

**“MASKS OF GOD”**  
**Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**October 12, 2025**  
**Speaker: Rev. Bruce Bode**  
**Celebrant: Jim Heard**  
**Music: Sally Riggers**  
**Media: George Rogers-Clark**

**Sermon Title & Description:** “Masks of God” – As we approach Halloween, we will explore the role of masks in our lives through the work of scholar Joseph Campbell, author of a four-volume *The Masks of God* and known to the larger public through his lively interviews with Bill Moyers’s in the popular PBS series *The Power of Myth*.

**Greeting by Minister & Introduction of Theme**

Thank you, Jim, for opening today’s service, and greetings to all of you, both to those of you present here in the sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually.

The theme of today’s service, as we come nearer to Halloween, will be drawn from the ideas of scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell, who lived from 1904 to 1987.

And let me begin by asking:

1. How many of you have heard of Joseph Campbell?
2. How many of you are acquainted with the six-part PBS video interview series titled *The Power of Myth* conducted by journalist Bill Moyers? (Bill Moyers, a remarkable man, died a few months ago on June 26 at the age of 91).
3. How many of you have read some of Joseph Campbell’s many books?

As it happens, I had the personal good fortune of organizing lectures for Joseph Campbell during three consecutive years – 1980 to 1982 – at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I served as an Associate Minister. At the time, I was 33 years-old and Campbell was 76 years-old, just a couple of years younger than I am now.

Also, at that time, I was deeply immersed in the poetry of California poet Robinson Jeffers ... and I knew that Campbell had also been influenced by Robinson Jeffers’ poetry when he was a young man.

I recall in my initial meeting with Joseph Campbell, as I was driving him from the airport to his hotel in downtown Grand Rapids – about a 20-minute ride – that I mentioned my interest in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. At that mention of Jeffers, Campbell proceeded for several minutes to quote passages from his poems that were lodged in his mind.

Our Responsive Reading this morning is, thus, drawn from some lines from the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, though I can't recall if these were any of the lines quoted by Campbell.

### **Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: If flows out of mystery into mystery: there is no beginning – how could there be? and no end – how could there be?

CONGREGATION: The stars shine in the sky like the spray of a wave rushing to meet no shore, and the great music blares on forever.

MINISTER: Erase the lines: I pray you not to love classifications.

CONGREGATION: The thing is like a river, from source to sea-mouth one flowing life.

MINISTER: We that have the honor and hardship of being human are one flesh with the beasts, and the beasts with the plants one streaming sap.

CONGREGATION: And certainly the plants and algae and the earth they spring from are one flesh with the stars.

MINISTER: The classifications are mostly a kind of *memoria technica* [an artificial aid to memory, a mnemonic device]; use it but don't be fooled.

CONGREGATION: It is all truly one life: red-blood and tree-sap, animal, mineral, sidereal – one stream, one organism, one God.

MINISTER: One consciousness: the one breath of the organ blown through innumerable conduits of sound.

CONGREGATION: Blessed are the ears that hear that eternal music.

(Robinson Jeffers: lines 1-2 from "How Beautiful It Is," lines 3-8 from "Monument," lines 9-10 from "The Women at Point Sur")

### **Opening Hymn #336: “All My Memories of Love”**

Our Opening Hymn is a haunting and tender hymn, which I am relating to Hallowe'en – All Hallows' Eve – and to All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, the following two days. It's titled “All My Memories of Love.” The words are from the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova.

1. All my memories of love hang upon high stars.  
All the souls I've lost to tears now the autumn jars;  
and the air around me here thickens with their song;  
sing again their nameless tunes, sing again, and strong.

2. Willows in September touch the water clear,  
set among the rushes tall of the flowing year.  
Rising up from sunlit past comes the shadowed sigh  
running toward me silently, love to fortify.

3. Many are the graceful hearts hung upon this tree.  
And it seems there's room for mine on these branches free;  
and the sky above the tree, whether wet or bright,  
is my ease and comforting, my good news and light.

(Anna Akhmatova, words; Mark Belletini, tr.; Solesmes version of plainsong melody, adapted)

### **Reading:** Excerpt from *The Power of Myth*

Joseph Campbell, as I mentioned, lived from 1904 to 1987 and was a professor for 38 years at Sarah Lawrence College outside of New York City. He was known as one of the top scholars of the myths and stories of people from all parts of the planet and from all times of human history.

He was particularly interested to explore the *common* themes of our human stories, believing that just as our species can be identified by a similarly-shaped physical structure so the human psyche, which he described as the “inward experience of the human body” (Joseph Campbell: Myths to Live By – Part I,” PBS interview with Bill Moyers, April 17, 1981), is also essentially constant in our species and thus produces certain common themes.

I had the privilege, as I indicated earlier, of organizing lectures for Campbell at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan during the years 1980-1982.

After those evening lectures to audiences of about 500 people, he would wind down with a drink in one of the hotel restaurants where he was staying ... and I had the opportunity to engage in numerous conversations with him in which he did not hold himself back from a much younger man. It was certainly a high point in my life!

In addition to these lectures, Campbell also agreed in the second and third years of these lectures to deliver sermons to the congregation. He refused, however, to call them sermons, insisting that they were lectures.

But, of course, his lectures, if you're familiar with them, were rich with thoughts and ideas pertaining to how we should live and what life asks of us. And how could his lectures not be rich with life-wisdom since, as he believed, this is what myths and stories are about: the life-wisdom that comes from the deep places of our being winnowed over time by successive generations.

As fortune would have it, these lecture/sermons that Campbell delivered were given in each instance on the Sunday just before Halloween. This was the Sunday in which the children of the congregation entered the sanctuary wearing their Halloween costumes. It was the perfect set-up for a scholar who had written a classic four-volume work on the myths of the world titled *The Masks of God*."

And, Campbell, who always spoke without notes, was completely delighted and taken in by this event, and he spoke on both occasions about the origin and meaning of the Halloween festival and about the theme of masks.

Our reading this morning will be about the function of myths in guiding the individual through the stages of a life.

It's taken from the interviews with Bill Moyers, the six-part PBS video series that was first shown in 1988, the year following Campbell's own return to what he referred to as the "mysterious source-land" from which we all arise and back into which we all fall.

In this reading, Flossie will take the part of interviewer Bill Moyers and I that of Joseph Campbell.

MOYERS: Do you think the poet Wordsworth was right when he wrote, "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting/The soul that rises with us, our life's star,/Hath had elsewhere its setting,/And cometh from afar." Do you think this is so?

CAMPBELL: I do. "Not in entire forgetfulness" – that is to say, the nerves in our body carry the memories that shaped the organization of our nervous system to certain environmental circumstances and to the demands of an organism.

MOYERS: What do our souls owe to the ancient myths?

CAMPBELL: The ancient myths were designed to harmonize the mind and the body. The mind can ramble off in strange ways and want things that the body does not want. The myths and rites were means of putting the mind in accord with the body and the way of life in accord with the way that nature dictates.

MOYERS: So these old stories live in us?

CAMPBELL: They do indeed. The stages of human development are the same today as they were in ancient times. As a child, you are brought up in a world of discipline,

of obedience, and you are dependent on others. All this has to be transcended when you come to maturity, so that you can live not in dependency but with self-responsible authority. If you can't cross that threshold, you have the basis for neuroses. Then comes the one after you have gained the world, of yielding it – the crisis of dismissal, disengagement.

MOYERS: And ultimately death?

CAMPBELL: And ultimately death. That's the ultimate disengagement. So myth has to serve both aims, that of inducting the young person into the life of his [or her] world – that's the function of the folk ideas – then disengaging him [or her]. The folk idea unshells the elementary idea, which guides you to your own inward life.

MOYERS: And these myths tell me how others have made the passage, and how I can make the passage?

CAMPBELL: Yes, and also what are the beauties of the way. I feel this now, moving into my own last years, you know – the myths help me to go with it.

MOYERS: What kind of myths? Give me one that has actually helped you.

CAMPBELL: The tradition in India, for instance, of actually changing your whole way of dress, even changing your name, as you pass from one stage to another. When I retired from teaching, I knew I had to create a new way of life, and I changed my manner of thinking about my life, just in terms of that notion – moving out of the sphere of achievement into the sphere of enjoyment and appreciation and relaxing to the wonder of it all.

MOYERS: And then there is that final passage through the dark gate?

CAMPBELL: Well, that is no problem at all. The problem in middle life, when the body has reached its climax of power and begins to decline, is to identify yourself not with the body, which is falling away, but with the consciousness of which it is a vehicle. This is something I learned from myths. What am I? Am I the bulb that carries the light, or am I the light of which the bulb is a vehicle?

One of the psychological problems in growing old is the fear of death. People can resist the door of death. But this body is a vehicle of consciousness, and if you can identify with the consciousness, you can watch the body go like an old car. There goes the fender, there goes the tire, one thing after another – but it's predictable. And then, gradually, the whole thing drops off, and consciousness rejoins consciousness. It's no longer in this particular environment. (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pp. 70-71)

**Musical Interlude:** *Clair de Lune*, Claude Debussy

As a musical interlude prior to the sermon, Sally will play the Debussy's familiar *Clair de Lune*, which is French for "moonlight." (And moonlight will also be at play in my sermon.)

## **Sermon: MASKS OF GOD**

### **Introduction**

As I mentioned in the introduction to the reading, I heard Joseph Campbell deliver sermons in two successive years on the Sundays just prior to Halloween. The sermon the first year was titled “Trick and Treat” and the sermon the second year, “Trick or Treat: Round 2.”

Halloween, Campbell explained, is a festival of the ancient Celtic world, in particular. Halloween, All Hallows’ Eve, is the evening preceding the holy days – All Saints’ Day followed by All Souls’ Day – and is matched exactly six months on the other side of the year by the festival of May Day and the evening preceding it of Walpurgis Night.

At Halloween the organic world is clearly passing into the realm of darkness; there is the falling of the leaves from the trees. And, on the other side of the year, is May Day and the celebration of the “breaking forth of the fresh leaves of spring.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 3, sermon published by Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan)

These ancient, pastoral peoples, said Campbell, “joined their meditation with the actualities of the natural world, participating in the world by way of meditation and relevant action.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 3)

### **The meaning of the goblins**

And who are these goblins, then, that appear just at this time of the year?

With the passing of the year into darkness, one’s meditation is naturally drawn to those who have passed from this life into the darkness of the grave. And in many parts of Europe in those days people would go to the graves of their departed loved ones, as is done currently in Mexico at the Day of the Dead, bringing not only prayers and recollections but also little gifts.

Campbell, quoting him now from those sermons, said, “There is a secret psychological aspect to this. So often when a dear person dies, we have a sense of guilt and regret for the lovely things we have not done, and for the little negative acts that we wish we had not rendered.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 4)

And along with this, he said, there is an old, old fear of the dead – that the dead can somehow reach out from their graves to hurt those who have hurt them, thus playing a nasty trick on the living. And so gifts are brought to the graves not only to honor and remember the dead but also to appease them.

This is how it was in much of ancient Europe. But in the Celtic world, to which our “trick or treat” custom owes its origin, it was the other way around – that is, the graveyards came to the homes of the living!

“Halloween,” said Campbell, “is the night of the re-entry of the dead into their domiciles, visiting again the people with whom they had dwelled. The idea of giving a gift, a treat, or suffering a trick – a shocking, surprising, nasty little trick – is associated with the guilt feeling.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 4)

The means by which the dead enter their former homes is in the form of their own dear children who wear the masks of the dead. And this is another ancient idea to which Campbell referred, a kind of reincarnation idea, in which the children are the returning ancestors.

“In a sense,” says Campbell, “they truly are. That is to say, the ancestral genes, the ancestral strain of inheritance, appears again in these little children. Many people in traditional cultures look at the child to see who it is who has returned.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 4)

So these masked creatures, our dear children, represent our departed loved ones. But they also, said Campbell, are “representatives of that general energy of life which pours through us and of which we are momentarily manifestations and creatures.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 4)

## **Two types of masks**

Watching the masked children in the “March of the Goblins” parade at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Campbell identified two basic types of masks. One type has to do with masks that represent various roles in society, roles that a child might one day like to take on – say that of a dancer, an athlete, a fire-fighter, a farmer, a doctor, a nurse, and so on.

And, then, secondly, there are the masks that represent, as Campbell put it, “unconscious dynamic powers,” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 3) forms not found in society or in our daily life, but rather forms having to do with the “deep mysteries of the unconscious.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 2)

And these can be quite terrifying. These are the more fearsome creatures: the ghouls, the ghosts, the goblins, the demons, the monsters.

## **The function of masks**

What is it about this “whole game of wearing masks,” Campbell asked? (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 4)

The answer: when you wear a mask, when you put on a costume, there’s a shift of energy. You can feel the energy flow and the life come forward.

The mask, as it were, pulls up the energy of the body, gives it a momentary focus – like actors and actresses, who take on a role and exude a tremendous energy, do things in the

role they would never do in their ordinary selves. Then after the play they take off the mask, put down the role, and return to their ordinary, everyday selves.

“Watch a youngster going down the street,” said Campbell. “He may be galloping as though he were a horse. If he were just walking, he might be a little bored. The galloping brings up life energy.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, p. 7)

### **Campbell’s curious encounter with a fire hydrant**

Campbell said he had a curious experience once when he was parking a car. He drove up to a curb to park the car and standing right next to the open space of the curb was a youngster in a rigid, catatonic-like posture. Campbell opened the door to get out of the car, but the youngster in a very strong voice said, “You can’t park here!”

Campbell looked around for “no parking” signs but saw none and so asked. “Well, why not? Why can’t I park here?”

“Because I’m a hydrant,” said the youngster.

“So,” says Campbell, “I went down the block a ways. I didn’t want to break into his meditation.” (“Trick or Treat,” October 25, 1981, pp. 7, 8)

### **Two teachings of masks**

Campbell spoke on these occasions of two basic teachings related to the masks.

First, that we are all masks of eternity, masks of God – temporary expressions of that uncreated, inexhaustible energy that pours itself, from who knows where, into the forms of time and space.

Society fashions roles or masks whereby we might receive and focus that energy and give it play in, hopefully, a beautiful and joyful way. And, thus, the masks we wear, the roles we take on in life, both shape and release this “undifferentiated energy” of life.

But, secondly, to make those masks or roles work for us, we must not identify with the mask or the role. It is a *mask* we wear – a mask that both reveals our true being and at the same time conceals it.

The mask, if it is doing its job, is pulling up the energy of our being from the creative abyss and giving it focus and form. But, at the same time, that mask is not our true identity.

### **Our deeper identity**

Our deeper identity, says Campbell, is the identity with the *undifferentiated energy* itself – to know yourself ultimately as this undifferentiated energy and not, first of all, as this particular and passing form in which it now takes shape – though, of course, we don’t know the energy except in the passing forms.



Thus, each of us are metaphors of the eternal; each of us are masks of God, temporary and temporal shapes of that which has no shape or form and which transcends all differentiations, all categories of human cognition, and has no proper name – “the tongue cannot soil it,” as is said in Eastern religion.

But if you identify with the mask, with your particular role in life and with this temporary and passing form, then you will lose the sense of play. You will lose the humor, the freedom, the energy, the vitality, and the joy.

You will become rigid and humorless, bound to the vehicle rather than to the energy of which the vehicle is a temporary carrier and manifestation.

### **Masks and the phases of the moon**

To illustrate how we are “masks of eternity,” Campbell, in one of his Halloween sermons, discussed the work of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, who compared the cycle of a human lifetime to the cycle of a lunar month.

As the moon goes through its phases – wears its masks, so to speak – so we go through the phases of a lifetime. And if a lifetime is taken as the traditional, biblical three score and ten years – seventy years – then the full moon is half a lifetime, or thirty-five years.

### **The first phase**

Thus, a child is born out of darkness, as the moon is born from darkness ... or, as Campbell puts it, from “the dark abyss of God’s will and God’s intention, out of which we all come.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 5)

And immediately, then, the child is imprinted with the force of its society. The child begins to put on the particular mask of that society – learn the language, the customs, the morals and mores, the religion, and the possible roles that are available to the individual in that society.

That’s the primary mask, says Yeats.

### **The second phase**

The next phase of life, the next mask we put on, corresponds to the eighth day of the moon. And here the light begins to increase over the darkness and here the individual must shape and adjust the imprinted mask received from its society so that it fits with the inward energies that have come from the creative and dark abyss of God.

This is the crisis of adolescence, the crisis of moving from the dependency of childhood to that of self-responsible adulthood, and from external authority to inward authority. It’s the crisis of working out one’s own natural impulses with the roles in society that are available to receive the impulse of that energy.

## **Initiation rites**

Initiation rites throughout the world have to do with dying to dependency and being born anew to self-responsible adulthood and taking on your particular role in a society.

Campbell was concerned about our own society's lack of initiation rituals and believed that much of our lawlessness, which shows a disrespect for the society that should be nurturing one, is due to this lack of initiation.

On the other hand, he said, since young people in our society are required to work these things out more-or-less on their own, there may be also a greater creativity in our society in a certain way.

## **The full moon**

The full moon, the fifteenth night, represents one's life at the fullness of consciousness, the height of one's physical and mental powers.

"The consciousness," says Campbell, "is at its maximum power and radiance." And your body is at its perfection. "I'm told," he said, "that in heaven after the resurrection of the body everyone there will thirty-five years old! So," he advised, "take care of how you look at that time." ("Trick or Treat: Round 2," October 31, 1982, p. 7)

It's at this point in a life, says Campbell, that you are to ask yourself a very important question, namely, "Am I the consciousness that informs the body, or am I the vehicle of the consciousness?"

Campbell answers that we are both at the same time and that we think of ourselves as both at the same time.

"But," he says, "as the body deteriorates later on, the consciousness removes itself, and you watch your body go." ("Trick or Treat: Round 2," October 31, 1982, pp. 7, 8)

So, at this fifteenth night of the moon's cycle, you have to make the disengagement from an absolute attachment to the body and its personality mask to the play of consciousness of which your body and personality is a vehicle.

## **One's primary identity**

In the second of these sermons, Campbell said, and I quote, "You are consciousness."

[Or, perhaps, you could equally say that you are energy, or creativity, or protoplasm, or spirit, or light, whatever term works for you. But Campbell, here, used the word "consciousness."]

“You are consciousness. That’s what you are, for a moment in this body which has now reached its thirty-fifth year.

“And this body is gradually going to deteriorate. The consciousness will finally disengage itself altogether from this vehicle. When you have identified yourself as that consciousness, you can watch the body go, with gratitude, as the mask or the role that carried you to realization.

“When you have identified with consciousness (and I mean this), you have identified yourself with the consciousness that lives in others as well.”

(“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, pp. 9, 10)

### **A metaphysical truth and the foundation of morality**

And this latter point for Campbell, this identification of your consciousness with the consciousness of others, is the foundation of morality and the realization of a metaphysical truth, namely, that you and that other creature are one, and that the sense of separateness is secondary. Primary is our unity.

It is this reality – this reality of ultimately being one organism – that elicits our compassion. Such compassion, for Campbell, is the ultimate achievement of the spirit – the knowledge of the heart that feels all things as one thing, that sees all beings are “Buddha beings” or as “Christ beings,” depending on your societal mask.

This is the ultimate breakthrough in consciousness – this recognition of our primary identity and of compassion.

### **Example of a spontaneous realization of the metaphysical truth**

But this realization can also break through *spontaneously* – not just through meditation or a religious discipline.

Campbell was fond of telling a story – which he also related in one of these sermons – of an incident that took in Hawaii, where he lived in the latter years of his life, the family of his wife, the modern dancer and choreographer Jean Erdman, being from Hawaii.

The story is as follows:

On the island of Oahu, where Honolulu is located, there is a ridge of rocky mountain that runs across a large part of the island. There the wind comes funneling in and people, says Campbell, go there to get blown about, but also to commit suicide, like persons who jump from the Golden Gate Bridge.

One day a police car with two policemen was coming up the cliff-side road into this area when they noticed, just beyond the railing, a young man clearly about to jump. The police car immediately stopped and the police officer on the passenger side of the car leaped out and grabbed the young man just as he was starting his jump. The police officer was now actually being carried over the cliff with the young man when the second police officer came around in time to grab both of them, pull them back, and so prevent the two of them from going over the edge.

Afterwards, the first police officer was asked, “Why didn’t you let go?” Says Campbell, “He had forgotten everything: his wife, his family, his career, his duties to the world – everything.”

The police officer’s answer was this: “I couldn’t let go. I had given myself to that young man in such a way that if I had let go, I could not have lived another day of my life.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 10)

To Campbell, this was a demonstration of a metaphysical truth – a deeper and larger truth – that can spontaneously break through the everyday truths of our separateness and the laws of self-preservation.

The truth of our self-preservation, believes Campbell, is a secondary truth – very real and very important, but secondary; primary is our unity. And sometimes that primary truth spontaneously breaks through and we catch examples of it as in this story of the police officer.

### **The final phases**

Then we move – briefly now – to the final phases of the moon ... to the twenty-second night of the moon where the moon is clearly moving back toward darkness. And “Here,” says Campbell, “one has to hold control of oneself to keep going and to continue the course.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 10)

And then, finally, the moon returns to darkness, and “The body then finally disengages you from itself, and you return to the dark mystery of God.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 11)

Says Campbell, in this concluding quote:

“To know this about yourself and to know that the life you’re leading is not the totality but the vehicle of your totality, is to understand the mystery of life itself as a mask and a transferring of masks and not remaining stuck to the mask of the first eight nights, or of the next eight nights, or the next, but a change of masks.

“Flow with it so that the consciousness is in process all the time, and does not become fixed. When it becomes fixed, another kind of death occurs. The consciousness is no longer fluent and moving but has identified itself with a role absolutely.” (“Trick or Treat: Round 2,” October 31, 1982, p. 11)

### **Return**

This concluding quote were words transcribed from a sermon that Campbell gave on Sunday, October 31, 1982 – Halloween. Five years later, on October 30, the day before Halloween, at his retirement home in Honolulu, with his wife Jean Erdman with him, Joseph Campbell himself changed masks. His consciousness disengaged itself from the body and he returned, as he had phrased it, to the “dark mystery of God.”

### **Closing Hymn #1011: “Return Again”**

Return again, Return again,  
Return to the home of your soul.

Return to who you are,  
Return to what you are,  
Return to where you are  
born and reborn again.

Return again, Return again,  
Return to the home of your soul.  
(Words & music: Shlomo Carlebach)

### **Closing Words**

Our Closing Words of Benediction are, again, from poet Robinson Jeffers:

We cannot be sure of life for one moment;  
We can, by force and self-discipline, by many refusals and a few  
assertions, in the teeth of fortune assure ourselves  
Freedom and integrity in life or integrity in death. And we know  
that the enormous invulnerable beauty of things  
Is the face of God; live gladly in its presence, and so die without  
grief or fear knowing it survives us.

(Robinson Jeffers, from “Nova,” adapted)

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Skagit Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mt. Vernon, WA on Sunday, October 12, 2025. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus there.)