

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 17 – November 21, 2016

Chapter 19 in my book is called *Story, Song and Music*. The subject is so big it could have been a book in its own right and I know I won't be able to do it justice even before I start.

As we weave our own personal story, which we have to do, there is a story of our world and our fellow-citizens being written and told all around us. Nowadays the loudest voice is often the TV news, which is probably the most distorted and ugly story imaginable because it is so selective and fear-oriented – 'if it bleeds, it leads' is a newspaper motto. We also have the droll chatter of talk-back radio, which is another conversation that is biased towards the sensational. There are also print publications that set out to tell a richer and more nuanced story and then there are poets and writers who capture the stories of our deeper human needs to a greater or lesser extent.

My favourite internet blog is a weekly by Maria Popova called *Brain Pickings*. She seems to capture the mood of the times with her literary allusions and she blends psychology, philosophy and colourful art to say something that is always positive. Lately she has featured the writings of the recently-deceased Leonard Cohen, whom she called a 'poet of redemption,' particularly his poem about democracy, which he said is an experiment still unfolding and he describes the pain of it that so many of us feel with the election of Donald Trump in America. Cohen's famous line about our imperfection – 'there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in' – and the way he celebrates both 'the holy or the broken Hallelujah' is an acknowledgment of how flawed we all are – how imperfect and yet how precious. This is a quality of our mind and a meaning that can best be explained in a story or a song, not by the abstraction of science.

This blog also mentions Elizabeth Alexander, the African-American poet who read her specially-written poem for Barack Obama's inauguration, who said 'you have to tell your own story simultaneously as you hear and respond to the stories of others.' Our minds are embroiled in this combination of stories at all times.

My story makes up a large part of what my mind does, but if it was only my story and you could see no sign of yourself in it we would have difficulty connecting. It's not that you and I are the same; just that we recognise similarities and these point our mind towards shared meaning. William James was supposed to have said 'there is very little difference between one man and another, but what little there is, is very important.' It's the same with stories. We've been telling them since prehistoric times and writing them down for centuries and we love reading them and hearing them or seeing them portrayed by actors. Now, you might think we'd be better served by stories that were true, but by far the greater part of our storytelling is what we call fiction.

In *The Storytelling Animal – How Stories Made us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall remarks that we hardly realise how bewitched we are by stories. We immerse ourselves in stories told by others in blogs, books, films and theatre and, in our conversation, we shape our own story around everything else. It is said that fiction is escapist, but why would we want to escape into imaginary lives that are even more difficult than our own? Gottschall thinks we learn from this. People who read a lot of fiction were found to be better problem solvers than those who didn't, particularly around social situations.

Personal memoirs are important because they help us to see that fiction and ‘true’ stories are not really very different. All stories are made up because they stem from our imperfect memories and figments of our imagination, though they are always ‘based on a true story.’ Good writers tend to be sparing or selective with detail or use universal symbols so that we, the readers, have to create the characters and the situations in the way that is most realistic for us.

Famous stories have changed the course of history. Gottschall describes how Hitler was besotted with the music of Wagner, particularly his opera *Rienzi*, which was about a great Roman leader with whom the young Hitler identified himself. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* polarised American society and triggered cultural change. Even more powerful are the great myths and legends including the various creation myths and ancient love stories such as *Tristan and Iseult* and *Psyche and Eros*. The list of stories that changed the world could go on and on.

The legend of *Parsifal* and his quest for the Holy Grail is probably the story that is most apt for me because it is being played out in my book and this Course. What I am doing here could be called my Grail journey because the story is about the feeling aspect of our minds and how it has been wounded. It is Robert Johnson, again, in *The Fisher King and The Handless Maiden*, who brings this mythical story into the context of our everyday mind and soul. The woundedness of the Fisher King symbolises the loss of our feeling function, which he says is a casualty of our modern way of life and the most common and painful problem that our minds have to deal with today. It’s why we need more books about feelings.

The Fisher King lives in constant misery in the Grail castle and Parsifal, whose name means Innocent Fool, gains access to the castle in his young life, but leaves again without having asked the crucial question that would heal the King and all his realm. There are many versions of the story with wonderful insights into the male’s journey towards maturity. It really is a man’s story, but also relates to the masculine in women as it speaks about how men must find their feminine side. In one version a young prince rides out with a banner saying AMOUR, meaning love, of course, but as soon as he meets another knight he gets into a terrible battle, which just seemed to be the right thing to do at the time. In another version he is called Amfortas, which means he who is without power. The story is about finding a true power. In later life, after much travail, Parsifal enters the castle of the wounded Fisher King again and asks the question – ‘whom does the Grail serve’ – which reveals the Higher Power that is the healing force. Failure to acknowledge this power that is greater than oneself that I call the unknown is the reason that the feeling function is so badly wounded in our society today.

For a woman’s journey the stories are more complicated and there are fewer of them for reasons to do with our patriarchal culture for many centuries. There is evidence for what Maturana calls a ‘matristic’ society long ago in Europe in which feminine power prevailed – that’s why he calls his Institute in Chile *Matriztica*. Robert Johnson uses *The Handless Maiden* in this book because he says that the wounded feeling function is felt by women more symbolically in their hands – the cry is ‘what can I do?’ The way things are has made it difficult for women to work out what to do to fully express the great power they already possess. It was actually a ‘Devil’s bargain’ by a miller to buy new technology to make his life easier that led, without him realising it, to the loss of his daughter’s hands – the wound affects young women. Healing involves a time in the forest alone and the act of saving a baby’s life in a river – I’m sorry I can’t explain it more clearly here, but I hope it illustrates how powerful these stories are.

A story is essentially a thread of meaning. Meanings are not formed in isolation – they depend on being connected together and much of that happens in our subconscious mind without our realising it. We go on creating stories in our sleep and our dreams are an important part of the life of our mind. There is a neural block at the back of our brain that usually prevents us from actually getting up to run away or punch somebody in the middle of the night. It’s the same with cats and dogs who will stir slightly as they dream; when that pathway was unblocked in an experiment they

started running around in their sleep.

We won't appreciate stories if we are relying too heavily on the left side of our brain because we could not give full reign to our unlimited imagination and our feelings, especially regarding human relations. Narrative imagining is a fundamental feature of the human mind. Mark Turner, an American cognitive scientist, writes in *The Literary Mind – The Origins of Thought and Language* that our everyday mind is essentially **literary** – stories are not just entertainment, they are our basic thought process and storytelling is not a special performance, it is what our mind is doing all the time. Narrative imagining is the fundamental instrument on which our rational capacities depend – it is the way we predict, plan and explain – the essential business of the human mind.

It is built on a sense of time, space and movement. Turner says that 'meaning arises from making connections across more than one mental space.' Concepts are not the discrete packages that they seem to be – they aren't localised and stable – never really settle in one place for very long. Making meaning can never be finalised. Brian Boyd writes in *The Origin of Stories – Evolution, Cognition and Fiction* that stories are ways of 'playing with patterns' that helps us to share attention and ultimately meaning – the kind of social attunement that comes from play.

Mark Turner explains that our 'literary mind' makes an enormous number of connections across our conceptual space and time as we are making meaning. This requires the ability to understand broad similarities of form and pattern, which are what we call metaphors, similes and analogies. Precise meanings would keep us separated whereas 'fuzzy logic' gives our mind enough room to move to find shared meaning with others so it is the artistry of language, especially metaphor, that brings us together. Hence you might see yourself in my story, somewhere?

In fact, metaphor (and the like) is far more than a literary device; it is the best tool that our imagination has to build bridges from one idea (or one image) to another and to recognise similarities of form and pattern that connect one part of our experience with another one, making it easier to understand. If I told you my life felt a bit like a 'can of worms' at the moment you would get the general idea. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson opened everyone's eyes to the fact that we structure our entire feeling and thinking process around metaphors. It is not only the poets who use metaphors to make meaning.

We communicate with one another as if it is through a pipe or along a wire when we say: 'I'll send it to you' or 'it's not getting through.' At the most basic level we use our idea of things being 'up' or 'down' to describe how we are feeling. We feel 'close' or 'distant' as if it was an amount of space. Our metaphors often stem from parts of our body like the 'foot of the mountain,' the 'mouth of the river' or a book that went to the 'heart of the matter.' Matter doesn't have a heart, but we do. If I told you about an argument I was having I might use a war metaphor saying that I 'shot his idea down in flames' or perhaps a bucket metaphor saying his idea 'wouldn't hold water' or 'had a hole in it.' We see life processes represented in a tree and the idea of branching out is an important descriptor of growth.

The more we use our left brain the more our mind narrows toward certainty, which is an illusion. The result is that we lose touch with our feelings and our sense of meaning becomes less clear, not more so. And yet worry about uncertainty is always with us. The most profound feeling of meaning is to know that you are truly loved. Paradoxically, the surest way of knowing this is also the most uncertain – it is to trust the unknown.

One source of uncertainty is that we may know something vaguely that we would like to know more precisely. But vagueness has some special qualities that our minds need. It is not the same as error, nor is it necessarily incompleteness. What is vaguely known is very important to us in the way we make meaning. We often delude ourselves with a false sense of clarity such as when we say there is a single cause for something with no other contributing factors or when we gather together a lot of flimsy evidence so convincingly that the dubious nature of our original premise

is forgotten. This is discussed in a book by Kees van Deemter called *Not Exactly - In Praise of Vagueness* in which the important subject of fuzzy logic is explained. Amusingly, he quotes Alan Greenspan, the revered U.S. economics guru, as saying: 'if I seem unduly clear to you, you must have misunderstood what I said.'

It is one of the important realities of our existence that the meaning we seek will not be precise. Fuzziness is inherent in our perception of reality and it can never be eliminated from our knowing. By studying it, however, we can see how we often use it to good effect, not to provide predictive certainty, but for our creativity and our relationships. It's a mistake to reject fuzziness blindly, which we tend to do because precision is overrated by our rational mind in its predominantly left-brain mode.

A friend of mine, Vladimir Dimitrov, is a world pioneer in the relatively new field of fuzziology. As a mathematician in Russia he had worked on complexity theory ('chaos') and after coming to Australia he developed fuzziology as 'the study of imprecision and uncertainty in the human mind.' His many books are quite complex (and some rather mystical) but a reasonably simple one is called *Introduction to Fuzziology - Study of the Fuzziness of Knowing*.

There are two reasons we need fuzziology. Firstly, we find in our experience that as things get more complicated we always reach a point where precision and relevance become mutually exclusive so we must choose one or the other. Often we have to sacrifice precision to maintain relevance. The other reason is that nothing exists in isolation, everything is interconnected, so it follows that the nature of the whole can't be explained by adding up the pieces and you can't fix a higher-level problem with the thinking that worked for a lower level as Einstein famously pointed out.

The fact that meaning often feels fuzzy leads us into a state that has been called the 'drowning man paradox' whereby the more uncertain something feels the more desperate we become for certainty about it. If we try too hard to make something happen it usually doesn't. We needn't worry that things will never change - they will. We can be more effective co-creators with that change when we recognise that it involves factors outside of ourselves as well as our own will.

It was ancient Hindu wisdom that prompted Vladimir to write: 'do not reject anything, but do not dwell entirely in anything either; always seek to go beyond.' Creativity comes only when there is some space left outside of certainty. The values we create through love come from something beyond the immediate limitations of our mind. Respecting the fuzzy nature of our mind is acknowledging the role of the unknown in our mind.

Vladimir shows that fuzzy logic is essential if we are to have any hope of sharing meaning with one another, which is why myths, stories and metaphor are so important. As Iain McGilchrist said, myth and metaphor are not luxuries we could do without - they're not optional extras or ways of obscuring reason, they are the way our minds connect.

Simple logic is like a little torch we carry that lights up certain features in the darkness of the unknown so we can see the bits we need to work with in a practical way. But meaning is not that simple. Where your meaning meets mine there is a 'conceptual twilight' in which our minds are more often groping towards one another than marching in step in broad daylight.

It is the fuzziness of metaphor that bridges the gulf between us; it enables us to connect one meaning with another because it gives our meaning-making some room to move. If meaning was all precisely black or white we would not be able to find common ground as easily as we do. That common ground is needed for our social engagement system to thrive.

This stems from the fact that primitive language with gesture and mime was communicating emotional patterns of meaning, not precise, literal concepts. Human thinking would not work if it was not naturally structured in metaphor. We can only understand new things in relation to what

we already know. For example, it's hard to think about life as a general concept, but if you say 'life is a journey,' you can start to think of the path you will follow, the likely terrain you will cross, which direction to head, who will go with you, and so on.

To say your life is a 'mess' hasn't explained much, yet it has explained quite a lot, because the listener has an image to work with of stuff strewn everywhere that needs tidying up. It's hard to explain a complicated, unpredictable, tangle of events, but if you say it's a 'can of worms' you communicate that idea quite clearly. Even the word, tangle, is a metaphor arising from our experience with a ball of string. All metaphorical images come from our direct experience. They are the way we visualise things we already know from our everyday experience so we can use that 'picture' to give some meaning to an abstract idea.

These visualisations or metaphors are the shapes and patterns formed in our unconscious, emotional mind. It's the same as children are doing in a playground; it is our imagination playing with shapes and patterns to make them into beautifully illustrated stories.

To read and write fiction is to draw on our whole mind – feelings, emotions and thoughts as they blend together to create our experience. I have mostly written non-fiction where I use abstractions so that our mind can logically connect different ideas together. In this Course I have tried to make it a story as well because that is what the whole mind is always seeking to do. Stories need to have a beginning, a middle and an end. We interpret what is happening with something deeper than logic – with an understanding that is based on our experience, our own story. We read that two people have fallen in love quite illogically yet we know that is okay and it's real. Then we read that they parted forever through a misunderstanding which is painful to us and sad because it was not supposed to be like that – yet it is. We can identify with the stories that we hear and read or see portrayed by actors because something similar happened in our own experience.

Whatever I may say or other books may say about how the mind works in an abstract or scientific way it is really only a story about our experience.

BREAK

An integral companion of story throughout our history has been song. It's fairly certain that humans have been singing and dancing together for a very long time, possibly ever since we rose onto two legs because that freed us up to move quite differently. Steven Mithen, who wrote *The Singing Neanderthal*, is amongst those anthropologists who believe that singing together was important for our language development; it is such a powerful way of sharing meaning. Brain studies show how much synchronisation occurs when people sing or play music together. Old customs such as singing around the piano in the lounge room have died off with the elitism that distinguishes professional singers from amateurs nowadays, but our need for it is still very evident, for example, in the proliferation of community choirs.

We humans are a musical species as well as a linguistic one. Oliver Sacks suggests in *Musicophilia* that our love of music is akin to our sense of aliveness because music 'feels almost like a living thing.' He says that listening to music is the most direct connector of the feelings we share and that it marries our mind and body like no other experience can. People with dementia or brain damage that affects their movement will suddenly get up and dance beautifully when music that they know is played. It was found that music stimulates the bonding hormone, oxytocin, in much higher quantities than talking and laughing together.

The way we appreciate music is an exemplar of meaning-making in general, being easier to capture in feelings than in words. Tonal images that we hear are more subtle, but no less important than visual images. The senses of sight and touch tend to dominate so we need hearing to remind us

that there is more to our world than what we can see or physically handle; heard images are less precise and therefore may include a greater sense of the unknown. Whereas sight draws us out into the world, demanding clarity, hearing lets it come in to our mind.

Music helps us to understand wholeness and emergent properties. It is not the individual tones, it is their flowing combination, that we appreciate and this is not a logical summation – it is an entirely new creation whose properties could not be found in any of the parts because they emerged in the process of creation.

A melody has a flow of meaning that is something like a story with a beginning, a build-up to a climactic event, and an ending. One of my favourite authors on music, Victor Zuckerkandl, who wrote *Sound and Symbol – Music and the External World* and *Man the Musician* explains that melody evokes our sense of time and harmony evokes our sense of space. Upon these two metaphoric pillars we construct our meaning for aliveness as felt in our sense of movement.

Perhaps the most important nourishment for our mind's sense of movement is listening and playing music. Mark Johnson wrote a commentary about the song, *Something*, which George Harrison created for the Beatles. '*Something in the way she moves, attracts me like no other lover . . .*' is written so that the pitch moves, the duration of each note moves, the girl moves and you feel moved. If you rearrange the notation slightly this effect is lost and it's difficult to explain why this is so.

Johnson also used *Over the Rainbow* as an example of how tension is created by the octave jump in 'Some-where . . .' and then the lilting bits in the middle heighten the poignancy of the last inexorable tonal progression to the end – 'why, oh-oh why, can't I?' You can't capture the feeling of intense longing in words like you can by hearing – or better still, singing – the last line of that song.

I felt a great need to write songs and sing them to people throughout the middle part of my life, particularly when the most significant changes were happening in my mind and soul. I sang about the pain and sadness of a broken marriage and missed opportunities in life, joyful songs about a new relationship after I had been living alone for a couple of years, and I used songs as a vehicle once I started teaching about the biology of Maturana because it seemed to make the difficult concepts easier to understand. I continued to do that in U3A until a few years ago.

When I wrote *Stress: The Musical* – a one-hour play with songs – two kinds of musical metaphor regarding stress were in my mind. Originally I used an abrupt interruption to the melodic flow to illustrate how the stress is increased if our relationships are blocked and do not flow. The audience involvement in singing along accentuated this effect. In a later version I also used a conflict of tempo to illustrate what happens when there are cross-currents in our communication that rock the boat and interfere with our smooth sailing. In song writing I found that one uses the lyrics to provide the detail and the melody to provide the wholeness in much the same way that our thoughts do the analysing and our feelings are needed to tie it all together.

The essence of *Stress: The Musical*, though, is also the basic idea of this book and Course – that we must use our minds to connect 'our insides with our outsides' in a way that flows smoothly and unites us with others and our world. The two characters in the play are a scientist and a clown and the scientist doesn't realise until it is pointed out by the clown that music is the 'great connector.'

My experience of writing songs about the biological science that I learned from Maturana and performing these in my teaching connected me with other people through shared laughter and tears, singing and dancing in a way that my work as a scientist could never have done.