

Spiritual Guidance and Story - Seán ÓLaoire

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The wisest creature on planet earth, according to Irish mythology, was a salmon. Not just any salmon, but a very specific salmon that we call Fintan. Fintan lived in a lake over which grew a very special hazel tree that dropped nuts; we call them the "nuts of knowledge." Fintan ate the nuts and acquired wisdom. He was thousands of years old. The belief was that whoever captured and ate the fish would acquire all its knowledge and all its wisdom.

Generations and generations of Irish fishermen attempted to capture him and failed miserably. Finally the philosophers joined in the search. One philosopher devoted his entire life to trying to catch Fintan. He camped out by the lake for forty years. For 40 years, this philosopher devised various strategies to capture Fintan and never succeeded.

Then one day, Fintan, it seems, just gave himself up. The philosopher captured him, was totally elated, built a fire, put him on a spit, and began to cook him. Just then, a little boy wandered by. This little boy was a child called Fionn Mac Cumhail (a very famous Irish character). Fionn was about nine years old at the time.

The philosopher said, "I want you to watch over this fish. It's going to be cooking for the next three hours. I'm really tired. I need to take a nap, but under no circumstances are you to taste this fish." So Fionn agreed, and the philosopher lay down and started to sleep. After about half an hour, as the young boy was watching the salmon cook, a blister came up on the skin because the fire was so hot. He reached out his thumb to touch it, and he burst the blister. It hurt like hell so he stuck his thumb in his mouth, and he sucked on it. A few moments later, the philosopher woke up. He took one look at the boy and said, "You ate it didn't you?" The boy said, "No, I didn't eat it. Look, it's still there." But the philosopher said, "I can see it in your face. I can see it in your eyes. You've

totally changed. You may as well take the rest of it now and eat it because it's no good to me." And from that day onwards, Fionn Mac Cumhail, whenever he needed to prognosticate, would stick his thumb in his mouth. We've a special name for this finger in Irish. It's called "méar feasa," which means the "finger of wisdom." We also have a name for the index finger, it's called "méar an eolais," which means the "finger of knowledge." The thumb and index fingers are very different. The index is just for giving directions. But the thumb represents true wisdom. So, the story goes, when you see your baby suck on its thumb, it's prognosticating. It's in touch with its own wisdom.

I was raised by my grandfather on these kinds of wisdom stories from the Irish tradition for the first 10 years of my life. Then, at age 26, I went to Africa and spent 14 years living in Kenya with the wisdom traditions of the Kalenjin people. I have a great love for stories. Recently, though, I have run into a problem. I have begun trying to create a theory of human evolution, and the theory is telling me that stories are finished. In order to make this understandable, I will need to tell the story of storytelling. I will entitle it: "From Babyhood to Buddhahood and from Chaos to Christ-Consciousness." Why tell the story of storytelling? Because storytelling has been the greatest tool and the greatest resource for therapy and spiritual direction of all kinds.

I want to suggest that there are three phases to human evolution. This is a very simplistic model. I call these phases BST, DST, and AST: *Before Story Time, During Story Time, and After Story Time.*

There's a truism that would have us believe that ontology recapitulates phylogeny. In other words, the evolution of an individual in society reenacts the entire history of the whole species. There is some truth in this. I have a belief that somewhere over the last few million years, as we evolved from the animal kingdom, for a long period of time, particularly as we were developing the use of language, there were no stories. We lived life through instinct, and it was a very scary place to be. Life was totally uncontrollable, utterly unpredictable, and from moment to moment, there were no ways of recognizing patterns. We didn't have

stories or precedents. There were no guides as yet. There were no rhythms that we could discern. So we reacted to various situations instinctively and in the moment. There was no way of learning from these situations.

At this stage, there was no science. There were no explanations. There were no cosmologies. There was no mythology. There was no need for God. This stage perhaps lasted up to 50,000 years ago. With the evolution of Cro-Magnon Man, we get the first evidence of cave paintings and the possibility of religion, stories, cosmologies, and mythologies.

This first era in human evolution was very frightening, I imagine. It must have been very, very difficult to not have a grandfather to prepare us for what we were going to experience in life. As with the species, so also with the individual: little children experience the same thing until they can form images. Finally around 15 months, we begin to develop language skills so we can manipulate symbols and thus we can be told stories and we can retain stories. So the first era of human evolution, it seems to me, is *Before Storytelling Time* when no explanations are possible, no science is possible and there is no need for a God.

About 50,000 years ago as a species and around age 15 months as individual children, we come into *Storytelling Time*. Then something different happens. We learn to listen to and create stories.

I suggest that we create four kinds of stories. The first ones I call *Event Stories*. Particular things happen in our lives, and we create stories to interpret them or explain them to ourselves. That is the first level of story telling.

The second level of storytelling is what I would call *Personal Mythology*. I string together a whole bunch of *Event Stories* in my life. From these, I fashion my sense of personal identity. It defines who I think I am. My *Personal Mythology* is the sum total of the *Event Stories* of my life.

The third level of story telling, I believe, is *History* where as a tribe or as a community or as a culture, we create a myth that binds us all together. This is the sum total of the individual *Personal Mythologies* of the group that constitute the

tribe or the culture. Finally, the fourth level, the highest level of all, is *Cosmology*, where as an entire species, we create a story to tell of our place in the universe.

Initially, these stages allow us to make sense of our experiences. Initially, they allow us to bond as a tribe or as a community. Initially, they allow us to say what our place might be as a species in God's plan. But there are problems at every stage.

For instance, at the *Event Story* stage, the story I make up to explain an incident in my life can liberate me or it can crucify me. I currently have a client, a woman, who was mugged ten years ago. She came to see me fairly recently. She is a very petite woman, and she said, "I'm just a little woman. I'm very fragile. I'm very vulnerable. Life sucks. I can't trust men. I can't go out of doors." I said, "When did it happen?" She answered, "10 years ago." I asked, "How long did the mugging last for?" She replied, "About three minutes."

A three-minute event that happened a decade ago has continued to crucify this woman for ten years. Now, in fact, it is not the incident that crucifies her, it is the story she has made up around the incident. We all do this constantly. The stories we tell ourselves about the incidents of our lives can either liberate us or they can crucify us. Mainly, in my experience as a clinical psychologist, we tend to make up stories that crucify us.

The second level of story is the *Personal Myth*. The *Personal Myth* is a way of self-identification where we typically take a non-representative sample of the billions of experiences we've had as a human being, stitch them together, and create an identity out of them. Imagine someone sits beside you in a plane and says, "What's your name? Who are you?" and you tell them a whole bunch of incidents that happened to you. As far as you're concerned, that explains who you are. That group of incidents make up your sense of identity. We act as if we are the sum total of the *Event Stories* that we've made up. This can allow us to feel victimized by life.

In the third stage, *History*, we make up a story as a culture and the story gives us cohesion as a group. That's the good news. The bad news is that we

then use this strength to bludgeon other cultures. It is the story of our cultural history as a nation that allows us to go into Iraq and kill 100, 000 people and justify it, feel like we're liberating them, and say that we are on a crusade of "*Infinite Justice*." Every culture does it. These are the problems in cultural stories: they are the histories that bludgeon the opposition and create prejudice. Once again, our sense of self, as a culture, is based on a non-representative sample of our experiences as a nation.

There was an interesting test done with English and French school kids a few years ago. They were asked to name the thirty most important battles fought between England and France. The kids came up with lists, and they were all real battles. But there was one big problem: there was almost no overlap between the lists that the French kids came up with and the lists that the English kids came up with. The French kids could only remember, because they had only been taught, the glorious battles in which France had won. The English kids could only remember, because they had only been taught, the great battles in which England had won. This is an example of how our histories are never representative of our experiences. They are based on a very biased sample.

The most important of all our stories, and thus the most important problems we face, are in our *Cosmologies*. The cosmologies are the stories we have made up as a species to explain our place in the world and beyond. Our first fallacy here is that we think "ours" is the only cosmos that exists, but Quantum Mechanics tells us that there are 10 to the power of 27 brand new universes created every second per cubic centimeter of 11 dimensional mathematical space. That's a lot of cosmoses. Most of those are mathematical duds, but even if the tiniest percentage of them survive, it's a staggering number. It is so foolish of us to pretend that this is the only cosmos.

Almost nobody knows what the second most important equation of the 20th century is. We can all spit out $E=MC^2$, but by consensus of the scientific community, the second most important formula of the 20th century says the following: " $N=N^* \times F_p \times F_e \times F_l \times F_i \times F_c \times L$," and is attributed to a man named

Frank Drake who was a radio astronomer in the 1950's. It is a probability estimate of the number of civilizations, just in the Milk Way galaxy alone, capable of developing technology that would enable them to communicate with other beings outside of their own solar system. A conservative estimate of the number of such civilizations is about 2 million. The Milky Way galaxy is only one of about 150 billion galaxies in this known universe, which is only one of the 10 to the power of 27 universes, generated every second per cubic centimeter of 11 dimensional mathematical space. But in our "common sense cosmology" we act as if this is the only cosmos. Then, we act as if we are the most evolved species within this cosmos.

What we do with these cosmologies? Not only do they divide us from all sentient life forms on the planet, but they even divide us from each other, religion to religion. I believe that Jesus Christ and the Buddha and the other great avatars weren't sent as teachers among us. They were sent as prototypes of where human evolution is meant to be headed. But inevitably, when a great charismatic figure comes among us, here's what happens: We kill the prophet. We eviscerate the teaching. We sanitize what's left. We interpret it literally. We enforce it dogmatically. Then we kill those who won't believe the sanitized version. First we kill the prophet; then we kill the teaching; and finally, we kill the unbelievers who won't believe the sanitized version of the teaching. That is what happens when cosmology goes wrong, when the great story goes wrong.

So, what is the way forward? Thomas Aquinas and the great scholastics teach us that grace builds upon nature. In other words, spirituality builds upon psychology. The further reaches of human evolution are built upon our psychotherapeutic interventions at an earlier stage. It is a seamless garment. To divide psychotherapy from spirituality doesn't make any sense. To divide psychotherapy from spiritual direction doesn't make any sense. We're dealing with the same spirit in its evolutionary trajectory.

Where do we need to proceed, as clinicians or as spiritual guides? There are some people who are still stuck in the BST, or *Before Story Time*. For them,

life is totally chaotic. As spiritual guides and as clinicians, we must bring them into *Story Time*. They have to have a story. Until they have a story, life is totally unpredictable.

But that is not the end of the journey. Once you get to *Story Time*, it is easy to get stuck. Most of us are stuck in *Story Time*. Only a very few have gone to *After Story Time*. For most of us stuck in *Story Time*, we are being crucified by the *Event Stories* or we're being held back by the *Personal Mythology*. As a nation, we're being crucified by our cultural stories. As a species, we're being crucified by our cosmologies. Therefore it seems to me that the purpose of great psychotherapy and the purpose of great spiritual direction is to invite those who already have stories to begin telling better stories: to let go of the stories that divide, to let go of the personal *Event Stories* that crucify us, to let go of the personal identities based on non-representative samples, to let go of the histories, the cultural stories that allow us to crucify other nations. We have to be offering people the possibility of better stories so ultimately they can move to where there are no stories anymore. That place, where the stories end, is the third stage.

Carl Jung once said that in order to do any useful psychotherapy with somebody, you've first got to join them where they're at, and then move them from where they are to where they want to be or could be. Eventually, I want to bring my clients to the following: life as we experience it is just a temporary incarnational dip.

I wrote a book a few years ago which I entitled *Spirits in Spacesuits*. I chose that title because it represents to me that basically we are spirit beings. We are bite-sized bits of God choosing to have a human experience. In order to have a human experience, we have to put on a "spacesuit." The spacesuit has four qualities: it has physicality; it has emotionality; it has intellectuality; and it has personality. But these are attributes of the spacesuit. They're not attributes of the essence of the Spirit within the spacesuit.

Therefore I believe we travel as cohort groups of souls from lifetime to lifetime. In spite of being a Catholic priest, I am a total heretic because I subscribe to the theory of reincarnation. It makes eminent psychological and mystical and theological sense to me that we dip in and out of our incarnation as a part of our learning process. The incarnation may be on a planet such as Earth or it may be on one of the other 2 million planets in this galaxy capable of developing life forms that can communicate with those outside their own solar system. We may choose an incarnation on a planet which has no emotional possibility but has extraordinary intellectual possibility.

I believe that as souls we make a choice to experience our spiritual evolution in many different kinds of environments. There is nobody on the planet now who didn't at some stage put their hand up and say, "Send me," or "I volunteer to go here." Our purpose in any incarnation is not to learn anything. It is not to discover anything. It is merely to remember who we are, where we've come from, what we've come to do and what our ultimate destiny is.

The Jewish Talmudic tradition says just before we're born, the angel of night, who is called Aiyella, pinches our nostrils and presses on our upper lip (that's why you've got indentations in both places) in order to create amnesia for whom we are and what we've come to do.

There is an African tribe in which the elders sequester each pregnant woman, typically about seven months into her confinement. They put her in a hypnotic trance, and speak to the baby. They believe that the mother's voice will be used by the child to answer questions. They ask two questions of the child: "What is your name?" and "What are you coming to do?" Whatever name the child speaks, that is the name the tribe will give it. Whatever mission the child identifies, that is the mission the entire group will try to support.

There is no happenstance or coincidence or accident about us all being here. We chose our planet, a ball of fire with a little crust over the top, subject to the vicissitude of Gaia. We chose a planet subject to the awakening of and the

movements of tectonic plates and the evolution of life forms here. All of us have done that consciously.

But we've all forgotten why we've come, and we've forgotten that we've come as a group. We're almost like the 49ers in the Super Bowl. We create this extraordinary game plan before the game begins. Then we go out into the field and everybody wants to be Joe Montana. There were some that came down here and took extremely difficult birth places and birth circumstances on the understanding that those more privileged among us would be there for them. We came as a team, all 6.5 billion of us. Sometimes people accept less than ideal circumstance in order to offer the rest of us the opportunity to exercise compassion or to develop scientific abilities to predict earthquakes or to cure illnesses, but we're all in it as a team.

John Donne said, "No man is an island. . . Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." What is the mission for those of us who remain behind? It seems to me that it is to wake up to who we are and why we've come, and to let go, finally, of the illusion of separate identity. We are not separate from each other, and we are not separate from God.

The evolution of therapy and the evolution of spiritual guidance call us to bring those who have no stories what-so-ever into *Storytelling Time*; and to bring those who are stuck with stories that crucify them into better stories that heal them, and, finally, to call those with "good stories" to move into *Beyond Storytelling*. At this stage, once again, there are no gods. At this stage, once again, there are no explanations necessary. At this stage, once again, there is no science. At this stage, once again, there is no learning, and at this stage, once again, there is no discovery. There is only remembering. We are now in contact with our true face. That is the journey of the therapist and the spiritual guide: to move us through these stages until once more we come back to a place where there is no need for gods, for explanations, for *Events Stories*, for *Personal Mythologies*, for *Histories*, or for *Cosmologies*.

At the third stage, the only necessary use of stories is to perhaps to integrate the little ones, the babies who are being born and who need the training wheels of stories in order to prepare for the spiritual safari that takes them *Beyond Story Time* again. The truly awakened person doesn't need a story anymore except to relate to people who need stories, or to relate to those who are beginning the journey for the first time. At that stage, when we have let go even of the great stories; having moved from no story to bad stories to good stories to no stories once more, we can say, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." Or with Meister Eckhart, you can cry, "I pray daily to God to rid me of God."