Messing about in boats & banging around in sheds: Scenario sketches for a life giving civilisation

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Introduction

This paper explores the pedagogic leverage of scenario sketching story telling as a useful way to promote life giving civilisation as something satisfying and exciting that groups of people may aspire to on a small or larger level. The leverage is not so much compunction which speaks strongly to the empathetic heart, described so powerfully by James Hillman (1981) in terms of heart and soul, but more optimistic enchantment, in the world of spirit and life energy which speaks more strongly of what things could be like in a better, more compassionate and civilised world.

The term life giving civilisation used originally by Clarke in 1969 has been borrowed and widened to refer to the many processes needed to promote convivial and inclusive social order in a human society. This is particularly relevant when the social fabric is in considerable flux and where traditional customs may no longer be adequate to assist people respond to unfamiliar and changing circumstances. Soulful compassion generated by compunction precipitation is balanced by spirited enthusiasm in the excitement and promise of scenario imagination.

According to John Armstrong (2010:p4) the many meanings of civilization can be clustered around four general characteristics of a society: firstly its common values and manners; secondly its economic, political and technological systems; thirdly, the way it cultivates refinement in aesthetic and sensual pursuits and finally its intellectual and artistic excellence. His humanistic version of these four elements of civilisation emerges as: inclusive belonging, life giving material progress, artful and courteous living and spiritual prosperity. The life giving version of civilisation proposed here seeks draws on Armstrong’s humanistic ideal but seeks to warm its possible aesthetic coolness and detachment by compassionate practices built around empathy and the golden rule as developed by Karen Armstrong (2009) and grounded in creative action as explained by David Gauntlett (2011). Educational processes fostering such life giving civilisation obviously need to involve the whole gamut of human biological, personal and social life.

What this paper is concerned with is ways in which a broad range of human knowing and learning in the service of this holistic project might be mobilised. As in my previous paper on this general topic (Willis 2010), it draws on the phenomenological
approach of John Heron (1992) who heuristically perceived in the knowing experience a fourfold overlapping cyclic sequence. A person becomes aware of something; becomes aware of images of it appearing in the mind; critically analyses the known object and discerns if action is required; and finally moves into planned action with an eye on planned and unforeseen consequences. The results of the action initially become once more objects of awareness and the cycle continues.

Building on an interpretation of Heron’s fourfold notion of the knowing process educational action for life giving civilisation will need to develop processes which acknowledge, evoke and balance the four modes of knowing and learning which are envisaged as following each other in human personal and social life. In direct application to the life giving civilisation project, the fourfold pedagogy of this project begins with evoked awareness, around foundational acts of life giving civilisation that can be felt in greeting, cooking, eating, making, playing, dancing etc and the many bodily and physical acts of civilised life. The second, which is of direct interest in this paper, is imaginal pedagogy implemented in creative expressions, rituals and stories which work with the so-called imaginal part of the human mind which is often hidden can sometimes be felt in gut feelings and hunches. The third pedagogic approach invites critical and analytical reflection and dialogue around ways of classifying and regulating choices and interactions. The fourth is empirical and creative pedagogy. It involves inviting learners to compassionate and civilised ways to plan, carry out, evaluate and modify human purposive practices.

The second approach, imaginal pedagogy which is once more under consideration here, can be seen as highlighting the existential foundation of choices for a life giving civilisation since it is seat of human visions, desires and aspirations. Narrative approaches are a useful pedagogic strategy to evoke this imaginal part of the mind. They underpin the scenario building pedagogy which is implicit in the stories about ‘messing about in boats’ and ‘banging about in sheds’ which is the specific theme of this paper.

Imaginal pedagogies:

Imaginal pedagogy draws on work of James Hillman (1981), James Mcdonald (1991) and Jamie Bradbeer (1998). It uses images and stories by which learners are invited to put themselves in various ways into an imagined world. While some of these are full of playful fantasy, others can have an important task when learners are invited to become part of the story and open to its discoveries and feelings. Imaginal pedagogy in images, confrontations and scenarios avoids attempting directly to instruct learners or even to make a case for some desirable policy or practice. It focuses on evocation creating resonances in the imagination. One of its major vehicles is stories. This section which develops ideas from my earlier paper (Willis 2010) explores the nature of narrative and story and their cultural capacity to evoke mythopoetic meaning.
Bochner (2002:p.80) following Rappaport (1995), suggests that stories have a number of common elements: people are represented as characters in the action, there is some kind of plot, things and events are placed in temporal order and there is some kind of point. Baumeister and Newman (1994: p.679) focus on this last element – the point. They distinguished two general categories of agenda: Firstly to affect listeners in some way and secondly to make 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. The stories of mythopoetic pedagogy 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 credibility 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. (cf. Willis 2005)

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’

**Compunction narratives and scenario sketching**

Some of these can be linked to compunction when people are invited to dwell with a focused imagination on the feelings and fears of others. This is one of the generators of empathy and is of considerable interest in building compassion. In the earlier paper (Willis 2010) mentioned earlier, I recalled how in the Bible, the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 11) used his imaginal talent to tell a powerful story of cruelty to touch the heart of the kindly, passionate and wayward King David and bring him to acknowledge and repent his wrong doing. Nathan’s pedagogic strategy is referred to here as a compunction narrative.
Another way that narrative can be used is to sketch interesting scenarios which engage the imagination of the learners not so much with an empathetic feelings for the persons in the story but rather in the set of social and ecological relations that respond to longings for a particular way of life. The narrative pedagogy using this approach can be called *scenario sketching*.

The suggestion of this paper is that educational projects promoting a life giving civilisation can be enriched by evocative scenario narratives of elements of a desirable civilisation. Examples of this are the forward scenario building stories of *Messing about in boats* and *Banging about in sheds*.

**Scenario sketching for a life giving civilisation:**

*Messing about in boats*

*Messing about in boats* concerns the adventures of social living in natural environments with the tacit interest in the convivial dimension of life giving civilisation. The other, *Banging about in sheds* tells stories of the adventures of making useful and decorative things from physical materials like wood, stone, metal and plastic. This is highlighted as a key factor in the embodied and grounded ‘making’ side of a life giving civilisation ‘Messing about in boats’ is a phrase spoken with satisfaction by the urbane and worldly Rat the water rat, to the similarly eponymous Mole. Mole and Rat are significant players in *The Wind in the Willows*, Kenneth Graham’s classic fantasy of the life of a group of anthropomorphic animals in rural England. The springtime story which is half parable and half fantasy tells of an informal learning journey (almost an informal pilgrimage), that the ordered and solitary Mole pursues when fed up with his predictable and comfortable life. Lured by the smells and sights of the new life of spring, he leaves the comfort of his snug burrow in search of adventure. He is prepared to have a go at new activities and take on the related physical skills required like rowing and roughhousing with the cunning stoats. He is also very good at maintaining his friendships in kindness and service and is not afraid to seek advice and explanation for mysterious life events hitherto unknown to him.

Besides creating a kindly and interesting world, elements of adult learning: the fear of being laughed at or excluded can all be seen in this endearing playful story and can perhaps indirectly encourage reluctant learners. In inviting learning, educators can assist with such encouraging ‘readings’ of Mole and rat and their companions.

*Messing about in boats* in the story is about people learning to get along while living very simply and not really setting goals, or concerned much about achieving things. The point is appreciating, getting along, rejoicing and appreciating the moment. The rhythm seems to be that one protagonist, usually the flamboyant and erratic Toad, has an adventure in which he needs to be rescued; he is joined by collaborators who enter into the critical moment with support and friendly critique. There is some kind of
resolution followed by the return to companionability: eating and chatting together in the warmth of home.

The general style of ‘The wind in the willows’ has people living together and fitting into a somewhat cultivated ‘nature’ distinct from the ‘wild wood’. There is an ecological accepting and celebrating of what is in the present moment. It is about playing and letting go. It foregrounds the value, importance and challenges of a courteous and kindly human social culture. All the elements of such compassionate and civilised social interaction are given an airing in the whimsy and elegance of these tales. Mole the key character is by far the least pushy. He is the one who benefits from and enriches the friendship and comradeship of his fellows in his capacity to share and to listen, to appreciate and to rejoice. He is the respectful appreciator with an endearing sense of unworthiness who is agreeably surprised when he is accepted and welcomed into the group initially as a friend of Ratty and later in his own right as his courtesy and forbearance, his accepting and open character and his dogged courage is revealed.

A few years ago, I attended a conference in England in July and visited a friend on my way back to Australia. I was invited to a picnic with a group of friends near a river in Sussex. I was unaware of the finesse that shaped and ordered the waterways in southern England and was enchanted to find that our picnic site was near a weir with a side channel to cater for potential overflow and to channel off water to surrounding fields. The greenery, the dappled light around our picnic site and the different sounds of falling water from weir and overflow channel created a gentle framing for our conviviality. It is the imaginal leverage of revealed beauty and conviviality to encourage emulation. I remember looking about the reeds at the bank of the river in case Mole or Rat were nearby in their boat. Here were images and messages of the infectious joy of simple coming together in a beautiful spot, that could be dwelt on and promoted with the right kind of pedagogy. I realised that, in the spirit of Rat and Mole and their friends close and less close, we were reproducing a few evocative moments of life giving civilisation in the company of our friends and acquaintances in much the same way.

**Banging about in sheds**

*Banging about in sheds* is a term I have coined to refer to stories written about people getting together to make things. Most of the people in this narrative are older men and most of the action takes place in sheds. One of the main story tellers around this agenda is South Australian, Mark Thomson, Research Director of the ‘Institute for Backyard Studies’, author of *Blokes in Sheds; Rare Trades; Makers, Breakers and Fixers* as well as a couple of books concerning the shadowy figure of Henry Hoake. Besides his own story telling gift which could be called a modern version of the Australian Bush Yarn, popularly linked to Henry Lawson, he also has the enviable talent of the adventure writer. He is ‘onto something’ and takes the reader with him on his narrative quest for shed understanding and illumination.
‘Banging about in sheds’ is about making things: different materials, functional tools, shapes and beautiful things. It is about a very fundamental notion of instrumental culture – of making and shaping the world. The general theme of Thomson’s stories is the human value of making, improvising and the importance of human creativity. He tells the story of his journeys into the world of men’s sheds where enthusiastic amateurs and craftspeople had found places where they could ply their trade, indulge their human desire to make things, to understand how things worked, to fix things, to invent things. Thomson’s books are full of black and white pictures of gnarled men and their friends and family, the textures of their ‘making spaces’, their tools, their improvisation from wire and left over parts of other things pressed into a new life, their endless ‘works in progress’ and their occasional gleaming finished items.

There is, in these scenario sketches, a respectful and joyful attention to human potential and actuality – what people can do with the resources at their disposal: creating, making, improvising using tools, skills, precision, style, design. Thomson’s stories speak of shed work as often solitary but also pursued often in a kind of freemasonry of makers and sheds where they work on their projects, meet friends, eat and drink and converse and laugh. His text is straightforward often with the cadence of the many conversations with shed people he meets and illuminated with powerful photographs of the people, their sheds, friends and activities. The photo story books bring the richness and attraction of shed culture to life. It seemed to me that these books could act as a kind of evocative scenario sketches - ways of creating the convivial ‘making’ elements of a life giving civilisation.

The final question is to explore ways in which the evocative potential of these scenario building narratives can be realised and so build up interest in and commitment to the ideal of life giving civilisation. Allowing for their structure as scenario sketches aimed at creating imaginal learning, the reading and presentation of these stories needs an attentive mythopoetic attention. This can be called ‘listening reading’ where the tendency to de-construct is resisted, and the story is asked to speak for itself and the listeners are present and ready to be taken into the story teller’s world.

Listening reading: Dwelling in the story

The imaginal pedagogy in story telling involves the story teller and their story and significantly the attentive listening readers. Such ‘listening’ reading allows the author to speak to the imagination and the heart. It is not a substitute for a cool and more critical reading but it can be an aesthetic source of precious enrichment. It can be the warm flesh on the bones of the human search for wisdom and truth making the quest more desirable as well as more convincing.

In a deeper and more mythopoetic reading, readers seek to be not diverted but to be mythically awakened. The word ‘myth’ here does not mean ‘untrue’ but rather
‘resonative with significant and archetypal images’ in the deep part of the psyche linked to powerful longings, fears and desires. This can be the reading of the attentive heart, or ‘listening reading’ by which the reader is heart struck by being lead into self confrontation or enchanted by an evocative scenario such as in *The wind in the willows* and *Blokes in shed*, which has been under consideration in this paper.

**Conclusion**

In seeking to promote life giving civilisation, there can be many educational approaches. This paper, ‘Messing about in boats and banging around in sheds’ is an attempt to reflect on the pedagogic power of *scenario sketches* aimed specifically at the second, or mythopoetic part of Heron’s fourfold matrix of human knowing and learning. The strategy which is hardly new, is to use such evocative scenario narratives to create a mood of interest and aspiration. This evoked enthusiasm is envisaged as a foundation for developing other dimensions of life giving civilisation with or without attuned educators.

The universal appeal in many countries of narrative approaches to reflection and pedagogic action may well give the approach some validity in cross cultural and cross nation settings. With so many narrative inputs shaping Australian culture from America, Europe and England, it will be good if the thoughts and imaginal processes in this paper might see some uptake in other countries. I suspect this will already have occurred perhaps under different processes and names. Story telling in its compunction precipitation and scenario building versions seems as old as human culture and it is good to re-visit its power and majesty and of course its limits in the work of holistic pedagogy for a life giving civilisation.

**References**


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