



# The Water of Life

Simon Gurnsey

Whether as a producer, auxiliary or protagonist I love surplus reality and the metaphorical elements in psychodramas. I have been a romping dog in a drama and any number of vines, rocks and broken axe handles. I feel enlivened and relish this in others. These elements may be, and often are, expanded into a whole story, one that has an integrity to the protagonist and the group. There is a co-creation at work as auxiliaries

experience the freedom of being something that isn't everyday, whether a personified rock or the warrior goddess Sekhmet.

A story has a narrative and logic that drives it forward carrying the drama. Sometimes these stories are ordinary 'small' stories, sometimes they are world-encompassing mythic tales; stories that mirror human nature, our collective histories and how things are the way they are. They go to the core of meaning and illuminate it.

I first came across the use of story as a means for both understanding complex systems and healing them when I read Bruno Bettelheim's (1976) *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim describes how the symbology and surplus reality in complex, well-constructed stories aids the development of both insight and perspective. He encouraged the use of story to attain a greater consciousness of our existence. He saw stories as a mechanism that assists us to develop more understanding and meaning. The book stimulated my thinking and provoked further study of the use that could be made of stories. Ironically, according to his biographer (Pollak, 1998) it seems Bettelheim himself invented large parts of his own history and plagiarised a great deal of *The Uses of Enchantment*. This doesn't diminish the impact of his writing on me.

I gained a deeper understanding of story when, as a playback theatre practitioner, I read Jo Salas's (1993) book *Improvising Real Life*. Our playback company spent many rehearsals developing our ability to work with metaphor to find the 'heart' of the teller's story.

*The intrinsic element of form in a story can transmute chaos and restore a sense of belonging to a world that is fundamentally purposeful after all. Even the most desperately painful of experiences are in some way redeemed when they are told as stories. (p. 1).*

As a means of intervening in a social system, stories are one of the 'oldest technologies', an immediately practical way of intervening to 'organise' and 'test' a system and 'stimulate the deep psyche' (Birch & Heckler, 1996).

When inspired by a mythic story or fairy tale, I become bolder and my creativity and spontaneity enlarges in response to the challenges and dilemmas faced by another person, myself, or a social system. This counters a reactive and often more restrictive tendency toward what I think of as being safe responses; ones that arise in me by way of a dependence on my more logical, rational thinking. Through the very nature of story, I find myself recognising patterns, generating solutions and entertaining a higher purpose.

At a psychodrama training workshop with Max Clayton and Chris Hosking at Te Moata, I was directed by a group member in a drama set in a surplus reality of the 'Promised Land'. The drama was steeped in my childhood reading of the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In the psychodrama, I was a Crusader imprisoned in a Saracen prison waiting for ransom from home. The internal logic of the story carried me through a number of scenes where I let go of and grieved for lost opportunities and let go of aspects of myself that were no longer serving me. I left my companion in the prison and he died there. The drama is, even now, easily brought to mind and, tears in my eyes, I am able to fully experience myself in that anguished prison and remember what I left behind in order to return home. The story is as *real* to me as any other truth from my life and as meaningful. It was my story, my fairy tale, created of a time, meaningful then and meaningful now.

I agree with Jones (2005) when he claims "Myths and archetypes, at the collective level, embody Moreno's sociodramatic roles. At the individual level they influence a person's psychodramatic roles" (p. 12). Stories are immediately useful to a producer of psychodrama. A love of story and an appreciation of symbol, image and metaphor are central to the work of any creative group leader and especially a psychodramatist. A story can encapsulate the whole in a way a summing up can never do. I recall during a processing session at the end of a peer practice group, the group was struggling for words and phrases to describe the central concern and the themes of the session. I suggested we use a story. I had seen Ann Hale do

this in a workshop, where with five minutes to go until the end she simply told us a metaphorical story that was the story of the group.

As I challenged my peers, I imagined myself as Puck, mischievous and playful yet authoritative, provocative and bold. I challenged the group to tell its own story and the group took up the challenge. One person started, 'Once upon a time...' immediately infusing the story with a mythic tone. Others followed, the story flowed, a sentence from one person, two sentences from another and in this way we told our story. Magical animals abounded. There was an evocative reference to 'Ostrich with his head in the sand'. The story finished and some members of the group then wanted to analyse the story when the story was enough, it stood for itself and we were the better for it as a group.

In speaking to the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the emotive, a mythic story can likewise enable us to focus on the vision of an organisation. The internal logic and structure in a story may be used to expand thinking and facilitate creative problem solving. Through a process of pattern recognition we may assign meaning, look for commonalities and integrate experience into a coherent and collective whole.

Here is an example of the use I made of a mythic story in a community organisation I was involved with. For some time we had been dealing with a challenging staff issue. A staff member acted with cold hostility in ways that continually opposed the management team. Other staff members took sides at different times and our organisation become divided against itself. The issue had been difficult and this was being experienced at both operational and governance levels. A partial resolution of the issue came when the staff member resigned. In the wake of this my organisation found itself in a period of soul searching and meaning making. The governance board had become highly invested in the situation and its outcome and felt we had worked hard to resolve the situation. We also blamed ourselves for the dilemma and in our reflection we were critical of ourselves. We wondered if we could have dealt with the issue better or with greater alacrity.

Taking up my leadership creatively, I looked for a mythic story that might act as a mirror and assist my organisation to transform their adversity. While talking with a colleague I speculated what story might fit my organisation. We looked for a story that would enable everyone to better appreciate the social forces and unconscious influences impacting my organisation and its members and to put what had just happened into a wider context providing, hopefully, an opportunity to heal some of the pain people experienced. My motivation was to allow the fundamental creativity of the story to provide a framework for talking about the whole

organisation rather than specifically about the difficulty with the staff member.

The Brothers Grimm retelling of the German folktale *The Water of Life* stood out to me with its trials and close calls, traps and bindings, treachery from within, alliances formed and ultimately, redemption and celebration. *The Water of Life* tells of a king falling ill and his three sons, one at a time, setting out to find the 'water of life' as the cure. The story speaks to me of accepting the inevitable challenges of life and bringing to them the qualities of humbleness and dedication to the care of others. As I worked to connect strongly with the story, I understood more about my organisation and our response to the challenges. There is a link in the references to the version of the story I used. I invite you now to read and experience the story.

*Long before you or I were born, there reigned, in a country a great way off, a king who had three sons. This king once fell very ill—so ill that nobody thought he could live. His sons were very much grieved at their father's sickness; and as they were walking together very mournfully in the garden of the palace, a little old man met them and asked what was the matter. They told him that their father was very ill, and that they were afraid nothing could save him. 'I know what would,' said the little old man; 'it is the Water of Life. If he could have a draught of it he would be well again; but it is very hard to get.' Then the eldest son said, 'I will soon find it': and he went to the sick king, and begged that he might go in search of the Water of Life, as it was the only thing that could save him. 'No' said the king. 'I had rather die than place you in such great danger as you must meet with in your journey.' But he begged so hard that the king let him go; and the prince thought to himself, 'If I bring my father this water, he will make me sole heir to his kingdom.'*

*Then he set out: and when he had gone on his way some time he came to a deep valley, overhung with rocks and woods; and as he looked around, he saw standing above him on one of the rocks a little ugly dwarf, with a sugarloaf cap and a scarlet cloak; and the dwarf called to him and said, 'Prince, whither so fast?' 'What is that to thee, you ugly imp?' said the prince haughtily, and rode on.*

*But the dwarf was enraged at his behaviour, and laid a fairy spell of ill-luck upon him; so that as he rode on the mountain pass became narrower and narrower, and at last the way was so straitened that he could not go to step forward: and when he thought to have turned his horse round and go back the way he came, he heard a loud laugh ringing round him, and found that the path was closed behind him, so that he was shut in all round. He*

next tried to get off his horse and make his way on foot, but again the laugh rang in his ears, and he found himself unable to move a step, and thus he was forced to abide spellbound.

Meantime the old king was lingering on in daily hope of his son's return, till at last the second son said, 'Father, I will go in search of the Water of Life.' For he thought to himself, 'My brother is surely dead, and the kingdom will fall to me if I find the water.' The king was at first very unwilling to let him go, but at last yielded to his wish. So he set out and followed the same road which his brother had done, and met with the same elf, who stopped him at the same spot in the mountains, saying, as before, 'Prince, prince, whither so fast?' 'Mind your own affairs, busybody!' said the prince scornfully, and rode on.

But the dwarf put the same spell upon him as he put on his elder brother, and he, too, was at last obliged to take up his abode in the heart of the mountains. Thus it is with proud silly people, who think themselves above everyone else, and are too proud to ask or take advice.

When the second prince had thus been gone a long time, the youngest son said he would go and search for the Water of Life, and trusted he should soon be able to make his father well again. So he set out, and the dwarf met him too at the same spot in the valley, among the mountains, and said, 'Prince, whither so fast?' And the prince said, 'I am going in search of the Water of Life, because my father is ill, and like to die: can you help me? Pray be kind, and aid me if you can!' 'Do you know where it is to be found?' asked the dwarf. 'No.' said the prince, 'I do not. Pray tell me if you know.' 'Then as you have spoken to me kindly, and are wise enough to seek for advice, I will tell you how and where to go. The water you seek springs from a well in an enchanted castle; and, that you may be able to reach it in safety, I will give you an iron wand and two little loaves of bread; strike the iron door of the castle three times with the wand, and it will open: two hungry lions will be lying down inside gaping for their prey, but if you throw them the bread they will let you pass; then hasten on to the well, and take some of the Water of Life before the clock strikes twelve; for if you tarry longer the door will shut upon you for ever.'

Then the prince thanked his little friend with the scarlet cloak for his friendly aid, and took the wand and the bread, and went traveling on and on, over sea and over land, till he came to his journey's end, and found everything to be as the dwarf had told him. The door flew open at the third stroke of the wand, and when the lions were quieted he went on through the castle and came at length to a beautiful hall. Around it he saw several knights sitting in a trance; then he pulled off their rings and put them on his own fingers. In another room he saw on a table a sword and a loaf of

bread, which he also took. Further on he came to a room where a beautiful young lady sat upon a couch; and she welcomed him joyfully, and said, if he would set her free from the spell that bound her, the kingdom should be his, if he would come back in a year and marry her. Then she told him that the well that held the Water of Life was in the palace gardens; and bade him make haste, and draw what he wanted before the clock struck twelve.

He walked on; and as he walked through beautiful gardens he came to a delightful shady spot in which stood a couch; and he thought to himself, as he felt tired, that he would rest himself for a while, and gaze on the lovely scenes around him. So he laid himself down, and sleep fell upon him unawares, so that he did not wake up till the clock was striking a quarter to twelve. Then he sprang from the couch dreadfully frightened, ran to the well, filled a cup that was standing by him full of water, and hastened to get away in time. Just as he was going out of the iron door it struck twelve, and the door fell so quickly upon him that it snapped off a piece of his heel.

When he found himself safe, he was overjoyed to think that he had got the Water of Life; and as he was going on his way homewards, he passed by the little dwarf, who, when he saw the sword and the loaf, said, 'You have made a noble prize; with the sword you can at a blow slay whole armies, and the bread will never fail you.' Then the prince thought to himself, 'I cannot go home to my father without my brothers'; so he said, 'My dear friend, cannot you tell me where my two brothers are, who set out in search of the Water of Life before me, and never came back?' 'I have shut them up by a charm between two mountains,' said the dwarf, 'because they were proud and ill-behaved, and scorned to ask advice.' The prince begged so hard for his brothers, that the dwarf at last set them free, though unwillingly, saying, 'Beware of them, for they have bad hearts.' Their brother, however, was greatly rejoiced to see them, and told them all that had happened to him; how he had found the Water of Life, and had taken a cup full of it; and how he had set a beautiful princess free from a spell that bound her; and how she had engaged to wait a whole year, and then to marry him, and to give him the kingdom.

Then they all three rode on together, and on their way home came to a country that was laid waste by war and a dreadful famine, so that it was feared all must die for want. But the prince gave the king of the land the bread, and all his kingdom ate of it. And he lent the king the wonderful sword, and he slew the enemy's army with it; and thus the kingdom was once more in peace and plenty. In the same manner he befriended two other countries through which they passed on their way.

When they came to the sea, they got into a ship and during their voyage the two eldest said to themselves, 'Our brother has got the water which we

could not find, therefore our father will forsake us and give him the kingdom, which is our right'; so they were full of envy and revenge, and agreed together how they could ruin him. Then they waited till he was fast asleep, and poured the Water of Life out of the cup, and took it for themselves, giving him bitter sea-water instead.

When they came to their journey's end, the youngest son brought his cup to the sick king, that he might drink and be healed. Scarcely, however, had he tasted the bitter sea-water when he became worse even than he was before; and then both the elder sons came in, and blamed the youngest for what they had done; and said that he wanted to poison their father, but that they had found the Water of Life, and had brought it with them. He no sooner began to drink of what they brought him, than he felt his sickness leave him, and was as strong and well as in his younger days. Then they went to their brother, and laughed at him, and said, 'Well, brother, you found the Water of Life, did you? You have had the trouble and we shall have the reward. Pray, with all your cleverness, why did not you manage to keep your eyes open? Next year one of us will take away your beautiful princess, if you do not take care. You had better say nothing about this to our father, for he does not believe a word you say; and if you tell tales, you shall lose your life into the bargain: but be quiet, and we will let you off.'

The old king was still very angry with his youngest son, and thought that he really meant to have taken away his life; so he called his court together, and asked what should be done, and all agreed that he ought to be put to death. The prince knew nothing of what was going on, till one day, when the king's chief huntsmen went a-hunting with him, and they were alone in the wood together, the huntsman looked so sorrowful that the prince said, 'My friend, what is the matter with you?' 'I cannot and dare not tell you,' said he. But the prince begged very hard, and said, 'Only tell me what it is, and do not think I shall be angry, for I will forgive you.' 'Alas,' said the huntsman; 'the king has ordered me to shoot you.' The prince started at this, and said, 'Let me live, and I will change dresses with you; you shall take my royal coat to show to my father, and do you give me your shabby one.' 'With all my heart,' said the huntsman; 'I am sure I shall be glad to save you, for I could not have shot you.' Then he took the prince's coat, and gave him the shabby one, and went away through the wood.

Some time after, three grand embassies came to the old king's court, with rich gifts of gold and precious stones for his youngest son; now all these were sent from the three kings to whom he had lent his sword and loaf of bread, in order to rid them of their enemy and feed their people. This touched the old king's heart, and he thought his son might still be guiltless, and said to his court, 'O that my son were still alive! how it grieves me that

*I had him killed!’ ‘He is still alive,’ said the huntsman; ‘and I am glad that I had pity on him, but let him go in peace, and brought home his royal coat.’ At this the king was overwhelmed with joy, and made it known throughout all his kingdom, that if his son would come back to his court he would forgive him.*

*Meanwhile the princess was eagerly waiting till her deliverer should come back; and had a road made leading up to her palace all of shining gold; and told her courtiers that whoever came on horseback, and rode straight up to the gate upon it, was her true lover; and that they must let him in: but whoever rode on one side of it, they must be sure was not the right one; and that they must send him away at once.*

*The time soon came, when the eldest brother thought that he would make haste to go to the princess, and say that he was the one who had set her free, and that he should have her for his wife, and the kingdom with her. As he came before the palace and saw the golden road, he stopped to look at it, and he thought to himself, ‘It is a pity to ride upon this beautiful road’; so he turned aside and rode on the right-hand side of it. But when he came to the gate, the guards, who had seen the road he took, said to him, he could not be what he said he was, and must go about his business.*

*The second prince set out soon afterwards on the same errand; and when he came to the golden road, and his horse had set one foot upon it, he stopped to look at it, and thought it very beautiful, and said to himself, ‘What a pity it is that anything should tread here!’ Then he too turned aside and rode on the left side of it. But when he came to the gate the guards said he was not the true prince, and that he too must go away about his business; and away he went.*

*Now when the full year was come round, the third brother left the forest in which he had lain hid for fear of his father's anger, and set out in search of his betrothed bride. So he journeyed on, thinking of her all the way, and rode so quickly that he did not even see what the road was made of, but went with his horse straight over it; and as he came to the gate it flew open, and the princess welcomed him with joy, and said he was her deliverer, and should now be her husband and lord of the kingdom. When the first joy at their meeting was over, the princess told him she had heard of his father having forgiven him, and of his wish to have him home again: so, before his wedding with the princess, he went to visit his father, taking her with him. Then he told him everything; how his brothers had cheated and robbed him, and yet that he had borne all those wrongs for the love of his father. And the old king was very angry, and wanted to punish his wicked sons; but they made their escape, and got into a ship and sailed*

*away over the wide sea, and where they went to nobody knew and nobody cared.*

*And now the old king gathered together his court, and asked all his kingdom to come and celebrate the wedding of his son and the princess. And young and old, noble and squire, gentle and simple, came at once on the summons; and among the rest came the friendly dwarf, with the sugarloaf hat, and a new scarlet cloak.*

*And the wedding was held, and the merry bells run.*

*And all the good people they danced and they sung,*

*And feasted and frolick'd I can't tell how long.*

Take a moment to let the story sit with you and notice your responses.

I sent the story to the board and invited their responses about what the story might elucidate about our organisation. We considered the story and speculated that the king's illness might be considered the social ills our organisations' work is dedicated towards remedying. Another association was to see the illness as symbolic of the difficult employee seen as the cause of the ill health of our organisation. The cure of the king's sickness is the 'water of life'. The 'water of life' was imagined as amniotic fluid containing an embryonic baby; pointing to the possibility of redemption, renewal and rebirth, the reclaiming of the innocence lost through betrayal, the abuse of trust, pretence and deception. As the story pointed to the inevitability of some trial and conflict in any human endeavour, some easing of guilt about the lack of early intervention was experienced.

A board member reflected the story had helped her gain an understanding of what had occurred within our organisation and what was now required. Renewal is being seen as emerging from aspects of our organisation that have hitherto been ignored or overlooked. Our ability to look at ourselves and review how we made actively recovered informs us as we continue to develop our organisation as a place of healing for it's community. We are guided to be clear and resolute in our strategic vision and purpose in order to achieve our organisation's goals.

Our organisation's manager valued the opportunity the story provided to take a perspective that was not his own. He believed he could better role reverse with the departed staff member and felt more compassionate towards that person.

The part of the story that had the most impact on me was of the deeper loyalty the huntsman displays, as he pays heed to the underlying relationship between the prince and his father rather than the desire for

retribution of the king and his court. By freeing the younger son he acted with humility and kindness in service of a greater good.

I continue to find meaningful associations in the story *The Water of Life* as my organisation faces the challenges of post-earthquake Christchurch. As in this story, individual courage and stamina combined with ongoing collective effort is required in the long search for the water of life in the community I call home.

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*Simon Gurnsey's interest in story began with psychodrama and developed through his passion for Playback Theatre. In playback he learned to play and in psychodrama he learned to be fully involved with others, as a result his spontaneity developed.*