

Mythic Ecology

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Abstract

This spoken address to storytellers began in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1999. It argues the equivalency of primeval nature and mythic consciousness and that concentrating on nature's material qualities fuels Cartesian sensibilities destructive to nature's mythic powers. Ecological restoration vitalizes mythic consciousness so reappearance of ancestral, atavistic and prescient expressions should be the immaterial measure of successfully restored ecosystems. Myths complete ecosystems. For that reason, the premodern should be granted pre-eminent standing against postmodernism because the premodern remains experiential, hence possessing authority, validity, and legitimacy among aboriginal peoples. (Re)entering the premodern is volitional. Accomplishing it bestows progress in settlers realizing nature's spiritual dimensions unrecognized after centuries of neglect. Working with these powers settlers shoulder responsibility for walking sacred paths first trod by aboriginal peoples.

Résumé

Ce discours prononcé devant des conteurs en 1999 à St. Catharines, en Ontario, allègue l'équivalence de la nature vierge et de la conscience mythique. Il soutient aussi que le fait de se concentrer sur les qualités matérielles de la nature alimente les sensibilités cartésiennes destructives des pouvoirs mythiques naturels. La restauration écologique donne vie à la conscience mythique afin que la réapparition des expressions ancestrales, ataviques et prescientes deviennent la mesure immatérielle des écosystèmes restaurés avec succès. Les mythes complètent les écosystèmes. Pour cette raison, il faut octroyer au prémodernisme une position prééminente par rapport au postmodernisme. Le prémodernisme demeure expérientiel et, par conséquent, possède de l'autorité, de la validité et de la légitimité chez les peuples autochtones. Le retour au prémodernisme est volontaire. Ce retour consacre le progrès des

pionniers dans la reconnaissance des dimensions spirituelles de la nature après des siècles de négligence. Travaillant avec ces forces, les pionniers assument la responsabilité de marcher dans les sentiers sacrés empruntés en premier par les peuples autochtones.

*Aanii. Sago.*¹ Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Writing about the oral traditions foremost involves a literary contradiction. Our ancestors wouldn't do this to us but sadly, we are required to do so for and to them. I offer them my apology and obligations.

Today I address that difference between orality and literacy as an environmentalist. And claim that the destruction of old growth ecosystems is the fundamental reason mythic knowing became simultaneously discredited. That destruction of mythological landscapes meant the authority of knowing appropriate to those places correspondingly declined. Because when we left the forest, the ancient correspondence between wilderness and storytelling diminished. And we had fewer beings to think with. Losing the experience of the wilderness we lost the dialogue between the spirits of the forest that had always been the mainstay conversation of the mythtellers (Kane, 1994). The medicine people. Let me explain, that the voices of the forest and the mythtellers were *both* clear-cut when enough people had lost that sympathetic correspondence. They clear-cut what they had lost the ability to understand and the footprints of memory grew stale. That does not mean that correspondence between land and story isn't there, it means that what replaced it has so de-legitimized that correspondence that we now see the two as opposites. As though water was opposite from ice. Shapeshifting.

Ecology is a dialogue in a language without words (Bringham, 1999) and to recover the ability to return sacred meaning to its rightful place in nature we must understand equally well that the "outside" we call nature and the "inside" we call spirit are also as ice and water. In knowing the dialogue between the human and the more-than-human (Abram, 1997) we can provide sustained acceptance that storytelling is also old growth. Yet, the mystery of its appearance and what storytelling does to our consciousness is often surprising because of its veracity and the range of its applicability across time and space. Myth is able to call water by its true name without engaging in the incessant Western need for fixed polarities and in knowing that name says what is true for the solid, liquid and gaseous states of water. Myth is essence without reductionism and a way of comprehending the natural world without violating its rules.

Restoring original thinking about nature and life-force requires us to understand that mythic tradition foregrounds nature from the backgrounding it has suffered in the modern disrelation between landscape and storytelling. That restoration means keeping a faith both in the wild heart of nature and the wild heart of our own nervous systems. If we can accept that those ancestral stories we hold dear are as much nature preserves as say Killarney, Ontario and Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo-Jump, Alberta then we can also understand that what we possess in those stories is old growth knowing. Myth is a conservationist knowing that finds in nature the meaning it preserves in thought and so neither violates the land, water or air. That faith requires us to keep a foot in nature as lived fact and a foot in what we call the Otherworld, that less obvious realm we call myhttelling. Old growth knowing returned through the restoration of old growth forests are our best hopes in recovering spiritual depth from the combined damage of the saw and the book.

Beauty and Meaning

Yet, believing we need the wilderness back also requires preparing our minds and spirits for re-inhabiting the integrity of rejoined cultural and natural ecosystems. Re-inhabiting cultural integrity needs familial guidance by restoration of nature's sentient powers and, once rejoined, models a reciprocating aesthetic. A way to get and keep things right again (Cruikshank, 1990). Myths are ecologies of meaning as precisely as are nature's ecologies. Recovery of one is recovery of the other. Wanting wildness back expresses the hope that humans can find happiness in natural beauty and in the culture of nature. We participate in the meaning of beauty through the making of beauty. If we don't place ourselves back into those nature preserves the right way, we risk ruination of that habitat by once again destroying the Island of the Turtle² that as settlers we have never fully believed in. And we didn't believe in Turtle Island because we tried to make meaning that wasn't resonant with her and her peoples. Because we sought to make meaning that excluded Turtle Island and her children and to live in that violation the way we do, by believing in television rather than in the ways of the forest. A forest that to most settlers remains home to dark and evil spirits in need of exorcism or deconstruction.

This recovery has unfortunately been called a post-historic primitivism (Shepard, 1992). But such linearity and use of a term so demeaning to aboriginal peoples can be avoided if we think of time as a circle. In a circle, of course, the past is always ahead of you *and* behind you. I prefer siding with Odysseus on this one though: he just wanted to get home from the

disaster of Troy, a disaster, I think, we can equate with the ecological disaster of modernity. But worse is the disaster of a modernist psychology that seeks inhabitation in a vessel of meaning stalwart in its dedication to itself rather than to the recovery of paradise. The drama of that recovery of home is also prophetic of the intensity and seeming madness of the struggle to get home again. Ecologically and psychologically. But in Odysseus' return, in his *being there*, he recovers beauty and re-inhabits the epiphany of that beauty as his final act. When he re-enters beauty he disappears from the narrative and becomes immaterial as a result. Odysseus recovered from being in a world of materiality and meaning that required his ceaseless participation and which perpetuated further engagement of that kind (Barfield, 1965). Odysseus got through being a materialist.

Ecologists similarly focus on nature's most material aspects since we are almost always engaged in measuring its relative disappearance or absence. In that regard, environmentalists are as guilty as Cartesians for splitting the world into two realms. Most often we divorce ourselves from a spiritual understanding of ourselves in the cosmos achieved by brushing our trails to out-fox our memory, memories that assure we have always been spirit beings. Until settler newness dominated Turtle Island's oldness with the prideful hubris and indulgence of the developer. Consequently, brandishing the sense of our material selves in the ways of the axe and then the harrow. Often forgetting in the process the immaterial component that is also there in nature. Storytellers, aboriginal or not, can teach ecologists something about working with the spirits of the fields and forests. But to have healthy forests and healthy myths requires understanding that story can only be guided by ecology, and ecology can only guide when it is intact. Whole and healthy, nature's traditional expression is myth. Because story and ecology are twin expressions of spirit. Understanding them as spirit reveals them as kindred. The sacred takes the form of wilderness and story alike.

I will go further and say that unless we understand that we can honourably re-inhabit beauty we will not want to get home again. For so long we have become at home in a world of vicarious experience and anthropocentric meaning and we keep trying to take increasing meaning from a declining natural world and its authentic cultures. Much as we try to squeeze increased nutritional value from crops that each year yield lessening sustenance. This is predictable late twentieth century behaviour that brokers abject denial amid the collapse of planetary ecosystems and traditional cultures. Only in renewing the health of ecosystems that are the place of our origins will we become able to fulfill the storyteller's mission. Nature's

franchise. And show people the backwards path of Hansel and Gretel and return fully to being what we actually are, members of the forest and its spirits.

To again learn to speak in the ways of the wild, storytellers have to regenerate forests and likewise minds able to express each other's spiritual essence. We need to become ecological as well as cultural restorationists and trust in the spirits that animate both. For they are the same spirits. To know again how story incarnates that spirit is to give to story the renewed strength to re-animate beauty in nature. The spirits need our help so that they can return to places they belong to. And so those healthy places can sing the stories of themselves again, stories that are as much theirs as our own birthright to hear and to learn to sing again.

Unless I am sorely mistaken, making beauty may be all the meaning humans need. The bird peoples seem completely satisfied living within their limit. They understand the carrying capacity of ecosystems and belief systems alike. They feel contentment and fulfillment within their ecosystems. It is the content of their singing. Learning their lesson we might finally condemn modernity as an expressed preference for bingeing on solipsism's buffets and vomitoria. Living within profoundly unhealthy meaning goes unrecognized if natural beauty and meaning remain un-experienced. Storytelling restores the spirit necessary to "want to" return to the forest and find there a confirming and internally consistent meaning, a place as profound as we imagined and a humble satisfaction that this is enough to know. We who tell stories should ask no less of our purpose. And we should understand that the meaning we have to make on Turtle Island is already here and that knowing it is enough and that knowing enough will make you complete. Intellectualism, on the other hand, is the inflated currency of the natural world. If we restore this continent we will find in the satisfactions of its beauty and even our labour an end to the tyranny and nightmare of reason. For if reason alone worked, there would be no explaining how social, natural, and environmental conditions have come to be so bad.

Word Magic: Recovering from Language

I think we can only achieve the motivation to want to recover intact ecosystems and life's mythic dimensions and knowings by first understanding ourselves and our surroundings as diminished things, diminished because the consciousness of modernism has reduced our words to language.

I know this by virtue of growing up under the tutelage of Irish and Ojibway tradition that practiced what folklorists demean as "word magic." On the Georgian Bay, or Spirit Lake, if you said the name of the bear

you could expect the bear to hear you and respond. As a result, all spoken language possessed a meaning at once reverential and ecological and fraught with implication. One did not tell a story lightly since by telling the story, always remembering story is an ecology of meaning, one was directly participating in the integrity of the ecology and psychology of the sentient landscape.

That world was neither “text” nor “language,” and when our forebears had their words taken from them in exchange for a language “about” reality, an entirely new and diminished way of thinking and being followed from driving word magic underground. The real names that live in the land are still there, but using language to find them backfires. Because language, as most academics understand and practice it, keeps its speakers elevated from the ground and so the place where the things and their real names live. A conceit that lives on its own awards. But as storytellers you know how the old ways work and that words are sentient beings when not enslaved to and as text. Words are “a kind of knowledge that *involves* affection but also a kind of knowledge that comes from or with affection. Knowledge that is unavailable to the unaffectionate, and that is unavailable to anyone is what is called information” (Berry, 1991, p. 63).

In the world of the traditional indigenous person, words were and remain sentient entities that directly participate in the world. And words were not the exclusive property of people, for a common language of the Earth was once spoken by all beings. Displacing this factual correspondence was a colonial philosophy of language, as you know, whose biblical interdictions rendered the sentience of words into a language conceived in terms of literary mechanisms, which substituted voice for echoes and alphabets for sentient, somatic engagement.

Folklore’s disease of language theory insisted mythic meaning degenerated over time but the anthropocentrism of the theory failed to account for any reciprocal role of the planet in creating and recreating original meanings. Revisiting the places where myth flourishes instructs on the genius of place and the genius that articulates the power of that place. Reciprocating cosmology is as imbedded in a sentient cosmos as it is in human consciousness. Conceiving of consciousness only as a built environment, whether social or material, remains on the outside looking in. To live myth and re-inhabit mythic consciousness, is not to mistake it for its atrophied shadow in text for there it has ceased to live as correspondence between nature and mind. To mistake myth for textual record, diminishes the new “cape” and the scepter of storytelling and the co-creation shared by sacred places of mind, heart, soul and terrestrial, marine and

aerial ecosystems. To respect myth one must live it rather than read it for in reading it we can succumb to that ultimate method of so arranging the world we no longer have to experience it. In living myth we nourish wilderness in consciousness and reality and guard against literacy's licence to domesticate.

For we as storytellers to regain the authenticity, legitimacy, and authority of our traditions we need to again be deeply rooted in place(s), and wherever those places are they need to become the places they were before the Europeanization of Turtle Island. Including our heads. We can be part of that transition and it constitutes both an apology to the land and its people but also holds the promise of standing shoulder to shoulder with our First Nations brothers and sisters. Aerial, marine, and sylvan ecosystems want the wilderness back so badly they seek its restoration every day. Watch grass growing through sidewalks or communities of people stopping land development. If humans are to stand a chance on this planet, then recovering an ability to be satisfied with deep meaning about surroundings will have to come from returning those surroundings to conditions of beauty. And once accomplished, live in the serenity of the epic of that transformation. The width of that difference being, say, the condition of contemporary St. Catherines and the Carolinian forests that preceded pioneer agriculture. When we recognize such mythic places they and their memories help us to become human beings again who will want to return to living in mythic time. Deep time. Not the crumbling memories of but half a millennium of watching ourselves watch ourselves on Turtle Island, but regaining a selfless sacredness measured in glacial and geological timescales. And in so doing understand that all land is sacred precisely because every acre of Turtle Island has been and is concentrated with a significance only the dowsing of words and the attention of plants and animals can wholly articulate. We hear their powers still in authentic place names and stories and watersheds.

But modernity has made us so anxious to hear the cacophony of human language that the songs the land sings to itself have now been called into question. Same thing when we stop listening to the animals. In failing to behave as human beings and keep more-than-human meaning alive we entitle ourselves to destroy Turtle Island in a way we never could when North America thought in the ways of Turtle Island, when the oral tradition was a chorus of rocks and trees and an animal choir.

Contemporary North American life has become poisonous because its ability to make psychologically fulfilling mythic knowing has waned. Now we go to mythic places not so much to live in a mythic sense but to cleanse ourselves of the industrial energy and industrial meaning that

characterize us. This is a beginning. Though storytellers may conceive of home as the oral tradition, it is fair to offer the reminder that in the origin stories of North America, humans were the last oral tradition in a world whose first songs were plaintiff whip-poor-wills and musing muskrats (Johnson, 1983).³ Bobcat logic. Regaining origin stories offers an ecological and etiological groundedness as well as an authority and morality concerning human conduct. For they teach us how to make sense of the lessons abundant in our landscape. Whatever my deconstructive, postmodern colleagues may say to the contrary, the primeval retains the ability to make laws concerning proper human conduct from its home lands. That is why storytellers go to sacred wilderness sights to repeat and renew the sacred stories of those sites at those sites. Without accurate symmetry between place and story, stories can never even hope to get the words right. Postmodernism possesses no such methodology wherein time and place are equivalent to human intellect in achieving their authority, validity, and legitimacy in story. Postmodernism walks with its feet off the ground and seems to like it that way. Once right and renewed, storytellers leave those sacred places rather than dominate them or domesticate them. I hope you can believe that what is called myth today is really the premodern trying to *be here* as we are supposed to be and as we once were when we were all indigenous somewhere. Before print's symbolic monoculture practiced the witchcraft of universalizing and homogenizing that rendered us strangers to our own lands and indigenous identities. Mohawk scholar Dan Longboat shared with me a story where ten thousand fires burned around the planet and around each flame ancient people practiced ceremonies of night, language, belonging, and resonance with land, air and water. Perhaps, Turtle Island's powers are transforming dominant culture from the amnesia and rejection of their own indigenous identities to finding on this continent the compelling call of their return. The promise of that discovery is not that settlers will become Native North Americans but recover in Indian country the ability to hear the long memory that has always been speaking within the emigrant longing to move-on around that very big circle we know as Earth. And in that migration hear again the ancient calling in languages without words.

Orality and literacy: The debate that forgot nature

In understanding the ecological home of the oral tradition *as a place* we reverse the linearity of a positivist vision of time that claims orality somehow belongs to the past. Story is as much a located being as an ecology of meaning, and it is here among us today. And while we are constantly

reminded that the oral tradition was a time of savage minds and some predecessor sensibility that gave way to the pure light of reason, we are also asked to accept that literacy spelled the end of the oral empire and, inevitably, turned the ecological circularity of oral reasoning into the linearity of literate modernity. This concept of time introduced the idea of the impossibility of going backwards. Let me remind you that when one thinks in a circle the past is always ahead of you and behind you. Mythic time, as Eliade (1965) and Martin (1993) assure, ran on the eternal return. So let us make a distinction between story as a manifestation of “being here” on the path of the eternal return as opposed to “being” per se. Being, in this case, is the encounter of the world as transient. Being can be a realm of elemental belonging, say, as sailors feel for wind and water. But it can also be obliviousness, that habitual behaviour one notices when taking city people into the bush who immediately begin non-stop talking rather than undertaking every step with solemnity, respectful listening, silent movement.

Orality and literacy: An environmental issue

Story, like traditional quiet in the bush, should surround one as we step with humility and reverence into the Otherworld. “Being here” is both a quality of the bush and those stories that effect and surround us in the same three dimensional way. Myth is as much home as nature, because both are environments. So conceived, the difference between literacy and orality becomes an environmental issue. The authority of myth diminished precisely because of the concomitant disappearance of old growth ecosystems and when I suggest that myth is old growth knowledge that was clear-cut by the saws that fed printing presses, only then did text become civilization’s authoritative, two-dimensional voice. Even when those trees died to print books opposing deforestation. And just like those regenerating forests, we need to understand how living in those forests permits the recovery of the mythic thought that is legitimate to those places. For it is through story that they talk to us and when we stopped talking in story we forgot that our role as animals of the forest is to divine and narrate the meanings of the forest, that way, thinking with and as the animals themselves. The more keenly aware we become of the absence of the natural environment, the more diminished we should feel because we have so little biodiversity left from which to compose our stories. Any story that is more than anthropocentric. Culture as well as nature has suffered ecological losses, the wildness of the oral mind that gave us magnificently vivid stories in equally vivid words was mimetic of the feel and vibrancy of the spirit of the bush.

We enjoy the birthright of an instinctual and intellectual faith that we are part of the forest. How much more authentic would it be if we could recognize that the stories came to us asking for articulation and praxis? If we could recognize the authority of the Otherworld's resistance to environmental ruin then we, as vessels of a healthy cosmology, can be the resistance of the cosmos by understanding that we tell its stories. Our ancestors would have; and before their forests were clear-cut and plundered that's what they did.

Yet, there is only hubris by thinking ourselves glamorous in this pursuit. By trying to restore beauty we can finally again derive meaning from the ecological integrity of our surroundings and recover from the need to wring vast amounts of meaning with and from language. Words, like surroundings, are a wholesome diet compared to the binge eating of junk meaning afflicting us ever since we languagized both world and the word alike. We need no more industrial meaning, no more mechanization of consciousness.

Instead, we need to see ourselves among those chosen to dream into existence that which while invisible now can only materialize by our belief in the integrity of our calling. And our faith in our ability to work with myth restores legitimacy to the mythic essence of the mythic earth. Think of our task as swimming upstream, laying eggs in the headwaters of consciousness. Think of literacy as a period we are trying to get through.

Ecologists restore with shovels and seedlings; why shouldn't storytellers also restore the Sacred Wood? If we place ourselves in the soil of Turtle Island, we have taken the first step in becoming indigenous to Turtle Island. In thanks for that transformation we have debts to wilderness and indigenous cultures and these include understanding the land and its principles as the authority to which our words respond. That is the only way to get our words right. Though the record of our errors in the Diaspora of industrial meaning must remain as monuments of our wretched excesses.

Maintaining and restoring a sprawling and epiphinal wilderness is a cultural achievement. Consciousness can also be recreated in the image of that wilderness. Knowing the land as only the dweller within it can, we build ecologies of meaning by giving those ecological patterns of sentience a chance to express themselves again, express their realism again (Thompson, 1988). It is a realism so unrealistic to modern minds that these minds have done all they could to diminish the correspondence between us and our landscape in the name of mall realism. Highway realism.

Guided by stories that want to be told again we plant our selves as seedlings aspiring to return home to sky, earth, water, and nervous systems with the longing those same bodies feel for having their own lives back.

Again to learn the ancient truth that ecology is a story in a language without words. The human task is to live right and to do so we must get the words right. And return the words abducted by the language of the book. When we do, the buffalo will want to come home again.

*Meegwetch.*⁴

Notes

¹*Aanii* is “Hello” in Ojibway/Nishnawbe. *Sajo* is “Hello” in Mohawk/Haudenasunee.

² Here I cite the origin stories of the First Peoples of Turtle Island. Turtle Island is North America.

³ In the creation story of the Ojibway the muskrat was responsible for diving beneath the great flood and returning to the surface with the mud that when spread on the turtle’s shell became Turtle Island. He gave his life in the process. See Basil Johnson, *Ojibway Ceremonies* (1983).

⁴ *Meegwetch* is “thank you” in Ojibway/Nishnawbe.

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Notes on Contributor

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