

2009.06.28 -- The Story We Tell Ourselves

The Story We Tell Ourselves

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Two weeks ago, in a fabulous sermon, Bennett Mitten referred to a statement by theologian Thomas Berry that has become something of a mantra for me: *"it's all a question of story,"* Berry stated. Berry died this month at the age of 94. He was a Catholic priest, a vanguard thinker deeply informed by a life-long engagement with the sciences, and he was a leading spokesperson for the eco-theological movement in North America. He believed that both education and religion need to ground themselves within the story of the universe as we now understand it through empirical knowledge. He believed, and I hope, that by telling a New Story of the universe as a single, multiform, energetic unfolding of matter, mind, and life we can overcome our alienation from it and begin the renewal of life on a sustainable basis. This new cosmology, if told and understood, could be numinous, revelatory and capable of evoking the vision and energy required to bring ourselves and our world into balance. If you do not know the story," he wrote, "in a sense you do not know yourself." "It's all a question of story."

The stories we tell matter. The stories we understand ourselves to be in can define the meaning of good and evil for us and, hence, shape our ethical behavior. "Stories have the power to move and affect us into new ways of seeing the world. Unlike purely rational arguments, stories unite reason and emotion so as to move both mind and heart. When they are successful, their power can bring about a conversion in our understanding of ourselves, our world, our destiny. The power of the story reaches down into the unconscious and transforms our ways of seeing and our willingness to act on our new insights." (Darrell Fasching) The kinds of stories that have this kind of power are what we call "myths." By myth, I don't mean a story that is patently false, unreal or imaginary; rather, we create and tell mythic stories in order to place our lives, and the lives and events of our communities and cultures, in a larger context which supplies them with meaning and significance. (see Darrell Fasching, *Narrative Theology After Auschwitz*, 1992, p.94; "Myth" in *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, pp. 671-3, and "Myth " in *Harper-Collins Dictionary of Religion*, pp. 749-51)

Some myths are cosmic in scale. They assert ultimate connection and meaning, rather than chaos, at the root of all things: "In the beginning," the Omaha people sang, "all things were in the mind of Wakonda." Other myths, like the Lakota story of the "Jumping Mouse" take us on a journey of transformation and spiritual maturity embodied by a most unlikely hero, the kind of hero with whom the likes of us can identify and thus find our own reserves of strength. Invoking an image of a mythic caravan, Rumi enjoins us to "come, come whoever you are...even if you've broken your vows a hundred times—come, yet again come," and thus he invites us into a capacious, welcoming community of compassion and joy.

The myths we create, the stories we tell of ourselves matter. Think of the power of myth for religious life, identity, and imagination, and the consequences of choosing one rather than another: is the mythic essence of Buddhism disclosed in the myriad array of heavenly compassionate beings who exist in order to assist the believer in her quest for enlightenment, or is it revealed directly without mediators in a deceptively simple, mysterious riddle posed by a Zen master that may untie the knot of illusion? Is Islam all about the domination of territory and behavior achieved by outward struggle, or a benevolent path of inward devotion to a god of beauty and love beyond names and forms? "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field of unity," Rumi writes. Not asking for a passport issued by sect or denomination, he promises: "Out beyond is a field of unity...I'll meet you there." For Christians, above all, will it be Christ the King and Judge whose severe grandeur in Michelangelo's painting of the "Last Judgment" made even Mary at his side turn her face away in terrible awe; or is it Jesus of Nazareth, depicted as well by Michelangelo the sculptor, as the "suffering servant," the man "acquainted with grief" whose slumping, broken body is gathered up in the loving arms of his mother and those of Joseph of Arimathea?

Which story and fund of images do we conjure up and bring forward in order to make a life of meaning? It's all a question of story and the selective, creative decisions we make: one myth, one image, one song at a time—do we sing: "I'm Material Girl in a Material World," or women, children, men: "We Come Marching, Marching for Bread and Roses"? These choices contribute profoundly in determining the outcome of who we are and will be; what communities we avoid and those we embrace; the principles and values we affirm and those against which we struggle.

Nations, too, are convoked and interpreted by the power of the mythic stories we tell. Believe me, and as you well know, it makes a world of difference whether a nation's overriding story is one of belligerent Manifest Destiny; or if its mythic vision is one of sanctuary, justice and inclusive rights—the kind described by Emma Lazarus when she wrote: "Give Me Your Tired and Poor," and when Martin Luther King's cried out with a clarion of voice: "I Have a Dream."

All of this is prologue to what I really want to say today, because today I'm thinking of our nation, our country, and the story we tell about ourselves. And how we think of things, and how we tell our story will shape much of what we do, or want to do, or understand what we shouldn't do.

And so my question on this Sunday before Canada Day, my last sermon before embarking on vacation and study leave is this: *what* is our story, our myth of origins and purpose? *How* did this country come to be and to what purpose? *Where* ought we to be taking it by virtue of the light which that story shines upon the narratives, characters, documents, and images we choose in order to fashion a story, a home, in which we can abide and flourish? I have been waiting ever since I became a Canadian citizen last December to ask these questions out loud with you.

I feel a sense of urgency in raising these questions now more than at any time since taking up my ministry here seven years ago. With growing dismay, and with little or no criticism from mainstream media, I watched an election in 2005 essentially thrown by an eleventh hour leak of documents by our national police force; and then three years later, observed with the rest of you, as a Prime Minister shut down the government to avoid losing a confidence vote. Elizabeth May has observed that just about the last time something like that happened was when England's Charles I shut down parliament when he found its restrictions upon his power not to his liking.

With growing alarm and disgust, I watched this nation's government do nothing to implement the Kyoto Climate Accords which it signed; and watch, still, how our current government takes no thoughtful, leading role in preparing for an absolutely crucial UN Climate Change that takes place later this year in Copenhagen. Instead, we sell off our unrenowable energy as quickly as possible for paltry royalties, leave the eastern half of the country dependent on unsecured imported energy, do less than almost any other democracy to develop alternative energy resources and infrastructure; and we slump in denial about the environmental and cultural devastation wreaked by the processing of oil sands.

My wonder, concern, and alarm mounts. In November 2005, after eighteen months of consultations with the Government of Canada, Provincial Ministers, Territorial leaders and those of five national aboriginal organizations, the Kelowna Accord were signed in order to improve the education, employment and living conditions for Aboriginal peoples. But then one government fell, and its successor has failed utterly to implement the Accord by not funding it.

We're proud that a rigorous economic policy eliminated deficits, and then, in one choice after another between, on the one hand, economic theory, business boosterism, and the Department of Finance, and poverty, housing, education, health, the environment and sovereignty on the other, with little vision, with no coherent story, we've made choices have led us to such a pass that we are taking up perilous residence in a troubled house and nation half-built; and frankly, the way I see it, we're confused and at a loss about how to proceed.

Turning sights on this land, John Ralston Saul wrote: "the ability of a civilization to survive and grow lies in its ability to describe itself." Thomas King puts it this way: "The truth about stories is that: *that's all we are.*" Tomson Highway writes: "Languages are given form by mythologies," and Guy Vanderhaeghe observed "The narrative is how you think of things." (Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, 2008, p. 21. Hereafter: Saul)

So I return to the question: What is the story we tell about ourselves?

Last month, I read John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, and I have come to the conclusion that it is the most important book I have read about Canada. This is the book I wish I had read before taking up my ministry in this country. It is a dramatic, thoughtful, and bound to be controversial attempt to rethink the foundational myths of this nation and its people. I also find his thesis and the evidence he selects to support it both provocative and congenial to our values and vision.

In sum, Saul contends that we have misrepresented ourselves to ourselves. Canada, he contends, is not a "European country" made primarily in the image of values inherited from France and Great Britain, and more recently from the United States. Instead, he argues that we are a complex Metis nation; a nation whose values, procedures and institutions were shaped by the on-going 250 year interaction between English- and French-speaking immigrants and the First Nations people who lived here and who had created ideas and practices well-tooled for abiding and flourishing in this land. Indeed, Saul goes further and claims that we are, at root, more Aboriginal than European, and that our "failure to recognize this is what prevents us from becoming the strong, confident, and progressive country that is our birthright.... Canada's real problem, then, is that we do not know who we are." (Andrew Potter, "Are We a Metis Nation?...", *The Literary Review of Canada*, April 1, 2009. Hereafter, Potter.)

He proceeds to make his argument in three stages: first, with an against-the-grain historical account of the interactions between Europeans and Natives, and the development of a Metis character; second, how after Confederation, we came to forget and repress, and thus distort, those origins through a misinterpretation of our founding documents. The result has been a profound alienation from our "true" national identity. And finally, as a consequence of that alienation, he skewers Canada's elite financial, cultural and political elites for a subservient, colonial mindset in thrall to London, Paris and Washington.

He then wraps it up with a call to reclaim our story, and that in so doing, we may rediscover what makes Canada distinct, coherent, necessary and even good; a "Fair Country" reconnected with a foundational identity animated by ideas and practices of interdependence, habits of finding the middle way, its sense of peacekeeping and benevolence, of serving not pillaging the land, and the belief that we should all be "eating from the common bowl." "The single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment, so far," he writes, "has been our inability to normalize—that is, to internalize consciously—the First Nations as a senior founding pillar of our civilization." If this was the norm, Andrew Potter has observed, "we would ask for their advice as a matter of course, [we would] look for the input of our First Nations [Metis and Inuit] on all the great questions of the day." We would cease to romanticize or write them off, and thus better re-discover who we are, the land we inhabit, and the nation we have yet to achieve. (Saul, p. 21, and Potter)

I don't want to turn this into a book report; nor do I want to give the impression that there isn't a lot to argue about and explore in Saul's thesis and use of sources. But it's a compelling, provocative picture, I have to tell you; a mythic narrative worth grappling with, a story worth telling to ourselves and about ourselves.

Let me just give you three brief examples of Saul's creative reclamation of our past. First, the story begins with the economic and domestic relationships established between Europeans and Natives over the first 250 years of settler life in Canada. He points out the role Natives played as full partners in military, civil and commercial affairs—teaching and helping the newcomers survive. In particular, he notes that "in marrying Native women, European men were marrying up—[thus] greatly improving their social, political and economic lives. These relationships were partnerships in every meaningful way, and through this constant intermingling, the Metis character of the Canadian people was shaped." (Potter, Saul, 8-16)

Second, he argues that the two key moments in the “creation of the idea of Canada” were the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701, and Sir William Johnson’s convocation of the great meeting at Niagara in 1764. In the former, the leaders of New France gathered thirteen hundred Aboriginal ambassadors from forty nations to effect intertribal peace and comity with the French; and in the latter, two thousand chiefs gathered at Niagara to cement the terms of the Royal Proclamation. The idea of both, Saul argues, “was to establish a continuous equilibrium, shared interest and shared welfare. The phrase in the Great Peace was that they would all “Eat from a Common Bowl.” Which is to say that relationships were about looking after one another.” In the standard histories of Canada I read in my first years here, trying to get my bearings as a new resident, I find no references to either of these events. And yet it is precisely here, that Saul locates the “origins of a mindset” and “argument about culture” that established the foundations for the “idea of future treaties,” health care, public education, and an approach that would “evolve into federalism.” That we would all eat from a common bowl. (Saul, 68-9)

Third example: the origins of Canada’s Motto: “Ad Mari Usque Mare”: from Sea to Sea. Did Edward Tilley of New Brunswick propose it as a mere description of the new Confederation’s vast territory? The phrase is from Psalm 72, and echoed in Zachariah 9:10; and here Saul has done some fascinating homework. The Fathers of the Confederation knew their Bible. Unlike us, they knew exactly what Tilley was proposing, and how it resonated with the foundational outlook, the myth, that Saul is trying to reclaim. “Dominion from sea to sea”—in the minds of the Canadian delegation these words carried no colonial implications, no mere description of real estate, nor even plumped up pretence to power/puissance/potestas.

Psalm 72 is one of the great works in world literature about the obligation of those who govern to create a more just and equitable society, about protecting peace and ensuring the prosperity, the commonwealth of all, with a particular obligation in service to the poor. Tilley knew it and so did his Confederation colleagues. And here in a telling moment, the best of what European settlers brought with them embraced the best of Aboriginal concepts of *witaskewin*—of continually renegotiated peaceful coexistence; of *miyo-wicehtowin*—of good, healthy, respectful relationships. (Saul, 255-6, 51)

From tales of Europeans marrying up into a superior culture, to the foundational concepts of the Common Bowl and the Great Circle, to recent crucial Supreme Court Decisions (*Guerin* in 1984, *Delgamuukw* in 1997, to *Oakes* in 1986) Saul is attempting, in *A Fair Country*, to expose debilitating colonial mindsets, reclaim, revise and reconfigure our dominant founding myths, and uncover “what in the Aboriginal reality is central to how we actually think of ourselves at some almost unconscious or instinctual level.” Our obsession with egalitarianism, our desire to maintain balance between individuals and groups, our idea of a non-monolithic society, our struggle, delight, and commitment to complexity, our preference for consensus; our intuition that behind the formal, written face of society lies something even more important, which we try to get at through the oral and through complex relationships...Saul finds these and other characteristics of a distinctive Canadian ethos embedded and deeply informed by an Aboriginal endowment. “Once we uncover that,” he claims, “we will find it far easier to deal with how we imagine ourselves and how we wish to act.” (Saul, 54-5)

This is only a hint of the provocative, challenging, and inspiring ideas and stories that I have discovered in this book; and I can think of no better way to lead up to this year’s Canada Day than to introduce it to those of us who haven’t yet had a chance to have a go at it. Indeed, I think it’s so important, that I have secured the commitment of all the UU ministers of Canada to read and discuss it this coming year. And I plan, this fall, on leading an Adult RE seminar here in a close reading of *A Fair Country*. I hope you can join me.

The stories we tell ourselves matter. Let’s use our heads, our good hearts and souls to help speak the stories that must be told, and thus illuminate the journey ahead, the road we must travel.