

# Introduction

Kostas Pinteris was far from shore, racing to pull in his nets before the coming storm broke from a darkening sky. The storm seemed to come out of nowhere, with great thunderheads sending powerful swells beneath his boat, to pitch and roll, and warn of dark consequences should he delay. And still his nets had not come in. He was far to sea, much farther than others from his island's small fleet, in a spot where fish were plentiful for those bold enough to go there. And now this bounty was apt to get him killed, for his nets were too heavy and slow to take in. His winch strained for every yard of purchase and he revved his engines to help, but everything moved as in a dream, and far too slow for weather like this. Finally, the catch was at hand, a roiling mass lifted from the sea and slung over the deck. But they were not fish that Kostas hauled aboard. They were men.

Do you recognize this story? Some part of you does. The ordinary man thrust suddenly into extraordinary circumstances. A man in search of bounty, who finds himself far beyond anything he bargained for. Met with powerful, elemental forces that test his mettle and his humanity, transforming him from everyman to hero in the span of one mythic morning. It's a story we've all heard, in a

thousand variations, from Aladdin to Indiana Jones. In myths and epics, even children's fairytales. And yet on this particular day – the story was true.

Our fisherman was from the Greek island of Lesbos and the men he pulled from the sea were the first wave of Syrian refugees making a desperate nighttime crossing from Turkey, for a toehold in Europe. They came in boats. They came on rafts and inner-tubes. They came, whole families, pitched into the sea from rickety boats that capsized and sank, leaving them to drown. And yes, our fisherman hauled them in, as surprised you would be, before the news of that crisis broke upon the world.

Weeks later when I heard about him in a radio interview, Pinteris was still at it. By then the authorities had organized a blockade and were doing everything they could to discourage the night crossings. Still he went out. Even though they fined him repeatedly. Even though his business was ruined and they threatened to impound his boat. "Until they put me in jail, I'll go," he said. And he meant it. But why?

Why does a man risk life, livelihood, reputation, and freedom in a situation like this? I'll give you my answer, but it may sound strange at first blush. In fact, if it makes no sense at all, we'll be in good shape, because then we'll have something to talk about, you and I. Something worthwhile and surprising. A new way to view your life. For what Kostas Pinteris never recognized – and few of us ever do – was that he was a man coming alive inside a myth.

Why do I mean by that? Perhaps you have heard that there are really only a handful of myths beneath all the stories we tell? But what if these same myths, heroes, and

their stories were the unseen architecture *shaping* your life?

What if, like some dreamer within a dream, each of us is embarked upon the adventure of life, with each phase corresponding to one of these age-old stories that describe our journey? Where coming of age, forbidden love, and all our quests for glory, mastery, succession, even death – are parts you must play in this drama.

What if, consciously or not, we are all acting out our role in these stories, hitting its major plot points and obstacles right on schedule, arriving finally at thresholds of decision that will launch us into our next phase. Would that surprise you? Because that's what this book is about.

It's about recognizing that little if any of what you do is wholly original. Every hope, every battle, every defeat or triumph has been won before, by someone – in fact, many thousands of someones. And the echoes of those battles, their insights, recognitions, and decisions live on in you. In the recesses of your unconscious. Quietly directing you down paths of self discovery that you only *think* you have chosen yourself.

Would you believe such a thing? And why would I even propose it? My response and much evidence fill this book, and we'll have ample time to ponder them. But first, a confession: I am not a psychologist. I have no clinical training – other than the great laboratory of life. Nor I am a mythologist or even a full time academic. I write stories for a living, here in Hollywood, that ever-churning, much maligned sweat shop of the heroic saga. And yet, despite this non-academic pedigree – or maybe because of it – I began to notice something startling. The very same storylines that were animating the characters in my imaginary

worlds, were showing up in the lives of my friends as well. Right down to their plots and key reversals, their adversaries, and moments of recognition.

Now you may argue, with some credit, that's ridiculous! That what I was seeing was a question of bias. That if a man looks hard enough for a fish in the water, he will see fish where there are none. Which is exactly what I thought. For the first ten years. But alas, the evidence has continued to grow. There are fish beneath these waves. Lots of them. Now why would that be?

The short answer is – *it all begins with sleep* – and the irrefutable division of ourselves into two types of consciousness: waking mind and sleeping mind; our conscious and unconscious selves. Since the 19th Century, psychologists have sought to understand the interplay between these two halves of ourselves. For Freud, the unconscious was a strongbox of repressed impulses and early childhood memories, a box he could tease open to explain what made a man tick. For his student, Carl Jung, the unconscious was an unfathomable depth, containing not just personal memories and impulses, but also a vast repository of the entire human legacy – *a collective unconscious* – of patterns and stories and archetypes that we all inherit, as surely as a bird inherits the migratory imprint that will guide it through life.

Whatever is true of our unconscious, we must accept that it remains, by definition, unconscious. Inaccessible to our rational, wakeful, critical mind. And yet, what we have come to learn, through studies of creativity and intuition, is that *our unconscious is always active* – running like some parallel operating system in the background of all we

see and do. Offering insights and snap decisions, inspiration and yes, story patterns meant to guide us towards recognitions and triumphs that we would otherwise not accomplish.

It is this ‘divided self’ that lies at the root of these myths-in-real-life that I’ve described, because what we do not know about ourselves becomes the secret driver of our lives. As any good therapist will tell you, the goal of psychology is to recognize and integrate these unconscious pieces of our personality. And yet, our unconscious isn’t going to wait around for a good therapist. *It wants to be recognized.* So it will use any means possible to communicate its needs to you. Jung has said:<sup>1</sup>

Everything that is unconscious is projected out  
into the world.

What does this mean? It means that one of the best avenues your unconscious has for communicating with you is to *project* (one could say arrange for) your inner conflicts to surface in the real world, where they can finally be recognized, battled, embraced, and ultimately integrated.

Don’t believe me? Just try repressing some important piece of your personality – your sexual orientation for example, or your life’s dream, or your feelings for someone important – and watch what happens. These needs *will come out*. They may come out first in dreams or in slips of the tongue; in outbursts or quiet mutterings. But eventually they become more forceful, more insistent, bending even the circumstances of your life to force a recognition. As if to say, “Hey! I’m here! Pay attention to what I’m telling

you about yourself. Because you're not going to like what happens if you don't."

A friend of mine in a cafe where I write found out that I was working on a book about myths and superheroes. She wanted to know which superpower I would pick.

"Well, it's not just about superheroes," I tried to explain.

"Yeah, but which power would you pick?" she insisted, because apparently, that's what mattered. Would I fly? Or walk through walls? Would I be as invincible as Achilles or as strong as Superman? Would I live forever? Would I even want to?

"Well, you've got to choose carefully," I told her. "Every power has its dark side."

"What could be the dark side of flying?"

"I dunno. Maybe my friends couldn't. Or they'd think I'm strange. Or they'd just use me to get around. I wouldn't really belong anymore."

"Oh," she said, a bit dismayed.

And there we have it folks. The push-and-pull battle between the two sides of ourselves that will show up in a million variations during your lifetime. *Do I want to belong, or do I want to be extraordinary? Do I honor these unique powers rising within me? And who will be hurt or left behind when I do?*

You'd have to be living on another planet not to have noticed the tremendous popularity of superheroes in pop culture these days. One can almost not drive the streets without spotting some new billboard for X-Men or Avengers, Supergirl or the latest Marvel superhero.

Nor is this simply good movie marketing. The reason we love superheroes is because they speak for a side of us too long suppressed – an ancient, mythical side that ranges far beyond the reach of our practical, responsible, work-a-day selves. And their struggle – between wanting to belong and wanting to be extraordinary – is your struggle, just magnified and easier to see. All of us harbor a desire (secretly or not) to participate in this divine realm. We have always wanted these powers, ever since the gods of Mt. Olympus, and probably long before them. Why?

Because these gods, these superheroes, these immortal unbounded beings are the forms of your unconscious self. They stand for a side of you that society forbids and ‘reason’ says cannot happen. Because man cannot fly, nor see the future, nor command the winds. At least not literally. Now, it would be easy to champion this superhero and all her unfettered access to magic and the mystical. It would be tempting to avow that she *should* be able to fly, bend space and time, or live forever, but that would not do either. There is a balance to be held. There is always a balance, as we’ll soon discover. And without our other practical, earthbound self, there would be nothing to resist. Nothing to rise above. Nothing to mark how extraordinary we become.

Instead, what I have learned to look for are those echoes of the immortals that occur *within* our very mortal lives. Where, you ask? All around us all the time. Into your boardroom strides the newest Prometheus, a young man ready to light up the world with his ideas, his business startup, his world-changing design. Outside my favorite cafe last week, stood a young cop living out the myth of

the Knight Protector so thoroughly he did not realize the tattoo on his bicep descends directly from the Knights Templar. When I asked him, he did not even know their name. But some part of him had taken up their cause as his own; some piece of his unconscious had guided him straight down their path. Or what about the young woman you just hired to run your company? One of a hundred candidates, but this one with the fire of Athena in her eyes, so confident you hired her on the spot. Did you know what archetype she was inhabiting? The one that made you so certain she could lead? Every one of these recognitions is coming directly from your unconscious mind, yet with a surety that you've learned to accept.

Well, here is your next leap of faith: can you also accept that your unconscious is capable of shaping your life, to force those recognitions you are avoiding?

In the chapters that follow, I believe we will see this is exactly what's happening for most people. That in the never ending competition between our conscious and unconscious mind, it is our unconscious that writes the story and composes the events of our life; while our conscious self – the ego you know – is thrown upon the stage to work out the predicaments that will define who we are to become. Like that dreamer within her dream, we are both creator and creation; playwright and actor. While the mechanism of our deception remains hidden by that very curtain between our two halves.

Man, know thyself.<sup>2</sup>

Years ago, I began the serious study of the myths that

lay beneath the stories I was telling. Dramatists do this because it gives us insight to our characters' inner battles, the struggles of the heart that go on *beneath* their outward actions. But the deeper I dove into these recurring stories, the more I had to face the recognition that people in real life were no different.

*It seems we are each reliving the myths of our ancestors. Unconsciously bending the course of our lives to fulfill the stories left to guide us to a greater purpose.*

How else, for example, can a figure like Martin Luther King so inhabit the myth of the messiah that it seemed to describe every step of his journey, right up to the assassination that capped his life and sealed its legacy? Or Mohandas Gandhi before him, following that same story, almost to perfection? Or what of the Cinderella stories that emerge during each Olympic Games, many of which can be charted beat-by-beat with the original myth?

Sometimes these mythic echoes appear exact. Other times they occur as a kind of harmonic variation, harder to hear perhaps, but leading us to the same crucial recognitions: *Oh, my friends are all that really matters*; or, *I sold my freedom for something worthless*; or, *I don't care what others say, this is the person I love*.

And lest you think these great stories only repeat in great lives, let me assure you that we find, time and again, these patterns express themselves through the most humble and ordinary lives. My life. Your life. Your story of choosing a partner. Finding your life's work. Battling illness. Becoming the parent your kid deserves – all are

crucial thresholds for anyone. That's why these stories keep recreating themselves. This time through you.

I don't expect anyone to accept this theory at face value. But for me, these mythic echoes have become far too numerous to ignore. So in the coming chapters, I invite you along for this inquiry into the divided soul. And if you think of me less as an authority and more as an investigative journalist, you'll be closer to the mark. Together we'll delve into the origins of these stories and why they jump so easily across time and cultures. We'll look at how certain myths arise for each part of our life, from adolescence to first love, marriage, career, successes and failures – stories you know well, but perhaps never imagined were more than fairytales for kids. Or that they might hold exactly the lessons you need at moments you need them.

And finally, we'll turn our investigation towards what I believe may be the true purpose of this strange communion between story and real life – the unlocking of a vast reservoir of human knowledge; a way to free up wasted energy from self doubt; and a way of living that allows all the hidden faces of our personality a stage upon which to be recognized.

Am I certain that all of this is at work inside us? Not at all. But I'm hoping you'll come with me to find out. Because for me, the evidence is mounting. Because after years of wondering, I need to know. And if I'm right, you do too!