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The World is Made of Stories

The World Is Made of Stories
Believing we've moved beyond religious myth, we mistake our culture's newest story for the world itself.

-David Loy (Zen Buddhist Tradition)

The American poet Muriel Rukeyser famously wrote that "the universe is made of stories, not of atoms." We are not just animals that use language: we are storytelling creatures, for telling stories is a fundamental activity of all people in all cultures. The Canadian cognitive neuroscientist Merlin Donald expresses this well:

Language is basically for telling stories. . . . A gathering of modern postindustrial Westerners around the family table, exchanging anecdotes and accounts of recent events, does not look much different from a similar gathering in a Stone Age setting. Talk flows freely, almost entirely in the narrative mode. Stories are told and disputed; and a collective version of recent events is gradually hammered out as the meal progresses. The narrative mode is basic, perhaps the basic product of language.

Stories, then, are more than just stories. It is with our stories that we make sense of the world. We do not experience a world and afterward make up stories to understand it. Stories teach us what is real, what is true, and what is possible. They are not abstractions from life (though they can be that); they are necessary for our engagement with life. As the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

Unaware that our stories are stories, we usually experience them as the world. Like fish that do not see the water they swim in, we normally do not notice the medium we dwell within. We take for granted that the world we experience is just the way things are. But our concepts and ideas about the world, like the stories they are part of, strongly affect our perception of reality. In Buddhist practice, one learns, early on and then continually, the truth of my favorite bumper sticker: "Don't believe everything you think."

This recognition may lead to the wish to strip away any and all accounts of the world and "return" to the reality behind them, to get back to the bare facts of experience. But that too is enacting a story, the story of "letting go of stories."

The point here is not to deny that there is a world apart from our stories; rather, it is to say that the way we understand the world is by "storying" it. Unlike the proverbial fish, however, we can change the water we swim within. Our relationship with stories can be transformed.

Stories are constructs that can be reconstructed, but they are not free-floating. In other words, we cocreate the world we live in. We need stories that account for climate change and enable us to address it. We cannot simply un-story global warming—although some fossil fuel companies have tried. Living according to certain types of stories tends to increase suffering, and living different stories can reduce suffering.

The central character in the foundational story that we return to over and over is the self, supposedly individual and real yet actually composed of the stories "I" identify with and attempt to live. Stories give my life the plot that makes it meaningful. Acting out one's stories has consequences, a process that in Buddhism is called karma. From this perspective, karma is not something the self has; it is what the sense of self becomes as it becomes entrenched in its roles. Habitual tendencies congeal into one's character—and one ends up bound without a rope.

There's an important difference between improving one's karma and realizing how karma works, which is to say, our problem lies not with stories themselves but with how we identify with them. One meaning of freedom is the opportunity to live the story I identify with. Another freedom is the ability to change stories and my role within them: I move from scripted character to coauthor of my own life. A third type of freedom results from understanding how stories construct and constrict my possibilities.

According to the British cognitive scientist Guy Claxton, consciousness is "a mechanism for constructing dubious stories whose purpose is to defend a superfluous and inaccurate sense of self." The main plot of such stories tends to revolve around fear and anxiety, because the central character—"I"—can never achieve the stability and self-sufficiency that is sought. Such narratives attempt to secure and aggrandize an ego-self understood to be separate from the rest of the world.

Those efforts boomerang because, as Buddhism emphasizes, such a discrete self is delusory. Awakening involves realizing that "my" story is part of a much larger story that incorporates others' stories as well. Our stories do not have sharp edges; they are interdependent. Like the jewels in Indra's net, they are

composed of other stories, recombined and internalized. I grow up by accepting some of the stories that society provides, and I reinforce them by acting in ways that validate them. Stories teach me what it means to be a boy or girl, American or Chinese, Christian or Buddhist, how and why and to what extent things like education, religion, money, and so forth are important.

The stories that make sense of this world are part of this world. It is not by transcending the world that we are transformed but by storying it in a new way. Or, to say it another way: we transcend our world by being able to story it differently. When it comes to religion, that means changing the metaphors we live by. Understanding religious metaphors and symbols in a literalistic way is a modern phenomenon that usually misses the point. In Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor, Joseph Campbell writes:

Half the people in the world think that the metaphors of their religious traditions, for example, are facts. And the other half contends that they are not facts at all. As a result we have people who consider themselves believers because they accept metaphors as facts, and we have others who classify themselves as atheists because they think religious metaphors are lies.

The metaphorical nature of religious language means that its assertions are difficult to evaluate. Myth, like metaphor generally, avoids this problem by being meaningful in a different way. Religious doctrines, like other ideologies, involve propositional claims to be accepted or refuted. Myths provide stories to interact with

The Buddhist myth about Siddhartha's fateful encounters with an old man, an ill man, a corpse, and a renunciate can be taken as historically factual, or as an imaginative way to represent why Siddhartha left home, or as a literary device that may have nothing to do with the actual life of the Buddha. Yet the myth is an effective way to story his teaching. Understood symbolically, this polyvalence is not a problem, because that is how myths work. It is not a matter of literal truth or falsity. As Rabbi Akiva Tatz writes in Letters to a Buddhist Jew, "All my stories are true. Some happened and some did not, but they are all true."

A better way to evaluate a myth—a symbolic story—is to consider what happens when we try to live according to it. The most important criterion for Buddhism is whether a story promotes awakening. A myth that is interpreted for me still needs to be interpreted by me, by what I do with it—and what it does with me. A story about the suffering of old age, illness, and death challenges the stories with which we try to ignore our mortality: the importance of money, possessions, fame, power. Letting go of those preoccupations opens up other possibilities: different stories, and perhaps a different relationship with stories.

Myths are not simply bad stories that need to be replaced with rational and scientific accounts that more accurately grasp the empirical world. From a story perspective, one of the most dangerous myths is that of a life without myth, the story of a realist who has freed himself from all that nonsense. The idea that science and systematic reason can liberate us from the supposed unreason of myth is one of today's popular fictions.

Stories have social functions as well as individual ones. Some stories, for example, justify social distinctions. Medieval kings ruled by divine right. A Rig Veda myth about the various parts of the cosmic body rationalizes the Hindu caste system. We challenge a social arrangement by questioning the story that validates it. When people stop believing the stories that justify the social order, it begins to change. When French people no longer accepted the divine right of their king, the French Revolution ensued. "Change the stories individuals and nations tell themselves and live by," writes the Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri, "and you change the individuals and nations."

One of today's dominant stories is that we live in a world ruled by impersonal physical laws that are indifferent to us and our fate. Human beings serve no function in the grand scheme of things. We have no significant role to play, except perhaps to enjoy ourselves as much as we can, while we can, if we can.

This story of a universe reducible solely to physical laws and processes has social applications as well. Evolution by natural selection undercut what remained of the West's old religious story: God was no longer needed to explain creation. Soon after Darwin publishedThe Origin of Species, his theory was appropriated to justify the evolution of a new type of industrial economy. Herbert Spencer coined the term "survival of the fittest" and applied it to human society. You must crawl over the next guy on your way to the top, or he will crawl over you. The value and meaning of life were largely understood in terms of survival and success, the measure of which was mainly financial, not reproductive. In this story, life is about what you can get and what you can get away with until you die. You're either a winner or a loser, and if you aren't successful, don't blame anyone else.

Not coincidentally, Spencer's social Darwinist story appealed most to the most powerful. Industrial tycoons such as Andrew Carnegie embraced his philosophy. As did John D. Rockefeller, who in a talk to a Brown University Bible class justified his business principles by comparing them with cultivating a rose, which "can be produced in the splendor and fragrance which bring cheer to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely the working-out of a

law of nature and a law of God." It is not clear whether the pruned rosebuds refer to Rockefeller's competitors or his employees, but we can be sure who the splendid, fragrant rose was.

Obviously, the basic outlook of social Darwinism—that one should pursue one's own economic interest even at the cost of others' well-being—is still very much alive and thriving. From a Buddhist perspective, it seems equally obvious that this story rationalizes some very unsavory motivations, including the "three poisons" of greed, aggression, and delusion. It is the deluded belief that one is separate from others that permits one to pursue one's own interests indifferent to what is happening to those others.

Sociologists have pointed out that a social application of Darwinism confuses impersonal biological processes with more reformable social arrangements. But if enough people believe in that story and act according to it, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We socially construct the world according to those principles and society in turn does indeed transform into something like a Darwinian jungle. Using natural selection in that way becomes a Kipling-like "Just So" story along the lines of "How the Leopard Got Its Spots." Such tales typically begin "Long ago on the African savannah" and become a game of finding the evidence for the worldview we want to buttress: "And that is how we came to be how we are now."

As I write this, a new Oxfam report states that in 2014 the richest 1 percent owned almost half the world's wealth (48 percent), while the least well-off 80 percent owned about 5 percent. If this were happening in accordance with basic socioeconomic laws—well, we may not like such a development and might try to constrain it in some way, yet fundamentally we would need to adapt to big disproportions. This is how a social Darwinist type of story can "normalize" such a disparity, with the implication that it should be accepted.

But there are alternatives. Instead of accepting such a story—which serves only to rationalize the growing wealth and power of a privileged elite—we can look for better ones, better because living according to them would reduce social dukkha, or suffering. Collectively as well as personally, our stories can change, and in this case must change, so that we can better respond to the economic and ecological challenges that now confront us.

In the pluralistic climate of contemporary life, the foundational narratives that served us in the past—religious and secular—can no longer be understood in the same ways. We can retreat into a parochial framework that views only one worldview as true, or we can embrace the multiplicity of stories and perspectives in a spirit of playful nonattachment. Knowing that we live in a world made of stories, we can, in the words of the Diamond Sutra, "let the mind arise without fixing it anywhere.

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The Power of the Third Moment
-Trungram Gyalwa Rinpoche

Another driver cuts you off, and you feel a surge of rage. A coworker gets the promotion you think you deserve, and waves of jealousy wash over you. The pastry display in the grocery store beckons, and you sense your willpower dissolving. Anger. Impatience. Shock. Desire. Frustration. Emotions seem to have control over us throughout the day.

These emotions and the stories we tell ourselves are often negative—and if you act on them, they can derail you. You know: That email you shouldn't have sent. The snappy retort you shouldn't have verbalized. The black funk that permeates many experiences and keeps you from feeling at ease. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. You can learn to recognizewhen emotions are controlling you and reframe your experience.

CHOOSING THE KARMA YOU CREATE
Past karma shapes your experience of the world. It exists; there is not much you can do about it. Yet you are also constantly creating new karma, and that gives you a golden opportunity. With your reaction to each experience, you create the karma that will color your future. It is up to you whether this new karma is positive or negative. You simply have to pay attention at the right moment. Think of how karma operates as if it were a key ring. It seems solid; you can move your key seamlessly around the circle. Yet there is actually a start and an end to the key ring—and a gap. If you know the gap is there, and you have the skill, you can extricate your key from the ring. Similarly, earlier karma creates your experience of events. Your reaction, based on your experience, triggers new karma and a new cycle of creation and experience. You can allow that cycle to continue in an endless sequence. Or you can find the gap, gain the skill, and extricate yourself from the cycle, simultaneously building your compassion and enhancing your sense of inner ease.

The Buddhist tradition is rife with teachings: on compassion, on why we should avoid hatred and jealousy, and on the power of a positive outlook. These teachings are extraordinarily valuable. They clarify and deepen our understanding—and they inspire us. But teachings and their explanations require logic to parse. In the heat of an emotional exchange, you may not have the luxury of logic, because logic requires time and an unbiased mind. Pressure creates a crisis. You don't have time to think, only to react. So you need a well-honed, quickly deployed skill, something that is short, easy to use, and effective. This is the Third Moment Method, a practical tool that in many

ways embodies the core of Buddhist practice.

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE MOMENTS
Life is composed of a series of experiences, and each of these experiences can be broken into three moments.

The First Moment
SENSING
In the first moment, your sensory organs—your eyes, ears, nose—perceive some sort of input. This moment between, for instance, a sound reaching your ear and your ear perceiving it, is instantaneous. It is also effortless, because it is hardwired into your system. In this moment, if someone says "lemon," you have heard the sound, but you haven't yet recognized what that sound means.

The Second Moment
ARISING
In the second moment, you recognize the sound—or other sensation—and you have an instant, subconscious reaction, classifying it as good, bad, or neutral. This, too, is automatic, based on prior experience: memories and understanding stemming from your ingrained cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, and linguistic perceptions. It happens so quickly that you may even think it is part of the first moment. You have a physical manifestation of your thought as your body responds to positive, negative, or neutral input—although a "neutral" reaction usually leans slightly toward positive or negative.

Maybe someone is describing a juicy lemon they've just sliced. You connect the sound "lemon" to an idea stored in your memory. It evokes a shape, a color, a scent, a taste. Your memory invites an emotional reaction. You love lemons and your mouth salivates; you find lemons sour and you cringe.

The Third Moment
REACTING
In the third moment, you have the choice of accepting your memory's emotion- tinged invitation or not.

Your reaction may be mental, verbal, or physical. If you have classified some- thing as good, you are drawn to it, even though it may not be beneficial. If you have classified something as bad, you push it away, sometimes with more force than is appropriate or necessary. In either case, you may do a lot of damage that you will later need to try to undo.

Let's think of "lemon" in a different context. What if your mechanic says that your brand-new car is a lemon? How would you feel? Furious? Foolish? Frustrated? What might you say to the person who advised you to buy it? The third moment provides you with the space to determine your response.

You have a choice about the kind of life you lead. You can let your environment dictate your experience, in which case, unless you solve all the problems of every person with whom you interact, you will always face some unhappiness. Or you can take control over your own experience of life. To me, this seems like a better path.

PRACTICING THE THIRD MOMENT METHOD
The Third Moment Method helps you take this path. In it, you use the Third Moment not to react but to watch—in a very specific way.

At the very instant an emotion arises, pause. Notice the emotion you are experiencing. The timing is very important. You need to be focused and aware before your emotion connects with a story and becomes solidified. You want to simply see the process for what it is.

By widening the gap between action and reaction, you can gain some distance from your automatic responses and also gain an opportunity to know your emotions.
You may be tempted to trace the source of your emotion; that is logical, but in this instance it is not helpful. Instead of focusing on who did what to whom, simply look into your emotion. Don't do this as an observer, with duality between yourself and the emotion, as though it were external to you. Instead, watch your actual experience; try to feel it directly. Feel your emotion as if it were an inflated balloon, filling your insides. Don't pay attention to the balloon itself; pay attention to what's inside it. What does it feel like? No rationalizing. No reasoning. What is at the very core of the balloon? Just space. This is not relabeling your emotion as space. It is simply awareness that the emotion itself does not exist in the way we believe it does, as something fixed and solid. Over time, as that awareness grows, you will begin to feel ease, and maybe even joy.

By widening the gap between action and reaction, you can gain some distance from your automatic responses and also gain an opportunity to know your emotions. You can stop being ruled by these emotions and instead begin to rule your experience of life.

To really enjoy this freedom, though, you need to practice. If you can practice the Third Moment Method frequently and deeply enough, you can experience the unconditional joy that breeds lovingkindness and compassion.

Of course, in the heat of the moment, it can be difficult to remember a practice that is not yet ingrained. You can try practice drills—mentally creating scenarios that evoke strong emotions, then using the Third Moment Method to diffuse them. This will begin to create a mental muscle memory. However, in your mind you still know the experience isn't real, so in many ways the effect is not real either. The best practice is real life.

BENEFITING FROM THE RESULTS
Remember: The Third Moment passes very quickly, and it is easy to miss. You find it in the instant between seeing a hurtful

email and send off a reply, feeling defensive and retorting, seeing a gooey dessert and reaching for it. This is the time to stop and practice the Third Moment Method.

Each time you can experience Third Moment Method, the easier it will become. If you do this, you will find that your mind is cooler, clearer, and less biased. You are more connected to the present moment. You are aware that your stories connected to emotions are not reality. That, in turn, affects how you interpret your experiences. You may also find not only that you interact with the world more easily but also that your relationships are better—starting with your relationship with yourself.