days of tragedies and a day of comedy, and attendance was both for pleasure and religious observance. Many of the dramas grew out of characters introduced in Homer's epics from approximately the eighth to seventh centuries B.C.E.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are above all stories that "reach the heart," but they also taught the standards of respect for the gods and loyalty to the community. The *Iliad* focuses on the last year of the ten-year siege of Troy by the Greeks, supposedly for the purpose of winning back Greek honor by recapturing Helen, once wife of Menaleus, one of the Greek kings. Of course, along the way to regaining Helen, these Greek tribes also planned to defeat the Trojans, slaughter soldiers, take captives and valuables, and destroy the city.

The *Iliad* is filled with violent encounters that rival today's most riveting war movies. Throughout the scenes of violence are woven the stories of men whose jealousies over battle prizes, honors, and women cause almost as much strife within armies as between enemies, and throughout the human stories the overriding story is human relationships with the gods. Every

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human activity is punctuated with sacrifices, libations, and prayers to the gods and goddesses. Great care must be taken not to appear to favor one of the heavenly beings over another; otherwise, the wrath of the offended god could come down on both person and group.

While ancient listeners must have sat spellbound, waiting for the outcome of individual battles, the resolutions of personal vendettas, the playing out of great love stories, they were learning the lessons behind the story. Always worship the gods, but do so with great caution and well-balanced respect. Be loyal to your community. Fight bravely if you're a soldier. Never give up. Die honorably in battle. Be loyal, beautiful, and respectful if you're a woman. Grudges between friends take away from the good of the community. They destroy relationships and use up resources that could better be spent fighting the enemy.

One of the relatively minor heroes of *The Iliad* emerges as the sole hero of *The Odyssey*. Odysseus leaves Troy victorious, and in a trip filled with excitement, danger, and a romantic dalliance with a goddess along the way, he spends ten years making a trip that should have taken a few months at most. In his travels, he learns that he should be wise rather than tricky, he needs to trust implicitly in his patron goddess, Athena, and he must always entertain strangers with respect, because they might be a god or goddess in disguise.

For female listeners, there is the beautiful Penelope, who has come to epitomize the faithful wife as she waits through ten years of war and another ten of the wanderings of Odysseus, not knowing if he is even alive. She is besieged by suitors during her twenty years of waiting, but is rewarded for her perfect love when Odysseus comes home to kill the suitors and claim her and his palace.

The later Greeks watched the old stories in play form. Agamemnon, the Greek king, had angered Achilles at Troy by stealing his war prize. He returns home to a faithless wife, Clytemnestra, who has taken his brother as lover and king to revenge the sacrifice of their daughter so that Agamemnon could have favorable winds to take him to Troy. Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon. Her children murder her. The lesson is driven home: men should not sacrifice their children, but wives must never, never rebel against their husbands. Violent death can be the only reward.

Having conquered the Greeks, the Romans absorbed their stories, making them their own by substituting Roman names. The most powerful god of the Greeks, Zeus, becomes Juno in Roman mythology. He is a powerful, scheming, revengeful, and philandering god. The greatest reteller of the Greek stories in Roman form is Ovid, who collected the stories in his *Metamorphosis*. These tales, although highly entertaining, serve the purpose of warning against greed, envy, faithlessness, incest, and failure to thank the gods who give favors to humans.

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Today, it is all too easy for us to point out that these stories are mere myths—a word we often use to mean lies, which we differentiate from our own "true" stories. And yet, as I have read the body of myths of the Greeks and the Romans, as well as many of the myths from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the rest of the world, I am impressed that they have a common purpose: although they are meant to entertain, just as I was entertained by the stories of my childhood, they are also meant to instruct in the rules of worshiping divine beings and respecting fellow humans.

They were meant to keep their listeners "in the truth," and to enforce communal standards. They still have much to tell us about who we are and about the nature of our relationship with our own God and his created beings. They bring us closer to the people who came before us and who strove for goodness in an often harsh and unpredictable world.

Joseph Campbell, the most noted mythologist of the twentieth century and writer of the four-volume set, *The Masks of God*, which details myths from virtually every culture in the world, said that the more he discovered the world's stories, the more he came to believe the truth in all of them:

> A spiritual man, he found in the literature of faith those principles common to the human spirit....He wanted to know what it means that God assumes such different masks in different cultures, yet how it is that comparable stories can be found in these

divergent traditions—stories of creation, of virgin births, incarnations, death and resurrection, second comings, and judgment days. He liked the insight of the Hindu scripture: "Truth is one; the sages call it by many names." All our names and images for God are masks, he said, signifying the ultimate reality that by definition transcends language and art. A myth is a mask of God, too—a metaphor for what lies behind the visible world. However the mystic traditions differ, he said, they are in accord in calling us to a deeper awareness of the very act of living itself. (Moyers xvii)

Although we see our own stories as true, Campbell would have seen them as part of the great mythic tradition. So what are we to do as we age and look back on the way the stories of our own childhood were told to us? Perhaps they seem simplistic or filled with cultural ethocentrism. Perhaps they don't seem quite as literally true to us today as when we were children.

Does this mean we scoff at them, or do we try to develop a keener understanding of their meaning for our lives. I examine the stories I heard as child, and although I understand them differently now than I did then, like Joseph Campbell, I find in them "a deeper awareness of the very act of living itself," and so those stories are a part of my personal mythology.

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