

## **OLD STORY, NEW STORY, WHO'S GOT THE TRUE STORY?**

“Where did I come from? How did I get here?” children ask. “Tell me a story, tell me a story about me.”

We are awed by the mystery of entering a world already formed and pre-existing the I that we commonly call “I”. As consciousness of self gradually begins to develop in the human infant, it begins to dawn on the child that life does not begin and end with its own dreams and imaginings. The people who populate its world somehow go on when outside its sight. The question begins to form: where do I fit into their world? How do they fit into mine? What is the invisible thread that binds us together in this life?

That thread is best expressed and explained through story, a narrative or set of images that weaves together actors and events through time in space. Our personal stories are stories within stories---family stories, cultural stories, national stories, species stories. Just as each of us has a personal story that shapes us as we shape it, every culture and subculture has a common story---a history and mythos---which instructs its members in a particular version of what it means to be human, and thus, what is required of them for social acceptance.

Our personal meanings and mythologies are nested in our culture’s understanding of what it means to be human: our relationship to kin, nature, history, and the forces of creation. Our norms and values are rooted in this larger understanding, which is transmitted by story, told again and again through the culture’s art, religious and educational institutions, and rituals. When a society breaks down, as both cause and effect of the breakdown, its stories no longer get transmitted effectively, often because they no longer fit people’s experience. This is happening today in our

culture, reflected in social breakdown of all sorts, and in the clash of the dominant culture's story with subordinated cultures' stories. It is a difficult historical moment. On the one hand, it is past time for the old story, which provided the ideology for the Indo-European white male's conquest of the world, to be left behind. On the other hand, with no common story, we have only a collection of individual stories with no common language, values, or meaning system.

The story a culture tells to answer the great question of meaning makes all the difference in the world. The story of who we are and how we got here tells us what our place is in the great scheme of things. It confers purpose and tells us what life is for. Story unites what was fragmented. It is the glue that holds together the pieces of our lives. It tells us what is expected of us, and what we must teach our children. It redeems our sufferings and sanctifies our joys through meaning. It places us on life's continuum. It tells us what was before we were, and what will be after we are gone. It tells us we are not alone.

The story that mainstream North American culture has adopted as its truth for the last four hundred years, began in a desert tribe in the Middle East and evolved over a period of several hundred years of oral history. Then it was translated into classical Greek language and metaphysics, disseminated at sword point by the Roman army in Europe, mediated by the institutional Roman priesthood for over a thousand years, reinterpreted during the Reformation, and finally brought by a fringe group to the North American continent. This single story has shaped our attitudes and approach to life at a level that is so fundamental as to be nearly invisible. It is everywhere, in our attitudes about good and evil, men and women, humans and nature, humans and the Divine.

The question is not whether or not this story should be forsaken. In spite of the costs and the risks, the Biblical story of creation, covenant, and empire, along with its civil corollary of manifest destiny, is imploding because it no longer functions as a useful primary story. We simply cannot believe it. For better or for worse, we have become, since the scientific Enlightenment, a culture which equates factual accuracy with truth. We simply cannot any longer “buy” a myth that scientific evidence seems to contradict.

Our challenge now is to nourish fresh soil in which new values and institutions can grow: a new story which corresponds to our best scientific knowledge..

There are many old stories to be told and honored. They are stories of different branches of the sacred family, as are the trees’ stories and the stars’ stories. The many stories all are nested, like boxes, in the one great story that goes beyond any species or cultural story. That story is the Universe story.

It has been here all along, waiting for us to recognize it. In this story is the wisdom of billions of years of revealed truth told directly through the sacred unfoldings of nature. It is told through every tree, every fossil, every star or blade of grass. It is told through you and me and every sentient being with the gift of reflection, the universe’s own ability to view itself. There are an infinite number of variations to this story, and there will be more as we learn more, but it is all one story, to be told and told again from all the myriad points of view. Here is one version now.

This is the way I tell the story. It is my story. It is your story, too. Listen.

*THE NEW STORY: THE UNIVERSE SPEAKS*

(with special thanks to Tom Donohue, Joanna Macy, Brian Swimme, and Thomas Berry)

Listen. Listen to your heartbeat.

It will help you to remember.

It will take you on a journey back to your beginnings, through time, through evolution to before your present form, before history, before humans even. It will take you back even further to the timeless time before the earth was born, before space was born, to the moment when the great flash of the great flaring forth originated all the energy that is, the moment when a bubble on the surface of nothing exploded into difference----

And difference danced.

Oh, how we danced with the joy of existence, twirling light speed through the void. Can you imagine--- hydrogen atoms circling each other, desiring each other, dancing in the swirl of our desire for form? Imagine---blazing billions of hydrogen atoms swirling together into great white suns dancing ever more tightly into atoms of helium--- more and more, hotter and hotter, until we reached a point of density where the star that would become our legacy, knit together wonders in her fiery belly and sacrificed herself, exploding into every element that is or ever was. She blasted out in all directions in a great cosmic cloud made of stardust.

You remember. Consider your eyes reading these words. Or your hand holding this page. The chemicals that make up your hands and eyes have been on a great journey to arrive at this moment. Your body remembers. It is made of stardust.

About five billion years ago, “our Milky Way galaxy shocked a peacefully drifting cloud of that star’s remains into giving birth to ten thousand new stars ... diminutive brown dwarf stars... blue

supergiants that quickly flashed into the incandescence of new supernovas. Others became long burning yellow stars, and still others became slumbering red stars. The universe, insisting upon diversity, also brought forth from this floating cloud of elements our own star: the Sun,<sup>ni</sup> who celebrated its existence by spinning off some of the elements hovering around it into a bonded systems of rotating discs: the planets.

Can you remember the end of aloneness in space when our dances came together to form the mother planet who gave birth to us: our very own planet Earth, our Gaia? Trillions upon trillions of our dances came twirling together then into one big ball, bonding, dancing our way into a hundred different forms which we would call the elements, the building blocks of Earth.

Do you remember the early days on Earth, days of hissing rain that never touched the ground--- as the clouds sucked us back in, then spit us out again, as solid became liquid and liquid became gas, one form flowing into another and back again? Can the hundred million molecules that make up your body recall their journeys as nitrogen and hydrogen as they danced together, rolling and swirling in great clouds of ammonia in those early days when Gaia was young? Can they recall bubbling up from her molten core, then dancing to the edge of space?

Do you remember?

Can you imagine that you remember?

And can you remember a billion years of raging thunderstorms in a world completely dark, except for the jagged bolts of purple lightning crackling while great torrents of rain washed across the rocky bones of Gaia again, and again? Then out of the primordial womb, lightning

was made flesh. Gaia brought forth the first living cell four billion years ago, conceived in a flash of lightning.

And then---remember, the rains that seemed endless ended.

The Earth cooled. The clouds began to part. For the first time Gaia could feel the warmth of the Sun on her body. Can you imagine how that felt? Oh, the rainbows born of that embrace! A whole age of rainbows! You remember, when the sun turned the sea sweet with sugars, and RNA and DNA danced together across the planet, seducing molecule after molecule in their glorious dance of life.

At first we were merged and boundaryless in our search for form. Who knew where you left off and I began? But before too long we grew membranes so that we could contain information.

Remember the original sensation of boundaries between you and not you? Between you and me? Suddenly you had identity. You were a particularity among particularities.

Beneath the brilliant sky, the living cell and her descendants performed wonders never seen before. We recorded and retained information. Now we could reproduce patterns sufficient to knit together other living cells, reproducing ourselves. We could even share this information among ourselves. The first mutant cell developed photosynthesis, and shared its new invention with its sister cells by transmitting its genetic information through a tube. Feasting on the sun, they grew, gathering hydrogen from the oceans, releasing oxygen into Gaia's atmosphere. In Life's delight with itself, they made more and more of themselves. They spread their oxygen everywhere. But oxygen was toxic to the anaerobes that inhabited the Earth. They began to choke and die. Only a few of the old forms survived, hiding in oxygen-less, dark places. Oxygen

took over, and only those who could adapt to its toxic fumes managed to thrive. The first great eon of the biosphere ended in catastrophe, the planet strewn with the remains of its first experiments with life, all choking on their own excrement, oxygen.

And then miraculously, instead of failing, life mutated in an extraordinary leap. The first cyanobacterium, invented respiration. Now not only could life deal with oxygen; it could thrive on it.

New life burst forth with ten times the energy of any other cell, proliferating into every region of the Earth, and splintering into different forms.

Empowered, life began to specialize, to develop particularities. Do you remember the wonder of the green particularities that made sugar in the sunshine? And the scarlet ones that gobbled up the sugar? Do you remember the most amazing one of all the organisms---the wiggling spirochetes who could propel themselves from place to place just by wiggling? Do you remember how they wiggled all over the planet in a sine wave, swimming and squiggling in time to the heartbeat of Gaia, as they transported her substance from one place to another? What an active soup that old primordial sea had become---making sugars, taking apart proteins, building fats.

The different organisms danced as competitors at first, each striving to preserve its own form.

Then, after hundreds of millions of years, we made an amazing discovery: we could do it all, if we worked together. We could make sugars and oxygen. We could eat, disassemble protein, even locomote, as one organism. We discovered community! We wrapped each of our dancing communities in one membrane and propelled ourselves, as multi-celled animals, through salty primordial waters. The world was young. The possibilities were endless.

Mother Nature touched us and we became. We evolved. No sooner had we spread to the four corners of the earth than we started gathering in larger groups. We took shapes like vases and bags and bells with long, swirling tentacles. We diverged into sponges, sea anemones, worms. Can you remember? Were you a nematode, a flow through food tube, taking in food at one end, and forcing it out at the other end through a marvelous new invention?

Some became clams, and some became starfish, and some became two foot long dragonflies who flickered as they danced in the light of that bright, young Carboniferous moon. But we---that which became we---became lancet worms, and swam through shallow tropical waters waving our tails from side to side, only two inches long. We were no more than a tail with gill slits, propelling the simple nervous system that would someday become the human brain. We waved our tails through the hundred million years it took us to grow fins, eyes, and a brain. Some invented the tooth when others invented the shell. Some of us grew short, stubby fins that could push us through the mud.

Slowly, in search of food, using our fins to propel ourselves through the mud from pond to pond, we began to venture onto the land. Do you remember? Do you remember the risk? Do you remember the fear? Do you remember how brave we had to be? Some of our cousins perished in the heat of the sun. But our great, great, great, great, great, great, great... grandmother, the Great Mother of all terrestrial vertebrates, survived and gave birth to a whole new class of life forms whose descendants would someday, millions of years later, name it amphibians. Can you imagine what it took to brave leaving the water for the very first time, to take that first step onto the land?



Do you remember being a tadpole with a pond for a womb? Can you remember sprouting tiny legs? Can you remember growing stronger legs then, with soft, little toes, and creeping once again onto the land? Can you remember how vulnerable we were with our soft, squishy bodies on the hot rocks? We had to evolve tougher skin in order to carry our precious water deep within us so we could survive away from the pond.

Do you remember the tough little animals we grew into, with razor sharp teeth and claws, attending every moment to survival? Do your cells remember being a little lizard sunning itself on the hot, harsh rocks? We became larger lizards. Some grew scales while others grew feathers. We grew fur. For a hundred million years, our ancestors hid in little holes, hoping not to become lunch, while the great plumed dinosaurs flipped their derrieres in the air cavorting in their mating dances amid the first flowers. What a blaze of colors and smells in those plumes and petals! Can your cells remember the aphrodisiac odor that hung heavy in the Cretaceous night?

Then sixty seven million years ago it all changed. The sky grew dark and the rains came pouring down. There was nothing to do but wait, to sleep it out, to huddle and cuddle together like we had done through a billion hibernations. What dreams did we dream through those cold, dark years?

When the sun came out again and we crawled out of our burrows, we found a world completely altered. The dinosaurs were gone. Other animals had followed the dinosaurs into their graves. But birds and the newly evolved mammals seized the opportunity to fill every available niche that a feathered or furry creature could fill. Some grew hooves and horns, some grew pouches. Some grew long, razor sharp fangs. Some became rodents, whales, bats, sea lions, and elephants.

We mammals developed a new capacity in our nervous system for feeling the universe. We entered the Cenozoic enthralled and terrified by the beauty and violence of our world. We quaked in fear at sounds in the forest at night. We rejoiced in the lusciousness of the fruit. Mothers bonded with their infants.

We grew little hands. We developed opposable thumbs. And with our thumbs and our neural capacities we wove a future for ourselves. We developed tools and released the stored energy of the sun, as we learned the use of fire. We evolved consciousness, the ability to view ourselves, to reflect on everything as the eyes of the universe viewing itself. We invented art. We painted the walls of our caves with rich color and images. We made music and love and language, and out of these we began to weave stories, story after amazing story.

Then, after millions of years, looking through a device of our own making, we saw a star being born. We began to tell a new story, the Universe Story. There are many versions. This is my version.

Sh-h-h. Listen. Hear it being told through every leaf, every fossil, every blade of grass. Reach deep into your cells' memories. There is your story, full of myth and magic. Let your grandchildren's grandchildren add their parts to it. There is room in this story for all. Let stardust made flesh celebrate the story of our journey together as part of the great story of the Universe. Let us take it out into the universe on our starships and proclaim the miracle of the continuing journey: from Stardust to Starhship.

---