

chapter
one



The Significance of Story

We are situated in a web of life. The same currents that run through our human blood also run through the swirling galaxies and the myriad of life-forms that pervade this planet: one and the same evolutionary current moves through all—a single self-transcending current of all-pervading energy that brings new life out of seeming catastrophe.

Ilia Delio

This we know. The earth does not belong to people. People belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the people of the earth. We did not weave the web of life. We are but a mere strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Chief Seattle

*Speak the story, whisper to the Earth,
touch the moments, blessings of rebirth.
Taste the wonders, the fragrances, the fears,
See Love's unfolding echo through the years.*

Miriam Martin, P.B.V.M.

We understand our lives in and through stories. Some of the stories we live are archetypal, that is, universal in scope, and we share them with many others. These are the stories that guide our cultures and social groupings. Frequently unspoken, they are the bones on which we hang the flesh of our lives. They focus our awareness, are foundational to our purpose, and help shape our meaning. They guide our moral choices and suggest how we enter into relationships.

In addition to archetypal stories, we each have highly personal narratives that we have fashioned to tell who we are and how we have come to be who we are. The parents and siblings who inhabited our early years, our successes and failures, the births and deaths, the traumas and dreams, the loves and betrayals—all of them weave together to form the personal story that both consciously and unconsciously influences every move we make. It is possible to view our lives as a composite of stories—of the archetypal, universal stories that we experience collectively, and the individual and unique stories that have come with our personal lives.

Spoken or unspoken, stories are powerful containers for the energy of our lives. We live out of our stories each and every day, and as we respond over and over again to their influence, we find that rituals emerge, some quite formally, as when we enter into liturgical celebration with a community. Most often they are not formal at all, but simply the habits of thinking and acting we develop as we live our personal stories one day at a time.

Besides giving form to ritual action, stories provide us with images—images that have the power to draw us more deeply into the story. Some images are more formal and carry energy for a community, like the symbol of the cross, or the yin-yang, or a physical place that has collective memory attached to it. These formal symbols hold archetypal meaning for a community and hold our deepest human experiences even as they help form them. Other images are more personal, particular to our own experience. They may be physical objects, or places, or inner visions that help organize our energy and commitment in a way that may or may not be related to a larger community. Still, they are potent as they engage our being and help fashion who we are and how we live.

Images have an interesting way of engaging our minds. What if I say, “Don’t think of a purple teddy bear”? What happens? It seems that automatically our minds go to the image of a purple teddy bear, contrary to the words that were spoken. Something about a visual form carried in our imagination has power to move our minds and draw us in. According to Bill Harris, founder of Centerpointe Research Institute, “Your brain takes whatever you focus on as an invitation to make it happen.”¹ This is a powerful assertion. The images that flow from the narratives that engage us will help form the reality that manifests in our lives. If this is true, and I believe that it is, the images that engage our imagination shape who we become. It happens all the time. We simply do not notice.

But what if we were to notice? What if we were to be intentional about engaging our energy in a story that we know has the power to change our lives? I am not saying that we do not have good and powerful stories that engage us already. But we now live in a global community, and it seems

wise that a universal story, one that lets go of the ethnocentricity and egocentricity that run through our past stories, will allow us to live in a global community with a greater sense of connectedness to all.

Thomas Berry has said that our generation is one that is in-between stories. We are caught between the story that religion tells and the story that science tells. For many of us the stories have seemed to clash, and we have felt the need to choose one or the other, even as we intuitively may have sensed that there has to be a single story that embraces the whole of life. During the last several decades, a new story has indeed emerged, a new cosmology that brings matters of science and matters of faith into a space where they no longer need collide, but can complement each other and render a fuller picture of what is true. Ironically, in modern times it is science that has told us the story of how all life is connected in a fundamental way—a story that the world's mystics have been telling for centuries.

The story that has guided the lives of those of us with Christian roots is the gospel. It is a story of the Holy One's ongoing love affair with humanity. It is a story that recognizes that the divine breaks into human experience in tangible ways and invites us to become united with Love itself so that we may become lovers. It is a story that resonates well with other religious traditions, for a thread that weaves through them all is an awareness of the transcendent dimension of human experience and the need to offer a response that is grounded in compassion.

Francis of Assisi is reported to have said, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Perhaps he knew that words can get in the way. Perhaps he knew that it is an image filled with energy that most effectively guides us and allows us to engage the story in a way that gives it flesh.

If the mind does indeed take us to that which we envision, then the vision we hold is the most essential component in living a fully awakened, fully engaged life. If compassion is the reality to which all of our experiences of the transcendent call us, then a story that lures us into compassion and an image that engages the whole of humanity into living as one diverse but interconnected community will allow us to evolve and manifest an awakened consciousness.

The Universe Story

The overarching narrative that has emerged as a result of modern scientific discoveries is called the Universe Story. It is a story of the origin and development of the universe that began with the Big Bang—what Brian Swimme calls the Flaring Forth—and continues in this very moment. It was in 2003 that Dr. Wendy Freedman and a team of astrophysicists, using information gathered by the Cosmic Background Explorer (COBE), was able to determine that the originating creative event occurred 13.7 billion years ago. All that exists in this universe lay in latent potential in that fecund moment.

Since the 1920s we have known that this universe of ours is expanding, spreading out uniformly in space. Recently, science has discovered that the expansion that is moving at an accelerating rate is propelled by something called Dark Energy, an invisible force that cannot be seen or measured in ordinary ways but is very real. We also know that a complementary force exists, Dark Matter, which helps hold the universe together. Dark Energy and Dark Matter comprise about 96 percent of the universe, with only 4 percent falling into the category we call “ordinary” matter.

The discoveries made in the field of astrophysics over the past few decades have been remarkable. Less than a century ago, it was thought that our own Milky Way galaxy was the only galaxy that existed. Distant galaxies that could be observed, like Andromeda, were described as nebula, just a smattering of cosmic material suspended in space. But in the 1920s Edwin Hubble, using his new hundred-inch telescope on Mt. Wilson in southern California, was able to see that Andromeda was a galaxy in its own right. Today we know that there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, extending billions of light years out into space. In 1968, with the Apollo space mission, human beings for the first time experienced themselves as extraterrestrials, caught in awe and wonder by the sight of “the big blue marble” that is our home. Since the early 1990s instruments like the Hubble space telescope have brought to us brilliant images of cosmic matter that are so dazzling that they take our breath away. The sheer immensity and elegance of the universe we have come to experience is ineffable, its beauty beyond words.

The world of quantum physics contributes to the Universe Story as well. Prior to the discovery of quantum mechanics, Newtonian physics asserted that the atom, a word which means “indivisible,” was the fundamental unit of matter. Scientists thought they had reached the bottom line of the material world and could therefore explain reality on that basis. But quantum physics turned that notion upside-down, demonstrating that atoms are not hard-boundaried units and that there is an entire world of sub-atomic particles that can be described as either particles or waves. And what scientists are now saying is that if we look down farther and farther, on smaller and smaller scales, what we come to is not some “thing,” but something like information, thought, or consciousness.

Quantum physics also asserts that life emerges from what physicist David Bohm called the quantum vacuum. Bohm said, “There is one energy that is the basis of all reality.”² According to Bohm, the quantum vacuum is the fundamental underlying reality of which everything in the universe is an expression—everything—including ourselves. Described as a vast sea in which all potentiality is present, from which every manifestation comes, the quantum vacuum has no particles, yet particles come about as its energy fluctuates. Brian Swimme has said that particles boil into existence out of sheer emptiness, and that is simply the way the universe works. Bohm also said that form is not the result of mechanical laws of physics and chemistry but emerges from the quantum vacuum.

It is no surprise then that a basic principle of quantum physics is that of nonlocality. Evidence demonstrates that objects can be affected in the absence of a local cause—in other words, we don’t have to be “on location” to exercise influence on someone or something else. Physicist Danah Zohar says:

At the subatomic level . . . correlation experiments have now been carried out many times on pairs of correlated photons, and the nonlocal influences that bind their “lifestyles” have been proved many times over. The photons’ behavior patterns are so linked across any spatial separation—it could be a few centimeters, it could be all the way across the universe—that it appears as if there is no space between them.³

Emerging from the single quantum vacuum, it seems that we remain connected throughout our lives, bound together by a mysterious energy that makes all creation a single whole.

In 1969, Dr. Edward Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist from MIT, first described the Butterfly

Effect. Lorenz was working on calculations of weather patterns when he happened to switch to a calculator that carried out to a few more decimal points than the first one he was using. To his surprise, he obtained very different forecasts using the two calculators. His discovery tells us that the tiniest of perturbations—a movement as slight as the ruffle of a butterfly’s wing—can change a system or energy pattern. Since each of us can be described as an energy pattern, the implications are profound.⁴

Another finding of quantum physics is the Observer Effect. The famous two-slit experiment, designed to find whether a photon is a particle or a wave, determined that when an experiment is set up to test for a particle, the photon manifests as a particle. When set up to test for a wave, the photon manifests as a wave. According to authors Ian Marshall and Danah Zohar:

The quantum observer stands *inside* his or her observations, which themselves play an active role in bringing about the very reality they then look at. In a sense not yet fully understood, the quantum observer helps to *make* the world of his or her observations.⁵

We are always connected, no matter what the spatial distance, and our slightest movements affect others. Lynne McTaggart says it quite well:

At our most elemental, we are not a chemical reaction, but an energetic charge. Human beings and all living beings are a coalescence of energy in a field of energy connected to every other thing in the world. The pulsating energy field is the central engine of our being and our consciousness, the alpha and the omega of our existence. There is no ‘me’ and ‘not-me’ duality to our