

The mythologies of everyday life:

In relationships people often wonder why their reactions to their partner are so intense and irrational. One notices this during times of conflict and anger, or at times of longing and desire. Most people have experienced first hand that when they fall in or out of love there are emotional forces at work that lie beyond the boundaries of logic and reason: Just as romantic couples often feel taken over by the passion of intense love divorcing couples feel taken over by the passion of intense anger or hatred. Even in everyday domestic life, people find themselves reacting with extraordinary intensity to what seem like the most trivial of issues.

A very basic question that everyone must ask is “What is really at stake when I find myself getting very upset or distressed by my partner or children?” How we answer this gives us keys to how to change our life.

Dramatic discoveries in the fields of anthropology and psychology offer new answers to this question. What we are now beginning to realise is that our struggles with everyday life are influenced almost entirely by how we deal with one issue: our innate powerlessness over our ultimate fate in life. In fact our most essential psychology is about what we do with the helplessness that is an inherent part of life. We may have control over what we do on a daily basis but we have no control over the great forces of life – our aging, illness, death, and the inevitable tragic strain running through all of our wonderful mortal existence.

Exciting discoveries show that to deal with the uncertainty and mystery of life, with its inherent suffering and tragedy, each of us actually draws from an invisible private mythology that directs what we should do and how we should cope. From an early age we develop a secret inner religion about why things happen, the kind of person we are, and the consequences of certain behaviour. This private mythology is developed and refined over many years as a consequence of a range of emotional and irrational forces that swirl around us. Later in life we superimpose an adult logic on top of this to make our beliefs seem reasonable. For example, Mary Coughlan is on the Late Late as I write explaining how her childhood abuse shaped her emotional and interpersonal life in ways that she had not understood until recently. But whether it is childhood trauma, or just the character of the home we grew up in, we develop a way of dealing with the world that is not based on logic but on deeply held emotional mythologies that help us cope with life. Our method of coping is not driven by reason and logic but by the power of existential awe and existential fear.

It may sound strange to suggest that you have your own private mythology or even private unique religion, but in the quiet secrets of your own little life you know it to be true. This is true not just of individuals but tribes, peoples, and cultures all through history have created sets of beliefs and rituals that enabled them come to terms with life’s suffering and mortality. The death of a loved one evoked grief and loss, the expression of which became ritualised into meaningful actions, which evolved into a variety of mythologies.

Mythologies, like religions, are in their original form poetic and imaginative ways to make sense of life and cope with suffering and death. They usually consist of beliefs and rituals that show respect for a vertical dimension to life that is beyond the

horizontal control of everyday concerns. They succeed when they provide hope and compel people to live more fully. A mythology, in essence, helps us to live a meaningful and passionate life.

So how does all of this apply to domestic life? Unbeknownst to yourself, you have been creating your own mythology in your private little life just as primitive man was doing around the fire and on cave walls. Each person has the equivalent of a private religion or spirituality that actually choreographs his or her behaviour in the most mundane emotional dramas of family or work life. The thing is that most people are not aware of this, and when they become aware of it they deny it vehemently claiming that their behaviour is reasonable and logical.

So in the small culture of your domestic life you ritualise your life and sacrifice yourself or others to create control and order in an emotional world. Beneath the modern exterior of your everyday urban life, behind the curtains of your poise and composure, you are no different than primitive woman repeating chants and rituals in order to come to terms with life – to soothe yourself in the face of its terror, to dance in the aftermath of its joy.

Of this I am certain, you do what you do, feel what you feel, and believe what you believe because you hold a set of attitudes about yourself, and act out a set of rituals with yourself, that affirm and consolidate an identity you have established for yourself that has been created on the anvil of your imagination. In truth, you are what you imagine yourself to be.