



MYTHICAL
JOURNEYS,
LEGENDARY
QUESTS

THE SPIRITUAL SEARCH:
TRADITIONAL STORIES
FROM WORLD
MYTHOLOGY

MOYRA CALDECOTT

**MYTHICAL JOURNEYS
LEGENDARY QUESTS**

**The Spiritual Search - Traditional Stories
from World Mythology**

MOYRA CALDECOTT

a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Preface

A myth is a story almost entirely told in symbol, metaphor and analogy. It is a story which, even without decipherment, works subliminally. At first, and superficially, the myths from thousands of years ago from cultures very different from our own may seem strange and barbaric. Yet, surprisingly, they ring true against our own once we have decoded their symbolic language.

They have had power to entertain and inform century after century, generation after generation, because they deal with universally important questions. 'Where do we come from?' 'Who are we?' 'Where are we going?' These are questions that are always at the back of our minds, but as yet have never been satisfactorily answered. Myths try to 'access the infinite' in order to answer them, and are constructs of the creative imagination.

Legends are somewhat different because they deal more with the progress of the individual soul in this world, and often use the lives of real historical persons to illustrate their point. Over the centuries, with retelling after retelling, the adventures of the protago-

nist are exaggerated and embellished until at last we can scarcely believe that such a person existed. But if we allow the legend to do its work properly we soon realize that each 'adventure' is an illustration of a universal principle that applies as much to us here and now as to the legendary hero there and then.

Why should we study these ancient stories when there are so many contemporary stories to read? Is it perhaps because every aspect of our lives is complex and mysterious and the more ways we have to help our understanding of them the better? We are so close to our everyday experiences that we often cannot see them for what they are. A new perspective may give a sudden shock of recognition and understanding. The myths and legends of antiquity are still around because, paradoxically, they have proved time and again that they can supply this shock, this 'new' perspective.

One of the most persistent themes in myth and legend is that of the significant journey, no doubt because of our own strong feeling that we ourselves, in our lives, are on a journey. No matter how often literal-minded people and scientists tell us that there is no evidence for this, we cannot shake off the impression that we existed before we were born and will continue to exist after our death.

In AD 627, King Edwin of Northumbria (the Saxon kingdom in the North of England) held a council to discuss whether he and his people should accept the faith of Christ or not, and this was said:

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge,

it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows.[\[1\]](#)

From the great literary masterpieces of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1307-21), Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (about 1387) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84) to those anonymous stories passed down by word of mouth during generations of tribal gatherings, the theme of the journey or the quest has stirred the imagination, stimulated understanding and powerfully charged the will towards renewal and transformation.

In this book I have gathered together only a few of the many stories about the journey — sacred, mythic and legendary — and I have offered in the commentaries only a brief suggestion as to what may be found there. My hope is that readers will be inspired to set off on their own journeys of exploration through the rich and fertile realms of myth and legend.

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Gilgamesh: The Quest for Immortality (Sumeria)

Origin

A cycle of epic tales describing the adventures of Gilgamesh originated in Sumeria, the Tigris/Euphrates region of the Middle East, nowadays known as Iraq. The hero was said to have lived in Uruk not long before or after 5000 BC, at the height of the Sumerian civilization. Gilgamesh was described as the king of Uruk, one of the major cities of the region, others being Ur and Kish. Early tablets record his battle with King Agga of Kish, suggesting that in fact Gilgamesh was a historical figure. Later tablets exaggerate his prowess and ascribe feats to him that could only have been performed by a mythic hero with some divine blood in his veins. It came to be said that he was the son of a human father, King Lugalbanda of Uruk, and the goddess Ninsun.

The earliest records of his life are in Sumerian, but later the Semite peoples who overran the region took

the story up and most of our information comes from clay tablets in the cuneiform writing of the Akkadian language. Babylonian fragments are older than the Assyrian, and trading links with the Hittites (from what is now modern Turkey) and the Hurrians (from what is now modern Armenia) later carried the epic even further afield. Fragments have been found by archaeologists in the archives of Boghazkoy, the ancient Hittite city, and at Megido, but most of what we have today were found in the ruins of the great library of Nineveh, which was sacked c.612 BC. The ancient Elamites were known to have performed a version of it as a drama. There is currently an English dramatic version in existence written by Robert Temple, author of an excellent verse translation of the epic called *He Who Saw Everything*.

The Story

Gilgamesh, the great king of Uruk, and his inseparable companion, Enkidu, returned in triumph from the conquest of the giant guardian of the cedar forests, Humbaba. The goddess of love, Ishtar, seeing the young man riding in the streets, his muscles rippling and his curls bound with gold, desired him and called him to her presence.

Gilgamesh stood before her proudly — aware of the scent of a thousand flowers, dazzled by the gleam of her skin and the jewels that twined in long strings around her limbs.

‘Gilgamesh,’ she said softly, ‘come closer. I offer you the greatest treasure any man could desire.’

‘What is that, my lady?’ the hero asked cautiously, keeping his distance.

She smiled fondly and reached out her slender hand, each finger circled with a different gem.

‘You will be my lover,’ she purred. ‘Come closer, mortal, and taste a greater pleasure than you have ever known.’

Still Gilgamesh held back.

‘Come!’ she repeated, this time a trifle impatiently.

‘Great goddess,’ he said. ‘I am a king and already have all the treasure any man could desire.’

Her eyes narrowed.

‘Forgive me, goddess, but all who have been your lovers are no more. To lie with you is to lie with death.’

‘Go then, Gilgamesh, and taste the venom of my curse!’ Her eyes flashed. Her lips tightened. Her voluptuous body seemed to harden and grow tall and angular. She towered over him and the sky darkened behind her.

He retreated.

Then Ishtar went to her father, Anu, god of the firmament, and demanded that he avenge the insult that Gilgamesh had given her. Her father at first refused and protested that Gilgamesh was a great hero and had much still to do for the gods.

But Ishtar grew shrill in her demands and declared she would open the seven gates that were between the

upper and lower world so that the dead would escape and harass the living.

‘Give me the Bull of Heaven, father, to trample down his kingdom, or the dead will outnumber the living on your earth!’

Anu sighed, and gave her the Bull of Heaven.

Triumphantly, she released him in Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh.

He roared and rampaged through the streets, but Gilgamesh heard him and he and Enkidu came out to meet him.

‘What sport, friend!’ Gilgamesh cried with shining eyes.

‘What sport, indeed!’ Enkidu replied, and together they wrestled the mighty Bull of Heaven and brought him to the ground. Then, with his bare hands, Gilgamesh ripped him apart and sacrificed his heart to Shamash, the sun god. He mounted the horns on the walls of his bedchamber, laughing at Ishtar’s puny attempt at revenge.

To his people he boasted:

Who is the most splendid among heroes?

Who is the most glorious among men?

Gilgamesh is the most splendid among heroes!

Gilgamesh is the most glorious among men![\[2\]](#)

Ishtar went to the Assembly of Gods in a rage and persuaded them at last that Gilgamesh and Enkidu had overstepped the bounds of human arrogance once too often.

‘One of them must die,’ they agreed, ‘and the other must suffer at his death.’

One night Enkidu dreamed that he would die.

‘As I was standing there between the heaven and the earth,’ Enkidu told Gilgamesh, ‘I saw a young man whose face was dark . . .’ He shuddered. ‘He transformed me with his magic into his double . . . and I found my arms were wings like a bird.’

Gilgamesh tried to comfort his friend, but he would not be comforted.

From this time on, day by day, Enkidu became weaker and weaker until he was so ill that he could not rise from his bed. In spite of the power he had as king over a mighty nation, Gilgamesh could do nothing to save his life.

Enkidu died.

Gilgamesh wept.

*What is this sleep that has now come over you?
You have gone dark and cannot hear me![\[3\]](#)*

For seven days he watched beside Enkidu’s bed, unable to grasp that he was not coming back. That he was *never* coming back!

At last he gave up hope and moved away in despair.

He left his palace, he left his city, and he wandered in the wilderness living like a beast, uprooting tubers and reaching for berries. He tore off his fine clothes and wore the skins of animals. Not only was he desolate at the loss of his companion, but he was deeply shocked at the power of death. He realized that he, too, would lie so

cold and dark one day, and would no longer have access to the bright splendours of the world. He railed against the gods that put this terrible doom on man and determined that he would find a way of living for ever. The riches he had as king were worthless if he could not have eternal life.

He remembered a story about a man called Ziusudra who, in the ancient days, had survived a flood that had destroyed the rest of mankind and had been given the gift of immortality by the gods. He determined to seek him out.

For a long time he journeyed across the wilderness of the world until he came at last to the mighty mountains of Mashu, through which he must pass if he wanted to reach the Underworld. His way was barred by the fearsome guardians of the mountains, half giant scorpion and half man and woman.

‘No man has ever crossed through these mountains and lived,’ said the scorpion-creature, raising his sting.

But Gilgamesh stood firm. He told of his heroic deeds and of his sorrow and despair.

‘If you can face the darkness of the mountain,’ the guardian said, ‘it will be Shamash, the sun god himself, who will decide your fate on the other side.’

The scorpion-creature rolled back the gate to the mountain, and the rocks rumbled and groaned beneath it.

Gilgamesh journeyed into the darkness of the mountain, travelling along the path the sun takes when it does not shine upon the earth.

Hour after hour he walked in darkness denser than he had ever experienced before. Hour after hour his spirits sank lower, his despair weighed heavier. And then, after the ninth hour, he felt a slight breeze and his step quickened. After the twelfth hour, he walked out into the brightness of the sunrise on the other side of the mountain.

He found himself in a garden of jewels. Leaves, flowers and fruit gleaming in the early sunlight were all made of the most precious gems. He gazed about in wonderment, almost forgetting his quest.

But remembering at last, he journeyed on.

After a time, he came to a tavern where the tavern-keeper was a woman-being called Siduri whose task it was to dispense calming and hallucinogenic drinks to those on the way to the Underworld. Gilgamesh looked so wild and desperate, and his clothes were so ragged and filthy, that she at first barred her door against him.

He beat on the door, announcing his name and a list of all the great deeds he had done.

‘If you are Gilgamesh, the great king of Uruk,’ she said doubtfully, ‘why are your cheeks so wasted, your face so sunken? You have the look of one who has come from afar.’

He told her of how Enkidu had died and how he had since wandered the wilderness, living like a beast. He told her who he was going to meet, and why.

She opened her door to him.

‘The way from here lies over the Waters of Death,’ she said. ‘No man can cross them and return alive. Why do

you waste your time worrying about death? Make merry by day and night while you live. Each day should be a feast of rejoicing. Let your garments be sparkling and fresh, your head washed, your body bathed in sweet scents. Enjoy the little one that holds your hand, and the wife who lies in your bed.’

But he would not listen to her and persuaded her to allow him to try to cross the great sheet of water that lay between the worlds — the Waters of Death.

She told him the only way he might be able to do it would be with the help of the boatman, Urshanabi, who had ferried Ziusudra across all those centuries before.

On her advice he sought Urshanabi in the forests, the flash of the boatman’s axe attracting his attention.

Again he was questioned.

‘Why have you been wandering the wilderness like one pursuing a puff of wind?’

Urshanabi listened to the great feats Enkidu and Gilgamesh had performed, and nodded his head when Gilgamesh told him of his despair at the death of Enkidu.

‘I believe that Ziusudra, the one man granted immortality by the gods, will be able to help me,’ Gilgamesh said, ‘and Siduri told me that you are the man who can take me to Ziusudra.’

Urshanabi pondered the problem.

‘Go to the forest,’ he said. ‘Cut and shape 120 punt-poles. When you have done this, bring them to where my boat is moored.’

Gilgamesh wielded his axe and cut and shaped 120 punt-poles, and together they embarked upon the Waters of Death. Urshanabi warned Gilgamesh that he must not at any time allow any part of himself to touch the Waters.

‘As each punt-pole is consumed, you must throw it away and bring out a fresh one.’

The punt-poles were used up before they reached the other side, but Gilgamesh took off his loincloth and made a sail of it to continue his journey.

Ziusudra, who lived at the meeting of three rivers, looked out across the Waters of Death and saw the boat with its strange sail. He wondered that it seemed not to have its usual master at the helm.

When Gilgamesh disembarked he lost no time in telling Ziusudra his story and how he longed for eternal life. Ziusudra, like all who had met Gilgamesh on this journey, warned him that mankind is no more than a fragile reed and cannot expect permanence. Nothing is permanent on earth:

*The dragon-fly emerges and flies.
But its face is in the sun for but a day.*[\[4\]](#)

‘If this is so,’ Gilgamesh asked Ziusudra, ‘how is it that you, a man like myself, have entered the Assembly of Gods and found everlasting life?’

Ziusudra told him about the great Flood in ancient times that destroyed all the rest of mankind. He was warned to build a boat and take on board ‘the seed of all living creatures’. He built it in seven days, on instruc-

tion, as a cube and sealed it against the storm that was to rage for six days and seven nights.

At sunrise on the seventh day after the storm arose, he looked out and found that it had abated. All had gone deadly quiet.

‘All men had returned to clay,’[\[5\]](#) said Ziusudra.

The boat eventually came to rest on the peak of Mount Nisir.

When seven days had passed and it seemed to him that the waters were receding, he sent out a dove. Finding no trees on which to rest, it returned. After another seven days he sent out a swallow. The swallow also returned. But when, in another seven days, he sent out a raven, the raven did not return. Ziusudra offered sacrifices and oblations on the mountaintop in gratitude for his survival.

But the Assembly of Gods was in an uproar. It seemed that Enlil, who had ordered the storm because of his anger at the human race, was furious that any living creature had survived, while the other gods were shocked at the extent of the devastation. Ishtar, in particular, wept for her people, and Enki spoke passionately about the injustice of punishing all for the sins of a few.

Enlil began to regret what he had done and agreed that Ziusudra, a human, should be given eternal life in recompense for what his race had suffered.

Gilgamesh listened carefully to the story of how Ziusudra became immortal. If one mortal could become immortal, he thought, surely it would be possible for

another — especially one such as he? He would be the first mortal to become immortal by sheer will power. Ziusudra laughed.

‘You cannot even ward off sleep for six days and seven nights,’ he told Gilgamesh. ‘How then can you expect to ward off death?’

Gilgamesh boasted at once that of course he could ward off sleep for six days and seven nights, and prepared to demonstrate it.

Ziusudra’s wife baked cakes, and each night Ziusudra placed one beside the bed of Gilgamesh to give him refreshment in the night. But each morning the cake was uneaten because Gilgamesh had slept.

Gilgamesh was forced to admit defeat and Urshanabi was instructed to take him back the way he had come. Ziusudra provided the king with fresh, clean clothes, and Gilgamesh washed himself before he set off.

As they parted, Ziusudra was moved to give him a gift. He told him one of the secrets of the gods. It seemed there was a flower that bestowed immortality — but it grew at the bottom of the sea where no man could reach it.

Nothing daunted, Gilgamesh tied stones to his feet and sank beneath the surface. He found the plant, plucked it and brought it back.

‘I will take it to my people,’ he cried triumphantly, ‘and we will live for ever!’

Ziusudra watched him go, wondering if indeed he would achieve immortality.

Long, long was the journey back with as many dangers as there had been on the way out.

Gilgamesh carried the plant carefully and after twenty leagues broke off a morsel. After thirty more he rested beside a pool. As he refreshed himself in the water, a snake slithered out from behind a rock, smelling the scent of the flower. Quick as lightning, it seized the plant and swallowed it. Horrified, Gilgamesh was in time to see it slough its skin and be rejuvenated before it slid from his sight.

For a while he sat beside the pool bewailing his fate. There was now nothing to be done but return home empty-handed. Wearily, he travelled the last miles to Uruk and then, on a hill overlooking the city, he paused. What he saw was a goodly place with great ziggurats and palaces and temples; with gardens and broad streets where happy people walked up and down; where children laughed, and lovers kissed.

He straightened his shoulders and strode down to reclaim his kingdom.

Commentary

Gilgamesh, with his mixed blood, had something of a primitive god's restless ambition for glory combined with the frustrations of being mortal and having only limited time in which to achieve what he desired.

The story goes that when Gilgamesh succeeded his mortal father as king of Uruk, he was thoroughly disliked and feared by his subjects. The young man was an arrogant despot, continually interfering in their lives.

In exasperation, they pleaded with the goddess Arura to give him a fitting companion who would somehow occupy his time and draw away some of his attention from his subjects. She agreed, and chose Enkidu, a wild man living among the animals of the mountains and forests. It was said that he could communicate with the natural kingdom and was much hated by hunters because he released their prey from traps and warned the animals of the approach of danger. To prepare him for the great change that was about to take place in his life a harlot was employed to seduce him. She bathed and scented him, and for six days and seven nights he lay with her until he was weak and satiated. When she left he found the animals shunned him, for he now had a human smell.

At their first meeting Gilgamesh and Enkidu fought, rather like the heroes Little John and Robin Hood in the British cycle of myths. After this trial of strength the two became firm friends with deep respect for each other. There are many tales from Mesopotamia of their extraordinary feats of strength, not least among them their defeat of the giant guardian of the cedar forests, Humbaba (Huwawa).

The death of Enkidu after the rejection and mocking of the goddess Ishtar took Gilgamesh from the heights of his arrogance to the depths of despair as he realized the fact of his own mortality. These events happened approximately 5000 years ago and yet we still respond to them, knowing that they are the events, albeit metamorphosed by symbolism, of our own lives. The cry of

Gilgamesh beside his dead friend is our own cry as we look at someone close to us lying dead.

*What is this sleep that has now come over you?
You have gone dark and cannot hear me!*

That Gilgamesh, the warrior, had gone so far in life without realizing the full implication of death is not as surprising as it seems. Until it touches those close to us, we too do not fully register the implications of death. When we do, we also set off on an inner journey of enquiry — disturbed by questions we cannot answer.

We, like Gilgamesh, have to face the mountains of Mashu — the impediment to true understanding thrown up by all the false but comforting propaganda we have been fed throughout our lives. The guardians of the mountains are scorpions, for truth has a sting in its tail and it is truth we seek. If we can convince them that we are earnest in our quest, they will let us pass.

The twelve hours of the night in the dense darkness of the mountain remind us of the ‘dark night of the soul’ the great Christian mystics speak about — the darkness we have to pass through when we leave all the comfortable misconceptions of our former lives and set out in search of true illumination. We nearly despair, until we feel the faint breeze of dawn at last, which is the first indication we have that our spirit is stirring to the rising of the sun (the source of light).

As we emerge from the darkness of our doubt and our despair, our first reaction is tremendous relief and joy. The world seems a garden of jewels — precious,

wonderful, dazzling. We see everything we had seen before in a new light and appreciate everything much more than we had before. We are in this euphoric state of relief after that rigorous journey through the mountain and forget, for the moment, that we have not yet arrived at our true destination — and that flowers are *not* jewels.

When we are ready to leave the garden and travel on we come to the tavern of Siduri, where we may still be lulled into a sense of false euphoria. We are tired of the struggle. It would be so pleasant to relax and accept her advice that we should ‘eat, drink and be merry’.

These early texts of the epic of Gilgamesh were known throughout the Middle East at the time the Hebrew biblical texts were being compiled, so it is interesting to compare Siduri’s words with those in Ecclesiastes 9.7—9, as J. B. Pritchard has pointed out:[\[6\]](#)

Ecclesiastes:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God hath now accepted thy works.

Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun [. . .] for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Siduri:

*Make thou merry by day and night,
Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
Day and night dance thou and play.
Let thy garments be sparkling and fresh,
Thy head be washed, bathe thou in water.
Pay heed to the little one that holds thy hand.
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom,
For this is the task of mankind.*

We are tempted, but if we are determined enough to pursue our journey, we move on. Surely life is more than this? But can it be more with death waiting to cut it short at any moment? Gilgamesh meets Urshanabi, the boatman (reminiscent of the boatman, Charon, who ferries the dead across the Waters of Death in Greek mythology). So many myths have the concept of life originating from the deep primeval ‘waters’, which existed somehow before existence itself was conceived by the Creator, that it seems logical there should be a return to the primeval waters — or at least a passage over them — at death.

In a sense we have to think about the beginnings of life, the very basis of existence, in order to make sense of death. We have to contemplate the ultimate origin from which duality, and all that followed from it, sprang. But we are not ready to plunge into the depths yet — it is not our time to die — and we may only skim over the surface at this point. Each prop (each punt-pole) we use will be taken from us until we have none left. This is the most dangerous time of all. Many lose their sanity at this point, faced by the loneliness and

vastness of the primeval waters. But Gilgamesh, the true hero, improvises a sail to continue forward. We cannot know what this sail will be, in our case, until every support we have relied on has gone. But we must remove every vestige of 'clothing' we have brought from the past and enter this new phase as basic and naked as we were born; without preconceptions, without advice or support from family and friends.

We come to Ziusudra, the man who survived the wrath of God. His story encourages us to believe that it *maybe* possible to survive death. The story of the Flood in the Gilgamesh epic is extraordinarily like the story of Noah in the Bible. Why was this story found so important by the Jews that it is retold in the Bible? Perhaps the story of such a flood is a warning to us that we are always on the edge of extinction. We exist only by the grace of God and if He withdraws His grace we are extinguished.

When I read the description of the storm that brought about the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh I remembered a description of a storm from the same region by A. H. Layard, the excavator of Nineveh and Babylon.

On the sixth of April we witnessed a remarkable electrical phenomenon. During the day heavy clouds had been hanging on the horizon, foreboding one of those furious storms which at this time of the year occasionally visit the Desert. Late in the afternoon these clouds had gathered into one vast circle, which moved slowly round like an enormous wheel, presenting one of the most extraordinary and awful

appearances I ever saw. From its sides, leaped, without ceasing, forked flames of lightning. Clouds springing up from all sides of the heavens, were dragged hurriedly into the vortex, which advanced gradually towards us, and threatened soon to break over our encampment.[\[7\]](#)

Ziusudra makes Gilgamesh perform a practical experiment to drive home to him the impossibility of avoiding death by will power. He asks him to try to do without sleep for six days and seven nights. He cannot, and has at last to admit defeat.

Pity for his fellow human (or is it a further test?) prompts Ziusudra to tell Gilgamesh the secret of the flower that renews youth. Gilgamesh plunges to the bottom of the sea — the ocean of divine consciousness into which we may only be aware of venturing when we are in the highest state of our own spiritual consciousness. Gilgamesh has come so far, discarded so much and learned so much, that he is now capable of achieving the flower. But is he capable of keeping it? Evidently not. The snake, the serpent ever present in Eden, plays his natural role. The chthonic forces of the Underworld, or our subconscious, do not allow us to become gods. We are human and fail every time in the final test. How often do we experience briefly a potent and important truth, only to lose it again as we fall back into, and are swamped by, the trivia of daily life?

But had Gilgamesh ultimately failed? When Gilgamesh saw his city again he saw it as a goodly place. He had come to accept life on its own terms — not in the sense

