What is a Myth?

When you look up at the sky, you see the sun, moon, clouds, meteors, comets, planets, and stars. You may recognize certain star patterns (called constellations) such as the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper (also called the Big Bear and the Little Bear). You might know the names of the nine planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Did you know that many of the names of these heavenly bodies come from myths?

Myths are stories of a special kind. They are created to give values to persons, places, and things. Myths respond to our need for some kind of reassurance and meaning in the universe. Myths are traditional tales of a particular people—Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others—and are especially connected with religious beliefs and rituals performed at public festivals. These rites were believed to invoke a type of magic that would aid the growth of crops and promote stability in the land. Out of these rituals came songs, poems, and stories which explained how people acquired basic things like simple speech, fire, grain, wine, oil, honey, agriculture, metal work, and other skills and arts.

A myth is an attempt to explain other things, as well, such as a certain custom or practice of a human society (like a religious rite), or a natural process, like the apparent daily motion of the sun across the skies. In their imaginations the Greeks of ancient times saw a man driving across the heavens in a chariot drawn by fiery horses. When evening came, he dipped into the western ocean, and while he slept he was carried back eastward along the earth's northern rim in a golden boat shaped like a bowl. Even today children might hear their parents say at sunset: "Now he's going down—now his feet, now his body, and now the top of his head." Sometimes it's fun—even for modern people—to give human characteristics to non-human objects.

Myths were passed down by storytellers from generation to generation.
What is a Myth?

1. Myths are stories created to give _______ to persons, places, and things.

2. Myths are tales from traditions of certain peoples and cultures, such as the _______, the _______, and the _______.

3. They are especially connected with _______ beliefs and rites.

4. These rites were thought to invoke a type of _______, designed to help _______ grow.

5. Myths explain how people acquired basic things like _______, _______, _______, _______, and _______.

6. The sun seems to move. The Greeks explained this by seeing it as a golden chariot drawn by _______.

7. Myths were used to teach humans proper _______.

8. The gods considered _______, or excessive pride, to be the worst offense, deserving the worst punishment.

9. People of modern times have created myths about such American heroes as _______, _______, _______, _______, and _______.

10. American myths also include the stories of _______ and _______.

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Greek Gods

1. The ancient Greeks were polytheistic. Keeping in mind that the root word "theos" means "god," what can you infer about the prefix "poly-"?
   A. It means "spiritual"
   B. It means "many"
   C. It means "one"
   D. It means "one" or "many"

2. What was the significance of Mount Olympus to the Ancient Greeks?
   A. It was the center of the Universe
   B. It was where the gods lived
   C. It was home to the Ancient Greeks' most important temple
   D. It was home to the oracles that interpreted the will of the gods

3. Hera and Zeus had a contentious relationship. In this context, what does "contentious" mean?
   A. Prone to fights and arguments
   B. Peaceful
   C. Powerful
   D. Loving

4. Which of the following is most closely associated with Apollo?
   A. _______
   B. _______
   C. _______
   D. _______

5. If a tidal wave devastated the coast of Ancient Greece, the people would probably blame it on:
   A. Zeus
   B. Aphrodite
   C. Poseidon
   D. Ares

6. If you were a farmer in Ancient Greece, to which god would you pray to ensure a successful harvest?
   A. Athena
   B. Demeter
   C. Hephaestus
   D. Ares

7. According to Ancient Greek mythology, what would happen to you after you died?
   A. Your soul would be comforted by Aphrodite, the goddess of love
   B. Your soul would be gobbled up by Ares, the god of war
   C. Athena would take your soul to the top of Mount Olympus, where you would be judged by Zeus
   D. Hermes would take your soul to the underworld, where you'd meet Hades

8. If you were a soldier going to war, what might you do before battle?
   A. Sacrifice a bull to Ares
   B. Pray to Diana
   C. Ask Hermes for a favor
   D. Light a fire to honor Hades

9. Which of the following is a true statement about the Greek gods?
   A. They were not part of the everyday lives of the Ancient Greeks
   B. They had many human foibles and attributes
   C. They are still worshiped today in Greece
   D. Most of them were despised instead of worshiped

10. What did Hephaestus and Ares have in common?
    A. They both lived far away from Mount Olympus
    B. They were both gods of war
    C. They were both gods of metalworking
    D. They were both in love with Aphrodite