

Get Wild: Metamorphosis ... for a change

Joyce Mosher



A vintage engraved illustration of Bernini's sculpture of Apollo and Daphne.

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In the Literature for Change course that I teach in Colorado Mountain College's sustainability studies program, we read scores of famous American writers who address environmental, social and economic issues from the founding of the country up to today.

To develop our imaginations and sense of deep history, though, we begin with the earliest known stories and images of the human experience: drawings on the walls of caves and mythic tales handed down orally for many thousands of generations. Globally, these pictures and stories share at least two important recurring features: creation narratives and the profound and mysterious interchangeability of gods, animals and humans.

The central power behind all these prehistoric expressions is the fascinating mystery of metamorphosis — the conversion of one substance into another. The great beginning, the emergence of the universe itself, is explained variously as a formation of the cosmos from the mind of a god or goddess, or as a big bang of proto-matter expanding from a state of high density and temperature.

Four billion years ago, planet Earth emerged. Over millions of years, the essential ingredients of life — carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen — evolved into a rich array of plants and animals. When, over a million years ago, several different forms of human species joined the plants and animals, these new creatures adapted to changing conditions of their surroundings, learning from the birds and animals they lived among, learning the wisdom of trees and plants.

Through vast eons, the human mind perceived a magic state of affairs in all of earthly phenomenon. Our ancestors noticed caterpillars morphed into butterflies — frogs changed from water-breathing tadpoles to land dwellers with lungs and legs. The night sky, led by the Moon, altered its heavenly messages in observable, cyclic rotation. All animals were seen to change physically throughout their lives, and even dead seeds experienced new birth as an earth-filling abundance of plants and trees that sustained new life.

These constant changes on earth and in the heavens, and transformations from death to life, suggested to early humans that the borders dividing one life form from another are permeable and changeable. Greek mythology illustrates countless examples of maidens turning into trees, youths turning into flowers, and men turning to stone or stars. The world's religions to this day retain the doctrine of mortal beings transformed to immortal spirits, as when blood becomes wine and bread represents the body of a god.

The many generations of the first people to inhabit North America kept alive, through oral tradition and ritual, primordial knowledge of the rhythms of earth, sky, and the countless creatures that make their homes on this planet. Two perennial favorites of students are Spider Grandmother, who teaches humans to weave and to become fully human, and tricksters believed to be present at the creation of the world, and who appear in various forms, creating and destroying order and challenging humans to stay alert and keep their wits about them.

As myth and magic moved from the Neolithic age, art and storytelling became modern-day science, so that today this magic is known as Ecology, the reciprocal relation of all life forms surviving together in unique environments. Our species can, through empathy and wisdom, retain the wonder of the connection of all of creation and hold all diverse beings in equal respect. Will we do this before it's too late?



Joyce Mosher

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Joyce Mosher is a long-time Breckenridge resident and a professor of literature and sustainability at Colorado Mountain College.