

Loynes, Christopher ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9779-7954> (1998) Once upon a time. In: International Congress for Experiential Education, 1998, Augsberg, Germany. (Unpublished)

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# Once Upon a Time

by Chris Loynes

## Introduction

This paper is not rigorous in the academic sense. It does not set out to propose or test a theory. Nor does it seek to make sense of carefully collected data. Rather, I am attempting to describe the intuitive sense making process of my own mind reconciling things I have noticed in my experience working with people outdoors. In writing this way I am keeping to a tradition of experiential learning described by John Heron as Manifold Learning (Heron, 1989). While this is not widely accepted as a rigorous approach it is, I believe, a rational one that allows the imagination and lay knowledge to openly compliment the conceptual mind and expert knowledge.

This, then, is a description of my truth, not a truth and it need not be true for you. The references are those books that are most directly relevant to my theme and which helped illuminate the sense I was making of my experiences to the point of being able to attempt to articulate them to others.

I hold a number of prejudices that have influenced this sense making and which I should first acknowledge. I believe that people are a part of nature and that we have a natural nature which is best developed when we are embedded in the environmental and community contexts in which we evolved. This might be summed up as healthy humans are natural humans in their natural context.

I also believe that part of our nature is to try to make sense of our experience and to learn and to heal from this process. I believe that, in our sense making, we work largely with metaphors we derive from our experience of the world and that, therefore, the richer our experience of the world the richer the potential for metaphor making.

I am not the first in our field to make connections between outdoor experiences and the meaning and value embedded in certain personal and social narratives of the world. These connections have had two forms of expression: the outdoors as a place to discover and act out personal truths and the outdoors as a place to acquire and experiment with social meanings and understandings.

Maurice Phipps (1985) recognised the Jungian archetypes embedded in outdoor adventure education. In particular he drew attention to the hero, the child, the journey, the anima and the animus as archetypes that have relevance to participants. Maddern (1990) and Gair (1988) wrote about the outdoor journey as a rite of passage from their first hand experience of outdoor work with teenagers.

Stephen Bacon (1981) saw Outward Bound as a metaphor for life in which individuals could reconcile their personal potential with social roles in the community and at work.

Schoel et al (1988) called this time and space an island and recognised the potential of the experience for healing in the title of their book 'Islands of Healing'.

Priest and Gass (1993) recognised the way in which our minds comprehend our experience in rich, metaphoric and many layered processes. They developed activities and a facilitation style (Gass; 1995) aimed at enhancing the transfer of learning from experiential education programmes to other contexts.

Gillis (1998) explored an interpretation of the American Dorothy story to highlight the elements of therapy through adventure.

## **Fairy Tales**

At one level a fairy tale is a children's story. It is also an aural tradition present in many cultures that, until recently in the western world, evolved from place to place and time to time. Some archetypal characters transcend specific cultural traditions including step mothers, dragons, young heroes and heroines, giants and wizards. Bettelheim (1979) believes that fairy stories have another purpose in the growth of a child, one that operates only when required and is unconscious to the child and largely invisible to the storyteller. In his view fairy stories help children resolve Freudian dilemmas of power such as establishing ones identity as separate from and different to the mother and father, reconciling awareness of mortality, integrating sexual potency into the child's personality and peer relations and of taking responsibility for making things happen in the world. Some, he believes, even address specific physical, sexual and emotional abuses of the child.

Bettelheim can make his own case better than I can so one example for illustration will suffice.

The story must be told to the child. It is only in this context that the imagination is fully engaged conjuring up the landscapes and characters. Bettelheim believes the imagination is the gateway to a dialogue with the unconscious. Written stories lack the ability for intuitive adaptation in the telling and reading interrupts the altered state of consciousness that a storyteller achieves in the listener. It follows that illustrated fairy stories, whilst remaining good stories, are less likely to work at the unconscious level and that there is no hope for Disney cartoons!

'Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a far off place....'

The introduction to a fairy tale has a particular purpose. It is intended to reassure the child that this story is not about the here and now but long ago and far away.

'... their lived a young girl called Snow White with her father and step mother.'

As the child is intended to identify at an unconscious level some of the central characters with actual people, especially mother and father, the characterisation must also address the disassociation issue. This is especially so as it is often the darker side of a relationship that is at issue in the tale. This disconnection at the conscious level is achieved through devices such as wicked parents being 'step' or 'foster' parents.

The hero or heroine, whilst often the most obvious character with which the child will identify, is not the only one. A good tale will be rich in characterisation with dark, light, powerful, impotent, good, evil, young and old figures. Many tales concern a boy and a girl. This may be so that they appeal to both sexes or that they appeal to the masculine or feminine in either sex. These central figures are always 'good' but oppressed by some powerful and dark figure. The dilemma can only be resolved by overcoming seemingly impossible odds in a journey, ordeal or challenge.

### **The Characters**

First Snow White: white for innocence but on the verge of sexual maturity, a beautiful and intelligent child, wealthy and high born, all the light side, the projection of the good and ideal of the listener's personality.

The step mother: with the 'magical' powers of an adult, jealous of her step daughter's youth, angry at her own aging and loss of sexual power, both a character for the adult reader to connect to and for the listener to project onto with the darker side of herself emerging into her awareness as she approaches adulthood.

The father: kind but remote, distracted and seeming not to notice his daughter's maturation represents all the rejection felt by young people as they develop towards autonomy. His refusal to recognise her maturity and sexuality represents all that holds the growing youth back in childhood.

The dwarves: (not the Disney version), outcasts, poor and perceived as lacking in morality (which turns out not to be true), the dark side of adult men and male sexuality, receptacles for the listener's worst fears about men.

The handsome prince: who restores the child to wakefulness and womanhood and restores her vision of the good in men and provides the vehicle for the ideal man in her dreams.

### **The Tale**

to Bettelheim the tale can be understood as a story about a child reconciling her hopes and fears about becoming a woman. The characters around her act as projections for aspects of her darker self especially her step mother, and of her fears about men, particularly the dwarves. Others, such as the prince, represent her ideals, whilst others such as the servant who does not kill her and the dwarves live out her evolving values.

There is a sociological deconstruction of the tale that addresses class issues and the morality of rulers and the consequences of their decisions. The prince is remote from his oppressed and poverty stricken people. The dwarves are the outcasts driven to theft to survive and hunted by the prince's army. The child emerges into an awareness of this world and has to reconcile the potential for evil in her father and for good in the wider world that she has been taught is dangerous and wicked. This version of the tale outlasts its literal central European origins as a metaphor for the realisation that parents are not perfect and the world is not as horrific as one has been led to believe. I mention this to illustrate that the best fairy stories are rich not only in character and plot but also in interpretation. Bettelheim believes this to be a feature that ensures the stories endure as they are versatile in the issues they can tackle.

Fairy tales are also full of symbolism. The symbolism of colours is strong in Snow White. Beyond the innocence red appears in increasing measure and in particular in the colour of the apple with its echoes of Adam and Eve and the tasting of carnal knowledge.

The symbolism does not stop here, the mirror, the castle, the wild wood, the mine, the precious stones, the apple, the glass coffin all have their interpretations.

The frightening wood (the scary, adult world ahead) turns out to be homely and provides for all her needs. The community turns out to get along, care for each other and work together. The dark side of her personality (note that dark in Jungian terms does not imply bad but wild or instinctual, perhaps natural drives) is named, explored and integrated into the personality (through the death of the step mother), although this growing up requires the 'death' of the child the young adult finds new, fulfilling relationships beyond her parents in the prince. The fairy tale is always hopeful and reassuring whatever the odds may seem to be at the beginning.

'... and they all lived happily ever after.'

Bettelheim believes it is essential, if a fairy tale is to work at the unconscious level, that, no matter how impossible the odds, it always comes right in the end.

If you are not already making connections with outdoor adventure programmes then let me help you along. The wild wood and the home of the dwarves is a irresistible match for the residential experience with new people taking responsibility for each other, facing new and challenging tasks. This experience is often undertaken at an age when the young person is spreading her wings and fledging the nest, establishing her own identity, finding her potency and learning to form peer relations especially with the other gender. At the same time she is able to meet adults that are not her parents and who treat her as though she were an adult not a child. They respect her providing space in which she does not feel threatened by the projection of her fears turning out to be true. She is given power and recognised for exercising it. She is appreciated for her particular contribution and not some external image of hope or expectation from her parents.

The outdoor programme not only provides the place and time but also contains many of the same symbolic elements of plot, character and scene found in a fairy tale. I'll return to these similarities later.

## **Myths**

Whilst having many similarities of plot, character and landscape myths differ from fairy tales. Joseph Campbell (1968) believes that, beyond their pure story content, they can be understood as a social process akin to a rite of passage, the heroes journey. Working at a personal level nevertheless they deal with the maturation of a child into the adult and the adoption of the roles and responsibilities that this entails. In particular they deal with the qualities and values that are considered desirable by the community and act as a process by which these are identified and internalised. It is the integration of the dark and the light and their expression in the wider world that is the subtext here: the taming of the wild side.

Myths can be understood as a masculine construct and one process by which the masculine paradigm asserts its presence, perhaps dominance, in the social world. I am using the term masculine in its Jungian sense of an archetype and not as an indicator of gender. Some commentators (e.g. Tarnas, 1991) believe this dominance of the masculine has been a fruitful, even essential journey for western civilisation, but that the time is now upon us for its reintegration with the feminine. It is not clear whether myth has a part to play in this process but, if so, it has implications for the development of any mythic content of outdoor adventure programmes.

To illustrate the mythic potential of outdoor adventure programmes I will draw parallels with the Star Wars trilogy. A modern myth, the scripts were written and directed by George Lucas in collaboration with Joseph Campbell as a deliberate attempt to draw on Jungian understandings of mythic processes. The parallels I will draw from the same three aspects of story: plot, character and landscape.

## **The plot and the landscapes**

The movies are 'rites of passage' movies. In the classic construction of a trilogy Skywalker, the hero, discovers that his childhood has nothing to offer him and is lost (represented by a desert world and the destruction of his home and foster parents by the evil empire). The second movie deals with his explorations of the adult world (bleak and hostile represented by an ice world) and his apprenticeship into the confusing and difficult role of adulthood (under the guidance of his mentor Yoda on a jungle world). In the last movie he realises his adulthood and finally conquers the evil empire to return to a fertile forested world of blue skies.

Other landscape elements star in the films. For example caves feature throughout the second movie. First one appears as the lair of a hostile and unexpected beast (the

unknown dangers of the adult world that the swashbuckling young hero encounters through his own ignorance and bravado) from which the hero escapes by the skin of his teeth through the exercise of his rudimentary adult powers (the force). The second is the protecting and hidden home which is destroyed again by the evil empire. The next is the throat of a giant worm that threatens to eat a spaceship possibly understood as the male fear of re-absorption into the womb, the loss of identity to the mother. The last and most potent is the dank place where Skywalker confronts his dark side represented by the evil lord.

### **The Characters**

All the main characters in the Star Wars trilogy can be understood as aspects of the hero's self that need to be integrated into his own identity before he can become an adult.

For example the Princess, least well developed as a character, is his feminine side. The swashbuckling friend is his ideal but highly unrealistic adult self. The evil lord is his dark side. The mentor Yoda is the guide within us that helps us along the right path. The robots are foolishness and wisdom counterpointed within him.

The classic device used to tell us this is that many of these characters turn out to be related to the hero, the evil lord is the father, the princess is his sister, the swashbuckling friend marries the sister. Other characters die. Each death indicates the integration or resolution of that element of the adult personality into the hero. The familial identities of other characters are revealed with the same meaning. In the end they all end up standing on the same platform with but behind the hero.

### **The Myth and the Outdoor Adventure**

Again I find strong connections between these ideas and the journeys and challenges outdoor leaders present to their participants. This presentation is not just the choice of a suitable landscape - mountain, forest, river, always wild and unknown places. It is also the construction placed upon the journey into these places. It is the notion of a difficult challenge only to be resolved by self determination, collaboration with others and the acquisition of essential new skills. Attached to this interpretation are a range of values about the right way to approach the task, relate to each other and respect the place and the experience. Yet these same places in later life become playgrounds and homely environments where the mythic elements required of them in youth can drop away.

### **Discussion**

Rather than discuss whether Bettelheim's and Campbell's ideas are true I propose to consider if they were true what bearing might this have on outdoor adventure experiences and our facilitation of them.

By making these connections with myths and fairy tales I do not mean to imply that leaders of outdoor adventures should create actual stories, scripts and characters to people

the landscapes they travel through. This is an option. However, I am also suggesting that what we already do, without any further amplification, may have this content embedded within it and potentially active for the participant.

### **Myths, Fairy Tales and the Leadership of Outdoor Adventures**

If this is so then the leader aware of these possibilities may find them helpful in understanding the reactions of participants to the events of a programme. I have found it a helpful framework with which to judge an appropriate intervention once I suspect a group have engaged with their experience in this way. It has also proved a useful tool with which to evaluate programme elements in order to create more congruence between the elements and a better sequence or progression.

It also raises some doubts for me about other popular approaches to the facilitation of outdoor programmes. For example reviewing or processing, developing a conscious and collective meaning of events in a programme, may be counter-productive if the conscious process inhibits the unconscious one as Bettelheim claims the deconstruction of a fairy tale to the listener would. This needs further consideration.

There are also some major dilemmas for leaders. If they are to act as the sole available adults onto which elements of a participant's psyche can be projected they are going to be wearing many and often conflicting hats. It will be hard to be the ideal self, the dark side, the guru, the fool, wisdom, the feminine and so on and for many rather than one person. I have noticed how on programmes that are rich in adult involvement a range of roles are adopted intuitively and not intentionally by the leaders. These may be responses to the projections from the group.

On occasions where I have deliberately developed a fairy tale or myth into the programme and the adults have assumed the characters involved the outcomes of the experience have been profound and beyond the norm in personal growth for the participants.

### **Myths, Fairy Tales and Organisations**

A further application of these ideas may concern adults. Morgan (1986) has written about the organisation as a patriarchal structure like a family. In such an image junior staff members or managers trying to influence the organisation and develop their careers can be understood as children. It may be that issues of personal development in childhood are reconstructed in this adult world and may again require resolution. Matters of power are the essence of organisational behaviour and function so it would not be surprising if this were so. Perhaps part of the explanation for the popularity of outdoor training could be that it offers a seed bed for the hero within each worker or that it provides a safe space in which issues of power in working relationships can be resolved.

### **Outdoor Adventure Leadership as the Post Modern Storyteller**



In addition to noting similarities between tales and adventures I suspect that adventures may be actually replacing the unconscious element of story in the growth of a child. This may be as a compensation for the lack of an aural storytelling tradition or as a preference for adventures as a postmodern 'other' for the unconscious dialogue that develops and heals.

In a post modern world in which the aural tradition of story telling has largely died out and the emphasis is on the personal and not the social construction of reality the outdoor adventure may be assuming some of the functions of story telling. It provides a rich 'other world' for an inner fantasy to be developed. Participants often talk about outdoor adventures as 'unreal' and going home as going back to the 'real world'. It provides many of the elements of a story and has the potential for many more to be developed.

It is also significantly different in that the events are actually experienced and not simply heard. The relationship between a real experience, the imagination and the unconscious has not been explored in this paper and may present significant differences and problems.

It is my intuitive sense of many experiences I have led for young people that at least aspects of this interpretation are confirmed. In a world in which truth is increasingly a personal rather than a social matter it may be that wild places and outdoor adventure have a critical part to play in human development once provided by stories.

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### **First Published**

Loynes, C. (1999) Once Upon a Time. *Proceedings of the 11th Australian Outdoor Education Conference: The human face of outdoor education.* 1-5.

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