

## Life as Myth: Do You have Eight Eyes or Two Webbed Feet?



In order to move forward, we need to look back. Along with the gems we'd like to carry into the future, we too often lug heavy bags filled with old hurts or outdated habits, some ours and some that have been passed down like ugly family heirlooms no one had the heart to discard.

So how do we peer into the past and examine our lives? Like me, you've probably tried the old standards: Noting your list of facts and figures, dates and locations. Writing your resume. Sharing cute little stories. Or crashing down well-known ruts into old emotions when something happens that stirs up a past memory.

We get one sort of information when we review our stories in the standard ways, through common lenses and assumptions neatly tucked into safe, homogenous frameworks.

Some of those remaining stories are worth sharing. But if we want to live in the real world, the wildly diverse world, we need a little fresh air to blow the dust away, scramble our assumptions and give our memories a little twirl. Something that offers another sort of information altogether.

In the summer of 2007, as I worked on early drafts of *Big Topics at Midnight*, I stumbled onto a way to look at my life that was a lot more fun. It helped me recognize parts of myself that I'd relegated to the closet and opened up a new perspective of my place in our world today: I could write about my life as if it were a myth.

A "Once upon a time..." kind of story with speaking animals, magical vehicles, unexpected powers and strange appearances.

Which sounded completely crazy.

In its well-trained way, my brain kicked into gear and tried to steer me in a more rational direction. But I had been watching my brain do this for a while, and I knew exactly what it was up to. This time I was determined not to let logic deter me from my playful desire to see what I would look like and do in fantasyland.

So I let my imagination play. I listened and waited. And played some more.

Patience paid off when my myth swooped in starring me as the Eight-eyed Steam Girl in Her Little Red Boat. I—the grown-up Nancy part of me—was just learning what this odd version of me already knew: I had more ways of seeing than the two eyes in my face, and I had long been prone to exploding in the middle of big topic conversations with the hot mist of my reactions.

Once I heard my new name, I wanted to hear more of my story. I knew what to do:

- Shut up my inner protesting that this was crazy. I reassured my skeptical voice that I would return to “normal writing” soon if nothing materialized.
- Lie down on my couch. Breathe deeply to calm my mind. Notice my feet, my legs, my belly, my heart—moving my attention far away from the chattering squirrel cage of inside my skull.
- Ask the Eight-Eyed Steam Girl in Her Little Red Boat to speak.
- Listen.

As the myth unfolded, suddenly even difficult “real” memories softened. The story was off and running before I knew it. I dashed to my computer and began to write.

*Once upon a time, long, long ago, a wild girl was born onto this planet. She was made of flesh and blood all right, but she was also made of fire and water.*

I laughed. Maybe blasting through life with the power of a steam locomotive wasn't the worst thing in the world. My myth continued to unfold throughout the next days and weeks.

What about your myth?

You think you don't have one?

Nonsense. That's what you need. Nonsense.

Tell your skeptical mind to go work in a dark corner for an hour or so and start listening for what might not make sense, at least in the usual ways.

Have your pen and notebook or keyboard ready, and hold on. It's quite a ride to see yourself this way.

You just might discover that the part you've tried so hard to change holds the very traits that give you character. Within myth, quirks and foibles spice up life rather than spoil it.

### **PRIMING THE PUMP**

Sometimes it's hard for us adults to let go enough to play creatively, proceeding to write without any idea what will emerge. Below are a few snippets from the beginning of three myths to give you a sense of what's possible.

Mine first...

*I was born an Eight-eyed Steam Girl. The fire of natural gas and oil shot through me from below; ancient waters poured down from above. The mixing was wild and chaotic. Fluid emotions and flaming passion combined to propel me down the tracks, rocking back and forth with my own rhythm. I could see where I was going even though I had no map in hand. A different sort of sight was required for my trip through life. And I had lots of sight—eight eyes. Not just the two typical face eyes but eyes of my heart, hands, feet and one right in the middle of my forehead...*

The beginning of Howard's myth (you'll see why I wanted to marry this man!):  
*Clinging tightly to a long, dark green garden hose, I soared across the light-years and made a quick stop in my backyard before I headed to the hospital to be born. I hadn't been able to resist one final roll in heavenly stardust and holy water and was completely covered with mud. I'd heard that humans were a bit squeamish about cleanliness, so I wanted to be neat and tidy when I made my dramatic entrance into the world.*

The beginning of Jen's myth:

*At the instant she was born, the thunder clapped so loudly that she didn't make more than a tiny cry, so as not to miss what it might be saying. She came into the world listening, ears open to the sounds of voices and meaning and hearts. She heard it all. Along with delight and wonder, grief and anger and sadness and shame. It was more than she knew how to bear, and she wept. As she grew, she more than made up for that first tiny cry with the voluminous tears she released, spilling an ocean around her and leaving her moored on the Isle of Herself, where she never could really get to everyone else without quite a lot of swimming.*

As another way to help you prime the pump, I've collected a few snippets from my own myth and followed it with a writing prompt to help you catch sight of your own mythical self. Use them like water wings until you are ready to step into the flow on your own.

### **TIME TO WRITE**

*I was born of fire and water—not a gentle mixing. Steam flowed out of my ears, mouth, breasts, out of every cell of my body. But this was not the steam of destruction; it was the steam that powered a vision held between the depths of the earth and the heights of the heavens.*

### **Of what were you born?**

*As one full of explosive steam, it's not surprising that I was born on Friday morning, May 12, 1954. Lots of blasting has been done on May 12 throughout history:*

- *1951: First hydrogen bomb test on Enewetak Atoll, Marshall Islands, by the U.S.A.*
- *1962: Atmospheric nuclear test at Christmas Island by the U.S.A.*
- *1970: Nuclear test at Nevada test site*
- *1984: Nuclear test performed by France*
- *1942: 1,500 Jews gassed at Auschwitz by the German Nazis*

*Clearly, this Earth needed a new kind of steam, and I knew that my fire-and-water body could offer a healing alternative to men's destructive blasting.*

### **Over the years, what else has happened on the day you were born?**

*I had the normal ten toes and fingers, but the doctor was concerned to note that I also had eight eyes. Some of my steam blasted through all eight of my eyes, blowing to smithereens the scales that had protected me during birth, but limited my sight.*

### **What once protected but now limits you?**

*My eyeballs were everywhere—on the bottom of my feet, in the middle of my palms, over my heart, on my forehead, and the two little ones in the middle of my face—the better to see things hidden and clouded in mystery. Once upon a time everyone was born with lots of eyes, but as things got “civilized” ‘round here, most folks thought it “primitive” to have so much sight.*

### **Where are your extras?**

*It took me a while to embrace it, but I was Texan through and through: a wild, independent, bold seeker filled with courage, adventure and creativity. Hard not to be that-a-ways with all of that steam power and sight.*

### **What are you, through and through?**

*By the time I was a toddler, the older folks worried that I was a bit too much even for ruggedly independent Texas. Apparently independence was only two-eyes deep, and I was over the top. They were sure eight eyes was some kind of correctable birth defect, and they set out to find ways to make me normal.*

### **How did adults worry about your “too muchness” when you were little?**

*Trying to be a “normal” two-eyed girl wasn’t easy. The problem was that those other six eyes still peered out behind, beside, beneath my face eyes. I about had to turn myself inside out trying to funnel everything I saw with my six oddballs through my two regular eye. Lots got caught in the strainer of my brain, most of which I learned to toss away as nonsense.*

### **How did it feel for you to be different?**

*My steam became a problem after my “extra” eyeballs were tucked out of sight. All that steam popping out was a bit overpowering for my family and neighborhood. They looked around for something to tighten me up a bit—for my own safety, you know.*

### **What part of you was considered a problem when you were young?**

*They wanted something beautiful, to make me look more like the other cute little girls. In Grandma’s yarn basket, they found two skeins of blue and yellow cord—just just the thing to stop my immature, messy, steam-filled outbursts. Slowly, skillfully, they began the long process of wrapping me up in these beautifully colored cords.*

### **What was used to tame you?**

*No more need for my family or teachers to keep my cords adjusted properly—I learned quickly how to do that just fine. I held my steam inside, and I stood straighter, more normal. I found ways to move within this bright and shiny binding.*

### **How did you begin to tame yourself?**

*One Sunday morning I was splashed with Texas holy water (smelled a bit like sulfur, you know) and tongues of fire lapped my nose. For a split second, gone almost before I knew it happened, I was steam-to-steam, heart-to-heart with the divine. Knowing in my bones that I was made in the image of God, I gasped with delight, threw my hands up and clicked my heels together in delight. Horrified gatekeepers in their Sunday*

*finest rushed over. "Shhhh! This is the House of the Lord. Be Quiet!" I dutifully bowed my head in silence.*

**Has a divine connection ever made you "misbehave"?**

*The magazines all said that beautiful cords made me even more beautiful. I liked bright colors, short skirts and being a girl. Guys were cute. Books were great. Life was fun. I'd managed to find a way not to notice the crowd of eyes behind my face eyeballs or the steam that banged around inside me like a noisy old radiator. Folks saw my chipper smile and two shinning eyes and never noticed that anything was missing?*

**What was hidden behind the surface of you?**

**YOUR TURN**

Enough questions, already!

Have you caught a glimpse of the bigger, wilder picture of yourself? Whether you be geared up with your many eyes or webbed feet, covered in mud or moored on an island of your own making, it's time to step into your magical vehicle and head into your own life story through the language of myth. Enjoy the ride.