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BY ART KLEINER

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A couple of years ago, at Oxford University's Saïd Business School, a small group of researchers and writers conducted a scenario planning project on the risks and implications of the financial crisis. They developed two alternative future scenarios based on cultural myths—the prevailing attitudes and beliefs, often so deeply held that they are virtually invisible, that determine the decisions made by business and political leaders. One scenario suggested that the policymakers of the future would follow an economic myth, seeking growth; another supposed they would follow an ecological myth, seeking the health of a larger, interrelated system.

Economics and ecology are only two of five myths that shape the world view of decision makers, says Betty Sue Flowers—the poet, television commentator, documentarian, and educator who brought this idea to the Oxford scenario planning team. The other three myths are heroic (seeking to win),

religious (seeking goodness), and scientific (seeking truth through reason). When a company's reputation sinks, politicians get into intractable disagreements, or a financial crisis unfolds, one common reason is a clash among these different perspectives.

Flowers is a uniquely qualified observer of the influence that mythic attitudes and beliefs have on current events. She saw the world of large-scale enterprise up close at Royal Dutch Shell PLC, where she helped draft many of the company's influential scenario planning reports, and the world of big government at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Tex., where she served as director from 2002 to 2009. As a literature professor at the University of Texas, she edited *The Power of Myth* (Doubleday, 1988), the bound record of Bill Moyers's six-part interview with mythologist Joseph Campbell, which was broadcast on PBS. Flowers met with *strategy+business* in New York to talk about myths, their implications for business and political leaders, and their link to resolving the financial crisis.

S+B: Why are myths such a powerful force in society?

FLOWERS: A myth is a view of the nature of reality, so prevalent that it goes unseen. Although myths are conceived by people, they can feel like they are the only reality, and they can become the context in which events are framed. The frame people follow then affects the judgments they make. The idea of business, for example, is a very powerful human creation, based on the economic myth: The best thing to do is to grow as large as possible. This myth is closely linked to the paren-

tal impulse, which is one of the most powerful impulses that human beings have. Asking "How do I take our product around the world?" is similar to asking "How do I raise a child to get into college?"

Of course, once children are grown, you let them go, but raising a product is a never-ending task. Over time, the danger of the economic myth is that it leads to single-line measurements of success, such as revenues, profits, and market size. Those will inevitably peak and decline at some point, because all systems have limits—and once they start to fall, they fall fast.

In fact, each myth has a limit that people caught up in it tend to fail to recognize. For example, if you look at the world primarily through the scientific myth, you believe in truth: that there is an absolute form of rational knowledge available to humanity, even if it hasn't been discovered yet. You expect the quest for truth to overcome resistance, which you tag as emotional; you don't realize how much people mistrust claims of truth.

The heroic myth translates every event into a winner triumphing over a loser; it makes people who follow it vulnerable if their side loses. The ecological myth says that



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the health of a whole system depends on complex interrelationships. It therefore tries to take everyone's needs into account, which can lead to immense expense and gridlock. And the religious myth—by which I mean not a perspective that favors any particular religion, but an ideological belief backed up by religious fervor—argues that all dissenting views are dangerous and must be stopped. That view cannot be sustained in a multifaceted, complex world.

S+B: When did you first become aware of how the conflict among these myths can result in misunderstandings (and worse)?

FLOWERS: In the early 1990s, I was invited to work on the Royal Dutch Shell global scenarios. One of our scenarios was focused on environmental sustainability as a driver for world decisions. At the time, Shell was applying for the right to let an old oil platform sink into the North Sea. After the British government approved the plan in 1995, Greenpeace organized such broad and dramatic protests at the site that Shell ultimately changed its plans.

I was interested in the way people talked past one another during this episode. Shell was clearly operating on the scientific myth. The Shell people did their homework, trying to find a cost-effective way to get rid of the facility with the least environmental damage, maximizing advantage for everyone. But the media is driven by the heroic myth, because that myth produces the best stories. To them, Greenpeace was David versus Shell's Goliath. So when Shell trotted out its middle-aged engineers to talk about the science, the TV directors cut from them to the young people who were

occupying the oil platform and chanting against Shell, which was portrayed as a typical greedy corporation. In other words, Shell was perceived as following the economic myth—pursuing growth at all costs. Greenpeace, meanwhile, was motivated by a more religious myth: Don't pollute the ocean, period.

I suggested to some of Shell's managers that they should helicopter a small, diverse group of young employees to the platform with food and drinks for the protestors and the message, "We're members of Greenpeace, too. Many Shell staffers are.

"If we have another economic crisis, it will be because no one has effectively tempered the economic myth with the ecological myth."

Let's talk about this." Then the headline would be, "Maybe Goliath wants to join David, and not fight him," which indeed was the case. Greenpeace later apologized and said they had gotten it wrong, but the apology appeared in the back of the newspaper and few people noticed.

Ever since, I've been determined to answer the question: What are the myths we live with, the ones that are so ever-present we don't even realize they're shaping our culture?

S+B: How did your tenure with government affect your understanding of the myths?

FLOWERS: I'm generally a left-leaning person politically, but if you heard me talk about the absurdities I experienced as a federal employee, you would think I belonged to the Tea Party. In an advanced democracy or a complex economy, government follows the ecological myth, prioritizing the health of the overall system, often at the expense of

common sense. Any individual government worker is constantly put in impossible situations.

For example, when I arrived at the [Lyndon Baines Johnson] library, we had just received a new shipment of Dell computers. Our people desperately needed them. But the government had not yet approved Windows NT, so I was supposed to send the computers to Washington, at great expense, to have them wiped clean and the older Windows 97 installed. Then, two months later, when Windows NT was expected to be approved, I

would have to send the same computers back to Washington to have NT reinstalled.

One of my first decisions on the job was to stall. We waited almost a year until NT was approved and we could open the boxes. If any computers snuck out early, I'm not telling. It was a well-meaning endeavor; a security breach might have cost millions of dollars. But the total effect was absurdity and huge expense.

S+B: What myth led to the financial crisis?

FLOWERS: First of all, it was predictable—and people predicted it. There were warnings as soon as the Glass-Steagall Act was repealed. But the economic myth, that growth could go on forever and that we create our own success, was in full swing. When people act as if that's true, it leads to bubbles.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with the economic myth. But from the ecological perspective,

there's no such thing as perpetual growth; it always hits a limit, and there are always unintended consequences. If we have another economic crisis, it will be because no one has effectively tempered the economic myth with the ecological myth.

The latter says that we're part of a larger system, which you have to participate in rather than dominate. People who perceive the world through this myth are more open to institutional arrangements in which government and industry work together on common solutions. They also tend to adopt measurements of success that relate to resilience and quality of life, not just having more. Companies become more interested in engagement with the rest of the world. Governments, meanwhile, discover they can't do everything themselves. They don't have the expertise, for instance, to clean up a major oil spill; they have to enlist industry support. The end result is not regulation *of* business; it's regulation *with* business.

S+B: Would it be appropriate to say that for any given company, there is a golden mean between ecological and economic extremes, and the challenge is to find it?

FLOWERS: I think that's fair. I would also say that if you look at the bigger picture, the inherent business of business is growth and the inherent business of government is health. That is a productive tension when these myths work together. But if one side becomes too powerful in relation to the other, the system as a whole will become unbalanced. +

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