The power of story and myth – the genesis of an approach to healing

by Paul Rebillot

Story

Once someone asked Gregory Bateson how we would know when the computer was actually able to think as a human being. He thought for a moment and then said: "The day when someone proposes a question to the computer, and after some spinning and whirring the computer comes up with the message: "Let me tell you a story …. !" (1)

It is through the telling of stories that much of the world's wisdom is communicated and for many aboriginal peoples it is by the passing on of tales that history is remembered. The Lakota Sioux would gather round the winter fire and tell not only the stories of creation, and the history of the tribe – but also the development of human consciousness in tales such as the adventures of Jumping Mouse and stories of the White Buffalo Woman. In Ireland the tales of the great Ulster Cycle – of which the Táin Bó Cualinge is perhaps the best known – date from at least 100 BC and were transmitted in an oral story-telling tradition for ca. nine hundred years before they were first recorded in manuscript form.

A story integrates an idea of the mind with the feelings of the heart and the sensations of the body. Even if the intellectual message is not understood the teaching may be realised by the soul, beyond words. Sufis know this and communicate most of their teaching through stories. Zen Buddhists also weave much of their meditation and enlightenment secrets into a tapestry of stories. And the teachings of Christ are most often contained in parables, studied and interpreted on Sunday mornings throughout the Christian world.

Myth

I have been attracted to Myth – that special form of story – from childhood. Looking at pictures of Greek and Egyptian mythic figures I would imagine what it could be like to have been alive at that time, never realizing that I was – and am – alive in the eternity of these stories. I worked with myths when I was a theatre director and teacher of actors and, later, as a Gestalt therapist I found new meaning in them.

In 1972-73 I was working with the staff of the lock-up ward in a hospital at Turlock, California. The psychiatrist in charge and the staff were following the Laingian (2) idea that mental illness is not actually an illness but a movement toward health. The patients did not get drugs unless they asked for them and so the ward was filled with people in quite active states of disorder. If a patient had to be 'vigiled' – sat with in a safe room as she experienced serious rage in relation to, for example, her father – the accompanying staff member could experience some pretty traumatic restimulation if she also had unresolved issues with her father. I was there to help with that problem, to assist the staff work through their own material.

One evening, as we relaxed after the day's work, one of the nurses mentioned to me how envious she felt of the patients who had managed to go through their illness and come out the other side. I was struck with an idea. What if I was to create a Rite of Passage for doctors, nurses and psychiatric social

workers to give them an experience of their own madness in a kind of ritual dramatization? That way they would have some inkling 'from the inside' of what their patients were experiencing and be helped to approach them more from a position of familiarity and less as a text-book case.

I was already familiar with the work of Joseph Campbell (Campbell:1949, 1972) and John Weir Perry. (Perry: 1998) They had suggested that many of the images that appear in the classic mythic archetype of the Hero's Journey are also images that frequently appear in an episode of schizophrenia. So I took the plot-structure indicated by Campbell and created a kind of ritual drama for people to experience (Rebillot & Kay: 1993). The results were quite dramatic. People told me that they found themselves much more capable and ready to do things they only dreamed of doing before. That they had found a kind of courage they never dreamed they possessed. As to whether the structure really ritually dramatised madness, I cannot say. Some who had gone through the process thought that it did, others disagreed. However whatever did happen was clearly a change for the better.

Ancient Greece

Intrigued by this, I decided to study the mythic experience more intensely, particularly as it related to Greek Theatre. I visited Greece, went to many of the ancient sites and spent time trying to evoke the quality of life that existed there during the golden age. I was particularly intrigued by the healing centre at Epidaurus because theatre had a special part in the healing arts practised there.

Following a series of preparatory treatments, patients – those who were out of harmony with themselves, with nature and the gods – would be sent to the Theatre because there they would have the chance to experience the interaction of the archetypes, as the Greeks regarded the gods and goddesses, with mortal human beings. This was a very important aspect of the healing process. At that time the audience identified very closely with the actor. When the main character experienced the climax of the tragedy – Medea or Agave (3), for example, killing her own child – the audience felt as if it were their own act and felt deeply, too, the consequences of that act. Through this deep identification, the audience members lived the mythic material and went home refreshed. (S)he could experience the deed and its consequences without having to act it out in real life. That is why Tragedy is called theatre of exultation, because, as in many of the experiential therapies, people could have a full cathartic experience without hurting themselves or anyone else.

The patient at Epidaurus would then go to be initiated into the service of the god or goddess with whom (s)he had been out of harmony. The gods and goddesses were the expression of archetypal forms. Each one incarnated a certain level of human experience and, since these experiences are common to all human beings, the gods and goddesses were seen as immortal. One would go to the temple of Apollo, god of reason and harmony, and see wonderfully balanced architecture, hear the highly organised music of the harp or lyre and see the statue of a beautiful young man playing the harp. These images impressed upon the conscious and subconscious mind (4) the character of the god Apollo. And just as the initiation at Eleusis was an experience of becoming one with Demeter and Persephone, so the initiation into the service of Apollo was the experience of owning the archetype, becoming one with the god of reason and harmony.

In the temple, the archetype was projected outward. By meditating on the form of the god and participating in the temple rites, one learned to understand that archetype. Through initiation, the archetype was assimilated, owned and integrated. This was accomplished, of course, only after the initiate was sufficiently well prepared so as not to be overwhelmed by the archetypal energy.

Working with Myths as with a Dream

Following my visit to (ancient) Greece, I decided to create a workshop structure based on this classical healing process as a way to work with individual myths. I call this structure 'Manifesting Your Myth as a Creative Process'. Participants choose a myth that they would like to work with beforehand but I believe that it is not essential to analyse that myth and find all the connections to one's life in advance. Trust must be placed in the subconscious (5) that enables the participant to choose the story that is just right for him/her. I deliberately ask people to choose a myth rather than a fairy-tale because in a myth there is generally some interaction between mortals and the gods/archetypes. This confrontation between different levels is important.

The Temple and the Fool's Dance

Once the myth has been chosen we begin what I call the 'Temple' aspect of the work. The body is the temple in which we meditate on the story. Each student distils his/her myth down to the essential cast of characters which may include animals, plant and even mineral figures. The students spend some time dancing out these characters, giving them form and substance, and discovering which touch them the most and from which they feel distanced. My intention is to give each person the chance to integrate all the characters in his/her myth as much as possible. This resembles the way Fritz Perls worked with dreams. My teacher, Richard Price, told me that Fritz claimed that if one could own all the figures in a dream, the neurosis would be healed. I believe that this can also apply to myths. We can imagine that myths are in some way the dreams of the human species; integrating the fragments of the human personality contained in each myth can be very healing. However, this requires that all the figures be explored, identified with and integrated.

The students now create a movement meditation to help with their integration process. After the characters have been explored through unstructured dance, they find a posture to represent each one. Each of these postures is a psychological gesture, summarising the feelings and qualities of each figure.

During the next step, in which participants slowly move from one figure to the next, much of the story is already communicated and embodied. All that remains is to find the transitions or changes that take place in the characters as the story unfolds. I call this bodily script the 'Fool's Dance'. In the Tarot the character of the Fool is the zero card, and the other cards are ranked in groups of seven around the Fool, who represents life energy. Some say that the other figures are merely empty postures until the Fool dances through them: hence the name Fool's Dance. When people are dancing their Fool's Dances it looks a little like a form of Tai Chi except that all the postures are individual and personal rather than pre-determined.

Through the Fool's Dance, participants live out their stories on every day of the workshop. Each day, we focus on different aspects of the story, allowing for some integration each time the dance is performed.

Theatre

When the Fool's Dance has been perfected, we enter into the phase that I call 'Theatre'. Each participant, playing the central character, will dramatise either their complete myth or its most important scenes with members of the group playing the other roles. The participant chooses a director from the group, and someone to be his/her substitute. The substitute will play the principal role, both when the protagonist and the director are setting up the dramatisation and when the protagonist chooses to play

another character. The director helps cast the roles, finds places in the room to stage the scenes and does a quick run-through of the story with people exploring their parts. Those involved in the various scenes then decorate the room for the performance, and the play begins. Initially the protagonist plays the main character and the others improvise their roles to the best of their ability. After the first performance the group – and particularly the protagonist – share their experiences. Everyone joins in, because the experience of even a minor player can be very illuminating to the person working. The protagonist then has the option of repeating the dramatisation. S/he can play the central role again, or another – or even explore scenes not included in the story to help understand the relationships between characters. Or s/he can now watch the myth from outside, with the substitute in the leading role.

Examples

Following the dramatisation we spend time working with the personal material that has emerged in the course of the enactment. I encourage the group to try as much as possible to find solutions to personal problems as well as sources of encouragement, support and inspiration within the context of the myth. I remember a woman whose son was dying of AIDS and who was very troubled as to how to deal with the situation. The only feeling she could contact was raging anger. She was unsure of which myth to select so someone suggested that she choose the Christ story and focus on Mary, Christ's mother. She did so. In previous dramatisations she had a lot of difficulty; feeling herself incapable, continually falling out of character through self-criticism. Playing the roles of Christ and Mary was very important for her. She had no trouble acting out the difficult passages of following the crucifixion path, and taking Jesus down from the cross. She worked through much of her anguish over her son's situation, and found the strength to do so in the role of Mary. Some months later, her son died. She said that she found a great deal of healing strength in the personage of Mary that she had played, and could call on that strength in the most difficult of moments. Following the process she could still, of course, access the rage that had possessed her before – but now all the other feelings surrounding so intimate a death were available to her, along with the strength to endure them.

Another way of working at this point in the structure is to do some Gestalt dramatisation work. A variety of Gestalt techniques can be used to explore and relate the mythic drama to the person's life story. I recall a man who was working on the myth of Ganymede, the beautiful young man that Zeus brings to Olympus to be the cup-bearer for the gods and goddesses. Before this the cup-bearer was Hebe and we set up an improvisation in which Zeus brings Ganymede up to Olympus and tells Hebe that she no longer has this position. The protagonist, rather than playing Ganymede, was playing Zeus. The woman playing Hebe was not going to be easily displaced. Zeus did everything he could think of to convince Hebe that she should give up her position – seduced her, joked with her, tried to convince her that another job would be more agreeable – she would have none of it. The protagonist was the only son in a family of five sisters and had never experienced his full power in relationship to them. Finally one of the other participants asked him what he really thought that Zeus would do in this situation. At that he picked up the woman who played Hebe and removed her from the room, expelling her from Olympus – effectively finding the power of Zeus and resolving the problem at the same time. It was the first time in his life that he had experienced such power. Although it was not a solution to his problems on the everyday level it was a very important discovery for him, so different from the Ganymede character who is carried o" by Zeus as if he were a submissive child.

Initiation

The last part of the process is for the person to create an initiation for him/herself which is enacted in the present with the participants of the group. Instead of initiating upward into the strata of the archetypes, I bring the story down to the level of here-and-now contact and interaction. I ask everyone to create a challenge for themselves arising from their chosen myth and to interpret it in a way that can be explored with the group. This need not necessarily be the main problem of the main character in the story – through the exploration of their myth participants may have found something else more enriching and necessary to their development.

Each one creates a Gestalt experiment through which to explore new behaviours, with the group members responding as authentically as they can. A wide range of possibilities are available and participants can be very creative.

Incorporating the Healing Function of the Myth into Daily Life

The initiations are very personal and give a chance to bring the material of the myth into present 'here and now' manifestation. The final step is to explore how the figures of the myth can help in day-to-day life situations. As a last example I will take a woman who had worked on the myth of Theseus. In the story Theseus has a titanic battle with the Minotaur. This woman was very timid and worked for a very male chauvinist boss who treated her as if she were a stupid child, saying things like: "If you can find the letter 'S' in the file cabinet, get me the Smith file!" Tired of such treatment, she needed to find her own power and begin to use it. Once, after having worked on her myth, when he spoke to her that way, she turned away from him and remembered the posture of the Minotaur in her Fool's Dance. She briefly took the posture, coming in contact once again with her power. Then she turned back to him and said: "I don't like it when you talk to me like that and I don't want you to ever talk to me like that again! He never did.

Conclusion

I think we can look upon the richness of our mythology as a great storehouse of ancient wisdom. However it is a wisdom that goes beyond rational understanding. It must be experienced in such a way that it can be fully realised and brought to bear on our present day problems. We can learn from the wisdom of the ancestors. The dramatised stories and myths were their psychotherapy. Our task today is to find out how to apply them to our present age.

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Published in INSIDE OUT - The Irish Journal of Humanistic and Integrated Psychotherapy / ISSUE 48: SPRING 2006, published by IAHIP (Irish Association for Humanistic and Integrated Psychotherapy). It is an internet based journal which can be downloaded from iahip.org

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Notes by Manfred Weule:

(1) Paul Rebillot is playing here with the opening of his article "Dancing with the Gods" in Pilgrimage. Vol. 9. no. 2. summer 1981, pp. 89-100. Bateson's story is also told there. It is taken from Gregory Bateson (1979), Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity, p.22.

(2) Refers to the psychiatrist Ronald Laing.

(3) Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele, the god of wine and intoxication, has returned - in human form - to his native city of Thebes to take revenge on its inhabitants who do not recognise his divinity. He makes all the women of the city go into a frenzy and leads them out to Mount Kithairon - including Agave, the mother of the ruler Pentheus.

The target of Dionysus' wrath is above all Pentheus, who, against the advice of the seer Teiresias and his grandfather Kadmos, decides to take action against Dionysus and the women by force of arms. This fails: both Dionysus and his Bacchae (Bacchantes) escape captivity and Dionysus and Pentheus meet each other. Finally, Pentheus, blinded by the god, allows himself to be persuaded to observe the orgies himself, disguised as a woman. Again, the messengers report how the two had made their way to the Kithairon, where Dionysus had placed Pentheus on a treetop. This observation post is Pentheus' undoing: the women discover him and throw him down. Desperate, he tries to make himself known, but his mother does not recognise him either, and together the women tear him apart. Agave returns to Thebes with her son's head, which she still believes to be that of a slain mountain lion, and only with the help of her father Kadmos does she realise what she has done. Now Dionysus appears for the first time in divine form and announces the fate of the Thebans. From the tragedy "The Bacchae" by Euripides.
Source: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Bakchen

(4) and (5) The text uses the term "subconscious" here. This is unusual in Paul Rebillot's work. Normally he uses the term "unconscious", thus avoiding a hierarchical view of levels of consciousness as in the Christian and Freudian view of the evil or inferior subconscious. On the contrary, in the subchapter "Initiation" Paul writes, for example: "Instead of initiating upwards into the layers of the archetypes, I bring the story down to the level of contact and interaction in the here and now.