A Winter's Tale; Myth, Story and Organisations

Geoff Mead

This is
not the beginning . . .

Two or three days after Petruska invites me to contribute a paper to this edition of Self & Society *I decide to go for a long solitary walk in the countryside to think about whether I have anything worth saying. The ground is covered with about two inches of snow and fine snowflakes are drifting in the wind. As I walk, I reflect on the nature of myth and story and how they relate to life in organisations and to my work as a consultant.*

I am getting more and more excited as I walk through the snow, musing, thinking, looking around and taking in the bleak beauty of the bare fields and woodlands and enjoying the physical sensation of movement and the cold air against the warmth of my body. As ideas and images come to me I dictate them into a pocket tape recorder. Later I will try to work them into some more coherent form.

I love the sheer power of story to intrigue and fascinate. It has nuance and resonance beyond any abstract concept or model. It feeds a primal hunger and draws us deep inside itself. Good stories have infinite possibility — they have shape and form, pace and flow and yet, at any point, can suddenly move in unexpected and unpredictable directions, unfolding moment by moment like the quantum universe in which they live.

Gareth Morgan, one of the most imaginative and creative of today's writers on organisations, identifies the potential of metaphors and stories to reconcile paradox and to transform our understanding of organisational dilemmas. Of course, no single metaphor or story captures the richness and complexity of human endeavour. Fortunately, we are blessed with an inexhaustible supply, both new and old.

Myths, legends and fairy stories are especially powerful because they are about the enduring themes of human life — love, death, choice, fate, grief, folly, joy — and because they have been filtered through an oral tradition for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years like water through peat to become sweet and clear. I think of these old stories as essential oils; rich, aromatic, and natural compared to the chemically processed designer cologne of newly invented tales.

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When we think of ourselves as characters in a shared story, as opposed to the central characters in our own individual biographies, it provides us with new forms of relationship and the possibility of change. We can always ask 'what if . . .', and write another chapter. I have sometimes used myths and fairy stories in this way to help unlock organisations from fixed and sterile positions.

I recall, at a management conference some years ago, reading the story 'Old Sultan', by the Brothers Grimm, to a group of fifty managers and asking them to relate it to their own organisations. Sultan was an old dog who had lost his teeth. His master decided that, despite his many years of faithful service, he was no longer able to frighten away thieves and that he should be put down. The dog heard his master planning his demise and sought the aid of his old friend the wolf. The next day, as agreed between them, the wolf pretended to make off with the master's young baby and Sultan rushed after to bring the child safely back home. In gratitude, the master declared that not a hair of Sultan's head should be harmed and that he should sleep on his own pillow and have food and shelter as long as he should live. The wolf expected that, in return for his help, Sultan would turn a blind eye if he should steal the odd sheep or two, but Sultan would have none of it, saying 'I must remain true to my master'. Of course, the wolf did not believe him and was astonished when Sultan's warning bark alerted his master who gave the wolf a fine hiding with the threshing flail. And so the story goes on . . .

The audience found many connections and resonances with organisational life. For some it was an allegory for down-sizing and redundancy, for others it represented a clash of values between loyalty and opportunism, for yet others the tussle over the baby was a metaphor for the fate of some grand new project. There was much laughter and excitement at seeing their own condition in a different light and some, despite the brevity of the exercise, left with new hope and inspiration.

I have been walking for about two miles and settling to a steady rhythm when I see small tracks in the snow, crossing the lane in front of me. I look up and see my old friend Hare in the field to my left. We both stand still and stare at each other in a moment of mutual recognition and then he is off, loping across the field, terribly exposed against the stark, white background. As I watch his irregular progress, the phrase 'story is metaphor in motion' comes to mind.

It is the movement inherent in story, added to the complexity and richness of association that cause it to be such a powerful way of making meaning from happenstance. It is precisely because stories are concrete and particular that their energy is so vital and concentrated. When we take this energy into organisations, for example by describing actual events and relationships in terms of a story, we are enriching the field of creative possibilities — a process I sometimes call complexifying simplicity (contradicting the everyday management practice of simplifying complexity). If the story is sufficiently intriguing, it can spellbind us out of left-brained stuckness into new and imaginative solutions.

I was once consultant to a regional management team of a major national public service which was struggling to cope with some difficult internal dynamics at the same time as coming to terms with very damaging externally imposed reor-

ganisation. The five members of the team each seemed to be locked into their own narrow perspective, without any common understanding of their situation. After interviewing all five at length and meeting them together, I had a sudden strong intuitive image of them playing out an ancient drama. I saw John, the chief executive, as monarch of a mediaeval kingdom torn between the demands of his own provincial court and his duties as lord-in-waiting at the great king's court in London. The other directors were his courtiers. Alice was his oft-deserted regal consort who cared deeply for her people and was also capable of manipulation and skulduggery on behalf of her favourites. Adam, just appointed, was newly come to court, recently knighted and conscious of the need to earn his spurs. He was somewhat in awe of Lawrence, a swashbuckling knight errant who had seen the wide world and felt uncomfortable in the service of a petty king. Finally, George, the oldest member of the team, was the king's counsellor, feared for his subtlety and ruthlessness, with influence in many parts of the realm as well as at court. I liked to think of myself as the court jester — the wise fool — although those with a more cynical view of consultants might question my wisdom!

This story allowed me to disentangle myself from the complex interplay of personalities and see the whole in a fresh and playful way. By de-personalising the relationships it allowed the 'actors' to step out of character, view themselves differently and project themselves into imaginary futures. Provided such a story is told with humour and respect, the storyteller can avoid the risk of causing offence or rejection. Also, I have found that I can generally trust the accuracy and relevance of such a sharp, unpremeditated insight. Story is, perhaps, the oldest way of making meaning and I consider that helping clients make new meaning for themselves lies at the heart of good organisational consultancy, as it does of good therapy.

Myth and story go beyond mere explanation and give us access to our inner wisdom. They help us escape from the confines of linear, rational thinking. This is absolutely vital if we are to embrace the chaos and complexity of post-modern life and not stick our heads in the sands of reductionism. Contrary to literary convention, stories (at least myths, legends and fairy stories — which are essentially non-literary) do not have a linear form with beginning, middle and end. Such stories are fragments of the never-ending story. They are currents and eddies in the great sea of stories. They exist independently of any person — a fact recognised in those cultures where the storyteller thanks the story and bids it farewell until the next time it is told. Nor must we typecast ourselves in one role in one story. Our psyches contain all the characters and all the plots of all the stories — even those dark, murderous aspects of the shadow that we hesitate to own — and so too do our organisations.

So I come to a third way in which story can contribute to working with organisations, by putting us in touch with the mysterious, the sacred and the transpersonal in our everyday lives. This can result from identification with, or openness to, mythological and archetypal figures and forces. Whenever I have helped clients to take such notions seriously, they have invariably found the experience both powerful and moving. There is much talk of the need for 'vision' in organisations — but what good is a 'vision' if not rooted in a

sense of higher purpose? It need not be expressed in grandiose terms, but unless at some level it touches the soul it will have little effect.

My best work as a consultant is inspired by a strong sense of connection to Hermes. Indeed I often think of consultancy as 'Hermaion', meaning a gift of Hermes, described by Murray Stein as the god of 'journeyers, of boundaries and of boundary situations, who transfers messages and communications among the realms; the god of passages from one dimension of existence to another, from life to death and from death to life, who in alchemy becomes the master of transformations... In Hermes we may find companionship on the paths that appear from nowhere, and may lead anywhere.' I have rarely seen or heard such a good description of the consultant's way, and I look to Hermes as guardian and patron of our work.

The poet David Whyte, in his marvellous book *The Heart Aroused*, talks of the need to invite our souls back into the workplace — both for the sake of our sanity, and for the passion and creativity that they contain. I believe that the use of myth, legend and fairy story is one way to send that invitation. Soul relates directly to story, as the mind relates to ideas, and the heart to people. Our relationship to story does not have to be academic or well-informed (even though classical scholarship sometimes appears to be a requirement for Jungian analysts!). All we really need to do is to listen and allow our imagination free rein.

At this point I turn up the long hill back to the village hall where I have parked my car and for the last mile or so concentrate on the business of walking. The only sounds on my tape recorder now are my breathing and the rustle of my jacket. Halfway there I kneel wordlessly by the bank, transfixed by the beauty of the snow flakes. Gradually my eyes focus on one particular flake about a millimetre across and for a long minute I gaze at its fractal glory. On an impulse, I lean forward and dissolve it on the tip of my tongue — our stories touch for an instant and are commingled for eternity.

And this
is not the end...

Further Reading

Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*, Sage, 1986

Gareth Morgan, *Imaginization*, Sage, 1993

Murray Stein, *In MidLife: A Jungian Perspective*, Spring Publications, 1983

David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused*, Currency Doubleday, 1994