

## PATHWAYS TO 'DREAMING': EXPLORATIONS IN STORYTELLING

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### Prologue

The practice and art of storytelling is fundamental to human existence.

To affirm that stance, I begin by telling an autobiographical story 'A gift of friendship' (see Appendix).

If we were now sitting around a meal table or by a fire, sharing food and drink, I imagine my telling would move others, and they would tell stories of their own. Through this exchange, the mustard seed of my story would grow into a large tree in whose shade we would sit, drawn into a community of strangers and friends. Just as I am drawn into the presence of Justin and of Mahler and into the company of the spirits of other friends and makers of music before them, so this sharing in storytelling would put us in touch with those we celebrate and with many human beings now and before us.

Justin's story, reverberates in most of us, if not all. It brings us close to that sense of which the Roman poet Vergil sang in his *Aeneid*: *sunt lacrimae rerum* (perhaps translated by 'there are the tears of things').

I could argue something obvious, that you would not deny, in your quieter moments: that the telling of stories is an essential mark of being human. Religion, art, oral tradition, history, dance, music and song, friendship, love, writing, poetry - all these express a deep human desire and need for storytelling.

Even physical and medical sciences, with their formal and logical discourse, tap into this vein, though they may disguise their art in symbols, forms and structures which seem to deny their original roots in storytelling. I could argue, too, that, as our world becomes swamped with visual images from electronic media, given their focus on soapies and the latest news stories, we may be being robbed of the time and capacity to generate our own stories to each other. And I would conclude that, to regain our humanity, we need to recapture, and enrich our capacities as tellers of stories to each other.

To return to the spirit of my story about Justin, who was poet,

philosopher and scientist, I will begin reflecting on a text about storytelling which I recently encountered, then move to responding to some texts which reflect on storytelling, myths, songlines and aspects of Australian Aboriginal 'dreaming'.

Finally, I shall open up some possibilities for crafting a Australian identity and spirituality, are rooted in 'Dreaming' from indigenous and other sources.

### Exploring a contemporary text

This text is *Waterland*, a novel by Graham Swift about the Fens in East Anglia.

A history teacher, a child of the Fens, in his fifties, is faced with forced retirement ('the end of history') and his wife's removal to a psychiatric clinic, after she has been found guilty of stealing a baby in a supermarket. The teller-teacher weaves fragments about the reclamation of land in the Fens, his family, their history in the making of this 'waterland,' together with stories of crises in his own life. These crises include a boy's murder by drowning in a canal in the 1940s, the death by suicide of his own elder 'brother,' and his own teaching of history to students in the 1980s. For the narrator, Tom Crick, one of the central realities in human existence is that we are 'story-telling animals', driven by a passion to explain the pains and ambiguities of our lives to whomever might listen.

Tom Crick is haunted by history. He seeks healing and escape from these ghosts by his obsessive telling of stories. By communicating with others around him, through his storytelling, he gains some moments of relief. His listeners become less and less present to this storyteller, with shattering consequences for him.

This protagonist is seeking to piece together his fragmented life, to 'explain' what has happened, 'whywhywhy'. This is an activity which is concentrated in his final days in the classroom. We readers are always addressed by him as 'children'. Personal, family and Fens history breaks into what he should be teaching according to the required school syllabus, the French Revolution.

His creed has revealing features:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man - let me offer you a definition - is a story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there is a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall - or when he's about to drown - he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

And when he sits with leisure but no less terror, in the midst of catastrophe, when he sits ... in his fall-out bunker; or when he only sits alone because his wife of over thirty years who no longer knows him, nor he her, has been taken away, and because his school children, his children, who once, ever reminding him of the future, came to his history lessons, are no longer there, he tells - if only to himself, if only to an audience he is forced to imagine - a story. (Swift, 1983: 53.54)

At the core of this text is a strong sense that the practice and art of storytelling lies at the heart of human existence.

This practice is exposed as a many-layered and complex art, not as a simple, single narrative. Complexity is represented by the three forms of artistic expression: fragmented, shifting narrative; rapidly flowing scenes which blend different chronological foci; and cinematic flashbacks between the present and past, held together by the narrator's art. This writer/artist has created a medium through which to express the truth that some people are compelled to tell stories as a way towards healing and liberation. But he also creates a sense in which this activity is a natural human endeavour.

The narrator assumes the role of tribal/community elder, whose task is to endow a rising generation with the myths he carries.

This text has us, as readers, witness to the need for every storyteller to have listeners and that, for storytelling to become an act of liberation and healing, it needs to take place in spaces and contexts where the telling can flow and the listening be active.

## Responding to reflective texts

### *Care of the soul*

First, some fragments from the fascinating book by Thomas Moore, *Care of the soul: How to add depth and meaning to your everyday life*:

In memory we never tire of reflecting on the same events. I spent many summers in my childhood on a farm with an uncle who told stories endlessly. This, I now see, was his method of working the raw material of his life, his way of turning his experience round and round in the rotation that stories provide. Out of that incessant storytelling I know he found added depths of meaning. Storytelling is an excellent way of caring for the soul. It helps us see the themes that circle in our lives, the deep themes that tell the myths we live ... (1992: 13).

Notice that his insight about the ways in which storytelling allows us to work the raw material of our lives, comes itself from that early experience of listening in summers to his uncle telling 'stories endlessly'. Reflecting back through his own life as a psychotherapist, Thomas Moore affirms that his uncle found 'added depths of meaning' from within that 'incessant storytelling' of his. Now the healer attests that storytelling not only lies at the heart of human living, but that through it we are placed in touch with an inner life. Through storytelling we have an 'excellent way of caring for the soul'. This has a wider context and meaning in that storytelling both enables us to sense themes that circle our lives, and these 'deep themes' express 'myths we live'. In other words, since we come from lines of storytellers, this practice and art begins to uncover for us ancient and perennial truth stories or myths that we have inherited as members of the human family journeying through the earth. In an Australian context, as potential sharers in Aboriginal culture, we could call these myths embedded in our lives and stories, our 'songlines'.

Later in *Care of the Soul*, the physician Thomas Moore addresses issues concerning 'The Body's Poetics of Illness'. His plea is for us to approach illness in our bodies with imagination and intuition, attending to what our inner lives, our souls, are seeking to communicate to us

through bodily symptoms.

I am reminded of Freud's office with its celebrated collection of ancient art pieces. As the traditional medicine of many peoples demonstrates, disease can be treated with images. The patient, for her part, needs to see the images of her healing, just as any of us in distress might look for the stories and images wrapped in our complaints... (ibid.: 170, 171).

Further, he proposes:

... [We] might place more importance on the stories we tell about our illnesses and the history of our bodies. We might notice dreams that occur at time of an illness ... (ibid.: 170).

I am reminded of my own response to a severe bout of pneumonia in the early 1980s. It weakened me and made me feel quite vulnerable. One of the ways in which I sought to recover strength and a sense of meaning was to reflect on the patterns of my own previous responses to serious illness, to make jottings and to sit, at the end of the day, regaling my wife with stories of these happenings. I also began the serious and regular practice of meditation, that time when we engage storytelling, dreaming and journeying beyond the surface into deeper territory.

Moore is telling us that stories are central and that we need to be attentive, attuned to music, poetry, myth and image born in stories. We need to be alert explorers as we move through territories into which stories invite us.

### *The Songlines*

When I first came upon a review of Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987,1988) in the *Age* (Saturday Extra, 8 August, 1987), accompanied by one of Michael Leunig's more remarkable depictions, of an Australian landscape covered with Dreaming tracks and travellers bent on journeys past waterholes, trees, mountains, I felt we had arrived at new insights about the ancestors of the Dreaming.

Since the publication of his book the word *Songlines* has quickly become incorporated in general discourse. It is fascinating that this accomplished writer chose as the medium for communicating his discoveries, a fictional, a storytelling form, dazzling in its vigour and

style, not a formal ethnographic treatise.

The blending of music, order and landscape embodies the kernel of songlines. In the same year in which the book was first published in Britain, 1987, Michael Ignatieff published a conversation with Bruce Chatwin where the writer summed up what songlines meant for him.

The songlines are a labyrinth of invisible pathways which stretch to every corner of Australia. Aboriginal creation myths tell of the legendary totemic ancestors - part animal, part man - who create themselves and then set out on immense journeys across the continent, singing the name of everything that crosses their path and so singing the world into existence. In fact, there's hardly a rock or a creek or a stand of eucalyptus that isn't an 'event' on one or other of the songlines. In other words, the whole of Australia can be read as a musical score ... (1987: 30,31).

So much for abstract descriptions of those basic elements: creating ancestors, journeys, 'singing the world into existence' and the insight that 'the whole of Australia can be read as a musical score'.

In the book we are given a specific instance of the reality of songlines in contemporary Aboriginal culture:

Bruce and his friend Arkady are taken into the desert by elders to the place of Lizard Dreaming. After a campfire meal, 'the man in blue ... got to his feet and began to mime (with words of pidgin thrown in) the travels of the Lizard Ancestor'.

I don't know what species of lizard he was supposed to be: ... All I do know is that the man in blue made the most life-like lizard you could ever hope to imagine.

... He would claw his lizard-feet sideways, then freeze and cock his head. He would lift his lower lid to cover the iris, and flick out his lizard-tongue ... (1988: 117).

The dancer then pointed to a hill nearby and shouted: 'That ... that is where he is!' This performance lasted no more than three minutes.

This particular songline, tracing ancestor journeys, stretched from the Lizard place in Central Australia, south to Port Augusta 'roughly 1,000 miles'. Since most tribes spoke the language of their immediate neighbours, songlines could move from community to community. The link was the melodic structure, so that singers from different language groups could infuse their own words into words foreign to them.

A final exchange at the camp fire:

'So a musical phrase', I said, 'is a map reference?'. 'Music', said Arkady, 'is a memory bank for finding one's way about the world' (loc.cit.).

Songs moved along their songlines because of encounters between their owners. Songlines served as trading points.

Trade means friendship and cooperation; and for the Aboriginal the principal object of trade was song. Song, therefore, brought peace (ibid: 314).

Bruce Chatwin, in his travels as an inquiring nomad, encountered other manifestations of songlines.

Dance, song, story and land are intertwined, carrying the memory and imprint of Dreaming Ancestors. These Ancestors who sang creation into being are, perhaps, the creation of immigrants who themselves carried dance, song, story and memory from other lands, and so people have links with each other through space and time.

Songlines and their variants remind us that songs and stories, through which memory and vision are handed on across generations, are both central to our human existence, and have contexts and meanings beyond melodies and narrative lines.

A central issue in our seeking of some realistic and just forms of reconciliation between Aboriginal and more recent Australians, requires that we build bridges between their songlines and those which our ancestors brought with them to this land.

### *The Dreaming*

One of the fathers of Australian twentieth century anthropology, W.E.H. Stanner began his fieldwork in the 1930s in the Northern Territory. Not until the early 1950s did he distil the teachings he received from elders about what he called the Dreaming. Stanner's writing on the Dreaming has become the starting point for understanding and argument since its publication.

Here a few fragments, particularly those which touch on storytelling:

Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a

kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of *logos* or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man.

Dreaming stories are vehicles which, like dreams, put Aboriginal people in touch with mystery, are a bridge between the spirits of creation and living in the present.

Why the blackfellow thinks of 'dreaming' as the nearest equivalent in English is a puzzle. It may be because it is by the act of dreaming, as reality and symbol, that the Aboriginal mind makes contact ... with whatever mystery it is that connects The Dreaming and the Here-and-Now.

He ends with a caution, perhaps in the spirit of his teachers' warning him that as a white man he would find it difficult to comprehend their teaching.

These tales are neither simply illustrative nor simply explanatory; they are fanciful and poetic in content because they are based on visionary and intuitive insights into mysteries; and, if we are ever to understand them, we must always take them in their complex content. If, then, they make more sense to the poet, the artist, and the philosopher than to the clinicians of human life, let us reflect on the withering effect on sensibility of our pervasive rationalism, rather than depreciate the gifts which produced the Aboriginal imaginings.

As in the case of the songlines, the teaching is that Dreaming is embodied in and transmitted through songs, stories, dances and celebrations. Our land is inhabited by the hero and heroine ancestors and we become enlivened by their spirits through these songs, stories, dances. The gift of the original Australians to the daughters and sons of more recent immigrants to this land, from many places in the globe, is that quality, state, practice of *dadirri*, that 'inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness', of which the Aboriginal artist Miriam Rose Ungunmerr has written. This spirit is sustained both by our relationship with the earth and our attentive, open listening to stories 'told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by'. And the cycle is repeated; 'As we grow older, we ourselves become the story tellers' (1988: 9).

So we are led to the nub. Threads run through these texts:

\* Telling stories to each other keeps memories alive and links past and present, not only within our own selves and personal histories. This telling can build links between people, between generations; bridges between ourselves and our ancestors, the spirits of our land, our Dreaming.

\* Telling stories opens us to the sense of *dadirri*, to that 'inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness'. It is 'an excellent way of caring for the soul'. And it 'helps us see the themes that circle our lives, the deep themes that tell the myths we live ...'

\* Stories are a way of putting us in touch with the landscapes and rhythms of our peoples' songlines, the journeys, pathways and creative expressions of our ancestors' Dreaming.

\* For these reasons, telling our stories and listening to each other can open the way to healing and growth, can give us a sense of meaning and direction in lives, which are all too often chaotic and ambiguous.

These reflective texts and their teachings remind us that here in Australia, we inhabit a landscape of larger realities, 'a labyrinth of invisible [but no less real] pathways'. So, in terms of 'caring for our souls' in this land, of sensing 'the themes that circle our lives, the deep themes that tell the myths we live ...', we, no matter our heritage or culture, can sing our ancestors' songlines, can be in touch with their and our Dreaming.

We began with my telling you a story of friendship from my life. Exploring storytelling together will open pathways to shared Dreaming. To move beyond pious hopes to healing encounters that take care of our souls, will be possible once we work together to share, listen and respond to each other in communities and spaces which challenge us to recover together our storytelling capacities and gifts.

Now our task is to move on to create together these spaces, encounters and pathways. Here we stand together at the edge.

## APPENDIX

*A Gift of Friendship*

Mahler's "Song of the Earth" brought us together. We had met at a friend's place early in 1954. He was a scientist who wrote poems. We discussed theology and how to change the world. I was edging towards decisions that would lead me into the practice of history.

I went to his place one night with some friends. He had just brought a record of Kathleen Ferrier singing "Song of the Earth". Justin wanted us to hear "Der Abschied", the last movement.

He made us sit on the floor. Then he put out the lights.

The music began. Her voice was unlike any I had ever heard. Velvet, earthy and coming from a world on the other side of death. Her song was full of tears and hope. It was as though Mahler had a sense of his death and a longing for resurrection.

This song moved me to the core. We were all silent.

The music was a bond between us.

We went our different ways. There were infrequent letters over those decades, as he moved to Antarctica, to Melbourne, on to Canberra. Later I left Sydney, then to America and into the Pacific.

In 1980 we came to Canberra. By some strange irony, he went to Cambridge, and we moved into his house. There I could dip into his books, sit at his desk, hear his records. No signs of "Song of the Earth".

August 1981. My family and I had settled back in Australia. I came to Canberra for a conference. His voice was urgent on the phone. We must meet for lunch. There was something he had to tell me.

We met at the club, gathered up our food. His face was grey, his hands shook as he spoke across the untouched meal between us.

He recalled his grave illness in Cambridge. He had collapsed in the laboratory. They could not find the cause.

In those weeks of waiting in hospital for tests to reveal causes, he slipped between waking and sleeping.

And there was that nightmare.

He hung on the edge of a chasm in a starless night. In agony, his call for help pierced the dark. No reply. Darkness. Alone. No God. He nearly died of despair. That sense of silence and dark loneliness stayed with him for some time. Then it passed.

Its presence, reality and passing into hope was what he felt compelled to tell me. To prepare me.

That night we ate with his family. Dinner was over. He was restless. He said we might hear some music. The family had given him beautiful sound equipment for him to hear music.

It was Mahler again. He chose the "Resurrection Symphony": its final movement, a resounding hymn of praise and hope.

Justin and I sat listening. No lights out. But Mahler's other voice called out to us. He was seeing light across the chasm.

A few days later I returned home. Soon Justin, his wife and two children came to visit. In so far as his diminishing strength would allow, we went for walks and resumed our old agenda. An earlier conversation reached across the decades and came to a new balance. About Tolkien and his friends in their university days.

A last glimpse of him, his wave as he drove around the corner on the way back to Canberra. That was September. A phone call in October from his wife told me the diagnosis was clear: A brain tumour.

I kept in touch by phone. Then, I called on Christmas day. She told me he had died peacefully that morning.

Through those years Justin had spoken to me in conversations, leading me and responding to my questions. Now I knew he had another voice. That was Mahler's. In that music Justin spoke of farewells, tears, hope and resurrection. Music was his gift to me.

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