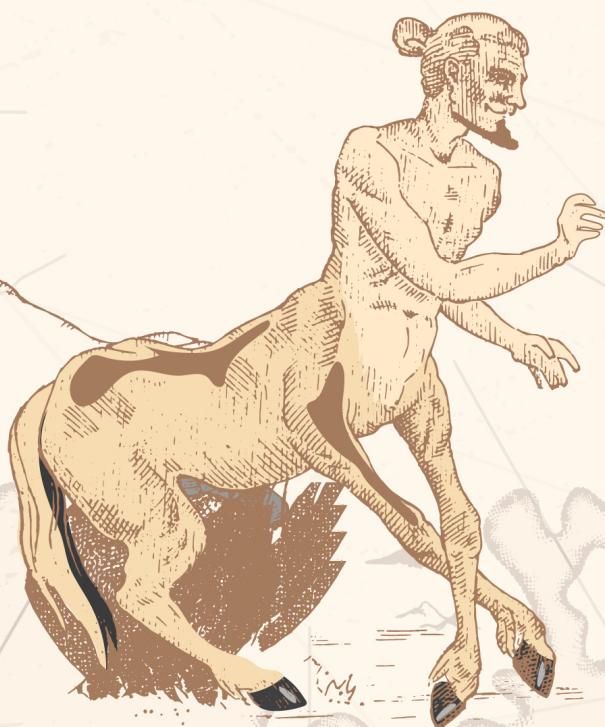


SUMMARY

MAPS OF MEANING

JORDAN B. PETERSON



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Summary of “Maps of Meaning” by Jordan B. Peterson

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn why myths give us meaning.

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Introduction

Do you remember the first time you encountered mythology? For me, it was in first grade, when I was assigned to read a brightly colored, illustrated anthology of Greek myths for children. And although my watered-down, childproof version didn't quite capture the complexity of the myths, I fell in love with the tales of vengeful gods and brave heroes, beautiful princesses and characters that were half-man and half-beast. I might not have grasped their adult nuances or their deeper meaning, but I understood one thing very clearly: these weren't just empty stories, they were lessons. These tales were attempting to pack universal truths about the human experience into a pithy and compelling package. The author believes that everyone loves myths for similar reasons, and over the course of this summary, we'll explore his theories about the importance of myths and the meaning they bring to our lives.



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We Use Stories to Understand the World

Would you say you're a big fan of stories? Many people might answer that question with a "no," affirming that they prefer science, facts, and statistics instead. Ironically, however, those same people often enjoy movies, television series, or video games, all of which are driven by stories. In fact, whether we realize it or not, stories are all around us and we use them to enhance our understanding of the world. We even tell ourselves stories every day! If you don't believe me, just think about your thought process when you're imagining what will happen next at any point in your day.

For example, let's say you're about to walk into a meeting with your boss. You're late on the report she asked you to complete. So, as you approach her office, your steps might be twinged with trepidation and you might find yourself visualizing the outcome. You're wondering if she'll fire you. You're wondering if she'll be angry. Maybe you're imagining what she'll say when you walk in. Or maybe you're imagining what you'll say to defend yourself. Maybe she'll be cool about it. Or maybe it'll be catastrophic. No matter what, it's almost guaranteed that you've imagined outcomes for every possibility. And whether you've thought about them that way or not, these thoughts are actually stories that you tell yourself to predict the outcome of the day or to provide assurance or comfort.

And the same is true of stories that don't directly involve us. If you're like most people, you probably have childhood memories of ghost stories, Bible stories, nursery rhymes, or fables told to you by your parents. Some classics include stories like The Tortoise and The Hare, the tale of David and Goliath, or the story of Adam and Eve. These stories are intended to help us navigate the world because they form our understanding of big-picture concepts about human existence. For example, the classic fable of The Tortoise and The Hare teaches us that "slow and steady wins the race"; from this tale, we learn that if we do our best and take our time, we'll eventually win in the end. Likewise, David and Goliath indicates that underdogs can triumph in the face of seemingly insurmountable

opposition, and Adam and Eve's origin story highlights a Christian interpretation of the creation story.

And indeed, it seems that everybody knows these stories. That's because we pass them down from one generation to the next as our parents and grandparents did to us. As a result, these stories and their lessons shape our worldview and our relationship with morality. But have you ever wondered why stories are so effective? Or how they survive to be passed down through generations? As is the case with many significant aspects of human existence, the simplest explanation is often the truest, and stories are no different. Quite simply, stories survive because they invite us to engage with them. They activate our imagination and our emotions. They enable us to live vicariously through characters. And in so doing, we are free to access moral insights that might escape us if someone spoke to us directly about our own behavior.

To consider how this works in practice, let's take a look at a very innocent fable and return to our analogy about the tortoise and the hare. While many myths take a much darker approach, examining critical elements of human morality, the fable of the tortoise and the hare is universally applicable to all ages. So, let's imagine that you struggle with the same issues embodied by the hare. You often bite off more than you can chew or you overestimate your own abilities. Perhaps you're a little more cocky than you should be and you let your pride get the best of you. So, imagine that someone came up to you and told you all those things about yourself. Would you be receptive to what they had to say? Would you be grateful for their insights and willing to take an honest, introspective look at your own behavior? Or would you feel attacked and resentful? Let's be honest, for most of us, it would be the latter.

But what if someone told you the story of the tortoise and the hare? Because it's a fictional story that situates you as an outside observer, it's easy for you to take a step back and evaluate both characters' behavior in an objective light. From there, you might say, "Wow, that's so foolish of the hare! Doesn't he know he needs to slow down and take his time?" And if

you're feeling especially open-minded that day, it's possible that the story might penetrate deeply enough for you to recognize that your behavior often mirrors that of the hare. In fact, it's possible that you guys have more in common than you would like. So, as you reflect on your newly-discovered insight, you have the opportunity to say, "Hey, I should change that! I'd be a lot happier and more successful if I took a lesson from the tortoise!" From this example, you can see how stories help us to learn more about ourselves, our morality, and the values we hope to cultivate.

But stories are also useful for making sense of the world. Today, many of us don't believe in a host of mythical gods-- in fact, most of us don't believe in any higher power-- but we can still understand how myths help us interpret life. For example, when ancient cultures invented elaborate creation stories and attributed shocking phenomena to supernatural forces, we can understand that it helped them to imagine where the world came from and why certain things happened. Rather than existing in a state of chaos and confusion, it was easier to ascribe natural disasters like famines, plagues, and hurricanes to the wrath of a vengeful god. Believing that you could ward off these disasters by appeasing the gods generated a sense of security. However false it might have been, this sense of security was preferable because it allowed people to believe that they had some control over their futures. And whether we believe in god or science today, modern people still do similar things. So, it's easy to see how myths imbue our lives with a substantial amount of meaning!



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Myths Teach us About Identity

It's instinctive: whenever we interact with any story, our natural inclination is to seek out the characters with whom we identify. In fact, that's precisely how myths teach us another important lesson about the world and our place in it. Because when we engage with stories and find ourselves in mythical characters, we're also learning about our own identities. As a result, the author argues that myths perform a vital function in the process of human development. He also observes that the educational benefits of myths are not limited to introspection. They not only teach us to understand ourselves, they also help us to find our place within society as a whole. In this chapter, we're going to take a look at how myths fulfil that role and why.

If you've read many Greek, Norse, or Egyptian myths, you might have noticed that although mythology differs depending on its culture of origin, myths always have a few key similarities. For example, most myths feature male protagonists who embark on a quest of some sort. Through the course of the quest, the hero usually faces his fears, fights monsters, and overcomes personal struggles before emerging victorious in the end. Sometimes he has help along the way and that help takes a variety of forms. In some cases, the government might be on his side; he might be supported by a kind and benevolent king. Likewise, throughout his travels, he might be assisted by a loyal friend, a brave princess, a fantastical creature, or a kind animal.

These myths help us to see the benefits of having kind, wise, and reasonable people in power. In myths that depict home as a safe place and the king as a kind and loving father, we learn that there is safety in numbers and that wise leadership can help us make good decisions. They also teach important lessons about the value of respecting others and not judging others by their appearance. For example, you might not expect a field mouse or another small animal to be of much help. But certain myths illustrate that even tiny creatures can make a big difference. By contrast, other myths employ a very

different cast of characters in order to teach another lesson. The hero remains good and pure, but he might be falsely convicted or villainized by a corrupt government. In these cases, the people in power are not the good guys and the kind, wise king is nowhere to be found. Instead, the king might be selfish, greedy, vain, or sadistic, and our hero is faced with the task of defying him. Often, the king acts against the best interests of his people and it's up to our hero to seek justice, even when everyone is against him.

Both types of myths are equally important because they teach vital lessons. From one, we learn to rely on our friends and family and trust the authority figures who have our best interests at heart. We learn to find safety and solidarity in a group. We learn to help others and trust that they will help us in turn. And as a result of these lessons, we learn to find our place in society. We learn that no one is an island and that we need loyalty, love, and friendship in order to survive. By contrast, adversity myths teach us that sometimes we have to stand alone in order to do what's right. We learn that the popular thing to do may not always be the right thing and that there may be times when we have to go against our friends. We learn that the standards and expectations of others cannot define us and cannot determine our self-worth. We learn that the law does not always reflect what is right or what is ethical. We learn that sometimes, you have to dethrone the king in order to bring justice to the oppressed, the abused, and the underrepresented.

Because myths represent the contrasting halves of the human experience and the shades of grey that often color our relationship with morality, we can develop a balanced understanding of our role as both an individual and a member of a group. Because stories give us the freedom to imagine and explore scenarios without experiencing them firsthand, we can work out moral and ethical dilemmas in our heads and form our moral compass in a safe environment. We can learn to identify with the hero. We can develop strength, wisdom, and individuality. And the more we engage with these stories, situating ourselves as the heroes, the more we prepare ourselves to

enter the real world and write our own stories. Therefore, myths can help us learn how to become our own heroes.



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Final Summary

We tell ourselves stories all the time. We use these stories to explain who we are, where we came from, and what will happen next. We tell stories about the origin of the world and about the struggle between good and evil. We might like to think that we've evolved beyond the need for these stories, but the truth is that they're an integral facet of the human experience. We need stories in order to learn, grow, and survive, and that's actually a beautiful thing! Mythology holds a significant place in the human library because it serves as a universal tool for explaining the world and our place within it. And whether you believe in myths or not, it's okay to enjoy and learn from them. Because myths create maps of meaning that we use to help us navigate life.



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