

LIVING MYTH PODCAST

Episode 378 - Mythic Medicine

So, I'm going to tell like a myth. And the problem with the myths typically speaking, is that they don't seem terribly personal at first. They're like the big schematic archetypal narrations in which everything can fit. And it can be hard to find yourself in it. So, we'll just see how it goes. The other thing that's different between a myth and a fairy tale or a folktale is that a myth usually names the divine. And you'll see that in this story, this is a story from India.

So, people say once upon a time, and yet, it can't exactly be upon a time. But people also say, time has to begin at some point. And some people say that it began way back when the god Vishnu, was sleeping on the back of the eternal serpent Ananta. And Ananta, was coiled on the surface of the eternal sea. And while sleeping, they say, Vishnu began to dream up the world, that is to say, the earth began to form. And forests and trees and rivers began to run. And the mountains began to take their stance in the sun. And everything began to grow and show its beauty and its promise. And they say that back there, at the beginning, there was a progenitor, an original human. Some say he was called Markandeya. And they say that he was also the first pilgrim, for no sooner did he find himself in that original landscape than he began to wander about. And as he wandered in the pristine beauty of the world that has just been dreamt up by Vishnu while he was dreaming, Markandeya saw the awe and the wonder and the beauty of nature so that each place he came to seem like a natural shrine, and at each place he would bow and make a devotion to the beauty and the wonder of what he was finding in existence.

And he was going along like that, the first pilgrim, the first wanderer, the first seeker, the first devotional person, and everything was going great until he slipped, the first pratfall, the first mistake, the first stumble. And no sooner did he slip, then he began to fall. And as he fell, he happened to fall into the mouth of Vishnu, who was sleeping with his mouth open. And they say, the God that dreamed up the world also was snoring at the time. For everything had to be there at the beginning, including snoring, and as Markandeya fell from the wonder of creation, into the open mouth of Vishnu, he continued to fall and he fell right out of the mouth of the dreaming God and he fell right out of the beauty of of creation, and he fell right into the endless, dark, eternal sea.

Once he was in the sea, he began to find fear inside of himself where he had previously found wonder. He began to get anxious, he began to become disturbed, and he began to sink. And pretty soon he was turning in all directions. And he could see nothing but darkness, and he could feel nothing but fear. And he wondered, Where was that beautiful world? Where is that wondrous creation that I had been wandering in? Was it a dream? Or is this the dream? What is reality, that wander in that beauty, or this dark despair of this endless ocean? He was going back and forth, not sure. And he realized, as he was going back and forth, surely he was sinking. And as he began to sink, he began to feel an overwhelming despair. And as he was falling into the darkness of that despair,

it occurred to him that if he kept feeling fearful, and if he kept allowing the despair to grow, he would surely drown. And if he kept looking for something outside, when he could see nothing, he would surely drown. And so finally, it occurred to him to look inside. And he turned inside himself. And once inside, he found a spark of imagination, he found something that gave him buoyancy, a sense of self that was hidden below the despair that had grown there. And he found when he felt that spark of imagination, he felt buoyant, and he looked around, and now, he thought he did see something on the horizon, what looked like a great mountain range that was kind of glowing at the edge of the eternal sea. And he realized that he had to get there somehow. And so he began to swim, and Markandeya who is the first pilgrim also became the first swimmer.

And as he began to swim, he put all the energy of his body and his heart into swimming. And pretty soon, he was moving closer and closer to the glowing mountains at the edge of what he thought was an endless sea. And as he was growing, moving closer to it, he could see that it was actually the shape of a great being laying on the ocean. He couldn't tell whether it was a great woman laying there, or a great man laying there, he could just see that it was a great being. And he began to think that must be Vishnu who dreamed up the world. And he began to swim even harder. But as he got partway there a huge hand, reached out and went down to the water, and lifted Markandeya and popped him back into the mouth of Vishnu and the saint and the seeker found himself back in the wonder and beauty of creation, wandering around, except now, he was wet, and dripping with the despair that he could not quite shake off. Now he was back in the realm of beauty. But he also was carrying inside an awareness of fear, of depth of anxiety, and a sense of despair. And again, he wondered, which is real, this beautiful realm, or that endless dark ocean in which you can drown. And he realized he had come into a new stage of life, and that he now had to carry a tension between what he had learned about darkness, and what he knew about beauty and creation. And he, they say, was the first person and we are the descendants from him. I'm not sure if that's true. But the idea of being caught in the tension between creation and wonder, and despair and loss seems to me to be something that's at play in the world again, and maybe we could learn something from paying attention to how it once was back at the beginning, when everything began, including including human life and the human soul. Me in the midst of all the calamity, what I'm trying to do is hold on to a few stories that I might use to swim with. Me, I'm sticking with what the old stories say. And hoping that the buoyancy found there can be found inside myself and I hope it's also true for you.

So big story, huh? And the human soul put in the middle of the thing. This is the old idea. In every culture, I've been able to study. The old tradition with a story is to sit and see what struck you in the story. A story is a series of codes and symbols. I call it mythological acupuncture. It sticks you where you need to get stuck. The story is trying to deliver knowledge to us. Story means storehouse, and everything that people have forgotten falls back into stories. And when we tell a story, it comes back to the surface. And so there's no right and wrong. There's just whatever strikes you. So see what struck you because a story is also psychoactive. So if you pick up a piece of the story, you can take it home, and it might turn into a dream tonight, it might take days before the story delivers to you what it's trying to say. So just for a moment, catch the detail to the symbol in the story that's most meaningful, the point in the story. No point is better than another because everybody has to go through the whole narrative.

So, he could feel that the fear was working. And of course, fear is what's working in the culture. That's how they turn everybody against each other, they make everybody afraid of each other. That's what the idea of making

some people aliens is about, to get people to be so afraid that they'll attack them. And that gives power to people that take power by dividing everybody, and so on and so forth. I should mention just by way of being clear, the two basic fears, right, our fear of abandonment, and fear of overwhelm. And Markandeya is going through both, right? Everybody has the experience of being abandoned as a child. Everybody is an abandoned child. It's not a problem, it's just a thing. Right? Because the mother and father can't give us everything that we needed, if they did we'd just stay there. We'd just be like little kids forever. So, we have to have a sense of being abandoned because it's the beginning of really realizing I have to go find myself, find my life. But the experience of abandonment, for many of us, is close to an annihilation. And so what happens is, I can live my whole life saying I will never feel that again, I will never be that close to annihilation again. And therefore, I will stay in this bad relationship for the rest of my life. That's a joke. But you know, I'm saying. Like, if you find yourself in a bad relationship, and you can't leave, it's probably your fear of abandonment. But guess what, if I'm in a relationship that is not good for my soul, I'm abandoning myself on a daily basis. I have now taken over the job of abandonment, and I'm doing the abandonment of myself. I don't know if I'm being helpful or ..?

Okay, and then overwhelm is the idea that a little voice or big voice inside me is saying, "I can't handle this, I really can't handle it. I'm not going to do it. There's too much for me, I'm not going out there." You know what I'm saying? That feeling that my soul is not equal to being in the world. That's called the feeling of overwhelm, and I can't prove this, but sometimes, and it's probably not even nice to say, but I can't help it, but sometimes a marriage is made between a person who is really afraid of being abandoned, and a person who is really afraid of being overwhelmed. And they cover each other's thing. But they never find out why they were here. Anyway, that's just reacting to the fear.

So there's a fear, if I don't know there's something down deep in myself, that's essential, that is a ground of being that has its own value, that even knows why it wants to be here, then I can be afraid of going down. And I can just live in that fear. And so Makandeya's going through that. He's in the sea of despair. You could say, despair, the French word *desespoir*, *spare* is the French word for hope. *Desespoir* means to be not just desperate, but to be without hope. And in case you didn't get that memo, you're supposed to lose your hope. Right? All of the early hopes are naive. Right? I hope to be tall. And I remember as a kid going I'm going to be tall. It was actually genetically impossible. No one told me. Anyway. The early hopes, I hope to be the best, I hope to be the winner, I hope to be safe, those are naive hopes and they're not valuable and therefore they have to be removed.

In sinking into the sea of despair, in a sense, Markandeya is losing his false hopes. And when those false hopes are gone, he's actually closer to the thing that is natural buoyancy, the thing that was hidden, the thing that's trying to be revealed, the if you want to use the fancy word, the *imago*, in the soul, the seed of genius, the seed of brilliance, the divine star, the thing inside that brought us to life that we're supposed to awaken to, we can't find it until we let go of the false hopes and we have even a moment of despair. That's part of what's being said there.

And the fear is, in the abandoning of things, or in the overwhelm of things, I'll turn out to be nothing. And that's why all the old stories are always saying that every soul that's born, and comes into the world comes in with this kind of package of genius capacities, natural gifts and talents. And, more important than anything else, a unique

way of being that makes them themselves. And that that hidden package is what education is supposed to be about. But it's also what the struggle of life is about. And I think what I'm saying, and what I've been writing about lately, is when the world gets this distorted, and this conflicted, we have to go to that. Despair is right under the skin of America. When you recount the stories of the shooting of black people in the street and pretending it didn't happen, the oppression of women and denying that it happened, that puts everybody right near despair. And I think we're going to be going into the uncovering, and the full experiencing of that, and the dashing of the pretenses and the false hopes. But it's really valuable to do that. That's a healing thing. But it's also more valuable if we understand that down at the bottom is the things that we really wanted, the things that make life beautiful, the thing that makes being alive, meaningful. That's what we're going to find. If we can trust that. I mean, one of the hardest things in the world is to trust one's own self.

I trust stories, and I've been studying stories since I was 13. And every culture that I've been able to study except for modern culture, posits the same idea. Every child has a genius seed. Genius means the Spirit that's already there. It doesn't mean high IQ. It means the Spirit that's already there. And everyone born has the spirit that's already there, the spirit that actually brings them into the world. And that's the thing that's trying to awaken. And that's at the bottom of this sinking into the sea of despair, which some people experience as depression, other people experience as the loss of a loved one, or the onset of an illness, it can throw us into those dark places. And if we understand that, in the depth of that dark place is the speck of star that really is the essence of ourselves, it's easier to tolerate that and it becomes a little less fearful.

So finding the ground of one's being creates a buoyancy, that pushes him back up. And then he gets a vision that he didn't have before. All he could see was darkness. And now he can see this glowing, he thinks it's a mountain at first. So now he's swimming with all his might. But he doesn't have to swim all the way back to where he was in creation. We only have to get close, because the Divine is trying to help us get back. That is to say the other world needs us as much as we need it. Am I making sense? To me this is a critical idea. I'm a little bit against heroism lately. I think the hero thing has gotten carried away, and heroics becomes a problem. Because heroics becomes overly dominant, overly extroverted, overly masculine and a whole bunch of things. So I've been positing, instead of the heroes myth, the genius myth, because if everybody has genius, they don't have to get powerful, they already have it. That means that every woman has it. Every girl, every boy, it means every person has it. And it's a little different than you have to go on a hero's journey to become yourself. You could just go inside and find the seed of oneself and grow it from there. I'm not trying to defame the hero's journey. I'm just thinking it might not be diverse enough to give everybody the sense that they are included in the great story. That's my idea there.

So heroics would say we have to swim all the way there, then we have to climb back into the dream of life, then we have to stand some trees up, you know? No, the effort puts us into the dynamic. And then the stories say, a lot of them say, the other world, the divine, the world of imagination needs us as well. Humans are a certain manifestation of the wonder of the world. And humans have always been considered to be the ones who consciously know that this is a place of wonder. The Mayan myth, the Popol Vuh, that's their creation story, and after the whole world, just like Vishnu's dream, has been made so beautifully, the creators, they have a group of creators, the key one is called Heart of Heaven, and Heart of Heaven notices something's missing in creation, even though the animals and the birds have great, you know, ways of being in great song, something's missing.

And then he realizes two things are missing. There is not a being that is conscious of the wonder and beauty of the world. And there's no one present to express gratitude for the gift of life. And that's when they begin to make human beings. So human beings are there to do these two great things, to have conscious knowledge of the world, which also means the cosmos, and an awakened awareness of the gift of life.

And then I'm arguing that the gift of life is unique in every case. And what we're really fighting for, is the survival of our life, but also the awakening of our uniqueness. And I'm also saying this in the background, that if we come in over here, and were gifted, we have our genius, we have the aim of our life, we don't know what it is, or our family doesn't know what it is, either. No one told them. And then we're going to struggle. It used to be called the initiatory struggle, to become aware of all that. And eventually, we're going to go out the other doors or a door over there. Usually they say exit, you got that memo. Everybody who came in is going out. No one gets out of this alive. That's the basic story. But almost all cultures said that after you die, there's some kind of a test, you get measured and weighed. And the thing is, if we came in gifted, then the test has to be did you become yourself? Just think about it. Right? The real question at the end of one's life is did you become yourself. It's actually the question every day of one's life, did we become ourselves? And it's hard to imagine how to become oneself if we don't have the idea that we are gifted and unique to begin with.

So all that, to me is in the background of the story. We don't have to go all the way, we just have to make an effort and wind up in the vicinity of the Divine, that then does the rest of it. I like that idea. I can't prove it, I just find it to be a non heroic humanly beautiful idea. Humans are by nature, in a tension between the heavens above which we can imagine, and the density of the Earth, which we are held to by gravity. We are stretched between those things. And we also are in a tension between the darkness of despair and the brilliance of inspiration. We're there and we are equal to it. In other words the fear of overwhelm says, "I can't do it. I just can't do it. I'm going to stick with just gravity. I'm not going to go for any big ideas." Or, "I can't, I can't handle the darkness." Right? I mean, one of the problems with Western culture is its utter obsession with light which leads to the obsession with white, which leads to the obsession with might. Darkness is where light comes from. Hafez says, "Let the darkness season you,."

Markandeya becomes more full, more awake, more unique by sinking into the darkness. The fear of darkness is a major problem in Western culture, which turns into racism, and all kinds of other foolish things. You know, they have a new map out and they're able to show how the world is losing darkness. There's so much incandescent light, and it's not just in the urban centers, it's all over the world now. And they have a map which shows all the light. And then they're saying it is now true, that we are losing darkness. And it's a complete misunderstanding. You know, remember the enlightenment. It was just a big mistake. I mean, think about it. Really, they said if we just could get enough light, we would know everything. We could fix everything. Look where we are. And not only that, they took those lights, and they made them into telescopes, you know, astronomical telescopes and they sent them out there into the universe and what universe and what did they find? Dark matter, dark energy, and fucking black holes. How's the Enlightenment going? You know, like Welcome to the Indarkenment. It's a much better thing. Right? Anyway, I'm serious.

And the problem with the loss of darkness is then we lose eternity. Because people used to, I mean, the people that came before us, which we're connected to, they used to look up and see the darkness of the night sky. And

at the end of the day, the day ended when the sun went away. Remember, because they used to have what do they call them, sundials. And the sundial showed you the time. A sundial doesn't work well after dark, is not terribly effective. And so, after dark, there was no time, because you couldn't see it. You could see eternity. We can feel that, we know we're that close to being touched by eternity. And that sky that everybody can kind of see sometimes is called the Milky Way. And the word galaxy has lactose in it. I mean, I know some people are lactose intolerant, but think of it as galactic milk. And the idea is the stars are not just shining, they're pouring galactic milk down on us. And so as the world gets too bright, we can't see the stars and we're not even getting our nightly dose of galactic milk. I'm joking, but I'm not.

And so Markandeya, like our ancestor, got dipped into darkness, and became more human, became more genuine, became more knowledgeable, became aware of the hidden light inside himself by going into the dark. So a story like this, to me is saying, we're in a dark time, it's probably going to get darker. And I wish it wasn't the case, but it is the case. And so then Hafez says, "Let the darkness season you." Let the darkness season us let it pull us into a deep enough place that we become ourselves. And then we can become the Bringers of new ways of doing, new ways of being. Because if you take the notion that humans are tied to the origin of creation, which scientists now are saying, you know, that if you really think about what's going on in science, the biologists have tracked human generation, all back to Africa, did everybody get that? It's traced back to one woman, by the tracking of mitochondria of women, all the way back to one, we all came from the same mother. And so this attempt to divide everybody is a misunderstanding of diversity, which is really the richness of life trying to manifest you know, we know that. But knowing it and figuring out how to live it is now you know, going to be the challenge. Because both from the point of view of biology, we literally by ourselves historically, are all connected, going back. And then by this cosmological notion of seeing, not just distance in light, but the past, beaming at us from the origin of creation. We're connected to that too.

I'm kind of going this way now because we have to imagine the world differently to get out of the trouble we're in. You know, I grew up in the 60s, I was pretty politically active. I was in the streets, I was in jail, I was in a lot of things. And I did not see the kind of transformation that was needed. It didn't last. We're in a similar time now near as I can tell. It is a time of upheaval, and therefore a time of possible transformation. And to me, we have to go a different way and get a much broader vision of what it means to be human. Even though there was a lot of humanitarian gain during the 60s, it wasn't held on to. And I think we almost need this cosmological shift to understand what we could be doing.

Ok what else struck anyone? We're just here in this ground between the beauty and the wonder of creation. Remember there's an ecological crisis, because people forgot that nature was here to be beautiful, and to be resonating. Culture and nature are not two opposite things. They used to say they are the two garments of creation. Nature is the green garment of ongoing life, pulsing life and culture is the many colored garment of creativity. And the two are connected, not disconnected. And when a person goes down inside, we're finding our unique human nature. And when we find our nature, we're connected to great nature. The connection is not outside and in the mind, it's deep down in the soul, and we find our connection. And that's part of the job now is not just to protect the ecosystems, but actually become actively engaged with the life of nature, which is part of human nature.