

our sacred stories



the essential pathway for meaning and belonging

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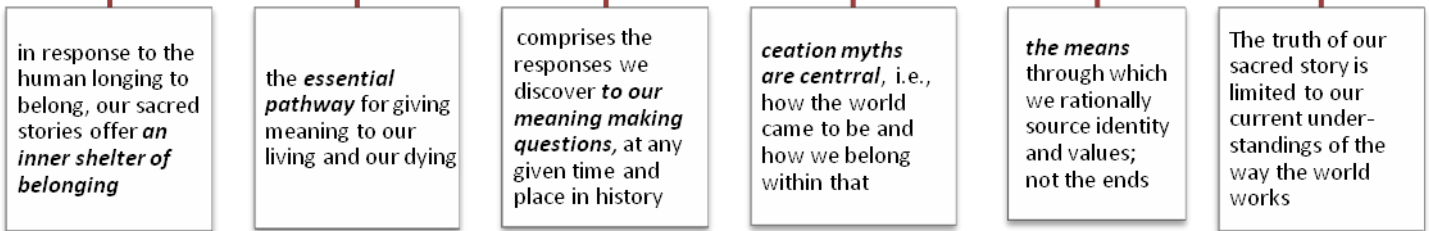
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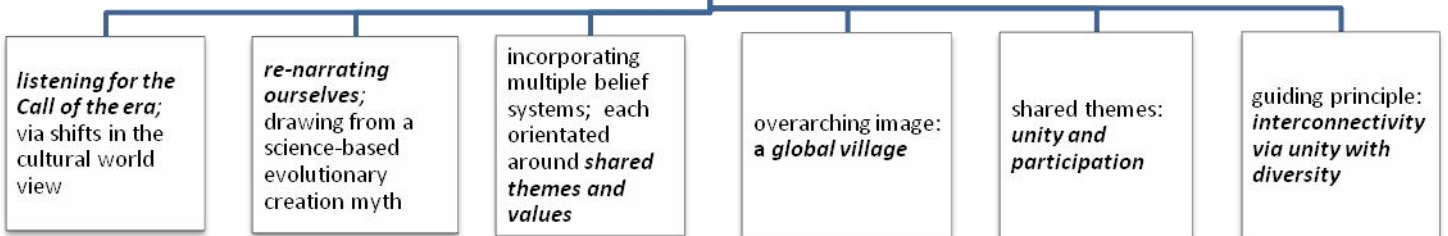
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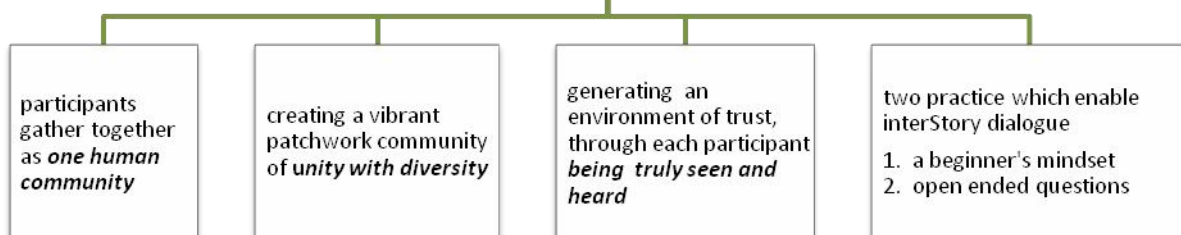
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The human heart is full of longing. We long to discover who we are. The voices of longing keep our lives alert and urgent. Yet if we cannot discover a shelter of belonging within our lives, we could become a victim and target of our longing. The late John O'Donohue¹

Introduction

We humans are innately inquisitive. We have looked up into the night sky and wondered: "what is out there?" We have looked to the horizons of land and ocean and wondered: "what is beyond those horizons?" "We have looked at planet Earth and wondered: "What is it made of?" "How did it come to be?" "How does it continue to be?" "What happens if it ceases to be habitable?" In response to our innate inquisitiveness, we humans are explorers. We continue to explore the lands, the oceans, the skies, and even deep space. We also continue to explore the way the human body/mind works. Since ancient times until the present, we humans have continued to explore the way the outer, or natural world, works. Within western societies, outer exploration is the domain of the sciences. Scientific exploration continues to expand our horizon of knowledge about the workings of the natural world, including the human body/mind. In this way, ongoing scientific exploration offers rational understandings regarding the world we inhabit.

As well as the drive for knowledge about the world, we humans also have an innate longing to discover meaning and belonging in the world. *Meaning* here refers to: the unified way we name and claim who we are at any given time, including our identity, purpose, and values. We experience meaning and belonging through inner exploration. Therefore, as well as being explorers of the outer world, we humans also have an innate desire to explore our inner world. Inner exploration is the domain of spirituality. Spiritual exploration takes the form of self discovery, self realization, and self transcendence and *turns on* questions such as: "Where did we come from?" "Why are we here?" "What becomes of us when we die?" "Is there a god/s?" "Why is there good and evil in the world?" "What does it mean to be human in an evolving universe?" "What is the nature of love?" We pose such meaning making questions within the light of our current knowledge about the world. The responses discerned form a unified narrative, or sacred story, from which to rationally source personal and collective meaning and belonging. Thus, scientific exploration gives rise to knowledge about the natural world. In the light of such knowledge, spiritual exploration enables us to experience meaning and belonging in the world via a particular coherent sacred story. Consequently, the fabric of our sacred stories is woven out of continued scientific and spiritual exploration.

A sacred story which is congruent with our current knowledge about the natural world, gives rise to an inner *shelter of belonging*. Such an inner *shelter of belonging* does not remain static; the shape of our belonging continues to change. Why? Because the shape of our belonging is determined by our sacred stories and our sacred stories continue to change and evolve in response to continued scientific exploration and ongoing lived experience. So, rather than being an end-in-itself, a sacred story is the means through which we rationally give meaning to our living and our dying,

at any given time and place in history. In line with shifts in our sacred stories, the shape of our belonging will also continue to change and evolve. As such, there is no once-for-all-time shape of belonging. Therefore, in each new era of human history, we are required to revisit our sacred stories within the light of current knowledge and lived experience, so that we may discern and take up our place of belonging . . . now.

What happens when we cannot discover an *inner shelter of belonging*? According to O'Donohue, we could become a target and victim of our longing. Why? Because our drive to belong can cloud rational judgments and in turn give rise to feelings, thought patterns, behaviours, and relationships which do not serve us, or our communities, well. Alternatively, we may well seek to numb our intrinsic longing to belong through addictions, which could range from drug and alcohol, to social media, to an overconsumption of goods and/or food. Furthermore, the drive for knowledge about the world is always subsumed by the innate longing to belong. Therefore, even though particular beliefs within our current sacred story may no longer resonate with our current knowledge about the natural world, we may continue to lay claim to them ~ even when they have become nonsensical. Consequently, if we cannot experience belonging through a coherent sacred story, we may well source it through unhealthy means.

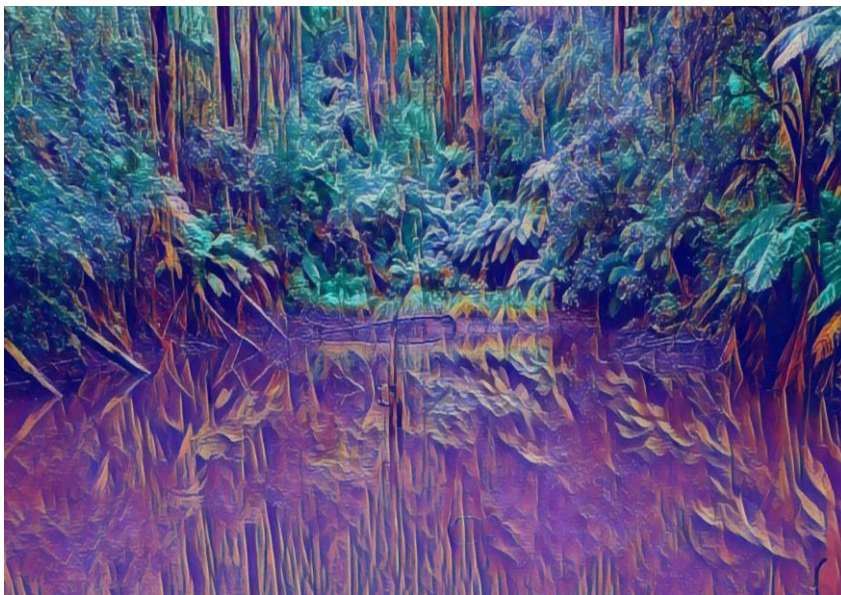
The purpose of writing

For the last decade I have been intentionally exploring the nature of personal and cultural sacred stories. I gained a theoretical appreciation of personal stories through my research for a Master's Degree. My thesis was entitled: *The Contribution of a Spiritual Director to the Spiritual Journey of a Person Diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder.*ⁱⁱ I then gained an experiential understanding of the nature of personal sacred stories, when my story broke open. I experienced firsthand a crisis of meaning, giving rise to a sense of inner dislocation and disorientation. It took many years of spiritual exploration before I was *found* in a new sacred story; before I was able to name and claim a new *inner shelter of belonging*.

During those years of personal exploration, I also came across the work of the late Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and ecotheologian. His research became an entry point for the exploration of the nature of cultural sacred stories, in particular the western cultural sacred story. It was Berry's contention that the western cultural sacred story was breaking apart, and as such the people of the culture were living in-between stories. In turn, with no dominant sacred story from which to source meaning and belonging, many people were in danger of becoming a victim and target of their longing to belong. And yet, if we understand something of the nature of our longing to belong and the role of sacred stories, we may choose to engage in spiritual practice of fostering a new cultural sacred story into conscious awareness.

My insights and understandings of the nature of personal and cultural sacred stories are scattered throughout my writings on the Tree of Life Spiritual Wellbeing website. The purpose of this article is to draw them together into the one document. I choose to offer my understandings within the public arena as an entry point for those who are interested in exploring the topic further. Also, for those who are experiencing inner disorientation and

dislocation due to the lack of a coherent cultural sacred story, this article may offer encouragement for the task of re-narrating their sacred story. The article will progress in the following manner. Given that the title of this piece is *our sacred stories* and that my training stands within the field of spiritual practice education, the focus of this article is spiritual exploration, rather than scientific exploration. At the same time, because our sacred stories emerge in response to current scientific knowledge about our world, a number of scientific shifts will be named in section five: Living a new cultural sacred story. The article will firstly outline something of the nature of spiritual exploration. Secondly, it will offer an understanding of the term *sacred*. Then it will outline the nature of sacred stories. From there it will offer something of the nature of living a new sacred story, focusing particularly on the western culture. Also, this section will offer something of an Australian context and how a new sacred story may be woven together through the three supposedly separate narratives of: the First Nations people, British colonialism, and the current multicultural context. Then the article will address something of the practice of interStory dialogue. InterStory dialogue is particularly relevant given the rise of a global village image and the possible clash of sacred stories. The article will draw to a close with concluding remarks.



the fabric of our sacred stories is woven out
of continued scientific and spiritual exploration

At the forefront of contemporary science, we no longer see the universe as a machine composed of elementary building blocks. We have discovered that the material world, ultimately, is a network of inseparable patterns of relationships; that the planet as a whole is a living, self-regulating system. The view of the human body as a machine and of the mind as a separate entity is being replaced by one that sees not only the brain, but also the immune system, the bodily tissues, and even each cell as a living, cognitive system. Fritjof Capra & Pier Luigi Luisi

Summary

We humans are both driven and enabled to explore the outer and inner worlds. Scientific exploration offers knowledge about the outer, or natural, world. Spiritual exploration guides us on an inner pathway of self discovery,

self realization, and self transcendence, towards a coherent sacred story. Through a coherent sacred story we are able to rationally source identity, purpose, and values. In turn, we experience belonging in our world. Even though both disciplines are distinct in their own right, the fabric of our sacred stories is woven out of continued scientific and spiritual exploration.

1/ The nature of spiritual exploration

As mentioned in the Introduction, our sacred stories continue to change and evolve. In response, ongoing spiritual exploration enables us to consciously engage with such a process; a process which involves both our being and our becoming. *Being* here involves living daily life with a clear self image, values, and experience of belonging. In this regard, Research Professor, Brenè Brownⁱⁱⁱ argued: "true belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world." So, our *being* involves authentic living via a coherent sacred story. *Becoming* involves trans-formative shifts in our view, which break through and transcend the limitations of a current sacred story. In line with such an understanding, spiritual exploration guides each one of us on our own unique ongoing life adventure of self enquiry in the form of self discovery, i.e., who we know ourselves to be at any given time; self realization, i.e., living authentically within a coherent sacred story; and self transcendence, i.e., breaking through and transcending the limitations of a current view; or sometimes completely restructuring our view. Therefore, spiritual exploration can enable: living authentically within a coherent sacred story; expanding the storylines within a sacred story; or at times, breaking through a limited view and living into a new sacred story. Thus, spiritual exploration takes place in this world, for this world.

In light of the above, the intention of spiritual exploration is not a privatized experience of living on some plane of existence where the common sorrows, frustrations, fears, and anxieties of daily life no longer affect us. Rather, spiritual exploration enables us to fully embrace our humanity, with all its attendant strengths and limitations. Fully embracing our humanity can be experienced in the following trifold form: 1. self-in-life ~ joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of being human in an evolving universe; 2. self-in-community ~ authentic communal belonging and response-ability; 3. self-in-love ~ personal wholeness in the form of inner freedom to live authentically. Each of the three experiences corresponds with the intrinsic human longing to belong at the three levels of human consciousness, i.e., the transpersonal ~ belonging within Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming; the interpersonal ~ belonging within the wider human community; and the intrapersonal ~ belonging within our own skin. As a result, fully embracing our humanity enables each one of us to figuratively: *come home to ourselves in our world.*

The above understanding of the nature of spiritual exploration draws primarily from the research of three authors. Firstly, John Swinton,^{iv} founder of the University of Aberdeen's Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability. Swinton argued that there was a distinction to be made between our experience of the human spirit and the practice of spiritual exploration. Secondly, philosopher and theologian, the late Bernard Lonergan.

Lonergan's research on human consciousness revealed a certain "open structure" which enabled self transcendence. The third was writer and social commentator, Anne Deveson.^v Deveson's research into the nature of resilience revealed it to be "a self righting mechanism."

1.1 Our experience of the human spirit

The human spirit is not an observable fact. Even so, Swinton argued that the experiential reality of the human spirit is generally recognized. He likened the human spirit to an: "essential personal, dynamic life-force" and/or "integrative presence" within each human being; intrinsic to and "animating" human meaning making and belonging. Therefore, the human spirit is known to be that dynamism which both impels and enables humanity to seek meaning and belonging, rather than live perfunctorily. Consequently, such a dynamic, integrative presence is perceived to "respond to" lived experience rather than act in a rigid, mechanistic way. As a result, it is the drive of the human spirit which keeps our lives alert and urgent, beyond the experience of simply existing.

Lonergan's research in the field of human consciousness both agreed with and added to that of Swinton. Lonergan asserted that common to human nature and activity is an "open structure." *Open structure* is another way of saying that the human experience of spirit incorporates the capacity to wonder, to question, and to gain responses. In turn, such an open structure enables us to experience self transcendence in the form of: the possibility of living into a new view ~ grounded in current knowledge. Lonergan believed that open ended questions were intrinsic to human consciousness and lay at the very heart of self transcendence. We can experience self transcendence in the three realms of the intellect, the moral, and identity formation. When self transcendence takes place in each of those three realms concurrently, a new sacred story is birthed. Therefore, in addition to Swinton's understanding that the human spirit is like an innate, dynamic, integrative presence, Lonergan added the potential for self transcendence.

Further to the above understandings, the human spirit is also known to be resilient. *Resilience*, according to Deveson: "is about evolution and survival, the capacity of all life-forms to endure. For all life has inbuilt survival mechanisms." In relation to the human experience of resilience, *endurance* takes form in an innate ability to survive, adapt, and flourish in response to adverse change in both the outer and inner worlds. In this way, Deveson claimed that resilience is: "an innate self-righting mechanism." In terms of the inner world, *self righting* can take form in two particular ways. Firstly, the experience of *self righting* can be likened to: bouncing back into the same shape; the same view of selfhood within the same sacred story. In this manner, when a person is faced with an upheaval in their life, their experience of selfhood may be stretched somewhat. Nonetheless, they have the capacity to absorb the shock with their inner world intact; like springing back into the same shape.

In contrast to the above experience of resilience, is that of *self righting* being be likened to: breaking through and transcending the limitations of a current view of selfhood. Why would this be necessary? For many people who experience upheavals in their lives, they cannot simply bounce back into the same shape; their inner world cannot absorb the shock and remain

intact. Questions around meaning and belonging, perhaps once dormant, emerge into their conscious view challenging or undermining their current beliefs regarding who they know themselves to be and how they belong. In turn, they experience a sense of inner disorientation and dislocation. When such a sense of inner disorientation and dislocation occurs, *self righting* is experienced in the form of: an inner compass, orientating them towards discovering new understandings and responses to their meaning making questions; responses which hold true within the context of their current lived experience. So, the second form of *self righting* gives rise to a new experience of selfhood, often within a new personal sacred story.

1.2 The practice of spiritual exploration

In response to the drive of the human spirit and within the context of a current world view, spiritual exploration is known to be a common human activity involving meaning making and belonging. Through the practice of spiritual exploration we are able to experience personal wholeness in the form of the inner freedom to live daily life with integrity and authenticity.

Swinton underscores such an understanding of spiritual exploration through the following quotation:

"[spiritual exploration] attempts to express the profound experiences and inner longings [of the human spirit] in terms that are meaningful for the individual . . . [in the form of] striving to answer deep existential questions pertaining to the meaning of life, suffering, illness and so forth, as well as recognizing the need for human interconnectivity and the desire to transcend the self in meaningful ways."

Profound experiences include: the awe of unitive mystical experience; the common joys and sorrows, confusions and fears of daily life; as well as the inner disorientation experienced through loss of meaning. *Inner longings*, according to O'Donohue, *turn on* the innate longing to belong; to experience interconnectivity at the three levels of human consciousness. Thus, in line with the nature of the human spirit to respond to lived experience, spiritual exploration also draws from and flows back into daily life by way of discovering, expressing, exploring, and integrating into a unified narrative, the profound experiences and inner longings of the human spirit which emerge in response to daily life.

1.3 Two genres of practice which sustain spiritual exploration

Spiritual exploration involves a different approach to that of scientific exploration. Scientific exploration takes the form of observing phenomena through the lens of analysis, i.e., logically probing, dissecting, scrutinizing and evaluating. In contrast, spiritual exploration involves a contemplative orientation and takes the form of gently posing our meaning making questions and living into the responses, all the while seeking inner wisdom's invitation towards authentic self knowledge. Such a process requires patience, because conditions need to be sufficient enough within us before we are able to perceive authentic responses. Thus, the process takes time and commitment.

On the topic of a contemplation orientation, author, educator, and activist, Parker Palmer^{vi} offered a metaphor which grounds an understanding of the process. Parker stated that inner wisdom is like:

"a wild animal - tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek may well emerge.

In line with Palmer's quotation, our inner wisdom is wild in that it is untamed by personal and social conventions. Therefore, it is nigh impossible to perceive inner wisdom's invitation towards authentic self knowledge through our everyday thought processes. Rather, we perceive inner wisdom's invitation through gently dropping our awareness beneath our constructed self, i.e., our preconceived assumptions and attachment to a personal identity; allowing our awareness to drop into the still, unstoried part of our human consciousness.

Two genres of practice which enable and sustain spiritual exploration in our time and place are that of: meditation and contemplative self enquiry.

1.3.1 Meditative practices

Meditative practices enable us to drop our awareness beneath the constructed self, into an inner unstoried place. In turn, we are able to recognize that our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations simply emerge and dissolve. Therefore, even though we have thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, we realize that we do not have to totally identify with them. Some people fear the unstoried place within, believing it to be like an empty void. However, the unstoried place comprises an ever flowing potential of lovingkindness, creativity, joy, trust, humility, compassion, hope, resilience, forgiveness, and gratitude for the gift of life. As a result, connecting with the inner unstoried place is fundamental to spiritual exploration.

1.3.2 Contemplative self enquiry

The second genre of spiritual practice is contemplative self enquiry. It is important to note at the outset that contemplative self enquiry is not a form of rumination, i.e., "repetitively going over a thought or a problem without completion" (www.psychologytoday.com). Rather, contemplative self enquiry is the practice of posing our meaning making questions and then allowing the questions to work their way through us. In this way, our spiritual questions become the pathway for discerning inner wisdom. We enable the questions to work their way through us by way of playfully noticing and exploring our present moment affective responses, within the conscious awareness of lovingkindness. Therefore, even though our questions forms the pathway, our engagement with the questions goes beyond an intellectual pursuit; our engagement involves a whole body/mind response.

The practice of contemplative self enquiry requires that we relinquish the desire to control the process of self discovery, and in so doing, undertake the venture without knowing the outcome. As a result, the process of self discovery requires an attitude of self compassion, nonjudgmental curiosity, patience, and being comfortable with the unknown, until it is known. Furthermore, contemplative self enquiry requires a receptive disposition, which in the words of Professor Denise Ackermann,^{vii} involves: "the giving of the undefended self in the act of listening." As we do so, we are able to discern our inner wisdom's invitation towards authentic self knowledge,

towards the inner freedom to live in accord with our values system. One metaphor for such a stance of authenticity is: *the undefended self ~ offered freely*.

Note: for more on these two genres of spiritual practice see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The Path of self knowledge & Contemplative practices/Meditation & Contemplative self enquiry](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The_Path_of_self_knowledge_&_Contemplative_practices/Meditation_&_Contemplative_self_enquiry)



Shifting into [inner] freedom is not a matter of transcending the human condition . . . the goal of awakening is to realize our full potential as human beings . . . helping us discover how to live a fully intimate human life. Loch Kelly

Summary

In response to the dynamic drive of the human spirit, and within the horizon of a current world view, spiritual exploration involves the common human activity of self discovery, self realization, and self transcendence, in the form of generating a coherent sacred story from which to live daily life with meaning and belonging. In this way, spiritual exploration enables us to fully embrace our humanity. Two genres of spiritual practice which sustain spiritual exploration are: 1. meditative practices and 2. contemplative self enquiry.

2/ Why use the term sacred?

Why use the term *sacred* in relation to the human activity of generating a unified narrative of meaning and belonging? The term itself holds varying connotations within differing settings; connotations which could derail the intention of this paper! Even so, I choose to retain the term because it alone conveys the depth of wonder and seriousness involved, the call/response nature of the venture, and the joyful humility required for generating a coherent unified narrative. Therefore, I choose to retain the term *sacred* in relation to our unified narratives of meaning and belonging.

2.1 The meaning: calling forth a deeply felt instinctual memory of interconnectedness

Since the term *sacred* holds varying connotations, it is important to describe how the term is being applied within this article. *Sacred* conveys something of what the Psalmist^{viii} named as: "deep calling unto deep." The Psalmist's phrase signifies a dynamic relationship which takes place beneath the everyday level of awareness. Such a dynamic relationship involves an experience of interconnectivity. Consequently, in its broadest sense, *sacred* refers to: *calling forth a deeply felt instinctual memory of interconnectedness*. The object of such interconnectedness depends upon the belief system of any particular community, at any given time and place in their history. Therefore, whilst the experience of sacredness is common across humanity, the object of, and engagement with the experience, will differ according to the belief system in which the experience has emerged. Consequently, *sacred* can include, but does not necessarily have to include, a religious belief system.

2.2 The Call/response process

The belief system which frames this article is: a world view of conscious evolution within a framework of evolutionary spirituality.^{ix} Within such a framework the object of interconnectedness is: Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming, which is now understood to be 13.8 billion years old and still in the making. Within such a framework, the phrase *deep calling unto deep* can be interpreted in the following manner. The *deep* which *calls unto* refers to an enduring Call to belong pulsating within the deeper rhythms of Life itself. We experience the Call to belong as an invitation to change, adapt, and flourish within differing eras of human history. Such a Call has been expressed in the following manner by two authors:

"The Call takes place underground, far beneath our awareness. Like a soundless song, it sings to us all our lives, whispering in a wordless way, "Follow!" I call it the song of the soul . . . I believe this ongoing inquiry into life is the song we are here to learn."
Anne Hillman^x

"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling, we shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time."
Poet, T.S. Eliot.^{xi}

In line with the above quotations, the enduring Call to belong is infused with lovingkindness and is experienced as Love calling forth authentic living through an ongoing inquiry into Life itself. Love, according to Hillman, is an "evolutionary imperative" which is experienced as a field of energy within Life itself. Such a field of energy animates our ongoing inquiry into life towards genuine relationship with self, others, and Life itself. In turn, we are enabled to take up our place of belonging-within-the-whole, at any given time and place in history.

The deep which is being *called to*, is the inner longing to belong within the human heart. Thus, the *deep calling unto deep* signifies that our human longing to belong does not sit within a vacuum. Rather, it sits within the enduring Call to belong within the very nature of Life itself. As we continue to respond to the enduring Call to belong we each experience an ever deepening sense of interconnectivity in the here-and-now, whilst at the same knowing that we are also participating in the ongoing evolutionary nature of Life itself. Therefore, we are not simply passive experiencers

of the process. We are participants in the Call/response process. In line with such an understanding, our sacred stories are both intensely personal and part of Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming.

How do we respond to the Call to belong? Within each new era of our history, it is our task to attune ourselves to the Call of that era. As we attune ourselves we are able to perceive, in the words of Whyte, the: "revelations of the world and allow it to affect us in its own terms." We attune ourselves through the contemplative practices of meditation and contemplative self enquiry which enable us to drop beneath our preconceived assumptions and once again repose our meaning making questions within the light of current knowledge and beliefs. The term I have coined for such a venture is: *the sacred work of being human*.



our sacred stories are both intensely personal . . .
and part of Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming

*We shape our self to fit this world and by the world are shaped again.
The visible and the invisible working together in common cause,
to produce the miraculous . . . So may we, in this life trust to those
elements we have yet to see or imagine, and look for the true shape
of our own self by forming it well to the great intangibles about us.*
David Whyte

Summary

The term *sacred* refers to: calling forth a deeply felt instinctual memory of interconnectedness. The object of such interconnectedness differs in response to differing world views. Within the context of this article the object of interconnectedness is: Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming. Within such a framework, it is understood that within the very nature of Life is an enduring Call to belong. In each new era of human history, we are invited to discern the Call of the era to discover and take up our place of belonging. Therefore, our personal and collective longing to belong does not sit within a vacuum; it sits within Life's Call to belong. Responding to the Call of the era, gives rise to an ever deepening experience of interconnectivity in the here and now, while at the same time participating in the evolving nature of Life itself.

3/ The nature of our sacred stories

Our sacred stories consist of our responses to our meaning making questions formed into a unified narrative. Such a unified narrative gives rise to a deeply felt instinctual memory of interconnectedness with self; with community; and with Life itself. As a result, in response to our human longing to belong, our sacred stories offer an inner *shelter of belonging*. What lay at the heart of our sacred stories? Creation myths are the centrepiece of our sacred stories. Why? Because our sacred stories *turn on* current understandings of how the world came to be, and our place of belonging within that. As a result, creation myths set both the overarching lens through which explore our meaning making questions, and the boundary of our perceptions.

3.1 The essential pathway for meaning and belonging

Our sacred stories are the essential pathway for giving meaning to our living and our dying, and experiencing belonging in our world. Authors Anne Brennan and Janice Brewi^{xii} argued that our sacred stories offer: "depth, history, roots, continuity, and a unified spirit moving us towards Soul and wholeness." In this way, our sacred stories give rise to an *inner shelter of belonging* through which we are able to experience personal wholeness, authentic communal belonging and response-ability, and joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of being human in Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming. When we experience belonging in this way we feel at home in our world. When we feel at home in our world, we can live daily life with personal integrity and authenticity.

In contrast to the above, without a sacred story we are figuratively *left in the dark* in terms of meaning and belonging. When left in the dark we experience inner disorientation in terms of meaning making, dislocation in terms of our experience of belonging, and sometimes even a sense of being invisible to our own self and our world. Naming and claiming a sacred story, however, is an inner unifying process through which we can reorientate, become visible, and take up our place of belonging in the world. Therefore, sacred stories are the essential pathway for human meaning making and the experience of belonging in the world.

3.2 Comprises the responses to our questions

As has been mentioned previously, our sacred stories comprise the responses we discover to the meaning making questions we pose. We do not pose our questions within a vacuum; we pose our questions and discover our responses within a particular world view, which centres on a particular creation myth. World view here means the knowledge and beliefs, norms and expectations of the network of relationships within our environment. In this regard Macy^{xiii} asserted that our sacred stories: "are conditioned by culture, race, class and gender." Therefore, it could be argued that our personal stories are shaped by stories within stories, including: familial stories, community stories, cultural stories, and where appropriate, religious stories.

In terms of a coherent sacred story which responds to our meaning making questions, educator and author, Christina Baldwin,^{xiv} asserted: "Not every word that comes out of our mouths is a story. Story is narrative. Words are how we think; narrative is how we link." In terms of linking, our sacred stories comprise a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The beginning

involves a creation myth which addresses our question: "Where did we come from?" The middle involves current responses to our questions around identity, purpose, values, and the questions of: god/s, good & evil, the nature of love, and the nature of being human in an evolving universe. The ending addresses our question: "What becomes of us when we die?" Thus, our sacred stories comprise the responses to our meaning making questions in the form of a unified narrative.

3.3 Shapes our being and our doing

When our sacred stories are coherent with our current world view they offer a rational source for personal and collective identity formation, i.e., who we know ourselves to be and our purpose. In turn, our self image determines our values system, which in turn, shapes the way we will live within, and act upon, our world. Therefore, our sacred stories determine both who we know ourselves to be at any given time, and how we will act. Thus, our sacred stories determine our identity and values. As a result, the naming and claiming of a sacred story is more than an intellectual pursuit. Our sacred stories lay at the very heart of both our being and our doing.

3.4 The means . . . not the ends

According to Hillman, our sacred stories form "a compelling context" from which to live meaningfully. Such a compelling context is derived through the rational exploration of the way the world came into being/continues to be and how the human body/mind works. Therefore, our sacred stories involve our reflection on, and articulated interpretation of, our lived experience through a particular world view. Even though we are often unaware of it, our world view is continually operating within us as both the interpretative lens through which we view ourselves-in-life, and the boundary of what we are currently able to perceive. As a result, to be human is to live with a limited view. Consequently, a sacred story cannot be an end-in-itself. Rather, a sacred story is the means through which we rationally source personal and collective self image, values, and belonging at any given time and place in history.

Even though naming and claiming our sacred stories is integral to identity formation, author Christie Cozad Neuger^{xv} claimed that it is possible for us to perceive a self image and experience belonging in the world without being conscious of our sacred story. This is possible when our lived experience coheres with the dominant cultural stream. As a result, Neuger claimed that the unspoken "core narrative" of the culture shapes the way we "understand and build each new experience into the story." We simply know who we are and how we belong in our world. However, for those people whose lived experience stands outside of the dominant cultural stream, or, for those who are living at a time when a cultural sacred story itself is breaking apart, the naming and claiming of a coherent sacred story is integral to identity formation.

3.5 The nature of truth within our sacred stories

The nature of truth within our sacred stories is such that it is both subjective and objective. Subjective: in that truth is interpreted and named through a particular world view. Objective: in that it offers a rational basis from which to live from and into personal wholeness and authentic communal belonging. In this regard, professor Janet Ruffing^{xvi} argued that the truth in sacred stories is "provisional" in that it is limited by a person's present

knowledge and understanding. Therefore, Ruffing maintained that the truth within our sacred stories is: "liable to revision on the basis of a new experience." New experience/knowledge expands our perceptions of self and life, thus expanding our world view and in turn, the truth of our sacred story. Such an understanding of the nature of truth gives rise to a clear view of personal and collective self image and values which is figuratively: *held lightly*. Through such a stance, we can live deeply from our current sacred story, without fully identifying with it.

In light of the above, the nature of truth within our sacred stories involves a paradox, i.e., where two opposing truths exist alongside each other. The first truth of the paradox is that we are of necessity, storytellers. We require a coherent (true) sacred story to live meaningfully and to experience belonging in our world. The second truth of the paradox is that our sacred stories are generated through reflection on and subjective interpretation of reality as we currently understand it. Therefore, as spiritual teacher and author, Eckhart Tolle^{xvii} asserted: "[We] are not [our] story." So, we require a coherent sacred story to live with meaning and belonging, and we are not our story. Thus, we live authentically through a particular sacred story, without fully identifying with it; we remain open to transformative shifts in our view, if and when they emerge within us. When we are able to live into such a paradox, we are able to figuratively: *stand in our own ground, openheartedly*.

The above paradox is reflected in the following words by poet, David Whyte:

"It is lovely to have a home, habits, etc. but when that beautiful home becomes a prison, when you can't really see anything out of the windows any more, or anything beyond the establishment you have made for yourself, then it is time to walk out of the door or listen for the knock on the door." David Whyte

3.6 Recognizing the season

Drawing from the above quotation, our sacred stories can be likened to either a beautiful home, or, a prison. They are like a beautiful home when they are coherent with a current world view. Conversely, they become like a prison when they are no longer coherent with a current world view, yet we remain locked within them. Thus, our personal and collective sacred stories cannot remain static. Rather, our personal and collective sacred stories are required to undergo seasons of change. And with each season, spiritual exploration differs somewhat.

There are three recognizable seasons that sacred stories continue to spiral through:

1. One season is where the sacred story is coherent with current knowledge, beliefs and lived experience; it is like a beautiful home. Such a beautiful home may expand due to ongoing lived experience, but it generally keeps a similar appearance. Spiritual exploration here involves embracing and celebrating the experience of feeling at home in the world, while at the same time reflecting on where we may or may not be living daily life in accord with our values system.
2. One season is where cracks appear in the sacred story. New knowledge and/or lived experience may challenge an existing narrative, giving rise to a sense of inner disharmony. If such cracks are fought against or simply

patched up, the narrative may end up becoming like a prison. Spiritual exploration here involves tenderly and nonjudgmentally posing the open ended question: "could inner wisdom be inviting me/us towards surrendering an attachment to an identity, or particular storyline, which has now become obsolete?"

3. One season is where the sacred story has broken apart, giving rise to inner disorientation and displacement. Spiritual exploration here commences with the *inner pause*, giving time for our human spirit to reorientate. Then the work involves the practice of consciously grieving the loss of the former narrative. Conscious grieving enables acceptance; through acceptance the seeds of possibility may emerge. Then, spiritual exploration continues by way of reposing meaning making questions in an open ended way and living into the responses. Over time a new sacred story will be found.

Our sacred stories continue to spiral through the above mentioned seasons. In response, the focus of spiritual exploration is on recognizing and responding to which season we are experiencing. Therefore, even though the practice of self discovery, self realization, and self transcendence are a constant within spiritual exploration, the way they are practiced will differ within each season.



our sacred stories can be likened to a beloved home, or a prison

Story is the song-line of a person's life. We need to sing it and we need someone to hear the singing. Story told, story heard, story written, story read ~ create the web of life in words.
Christina Baldwin

Summary

The naming and claiming of our sacred stories is a unifying process, which offers an inner *shelter of belonging* in the form of a deeply felt instinctual interconnectedness with self, others, and Life itself. Our sacred stories comprise our responses to our meaning making questions within the light of a particular world view, centering on a particular creation myth.

Because world views continue to change and evolve, so our sacred stories continue to change and evolve. Therefore, there can be no once-for-all-time sacred story. As a result, truth takes the form of a paradox in that we live authentically through a coherent sacred story, while at the same time remaining open to transformative shifts in our view.

4/ Living in-between sacred stories

To be human is to live through a coherent sacred story. Storytelling is the human way of experiencing meaning and belonging in the world. In this regard Baldwin^{xviii} argued: "the unceasing interplay between experience and narrative is a uniquely human attribute. We are the storytellers. We are the ones who put life into words." Thus, since ancient times we humans have engaged in the sacred work of putting life into words. For example: the First Nations people of Australia who have lived in the country for over 60,000 years. They developed *The Dreaming*, a sacred story of meaning and belonging offering their account of how the world came into being, and their place of belonging within that. As a result, putting life into words is not simply an intellectual exercise. Rather, storytelling determines who we know ourselves to be at any given time, and how we will act. Therefore, we live our sacred stories.

At certain junctures in history, the knowledge gained through continued scientific exploration and ongoing lived experience, breaks through the understandings that had previously been taken for granted. For example: in the 16th-Century scientific exploration identified that it was actually the Earth which revolved around the sun, rather than the other way around. Such new knowledge challenged the belief system of that time; the belief that Earth, and by extension human beings, were the centrepiece of creation. Thus, new knowledge can break open a prevailing sacred story and for a time, according to Thomas Berry,^{xix} the population involved lives "in-between stories." Such historical junctures require of those involved to begin again and, taking into account human history thus far, to discover a new cultural sacred story, and in turn, take up a new place of belonging.

Are we experiencing one such juncture? Numerous authors^{xx} have asserted that this is the case. Joanna Macy^{xxi} has named our era as: "the Great Turning." For many, this time of cultural transition is giving rise to an experience of inner disorientation in terms of meaning making. Also, many are experiencing a loss of connection and belonging in their world. Therefore, as with previous cultural transitions, this one is impacting many people in significant ways. And yet, as Hillman contended, such junctures in history offer: "a threshold for transformation." She continued: "The crisis we experience at a threshold is often painful but it also holds the seeds of possibility." Regarding a new sacred story, the seeds of possibility are emerging.

seeds of possibility are emerging

5/ Living a new cultural sacred story

How can a new cultural sacred story be discerned? Through attuning to the Call of the era. And how do we attune to the Call of the era? We notice and reflect upon the changes taking place in our cultural world view due to ongoing lived experience and continuing scientific exploration. There are numerous shifts in our cultural world view which are calling forth a new sacred story. This section outlines the following shifts: 1. A shift in western culture's creation myth. 2. A shift in scientific understandings of the nature of the universe and the move from a mechanistic model to a systems theory model of how the world works. 3. Two changes in ongoing lived experience: (i) the image of a global village; (ii) the previous narrative has outlived its usefulness. Such shifts in world view are ones which caught my attention as I intentionally sought to attune to the Call of the era.

5.1 A new creation myth

In response to ongoing scientific exploration, the dominant creation myth has shifted. Why? Because science has now been able to give account of the origins of the universe. In this regard, physicist, Brian Swimme^{xxii} claimed:

"We are the first generation to live with an empirical view of the origin of the universe. We are the first humans to look into the night sky and see the birth of stars, the birth of galaxies, the birth of the cosmos as a whole."

In response, the dominant creation myth now draws from what futurist and author, Barbara Marx Hubbard,^{xxiii} named as: "Big History." Big History involves a science based theory of evolution in which the origins of the universe date back some 13-14 billion years. A Big History creation myth breaks through and transcends the limitations of the former dominant creation myth, which drew from a Judeo/Christian religious tradition. Given that creation myths are the centrepiece of sacred stories, the Big History creation myth will now become the centrepiece of a new cultural sacred story.

A Big History creation myth centres on an integral way of thinking and being in the world. Such an integral way of thinking and being is grounded by the understanding that we belong to the greater Story of Life itself; that our personal and collective sacred stories are interconnected within Life's evolutionary nature of being and becoming. Therefore, in response to a Big History creation myth, our spiritual exploration is shaped by the understanding that we belong to the greater Universe Story. In this regard, social psychologist, Diarmuid O'Murchu^{xxiv} argued: "we belong to a greater whole from which we receive our very being and without which we have neither meaning, purpose, nor uniqueness in the great cosmic drama." Such an evolutionary framework of understanding has given rise to the question: "What does it mean to be human in an evolving universe?" We are continuing to live our way into a coherent response to that question.

5.2 Further scientific shifts shaping a new world view

In response to a science-based Big History creation myth, there are a couple of shifts taking place within sections of the scientific community which are reshaping our current view of such a myth. One shift is in the view of the universe per se. The other shift involves a change in the model used to understand the workings of the natural world. Such scientific shifts are re-shaping our spiritual explorations in terms of meaning and belonging.

5.2.1 The living universe hypothesis

The first shift is towards the hypothesis of a living universe. The living universe hypothesis is not without controversy because it contravenes the long established scientific hypothesis that the universe is non-living, or dead. However, according to speaker, author, and proponent of the living universe hypothesis, Duane Elgin,^{xxv} there is enough evidence to point towards a living universe hypothesis. If Elgin is correct, the living universe hypothesis offers a compelling context from which to repose and explore our meaning making questions.

Before outlining the tenets of the shift, it is important to outline something of the view of a dead universe. In this regard Elgin claimed that the dead universe view believed the universe to be: "a barren and inhospitable place comprised almost entirely of non-living matter and empty space." In turn, such a dead universe hypothesis gave rise to the notions that we live in an indifferent and meaningless universe and as such our lives were also meaningless. Within such a framework of understanding, Elgin argued: "material possessions and accomplishments [were] the primary expression of one's identity, and thus an important source of happiness." Thus, in terms of being the backdrop into which we posed our meaning making questions, the dead universe hypothesis contributed to the rise of the following values within the former narrative: anthropocentrism, i.e., the primacy of the human species over all other species; individualism, i.e., the primacy of the individual over the collective in the form of the pursuit of personal happiness; and consumerism, i.e., the more material goods bought and sold, the better.

in contrast to a dead universe view, Elgin claimed that in a living universe hypothesis: "the universe is deeply alive as an evolving and learning system and we humans are on a journey of discovery within it. We are learning to live within a living universe." Furthermore, Elgin argued: "a living universe view is a paradigm that portrays the universe as buzzing with invisible energy and aliveness, patiently growing a garden of cosmic scale." How will the living universe hypothesis shape our response to the question of human meaning and belonging? In this regard, Hubbard's understanding of conscious evolution offers a foundation from which to commence our spiritual exploration. Hubbard argued:

"conscious evolution inspires in us a mysterious and humble awareness that we have been created by this awesome process of evolution and we are now being transformed by it to take a more mature role as cocreators. In this view we do not stand apart from nature, but rather, we are nature evolving."

Thus a change in view towards a living universe hypothesis will enable us to discover an identity as conscious participants in the greater story of Life itself; as self-in-life rather than self and life. Such an identity and purpose has the potential to break through and transcend the lived experience of anthropocentrism, individualism, and consumerism.

5.2.2 Systems theory

The second scientific shift is that of moving from a mechanistic model for understanding how the natural world works, towards a systems theory model. Within the mechanistic model: life was regarded as a machine; the whole was the sum of the parts; things were reduced to their separate parts; then the parts were studied in isolation. The mechanistic model revealed

much about the structure and composition of the world and the human body/mind. At the same time, drawing from a mechanistic model, the previous sacred story centred on the principle of either/or in the form of competitive dualist opposites, e.g., mind VS body, matter VS spirit, us VS them. The principle of either/or gave rise to the domination model of relating to one another, where we viewed ourselves in competition with each other. In turn, such a view gave rise to judgment, fear, and prejudice.

In contrast to a mechanistic world view, the natural world is now also being explored through the interpretive framework of systems thinking. (See: Fritjof & Luisi, Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, Nora Bateson, Duane Elgin).^{xxvi} According to physicist, systems theorist, and deep ecologist, Fritjof Capra & Professor of Chemistry, Pier Luigi Luisi: "A systems theorist thinks in terms of the whole and how the parts relate to the whole." For example, the human respiratory system comprises a whole made up of its own parts, while also being part of other bodily systems, which make up the greater whole of the human body. Therefore, as Capra & Luisi argued: "to understand things systematically means literally to put them into a context, to establish the nature of their relationship." Within such a view, the universe is a living system, made up of systems within systems; each system comprising a whole made of its own parts, while also being part of a larger whole; no particular system taking priority over another. Furthermore, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts because: "the way that its parts combine adds a different quality." The term given to such an understanding is emergence. Therefore, within a systems theory view, we humans participate within a living, emergent world.

Furthermore, within a systems theory perspective, Capra and Luisi argued: "evolution is no longer seen as a competitive struggle for existence, but rather as a cooperative dance in which creativity and the constant emergence of novelty are the driving forces." In line with such an understanding, the transformative shift from a predominantly mechanist model towards a systems model, will in turn, shift our personal and collective sacred stories away from a competitive struggle orientation, towards a cooperative dance orientation. The shift is one of deep change, i.e., transformative shifts in our inner orientation, or inner ground of our thinking and being.

5.3 Shifts in relation to ongoing lived experience

As well as the shifts in scientific exploration as presented, there have been a couple shifts in relation to ongoing lived experience which are worth noting.

5.3.1 A global village image

We now live in an era characterized by the image of: *a global village*. Such an image has emerged through the ease of travel and the ease of communication across the globe via the internet. As a result, philosopher, Ken Wilber^{xxvii} argued: "we are living in an historical time when all of the world's cultures are now available to us, which in turn has given rise to an information overload of seemingly competing spiritual practices and belief systems to draw from". We truly are living in a spiritually expansive world. Such a spiritual expansiveness has challenged our former narrative which was centred primarily on the teachings of the western Christian tradition. Now, we are living in a cultural era which seeks meaning beyond a singular source; beyond a singular truth in the way we collectively give meaning

to our living and our dying. Within such a setting, a sacred story drawing from one religious tradition is no longer viable.

The image of the global village was also fostered within our awareness through the pictures of the Earth rising over the moon taken by the Apollo 8 moon mission. The pictures offered a visual experience of no state or national borders, simply a sphere covered in ocean and land. Reflecting on the pictures, it becomes apparent that we truly stand together in this venture called Life; together as one human community within the wider Earth community. Even though we live with different cultural and religious beliefs, we are of the one species, which is interconnected with the wider Earth community. Therefore, our cultural sacred story now needs to reflect such an interconnectedness.

5.3.2 The previous narrative has run its course of usefulness

In terms of ongoing lived experience, it would seem that the previous narrative has run its course of usefulness for two reasons in particular. Firstly, it has run its course because it is no longer congruent with current knowledge and beliefs regarding how the natural world came to be/ continues to be and how the human body/mind works. Therefore, it can no longer respond coherently to our meaning making questions, or our longing to belong. Secondly, it has run its course because it gave rise to a values system geared towards the flourishing of the human via concepts of anthropocentrism, individualism, and consumerism. Such a values system can no longer be sustained in the natural world because it allows us to relentlessly deplete the Earth's resources. In this regard, Charles Eisenstein^{xxviii} asserted:

"From what state of being do we extinguish other species, ruin the earth and sea, and treat nature as a collection of resources to be allocated for maximum short-term benefit? . . . No mere personal failing, this numbing is inseparable from the deep narratives that run our civilization, and the social systems that those narrative support."

Thus, we have gone as far as we can with the core belief that we humans are central to the sacred story. We are significant characters in the greater Story of Life itself, but not the centrepiece. A new sacred story will have to reflect such a shift.

5.4 The work of re-narrating ourselves

The sacred work of being human involves discerning the Call of the era and responding by way of taking up our place of belonging within that. In light of the shifts in world view as presented, the Call of the era seemingly *turns on* the principle of : interconnectivity via unity with diversity. Re-narrating ourselves within the guidance of such a principle will be no easy task, even though it is a natural part of the human venture of being and becoming. The task of re-narrating ourselves will require a change in many of our deep seated personal and collective assumptions. In this regard, Robert E. Quinn's understanding of change can be helpful. Quinn contrasted "incremental change" with "deep change." He argued that incremental change can be likened to: "a mechanical process, one that we can control. We think we know what adjustments must be made for the desired result to occur." In terms of re-narrating ourselves, incremental change is like playing at the outer edges of the narrative. In contrast, Quinn argued that deep change: "is fundamentally different because it requires people to develop new expectations. As people experience deep change, they move from their

old assumptions to a new set of assumptions." Therefore, re-narrating ourselves cuts to the very heart of our inner ground of thinking and being.

Even though deep change is required, Catholic priest and scholar in comparative religion, the late Raimon Panikkar,^{xxix} argued: "Life is neither repetition nor continuation. It is growth, which implies at once a continuance and rupture. Life is creation." Drawing from such an understanding, a new sacred story will not simply dismiss that which has gone before. Rather a new sacred story will both include (continuation) and also break through and transcend (rupture) former sacred stories. *Include* here means that the universal human wisdom teachings will be recognized and incorporated. *Break through* and *transcend* here means that particular outmoded storylines, or beliefs, will be released. As such, deep change will enable us to draw out the wisdom teachings from past and present civilizations, without the need to either substantiate, or call into disrepute, the belief systems in which the wisdom teachings originated.

5.5 A new cultural sacred story includes multiple belief systems

In light of the shifts in world view as presented above, it would seem that a new cultural sacred story will of necessity include multiple belief systems. On what basis could it be classified as a cultural sacred story? Each belief system will be unique in its own right and also intrinsically connected and response-able to the wider whole through shared themes and values. So, rather than particular storylines, or beliefs, to which all must adhere, it will be themes which orientate the varying belief systems. In turn, the shared themes will give rise to a shared values system which seeks the flourishing of all life. As a result, a new cultural sacred story will not be dependent upon one particular belief system. Rather, any religious/spiritual/philosophical belief system which is open to the themes and values will participate.

5.6 Orientating themes: unity and participation

Again, drawing from the shifts in world view as presented, the themes orientating a new sacred story seem to be: 1. interbeing, i.e., the interdependence of all life-forms within a framework of systems within systems; 2. the greater story of Life itself - where we humans are not the central protagonist, rather significant characters in Life's creative dance of being and becoming; 3. the human tradition - which views all of humanity in the evolutionary process of being and becoming, ourselves included, and as such takes into account human history in its entirety, including religious and spiritual traditions; 4. participation with, rather than domination over; 5. interrelatedness, i.e., being influenced by one another; 6. inter-connectedness, i.e., all part of the wider web of Life itself. In short, the themes as listed fall within an overarching themes of unity and participation. In light of such themes, the values system will be geared towards the flourishing of all life. Such a values system in-and-of itself will call forth personal and collective moral responsibility.

5.7 Guiding principle: Interconnectivity via unity with diversity

Even though unity is a central theme of a new sacred story, the meaning of the term no longer refers to uniformity, i.e., the quality or fact of being the same, or of not changing or being different in any way (Cambridge Dictionary). Rather, within a new sacred story, *unity* welcomes difference. Macy^{xxx} even went as far as claiming that unity with diversity: "requires the uniqueness of each part." The principal of unity with diversity breaks through and

transcends the former mechanistic, competitive, dualistic opposites premise of either/or which dominated the former narrative and gave rise to anthropocentrism, individualism, and consumerism. In contrast, the principle of unity with diversity enables us to connect more deeply to one another, while at the same time continuing to cultivate our unique experience of personal wholeness.

5.7.1 The holon as metaphor

How can the principle of unity with diversity guide us in our daily living? The principle offers a new lens from which to view ourselves-in-the-world. One entry point into understanding such a new lens is through the notion of a *holon*. A holon is something which is simultaneously a whole and a part. Arthur Koestler^{xxx} wrote of a holon this way: "a holon is an identifiable part of a system that has a unique identity, yet is made up of sub-ordinate parts and in turn is part of a larger whole." In a similar vein, O'Murchu claimed:

"a holon is a whole made of its own parts . . . yet itself is part of a larger whole. And each holon has two opposite tendencies: 1. a self assertive desire to preserve its individual autonomy and 2. an integrative tendency to function as part of the larger whole."

In line with the above quotations, a holon *turns on* the premise of both/and. The premise of both/and gives rise to the view that we can now know ourselves to be: unique beings in our own right yearning for the experience of personal wholeness, and that we are intrinsically interconnected and response-able to a much wider web of relationships. Therefore, within the premise of both/and, we do not lose our personal identity. At the same time we know ourselves to be intrinsically interconnected within a larger whole.

In terms of our sacred stories, the premise of both/and gives rise to the understanding that each narrative is both unique in its own right and that it is intrinsically interconnected within the wider cultural sacred story. Furthermore, that our cultural sacred story is both unique in its own right and intrinsically interconnected within the wider human community' sacred story. Still further, the human community's sacred story is unique in its own right and intrinsically interconnected within the wider Earth community sacred story. Within such a view, no particular sacred story takes precedence over another. The name given to such a dynamic process is nested holarchies, where each unique sacred story is in relationship within the greater Story of Life itself.

The *holon* as a cultural metaphor is gaining prominence in western culture. For O'Murchu and others like Ken Wilber^{xxxii} and Joanna Macy, the holon as a cultural metaphor is now superseding the previous metaphor of the machine, which rose to significance in response to the industrial revolution. The holon as metaphor grounds an understanding of how we may live together in unity with diversity in a way that breaks through the either/or boundaries of ethnocentrism and frees us from judgment, fear and prejudice.

To summarize section five so far: the orientating themes of a new cultural sacred story are unity and participation, grounded in the principle of unity with diversity; set within a global village image and the metaphor of the holon which gives rise to an understanding of both/and; drawing from a science-based evolutionary creation myth and systems theory. In turn, the values system is geared towards the flourishing of all life. Such a values system calls forth personal and collective moral responsibility.

5.8 Is this sacred story really new?

The question could be posed: "is this orientation of unity and participation actually new?" Such themes have orientated sacred stories since ancient times. For example: the aforementioned sacred story of the First Nations people of Australia. In this regard, Jennifer Isaacs^{xxxiii} recounted that: "According to Aboriginal belief, all life as it is known today - human, animal, bird and fish - is part of one vast, unchanging network of relationships which can be traced back to the great Spirit Ancestors." Therefore, it would seem that the orientation of unity and participation is an ancient one.

Furthermore, the mysticism streams within the religious traditions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity held an understanding of unity and participation. For example: Islam - the poet Rumi in the 13th Century, Judaism - the Kabbalah, and Christianity - Julian of Norwich, writing in the 14th Century. Also the pantheistic tradition believes that: ""God is everything and everything is God (www.philosophy.talk.org). Additionally, western philosophical traditions have debated non-dualism. Also, eastern spiritual teachings regarding non-dualism have been around from the seventh century, perhaps even much earlier. Plus, according Ted Kaptchuk,^{xxxiv} traditional Chinese medicine takes a systems approach, whereby rather than focusing on a singular cause and effect diagnosis, the focus is on the relationship between the whole. So, what could possibly be new?

In light of the above, the themes of a new cultural sacred story are both ancient and new. They are ancient in that they have orientated many previous belief systems. They are however, new for contemporary western societies. Why? Because the context in which we are exploring the themes is new. Such a context includes a science-based evolutionary creation myth, a global village image, the metaphor of the holon, and systems theories. Therefore, whilst the themes of unity and participation may similar, the language and images that ground such themes are new to us.^{xxxv} Such an understanding of the themes being both ancient and new concurs with Eliot's quotation on page eleven, in that we are drawn to continue our spiritual exploration and in the end we return to where we started and know the place for the first time. Thus, as we live into a new sacred story, the ancient themes will be experienced by us, as if for the first time.

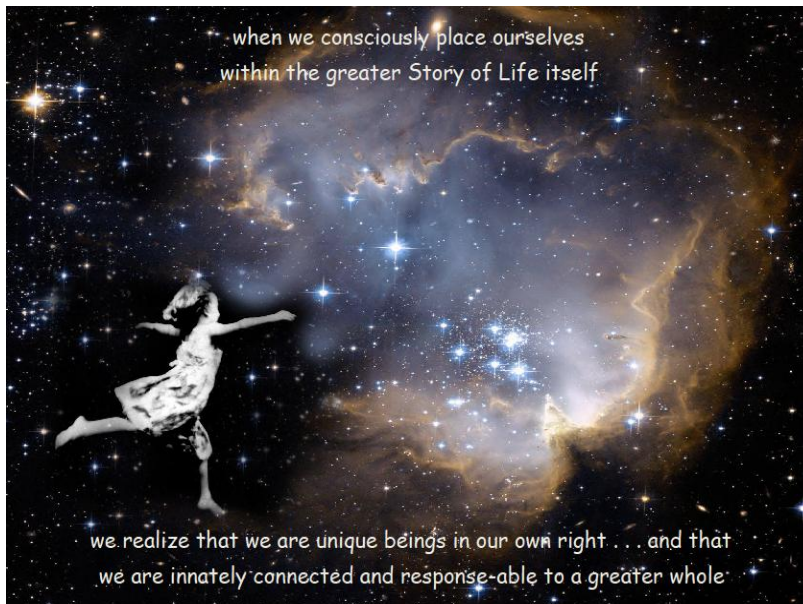
5.9 A new Australian sacred story

In terms of a new Australian sacred story, the concept of multiple belief systems engaging with shared themes and values may be one way of linking the three supposedly separate narratives of: the First Nations people, British colonialism, and the current multicultural experience. Such a concept came to life for me through the book entitled *Radical Heart: Three Stories make us one* authored by lawyer and senior adviser on constitutional reform to Cape York Institute, Shireen Morris. Morris' book gave account of the struggle for constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. As a non-Indigenous Australian I found the book to be quite a confronting read in terms of the government continuing to raise barriers to Indigenous recognition and reconciliation. Even so, there was a line of connection between her understanding of three stories making us one, and my writings on a new cultural sacred story which included multiple belief systems orientated by shared themes and values. Thus, Morris' idea that three stories make us one certainly resonates with a new cultural story which *turns on* the theme of unity with diversity.

The title of Morris' book picks up indigenous lawyer, academic, land rights activist and founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson's, characterization of the three parts of Australia:

"Our nation is in three parts. There is our ancient heritage, written in the continent and the original culture painted on its land and seascapes. There is our British inheritance, the structures of government and society transported from the United Kingdom fixing its foundations in the ancient soil. There is our multicultural achievement: a triumph of immigration that brought together the gifts of peoples and cultures from all over the globe - forming one indissoluble commonwealth."

What if each of the three narratives was recognized equally, whilst at the same time, knowing that each particular narrative is an integral part of a greater whole? If we could view our cultural identity as three stories that make us one, what a different cultural identity we would have. Well, we could actually have a cultural identity!



We need a common and compelling vision of the nature of the Universe and the role of the human within it. Such a new cosmology must be grounded in the best empirical, scientific understanding, and must be nourished just as deeply by the vibrant cores of our planet's wisdom traditions. Only such a vision has a chance of awakening the deep psychic energies necessary to shape a new era of health, well being, true prosperity. Brian Swimme

Summary

It would seem that in response to continuing scientific exploration and ongoing lived experience, western societies have experienced a rupture in their sacred story. The process of generating a new sacred story involves deep change in commonly held assumptions. Therefore, even though re-narrating is a natural function of the sacred work of being human, it is not an easy task. A new cultural sacred story will be orientated around themes, rather than particular storylines to which all must adhere. Such shared themes involve unity and participation grounded in the principle of unity with diversity; set within the global village image and the premise of both/and; drawing from a science-based creation myth and systems theory. In turn, the values system will be geared towards the flourishing of all life.

6/ InterStory dialogue

In light of the image of the global village and the guiding principle of interconnectivity via unity with diversity, interStory dialogue is now an imperative. Even so, before we westerners can engage in interStory dialogue, it is important that we first name and claim our new cultural sacred story. Why? Because interStory dialogue requires that each culture has a clear understanding of their narrative so that each may figuratively: *take their place at the table*. When we know our sacred story, we are able to engage in interStory dialogue with an attitude of openness to listen and respond to one another's norms, beliefs and values, without rushing to either defend, or, relinquish our own. Unfortunately, being in-between sacred stories makes it difficult for us westerners to truly participate in interStory dialogue. Perhaps our role at the moment is one of listening to other sacred stories with nonjudgmental curiosity.

6.1 The intention of interStory dialogue

InterStory dialogue enables the creation of a vibrant *patchwork* community oriented around the principle of unity with diversity. In this manner, Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko^{xxxvi} claimed that dialogical dialogue - or in the language of this article, interStory dialogue - is:

"a dialogue that is always an exploration. Its philosophical roots stem from an understanding that the other is not really other, but participates in a shared reality of which we ourselves are a part . . . Together, we both participate in a shared reality and we affect and change that reality through our interactions with one another. "

Thus, in light of the understanding that we each participate in a shared reality and that we gather first and foremost as one human community with differing cultural sacred stories, interStory dialogue enables each participant to attune to one another, or in the words of Parker Palmer:^{xxxvii} "to truly see and hear each other." Such attunement does not mean that participants have to agree with each other's beliefs. Rather, as participants listen and respond with nonjudgmental curiosity and receptivity, they can experience a kind of resonance. In turn, an environment of trust is generated. Within such an environment of trust, participants can figuratively: *stand in their own ground, openheartedly*. Also, they are able to figuratively: *walk around in one another's sacred stories*, without fear of losing their own.

In light of such understandings, the intention of interStory dialogue is more than a simple pooling of ideas, opinions, and beliefs. Rather, the intention of the dialogue is, in the words of McEntee and Bucko an: "opening oneself to the other without fear of losing one's own positions." At the same time, whilst participants do not engage in interStory dialogue with the intention of changing another, or of being changed themselves, interStory dialogue itself is capable of evoking transformative shifts within each participant's view. When participants truly attune to one another, previously unrecognized blind spots in their own view can emerge. Therefore, interStory dialogue does evoke change.

6.2 Two practices which enable interStory dialogue

Before outlining two of the practices which enable interStory dialogue, it is important to note that if we can remember that our narrative is not an end-in-itself, rather a means through which we source our self image, purpose,

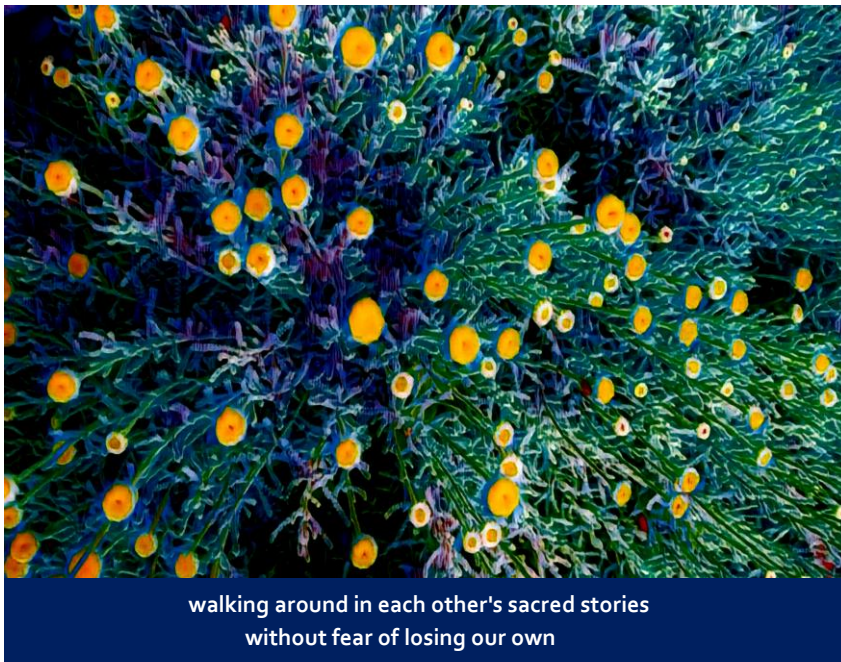
and values, we can figuratively: *hold it lightly*. When we hold our narrative lightly we are more able to listen and respond to one another with an attitude of genuine curiosity, without the need to either rush in to defend, or relinquish, our own position. As a result, interStory dialogue becomes possible, even with participants who hold disparate views. At the same time, interStory dialogue is not all sweetness and light; it can be a rigorous endeavor.

6.2.1 A beginner's mindset

The first practice is that of a beginner's mindset. Drawing from a Zen Buddhist tradition,^{xxxviii} a beginner's mindset encompasses openness, curiosity, lack of preconceptions, comfortable with the unknown, and a mind which is able to *be with* the present moment. If we can engage in interStory dialogue with a beginner's mindset, we are more able to remain open to one another.

6.2.2 Open-ended questions

As mentioned in the above quotation from McEntee and Bucko, interStory dialogue is always an exploration. Therefore, the second practice is that of open ended questions. Open-ended questions emerge quite naturally from a beginner's mindset. Also, as Lonergan taught, open ended questions are at the heart of transformation. Consequently, when we pose open-ended questions in interStory dialogue we are creating space for all participants to remain open to transformative shifts in their view.



Our first task in approaching another person, another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes. For the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that [Life itself] was there before our arrival. MaryRose Fitzsimmons HHS & Isabel Gregory

Summary

Before engaging in interStory dialogue, we are first required to do the work of generating our own coherent sacred story. InterStory dialogue enables trust to be generated, not through holding similar belief systems, but through the act of being *seen and heard*. The intention of interStory dialogue is not to change another's beliefs, or to be changed. The intention is to create a wondrous patchwork quilt of unity with diversity. Even so, real dialogue can evoke transformative shifts in each participant's view.

7/. Concluding remarks

The article commenced with a quotation from John O'Donohue regarding the human longing to belong. We experience belonging through a coherent sacred story. Our sacred stories *turn on* current understandings of how the world came to be and how we belong within that. Therefore, creation myths lay at their very heart. Our longing to belong does not sit within a vacuum. Within the very nature of Life itself is the Call to belong at any given time and place in history. We discern the Call of the era through noticing and reflecting upon changes in the cultural world view. Responding to the Call of the era requires of us to generate a coherent sacred story from which to rationally source personal and collective identity, purpose, values, and the experience of belonging. In turn, our sacred stories offer an inner *shelter of belonging* in the world. Through such an inner *shelter of belonging*, we can live daily life with integrity and authenticity.

It has been argued that the dominant western cultural sacred story has broken apart due to ongoing scientific understandings and lived experience. As a result, our era is calling forth a new cultural sacred story orientated on the themes of unity and participation. Why those themes? The Call of our era seems to be one of interconnectedness in the form of unity with diversity. Such a Call can be perceived through a number of shifts which have taken place. Of note is the shift towards a science-based Big History creation myth which centres on an integral way of thinking and being, within Life's creative dance of being and becoming. Other factors include: a shift in theories regarding the nature of the universe and the way the natural world works, the global village image, and the need for a new values system which seeks the flourishing of all life. Each of the shifts calls forth an experience of interconnectivity.

The calling forth of a new sacred story involves the work of beginning again, and taking into account human history thus far, reposing our meaning making questions within the light of current knowledge, beliefs, and lived experience. Even so, such a venture is more than an intellectual exercise. We live our sacred stories; our sacred stories lay at the heart of our being and our doing. Even though the task is difficult, we need not fear the process, for the Call to belong is permeated with lovingkindness. Responding to the Call is a natural part of the sacred work of being human. Re-narrating a sacred story has taken place many times though out human history, and will no doubt continue to do so in the future.

we make our lives bigger or smaller, more expansive or more limited, according to the interpretation of life that is our story. Christina Baldwin

Resources

- ⁱ John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring our Hunger to Belong*, 1998
- ⁱⁱ The thesis is posted on [www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The contribution of a spiritual director to the spiritual journey of a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The%20contribution%20of%20a%20spiritual%20director%20to%20the%20spiritual%20journey%20of%20a%20person%20diagnosed%20with%20bipolar%20disorder). Whilst the thesis is contextualized within the religious tradition of Christianity, the insights and understandings relating to storytelling are common to the wider human experience.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brenè Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*, 2017
- ^{iv} John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care*, 2001
- ^v Anne Deveson, *Resilience*, 2003
- ^{vi} Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Towards an Undivided Life*, 2004
- ^{vii} Denise Ackermann, "Reconciliation as Embodied Change: A South African Perspective." CSTS Proceedings 59, 2004
- ^{viii} Psalm 42:7 Hebrew sacred text
- ^{ix} The belief system from which the thoughts in this article emerge, is that of conscious evolution via a framework of evolutionary spirituality.
- ^x Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love: Discovering Fire for the Second Time*, 2008
- ^{xi} T.S.Eliot, *The Four Quartets*
- ^{xii} Anne Brennan and Janice Brewi, *Passion for Life: Lifelong Psychological and Spiritual Growth*, 2001
- ^{xiii} Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 2007
- ^{xiv} Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher: Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story*, 2005
- ^{xv} Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counselling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach*, 2001
- ^{xvi} Janet Ruffing, *Uncovering Stories of Faith: Spiritual Direction and Narrative*, 1989 . Reprinted as *To Tell the sacred Tale*, 2011
- ^{xvii} Eckhart Tolle, *Findhorn Retreat: Stillness Amidst the World*, 2006
- ^{xviii} Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher*
- ^{xix} Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, 1999
The Dream of the Earth, 1988
- ^{xx} Thomas Berry, Joanna Macy, Charles Einstein, just to name a few
- ^{xxi} Joanna Macy & Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, 2014
- ^{xxii} Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, 1984
- ^{xxiii} Barbara Marx Hubbard, *Conscious Evolution: Awakening the power of our social potential*, 2015
- ^{xxiv} Diamud O'Murchu, *Quantum Theology, Spiritual Implications of the New Physics*
- ^{xxv} Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe: Where are we? Who are we? Where are we going?*, 2009
- ^{xxvi} See Fritjof Capra & Pier Luigi Luisi, *A Systems View of Life*, Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, Nora Bateson, *Small Arcs of Larger Circle: Framing through other patterns*, Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*
- ^{xxvii} Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: a Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 2008
- ^{xxviii} Charles Eisenstein, *Climate: A New Story*, 2018
- ^{xxix} Raimon Panikkar, as quoted in *The New Monasticism: An interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*, Rory McEntee & Adam Bucko, 2015
- ^{xxx} Joanna Macy & Molly Young Brown, *Coming back to Life*
- ^{xxxi} Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, 1967
- ^{xxxii} Ken Wilber, et al, *Integral Life Practice: A 21st-Century Blueprint for Physical Health, Emotional Balance, Mental Clarity, and Spiritual Awakening*, 2008
- ^{xxxiii} Jennifer Isaacs, editor, *Australian Dreaming: 40 000 Years of Aboriginal History*, 2005
- ^{xxxiv} Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*
- ^{xxxv} Joanna Macy, *World as Lover*
- ^{xxxvi} Rory McEntee & Adam Bucko, *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*, 2015
- ^{xxxvii} Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*
- ^{xxxviii} Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 1987

Quotations under the artwork

p. 5 Fritjof Capra and Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life*

p. 10 Loch Kelly, *Shift into Freedom: The science and practice of open-hearted awareness*

p. 12 David Whyte, 'The House of Belonging'

p. 16 Christian Baldwin, *Storycatcher*

p. 24 Brian Thomas Swimme, as quoted by Karen Harwell, 'Awakening the Story of the Universe in Our Lives,' www.ecozoictimes.com

p. 27 Mary Rose Fitzsimmons HHS & Isabel Gregory (Quotation received during spiritual direction training)