

Never without a story – why?

Our paraphrase (The Message) reads: “[Jesus] was never without a story when he spoke.” One of my first ever Kindergarten reports read: ‘Nikolai is never more attentive than when he is listening to stories.’

Have you ever wondered why storytelling is so important and powerful? **[bombed out city of Berlin – I’m patting a dog – last words: Do I have to leave – I don’t eat very much] Davy Crocket & pedestrian crossing stories – the power of perception; ‘what happens in the home stays in the home what happens in the school stays in the school’]. Confusion, devastation distraction, trauma. Point is, which stories do we listen to?**

Unsurprisingly, our Torres Strait Islander and First Nation peoples, the oldest cultures in the world who have sat around fires for thousands and thousands of years – maybe 80,000 and more – they know “the *who* and *where* and *how* I shall be” and their advice to us is this based on two ways of knowing **[brief reflection on “to know” and to know = “kennen lernen” “wissen”] two ways of knowing – a different way of knowing: an intellectual way of knowing [“wissen”], and intuitive way of knowing [“kennen lernen”].**

My sense is that we understand best when we work intuitively first and then play catch-up with reason. And Jesus, it seems, worked

that way too: appealing to our emotional intelligence, and then justifying it by reason (cf. Come let us reason together, says the Lord ...).

Like our Torres Strait Islanders and First Nations peoples, as Debra Dank reveals in *We come with this place*, reveals in her tribute to family and to the Gudanji Country (Echo publishing) *here is Australia as it has been ... and Australia as it became... but also Australia as it could and should be*):

Stories sit in many places, and

- **they talk us *into* our place.** They talk us *into* this land the way they did with all our old people. And
- **when we practise *obligation** and *reciprocity**,** those same stories teach us to listen to the wind playing in the grasses and the clouds *making signs*, **because those old people are sending stories still.**
- **Listen and think and feel and see and believe carefully, all together, at the same time,** and let that feeling soak into your bones.
- **Leave it there *until that story is the place that grows you*** - from the inside out - making your bones and body strong until it is time to return that strength to our earth.
- **Know this story and keep it in your body, swallow each sip of it deeply just as this country drinks in the first rains.**

As we proceed with what is in effect a contemplative exercise let us bear those insights in mind and let us pray George Appleton's prayer, often cited in the *Northumbria community prayers*, two great traditions meeting together united as one – as it should be:

Give [us] a candle of the Spirit, O God, as [we] go down into the deeps of [our] being. Show [us] the hidden things, the creatures of [our] dreams, the storehouse of [our] forgotten memories and hurts.

Take [us] down to the spring[s] of [our] life and tell [us] [our] nature and [our] name. Give [us] freedom to grow, so that [we] may become that self,

the seed of which You planted in [us] at [our] making. Out of the depths [O God] we cry to You...

As we come to our Gospel reading again, let us first tease out some of the salient features of Jesus' stories.

We notice, for example, that the world of God (I prefer this rather than 'kingdom'), is like a person who "throws seed on a field" and then "goes to bed and forgets all about it."

Secondly, we observe that the world of God and the person's encounter with it is like the seed itself, of which the person also is utterly unaware. So much so that even when this person sees the first green stem of growth, and then the bud and then the ripened grain and... *then* the whole harvest which follows, they are left dumbfounded, with no idea still of what's happening to them, really/actually going on when they are face to face with God.

All they can do, it seems, is to stand aside and marvel in wonder at the mystery of it all.

In the second story, the world of God is likened to 'an acorn'. And like the 'seed,' no one can take credit for what it *is* or how, from the tiniest of beginnings, it has evolved into such a massive oak tree that huge eagles can make their nest (a nest from which wise eagle parents tear up the nest and cause their fledglings to fly).

How, then, do we make sense of these remarks about stories, especially stories about the world of God and the Person of God, both unlike anything *else* or any other *person* we might *think* we know?

Coming completely from *left field* but **equally compelling** is this **explanation of story** from a Harvard man William Flesch, Professor of English now at Stanford.

He has his own connection to make in his book, drawing on Michael Leiris (1938 and 1946) and the question *he* asks is this:

whether storytelling might not be like the Matador in a bullfight, exposing the storyteller to a danger comparable to what the bull's horn threatens the matador with.

Should we dismiss this as mere *metaphor*?

Flesch certainly insists that the storyteller – the matador and the writer – are themselves examples of a real danger. He observes that they, the Matador and the bull, are examples of not only the danger of storytelling but of our entire evolutionary past (cf. Jesus Emmaus coverage of a violent Jewish historical past “Why should you be surprised?” he says to the men’s troubled and confused minds and hearts:

of the *general biological imperative* to court real danger, to court *others* by courting danger. Costly signalling is dangerous, **and if [storytelling] has an aspect of costly signalling to it, its most agonised modes may at least be as continuous with what the bullfighter does.**¹

¹ *Comeuppance, Costly Signalling, Altruistic Punishment and Other Biological Components of Fiction*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England, 2007: 143.

Why such a bizarre connection? *Because*, he continues, ‘The truth is the violence of the world. We could say... that this sort of truth – in a deep sense a literary one – is the extreme cost humans pay for being human.’²

And pertinently for us tonight as listeners and readers, we also bear something of that cost when we are asked to know the truth, and *that truth* in particular being,

[the] ravenous extent to which being in the world involves cooperating in violence not only violence against defectors, against those from other populations... but cooperating in violence against oneself or members of one’s own group. ³

In other words to tell the truth is to absorb the fact that imbedded in the truth *is* an intrinsic and unexpected violence.

Perhaps the Matador image will make more sense when we take into account Jesus’ explanation in Matthew 13 that:

¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that they (those spreading disinformation plotting his death) “see with the eyes of their understanding but do not perceive, and hearing [they’re not actually] listen[ing], [that’s why] they [don’t] understand.”

As , chillingly concedes, “In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it.”

² Ibid, p.143.

³ Ibid, 144.

And that's why, we could say, using the Matador image... in the present state of mind being what it is, Jesus must deliberately mesmerise them with *ambiguity* as they listen, so they won't gore him to death, which is what they would do if they had half a chance.

He'll save such a "catastrophic disclosure" for another time when he knows it's his time and not theirs.

Flesch writes:

What is the Matador confident of? That the bull will recognize that confidence. If it doesn't the bull [would] still be able to kill him. This a costly signal on the matador's part: the cost is the high risk he takes of death. His contemptuous confidence signals the bull that his charges and snorting have been in vain. It is an honest signal as well, correctly warning the bull away from wasting further energy on charging... that the bull's aggression is unavailing.⁴

We conclude with Debra Dank's parting words and the haunting question which affected Jesus' country and ours, and *our* world:

- always take care when you place your feet in this earth, and in this water the old people have lived here, they have died here too, and it is their bones that make the dust that blows across the plains and
- **their story that you breathe into your body**
- they watch at your shoulder as you travel to other places and sometimes their whisper plays its way into your ears
- someone has walked this way before and as you walk yourself into their footprints,
- **their story becomes yours.**
- Keep it sitting inside and hold it there because awful things are being done to our country and one day it may not be able to tell us anymore.
- **And then, what will happen to our Country, our body?**

⁴ Ibid, 76.

[my Matador story]
[Thomas Merton's encounter with Japanese Zen Buddhist monk]
[Julian of Norwich and her acorn]