Michael Meade Brings Genius to Life in Atlanta

by Charles Knott

At a bookstore in New York City that specialized in world religions, there were perhaps a dozen customers throughout the store who were silently turning the pages of books that interested them when I opened the door to enter. Every one of them stopped what they were doing and gave me their full attention. I imagined each one thinking, "Why is this person entering my life at this precise moment?" Several of them closed their eyes briefly as if to honor the answer they were being given from whatever source they had importuned. They seemed fully focused on the moment and completely open and curious. Then, once they got the message they were seeking, they nodded and went back to their browsing. I encountered some of that same focused spirituality this weekend when I had the great pleasure of seeing Michael Meade on two occasions: once at Serenbe and again at Oglethorpe University.

Serenbe is a "new urban village" located in the semi-rural area within the city limits of Chattahoochee Hills in south Fulton County near Atlanta. As the guest speaker for one of three weekend dinner programs there, each one focusing on a conventionally taboo dinner subject, Michael first talked about death to a group gathered in the Pavilion. Afterwards, the group migrated to the Farmhouse for a "Death and Dinner" discussion. He told a story called "Appointment at Samarra." In it, a man sees Death in the marketplace and fears that death has come to take him away. In an effort to save his life by eluding Death, and terrified that his last moment on earth has come, he climbs on a horse and rides as hard and fast as he can for hours until he finally arrives in distant Samarra. Surely it is a place of safety where Death will not find him. Unfortunately, when he had met Death in the marketplace, he did not know that Death was on his way to keep an appointment at Samarra, so his urgent ride to escape took him directly to where Death was waiting to receive him.

Michael's approach to storytelling is to invite the members of the audience to tell how they responded to any given part of the story. My own response was to tell the group that a few weeks ago I was working out beside an old man (about my age); we were each on a treadmill, walking and running as fast and hard as we possibly could, when an ironic thought occurred to me: here are two old fools trying to outrun death! The conversation in the group led predominantly in the direction of how bitter one might be to arrive at death without having lived one's life fully. This point reminded me of Thoreau's remark: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

Charles Knott did his doctoral work in drama therapy at New York University. He was program coordinator and lectured regularly at the C. G. Jung Society of Atlanta for a time during the 1990s. He is currently a contributing writer for The Grapevine Art & Soul Salon, an online literary/art journal at: www.grapevineartandsoulsalon.com/

Photo - youtube video from *Mosaic Multicultural Foundation*

For Thoreau, “really living” involves going into the woods and leading a meditative life, an approach that suits me extremely well. For others, it might involve encountering new parts of the world. For instance, a friend of mine recently said she was becoming aware of encroaching age and that she had decided to make the most of things. I asked her what she was planning to do, and she said, “I’m making a trip to Brazil.” For me, making the most of the time I have left involves reading and meditating.

I saw Meade again two nights later, this time at Oglethorpe University, at an event sponsored by Mosaic Multicultural Foundation (founded by Michael Meade) in partnership with the Atlanta Jung Society. There was an audience of around 250 people. They were warm and receptive to Meade, and the rapport was immediate.

Here he told the story of a child being born as a “half child.” The child existed only in the form of its left side from head to toe. Being shunned by the village to which it was born, the child wandered until he came to a river down which floated what was apparently his other side. The two sides joined and immediately went into turmoil. This result was ironic because the child had gone from his original fragmented form to a condition of wholeness. Wholeness, in turn, usually signifies self-realization, the ultimate spiritual goal. When the point was made by members of the audience, Meade responded that wholeness and self-realization might actually refer to a state of conflict!

The part of the story that seemed to interest Meade the most was this: when the child returned to his village in a condition of wholeness filled with conflict, he was welcomed at the entrance to the village by an elder. Two topics that preoccupy Meade these days include our culture’s need for actualized elders, those who have achieved wholeness, who have reconciled their conflicts to a great degree and are ready to mentor young people, as well as the willingness of the world village to receive young people who have been shattered by conflict and need to be healed by community. Each time a person suffers conflict, that person is torn and must be healed. The conflict can be seen as a “call to the journey,” and the healing from that conflict can be seen as an aspect of the “return from the journey."

I was reminded of the countless times I have experienced or witnessed a return that was more traumatic than healing, as if the forces that should have been used for healing were used for punishment. I have especially vivid memories from the 1960s of soldiers returning from Vietnam and, while they were still in uniform, walking through an American airport and being spat upon by American citizens.

Meade has worked with people in need for a long, long time. He has worked with combat veterans, street kids, and all manner of human suffering. He concentrates on those who have been traumatized. The source of the trauma can be anything from combat fatigue to experiences of loss. He calls his work "mentoring," and he believes that this should be the role of all people who have suffered and know something about healing. He is particularly interested in the role that elders might play in this process. Just being "older" of course, does not make one an elder. People of any age who have lived shallow, unconscious lives will have precious little to offer as mentors. I agree with Michael that we must do our best to engage authentic elders, those who are figures of maturity and wisdom. He is particularly concerned that returning veterans often have no one to receive them, and their unresolved confusion leads to endless suffering and, all too often, to suicide. Meade likes to mentor, and wants to train others to mentor. He was pleased at one point to have veterans of Vietnam mentoring the younger veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Combat veterans who have survived PTSD have gained valuable survivor knowledge that in Meade's reckoning should be shared with their younger brothers and sisters-in-arms.

His most fundamental hope is that somehow the "genius" in each of us can be awakened. For him, the term is not a reference to IQ or talent; rather, it refers to the core pattern of one's being. Rejecting the notion of the *tabula rasa*, i.e., that we all are born a characterological blank slate and will become whatever is written on us, Meade believes that the forces that create us have a separate intention for each of us. The meaningful question then becomes, who are you meant to be? Will you become who you are meant to become? Will you give your life to what you love? Will you evolve into your authentic self?

For me, the concept evokes Campbell's observation in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that the hero cures the wasteland condition by the act of living an authentic life. In wasteland conditions, where corruption and inauthenticity rule, discovering and living according to one's authentic life is a daunting challenge. How does one even take the first step? In his book *Fate and Destiny*, Meade presents an account of how, to avoid being forced to act against his own authentic self during the Vietnam war, he went on a hunger strike of two months' duration. He won that battle by demonstrating a willingness to die, if necessary, to defend the integrity of his own being. Of this experience, he says, it's "an Irish thing. If we can't defeat you any other way, we will fast against you!" But the promise of storytellers is that the challenges of discovering and living according to the needs and impulses of the authentic self can be explored and enhanced through a study of world literature. The "hero with a thousand faces" refers both to fictional heroes and to one's inner authentic self. Our lives are stories, and the better we understand stories, the better we understand ourselves.

All of human psychological knowledge is contained in the world's stories. The most succinct and useful statement of this idea was made by Joseph Campbell in an interview where he said, "Every psychological impulse has a mythological counterpart." This means every life situation can be located in a story. The value of this is that your own life story can be assimilated into a recognizable narrative that can show you various potentials for the next step on your journey. You can use it to bring shape and meaning to moments of stress that might otherwise be hopeless or even terminal. Locating your life situation in a story connects you to all of humanity and relieves some of the loneliness and the feeling of "Why me?"

Above, I referred to the "call" and "return" of the hero. These are parts of the so-called cosmogonic cycle which Joseph Campbell writes about so brilliantly in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Meade praises Campbell's work as a major, even predominant, formative influence for his own life. He is aware, however, that the hero myth Campbell writes about is set in a masculine, extroverted ambience. For our present day and age Meade wants to think of a more introverted model for self-discovery that has in it some of the values traditionally associated with the feminine. He describes the digital age as furnishing us with "a horizontal experience" of each other and says that our brilliant methods of instantaneous communication have "made the world flat again." While there is nothing wrong with this as far as it goes, we must not forget that we are not only creatures of the earth but also creatures of the heavens and the depths of psychological life.

So, Meade also wants a "vertical" way of thinking. Logos, the factual, intellectual, literal, scientific type of understanding is of intense value, but it should be balanced with mythos: the emotional, the imagistic, the metaphoric. If one is of the brain, the other is of the heart. If one is of the earth, the other is of the sky, the heavens.This sentiment evokes a passage in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* when, traveling through New Mexico, Jung has a conversation with an elder of the Pueblo Indians. The elder tells him that all white men are crazy because they think with the head. Jung asks him what part of his body he thinks from, and the elder touches his chest to convey that he thinks with his heart, like all sane people.

In the Oglethorpe audience there was a collective smile and sigh of agreement as Meade made his points. This one turned out to be a highly savvy audience of people already involved in mentoring of one kind and another: counselors, psychotherapists and teachers. They seemed to me to be hungry to have their lives described in the context of these thoughts, and they were grateful for the present opportunity to find their own lives celebrated in the stories and metaphors Meade brought to them.

Pervading the room was also a certain urgency in these matters. Several times, Meade, while promising "not to talk about politics," actually did talk obliquely about politics: the world, he said, is "churning." He said the hopeful thing is that wherever there is destruction, there is new creation. He is heartened, he said, by the amount of work people suddenly are doing. Until recently, when he asked an audience how many of them were working in some form of mentoring, he might see raised hands among 10% of the group. Now, he says, those engaged in mentoring would seem to be closer to 50% in most of his audiences. Our political world has become so dysfunctional, I suggested, that people are realizing if anything is going to get done they are going to have to do it themselves, a sentiment with which he agreed.

Thank you for being here Michael! I hope you come again soon.