

# YOUR OWN DAMN LIFE

## Michael Meade On The Story We're Born With

JOHN MALKIN

**W**hen author, mythologist, and storyteller Michael Meade was a young teen, he was in a gang that ran on the streets of New York City. One day he was cornered by older, rival gang members with knives. Knowing he might be cut if he didn't act, Meade spontaneously told his attackers a story. His tale was compelling enough that the mood shifted and the threat of violence dissolved. While trying to save his skin, young Michael had found his voice.

Today Meade uses story, song, and mythology to help others discover their inner wisdom and inherent gifts. He believes that each of us is born with a "seeded soul" and a "story within us that's waiting to be lived." For forty years Meade has delivered this message to young men and women, prisoners, war veterans, gang members, native peoples, and elders. When he teaches, his aim is always to draw out the inner genius in others. Every person, he says, is the author of his or her own life.

Meade was tested again when he was twenty years old and drafted into the army during the Vietnam War. During training he refused to perform many of his duties. ("I don't take orders well," he reflects.) As punishment for his noncooperation, he was placed in solitary confinement in a military prison for almost six months. He began fasting in protest and went from 159 pounds down to 87. Officers from the battalion came to convince him to eat, but their demands were met by the same steely resolve Meade had shown at thirteen. Giving up on changing his mind, some of the majors and colonels eventually began to speak about themselves. The emaciated prisoner offered compassion to his captors and even gave advice. He thinks they unburdened themselves to him because "I was the only person who would listen."

Meade has written many books, the latest of which is *Fate and Destiny: The Two Agreements of the Soul*. He is the founding director of the nonprofit Mosaic Multicultural Foundation ([www.mosaicvoices.org](http://www.mosaicvoices.org)), based in Seattle, Washington. In the 1980s Meade was a leader in the mythopoetic branch of the men's movement, in which he attempted to bring a new approach to the personal and cultural issues in men's lives.

Awakening the unique potential in all people is especially important in the United States today, Meade says, to combat the conformity that mass culture increasingly demands. True culture, he claims, "arises from the creative depths of one's self and one's life situation."

*In person Meade is relaxed and confident. His shoulders are broad, and his eyes are clear and engaging as he offers up mythological, psychological, and spiritual maps of the human experience. He brought to our conversation a blend of street smarts and deep learning about where humans have been and where we're headed. At the age of sixty-six he projects the air of an elder, expressing concern that so many older people these days are "forgetting themselves" (a reference to Alzheimer's) because they have been forgotten by their culture and their families. "The role of a fully realized human being," Meade says, "is to arrive at the door of death having become oneself."*

**Malkin:** Your book *Fate and Destiny* opens with the story of your thirteenth birthday. You received a book from your aunt that she'd bought by mistake.

**Meade:** Fate is the mistake that was meant to happen. It's the accident that was no accident. I was a studious kid but also a troublemaker. My aunt asked what I was interested in, and I said, "History." So she went to a bookstore — she may have been the first person in my family ever to go to a bookstore — and bought me a history book. As I was tearing off the wrapping paper, she said, "Oh, I got the wrong book. It's a mistake. I'll take it back."

But I saw Pegasus, the winged horse, flying across the cover and said, "No! I want this book." It was *Mythology*, by Edith Hamilton, the first book I ever owned and the beginning of my understanding the world through a mythological point of view. There it was by mistake, by accident, by fate, on my thirteenth birthday: the book I needed to have.

**Malkin:** You write that "we can't run from fate, but can only run into it."

**Meade:** There are some things that constrain our lives, that limit us somehow, whether it be a family history, a genetic predisposition, a specific fault, or an omission that wounds us. I know a lot of young people who are older than their years because they've been trapped inside old family stories or attitudes. I call these limits that we did not choose, but that we must live with, "fate." When we face our fate, we find our destiny, which is our soul's destination in life. That which limits us has within it the seeds of that which can help us transcend our limitations. Through the exact twists of fate we find our own unique soul.



GARY GUINIGUNDO

**Malkin:** You say that rather than wondering about the meaning of life, we might instead wonder, “What is the meaning of *my* life?”

**Meade:** When I was growing up, I liked big questions: What is life all about? Why are we here? Eventually I learned that the key question involves the meaning seeded within each individual life.

Almost all cultures have the notion that there is a judgment when we die. Some kind of accounting has to be made of one’s life. I believe God — and to me “God” is just shorthand for the ineffable divine presence — has only one question for us at the end: “Did you become *yourself*?” We have a seeded self that begins to germinate at birth. Our true goal in life is to become that self.

There’s an African proverb: “When death finds you, may it find you alive.” *Alive* means living your own damn life, not the life that your parents wanted, or the life some cultural group or political party wanted, but the life that your own soul wants to live. That’s the way to evaluate whether you are an authentic person or not.

**Malkin:** Why did you write *Fate and Destiny* now?

**Meade:** People draw some sense of self from the story told in the world around them. As poet Muriel Rukeyser said, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” Right now, with culture unraveling and nature being rattled to its core, there is little security to be found in existing institutions, and coherent stories are increasingly hard to find. The other place to find a coherent story is inside. That means going to the core of your own life and finding the story seeded within.

**Malkin:** And this is important right now because things are falling apart culturally, economically, politically, and environmentally?

**Meade:** Yes, it is rare that a culture would be so thoroughly troubled at the same time that nature is so deeply disturbed. A culture falls apart when its sense of youthful imagination disappears at the same time that the wisdom of the elders is forgotten. Young people are growing up in a world of tragedy. They may appear to be ignoring it, but they are actually feeling it strongly. You’re not supposed to be worrying about the end of the world as a teenager; you’re supposed to be bringing your dream to it. The world seems old and troubled now, and the young are no longer allowed to be as young as they should be.

On the other side of the road of life you have the elders, who are often just “olders.” They could become elders in the collective story if they could awaken from the fear that they are over the hill and going downhill. They don’t understand that elders awaken through a descent into the depths, where life renews itself. Going downhill involves a process of going deeper into oneself and realizing, *Aha! My life has meaning if I see it from the angle of fate revealing a sense of inner meaning and destiny.*



MICHAEL MEADE

Many traditional cultures believe that the true elders stay young at heart because they remain close to the dreams they had when they were young. In modern culture people try to change their outer appearance to look younger, but the role of the elder is to go deep inside, to stay in touch with the eternal as well as the sage in one’s heart. Aging is a biological process that happens to everyone. Everybody gets older, but not everybody gets to be an elder. Becoming an elder involves a lifelong awakening to and reflection upon the story embedded in one’s soul.

The revolutions in the Middle East, which will hopefully lead to democratic outcomes, are partly driven by the fact that the majority of people in the Middle East are under thirty.

In American culture the aging baby boomers and increasing longevity are creating the opposite: an aging population. That means we have a different kind of cultural imagination than the Middle East has right now. One downside to an aging population is that fears and anxieties can easily grow as we become older. You can see that in conservative politics and when people vote out of fear or hold too tightly to their wealth because they are afraid of the end of life.

When older people become elders, they act not out of fear but out of wisdom and understanding. They’re not sitting at death’s door still trying to check their portfolios online. Elders feel inspired to give back the wisdom they’ve extracted from life and not simply be receiving material benefits. If there were to be a genuine revolution in this culture — which claims to be free but increasingly lacks freedom — it’s more likely to come from older folks who give up the fears associated with aging and dying and become elders instead.

One of the biggest surprises in the last ten years was when Warren Buffett made the decision to begin giving away most of his money. Perhaps Buffett awakened to the fact that, when you get to a certain age, the material wealth you have accumulated isn’t really as valuable to you. Your portfolio is not worth much on the other side. So why not do some good with it now? Buffett is a model for the older people of our culture, who happen to have the majority of the wealth. Donald Trump seems to be the opposite. He’s still trying to trump everybody.

The next stage of growth in America would be for the elders who can afford it to begin giving away what they’ve accumulated rather than worrying too much about retirement security. As an Irish poet once said, a false sense of security is the only kind there is. The true elders know that.

**Malkin:** What about the importance of youthful imagination in a free, creative people and culture?

**Meade:** Young people are always using their imagination. That’s why they tend to create the fashions. They’re fashioning what comes next from whatever they can find in their environment.

When I work with youth, I try to assist them in discovering their own unique essence. The sad fact is that everything

in this culture is working *against* that essence. Mass culture is opposed to the uniqueness of individuals. Young people, whose job it is to become themselves, are walking into a culture whose goal is to turn them into everybody else. What I try to do is help young people realize who they already are inside. American culture says that you must make something of yourself, but the mythological understanding is that everybody already *is* someone. They have a seeded self at birth. As soon as young people are aware of the uniqueness inside them, they can begin to manifest the stories they're carrying.

Once, I was working with this inner-city street gang in Chicago. The boys had all grown up in a neighborhood where violence was prevalent, so they'd joined gangs, as many youth do in such environments. I told them myths from different cultures about finding one's dream in life. We were having a deep discussion when there was a drive-by shooting, and bullets came into the house. We had to duck as the troubles of the culture penetrated the room. Then we got back up and

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continued talking.

I've been learning to spot and encourage the genius in a young person, which helps awaken that genius. I noticed that the leader of the gang used very exact and creative language. This was a dangerous person and not someone you would want to meet on a dark, empty street, but he had a certain charm and good language skills. I decided to try to bring more of that talent out in him. He wound up going back to school and studying English literature. Eventually he took a job with a mentoring organization; he did some writing and became a storyteller. It doesn't mean all his troubles are over. It means that now his troubles are related to the story that he was born with, rather than simply arising from the neighborhood drama of violence and drugs.

**Malkin:** One myth we have in the U.S. is that we have perfected democracy, so much so that we feel compelled to export it all over the world, even demanding that others do it the way we do it, which isn't very democratic.

**Meade:** You could say that there are two levels of myth. The first level is the local, the myth of the environment one

is born and raised in. The local myth of America is freedom, which translates into democracy as a method of governance. It's a good story and includes the promise of something greater. The problem is that the local myth is never true enough. It's never deep enough. And when it remains shallow, it's easily converted into its opposite.

You're not free to do whatever you want in America at all. Try traveling nowadays. It's not a demonstration of individual freedom; it's a demonstration of collective fear and insecurity. There's always the shadow story, which can easily become the main story. You could say that we're living on the shadow side of democracy. You can see that shadow in the rise of fundamentalism, where narrowly constructed beliefs and ideas take the place of genuine imagination. And without imagination, there is no real freedom.

Today in the U.S. we have a diminishment of freedom and a serious disruption of democracy because the two political parties are divided along ideological lines and committed to demonizing each other. There is a collapse of imagination, leaving simple ideological oppositions. So where does freedom pop up? In the Middle East, where no one expected it to appear. It pops up through the imagination of young people who would rather die than live under oppressive regimes.

The second level of myth involves the underlying story that ties all the other stories together. The deeper myth of democracy originated in the Greek city of Athens, which was named after Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Democracy requires a constant search for the wisdom that underlies the oppositions of life.

At this point, if we're going to rediscover the deeper myth of America, I think it may have to come from the older people. And it's not the freedom of an oversized house and a stock portfolio. That's simple aggregation. It's the freedom to live a passionate, imaginative, meaningful life right up to the last moment. In order to do that, people cannot be hindered by too many possessions and too many small, narrow-minded ideas. Ideologies are, by my definition, always small, one-sided, and mean-spirited ideas. Freedom is a powerful force, but also very delicate. It becomes lost when those who are closest to it lose the courage to live with it.

The role of the elders includes acting from ideals such as beauty and truth, knowing that these ideals will not be realized, but also knowing that life needs beauty in order to continue. Elders know that younger people need to see truth being championed by those "old enough to know better" in order to have courage and avoid cynicism, which is an increasing problem in this culture. Cynicism is a detour from the road of life, a sidetrack that opens onto the highway of nihilism. In order to avoid it, we must act through the ideals that are the core of our life. The championing of meaningful ideals is what the U.S., at its best, represents to the rest of the world.

So when the U.S. begins torturing people to get information, it is damaging the collective dream of freedom. It is also the dream of life that is being tortured. We seem to have lost the courage to live closer to the ideal. And at this point in history the ones who must begin to demonstrate that courage again are the older folks.

**Malkin:** How do you relate to fear personally?

**Meade:** Fear tends to drive me *toward* imagination. The scariest thing for me is when imagination becomes locked down and everything becomes predetermined. That's when I feel concerned that life will be choked off. Fear is there to generate motion; it becomes a problem when we are paralyzed by it. Healthy fear actually triggers instinct and intuition.

**Malkin:** You take issue with the idea that the Internet is joining us together.

**Meade:** My complaint is that the World Wide Web, with all its horizontal strands, lacks a *vertical* dimension. People used to think the world was flat. Well, they think that again in believing that a flat web connects us. The real web of the world has vertical extension as well as horizontal dimension.

Take social networking. The problem is that it's not really social enough. "Social" suggests being together, being companions in life. The story comes not just from horizontal experience. The dramatic part appears when it goes vertical. A person rises above others or falls down below everybody else. The realms above and below used to be called "spirit" and "soul." Spirit lifts the person up, whereas soul pulls a person deeper into life. We're not supposed to live a horizontal life on the surface of things. We are supposed to live the entire gamut, from the heights of thought and imagination all the way down to the depths of woundedness and the deeper capacity to love. We live in a world of many dimensions, and the human soul is equal to the world. After all the exploration of the earth, the world is being made smaller again. When I work with young people, I tell them they have the capacity and need to participate in the larger world.

One reason for the seemingly intractable problems in this culture — this mindless battle between stimulus and cutting taxes, for example — is a collapse of imagination. Life, with all its dreams and surprises, has collapsed into economics. When the economy rose to the top of the conversation in the culture, I knew we were headed for financial disaster, because wherever people put their attention, that's where the drama will go. So the drama must be acted out financially. What's lacking is *imagination*. There isn't enough imagination to change the debate. And there is so much fear. People are afraid to let go of the little bit they have. When everything collapses into economics, younger people can't use their vertical imagination to set their life on a course with meaning, and older people begin to forget who they really are.

**Malkin:** Could you tell me more about the difference between soul and spirit?

**Meade:** Spirit in mythology and traditional cosmology is connected to fire and air, and it rises. Soul is connected to water and earth, and it descends. When we rise with spirit, we get peak experiences and those overviews of life that include moments of freedom. Soul goes the opposite way. Water runs down. The earth has gravity and pulls us to it. The soul wants us to grow down and become deep like a river. When people talk about "connection," they're really talking about soul. The real connections are not surface connections. You can have many friends on Facebook, but your real friends are those who know and support your deep self and will remind you when you're

losing touch with your own soul.

What is often missing in modern mass culture is this depth of connection. When you see a culture dividing into simplistic polarities — which is all of our politics nowadays and most of our religion — what's going on is a loss of soul. People who are in touch with their soul know what they're supposed to be doing in the world and what their way of contributing to life is, in the same way that people know what music they love and what food they enjoy — not just life-sustaining food, but food that has flavor, that makes you feel nourished, even inspired.

The U.S. has become mired in spiritual materialism. People are substituting material accomplishments or possessions for the things the soul loves, such as music and meaningful speech. The soul even loves suffering when the suffering produces realization. In a mass effort to find superficial comforts and avoid suffering, the whole culture has lost soul.

**Malkin:** Music and rhythm have played a large role in cultivating your soul, haven't they?

**Meade:** Yes, I've found that I'm happier and closer to the

Everyone needs some help learning who they already are. That's the root of genuine education and the task of real culture.

rhythm of my own life when I play drums and sing. When I can't, I start to have a broken step and fall out of rhythm with myself.

Of course, playing music is not simply about how well you do it. I watched *American Idol* because I was curious what Americans were idolizing. I love the fact that it's about song and voice, but that gets turned into a contest to determine who's got the *best* voice. Meanwhile every voice is unique. The best voice is the one you have. Not that you don't improve it, but you improve it by learning what it is and what it has to contribute to the symphony of life.

I'm thinking of a great story that James Hillman included in his book *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*. At the Apollo Theater in Harlem, every Wednesday night is amateur night. At an amateur night in 1934 a seventeen-year-old girl took the stage planning to dance, but the act before her was a dance duo that was so good that she felt she couldn't follow it. So, while standing onstage, she decided to sing instead. That girl was jazz great Ella Fitzgerald. She had never sung in public. She didn't know that she *could* sing! But as soon as she stepped onstage, the core story of her life awakened, and she began to sing. I happened to hear her in person when I was growing up in New York, and anybody who has ever listened to her understands that hers is a natural gift coming from the depth of her soul.

*(end of excerpt)*