Beliefs and assumptions, both true and false, provide the foundations on which we stand - the givens that allow us to live and act in the world. Many of them, some so deep that we are not aware of their existence, function for people in modern societies as myths do for people in traditional cultures. For example, “the universe began with a bang,” “the mind processes information like a computer,” “success is the key to happiness,” “work defines who we are,” “economic growth is essential.” Elaborated in the form of stories, theories, and ideas, these and many other contemporary equivalents of myth shape the ways in which we think, feel, and experience ourselves and the world around us.

Drawing on research from a number of fields, ranging from anthropology and comparative religion to psychology and the history of science, the course explores various different functions of myth and ritual in traditional cultures to see what insights they can give us into similar mythic roles that influential stories, ideas, assumptions, and practices play in contemporary life. From how the scientific theory of evolution structures much of our thinking today to how the idea of progress drives business activity and influences government policy, this thought-provoking exploration focuses on recognizing and understanding the hidden myths at work in each of our lives and finding ways to awaken their power to inspire a renewed sense of personal meaning and fulfillment.
By becoming aware, in particular, of the spiritual impulse that has historically given rise to the present-day preoccupation with economic growth, we can redirect our attention to the inner dimensions of ideas of progress and the American Dream neglected in so much of modern life. From chasing after material wealth and power, we turn to uncovering the treasures hidden within. We come to realize that instead of having to “grow bigger or die,” we can choose to “grow deeper and live.”

The course covers the following topics in a combination of lectures, discussions, and exercises:

**Week 1, Mar 28: The Reality and Power of Myth**
- The need for myths and the functions they and their equivalents perform in traditional and modern cultures.

**Week 2, Apr 4: The Scientist and the Priest**
- How scientific theories and technological innovations capture the imagination and function as equivalents of myth in modern thought and society.

**Week 3, Apr 11: The Work of Myth**
- Beliefs and rituals that fuel the business economy and give legitimacy to institutions of law and government.

**Week 4, Apr 18: Myth and Creativity**
- Creative uses and destructive abuses of mythic themes in the arts, advertising, and the media, including film.

**Week 5, Apr 25: The Healing Power of Myth**
- How deeply held beliefs and attitudes can be used in medicine and psychotherapy to promote health and wellbeing.

**Week 6, May 2: The Mythic Quest**
- The role of myths in awakening the spiritual impulse and recovering the sense of meaning and deeper reality lost in the
complexities of modern life.

There are no required texts, but suggested readings for those interested in learning more about various approaches to myth will be available in the course materials.