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**Shape the World:
Creation Myths & New Pathways**
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I.

On a summer's day nearly a century ago, in a tidy house on Northmoor Road in Oxford, England, a college professor nearing his middle years was grading papers. When he happened upon a mercifully empty page in an examination book, he wrote "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

The man was John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, and the short sentence he wrote on that hot summer's day was the beginning of a tale called *The Hobbit* - a worldwide best-seller that has not been out of print since its publication in 1937. The popularity of the novel had Tolkien's publishers asking for a sequel, and what he brought to them in 1949 was not simply a sequel but a huge, ranging mythological story that needed to be published in three volumes. These volumes, comprising *The Lord of the Rings*, were published in 1954 and 1955. The books became beloved, embraced by counter-cultural movements in the 1960s, turned into animated adaptations in the 1970s, and ultimately a wildly successful series of film adaptations were released in the first years of the twenty-first century.

In some ways this has become a fairly well known story, at least in the years since the movies became huge international blockbusters, bringing the work to still more generations of fans.

But if we want to look at the creation, the origin story for this beloved work, there is more tale to be told.

J.R.R. Tolkien did not exactly remember the year when he scrawled his line about hobbits on a blank page in an Oxford examination book, but it seems to have been around 1930 or 1931. The story of the world of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* begins much, much earlier, however.

Tolkien had had a fascination with story and with language from an early age. Born in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 1892, his mother took he and his brother back to England in 1895 due to his health struggles in the hot climate. Before their father could rejoin them, he died when Tolkien was 4 years old. His mother died when he was twelve. He carried the memories of the elaborate and fantastic bedtime stories his mother told him for the rest of his life, even as he moved from staying with relatives to staying at a boarding house where he would meet the woman he would eventually marry, Edith Bratt - three years his senior, she was also an orphan.

While Tolkien was at King Edward's School, he formed a group with three other boys - Christopher Wiseman, R.Q. Gilson, and Geoffrey Bache Smith - who met regularly to drink tea and discuss great works of literature. All the young men aspired to a life of letters; they spoke of language and literature and poetry, and they dreamed dreams of a world where they created their own works even as they continued to learn from and admire the works of others. They called themselves the "T.C.B.S.," short for "Tea Club, Barrovian Society" - quite a fancy name based on the tea shop where they would meet and spend hours chatting (and, one supposes, drinking enough tea to allow them to stay).

In March of 1916, he did get to marry his sweetheart Edith, but then was called to duty in France in June of that same year. Stationed at the Somme with the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, by November, Tolkien was back in England, suffering from trench fever.

The First World War was one of the most deadly conflicts the world has ever seen. With an estimated 9 million combatant deaths and 13 million civilian deaths, the toll on the nations involved was immeasurable. In addition to the loss of life directly related to warfare, there were subsequent related genocides and also deaths related to the 1918 influenza pandemic, the spread of which was much facilitated by the millions of persons displaced by war. In a time far less globally connected than we are today, the call to fight brought travelers from afar - and created refugees.

The Battle of the Somme, an intensely deadly and protracted fight, not only sent Lieutenant Tolkien home, it also took from him two of the four members of the T.C.B.S. Rob Gilson was killed on the first day of the battle, July 1, 1916. Geoffrey Smith died after a wound he sustained became gangrenous, on December 3 of that year. Tolkien, still recovering, received a letter from Smith that he had sent before his injury. It read, in part, "My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered tonight [...] there will still be left a member of the great T.C.B.S to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the T.C.B.S. [...] May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot."

While he was recovering in the hospital in England, Tolkien began work on what he called The Book of Lost Tales, what we now know as *The Silmarillion*. This work is the creation myth for Middle-Earth, the world he created and populated with hobbits, as well as elves and dwarves and dragons... and men.

Ronald Tolkien, for so his family called him, had long been fascinated with languages. When he was a boy he started learning them, and inventing them. He realized that inventing a language without a context was beyond challenging - it was almost

nonsensical. What sort of culture used this language? One that is principally agrarian, or one that is nomadic? One that is warlike or one that is peaceful?

Tolkien began creating a world - writing a creation myth as he lay in bed, sick from a deadly war and heartsick from the loss of his companions. In later years Tolkien stated he wished to create a "mythology for England," an ancestral tale for a real land, created out of the whole cloth of his own imagination.

Is this arrogance? Is it the most healing work he could perform?

Yes.

II.

"The truth about stories is that is all we are." Native Canadian, writer, and lecturer Thomas King gave a series of talks that have been compiled into a book called "The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative." In the first essay in this book he compares and contrasts the creation myths of two cultures: one from the Iroquois people of north-eastern North America, and the Christian story of creation as told in the Hebrew Scriptures (often called the Old Testament), specifically the book of Genesis.

The creation myth - the origin story, if you will - of the Iroquois people may be familiar to you as the story of the woman who fell from the sky. Sky woman lived in an upper world, and explored it curiously. Digging around in a hole, she fell straight through, towards the Earth, which was a world of only water. The animals saw her falling and birds rushed to catch her. Turtle supported her on the waves. Other animals were curious and engaged with Sky Woman, and when they saw she was pregnant, the best divers - Pelican and Walrus and Otter and many others - all worked to bring up mud from the bottom of the ocean to form the lands of earth, where her children could walk along with the animals.

The creation story from Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures may also be familiar to you. “In the beginning...” God created the world from the void - light and dark, water and land, animals and humans. God charged humans to live on the land and to eat freely of the fruit of all trees...but one. The first man and the first woman, Adam and Eve, had one job - and they couldn't do it. They ate the fruit they were forbidden and were forever expelled from earthly paradise, and the story of creation also became the origin story of shame, guilt, and deceit.

Thomas King, whose own Cherokee people also have a creation myth involving animals helping to build the land together with humans on a watery earth, holds these two myths up together to ask what they might say about the humans who told them. He writes, “So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides toward chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation.”

The truth about stories is that's all we are. The stories we learn from, live in, and tell again and again so often say more about us than about the characters inside the stories. Born of human imagination, the kind of world we shape in stories matters.

Tolkien, who converted to Catholicism following in his beloved mother's footsteps, was most conversant in the Christian creation story. But he studied many languages and stories, loved them passionately and pursued them ardently. He loved to read tales of the fantastic and of fairy realms; they brought to mind the stories his mother told him in his childhood. This meant comfort and it also helped to keep his memory of his mother alive.

When Tolkien started inventing languages he soon realized he needed to invent the peoples that spoke those languages. What stories would they tell? What would be their most important and treasured things? If stories are who we are, then we must know the stories of any creation.

Creating languages...creating peoples to speak those languages...creating the world those people inhabited...creating the stories they chose to tell in their created language within their created world... This is a multi-layered and ambitious goal. Where on earth did Tolkien get the audacity - some might indeed say arrogance - to take on such a task?

There are two stories to tell about THAT origin. One is the work of Elias Lönnrot, a Finnish physician and philologist, who took it upon himself to collect and publish the *Kalevala*, the national epic of Finland, in the mid-19th century. In his travels as a doctor in rural reaches of the country, he heard again and again the oral tradition of the Finnish people - even as they were occupied by first Sweden and then Russia, the stories they told again and again reminded them who they were. Tolkien, as a fellow philologist and a lover of poetic tales, was greatly influenced in his world-creation by the tales and language of the Finnish people.

The other story to tell about the origin of Tolkien's audacious act of creation is a subtler, more interior one. Tolkien was a son of empire. A British man born in the colony of South Africa in the years between the First and Second Boer Wars, he grew up in a world where the expected expression of those of his culture was dominance. But he was also orphaned by the age of 12, challenged by this loss he moved on to form more close emotional bonds with his dearest friends - only to have half of them taken from him by the savage destruction of war. "My dear John Ronald," his friend Geoffrey Smith pleaded from the depths of that war, "may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them."

III.

An act of creation. An act of memory. A healing act born of pain, loss, destruction, and separation.

On this Memorial Day weekend it felt fitting to spend some time in the past, thinking of the impact that war had not merely on a single man or even a single nation, but also on people around the globe.

Tolkien's tales have enchanted generations; his books were near and dear to my own father's heart, and he instilled in me a love of these tales and this elaborately created world. In the interest of full disclosure, the origin of this sermon comes of my own history as well as world history; this story is a part of who I am, as well.

We are currently bound up together in a time of loss, ourselves. Though our current pandemic touches each of us in different ways, unjustly affects some much more than others, none are untouched.

What letters are being written now, what videos are being created, what stories are being told, what tweets being scattered into the ether crying and decrying our time, our limitations, our fear and frustration...and also our hopes? For right now is when we are shaping our future. As Rev. Carl asked us to reflect on the answers we might each hold to the many problems this world is facing, I invite us to take up reflections on the past that shaped the world we currently inhabit. What stories created us? What stories are we creating?

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien had no idea that his fascination with language and with story and with the healing journey of creation would come to move the hearts and enliven the minds of so many millions across the years. He only had his memories, and the comfort that story could bring to him. He had promises made to fallen friends. He had words written in a dark and lonely time.

It IS audacious to think of creating a whole world. Tolkien's creation myth for his Middle-Earth is based in song. Iluvatar, the creator, made the Ainur, the "offspring of his thought." And he sang to them. And he encouraged them to sing. But he saw they were singing only one at a time, or a few together. One day when they were listening,

silent and rapt, to the song of Iluvatar, he gave them a charge: “Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with [their] own thoughts and devices, if [they] will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song.”

If the truth about stories is that’s all we are, what kind of people are born of song?

Not of fire. Not of ice. Not of conquest nor of domination, but of the harmony of song.

The tragedy of the world is the disharmony of the song.

If any of this story has resonated with you, please take the gift of that in gladness. And if you have found little of yourself here, I ask you to call to mind the stories that have shaped you and have saved you. I ask you to call to mind the music that lifts your spirits. I ask you to call to mind a poem that felt like picking a flower; to call to mind a flower that smelled like your best memory. To conjure up in your mind the taste of a favorite meal and feel deep in your chest the memory of the heartiest laughter.

We name as one of our Sources of Unitarian Universalism “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” These words and deeds are not just speeches and sermons. They are art, they are vision. They are the audacity to create a world to heal yourself...and to invite others in on their own journeys of healing, of discovery, of meaning-making.

The art, the stories, the creations, the audacity of the past has lit within us the Flame Imperishable.

The flame is the symbol of our faith, that we light each week in honor of the fire we carry within. In the truth of that light I ask you to consider the lyrics of our hymn “The Fire of Commitment” - “When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within, Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin.”