WEAVING TAPESTRIES TOGETHER AT THE LOOM: CONVERGENCES AND PARADOXES

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Contexts

Ten years ago, I encountered six searchers after meaning. In the liminal spaces of our conversations together we wove the tapestries of their lives at the loom.

There was Brigid, a young woman, married and with children, who worked at a Cancer Clinic and spoke of the ambiguities and pain which she shared with others and found in her own life. Catherine is a nun, an artist, a woman of my own age, for whom God, the 'Other', was a mystery. She faced the death of her father, the paradoxes of his own and her faith, the challenges of a Church undergoing deep change and the ambiguities of friendship. David was born a Jew in Europe. The son of migrants, he became a Christian during the first of many journeys into Asia. For him, transcending conflict and searching for structures and relationships that were paramount. Michael had been a priest who struggled for justice and peace in the days of the Vietnam War. 'Deep memories' of that struggle kept breaking in upon the telling of his life. Elizabeth had been a country girl who, five decades before, had come to the city to become a nun and had travelled a perplexing pathway through her life in religion. Now she was at peace with her God, the world and her dreams. Sarah was a woman of vision who found wisdom in the haunting images of dreams which had challenged her as she sought meaning in her earlier, maturing years.

Each of these encounters has led to vibrant threads of meaning which we traced out in the tapestries of their telling and beyond. These conversations, for them, were times for recollecting. For me they have become a journey of transformation, echoing those hero journeys of earlier, primal ages and of more recent times. They

have led me to explore my own 'Traveller' myth, which is to follow.

Let us explore convergences and paradoxes about the nature of storytelling as a way for us to make meaning. Here we engage in exchanges with some contemporary writers who have searched out deeper meanings through exploring metaphor. The maps which these writers invite us to employ are constructed from larger, often ancient systems and pathways.

We shall explore here two recent books: Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Women who run with wolves: Contacting the power of the wild woman* (1992), and Jean Houston's *The hero and the goddess: The Odyssey as mystery and initiation* (1992).

This weaving of narratives has a context in the lives of these searchers and myself. The tellers and others remind us of that truth:

> ... Our development is interdependent with the development of other human beings ...

And,

> ... We have no life story independently of other life stories which have laid the foundations for the very possibility of our story (Navone, 1990: 148,148).

Contemporary writers remind us, too, of larger contexts of myth and metaphor within which our life stories reverberate.

This is not simply a romantic yearning for those primal human myths. The seeking of mythic echoes has a larger moral purpose. Jean Houston reminds us that an ancient myth such as *The Odyssey* speaks 'with stunning relevance to us and to our time', when we are faced with 'the drama of whole system transition our planet is undergoing'. Since, in our generation, the interlinked 'density and intimacy of the global village' has intensified, and our knowledge and technological capacity have multiplied, giving us untoward power 'over the primordial issues of life and death', we require a deepening spirituality and a heightened sense of the direction of our lives. So that we may 'do the work of rebuilding the Earth in whatever way is appropriate for us all', we need to draw in fresh ways on the wisdom and 'experience of our inner and outer worlds'

' ... [We] have to become protean — able to transform and extend ourselves in body, mind and spirit' (1992: 306).

A pathway into this needed sensitivity and consciousness can grow from weaving into our lives the challenges and journeys of those who went before and whose accomplishments are sung and retold in those 'Dreaming' stories of our ancestors — myths, legends and tales which these writers explore as sources of human wisdom and understanding.

Women Who Run With Wolves

After the experience of those conversations with my companions in telling and listening together more than a decade ago, I am convinced that we fashioned with each other special, liminal spaces within which we practised the art of narrative and attentive listening, to which Clarissa Pinkola Estés invites us. In such spaces, away from the pressures of our daily lives, we were able to become attentive to those life-enhancing waters flowing beneath the river of our lives, what Estes terms *Rio Abajo Rio*, 'this river beneath the river' (1992:31). These are encounters to treasure. They challenged and enriched us. That enrichment was partly due to the opportunities given to weave together the stories of our lives. Estés is suggesting that enhancement came to us from other sources, that 'storytelling is bringing up, hauling up; it is not an idle practice' (1992: 463).

One tale which Estés explores is 'Sealskin, Soulskin', a tale from Nordic and Arctic zones. It tells of a lonely fisherman who encounters a group of seal women, singing and playing on a rock, out of their sealskins. By hiding the skin of the most beautiful seal woman, he persuades her to be his companion and wife, on the understanding that she must return to her home, in the depths of the sea, after seven years with him. They have a child between them. After seven years, the fisherman refuses to return her sealskin to his wife and he leaves their house in anger. The child is called in a dream one night, and is led to his mother's skin which he brings back to her. Together they go down to her home under the sea. She later returns him to his earth home, promising to be with him and to breath wind into his lungs for the singing of his songs. As the child grows to man, he becomes a great drummer, singer and maker of stories. Sometimes people see him kneeling upon a rock near the sea 'seeming to speak to a certain female seal

who often comes near the shore'. No seal hunters can ever snare her whom they call *Tanqigcaq*, 'the bright one, the holy one'. Some say that though they know her to be a seal, 'her eyes are capable of portraying those human looks, those wise and wild and loving looks' (*ibid*: 262).

Estés interprets this as a woman's initiation tale, by which women enter their initiation path through the loss of their sealskin:

> The pelt in this story is not so much an article as the representation of a ... state of being — one that is cohesive, soulful ...

Having lost that state, her sealskin, she seeks it again in order to restore a sense of her deeper self:

> This great cycle of going and returning, going and returning, is reflexive within the instinctual nature of women and is innate to all women ... We lose the soulskin by becoming too involved with ego, by being too exacting ... or driven by a blind ambition ... (*ibid*: 265, 266).

The lonely fisherman of this tale represents the ego which

> is attempting to participate in the life of the soul. But... he is not particularly built for it, and tries to grab the soul rather than develop a relationship with it... Like other lonely or hungry things, it loves the light ...
>
> Even though it cannot live under the water, it has its own yearning for relationship with the soul (*ibid*: 271).

From the cohabitation of the seal woman and the lonely fisherman a spirit child emerges. This child:

> is *la nina milagrosa*, a miracle child, who has the ability to hear the call, hear the far-off voice that says it is time to come back, back to oneself ...
>
> It is the child who brings the sealskin, soulskin back to his mother. It is the child who enables her to return to her home.

> This ... impels us to ... change our lives, better the community, join in helping to balance the world ... all by returning to home ... (*ibid*: 273).

This tale reinforces Estés' insight about our need to recognise and be attentive to the river of the spirit flowing beneath the waters of everyday appearances. She is inviting us to go beyond paradoxes, surface meanings, to be in touch with deeper realities which course through our lives. She employs metaphors drawn from strands of storytelling which have grown in different cultures, among diverse peoples throughout human history.

She reminds me of truths which I had encountered in listening to elders chant traditions to younger people in Papua New Guinea:

> In my traditions there is a storyteller legacy, wherein one storyteller hands down his or her stories to a group of "seeds". "Seeds" are storytellers who the master hopes will carry on the tradition as they learned it. How the "seeds" are chosen is a mysterious process that defies exact definition, for it is not based on a set of rules, but rather on relationship. People chose one another, sometimes they come to us, but more often we stumble over each other and both recognize the other as though over eons ...

You could say that Brigid, Catherine, David, Michael, Elizabeth, Sarah and I stumbled on each other, came in touch more by chance than design, were led by some means to each other. So we are our stories. Michael confirmed once that we were "seeds" for each other and for the communities which shaped us. He recalled my time in Papua New Guinea listening to old men telling oral traditions. He saw me as an elder to whom people told their stories, and so we grew as people through the telling of these stories and their transmission to a wider audience.

For Clarissa Pinkola Estés, many strands converge in the tapestries which people weave through their telling of stories. Stories for her, and now for us, are songlines, seeds, pathways to Dreaming. Through her teaching, we have a sense of deep paradox, where light and dark are one. When telling our stories to each other, and listening intently to one another, we sense that these narrative forms are themselves vehicles, seeds, which are pathways for teller and listener to concatenations of other stories;

pathways which lead to and resonate with rivers flowing below rivers. They are songlines which put us in touch with the Dreaming of our ancestors and which draw together into one song all the varied notes of the chorus of creation.

The Hero and the Goddess: the Odyssey

Jean Houston begins her exploration of *The Odyssey as Mystery and Initiation* with a challenge:

> Working with, and playing with, the world's great myths and stories can change our lives. Totally.

She invites us to engage vigorously in an active reading of this great myth as if it were:

> the story of your own journey, your own initiation. As if the story held clues and codes to illumine your life and help enhance your human possibilities ... (1992: xiii, xiv).

She takes us on a 'journey of transformation' with Odysseus (whose name in Greek means 'trouble') as he travels with his companions from Troy through many adventures and challenges, until, many years later, he returns to his home in Ithaca and is reunited with his beloved wife Penelope and their son Telemachus, who was a newborn baby when Odysseus departed, years before, for battle at Troy.

As my companions in conversation and I discovered, storytelling is at the heart of our human existence. She invites us into a pathway leading from stories to myths and archetypes.

Myths bring us to a world beyond the daily world of the surface which we can so easily inhabit.

Living as we do in a time of transition, we can still be drawn by the power of myth, which 'still beckons to us like a strange and beautiful country seen through the mist', but which only retreats again 'when we have approached too near'.

> Myth remains closer than breathing, nearer than our hands and feet ... It winds its way through the labyrinthine pathways of our brain, codes itself into our cells, plays games with our genes, incarnates us in the womb, weaves through the

> roles and rituals of our lives, and finds denouement with our death. Myth waters our every conscious act. It is the very sea of the unconscious.

So our myths, our songlines, our Dreaming, like those larger frameworks within which the tapestries of our lives are woven, are 'source patterns originating in the ground of our being'. They are 'the DNA of the human psyche'.

> ... These primal patterns unfold in our daily lives as culture, mythology, religion, art, architecture, drama, ritual, epic, social customs, and even mental disorders (*ibid*: 7).

Her practice, in which she invites us to participate, in company with Odysseus and his crew, brings this ancient myth into the heart of our lives. We need to taste a little of what she offers.

She has exercises for each episode. In an opening exercise we explore together the first adventure of Odysseus and his companions, their sacking of the Island of Ismarus, an example of 'the call as blunder'. There follow four steps. First she reflects how her own life manifests a call to growth, risk and change: the call-blunder as a personal historical happening and the call-blunder as a chronic character defect. In each instance she feels that she has been led into a rich and varied life. Then she invites participants to recall a critical choice in their lives which they and others considered to be a blunder, and a character trait they believe caused them to blunder, and to trace out the paths leading from these.

Next, in pairs, they tell each other their story as Odysseus told his story to the Phaeacians on that long evening thousands of years ago'.

After this telling and listening, she invites all to write out their story 'but to do so with verve and rich language, as if you were a Homeric bard writing your own story'.

She suggests that,:

> By telling it Homerically ... and writing it down, you make your life epic. Patterns of your life reveal themselves poetically, in ways they are rarely seen.

This is, for participants, not therapy but *therapeia,* which in Greek:

> means "support" and "caring". But it also carries a secondary meaning — "doing the work of the god" — or, in our terms, doing the work of the whole ... (*op. cit.*:98).

We are invited to be companions with Odysseus on his heroic 'journey of transformation'. Thomas Moore would call this 'caring for our souls' (1992): we are placed experientially in touch with this epic myth and its hero and we act out age-old truths and discoveries about ourselves, our lives, and our world. There is an echo here of a truth revealed in the telling of my companions:

> In the Discovery of the Larger Story, we become willing to see individual lives as part of a Greater Life, and everyone and everything we meet upon the way as essential participants in the unfolding myth of life on Earth (*ibid..*: 77).

Convergences between these two writers are clear: they draw from larger metaphors, mythologies to explore new possibilities for our growth as human persons.

And paradoxes? We could go on living our lives as though they had not written. Who knows where that might lead us? Or we could admit that what they teach and envisage strikes deep chords of resonance for us. They are inviting us into age-old, new territories of consciousness, and each invitation means leaving the warm comforts of familiarity and voyaging out into the deep, with its untold reefs, storms, uncertainties. And perhaps these invitations contain that ultimate paradox: that we must let go, venture out, lose to find. Like that grain of wheat laid in warm Mother Earth, we must fall and die,to old, familiar ways of being, in order to bring forth life. There is that other risk: that these insights and teachings which have life and promise will be taken and exchanged for easy, facile, fundamental simplicities which mock and distort them. The choice is with us, as with all those who went before us and whose stories and journeys we embody in the fabric of our lives.

Through mining deep into stories, hauling them up and contacting the power of the Wild Woman in all of us, we have recovered the age-old sense in which story 'shows us the way,

down, or up, or for our trouble, cuts us fine wide doors in previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland' (1992: 20), our Dreaming. Having travelled through hazards, challenges, darkness and desire in company with Odysseus, we are invited to return to the welcome embrace of the faithful Penelope.

Meantime, as we journey together, speaking and listening to each other, we will continue together to weave tapestries at the looms of our lives. Now, on this side, in the spacetime of our lives, with their paradoxes, pains, their darkness and light, we are drawn by that deep desire to tell and to listen. The threads, strands, veins and sometimes confusions become apparent. But we glimpse patterns, meanings, the other side.

My six companions for the journey and these writers, and all those others to whom my companions and their stories lead us, all together affirm that telling and listening to stories is a great human treasure which we have inherited, that we must recover, uncover, if it has been hidden or forgotten.

Storytelling is not only a pathway to making meaning in what is often a perplexing and difficult world. It is a node, a crossroad, a turning, and opening in the present. Through our stories we bring generations of stories and journeys from those who have gone before and from those whom we encounter on our own journeys. This is a pathway to our Dreaming, and to healing and liberation for ourselves and our world and the world of our children.

This ending is our beginning, and our future is in our encounters together with our pasts. By beginning the conversation we shall come alive to all kinds of possibilities not tapped before. And then, having entered that undiscovered country together we shall know this place, this Land, and ourselves for the first time. Then (to echo a Cheyenne initiation chant), our hearts 'will be like sun coming up on a summer morning' (Turner, 1992:117).

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