



A TALE TO TELL?

Martin Spray

I

The Senecas, a native people of north-east North America, say that it was the stories told by a speaking stone that gave them all the knowledge they have of the world before this one. Presumably their stone was an Iroquois speaker. I note that stones, like people, have language limitations. *“Rhaid edel Cymry i dorri'r garreg, nid yw'r graig yn deall Saesneg”*, said the Welsh slate-quarrymen: “You must get Welshmen to cut the stone, the rock does not understand English.” [1] I, unfortunately, have no experience of stones understanding what is said to them, let alone of them saying anything, but I have sometimes found them useful for encouraging human conversations.

My interest in stones and stories was in their potential as prompts for students beginning some of the courses I taught. They were mostly environmental students in a broad sense, studying such things as geography, community development, and landscape architecture. I found it useful to (gently) disorient students at the outset, to try and ‘loosen up’ their thinking. Of course, I may well have confused them by inadequacies in my teaching, but I don’t want to explore *that* at the moment. Instead, I want to describe one of the ‘ice-breaker’ exercises I developed to begin some modules with. The suggestion of doing something – with humour – to dis-inhibit students’ minds and tongues before starting the module proper struck me as a good one. It is suggested that adding a little humour “builds group cohesion. People respond more positively to each other”, and stress is reduced. [2] I was fortunate to have relatively small classes, which made this a convenient, not overlong, exercise.

II

The class got into pairs, and each pair was given a paper-bag, and was told to examine its contents. After a few minutes, the students were given further instructions as follows:

Each bag contains a stone. But these are special stones. They are 'natural models' of areas of land. They are not necessarily showing their landscapes' natural colours. You will have to decide if the edge of the stone represents the edge of the land or is the boundary of the model. I shall come round to see that you have your stone the right way up!

Look carefully at your model. Discuss what comes to mind about the land it represents for about fifteen minutes, and then be prepared to tell the rest of us about your land.... The 'story' you tell about it should be as rational, logical, and coherent as possible. The presentation plus a few questions should take about five minutes.

- > *How big is the land the model represents?*
- > *What are the main characteristics of its physical environment?*
- > *What, if anything, lives / grows there?*
- > *Is this land influenced by humans?*
- > *Does or could this land sustain them?*
- > *Do people live there?*
- > *What - if anything - do they do there?*
- > *What do you think it is like to be there?*
- > *Would you like to take a holiday there?*
- > *Would you, if you could, like to live there?*
- > *Describe a journey from A to B, where A and B are as far apart as possible.*
- > *By the way... where in the universe is it...?*

III

It was usually on Earth. It was usually some kilometres long, but the stories told of lands ranging from hundreds of kilometres down to a few metres across. It could be urban, rural, or wilderness; clothed in luxuriant foliage, or a desert; a desert natural or man made. It was sometimes a horrid place, but more often a pleasant one – worth considering for a vacation. In a few cases, it was extraterrestrial, and very occasionally in another universe.

All the stones in the paper bags (I had a selection of about twenty) were, I think, relatively easy to spin stories about. They were mostly hand-sized, and all had what I thought were interesting features. All were picked up in various parts of Britain, and they were used as found, after washing. Most were naked, but two supported encrusting lichens.

There was a piece of purple slate from Gwynedd, with an intense criss-crossing of grey lines; a piece of Forest of Dean sandstone that had a pock-marked surface; and a piece of water-worn shale from a beach somewhere I've forgotten.



Between them, they showed quite a diversity of shape, texture, pattern, and colour. They were interpreted in an interesting diversity of ways – and nearly always the story told by the pair of students was fairly logical and reasonably realistic. Of course, some pairs couldn't agree on a story – so they told two.... However, I don't recall anyone being fazed by the exercise, though it was clearly beyond their experience.

IV

Perhaps the most distinctive stone was an almost spherical 'cannonball' fifteen centimetres in diameter, that fell out of the sea-cliff near Whitby. That last stone, the cannonball, was – predictably – seen as a very large object, usually a planet, sometimes Moon because of its partly pitted surface, and it was sometimes thought a rather inhospitable place. The pocked sandstone, which always reminded me of a First World War battleground or the aftermath of carpet-bombing in Vietnam, tended to be interpreted as an area of pools, perhaps resulting from quarrying – or alternatively as a heavily cratered part of the Moon.

Reaction to the North Wales slate was interesting. Several pairs saw the lines as a road network, and the landscape, some kilometres across, was either urban or agriculturally rural. They were also seen as boundaries of small fields, the smaller 'enclosures' being cultivated, the larger ones pasture. In fact, this stone generated stories of field patterns, city blocks, road networks, Nazca lines, and land-artist Richard Long gone wild!



Size was also ambiguous in the case of a square of Scottish seashore rock covered in lichens – appropriately, mostly the 'map lichen', *Rhizocarpon geographicum*. The landscape seen here was either very small-scale, for instance plants in a part of a well-stocked garden, or larger scale, with individual lichen growths seen as – usually – natural vegetation patches, or perhaps crop areas with natural vegetation interspersed. It once became a coral reef. This stone's story was usually a happy one, told enthusiastically: of course the

stone itself, I admit, was a bit of a cheat, 'softened' as it was by colourful, distinctly edged lichens. Our class conversation was especially effective when members of a pair saw very different landscapes, as in this case.

V

"Places become meaningful when there is a story", says environmentalist Jules Pretty; and in *Ecologies of the heart* E.N. Anderson discusses the roles of myths and folk tales in the transmission of environmental information. [3] Anderson notes that in both Australia and California these "function as, among other things, devices to teach the young about the environment. [Native Australian] children learn myths that include the travels of culture heroes around the water-holes in the territory. For these desert people, [...] a list of water holes is a great deal easier to memorize if it is embedded in a racy story with lots of sex, violence, and religion." Such stories are not, of course, made up on the spot as were the ones students produced for me, but I think both kinds suggest some of the benefits that tale-telling can offer. Ice-breaking and the loosening-up of students' thinking is only an initial part of it.

I suspect that interpreting a landscape fantasised onto a rock is like much else humans do: a game of story-making and telling. Humans have a number of times had to make serious interpretations that veered into fantasy – though perhaps the general rule has always been to interpret something new as if it was something familiar. A classic example is the buildings and structures 'seen' when early telescopes were pointed at Moon. Sensible moon watchers 'saw' roads, canals, temples...[4] Here on Earth, the buildings of exotic cultures, when they were first met by Europeans, could be misunderstood. I guess there are cases where we have never fully understood the landscapes in which some peoples live. If, for instance, we deem the people primitive, we are inclined to deem their home 'wilderness'. [5]

Curiously, the example of landscape as story most familiar (but still only slightly so) to many in the West is the 'songline' of native Australians. In a more d-i-y mode, and culturally nearer home, readers of the Welsh *Mabinogion* wonder tales [6] can (I'm told) still follow some of the action on the ground, and such experience is probably widespread around the world. Some cultures and languages hold on to the meanings of the names of places more firmly than others – such as English: we have many cases where we know that Ippa or Beorna or Alf did it, but what it was they did, we haven't a clue! However, closer to what I'm thinking of here is something more like the unsophisticated and un-literary, and distinctly impromptu, story-making of a child – or an adult – at play.

Not long ago, Nobel physicist Gerd Binnig looked at silica in a scanning tunnelling microscope, and saw "little hills, and the hills formed a complicated pattern" [7], but generally professionals and academics are wary of such language, and tend not to tell stories. Such serious folk have put play aside – or, if you agree with Johan Huizinga that we are *Homo ludens*, the ape that plays, think they have, but really *haven't*. Could it be that (to use psychologist Donald Winnicott's title) we have tried too hard to separate playing and 'reality'? [8] Has studying and describing such rather nebulous things as landscape drawn us too far into the scientific discourse? I would say "yes".

Perhaps students of science “rin up hill and down dale knapping the chunky stanes to pieces wi’ hammers like sae many road makers run daft” to see “how the world was made”, but most of us need (if not poetry) more poetic rationales that let us (for instance) see “How once these heavy stones / Swam in the sea as shells and bones”. [9] There is a danger that “science without storytelling collapses to a set of equations or a ledger full of data” – which may be of immense value to experts, but brings no enlightenment to the rest of us. [10]

This is not a call for us to be irrational, or to treat serious matters as mere games; but it is a suggestion that a mixing of rational, ‘scientific’, interpretations of the world with more ‘creative’ approaches can be more insightful than just one alone – if only by allowing us a more imag[e]-in[ov]ative vocabulary. Walking on two legs is – after all – usually better than hopping along on one. [11]

VI

Did this silly game give my students any lasting benefit? I do not know... although immediate feedback was encouraging. I think it helped some of them into the deep ends of their imaginations – depths often left undisturbed. I asked for descriptions and rationales to be as ‘realistic’ as possible. ‘Story’ may have been a rather poetic term for these, but everybody seemed to find words suitable for the task. They were usually very sensible. To conform to the university’s regulations, I suppose I should have specified learning outcomes and made a risk assessment (stones + feet = !), and the rest of the edugarbage. But wasn’t it only a game? Maybe some children have had more interesting bedtime stories as a result... I sought, of course, a show of twenty-first century imagination, not (say) the imagination of early archaeologists, who made rather off-beam interpretations of henges, dolmens, and other things being (re)discovered; nor, at the scale of the minute, the seventeenth century imagination of Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, who looked down his early microscope at a grain of sand, and drew what he saw: “a ruined Temple [...] and two images of humane shape, kneeling and extending their arms to an Altar”. [12]

Of course, there are ways of telling besides story-making. What more important function could *art* have?... Given the time constraints, the types of students, and the exercise’s ice-breaking role, asking for a story seemed fair; asking for a sculpture, painting, song, or dance sequence was not. For a different course, with fine art students, such artworks could be produced – and usually required accompanying ‘stories’ to interpret them.

A final thought: A long time ago, when I taught ecology to landscape architecture students in an Art & Design college (an interesting combination!), I shared grumbles with a landscape colleague with whom I interviewed prospective students. These were mostly at the A-level stage, when, for many, ‘education’ had wilted both imagination and conversation. Their thoughts were kept within close horizons. It was partly as if they were developing the problem that Zen writer Shunryu Suzuki sums up so neatly: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities. In the expert’s mind there are few.” [13]

Can we put some possibilities back? Can we keep the grown-up's straighter thinking while reawakening the inner child's off-the-leash wonderment? I am always saddened when I remember how narrowed-down we become; how we grow up like the child who once could "read the bark of trees, / leaf veins, / seashell-convolutions, / footprints, / and the touch of fingers," but who now "goes to school, / and he can only read / words." [14] Striding confidently onwards, as it were, without looking into tracks that take you away from the straight-and-narrow, is not always the best way to approach a problem. "*Pour inventir il faut penser à côté*", said Étienne Souriau. It has occurred to not a few people that kids are innocent de Bonos, their thoughts always jumping sideways, making connections that grown-ups just don't get. I don't know its source, but a quotation I happened on gives me encouragement: "*Le storytelling permet de penser <à côté>.... Quelle sont les histoires qui changant une vie?*" [15]

"If only", said my designer friend, "we could recruit straight from the primary schools!"



All photos by Rowan Spray - rowansprayphotography@gmail.com

References

- 1 Susan Feldman (ed.) (1965) *The storytelling stone. Myths and tales of the American Indian*, Dell Publishing, N.Y.. Jan Morris (1998) *Wales. Epic views of a small country*, Viking.
- 2 Maryellen Weimer, Humor in the classroom: 40 years of research, *Faculty Focus* February 1st. 2013, online, is a useful start to looking into this subject.
- 3 Jules Pretty (2007) *The earth only endures. On reconnecting with nature and our place in it*. Earthscan. E.N. Anderson (1996) *Ecologies of the heart. Emotion, belief and the environment*. Oxford University Press.

4 ... even animals. Samuel Butler lampooned Royal Society members in his long poem *Hudibras* (1662-1678): "Have we not lately, in the moon, / Found a new world, to th' old unknown? / / Made mountains with our tubes appear, / And cattle grazing on 'em there?"

5 E.g. Clive Gamble (1986) The artificial wilderness *New scientist* 10 April 50-54 (Australia); Fred Pearce (2000) Inventing Africa *New scientist* 12 August: 30-33. 'Natives' could then be treated as members of the wild fauna.

6 *The Mabinogion*, e.g. the translation by G. & T. Jones, Everyman edition, Dent.

7 In Martin Kemp (2000) *Visualizations. The Nature book of art and science*. Oxford University Press. (Gerd's surname is also given as 'Binning'.)

8 J. Huizinga (1944, 1955) *Homo ludens. A study of the play element in culture*. Beacon Press, Boston. D.W. Winnicott (1971) *Playing and reality*. Later edition by Penguin.

9 Walter Scott (1824) *St. Ronan's well*. Andrew Young, 'Idleness' (1960) *Collected poems*.

10 "Scientific truth is sometimes best revealed in fiction" is the gist of Janna Levin (2006) The truth of lies *New scientist* 10 August: 64-65.

11 Verbal story-making is, of course, only one way of telling. 'Art' offers many ways, from sculpture to music. M. Spray (2005) Using both legs. www.greenmuseum.org/.

12 Things antiquarian are well illustrated in John Michell (1982) *Megalithomania. Artists and antiquarians of the old stone monuments*, Thames & Hudson. Michael Welland includes the van Leeuwenhoek drawing from the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 1703 in *Sand. A journey through science and the imagination*, Oxford University Press (2009).

13 Shunryu Suzuki (1970) *Zen mind, beginner's mind*, Weatherhill, N.Y..

14 School, college, university...? I have quoted from this little poem by Jennifer Farley several times, as it seems so apposite, but do not know where it was published.

15 Freely translated: "To innovate, think sideways." "Telling stories lets you think askant. What stories changed your life?" I think the first quotation is from French aesthetics philosopher Étienne Souriau (1892-1979), though it is commonly quoted as by Einstein. While trying to check that, I found the comment on *le storytelling*. Edward de Bono popularised his term 'lateral thinking' in the book of that name (Harper & Row, 1970).
