

## **“JOYFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE SORROWS OF THE WORLD”**

**Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**

**November 16, 2025**

**Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode**

**Service Leader: Dianne Whitaker**

### **Sermon Title & Description:** “Joyful Participation in the Sorrows of the World”

Joseph Campbell lived and taught a mighty “yea” to life, taking hold of life *as it is* – not what you think life should be, could be, might be, will be, but what it is. One of his favorite Buddhist sayings in this regard was the phrase “Joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.” This service will investigate both the nature of the “sorrows of the world” and what it means to participate in those sorrows with joy.

### **Quotations for slides before service**

Nature within her inmost self divides  
To trouble men with having to take sides.  
(“From Iron: Tools and Weapons,” Robert Frost)

There is a plane of consciousness where you can identify yourself with that which transcends pairs of opposites.  
(Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 48)

The separateness apparent in the world is secondary. Beyond that world of opposites is an unseen, but experienced, unity and identity in us all.  
(*A Joseph Campbell Companion*, p. 25)

The clearer our insight into what is beyond good and evil,  
the more we can embody the good.  
(Stephen Mitchell, introduction, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*)

### **Lighting the Chalice** (spoken in unison)

Let there be light – the light of joy, the light of happiness, and the light of contentment.

May it illuminate our paths and fill our lives with peace.

And let there be dark – for it is from our dark places that we are brought forward.  
Tried and tested, and impelled toward growth, it is in these places that we realize compassion and learn to love.

And there was day and there was night.  
And there was joy and there was sorrow.  
And it was good.

(Andrew Pakula)

## **Greeting by Minister, Introduction of Theme & Responsive Reading**

Thank you, Harmony, LeRoy, and Dianne, for opening today's service, and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

About a month ago on Sunday, October 19, prior to Halloween, I led a service here related to the work of scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell titled "Masks of God."

Joseph Campbell, who lived from 1904 to 1987, is known to many through a six-part PBS video interview series conducted by journalist Bill Moyers titled *The Power of Myth*, which first aired in 1988, a few months after Joseph Campbell's death.

And, as I mentioned a month ago, I had the personal good fortune of organizing lectures for Joseph Campbell during three consecutive years, 1980 to 1982, at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I served as an Associate Minister for 22 years from 1978-2001. At the time when I first met Campbell, I was 33 years-old and he was 76 years-old, just a couple of years younger than I am now.

Both Joseph Campbell's scholarship and his person have been very important in my own life, and this morning I'd like to explore with you one of the themes of his work that has impacted me, a theme that relates to a Buddhist phrase that Campbell often quoted, "Joyful participation in the sorrows of the world."

Let's begin unpacking this phrase with a responsive reading drawn from the poetry of the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran.

The content of this responsive reading relates to one of the issues that confronts our human species as it awakes to self-conscious awareness, namely, our awareness that in order to maintain our own life we have to take other life, which, now, as we consciously awake, we know – and can see and feel – wants to live just like we do.

Here's Kahlil Gibran's approach to this reality:

### **Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth, and like an air plant be sustained by the light.

CONGREGATION: But since you must kill to eat, and rob the newly born of its mother's milk to quench your thirst, let it be an act of worship.

MINISTER: When you kill a beast say to him in your heart,

CONGREGATION: "By the same power that slays you, I too am slain; and I too shall be consumed.

MINISTER: For the law that delivered you into my hand shall deliver me into a mightier hand.

CONGREGATION: Your blood and my blood is naught but the sap that feeds the tree of heaven.”

MINISTER: And when you crush an apple with your teeth, say to it in your heart,

CONGREGATION: “Your seeds shall live in my body, and your fragrance shall be my breath.”

MINISTER: And in the autumn, when you gather the grapes of your vineyard for the winepress, say in your heart,

CONGREGATION: “I too am a vineyard, and my fruit shall be gathered for the winepress, and like new wine I shall be kept in eternal vessels.”

MINISTER: And in the winter, when you draw the wine, let there be in your heart a song for each cup;

CONGREGATION: And let there be in the song a remembrance for the autumn days, and for the vineyard, and for the winepress.

(“But Since You Must Kill to Eat,” from “On Eating and Drinking,” *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran, adapted)

### **Opening Hymn #17: “Every Night and Every Morn”**

Our Opening Hymn relates to the polar opposites of joy and sorrow through which we experience the Whole of our lives. The words are those of the English poet William Blake, the music is that of Ralph Vaughn Williams. It’s number 17 in your gray-covered *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnal, and the words will also appear on our screens.

1. Every night and every morn  
some to misery are born;  
every morn and every night  
some are born to sweet delight.

2. Joy and woe are woven fine,  
clothing for the soul divine:  
under every grief and pine  
runs a joy with silken twine.

3. It is right it should be so:  
we were made for joy and woe;  
and when this we rightly know,  
safely through the world we go.

(Words: William Blake; music: Ralph Vaughn Williams)

## **Introduction to Reading**

Joseph Campbell is certainly one of the greatest scholars I ever had the privilege of getting to know personally.

One of the things I so appreciated about him was his willingness to go beyond the role of simply being an “objective” scholar to speak personally about what he had learned from his studies in world mythology – what life-lessons he had drawn from them.

This morning I will speak about one of the primary life-lessons Campbell garnered from his studies, an idea both complex and difficult, perhaps particularly for those of us raised with a Western mind-set.

It’s also an idea that, at least at first, may be difficult to accept. I know for me it has been an idea I have pondered and turned over in my mind many, many times since I was first introduced to it through Campbell’s work.

Thus, my intention this morning is not so much to recommend, justify, or evaluate his idea as it is to put it out in front of you as clearly as I can for your reflection.

I begin my approach to this idea through this morning’s reading, which again, like last month, is part of the interviews of Joseph Campbell by Bill Moyers in the six-part PBS series titled *The Power of Myth*, which was also transcribed into a book by the same title, a book that actually contains more than was in the video series itself.

And again, like last month, Flossie Bode – who on more than one occasion prepared dinners for Joseph Campbell and other invited guests meeting with him in our Grand Rapids, Michigan home – will take the part of Bill Moyers in this interview, while I will read Campbell’s part.

We pick up the interview with Campbell talking about this terrible business of life feeding on life.

## **Reading**

CAMPBELL: Life is, in its very essence and character, a terrible mystery – this whole business of living by killing and eating. But it is a childish attitude to say “no” to life with all its pain, to say that this is something that should not have been.

MOYERS: Zorba says, “Trouble? Life is trouble.”

CAMPBELL: Only death is no trouble. People ask me, “Do you have optimism about the world?” And I say, “Yes, it’s great just the way it is. And you are not going to fix it up. Nobody has ever made it any better. It is never going to be any better. This is it, so take it or leave it. You are not going to correct or improve it.”

MOYERS: Doesn't that lead to a rather passive attitude in the face of evil?

CAMPBELL: You yourself are participating in the evil, or you are not alive. Whatever you do is evil for somebody. This is one of the ironies of the whole creation.

MOYERS: What about this idea of good and evil in mythology, of life as a conflict between the forces of darkness and the forces of light?

CAMPBELL: That is a Zoroastrian idea, which has come over into Judaism and Christianity. In other traditions, good and evil are relative to the position in which you are standing. What is good for one is evil for the other.

And you play your part, not withdrawing from the world when you realize how horrible it is but seeing that this horror is simply the foreground of a wonder: *a mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. [That's a phrase from German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto meaning "a mystery frightening and fascinating."]

"All life is sorrowful" is the first Buddhist saying, and so it is. It wouldn't be life if there were not temporality involved, which is sorrow – loss, loss, loss. You've got to say 'yes' to life and see it as magnificent this way; for this is surely the way God intended it.

MOYERS: Do you really believe that?

CAMPBELL: It is joyful just as it is. I don't believe there was anybody who intended it, but this is the way it is. James Joyce has a memorable line: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

And the way to awake from it is not to be afraid, and to recognize that all of this, as it is, is a manifestation of the horrendous power that is all creation. The ends of things are always painful. But pain is part of there being a world at all.

MOYERS: But if you accepted that as an ultimate conclusion, you wouldn't try to form any laws or fight any battles or –

CAMPBELL: I didn't say that.

MOYERS: Isn't that the logical conclusion to draw from accepting everything as it is?

CAMPBELL: That is not the *necessary* conclusion to draw. You could say, "I will participate in this life, I will join the army, I will go to war," and so forth.

MOYERS: "I will do the best I can."

CAMPBELL: "I will participate in the game. It is a wonderful, wonderful opera – except that it hurts."

Affirmation is difficult. We always affirm with conditions.... But affirming the way it is – that's the hard thing....

(*The Power of Myth*, pp. 65-66)

### **Musical Interlude #391: “Voice Still and Small”**

As a musical interlude, Harmony will sing “Voice Still and Small,” a song that calls attention to a voice deep inside us that affirms our lives in the face of challenges. The words and music are those of a ministerial colleague, the Rev. John Corrado, who I knew and much respected when I was a minister in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Voice still and small, deep inside all,  
I hear you call, singing.  
In storm and rain, sorrow and pain,  
still we’ll remain singing.  
Calming my fears, quenching my tears,  
through all the years, singing.

(Words & music: John Corrado)

### **Sermon: JOYFUL PARTICIPATION IN THE SORROWS OF THE WORLD”**

#### **A question**

One time when Joseph Campbell was in India, he thought he would like to meet a major teacher of Hinduism. By this time in his life, Campbell already had a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit – which, incidentally, he thought was the most developed language for expressing the life of the spirit – and he had as well a thorough knowledge of Hinduism.

So, an audience was arranged for him with a major Hindu guru, or teacher, a man by the name of Sri Krishna Menon, whose holy name was Atmananda, meaning “the rapture of the soul” – “*atman*” meaning “soul; “*ananda*” meaning “rapture” or “bliss.”

Campbell appeared before the teacher, sitting directly facing him, and the first thing Sri Krishna Menon said was, “Do you have a question?” (This is the pedagogical method in this tradition: the teacher addresses the concerns the student is interested in and open to exploring.)

Campbell replied, “Yes, I have a question.”

“Since in Hindu thinking all is Brahman, all is a product of divine energy, no matter how we judge things ethically or in terms of prudence, it is still all a divine manifestation. So: should you, or can you, or how do you say ‘no’ to anything? How do you say ‘no’ to stupidity, to ignorance, to thoughtlessness, to vulgarity, to brutality, to war?”

This was Campbell’s question to the Hindu teacher. Sri Krishna Menon’s response was:

“For you and me, this is the way.” In other words, the way is to say “yes” to everything that reality produces.

(Note: The foregoing is a combination of two different accounts of this conversation in interviews with Bill Moyers. The one account is from a Moyers' interview with Campbell in 1981, transcribed from a PBS program that aired on April 17, 1981, p. 8. The second account is from interviews from 1985-86 transcribed in *The Power of Myth*, p. 67.)

As it happened, this question that Campbell asked Sri Krishna Menon was the same first question that he, earlier in his life, had asked his teacher. And, so, a wonderful conversation took place between the two of them on the theme of the affirmation of all things that come our way.

And this conversation confirmed in Campbell an idea toward which he had been leaning – and which he also found expressed in certain statements of Jesus in the Gospels such as “Judge not” and “Love your enemies” – the idea that one must affirm all things, even what you despise and would say “no” to.

Or, to make the point even stronger, the idea is to affirm *particularly* what you despise – that is, to say “yes” to “that act or that condition which in your mind is most abominable.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 66)

It was from this perspective that Campbell used and advocated a phrase that comes from Buddhism, “The joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.”

### **How to take this?**

Well, I was struck and puzzled when I first heard Campbell relate this encounter with Sri Krishna Menon – that was probably about forty or forty-five years ago now – and I’ve been trying to see my way through the meaning of this ever since.

So, what will follow this morning is where I’ve come to on this issue and what I understand Campbell to be saying when he talks about affirming absolutely everything as a production of divine energy or, as in the earlier reading, “the horrendous power that is all creation.”

### **Two planes of consciousness**

To understand Campbell’s principle of the affirmation of reality *as it is*, one needs to speak of two planes of consciousness or two levels of reality in which we exist *simultaneously*.

### **The plane of duality and ethics**

The one plane of consciousness is the world of action.

This is our everyday world of duality and division, a world in which we are *necessarily* making judgments and evaluations every step of the way – judgments from small to large – from deciding what clothes we will wear when we get up in the morning to determining a life’s profession; decisions on whether to swat a mosquito or to go to war.

This is the realm of ethical and prudential judgments in which by saying “yes” to one thing we are also saying “no” to other things.

### **Western religion's accent on ethics**

And Western religion with its accent on the ethical tends to relate primarily to this plane of consciousness, sometimes almost equating religion and ethics ... so that religion has to do with ethical behavior, with living an upright life, and with choosing "the good" over "the evil," and seeking to "overcome" what we judge to be evil.

### **Western religion's concept of God**

And Western religion's concept of "God," in keeping with this ethical accent, is of a "being" that is pure light and goodness, the shadow having been cast upon Satan, the dark and demonic deity.

### **The plane of "metaphysical observer"**

The second plane of consciousness is, what Campbell calls, the world of the "metaphysical observer."

At this level one does not act but simply observes – simply watches without judgment and discrimination.

This level of consciousness is both prior to and beyond the level of duality and of ego-consciousness.

Ego-consciousness, of its very nature, divides reality into "pairs of opposites" – that's the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which our evolutionary forebears picked ... and it's the Tree from which each of us also pick as we grow into life.

### **Eastern and mystical religion**

Eastern religion and mystical religion, both East and West, is related more to this second plane of consciousness.

"Brahman" is all there is and includes what we judge to be "dark and demonic" as well as what we judge to be "light and good." In this setting, ethics are not absolute in a philosophical sense, but rather secondary and relative.

Now, this doesn't mean that one is "unethical" in one's behavior or that ethics are unimportant; but, in terms of religion, it means that ethics is the foreground of a larger realization, namely, the realization that one's primary identity is not with light over dark or good over evil, but with an absolute reality that is beyond both "light and dark" and "good and evil," and, indeed, incorporates the two and produces the two.

So, when Campbell talks about affirming reality *as it is*, he's talking from the position of this second plane of consciousness ... which, in terms of priority, is actually the primary plane.

### **The analogy of tennis**

As an analogy of these two planes of consciousness, Campbell speaks of a tennis match.

To play a game of tennis you need "opponents." You need two persons willing to stand on opposite sides of a net, each trying to outdo the other.

And to get a good game of tennis you need to have opponents who will enter the game vigorously, perhaps even fiercely. They have to want to win; they have to focus on the goal of winning.

### **Winning and losing in games**

Have you ever played games with persons who don't care whether they win or lose?

I had a dear, tender-hearted aunt, who would deliberately lose in games because she didn't want others to feel badly when they lost.

Well, of course, that absolutely spoils the game! There's no vitality or energy. Forget it. Why play?

So that's the field of action. And that's one plane of consciousness.

### **A second plane of consciousness**

But it's not the only plane of consciousness. You need a second plane, which, in terms of the tennis analogy, is the judge or referee, who sits on the stool above the net watching the action.

This judge – above and outside the action, and not favoring one side or the other in the game, but recognizing the vitality and beauty of the game itself, and understanding the value of each side for the game – is only interested that the game be played according to the rules that have been set down, because without those rules, and without the opponents following those rules, there is no decent game.

### **A real player in the game of life**

Now, to be a "real player" in this "game of life," says Campbell, it is necessary to live in *both* planes of consciousness at the same time.

To be a real player in life, you have to be able to do two things:

First, you have to be willing to try to carry your side of the net: practice hard, play to win, don't easily give up, and all of that.

And, secondly, and simultaneously, and even more importantly in this "game of life," you need to be aware of the game itself and not so attached to the winning and losing that you miss the rapture of the game – a game, of course, that includes both you *and* your opponent.

In other words, the game itself is more important than who wins or loses, though the winning and losing are *necessary* elements of the game.

### **"Poor sports"**

Again, have you ever played a game with persons who are more attached to winning than to the game itself?

This, I find, is even more frustrating than to play with persons who are only half-participating because they don't want to hurt your feelings if you lose.

As Campbell says, those who are too attached to the winning and losing are called "poor sports," and with them the whole game is spoiled.

So, too, in the game of life "poor sports" are persons more attached to winning and losing than to the play of the game.

### **The recent World Series**

I don't know now many of you follow professional baseball, but I experienced these two planes of consciousness in regard to the recent baseball playoffs, particularly the American League Championship series in which the Seattle Mariners lost to the Toronto Bluejays in seven games ... and then the World Series in which the Bluejays lost to National League Champions the Los Angeles Dodgers in seven games.

Now, of course, living here in the Northwest, I was on the side of the Seattle Mariners in their run for the American League Championship. And they acquitted themselves very well. It certainly could have gone their way; it was a very exciting series.

Then, in the World Series, I was now on the side of Toronto. And, again, this series went down to the wire, particularly in the final game, which went into extra innings ... with each team making remarkable plays, each team pushing the other, the outcome, as it were, turning on a dime – one bounce of the ball here, one missed tag, one chinked hit, one umpire's call, and we'd have a different outcome in the Series.

Near the end of that final game, as it went into extra innings, I felt myself moving from being on one side or the other to being the "metaphysical observer," simply appreciating the game itself, regardless of who won and who lost.

## A tiny parable

I'll give you yet another of Campbell's favorite illustrations for this concept of living simultaneously at two levels of consciousness. It relates to a tiny parable from a Hindu scripture, the *Rig Veda*, and goes like this:

On the Tree of Life there are two birds, fast friends. One bird eats the fruit of the tree; the other bird, not eating, watches.

Or, expressed even more succinctly: Two birds, fast friends; one eats, one watches.

Our Tree of Life has two birds in it representing these two different orientations, these two planes of consciousness.

The one bird, eating the fruit, participates in the field of action. It's killing a fruit – life feeds on life. (For Campbell, you don't escape the sorrows of the world by being a vegetarian. "Ever heard a carrot scream?" he quips.)

Try as you might, you can't avoid the field of action or its difficulties and the necessary decisions involved. But you can see a larger reality even in the midst of the "sorrows of the world."

And that's the role of the second bird in our Tree of Life, the one representing the "metaphysical observer" within us ... who, detached from the action, simply watches without judgment, and from this perspective is able to see a reality that embraces and transcends the "sorrows of the world." And, with wonder and astonishment, observes the vitality and beauty of the Whole and identifies with that.

Thus, says Campbell, we need *both* perspectives in life. We need to live *simultaneously* in both worlds ... which is not easy to do, because, on the one hand, we tend to get so caught up in the action, so attached to our position in the action, that we miss the glory of the divine play ...

... or, on the other hand, having detached from the yes-no, the winning-losing, the good-evil, we hold ourselves back from the play, perhaps overcome by its tension and anxiety or put off by its pain, sorrow, and ruthlessness.

## The call to participate

But Campbell's message is an emphatic call to participate. Participate, he says, in the field of action! Don't hold yourself back from the play in the field of time!

Quoting William Blake, Campbell says, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" ... meaning that the experience of the eternal depth of things is to be found here and now, and in the current incarnations in time and space – not when our circumstances change, and not in some different place, nor in some future time. So, play the game now!

Do you know what joy and vitality there can be in playing a game freely and fully and without fear and without desire? That's the way to play the game – that is, without *ultimate* attachment to winning or losing. And that's what it means to participate with joy in the sorrows of the world.

### **My father, his brothers, and vigorous participation in games**

On my father's side there were six brothers, all of whom loved games and who entered vigorously into them.

And they taught me to love games and to enter into them with full energy and participation, which I did and have.

(I have a friend who once described me “as the most competitive person he had ever met.”)

But my father and his brothers also taught me another aspect of games, which, for the most part, they followed, and which I also try to follow, namely: *When the game is over, it's over; let it go, time to move on.*

I think now of my father and his brothers in relation to these two planes of consciousness.

### **The image of the Bodhisattva**

In terms of entering the play of the “game of life,” Joseph Campbell sees the primary symbolic images of both Buddhism and Christianity as related to this sense of willing participation in the give-and-take of *this* world.

In Buddhism, you have the figure of the Bodhisattva.

This is the figure of the one who has achieved Buddhahood – has achieved enlightenment – has awakened to full consciousness of his or her being.

Or, in terms of these two planes of consciousness I'm talking about, this is one who has recognized his or her identification with the ultimate reality that transcends the pairs of opposites and the sorrows of the world and can now live at that plane of consciousness.

But the question is: Will this enlightened being now withdraw from the world, retire from it, stand apart from it with clean hands, or will this enlightened being return to the world to participate in it?

The Bodhisattva is the image of the one who returns to participate – and participates, then, with *compassion*, not fear or greed, but with compassion, having seen that all beings, whether they affirm you or oppose you, are Buddha beings – living expressions, each and every one of them, of the divine energy that is the only energy there is.

## **The image of the crucified Christ**

Campbell finds a comparable image of this sense of willing participation in *this* world in the figure of the crucified Christ in Christianity.

How does this work for him?

Campbell was fond of quoting a text of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians – a text which is really a hymn or credo of the early Christian church, perhaps the earliest – that runs this way:

Christ, being divine and in the form of God, did not think equality with God something to be clung to, but humbled himself and became a servant, even to death on a cross. (See Philippians 2:5-8)

This, for Campbell, is an image of one, who, like the Buddha, has transcended the play of life, one who has the form of God – God, here, being a symbol for that which encompasses and transcends the pairs of opposites of life – but doesn't hold to that form, but instead, enters the play and lives in the duality of this world.

There's no better symbolic image of this duality than the image of the cross with its double pairs of opposites. In the symbol of the cross you have both the horizontal and the vertical arms – left and right, up and down – meeting at the center.

And there, at the center where the double pairs of opposites meet – and the Greek cross with its equal-length arms is the best symbol of this – there at the center is the point where the human being is inescapably fastened.

## **My religion in a red and gold lapel pin**

You can't see it, but this little red and gold circle pin in this sport coat I wear depicts a Greek cross with its equal horizontal and vertical arms.

Over the years this little lapel pin has become very important to me ... and I would feel undressed leading a service without it.

However, recently it became lost ... and my dear wife, who you met earlier as Bill Moyers, was good enough to order me two of these pins, which arrived in time for today's service.

(A good part of my religion and world-and-life view is symbolized in very condensed form in this little lapel pin, which I won't go more into at this time.)

## **The image of "Christ triumphant"**

Now, this image of the cross doesn't include the figure of the human body – doesn't directly depict a crucifixion – but of direct crucifixion images the image that Campbell likes the most is a form of the crucifix known as “Christ triumphant.”

This is not the common crucifixion image with head bowed in sorrow and blood pouring; but, rather, head erect, eyes open – willingly, freely, and fully accepting this fate, coming joyfully and triumphantly to the cross, as St. Augustine says, like a bridegroom to the bride, the bride in this case being the world of time and space, the duality of “yes” and “no.”

*(The Power of Myth, p. 138-39)*

### **On affirming absolutely everything**

If you have a little more bandwidth, I'm going to conclude with Campbell's ideas of what it means to accept the world *as it is*?

What does it mean to say “yes” to absolutely everything?

Campbell, drawing on a statement of the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, says that if you say “no” to a single thing in your life, you have unraveled the whole thing. *(The Power of Myth, p. 161)*

In other words: Whatever you reject, whatever you refuse, whatever you are not able to assimilate, narrows your life and draws off your energy.

And, on the other hand, whatever you are able to affirm, whatever you are able to swallow and digest, whatever you are able to take in and own as part of yourself, enlarges your life and increases your vitality.

### **An illuminating experience**

In the Moyers' interviews, Campbell gave this example.

“I had,” he said, “an illuminating experience from a woman who had been in severe physical pain for years, from an affliction that had stricken her in her youth. She had been raised a believing Christian and so thought this had been God's punishment of her for something she had done or not done at that time. She was in spiritual as well as physical pain. I told her that if she wanted release, she should affirm and not deny [that] her suffering was her life, and that through it she had become the noble creature that she now was.

And while I was saying all this, I was thinking, ‘Who am I to talk like this to a person in real pain, when I've never had anything more than a toothache?’

But in this conversation, in affirming her suffering as the shaper and teacher of her life, she experienced a conversion – right there. I have kept in touch with her since – that was years and years ago – and she is indeed a transformed woman.”

*(The Power of Myth, p. 160)*

Campbell, in interpreting this “conversion” experience, believes that what he gave this woman was the idea that she was the agent of her own life. Her situation was not the punishment or plan of some outside deity, but rather her situation was part of the play of the universal energy *of which she herself was a part*.

And to the extent that she could affirm her situation – not necessarily like it – but affirm it and take it in, digest it and not rebel against it, and not blame herself or anyone or anything else ... to the extent that she could do that, she could enlarge her life.

Says Campbell, “The demon that you can swallow gives you its power, and the greater life’s pain, the greater life’s reply.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 161)

And so his advice is this: Take your life, and your life’s situation, *as if* it had been your intention – not literally, but *as if* it had been your intention.

“With that,” he says, “you evoke the participation of your will.” That is, you look for the possibilities in your life’s situation, whatever your situation is. (*The Power of Myth*, p. 161)

(This is also the psychological force of the Eastern idea of “karma.” By taking your present situation as something based on your previously made choices, you are turned aside from both blame and a sense of entitlement, and you work on your own life *as it is*.)

### **The doctrine of “things mutually arising”**

Then, one final thing related to this topic of saying “yes” to life as it is and transcending blame.

From Buddhism, Campbell also picked up the doctrine of “things mutually arising” ... which is the idea is that everything arises together as *one inter-related whole*. So, there’s no room for blame for anyone or anything.

Campbell had a Tibetan Buddhist friend with whom he worked for over ten years on a book translation. The Tibetan Buddhists, as you know, have suffered horrific persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communists. Campbell says that in all the time he worked with this man, he never heard him utter a single word of recrimination or complaint against the Chinese Communists.

Nor, says Campbell, do you hear a word of condemnation or resentment of the Chinese Communists from the leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama.

(I have been told that the Dalai Lama, when asked who his greatest teacher has been, replied, “Mao Tse Tung.”)

Says Campbell, “I have learned what religion is from these men. Here is true religion, alive – today.” (*The Power of Myth*, p. 158-59)

## Interpreting this doctrine

Does this mean that one does not discriminate or hold others to account? Does this mean one simply acquiesces in whatever comes your way?

Not at all, for again there are two levels here. In the field of action, you make your evaluations and judgments, you take your stances, and you hold others to account.

But, because you are also living simultaneously on the plane of the metaphysical observer, you do so *impersonally* and without blame, condemnation, or judgment in the *absolute* sense, for, at this level, it's all part of the same energy.

Again, the Dalai Lama is a marvelous example of living simultaneously at these two levels. And he is very aware of what he is doing. I once read an interview where the following question was put to him:

“It has been said that the Whole Person is one who lives simultaneously in two worlds – what about this?”

The Dalai Lama responded this way, saying:

“One has equanimity. One is impartial; but in accordance with circumstances, taking certain action. In his inner world, there are no differences, but in his outer world he keeps aware of differences, and accordingly takes action.”

Or, as Joseph Campbell says, you can't say that there shouldn't be poisonous serpents in the world. That's the way this world is. But if in the field of action a poisonous serpent should threaten you, you take action, even to the point of killing that serpent, if necessary.

That's not saying “no” to the world or to the serpent, but it's saying “no” to that situation, and it's taking action in that situation.

(Moyers' interview with Campbell in 1981, transcribed from a PBS program that aired on April 17, 1981, p. 8)

## Conclusion

So, to extrapolate and conclude: You can't say that life shouldn't feed on other life, or that it shouldn't include greed or thoughtlessness or racism or the atomic bomb or ... or ... or – pick your poisonous serpent.

These things are. They are part of the unfolding of the energy of all being. And they are part of you, too, if you take the time to look.

And so the thing to do is to try to find that place in you where these things reside, so that when you make your decisions in this world, when you take your stances, when you stand up for your convictions, when you try to “improve” this world, you will do so with *compassion*, knowing and experiencing that's it's all part of one grand opera staged by powers that are beyond your comprehension.

### **“Is this a private fight?”**

Campbell was fond of an Irish saying that runs like this: “Is this a private fight, or can anyone participate?”

Campbell’s answer is that it’s a public affair to which everyone is invited.

Now, you will get hurt sometimes, and often bruised, and sooner or later you will die, but *don’t take it personally*.

But do take it. Say “yes.” Enter the fray. Participate. Participate with joy in the sorrows of the world!

### **Closing Hymn #128: “For All That Is Our Life”**

1. For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;  
for all life is a gift which we are called to use  
to build the common good and make our own days glad.
2. For needs which others serve, for services we give,  
for work and its rewards, for hours of rest and love;  
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.
3. For sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain, and loss,  
for each new thing we learn, for fearful hours that pass:  
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.
4. For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;  
for all life is a gift which we are called to use  
to build the common good and make our own days glad.

(Words: Bruce Findlow; music: Patrick L. Rickey)

### **Closing Words**

Our Closing Words of Benediction are from Robinson Jeffers, a poet who influenced Joseph Campbell in his younger years, these words:

We cannot be sure of life for one moment;

We can, by force and self-discipline, by many refusals and a few assertions, in the teeth of fortune assure ourselves

Freedom and integrity in life or integrity in death. And we know that the enormous invulnerable beauty of things

Is the face of God; live gladly in its presence, and so die without grief or fear knowing it survives us.

(Robinson Jeffers, from “Nova,” adapted)

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on Sunday, November 16, 2025. This is a follow-up to the October 19 service titled “Masks of God,” available on the OUUF website in printed version at: <https://olympicuuf.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Guest-Speaking-Sequim-October-19-2025-Masks-of-God.pdf.pdf>.

### **Biographical Data on Guest Speaker**

Bruce A. Bode is Minister Emeritus at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (QUUF) in Port Townsend, Washington, from which he retired in 2018 as the Senior Minister after serving the congregation for fourteen years (2004-2018).

Before coming to Port Townsend, Rev. Bode was the Interim Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston, Texas (2002-2004) and the Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma (2001-2002). Prior to that, he served for twenty-two years (1978-2001) as an Associate Minister at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a large, independent, religiously liberal congregation.