



“Sacred Trees and Refuges” – Interview with Rachel S. McCoppin, Author of [The Lessons of Nature in Mythology](#) by Willi Paul, [Planetshifter.com Media](#) (+ PDF)

‘The Lessons of Nature in Mythology reveals the important role of nature in mythology: from creation myths, myths that present the necessity of the harvest for survival, myths that tie humans to wild aspects of the environment, and finally myths that reveal the human life cycle as no different from the cycles of the seasons.’ (McCoppin, p. 16)

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Interview with Rachel by Willi

Who controls myth today? Can people write new ones (mine are [here](#))?

This is a really good question – ancient mythology was often the sacred stories of a people. Mythology provided humans with answers to some of humanity’s most difficult questions, about morality or mortality for instance. Therefore, many scholars have questioned what happened to the powerful role of myth in contemporary times. I think that myths how they were intended in ancient times, especially in nature-dependent cultures, have largely been forgotten in our times, but I do believe that there are many instances in contemporary culture that still shows remnants of mythological concepts. Your question asks “who controls the myths today” – I would say that we certainly see mythological concepts in popular culture, as well as the media.

I think this use of these concepts can be good, but I also think it is mostly detrimental; for instance, definitions of a hero in contemporary film, like the many films of superheroes, often present stunted versions of the heroic journey where the heroes of today represent unattainable versions of heroism. They are shown as stronger, braver, etc. than the average person, and so audiences admire them, but do not relate to them. I feel that ancient myths, conversely, often portrayed heroes that audiences could relate to—the heroes often failed their journeys, were overcome with doubt and confusion, etc. Again, the myths were sacred stories, so when audiences related to the heroes, they could find meaning in the stories that might help them in their own lives.

How do you define [archetypes](#) in your book?

I define archetypes in my book according to many themes addressed by mythological scholars as common archetypes, but I specifically focus my book on natural themes as important archetypes within myths, such as creation and destruction archetypes, divine and mystical beings as personifications of nature, etc.

Here are my elements of modern myths. Your feedback?

1. Para-normal
2. Universal struggle
3. Journey, Initiation, Community as Hero
4. Symbols
5. Alchemy
6. Nature is Sacred
7. Threat of apocalypse
8. Digital - Non-Digital Collision
9. Future/ Sci Fi-based
10. Permaculture and Transition

There are many examples of man's [destruction of Nature](#) and the seasonal cycle. Monsanto's toxins and the world drought are examples. Are there new myths surrounding this phenomenon?

Yes, your examples here are great, and when I look at them, I see many archetypes that exist in myriad world myths from ancient times. Many myths present mystical elements in their tales, such as the para-normal, or examples of alchemy; often these elements are presented to encourage audiences of the myths to embrace aspects of the world that are difficult to understand by only using logic. Again, in heroic myth, the hero often must enter upon a phase in the heroic quest where he or she becomes confused; sometimes this occurs in a mythical otherworld, where often there are para-normal characters or mystical elements serving to push the hero into embracing a world view that is different from the one held by the hero before his or her quest began. I think these elements in contemporary times might serve similar purposes as we see them in more ancient renditions of mythology.

The format of “universal struggle” or the archetypal hero’s journey that you mention are topics that fascinate everyone I think. Many scholars look towards these tenets that seem to appear in myriad myths, and so they wrestle with how this came about. Many, like Jung and Campbell for instance, declare that we see these tenets again and again, even in modern tales, because they are human elements. We, as humans, conceive of our lives following patterns that existed since the beginning of human history. We face struggles, and view the effort to overcome these struggles in terms of a quest; we relate to stories where a protagonist has learned something valuable because of their quest. It gives us purpose when called to venture upon our own journeys.

Your examples of the presentation of nature in modern myth is interesting. I think there is a tendency to present “nature as sacred” as you say, but in contemporary times, it seems we do this, but in a way that is profoundly removed from how this message may have been portrayed in ancient myth. Nature-dependent cultures, such as those in the Neolithic period, were of course intimately involved with nature; they depended upon the environment for their survival. The cycles of the seasons, the success of the harvest, etc. were elements that Neolithic people were highly aware of;

therefore, their perceptions of divinity, and what was constituted as sacred, was firmly intertwined with nature. Many nature-dependent cultures conceived of humans as inseparable from the natural world, as equal to other living beings, and believed that time was cyclical, not linear, because death in nature, was something that appeared temporary.

Therefore, many myths from nature-dependent cultures focus on the message that death for all living beings is only one moment in an endless, natural cycle—in spring and summer botanical elements thrive, but in fall and winter they wither and die; however, in spring, these same elements appear to be reborn. When myths present humans as also adhering to this natural cycle, the message of the meaning of life and death is arguably a very different message than the ones our contemporary culture offers. By showing that nature as sacred today, I feel we do this without sincerity, without an understanding of what that really means or what it meant to many nature-dependent cultures. Nature, today, for instance, is often presented as a sacred place of respite, where we can go to escape our busy lives, but after we do this, we leave nature to enter again into our busy lives; we seldom define our lives, or ourselves for that matter, as firmly a part of nature. We certainly, in contemporary American culture, seem not to hold nature as superior to ourselves, so this changes the portrayals we offer of the natural world.

What are of few critical initiations and rituals in Nature and modern day myths?

We, in contemporary culture, have many old rituals that we continue to perform that have been in some way connected to the rituals of ancient times—the celebrations surrounding May Day, or the solstices, bringing in a tree at Christmas, dying eggs at Easter, dressing up at Halloween. All of these practices come from more traditional celebrations of the seasons of nature. I think, though, that often we might not know or recognize the important connection to nature these rituals might signify, so we perform the actions without embracing the intended meaning. For instance, solstice or May Day celebrations often have people erecting a May Pole and dancing around it, but internalizing the great need for spring to again resume in order to propel the harvest season, so that the people can prosper, is not really an aspect of the ritual today as it was in more traditional times.

I do not live in Greece and see very little of the old myths in Silicon Valley or elsewhere. There is no Mt. Olympus. Money is King. Help?!

I live in Minnesota, and for me, I do have to be close to abundant nature to feel fulfilled. I spent many years living near Detroit, and I struggled to find the solace that nature provides me today. I became fascinated by myths because of seeing the patterns of nature in more intimate terms in a remote environment. When I started to visit places like Greece or Ireland, I was struck by how much the landscape at these places seemed to fit the myths so well. The land seemed to be the myth in many ways; for instance, in seeing the landscape that birthed the famed Greek Herakles, rugged mountains, sparse brush, it fit the conception of this hero who wore a lion skin and carried a club. Mythology for me, when I started to reexamine the myths I had always loved, took on a different meaning.

I started to see that so many myths followed patterns evident in nature each day. Multiple myths strove to define divine beings, heroes, quests, in terms of natural elements or seasonal change. Then, for me, the myths really came alive; they helped me look out at the nature around me in Minnesota and find meaning in my own life. This isn't to say that people in more developed locations cannot also find mythic meaning in the nature that still exists around them. Near Detroit, I remember finding a single tree that for some reason moved me; I remember looking forward to the intersection where this tree stood because seeing it, I could firmly see the changes of the seasons, when I might have missed them living my busy life. I think wherever you are, once you internalize the natural mythic messages that were so sacred to people for millennia, you view mythology, but also nature, differently.

When you write “natural elements” are you including pagan practices and mythology?

Yes, but I view the term “pagan” was a definition later articulated by cultures that labeled the existing belief systems of a people as “pagan” because these beliefs were different from their own. Often many cultures with very different belief systems would be labeled “pagan”. The practices and rituals of a culture undoubtedly affect the myths of the culture, and so striving to understand these cultural elements is important when studying mythology.

How do you interpret Nature and mythology in places like wildlife refuges and zoos?

I think that, as I spoke above a bit, how we define nature as a culture shows how nature is depicted in our modern myths, our attempts at preserving places as refuges, etc. I think all attempts preserving nature as it is, is of course wonderful. Encouraging people to get out into nature as often as possible is an important thing. But, again, reflections of the importance of nature often seems like a passing whim. To destress, we seek nature, but only for a few moments. Also the nature we seek is often cultivated. We want parks with paved paths; nature then becomes a tool that humans have tamed for their benefit. In myths from many ancient and/or nature-dependent cultures, this view of nature is not only absurd, but it is a dangerous view. We have multiple myths that showcase mythic characters who believe they can control nature, and they end up destroyed by nature. Many myths speak towards the importance of embracing all aspects of nature, not only the pleasant elements.

Can you speak to the recent rise of [rewilding](#) life style? Is this movement capable of creating new myths?

I think that all attempts at immersing oneself in nature is going to be beneficial for the individual, but from my perspective, I'm not sure if by doing this, we will create new myths that mimic what we see when a culture as a whole is fully dependent upon nature for survival. We can always invent new myths; literature and film has provided us countless examples of "new" myths, but the purpose behind the myths I think is of vital importance if we are ever to come close to the intention of the cultures that created their respective myths. If we create a myth as a tale that captures something that is sacred to us, then it becomes a myth. If nature is viewed as vitally sacred by a people, then it too can become part of a new mythology in a way that might at least come close to the way I see it often being presented in ancient mythology.

It seems obvious that science and technology have over-taken Nature as cultural game changers and myth limiters. Your thoughts?

Yes, for sure, as I spoke above, I firmly think that when a culture forgets their tie to nature, it places people at an unrealistic place where they feel falsely superior to the elements of the natural world. If we forget our place within nature, as only one part of nature, then we abuse nature, and of course end up abusing ourselves.

What the "land reveals" sounds like a [permaculture](#) process that asks the designer to study the "lay of the land" and come up with a holistic plan.

I think ancient myths are largely created from people's perception of the landscape and the processes of nature. Again, mythology consists of the sacred stories of a people, so portraying an understanding of nature, or at least a reverence of nature in myth, makes it understood that nature is sacred to the people creating the myth. I have traveled to a few ancient locations, in Greece, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Scotland, etc., that were held as sacred to the cultures that created some of our most beloved myths, and to me the locations chosen for the sacred temple, sanctuary, etc. seems to have been precisely chosen according to a holistic plan that in every way incorporated the landscape – seeing this also, for me, helps me understand the myths that are connected to these important places.

Can the soil still be a catalyst for myth making today?

This is an interesting question – I would say that the soil played a fundamental role in ancient mythology. The soil was often viewed in myriad cultures as birthing the first elements of nature, as well as the first human beings. Many cultures also envisioned the land, and especially the soil, as alive, so myths were created that explained all life emerging from the soil as well as returning to it upon death. Womb-like imagery of a Mother Earth Goddess emerges from this in many cultures, so it is interesting to think of the myths that might come from contemplating the soil today. Again, though, the soil in Neolithic communities for instance, would probably have held much more significance to people than most would attribute to it today. And myths only become sacred if they truly speak to what the audience hold as sacred.

When are [Nature sounds](#) elements in myth?

This is also an interesting question – I think that all elements of nature have at some point become tenets found within myth: rivers, trees, flowers, even fleas. Often single aspects of nature become personified, as nymphs in Greek mythology for instance, or even as divine beings, like the Hawaiian Pele. But, thinking about “nature sounds” makes me think about one’s perception of nature while immersed within it – the sounds one hears in nature within myriad myths identities for the audience of the myth exactly how the mythological character perceives his or her natural environment.

Please define holy, sacred and [sacrifice](#) in modern day mythology?

What is deemed holy or sacred today might be more connected with abstract concepts, rather than the concrete conceptions of the sacred in many ancient myths, especially in terms of reverence for the environment. I think the concept of sacrifice has profoundly changed in many contemporary renditions. Many films for instance show sacrifice in terms of something a hero does that is so profound it deserves high acclaim, but many myths from nature-dependent cultures present sacrifice in terms, again, of the patterns of nature. If many nature-dependent cultures view life as cyclical, following the seasonal patterns of the environment, sacrifice becomes something that is portrayed as less monumental than it is in contemporary versions of myth. The American Indian Penobscot myth of the Corn Mother, shows the divine Corn Mother asking her husband to kill her and drag her corpse over the land, so that her body can produce the staple crop of corn to enable the survival of her children and community. This is certainly a sacrifice, but in this myth it is presented as mundane, as the Corn Mother doesn’t really die; she merely dies for a moment, but is reborn as corn. Today mythic sacrifice in films often show the character as a hero who deserves fame for his or her sacrifice because it is viewed as an ultimate end.

What are some “end of Nature” myths – old and new? Is environmental destruction also mythic creation?

Many ancient myths of destruction exist, in Indian, Norse, Greek, Roman, etc., mythology. Though, often myths that showcase the end of the world do so in a way that is similar to the myth of the Corn Mother. The world is viewed as adhering to the same patterns of the seasons as humans must adhere to, so death for the world is required, as it is required for all living beings who live upon the earth. But, again, like the myth of the Corn Mother shows, death in a culture that views time as cyclical, is only one momentary stage of nature’s patterns; therefore, when the world is destroyed by a flood, or cataclysmic event, a new world always emerges, as everlasting life, in natural terms, is a promise of the environment.

The Norse myth of Ragnarok shows the world, and all the beings who exist in it, including the divine Aesir, as dying, but a new world will be born from the destruction of this world, so yes, mythic destruction is viewed as always mythic creation when viewed in the terms of nature. However, what happens when we as a people have destroyed the environment, so that its promise of renewal, which is such an integral aspect of so many ancient myths becomes threatened? I think the myths change, but as with the contemporary myths of the hero who is misrepresented and therefore may not provide audiences with meaning in their own lives, I worry that our many filmic depictions of destruction might present a possibility of this ancient rebirth coming from destruction when the health of the environment depends upon its ability to assure this cycle.

Myth arises out of Nature only? Would there be myth without humans?

I love these questions – I label the introduction of my book, and also conclude it with a statement that is connected to your questions here. I feel, as I discussed above, that the land or nature really is the focus of the myth. Herakles is the rugged mountains of Greece, Demeter and her daughter Persephone are the harvest. You ask “would there be myth without humans”; since I view so many myths as just a human attempt to capture their understanding of nature, I think that we would just lose this attempt at conceiving what nature is, but nature would of course continue its patterns, if it has not been destroyed to a level that it cannot perpetuate these patterns.

Can Nature be the Hero? Can the community be the Hero?

I do think that nature is the hero of most heroic myths; in fact, next year in fall 2016, I have another book being published by McFarland entitled *The Cycles of Nature in the Hero's Journey*, which focuses on precisely showing heroes in this light.

I also think that the community is always a part of the discussion of myth, but the way we define community is important. For me, the community of the myth is the audience, and yes, I think that the point of telling the myth, especially myths of the heroic quest, is to teach the audience how their lives are connected to the lessons of the myth, which for me are natural lessons.

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Bios -

Rachel McCoppin, Ph.D. is a Professor of literature at the University of Minnesota Crookston. She has published articles in the areas of mythology and comparative literature. She has published a scholarly book by McFarland: [The Lessons of Nature in Mythology](#) (2015). Her work has appeared in journals including: *Symbiosis*, *Studies in American Humor*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *World Literary Review*. She has also published articles in many scholarly books published by Palgrave Macmillan, McFarland, Atlantic, and Greenwood Press.

Willi Paul is integrating the permaculture, transition and new mythology movements. He has published articles, interviews, eBooks and new myths at Planetshifter.com since 2008. Please see his [portfolio](#) and collected works at [academia.edu](#).

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