‘Thou art the man’: Social ecology and narrative imaginal pedagogy

Peter Willis, University of South Australia, Australia

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Introduction
In the Bible (2 Sam 11), King David falls in love with Bathsheba a married woman. He engineers her soldier husband’s death by putting him where the fighting is fiercest in one of the local battles and then marries her. The prophet Nathan is then sent by the Lord to meet with the King. King David receives the Lord’s prophet who tells him this special story. It is about a rich man who had large flocks and a poor man who had one small ewe lamb. When a traveller came, the mean rich man took the poor man’s only lamb to cook for the traveller.

King David, usually a warm hearted and honourable man, becomes upset and angry. He bursts out that this cruel, rich man who has shown no pity, deserves to die. At this point Nathan says the prophetic words: Thou art the man. The King guilelessly caught up in the story with no opportunity to think of excuses and rationalisations, sees the enormity of his action revealed in Nathan’s metaphor of selfish and merciless greed. Nathan’s story telling pedagogy not only precipitates the King’s awareness of wrongdoing but reaches the King’s heart so that he repents.

In this paper I want to suggest that the message story or parable used by the prophet Nathan to capture the imagination and move the heart of King David was a form of narrative imaginal pedagogy and that versions of this approach can be useful in promoting the values and practices of social ecology.

II. Social ecology and its learning agenda
Social ecology refers here to ways to nurture the interdependent processes characterizing social groups within their physical and social environment. Social ecology draws originally from the ideas of Murray Bookchin (1993). In Australia a broad humanistic version of social ecology has been taught at the University of Western Sydney. Stuart Hill (2000: p1), one of its key protagonists wrote that the goals of social ecology:

- include wellbeing and health, in the broadest sense, equity and social justice,
- and the fostering of mutualistic and caring relationships, personal meaning,
- organizational learning, co-evolutionary change and ecological sustainability.

Social ecology, as an applied ideology not unlike some forms of spirituality (cf. Willis & Morrison 2009: p.5) can be seen to have three elements: A set of beliefs and ideals, fostering practices and applications in everyday life. According to Hill (2000: p. 2) contextual awareness, self reflection, predisposition to care are at the core of social ecology which seeks to speak to a wide spectrum of
human awareness and choice. I found the heuristic ideas of John Heron developed nearly two decades ago relevant and useful to the quest.

III. Four modalities of knowing and social ecology

John Heron (1992: 14) suggested a heuristic way to order knowing and learning experiences is to see them having four modes, each leading to the next in a circle. The circle begins with awareness and sensation mode linking the knower to the world of things and experiences. This experience gives way to direct image perceptions, which are named as imaginal or metaphoric modes of knowing. This leads on to the critical mode of reasoning and leads finally to praxis knowing that comes from acting and reflecting on the impact of that action.

For Heron (1996: 33), these four modes of knowing and learning can be distinguished to a greater or lesser extent in the purposive activities of everyday human life. Awareness sensation action is evident when we connect directly with things; imaginal action is evident in our intuitive grasp of aesthetic patterns in awareness experiences, art forms and stories; critical action is expressed in rational appraisal, while praxis action is evident in the empirical knowledge of practice. According to Heron, each mode of knowing evokes the next. Thus the awareness mode evokes the imaginal, the imaginal the critical, and the critical the praxis. In the generalised processes of social ecology, initial sensation modalities can be linked to what can be called awareness social ecology, imaginal modalities with mythopoetic social ecology, rational modalities with critical social ecology and reflective action-based modalities with praxis social ecology.

I wanted to explore ways in which the ideology of social ecology as an active and applied practical ideology with the three elements mentions above: beliefs, fostering practices and applications in everyday life, could connect with these four modes of knowing.

**Awareness social ecology** seeks to encourage ‘awake mindfulness’ of one’s embodied and relational self in the human and the surrounding non human world.

**Mythopoetic social ecology** can be said to draw on James Hillman’s (1976) ideas of human imaginal knowing and learning, which he developed through his interpretation of Henri Corbin’s (1969) translations and expositions of Ibn ‘Arabi, the Sufi mystic. According to Hillman, the mythopoetic or imaginal mode of knowing and learning ‘provokes, delights, confuses, tantalises’ (1976: 158). It can ‘start us imagining, questioning, going deeper’. Mythopoetic knowing in social ecology serves to enhance the aesthetic quality and existential enrichment of life. The imaginal knowing of mythopoiesis is not the same as the workings of the imagination, which are much broader and full of possibilities that may or may not be grounded in reality (cf Hillman 1981; Boyd and Myers 1988; Dirkx 1998; 2000; Nelson 1997). Imaginal processes are linked to the way people consciously or unconsciously value things and experiences seemingly instinctively and often without full awareness. These, according to Hillman, are supported by ‘generative’ or ‘mythic’ images, images that hold the imagination and move the heart, the influence of which is somehow present deep in the person’s psyche.
Mythopoetic forms of knowing complement logical rationality. They are evoked when people, reflecting on important moments of their life and dreams and focusing on central images appearing in them, seek to develop a ‘way of talking with the image and letting it talk’ (Hillman 1977:65). Mythopoetic processes tend to serve social ecology’s believing and fostering elements but not so much its grounded ways of monitoring applications of social ecology in day-to-day living. This is left to the awareness, critical and praxis modes of knowing.

Critical social ecology draws on the human cognitive capacity to analyse, discern and appraise. Social ecology needs to incorporate cognitive approaches to foster a critical and ethical capacity to guard against over-credulity on the one hand and unethical practices on the other.

‘Praxis’ social ecology adds a touch of grounded realism to awareness, mythopoesis and critique. Freire (1970; 1973) used the word ‘praxis’ to refer to the process of putting ideas into action attentively and reflectively. Praxis social ecology resists sloppiness, hypocrisy and sloth.

Having located mythopoetic social ecology in a four part matrix drawing on Heron’s ideas, the next part explores the mythopoetic learning in this form of social ecology, its relation to life narratives and the challenge to develop appropriate pedagogy.

IV. Mythopoetic learning and deep story telling
This question of mythopoetic learning emerged at a ‘place writers’ workshop held in Autumn 2004 at the Far South eco-camp near Dover in South Eastern Tasmania. About forty poets, writers and environmental scientists spent the Easter long weekend exploring theme of ecological life and a sense of place. Some participants with more scientific and empirical background and culture were drawn to the ecology of biological sustainability and biodiversity. Others with a more aesthetic life stance were interested in the ecology of human collaboration on all levels of awareness – production, governance, creativity and community. They celebrated their engagement with place and each other with excerpts from essays, and stories and poems of place. I was struck by the all round stance of a couple of participants whose awareness seemed to cross and draw together the multiple theme of social ecology – love and care for the earth as an eco-system and love and care for the humans in that eco-system. What made these people significant was the breadth and depth of their awareness and their integrity and conviviality. This was revealed in all kinds of informal courtesies during the three days and in their presentations to the group of environmental and social action, poems and stories of moments of insight and passion. I felt that it was possible to get a ‘feel’ for the charm and caring attractiveness of the attempt to live out the social ecology vision: their concerns, their non judgmental stance and their passionate quest for an authentic and democratic social ecology. It was their stories of engaged social ecological life that moved me and threw me back to Nathan the prophet and King David.

I noticed that some activist participants were obliquely confronted by contradictions in their own life narratives. Some attentive activists said to me that they became reflexively aware of a shrill tone that occasionally emerged in their passionate discussion about mobilising popular support against apathy and ridicule to protect the ecosystem of the planet. In their experience of the conviviality of the conference
that they began to see this warm acceptance might be necessary as a foundation for social change.

As the conference went on, some activist participants who had angrily used language like ‘eco destroyers’ or ‘idiots who cant see that the ecosystem is in trouble’ to describe the group who did not espouse their views, began to feel a kind of ‘thou art the man’ feeling that King David had felt when prompted by Nathan.

Some began to realise that inviting people to consider change is radically different from preaching or attacking them and their ideas; that for people to become interested in embracing real and possibly uncomfortable change, preliminary fellow feeling was needed, a kind of shared conviviality within which differences could be listened to and considered without too much instant acrimony. A few people then spoke of their change of heart and the ‘thou art the man’ moment when they realised that in their rigid and doctrinaire tone, was a kind of implicit dislike and disapproval for those holding opposing views which needed to be faced and its toxic effect somehow minimised. These social ecology practitioners like King David were quite profoundly moved in their realisation and seemed determined to accept the serious challenge in seeking to change. I remember thinking that such a learning outcome was such a valued side effect and had been brought about by the creation of a social ecology event for three days with its strong shared discourse of conviviality and respect.

It seemed to me that, while there might be some relevance to the other three modes of knowing: awareness, critical and praxis, these prophetic confronting stories seemed to connect powerfully with people’s mythopoetic mode of knowing and their own deep self story. The last section of this chapter explores imaginal pedagogy which has been created as an appropriate tool within the ideals of social ecology, to generate a strong mythopoetic response.

V. Imaginal pedagogy for social ecology
An imaginal pedagogy seeking fostering social ecology awareness needs to have the capacity to capture the ecological imagination and move the heart toward environmental and social conservation and inclusivity

My colleague Tim Leonard and I (2008) had pointed out that imaginal approaches to learning and education resist an exclusive concentration on linear behaviourist approaches espoused more than half a century ago by the training approaches of Ralph Tyler (1949) and in a different way by the critical and cerebral approaches of Habermas (1972, 1984) and the Frankfort school. We wrote, inspired by James Macdonald (1981) that:

    by confining the evaluation of curriculum to the assessment of its original objectives, the [linear] model diminished the role of personal interaction, imagination, emotion, and serendipity in the lived experience of teachers and students in actual classrooms. (2008, p.2)

Compared to the pedagogy involved in assisting learners to take on accurate information or precise and well-developed skills, the imaginal pedagogy is divergent and less bounded and confined. Whereas the instructional pedagogy tends to look in a convergent way to measurable objectives and performance outcomes, imaginal pedagogy speaks more obliquely to the imagination and the heart and looks to
resonance rather than replication, and to evocation or enchantment rather than to compliance with specified outcomes. Even though a general personal stance or orientation is what is aimed at in a pedagogy for social ecology, such dispositions may be difficult to identify in performative or behavioural terms, and changes of performance specifically linked to an evocative curriculum even harder to measure. So how can the power of the imagination be evoked in an imaginal pedagogy to foster a social ecology mythopoesis? As Greene says of the imagination, ‘it is what, above all, makes empathy possible’ (1995, p.3) and empathy in social ecology is important. Pattenden (2002: pp. 29, 30) represents this challenge well:

\textit{Images form a horizon of choices that awakens a community to change and growth. The power of images is potentially disruptive to institutions concerned with limits on behaviours and … social contracts. The arts create both attraction and repulsion.}

\textbf{Imaginal pedagogy}

Imaginal pedagogy seeks to evoke a ‘listening’ rather than ‘resistant’ response from the recipients which can be facilitated by the stance of the educator and the appropriateness of the \textit{image} and \textit{story} employed. Image and story refer to linked and complementary acts of portrayal and narrative pedagogy. I have written about \textit{portrayal} pedagogy (cf. Willis 2008) but the pedagogic impact of complementary \textit{narrative} pedagogy is an addition.

\textit{Portrayal} imaginal pedagogy provides an evocative picture of the character of the archetypal exemplar with which learners can identify or be repelled and be lead to use a kind of searching learning mirror: Could I really become like that and do I want to? \textit{Narrative} imaginal pedagogy uses stories of chosen behaviours to reveal the implications and effects of moral choices with which the learners can identify, carried out by a person who is perceived to be not too ‘other’ to the learners. Narrative imaginal pedagogy is pursued through interesting and persuasive stories of the values of convivial rather than combative versions of social ecology. It needs to avoid preaching on the one hand and indoctrination on the other.

\textbf{Narrative imaginal pedagogy for social ecology}

This section explores the nature of narrative and story and their cultural capacity to evoke meaning in a number of ways. This leads to a brief comments on the way evocative stories can be used in narrative imaginal pedagogy.

Frank (2000: p.354) suggests that narrative is a more abstract term for the structure of a story rather than its full reality which is contained in the idea of story. Bochner (2002:p.80) suggested that stories have a number of common elements: people are represented as \textit{characters} in the action, there is some kind of \textit{plot}; things are placed in temporal order and there is some kind of \textit{point}.

Baumeister and Newman (1994: p.679) focused on this last element – the point. They distinguished two general categories of agenda: Firstly \textit{affecting} listeners in some way and secondly \textit{making sense} of experiences. Stories used in narrative imaginal pedagogy tended to have features of both agendas: affecting and making meaning but, as will be pointed out briefly below, with a strong mythopoetic character in the kinds of affect and meaning being evoked.
A key element in the stories of narrative imaginal pedagogy is that they need to resonate with great ‘mythic’ themes in human life like birth and death. Stories in narrative imaginal pedagogy carry a certain gravitas as contributing to mythopoetic life. Narrative imaginal stories when used as pedagogy need to be told with as much leverage and crediblity as possible in order to endorse the dramatic invitation to another but still relevant world of matters of life and death.

A second element is appropriate literary artistry. The audience has to feel and be caught up in the invitational undertones of different kinds of imagery and media. A third element is dramatic form. The imaginal pedagogic narrative with its tacit contradictions is given aesthetic strength by music and poetry and drama. Dramatised stories were used by August Boal (1992, 1995) and collaborators in his work on the ‘drama of the oppressed’.

A related fifth element is delayed and dramatic denouement. Narrative imaginal pedagogy seeks to create dramatic tension and delayed resolution of the themes and plots at play in the story being told. As Hamlet (Hamlet Act 2, Scene 2) said in an aside to the audience before the performance of a play to be performed for the royal court which he had modified for his imaginal agenda: ‘The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King’

VI. Conclusion
This chapter has introduced the stories and images used in imaginal narrative pedagogy as appropriate ways to promote social ecology. It has briefly explored the democratic ideology in social ecology, the fourfold nature of human knowing and learning and the importance for promotional pedagogy in social ecology to promote it’s ideals in non intrusive but effective ways.

References


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