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Your Mythic Journey with Sam Keen and Bill Moyers

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Your Mythic Journey with Sam Keen

BILL MOYERS: [*voice-over*] When Sam Keen is asked by strangers to describe what he does in life, he answers, "I'm a homesteader, a husbandman of 60 acres, a companion to a horse, a spiritual gypsy, a lover of questions, a freelance thinker, a man rich in friendship and, in a former life, a professor. Therein lies a story, his story."

For Sam Keen, telling our stories may be the most human thing we do. By telling stories, we remember our past, invent our present and envision our future. Then, by sharing those stories with others, we overcome loneliness, discover compassion and create community with kindred souls.

Storytelling has been Sam Keen's life, from his childhood in a little southern town to graduate studies in divinity at Harvard and his doctorate in philosophy at Princeton. Stories are the theme of his books—*To a Dancing God*, *Life Maps*, *The Passionate Life*, *Faces of the Enemy*, *Your Mythic Journey*, a guide to helping others detect their story, and most recently, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*.

For 20 years, Sam Keen has conducted seminars around the country on personal mythology, often with his friend, the late Joseph Campbell. The people who come are encouraged to explore their lives as a narrative, to find out the story they've been living without knowing it and then to start shaping the drama of their lives as they want to live it, a story at once more personal and honest.

Home, for Sam Keen, is a ranch in Sonoma, California which he shares with his wife Jan, their daughter Jessie, a couple of dogs and some horses. I caught up with him there and at the Omega Institute in upstate New York, where he was conducting a workshop on The Mythic Journey.

SAM KEEN: [*in seminar*] Myth is cultural software. You all know about computers, so I'm going to use this analogy 'cause I think it's a very accurate analogy. Each of us is born into the world with certain biological hardware, but you know, something very strange happened. The minute we were born, people started shoving software disks in with programs.

Mama shoves a software disk in, the culture shoves one in. For instance, already, you're being shoved one in. They say, "Oh, she's a little girl. Look how nice she smiles. Oh, she's a little girl," you know and you get the—what is it, pink booties, isn't it? And you know, you hand her the doll and you're already getting—in other words, you're already getting a gender program get in. "Oh, she's a little girl. She's going to be sugar and spice and everything nice." "Oh, he's a boy. He's supposed to be rough and tough and hard to bluff."

Your family shoved in a software disk called "Keens don't do that." "The Smiths don't do that." "The Wileys take a little bit of a drink because it's the Irish way." Or, "The Joneses never succeed because we're always alcoholic." The family plugged in all kinds of myths. Then, somewhere, very early on, you begin to shove a soft-

were disk in yourself, called "My Story," and very often, if you notice, it conflicted with Mama and Daddy's story. Now, the problem is you and I grew up not knowing there was a difference between the hardware and the software. We didn't know that we could tell different stories.

And that's the problem because if we don't know that the story that we were brought up with is optional, then we live it out blindly and unconsciously. So what we're going to do in this time together is a formalization of what you do with your best friend and it's based upon the simplest of all ideas, that gab cures us — talk, sharing our story — and that we're all carrying around a wealth of stories, the treasure is right here and that what it means to live your life well is to go from living out a myth unconsciously to creating a conscious autobiography.

MOYERS: You've spent a lot of your time in the last few years, I know, leading seminars, trying to help people discover what you call your personal mythology. What do you mean by that?

Mr. KEEN: If you look at a mythology of a tribe, say, look at a mythology of Hopi Indians or of the Kwakiutl or of any tribe, you'll see that all mythologies give answers to certain primal and perennial human questions. "Where did I come from and where am I going" and "Who are my people," and "What is my place," and "What is the meaning of suffering?" And "What is the meaning of death?" And "What is sex about?" and "How close should I be to people?" And "For what am I guilty and what should I avoid?" "What's taboo," all those questions.

Well, when I began to examine my own experience at a very crucial and disturbed period of my life and I had to ask myself the question, "Well, what do you believe and how do you find any rock upon which to put your feet?" And for a long time, I was at a loss and suddenly, it occurred to me that if instead of looking at the answers that myth gave, if I looked at the questions and began to interrogate my own life, using those questions — well, who are my heroes? Who are my villains? What is my source? Where did I come from? Who are my people? — and begin to ask myself that, that I could find within my own autobiography, as it were, a complete but undeveloped mythology and that if I would begin to look at those stories and recover those stories for myself, that I had a mythology that gave me a story by which I lived.

MOYERS: Did you do that? Did you go back in your own memory?

Mr. KEEN: That's what I did. That's what I did.

MOYERS: How did you do that?

Mr. KEEN: Well, the particular point this came up for me was at the time of my father's death. You know, Freud says the death of the father is a signal event for a man's life because whether your father is good or bad, while he's alive, there are giants in the world. And when my father died — and I was very close to my father — I found my emotional underpinnings slid out from under me and I didn't know what I believed for a long time.

And I went back and I thought and I thought and I thought. And at the point where things changed, I remembered this story. When I was about six or seven years old, Dad was carving a monkey out of a

peach seed and I asked him, "Well, can I have it?" And he said, "No, this is for your mother," he said, "but I'll carve you one one day." Well, he didn't and the last year before his death, I went back to Arizona to see him and he was sick — he had emphysema — and he was reviewing his own life to see, you know, where he had failed and where he had succeeded.

And he talked about a sense of failure and, in an effort to reassure him, I said, "No, Dad, you know, for me you were always there. In every important thing, you were there for me. You supported me. You didn't have a lot of 'oughts.' You loved me without condition and you kept your promises to me." And you know, sort of to lighten up the situation, I said, "But the only thing you didn't do, you never carved me that peach-seed monkey."

And I said goodbye to him and I went home and about two months later, this came in the mail, this little peach-seed monkey. And he said, "Well, here it is," and if you notice, one leg on it has broken off and he glued it on and he said, "Well, I didn't have time to carve a perfect one." And that was the last communication I had before he died. And see, for me, it was a symbol in my life of going back to what was solid and finding within my own autobiography a sacred moment.

MOYERS: And what did it do for your personal mythic journey, as you call it?

Mr. KEEN: Well, it was the beginning of my personal mythic journey.

MOYERS: You hadn't really thought about this sort of relationship or these connections or these values until then?

Mr. KEEN: I'd thought about them, but I don't think that I cast them in that light. I didn't realize that I had to write my own story. I think I was still trying to find other people's stories to fit into.

MOYERS: You were how old at the time?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I was 33 or 34 — 33, but see, I was a young theological student at Harvard and so, like any good academic, I was reading people who were my heroes.

MOYERS: Who were they?

Mr. KEEN: Oh, they were Martin Buber, they were Paul Tillich, they were Gabriel Marcel, they were D.H. Lawrence.

MOYERS: Nothing wrong with those heroes.

Mr. KEEN: No, they're all good heroes, but it was as if I was taking their road maps of life and trying to go on my journey instead of saying, "Wait a minute, their road maps were good for them and I can learn a lot about mapmaking and I can hear about their pilgrimages, but I have to query the nature of my experience to find out what my journey is and my map is and my purpose and my vocation."

MOYERS: And the peach-seed monkey was the first step?

Mr. KEEN: The peach-seed monkey was the first step in that.

MOYERS: Because?

Mr. KEEN: Because it was foundational. Because I found out that the foundation of my values that I believed in — I believed in promises, first of all. I believed in the making and the keeping of promises.

MOYERS: And you had actually been hurt over the years because your father had never sent you the monkey he promised?

Mr. KEEN: Well, I don't know if I'd been hurt—

MOYERS: Well, you obviously thought about it. The promise had not been kept.

Mr. KEEN: I thought about it. It was minor, you know. It was—

MOYERS: It couldn't have been minor if it had this effect on you after his death. It had to be something down there in your story that you weren't telling yourself or otherwise, it would just have been an act of sentiment.

Mr. KEEN: Well, I suppose that—you know, our parents always fail us in some ways. They never give us adequate maps for our lives. I think Dad gave me—they gave me a pretty good start and a pretty good—certainly, his care was very unconditional. There were other ways in which he didn't equip me well. His own timidity about his sexuality and things of that kind, I think, I had to work through.

I had to say no to him as well as to say yes. But I think the peach-seed monkey was a symbol of the yes rather than of the no. The no was much later in coming and that came in the times when I had to really question that myth, when by going through a divorce, I had to break vows. And here, I was saying, the—you know, Nietzsche says, "Man is the only animal who can make promises." So when we make a promise, we bind ourselves over time. We say, "I'll be here for you tomorrow. You can count on me."

MOYERS: So you believe that, even though you disavow it, even though you break it?

Mr. KEEN: I believe that, even though it came [to] a point in my life when I had to break my vows in terms of getting a divorce. And I had to find a way to understand that divorce may not be ultimately the breaking of a vow, it may be the changing of it, 'cause there may be such a thing as creative divorce, that when you say, "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, till death do us part," we're speaking about the death of the spirit, not actual death. And there may be a time when your spirit involves you in having to change.

1st WOMAN: [at seminar] The whole concept of what this program is going to be really fit in with what I'm going through right now for myself, trying to back up and find out— you call them hardware and software, I call them tapes— things that I learned, patterns that I learned. My parents had been separated and then divorced and I was very concerned that if I were to get married that I would stay married.

And a year and a half ago, I got married, having already bought a house with my now-husband and it's gotten to the point— my husband has his own agenda, but it's gotten to the point where we have spent, really, the last few years distancing ourselves and getting to the point where having fun meant being apart and doing things that were separate. I had things that I liked, he had things that he liked and we got ourselves into a real crisis situation just in the last few months. And I don't find it very comfortable and I don't find it very fun, but I find it very necessary and it's actually very painful.

1st MAN: [at seminar] I'm very much a child of the 50's and I was raised by a good family that bought into the myths of the culture of the 50's. I had learned that men don't have relationships, they possess people. I had learned that men were not vulnerable. I had learned that we measure our success by our economic status and what we had accumulated. And of course, I found that so empty and I was so alone—I guess, in a sense, it's almost like finding all of a sudden that the religion that you were confirmed in and believed all of your life was an empty one and it's awfully, awfully hard to deal with, for me.

2nd WOMAN: [at seminar] This is very important to me personally. I have found that I've looked into my story and realized only over the years that no matter how far I went or no matter with the—you know, who I was with or what I was doing, that I was still carrying around the same things and I was repeating them over and over again. And it's like, "Let's uncover the myths," the real—the tapes, the scripts, whatever we want to call them. I need to uncover them because I can't—I don't want to repeat them anymore. I don't want to repeat them over and over again.

2nd MAN: [at seminar] After age nine, I grew up in a number of foster homes and it's created a sense of vulnerability that I think helps me to appreciate and understand people's struggle. So one of the things I'm interested in in myths is the positive aspect of validating someone's worth and someone's self-esteem. The other is I want to study the notion of myths—for someone like myself who's been in different families, how has that been a problem for me, how can I capitalize more on those experiences I had that a lot of people don't have?

3rd WOMAN: [at seminar] I'm here for very personal reasons, beginning with the fact that I took a lot of abuse as a child and my father was alcoholic, my mother was sadistic. And in consequence of that, the legacy was quite damaging and I've done a lot of work on that with a therapist. So I can see this is a continuing process of overcutting the damage and the isolation and rejoining the human race, as it were, but now getting out of the bad personal messages that I start with and on the other, that I'm bad, I'm not wanted. I don't want to opt into what other bad myths the culture is handing me and I find there's a lot of navigating to find other people who are also trying to find out who they are and also have the tolerance for themselves and for, as well, each other.

MOYERS: I've approached you and I've said, "Help me tell find my own mythic story, to tell my story, to write it down," 'cause you do urge people to write it down—

Mr. KEEN: Right, right.

MOYERS:—to discover our own mythology. Well, give me a few exercises. What would I do if I wanted to start to write—to discover and write down my own story?

Mr. KEEN: Well, what I would do is I would say, first of all, "Bill, I'd like for you to draw me a floor plan of this house where you used to live in Marshall, Texas before you were 10—" I forget when you moved to Marshall.

MOYERS: Eight-oh-one East Austin. I can see it, but I never thought

of the floor plan.

Mr. KEEN: Well, the floor plan because if you go into a house and draw a floor plan of the house and you draw all the furniture and you draw everything in that house and then you begin to take me on a trip through that the way a novelist would. Well, do it.

MOYERS: Well, I can see the little bedroom where I slept by the window, listening on Saturday nights to The Grand Ole Opry. Hadn't thought about that in a long time. I don't know what that says, but that's part of the floor plan. I can see myself working on my homework in the little tiny kitchen. I remember coming home from school with the smell of yeasts — my mother was baking rolls — coming from the kitchen. I can see that. I can recall these as I think of the floor plan. What does that tell you about my mythic journey?

Mr. KEEN: Well, in the first place, I guess, if we kept this on, it's not so much what it would tell me as that within an hour of our talking this way, we would have a sense of knowing each other. We would have a sense of comfort, we would have a sense of revelation. We would have a sense that — we would begin to build up intimacy and a community. One of these strange things is that I don't really know my story until I begin to tell it. I don't — it's takes a community to tell a story because it takes a teller and a listener. And the way that we actually form communities that we prize — what I would call "healing communities" — out of sharing our stories.

MOYERS: Does this have any kind of practical application, advising other people to take their mythic journey, write their own story? Does it have any practical application for people who are not writers and intellectuals?

Mr. KEEN: Oh, enormous, I think. For instance, every family has a mythology in which it assigns people in that family certain roles. My family, for instance — I have an older brother and he was always the mechanical one. Never finished college, mechanical genius and he and another guy invented this stuff that polishes computer circuits and they own 98% of the business of polishing computer circuit stuff in the United States. And so it was — Lawrence was always the mechanical one and I was always unmechanical.

So I was about 36 years old when I first took a test to determine — cause I had to go to work in Electric Hose and Rubber Company in Wilmington, Delaware to support my habit of going to graduate school — and I took a test to see how well I could see mechanical relationships between things to see where they were going to put me on the production line. So they called me in and they said, "Well, you're in the 5 percentile." And I said, "Yeah, that sounds about right. About 95% of the population is better than I am at seeing these things." They said, "No, you're in the top 5 percentile." I said, "No, that's my brother."

Well, every family has those scripts and one of the things that happens in families very is that, often, there is a script. There's the Cain and Abel script. One is good and the other is bad. So quite often, say, in prisons or in alcoholic families, alcoholic groups, you find the person who was designated as the bad son or the bad daughter or the rebellious one and they have quite faithfully lived out those scripts that their family have given them and gotten in trouble. And when

they finally bounced off the end, they said, "Wait a minute. This isn't who I am. That's not who I am," and so then, they have to start from scratch and they go back and the first thing they do is they recover the script itself. They recover those voices where they can hear their parents saying, again, "Well, Joan is the kind of girl who's going to end up in the gutter. You just watch out," you know. "I'll tell you, that girl's going to get pregnant by the time she's 16." And "Hell, you know, Johnny ain't never going to amount to anything anyway." You know, in southern towns, it was all built in.

So starting from scratch means going back and recovering those scripts and then beginning to write our own story.

MOYERS: It's not reliving your life. It's not changing the realities that you've experienced. It's putting your own understanding — it's drawing your own understanding from what happened to you, writing the script, not the life.

Mr. KEEN: One of the simplest exercises I do in trying to teach people to tell their own story is I have them write an outline of their autobiography. I say, "Just do me a chapter outline," and I will sometimes say to them, "All right, you've just written your autobiography and Harper & Row is going to publish it and they're going to give you 10 pictures." You know, all history books have pictures, George Washington crossing the Delaware. "What are the 10 pictures of the signal events in your life?" And what it does, it makes people have to think, "Well, what was important? When did it change? When was I on an up cycle? What were peak experiences in my life? What were valley experiences? What enemies have I had? What battles have I fought? Who were my allies?"

It's this process that very often old people go through naturally, in trying to recapitulate and come to terms with their lives, but I think we should begin that process much earlier.

MOYERS: What if you write your story, though, and no one reads it? **Mr. KEEN:** Oh, that's all right. You write it for yourself. You write it for yourself — that's not quite true. If you write your story only for yourself, there'll be important parts left out because audience shapes our story, too. Story-telling is a communal act. It requires community and it creates community. It's not isolated. It is not something an individual does.

MOYERS: That I can understand, but you stress the point that it's not just sharing stories. It's sharing our myth with each other. Why is myth so important to the story?

Mr. KEEN: I say that the task of a life is to exchange the unconscious myth with a conscious autobiography, see? So if I say the first 20 years of my life, I was shaped unconsciously by the Christian myth and by the myth of being a Keen and by the myth of being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant southerner, all quite heavy information systems — so at 25, I didn't know I'd been shaped that way. Now, at 35, when I began to reflect on that, I say, "Wait a minute. Something was shaping me." Now, when I do that, I begin to get a distance between myself and that shaping myth and I begin then to write my own story. "Wait a minute. There's some of that, things I don't like. I don't like that macho part of the male myth. I don't like that antiseptic, uptight part of the Protestant myth." I throw it out. See, I begin

