

## Blinded by modern mythology

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Mythology has often been used in an attempt to explain unknown mysteries of our lives. Many of the same type of explanations persist among both secular and religious pre-scientific thinkers who often created myths to address unknown aspects of life.

Webster's Dictionary offers the following definition of myths: "an old traditional story or legend, especially one concerning fabulous or supernatural beings, giving expression to the early beliefs, aspirations and perceptions of a people and serving to explain natural phenomena or the origins of a people. . . ."

One roadblock to enlightened thinking is our unwillingness to suspend judgement when we lack evidence. Unfortunately, our longing for certainty may entrap us into mythical beliefs.

While some myths are benign and do not hinder people from pursuing new evidence, destructive myths inhibit people from looking for answers through critical thinking and the scientific method. For example, we may hold the modern view that people of the same ethnic origins and skin colour as ours are more honest, trustworthy and dependable than others outside our group.

Colin Grant's *Myths We Live By*, states ". . . if the notion of myth is broadened to encompass perspectives and priorities we take for granted, just as ancients took for granted the stories of gods, goddesses . . . they represent commitments in life that are so basic and assumed that we normally do not notice them. It is just as difficult for us to see that we are in the midst of accepting certain modern myths as it was for the ancients to see that they were caught up in the midst of the myths of their time."

Many people today believe in the myth of sports heroes as a most important part of the real world. High salaries of professional athletes surpass our wildest expectations of 50 years ago. Fans are willing to pay hundreds of hard-earned dollars to see athletes "play" at soccer, hockey, and baseball.

Another powerful modern myth is the indispensability of the family automobile. According to a recent report from *Reality Check: The Canadian Review of Well-Being*, cars are the single biggest expenditure of Canadians.

We also spend huge sums to purchase "winning" lottery tickets, but that too is part of another modern myth. We may mistakenly hope to have a lucky ticket or have the right karma to win our fortune.

Sixty years ago, in medical circles, there were strong indications that smoking was a cause of emphysema and lung cancer. When these findings were presented to the general public, tobacco industries began active campaigns to create modern myths that cigarettes were medically safe, psychologically relaxing, and healthy.

The two somewhat differing Genesis biblical accounts of creation are presently regarded as mythological by many modern religious believers who now regard the theory of evolution as more scientifically accurate. There are, however, many present-day believers who accept the ancient Genesis accounts as literally true.

The Santa Claus myth is more benign than the safe tobacco myth, but shares interesting similarities. Both myths are promoted by people who know the claims made are not true.

There is the myth that being a connoisseur of fine alcoholic beverages indicates that one has discovered the good life. In addition, gambling is a harmless enjoyable way to spend money and keep taxes down.

There is a consumer myth that tells us the more we buy and consume, the happier we'll be and the healthier will be our economy. Fortunately, a myth that is known to be a myth has already lost its harmful potential. For example, Warton Willie's weather predictions, Chinese fortune cookies, or unlucky number 13 are relatively harmless because they are generally not believed.

We look for heroes with superpowers and mistakenly embellish our politicians, movie actors, and athletes as leaders and gurus. Our children's books too often are replete with bogeymen, Easter bunnies, tooth fairies, goblins, yetis, mermaids, Loch Ness monsters, and extraterrestrial beings.

We have an obligation to be guided by standards of science and critical thinking, which can be helpful in determining whether or not an action or belief is based on a myth. Finally, we can acknowledge that, in modern times, we too accept and act on numerous modern myths, some of which can be destructive to our own social progress.

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