



# The Role of Mythology in Education

by

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You must have a certain amount of courage when you decide to send your children to the Waldorf school. This is true whenever you leave the standard, well-developed path and head in new directions. As long as we remain on the asphalt highways, even if we go blind, nothing catastrophic will necessarily happen. But when we enter new territory we need to keep our eyes open for every surprise that is streaming towards us.

Asphalt highways are excellent and necessary to use when we need to arrive at a destination quickly. But for education and learning they are destructive. The life elements at home and at school must be the stream of surprises! Parents and teachers must learn to dive into them, if they really want to help their children. Every person we meet can be a surprise, even if we already met them one thousand times before. For everything living activity is never the same. It changes constantly. There are always new developments.

If we write a letter to someone we have not seen for five years, it may be possible that we are writing not to the real person but to our mental image of the person of five years ago. In such cases we can easily realize we are filled with excitement. We open ourselves for surprises. Then why do we not have the same excitement when we meet a person? How can we know in advance that the person is the same as before? Let's face it, we are extremely lazy and therefore we like to assume that everything is as it was. We wrap ourselves in a grey fog of indifference.

Many times it is not difficult to take on surprises, for example when we inherit a fortune. Other times the surprises can hit us in such a way

that we roll down the curtains and pretend that nothing has happened. This is true of everything that does not follow what we intend. Extra work is demanded of us when we revise old mental images. It is much more comfortable to leave them in the old folder.

Mythology can be such a surprise. For example, some people who are positive about Waldorf education say that the students' workbooks on mythology are so strange, fantastical and nonsensical that you just have to live with them. Otherwise the school is good. This is very understandable. The opposite would be a surprise when we consider how mythology has been treated in our schools and in most people's consciousness during the past one hundred years.

If we take some poems by Welhaven from one hundred years ago, we notice that they are filled with mythological names, Greek gods and heroes. But for whom did Welhaven write? It was not for the broad public. Actually it was for a select, elite group of educated people.

Then the technological revolution took place. We distanced ourselves from the classical world. Greek and Latin were shoved out of the schools and therewith all knowledge of mythology. All that is left are some of the most important names that children sometimes learn by heart. If teachers would share any more than that, it would be considered disrespectful.

The result is that people today know close to nothing about mythology, and the little they do know is totally meaningless. Usually they know some names that are separated from their true reality. And these names are usually of material nature. Names that for one thousand to two thousand years were connected with what the most respected and dignified people knew about. Names that filled them with courage and strength, the power of life and meaning now used as advertisement. The names of the originally dignified goddesses Frigg and Frøya mean little today. But everyone wants Frigg's oatmeal and Frøya's chocolate. The same is true for Glitnes life insurance, Idun's vinegar, Tjalve's sportsmen, Njord's tennis players, Hercules' suspenders, Heimdall's toilet paper, and Janus' bathing trunks. No one cares for Hermes, the messenger of the gods, but they go to Hermes Travel Bureau. The ancient names of gods have a certain, unconscious attraction and therefore they are used in advertisements. This is unbelievably disrespectful of something that in the past was very serious and valuable. Is it our right to be disrespectful?

Our civilization is naturally the highest that human beings have ever created in terms of technical advancement. And we are close to considering this most important. We can satisfy ourselves with our technical progress until we discover that every technical advancement entails a difficulty that must be overcome in a social context. When we look at the social context, there is very little reason to be arrogant and self-confident. When we look at which human forces arise between people, we must put aside the habit of calling it superstitious or unimportant. Rather we ask: What is that? Which forces in mankind brought this about? Then we discover that something other than superstition and random, fantastical images live in the ancient mythologies.

Every time people look up to figures that are more powerful than they are, they touch the forces that are active in people, but also go beyond their little and limited humanness. That which goes beyond the individual is naturally not the same in every situation. They may be different forces, but no matter how the human and the godly may be, they cannot unfold directly and unrestricted in us. As long as we live, we continue to be certain people with certain personal interests, certain interests in food, warmth, comfort, health and power. All of these interests demand a large part of our forces. Tensions build up between the personal and the superpersonal forces that rise above the individual. We can decide: As of today I will end my lower, earthly, personal egotism. But that would be a pure illusion. We will continue to struggle for fulfillment of our personal needs. The question is whether or not we drown in our struggle. Can we work with such a strong superhuman power that we can carry out all of these efforts in such a way that the superhuman power can become stronger and clearer each day?

Let us concentrate these ideas in a picture. We observe a human being of earthly and heavenly origin: Hercules, born of an earthly mother, Alkeme, but by a heavenly father, Zeus. He receives the richest gifts of the heavenly gods. But he cannot use them limitlessly according to his own choice. From the time of his birth an insurmountable necessity accompanies him. He is not his own boss. He must serve the mean, earthly, weak and tyrannical King Eurystheus. When the powerful Hercules finds out that he, the exalted hero of heavenly origin, shall serve the weak Eurystheus, he becomes wild with rage, and in his blinding rage,

he kills his own wife and children. When he comes to his senses Hercules sees the consequences of his actions because he refused to take on the work he initially considered degrading.

Then he takes on the twelve superhuman, apparently impossible tasks that Eurystheus demands of him. It turns out that he is not degraded by these tasks. Eventually Hercules completes the work and goes about his life with new forces and skills, stronger and more alive than before. With every task, he overcomes and transforms a piece of his lower, insatiable human nature. For the most part they are wild, uncontrollable animals he is to defeat, capture alive or tame; such as the Nemean lion, the Lernean hydra, the Ceryneian buck or the Erymanthean boar. For each task Hercules completes, Eurystheus loses some of his power over Hercules. Finally only the heaviest and most difficult task remains: Hercules successfully enters the kingdom of death without losing his footing. Then Eurystheus has no more control over Hercules. Now Hercules can dwell and work among people as his own person., no longer the slave of Eurystheus.

In this way the god-like, superhuman forces begin to work in an individual. There is another side to this. The single person has powerful forces at his disposal, and they could be used to obtain benefits for himself. Individualizing the godly forces is like a robbery of the godly forces. Consequences were not avoided. We humans become tied to the massive, hard, earthly realities and slowly lose our powers.

Let us once again compact this reality into a picture, another picture in Greek mythology: Prometheus steals the fire that is originally the property of the gods and builds the foundation for human civilization. With all of our outer cultural progress and shining goods also come arrogance and hubris. Consequences were not avoided. Prometheus is fastened to the Caucasian cliffs and an eagle hacks at his liver. When asked if he will give in and stop being so arrogant, Prometheus does not comply. The punishment does not lead him to plead to be once again taken into the godly totality as a humbled, insignificant entity. He resists. He does not plead in tears to be released. He lets the eagle hack into his liver. There is no resolution to the conflict. What is the only path to agreement? It must be to conquer the hard, earthly necessity—the work of Hercules is completed.

We notice the truly triumphant Hercules arrives. He shoots the eagle and releases Prometheus. Now resolution may take place. And Prometheus receives the ring, the symbol of unity. Yet he does not disappear in the godly totality like a drop of water in the ocean. He has gone through the process of individualization. He has been fastened to the cliff. Now he carries forward a permanent value. This is symbolized in the stone in his ring.

In Greek mythology, in these inner pictures, whether they are godly figures or god-like human figures, we see beautiful, fantasy colors and forms. Yet this is no empty fantasy game. If we deepen our understanding of the mythological pictures, we discover that they are humanity's own hidden and best forces that form the pictures. These are the forces that rise above the little, single person and are therefore not only human but also the godly in human beings.

And in Greek mythology we find these forces very close to human beings. Let us look at one situation where these are expressed clearly. The Greek leaders Achilles and Agamemnon stand against each other. It appears the entire fortune of Greece will suffer when both leaders continue to fight. Massive rage envelops Achilles. He pulls his sharp sword from his side, send away the other leaders at the forum and is about to kill Agamemnon, but he does not get that far:

Then, as thoughts tumbled wildly in his mind and he uncontrollably attempted to pull his battle sword, swerved Athena down from the heavens.

As a messenger she was sent by the white-armed Hera;  
for she was fond of both of them and loved them greatly in her heart.  
Tall she stood behind the son of Peleus and touched his blond  
curly hair, merely visible for him, but not for the other.  
Astounded, Achilles turned and recognized in outrage,  
Pallas Athena; whose eye-glance is seldom seen.  
Wondering, sounded his winged-word as he spoke and asked:  
“Daughter of Zeus, why do you come here swiftly?  
Except that you see for yourself the anger of Agamemnon's arrogant  
violence?  
Yet, I will tell you a word and it will certainly be true:

Perhaps his insulting arrogance will soon cost him his life.”  
Then spoke the blue-eyed Goddess Athena:  
“Know that I swerved down from heaven to soothe your rage,  
if you give it up. The white-armed Hera sent me a message,  
for she is fond of you both and loves you highly in her heart.  
Stop the conflict, follow her message and do not pull the sword!  
Cover him with angry words as much as you like.  
One thing I certainly promise you and my promise shall be fulfilled.  
Once you will receive, in return for all of the injustice you suffer,  
threefold gifts.  
So force yourself to do as I ask you.”  
Immediately Achilles, the lost hero, spoke and answered:  
“High goddess, a plea from you I should certainly follow,  
fill it may the most bitter harm in my soul, it is the best.  
He who accepts the message of the gods, will you listen to.”  
Grasping the handle of silver with his powerful fist,  
Thrusting the mighty sword back in the sheath, he followed  
Obediently Athena’s advice; while she returned to Olympus  
To the aegis-winged goddess’ castle where the gods meet.

The light of Pallas Athena’s brilliant power shines directly into Achilles’ uncontrolled, chaotic rage. The goddess Pallas Athena is just as real as the human Achilles, or more correctly stated: She is more real, her light conquers his rage. She acts with her godly power near individual humans. Yet is this light something that is characteristic only of Pallas Athena? Do we not find this light wherever humans look up to the godly above them?

Is this light characteristic of the Persian god Ahura Mazdao, the sun god in successful battles against all of the spirits of darkness that are lead by the evil Ahriman? So it is. Light is also the characteristic for that god. We immediately see the decisive difference between him and Pallas Athena. He does not stand near the hero and touch his blond curls. Ahura Mazdao is the great, all-encompassing god of light that shines and weaves in all of the light of the world. It would be a rude blasphemy against Ahura Mazdao to place him equally with Pallas Athena; he is of much higher rank.

And is it not hedonistic and unchristian to speak of different gods as if they were realities? There is only one God, you may believe. The various gods are human pictures, people say. That is true. You would have to be dumb if you tried to refuse any human limitations in imagining all of the different figures of gods.

Here it is important not to think halfway and lazily. We discover that the same applies for the one and only God. Both *one* and description *many* are limited human descriptions. The truly godly cannot be grasped and held fast by either the description “one” or the description “many.” Rather, it reveals itself and lives, and it can reveal itself and live in both descriptions. When we study the various folk mythologies, we discover monotheism with one God actually only by the Semites, the Jews and the Arabs, and by others who are clearly influenced by the Semites or belong to them. In all of the Aryan mythologies there is polytheism, many gods of different rank. How do the Christians and the Evangelic Christians relate to this? They are neither one-sided, Aryan-polytheistic nor Semite-monotheistic. They have both elements. There is the almighty God. Yet He is three: God the Father, God the Son, and the God Holy Ghost. And they have a lot of beings below them in three times three kingdoms of angels, hierarchies in which the angels are the lowest rank, those that stand closest to human beings.

So we can we ask: Which rank is Pallas Athena in the Christian hierarchy? We have already seen that she has direct contact with human beings. Therefore she has the same rank and the same activity as an angel.

How does Norse mythology relate to all of this? Just as with Greek and other Aryan mythology, we find great diversity that is richly developed. The aesens are a series of different figures that either stand close to human beings or farther apart. There is not a single God, the one and only God. Therefore it is characteristically polytheistic, yet we cannot deny that unity is there. We do not discover it with a superficial effort. The unity is found in the structure of the dramatic actions.

The world is created from the unified, undifferentiated, original place, Ginnungagap. But the unity is divided into opposite worlds: the cold Niflheim and the warm, life-exuding Muspelheim, the opposites that appear everywhere, for example in the human being’s life-exuding warmth and passionate life of will and in the more loving understanding in the

head. Yet these opposites are not indivisible without communication. From the warm Muspelheim arises the huge, life-giving, milkcow, Audhumla. Yet it would like to approach the cold Niflheim to lick the salt from the stones there. From the cold Niflheim arises the ice troll Ymir. He would like to have the forces of life from the warm Audhumla and he drinks milk from her. From the opposing worlds arise new generations. And from a final connection between these world's generations, Borr and Bestla, arise Odin, Vili and Ve. This "trinity" gives up their positions for the new: Odin, Lodur and Honir. Lodur has most of Muspelheim's burning flames in him, Honir has most of Niflheim's coldness, while Odin lives between them as a harmonious representative.

With a direct quotation from the older *Edda (Voluspaa)*, I would like to support that this is not a random interpretation. It is a description directly from oldest Norse mythology. The two opposite worlds, Niflheim and Muspelheim, are especially represented by Honir and Lodur while Odin communicates both qualities. Also they are directly related to the warm, human forces of will on one side and the brain-oriented reasoning (*aathug*) on the other side. The communication takes place in a rhythmical breathing process:

*Aande gav Odin,  
Aathug Honir,  
Let fager Lodur  
og livsens varme.*

In English according to the meaning:

Odin gave the breath of consciousness,  
Honir gave us reason  
That lit up the colorful Lodur  
And the warmth of life.

The immediate impressions one receives of Old Norse mythology are of grotesque and fantastical figures. As we have seen in this article, these fantasies are anything but empty and random. They address central realities in human beings. This is also true of other figures in Aasgaard.



Yet these gods who continuously fight against the dark forces of evil are not omnipotent in their battles. Their fight with evil is not the ever-successful fight the Persians experienced in their mythology. The mighty God of Light, Ahura Mazdao wins no matter what. There is never the slightest possibility for the god of darkness, Ahriman, not to be completely defeated. Norse mythology is very different. Here the battle is wide open from the very start. And we have a dark feeling that it will end in tragedy. The Aesens have evil beings living among them and also as their friends. They have a painful and trying destiny that leads to destruction.

But not all Aesens are that way. Balder is pure. Balder shines. He brings peace and joy wherever he goes in the worlds of the gods and the human beings. In Balder's pure light lives the human being's direct, original, nature-given connection with the divine. Wherever Balder's light forces shine, the dark shadows on the earth disappear.

Yet also Balder is dragged into the destruction of the world. By Loki's evil deception he is shot by the blind Hod. And Balder must enter the kingdom of death, Hel, where he can no longer bring light and joy. Is he gone forever? Will Balder return with new light?

The world darkens. Evil is set free and takes control. Human beings lose their direct contact with the divine. The world enters corruption and destruction:

*Hardt I heimen  
Hordom kaldleg,  
Oeks-old, sverd-old,  
Skjoldar klovna,  
Vindold, varg-old,  
Fyrr Verdi stuper,  
Grunnen gjallar,  
Gygrar fljugande.*

In English according to the meaning:

Life is heavy and difficult in our homes.  
Coldness and hardness abound.  
Battle axes and swords

Smash our shields to pieces.  
The wind is fired up, the wolves are fired up.  
The world is going down.  
The ground is shaking.  
The troll woman flies.

In this way Norse mythology lives in a dramatic tension that has the human being's inner life drama at its core. Balder is gone. The evil forces attack everywhere, and it appears they will control the forces of goodness. Will Balder return? When children are allowed to experience the full power of Norse mythology in its totality, drama and colors, they understand its entire depth and broad perspective. With their whole being they can live with this mythology because its origin is the origin of the human being. The question of whether Balder will return becomes their question. I was pressured by my students to explain in advance whether he will return: "Will Balder return? Just tell me! Will he come back?" And finally, after Ragnarok, when the old world is destroyed, the new world shines forth and Balder appears:" Yes, that is what I knew!" cries one of the children triumphantly.

By the same token when we allow our children to live with Norse mythology without conceptual explanations but with direct observation, they will never ask, for example: "Is Odin real?" They will ask: " Is Odin alive now?" I had never received such a question before. And I had no answer ready from a list of education directives on what teachers should say in such a situation. But I knew immediately that I could not say yes. That would have been a lie to say that the life reality that Odin once was still exists today. And I realized immediately that also I could not say no. For the old life reality that was Odin is absolutely not destroyed. It continues to work in hidden, transformed shapes. But what should I answer? To truly answer the question I would have to tell the entire historical development from then through today. Then will the answer appear. So I answered: "We will see. We have not reached that part of the story quite yet." This answer was absolutely beyond my calculations as a schoolmaster. Immediately a new impulse appeared in the class as one of the children demanded intensely: "You will tell us the whole story until today, right?" In this way a historical expectation can arise, the element in life for experiencing history as an adult or a child.

When is the right time in education to bring Norse mythology? In grades one and two everything happens outside of time: Something happened. When did it happen? Once upon a time. This is how we tell stories from the past to children at the ages of seven or eight. They do not experience it in the present tense. To be more accurate, they do not experience any development in time.

In the third grade main lesson block in “local living,” the element of time appears. Then children experience the past: our grandparent’s age and our great-grandparent’s age. They experience how life unfolded in earlier times. This initial experience of time is actually no more than a feeling for time, rather than an active, deep experience of a development in time.

So, in grades one, two and three lessons are in a cohesive sphere of feelings. From a complete and outside world their individual willpower is first awakened in a serious way in the fourth grade. That is when Norse mythology is appropriate with all of its willpower-oriented drama. Also Norse kings and heros appear. And from this element history lessons are born. In the fifth grade world history appears.

Mythology is not a superficial game of fantasy at the Waldorf school. And it is not presented so children can learn the mythological names. Rather Norse mythology is a necessary means for educating children at a certain point in time, namely grade four.

