

**“THE TREASURE CHEST OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY: 2) WHO ARE YOU?”**

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Call to Gather:

Proverbs 27:19

As a face is reflected in water, so the heart reflects the real person.

Reading

For the reading today, I'm going to summarize a scene from Mary Zimmerman's brilliant play *Metamorphoses*. Zimmerman is a professor at Northwestern University as well as a playwright and director. She won a Tony award for Best Director for *Metamorphoses*, which is based on Ovid's work of the same name. The play is intended to be performed around a large, shallow pool of water. The story we're about to hear is really three stories in one: it starts with an interlude about Narcissus; then it tells the main story—that of Pomona and Vertumnus; and within that story, Vertumnus tells the story of Cinyras and his daughter Myrrha:

The scene begins with two performers entering. One begins to mop the stage while the other removes a music stand from the water. As he starts to exit, he catches sight of his reflection in the pool. It arrests him. He becomes still. The other performer finishes mopping and notices the stillness of her companion. She tries to move him, but he is paralyzed. She looks offstage impatiently. A third performer enters, carrying a potted narcissus (plant). He hands the plant to the first performer. In one motion, he lifts the second performer, and the first performer fills the newly empty position with the plant. Everyone leaves, the third performer carrying the second, still-frozen performer.

Here's the story of Pomona and Vertumnus. There lived at one time a wood nymph named Pomona whose skill in the care of plants and trees has never been equaled. She didn't disdain Aphrodite (the goddess of beauty, love and fertility) as much as ignore her. She kept aloof from any suitor.

But one suitor, Vertumnus—the god of springtime—was very much in love with her. In the manner of the shyer gods, he disguised himself and hoped to woo her through his disguises. He disguised himself as a storybook country yokel, and then a pruner (of plants), a soldier, and a fisherman. None of it worked: Pomona wasn't the slightest bit interested in him.

Next Vertumnus disguised himself as an old woman. He approached Pomona and complimented her on her loveliness. Pointing to the nearby orchard, he said, “Just look at that, would you? And think how that tree and vine complement each other, complete each other. Separate they aren't much, but together, they're splendid. There's a lesson in that, my dear, one you might

consider. The way you've been keeping to yourself is no good, it's a sad violation of nature, as well as a waste. A lover is what you need to make you complete as a woman...You'd have many choices, I think. As many as Helen. But there is one in particular I'd recommend: Vertumnus. I know him as well as I know myself, and I warrant, I guarantee, that his eyes are for you alone. Consider that he's young, attractive, healthy, and strong. Your tastes, too, are the same, for he likes trees and gardens almost as much as you. Besides, he's fun and takes on various disguises—it's a game he likes to play. Believe me, you may take these words that I speak as if they were coming from his own mouth."

This didn't work either.

So then, still disguised as the woman, he said, "Listen, aren't you afraid of offending Aphrodite?" And he told her the story of Cinyras and his daughter. The story went something like this: There was a girl like you named Myrrha," he told her, "and she too ignored Aphrodite. She wouldn't fall in love. There were suitors everywhere, but she was blind to them. Finally, Aphrodite had had enough, and seized her with a passion for her...father. Myrrha struggled against this passion, but it was too strong. (Here the action of the drama changes from Vertumnus telling the story to actors portraying it.) Myrrha moves toward a noose to end her life, but her nursemaid walks in and stops her. Her nurse figures out that love is what's bothering her, and swears she will help Myrrha get what she wants. Then, to her horror, the nursemaid figures out that Myrrha's passion is for her father.

The nursemaid arranges for Myrrha to visit her father's bedroom while Myrrha's mother is away. The one condition is that Cinyras must be blindfolded so he cannot see who the young woman in bed with him is. What happens next is unnamable. Myrrha slips out the room, guilty but shameless. She returns for a second and third night. Finally, Cinyras wants to see who his lover is so badly that he pulls off his blindfold and sees his daughter. With a cry, he lunges toward her and tries to drown her. She escapes into the darkness, out of the room, the house, the city, into remote and exotic lands, even as far as the Arab wilderness. She prays to the gods to be transformed into something else, and the gods answer her prayer. Some say she changed into a tree. Some say she gave birth to a boy called Adonis. Others contend that she dissolved into tears.

This story got Vertumnus nowhere. Pomona asked him, "Why are you wearing that ridiculous wig?"

"I don't know. I thought—"

"Take it off. And take off that idiotic dress."

"I'm embarrassed—"

"Take it off."

When at last the god revealed himself as he was, much to his surprise, he had no need of words. Little Pomona was happy with what she saw, unadorned and undisguised. Soon enough, the vine was clinging to the tree.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 48-62.

## Sermon

Did the reading make your head spin? I hope so! Myths can do that. This sermon might do that, too. Sometimes that's a good thing.

I shared the story about Pomona and Vertumnus with the companion to this series. I think it made a lot of their heads spin. Several in the class voiced the question that may have occurred to many of you as well: Why in the world does Vertumnus tell Pomona the story about Cinyras and his daughter Myrrha? After all, it is pretty weird to tell a story about incest when you're trying to talk someone into love. Is Vertumnus stupid? Is he just socially inept? Did he hope to put the fear of Aphrodite in Pomona's mind? I mean, surely she doesn't want to end up like poor Myrrha whose life was ruined by the spell Aphrodite put on her. So maybe Vertumnus thought the story would scare Pomona into seeking a man. Well, like any counselor, I responded by asking the class how they would answer this question. There were, not surprisingly, a variety of answers.

And why does Vertumnus put on all those silly masks in his lame effort to attract Pomona—a person he hopes will love him as he truly is? And why does he keep doing the disguises when there's not the slightest indication it's working for him? More questions!

And is there a lesson we're supposed to draw from the three stories folded together by Zimmerman? In the first little interlude, Narcissus looks at his reflection in the water and doesn't see his real self. He gets terminally caught up in his exterior image. He sees a beautiful self that really isn't there. Myrrha hides herself—on the inside and the outside—from her father by insisting that he be blindfolded. But we can't hide ourselves forever. And disaster strikes. Vertumnus tries all of those stupid external disguises rather than just being himself as he is on the inside and the outside. Then, at Pomona's urging, he finally sheds them all and shows his true self. Why group these three stories together? What's it supposed to mean?

Last week I talked about how one of the beauties of a good myth is its complexity—a complexity which matches yours and my complexity as human beings. We are—all of us—very complicated creatures. Our lives are complex. Our personalities are complex. A good myth captures this complexity by suggesting multiple things at the same time. And it leaves us to sort through the paradoxes and conflicting lessons and to try to find the wisdom that speaks to our life. Myths insistently ask us, "What do you think?"

All of this is particularly true when it comes to myths that address the question that has to be central to any spiritual journey: "Who am I?" Mythology can help us answer this question. Joseph Campbell said that mythology provides a field in which to locate your self.<sup>2</sup> But myth does not give us a neat and tidy answer. It gives a complicated answer to this complicated question.

Why is this question "Who am I?" so darn complicated? Well, for one thing, who I am at this particular moment and who I am tomorrow, or a year from now, or (the gods willing) thirty years from now will most likely be different. We are all works in progress,<sup>3</sup> from the day we're born to the day we die. We are in a constant state of metamorphoses, evolving from one thing to another. I think we can see the complexity of this question reflected in this grouping of three Greek myths.

Many movies probe this question of identity in a similarly complicated way:

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* (Navato, CA: New World Library, 2004), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 209.

- In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (my favorite book and movie of the series), Harry is saved from mortal danger by, he thinks, his dad. Then through a manipulation of the space/time continuum, he witnesses the situation a second time. He realizes that he was actually saved by...himself. But, of course, his dad is reflected in who Harry Potter is, so in a sense his dad was there, too.
- In *Galaxy Quest*, real film actors play TV actors from a *Star Trek*-like series who find that, much to their shock and dismay, they are battling real aliens in actual outer space rather than fake aliens on a cheap Hollywood set.
- In *Tropic Thunder*, the white American actor Robert Downey Jr. plays a white Australian method actor playing an African American soldier. The fake battle portrayed in the movie also becomes real.
- In *Shakespeare in Love*, Joseph Fiennes and Gwyneth Paltrow portray William Shakespeare and Viola de Lesseps, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Shakespeare is writing and directing the debut of *Romeo and Juliet*, a story which starts to interweave with his forbidden love affair with Viola. In the end, they must part ways (as Romeo and Juliet must), and Shakespeare immortalizes Viola forever in *Twelfth Night*.
- In *Pillow Talk*, Rock Hudson, a gay man who spent most of his life pretending to be a straight man, plays a straight man who pretends in the movie to be a gay man.<sup>4</sup>
- In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Johnny Depp inhabited the character of Captain Jack Sparrow by channeling the cartoon skunk Pepe le Pew and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones.
- And in *Avatar*, the center of the drama is a love affair between the paraplegic veteran Jake Sully and an indigenous Na'vi woman named Neytiri. Neytiri lives on Pandora, a moon of the distant planet Polyphemus. (And lest you think my viewing *Avatar* through the lens of Greek mythology is a stretch, please note these names. Pandora comes from...Greek mythology: Pandora is the first woman. And Polyphemus, the planet around which Pandora revolves, is named for a Cyclopes who figures prominently in the *Odyssey*.) Anyway, in *Avatar*, Neytiri falls in love not with the physical Jake, but with an avatar, a genetically created body that Jake's mind occupies.

Is your head spinning yet? This is what good myths—and Hollywood reinterpretations of good myths—do: they make our heads spin, and, if they're really good, they point us over and over back to that question "Who am I?" All of these movies point to the complexity of answering this essential question.

Like all of these actors, we play with this question when we dress up in costume or act in theatre. During last month's Revels service, I got to play a character from African mythology. He's a rich, spoiled king who futilely tries to find happiness and fulfillment in material possessions. To help me inhabit this role, I partially channeled the character Tracy Jordan, an actor played by the actor Tracy Morgan, on *Thirty Rock*. But here's the kicker: I wasn't just acting as the spoiled king or Tracy Morgan playing Tracy Jordan. I was also channeling a part of myself in this role. I think this is what we do when we put on a mask, even when the mask

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<sup>4</sup> Doniger, pp. 162, 176, 189-190, 198-199.

seems very far from who we really are: the mask captures some truth about our self. For me, I'm the youngest in my family's birth order. I have deep experience playing the role of the petulant, spoiled little brat, flipping the Monopoly board when my older brother was winning.

My dad has a hilarious mask that makes the point that we are in part ourselves when we don the mask of another. It's a cheap plastic mask he found somewhere and bought because it looks exactly like a caricature of...himself. The mask has a high forehead like he has. The hair is like his, even combed the same way. It has glasses like he has (and actually allows him to wear his glasses underneath the mask). The lips and nose are just like his. It looks like him. In his school teaching days, he'd wear the mask on Halloween and totally crack everybody up: wearing a mask that looks just like you, it turns out, is very funny.<sup>5</sup> This was a mask that obviously revealed part of him—that's the source of the joke.

So, who are you? Are you who you are on the outside—your face, your public self? Or are you some inner essence? Neither? Both? Mythology points to "Both" as the answer to this question. The Greeks, more than most, were as interested in the external as the internal. Nietzsche praised the Greeks for being "superficial—out of profundity."<sup>6</sup> And through its confusing take on this question of whether the real you is on the outside or on the inside, Greek mythology suggests that's it pretty hard to tell at any given moment.<sup>7</sup>

Well, each one of us has multiple masks we wear. Especially as kids, we play around with a lot of different masks as we search for who we really are. I remember, for example, putting on the masks of several of my sister's boyfriends as I played around with the question of who I really am. I also really liked to imitate famous people like JFK and Richard Nixon and Tiny Tim (of ukulele fame). So I put those masks on, too. All of these masks actually helped me find who I really am. I had to become who I'm not in order to figure out who I am. In another sense, though, these masks are a part of me, too, even though I didn't become them. Yes: there's a little bit of JFK and Richard Nixon and Tiny Tim and my sister's old boyfriends in me because those are masks I've worn. Just like I have a little bit of Tracy Jordan in me because I've worn that mask. So here's another paradox: masks not only conceal who we are; like my dad's mask that looked like him, they reveal who we are, too.<sup>8</sup>

Putting different masks on to find himself is what Vertumnus does in his inept pursuit of Pomona. With her help, he eventually figures out that he is not a yokel or a pruner. He is not a soldier, a fisherman or an old woman. He's Vertumnus, a shy god who's good enough just as he is. Through wearing the masks of others, and with a little help from Pomona, he discovers himself. But each of those masks is a part of who he is, a part of his journey.

So who are you? Mythology suggests that rather than a singular core self, the self is more like an onion. There isn't really a core at all, but layer after layer—all of which comprise the self. Maybe we're really just a bunch of masks. The mythologist and historian of religions Wendy Doniger writes in her book *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was* (a great title):

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<sup>5</sup> When I told my Dad I was mentioning his mask in this sermon, he reminded me of one of the favorite things he'd do with it in his music classes: he'd play the piano and have the mask on the back of his head. So there was him, smiling at you from the back of his head while he played the piano with the front part of his body.

<sup>6</sup> Doniger, p. 213.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161, 213.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

There's no ground zero for the self...Perhaps, then, the best bet is to wear as many (masks) as possible, and realize that we are wearing them, and try to find out what each one conceals and reveals...We are imprisoned in our self, but it is a very big prison. When we put on a mask we have a choice..., and in a sense, they are all our own.<sup>9</sup>

The key point, then, may be to wear the masks with mindfulness, with intentionality, with awareness.

Okay, so how does all of this help us answer the question “Who am I?” Well, let me try to illustrate it by answering this question aloud for myself. I regularly wear a lot of different masks. Each one, I think, reveals the real me in some ways and in other ways conceals it. I am Roger the minister, Roger the spouse, Roger the father, Roger the son, Roger the brother, Roger the Packer fan, Roger the Tigers fan, Roger the outdoors lover, Roger the runner, Roger the concerned community member and world citizen, Roger the man, Roger the gentle person, Roger the inept “handyman” (to name a few). None of these is wholly who I am, but they are each a part of who I am even though they are masks that I put on and take off. They're all masks, and they're all part of the real me.

This realization reminds me that I am in a real sense Roger the minister, but I'm more than Roger the minister. It's a mask I can and should put on and take off. Some of my colleagues forget this and never take the mask of minister off. They forget that this is but one of their masks, and it conceals as well as reveals who they are. This is an easy trap to fall into because people often project the role onto us ministers even when we're “off-duty.” I get most aggravated by this phenomenon when I'm with my old high school friends. They have an inclination to treat me differently now that I'm a minister. I'm always tempted to say, “Hey, it's just me, Roger.” All of this is why I appreciate wearing my clergy robe from time to time here. Rather than giving me a big head because it sets me apart from you, it humbles me in this role. It reminds when I put the robe on and when I take it off that this role of minister is a mask. It's me, but it's not all of me.

One final point: it's about unconditional love—the kind of love that Pomona has for Vertumnus. When we really see one another inside and outside, in all of our beautiful and complicated glory, and when we accept that whole, I think we practice that elusive thing we call unconditional love. In *Avatar*, when Neytiri finally sees Jake Sully as himself—a paraplegic human being rather than a tall blue Na'vi creature—she sees his whole self for the first time. And she says, “I see you.” For the first time, she sees this important part of him, this mask of his beautiful, flawed physical body that both conceals and reveals who he is. But Jake in his avatar body is also the real him. That picture of Jake as an avatar is also in her mind and memory even as she says, “I see you.” They are all Jake: his paraplegic body lying in front of her, his avatar body in her memory, his soul which is paradoxically in both bodies. And she loves him—with his Jake mask on or with his avatar mask on.

This is unconditional love. One of the gifts of unconditional love is that it mirrors back ourselves in all of our beautiful and complicated glory. This is what happens at that magical moment in *Avatar* when Neytiri says “I see you.” This is essentially what Pomona says to Vertumnus when he dispenses with the silly masks. It is an extraordinary moment, but not one that we have to travel to Pandora to find. Unconditional love is available on this planet, too, though none of us can cause it to happen for ourselves. It is a gift we can give, and a gift we can

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<sup>9</sup> Doniger, p. 3, 213-214, 229-231.

receive. Whenever it happens, it is precious and every bit as extraordinary as in any of these myths.

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