

Tales to Sustain

In the spring of 2005, Eric Maddern invited a number of concerned storytellers to Cae Mabon, his retreat centre in Snowdonia, to spend a weekend exploring how storytelling might be applied to the challenge we today face to make our society ecologically sustainable. Eric thought this was the first time in Britain a group of professional storytellers had gathered for this specific purpose. The group, numbering sixteen, included jobbing storytellers and environmental educators, ecobards and an ecowarrior, creativity coaches, and, I fancy, at least one elemental spirit in human disguise.

Though Jon Cree, Malcolm Green, and Eric took on the job of coordinating our activities, the weekend was deliberately not pre-planned. The first third of our time together was devoted – through dialogue in pairs, small groups, and plenary – to constructing an agenda. That might not sound an efficient use of time, but it was soon clear we were at the start of a process that would extend way beyond this weekend: we were in effect setting a provisional agenda for this larger-scale process. I say ‘provisional’ because it was a rolling agenda that kept morphing throughout the weekend and will continue to do so as storytellers respond to the ever unpredictable unfolding of the ecological crisis.

Our agenda divided loosely into ‘challenges’ and ‘practice’. The latter was explored through a series of mini-workshops in which people shared some of the practical expertise they employ in their own work. Alasdair Taylor and Mel McCree offered indoor and outdoor bodywork exercises, based on the premise that a gentle and sensual relationship with one’s own body facilitates a similar relationship with the earth. Chris Holland taught us how to stalk light-footed like a fox. Jane Flood had us confront the shadowy ‘underbelly’ of our psyche to empower us to handle the dark side, the bad news, so integral to many ecological stories. Pat Bowen, Jon, and Malcolm engaged our senses and imagination with physical details of the woods around us, both to inspire poetry and storymaking and to interface our storytelling with the outdoor setting. Shando Varda ran imaginative games in which we envisioned the characteristics of desirable futures and the processes by which such futures might be reached. Esvllt Harker and Jane explored the interplay between story, language, and place in their work within geographical communities.

The ‘challenges’ were examined by discussion: What do we mean by ‘sustainability’ in the present context of ecological crisis? What should be the role of the storyteller in furthering a sustainability agenda? How do we construct stories that provoke questions about sustainability? How might storytelling be used to raise issues of sustainability with influential decision-makers? The question about the storyteller’s role stirred debate about the desirability of loading stories with any kind of agenda. David Metcalfe articulated the point that everyone’s storytelling is inevitably coloured by the values they hold – some kind of agenda will be implicit, whether or not you’re conscious of it – yet, in delicate tension with this, stories don’t need to be didactic, or even *about* sustainability, to convey through metaphor the values associated with sustainability. In one team’s effort to construct a story that raises questions of sustainability, Malcolm was keen that we should fashion a story that was directly challenging to ourselves, and people like ourselves, rather than one that pointed a finger at people who were, for us, ‘other’, such as youths or corporate shareholders.

The sharing of actual stories, many but not all with ecological themes, took place during evening sessions in the roundhouse. One night Eric invited us to contribute true stories, fortunate and unfortunate, about the state of the earth. The most heart-rending tale that night – Chris Smith’s account of an Arab family’s suffering in Israel – might, at first, seem unconnected with sustainability, but, when you think about it, Israeli–Palestinian conflict has ecological roots in the competition for fertile land. The third night, Eric compered a cracking session in which nearly everyone performed and then we sang old songs while David and Eric took turns on guitar. There was a wonderful feeling of togetherness, the kind of collective experience that, so long as it doesn’t become exclusive, people need more of to strengthen us to grapple with the ecological crisis in a civilised, cooperative way.

The need for fellowship in the face of that challenge was one reason I valued this gathering. Most of us were keen to remain in touch and to meet again a year hence to exchange more stories and more theory and practice. Some felt inspired to enhance the green dimension of their storytelling. Others began to hatch plans for a larger sustainability-centred event open to the public.

The venue of Cae Mabon – the trees and rushing stream so powerful a presence and the centre’s hand-built accommodation and compost loo providing practical insight into what a more sustainable way of life might be like – conferred some consistency between what we were talking about and our lived experience that weekend. The enfolding woods dispelled one’s sense of the normality of urban life. When we walked in pairs to share deep thoughts, a gentle snowfall through the trees trans-

ported us into a kind of otherworld. My own thoughts turned to the finitude of mortal life and a dawning realisation that our secular response to the ecological crisis, though vital, may be futile without some spiritual source of hope. In the shifting sands of that bigger picture, stories are our guide (see pages 165–9).

One dusk at the lakeshore, standing on the remains of the old railway wharf, now overgrown and crumbling away, David and I watched the snow smoking off Snowdon into the slate grey sky and tried to make out, across the lake, the swallows that Malcolm assured us were feeding low above the water, a shimmer of movement that only his far-seeing eyes could detect.

‘Things can’t be too bad,’ he said. ‘At least the swallows are back.’

Since this first meeting in 2005, there has been a Tales to Sustain gathering every year (except 2006), at a different location each time and articulating a different intention for our activities. These events have brought into being a loose but growing network of practitioners in the application of storytelling to environmental education and activism.

I’m grateful to David Metcalfe for his input into this article.