

The Role of Story in the Noosphere's Future: Part Three

David Sloan Wilson: One thing we've been saying all along, but I just wanted to make it explicit is that stories are much about motivating action. Basically, they create a moral worldview that motivates action, much more than a dry scientific account. Science tells you what is. It doesn't tell you what to do without adding values, but stories add those values and emotions and so on. Once you step into the world of a story, you are compelled to do something, and that basically defines stories. Now, we've been talking a lot about like the stories that move us in a direction that we'd like to go, as opposed to stories that move us in some other direction, like stories that maintain the status quo, whereas we want stories that change the status quo.

I wanted to bring in indigenous stories because if we're going to talk about genres of stories, we really have to go way back to hunter-gatherer indigenous societies. And I'm going to read from another conversation partner I had, Tyson Yunkaporta, who's an aborigine and he wrote a book called *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*. And here, he's describing a folk figure in Australia, Emu. He says, "Emu is a troublemaker who brings into being the most destructive idea in existence: I am greater than you, you are less than me. This is the source of all human misery. Aboriginal society was designed over thousands of years to deal with this problem. Some people are just idiots, and everyone has a bit of idiot in them from time to time, coming from some deep place inside that whispers, "You are special. You are greater than other people and things. You are more important than everything and everyone. All things and all people exist to serve you. This behavior needs massive checks and balances to contain the damage it can do."

What he's describing, correctly in my view, and as basically science is coming to, is that this is social control, controlling the bully, controlling the aggrandizing individuals, the problem of social life and so many stories exist to restore that balance.

That's a balance that needs to be restored in all societies, quite apart from what we actually do which might be different in the future than in the past. A lot of these themes that were we're talking about, they go back to the beginning under the entire nature of stories in all societies, including oral societies.

David Brin: Well, I think it's very important to recognize that some of the finger wagging wisdom that we get from other societies and other traditions reflects our own wisdom, in that the notion of expansion of inclusion which has been the great far too slow, grindingly slow, grindingly painful, but the great inexorable American project was never done anywhere else to anywhere near the momentum and the degree. What it points out is how hard it is to uplift a little plug from my own universe, how hard it is to uplift cavemen apes. It's really, really hard. Ask any woman who gets married. It's really, really hard to do, especially when you do expand your vision to include bull elephants, stallions, male lions, elephant seals, and all of that.

And you realize that I am greater than you, so I'm going to take all your women and wheat is something that is amazing that we can hold in front of ourselves a vision a future society in which this is all under full degree of control, under full degree that boys are all raised, so that it's all under control, and the portion of this that is pansexual that women can be bullies too. This is not easy, and so there's a part of me that says I want to include, I want to learn from these aboriginal stories, and all of that and these give us good guilt trips. And there's a part of me that goes, "Well, you know, I'll bet you, I'll bet you your tribes, this wouldn't be one of your top legends if it wasn't a daily problem for you."

DSW: Tyson would agree with that, and I read the story in part because I think that it more or less conforms to what you say David when you talk about the authoritarian threat, is that's like Emu run amok basically. We have now, we have a situation in which Emu is not constrained at all now. And you say that authoritarian societies cannot work as far as the future is concerned.

DB: Their track record is so abysmal that long litany of horrors that we call history is more than enough refutation to allowing feudalism or pyramidal structures back ever again. Because if we do this time, they'll make sure that democracy and enlightenment are never tried again. And we'll just be one more failed Fermi site, and the galaxy will have to wait for somebody else. And isn't that a grand burden?

DSW: PJ, I'm going to enter our wrap-up round here after your turn PJ.

PJ Manney: So, what ended up happening was at this Con, I just started channeling everything I said to you, and we got such an incredible response. That's when you know you're on to something, and then I later found out that Neil Stephenson had been on a similar track with the group at ASU, Arizona State University and others have been thinking about this as well, but I thought it's funny, there's no place for us to talk. I started a Facebook group which is now private, because it has to be for the new rules on Facebook called the New Mythos and I'm the only moderator.

It's a beautifully kept garden, but everybody can talk and everybody can post and everybody can join, where its authors, many of whom you've heard of that bring to it new ways of thinking, new ways of structure, new thoughts about character, new thoughts about story period. We bring history, sociology, psychology, economics. We're looking to tell new stories of a future that will benefit us all, and that's the key. Again coming back to these expanding frames of context and reference, I want to see something that at least benefits our world. That's my minimum, and one of the things was very inspirational for me was reading Robert Wright's *Nonzero* and which is one of the great books.

Clearly, both Davids, you're fans, and his idea of these win-win-win scenarios of these positive non-zero-sum games, that's what it's about. So, how do we tell stories about positive non-zero-sum games, where we have conflict, we have drama, we have all of the things that make great story? But in it, in these different stories, we find different seeds of how we're going to succeed, what is it going to take for us to chart a better future, and that includes different interpretations of the noosphere.

DB: And that is one of the reasons why in both of my young adult series and PJ, I'm going to send you all five existing novels. I'm going to dump them into your mailbox. The young adult series that has all the bright up-and-coming authors in it portrays kids from across time yanked into the 2340s, the 24th century to help save a Utopia that's in peril. That way, you can have the adventure. You can have the peril, but the vision of the future is, "Hey, you kids, guess what you did in the 2060s and '70s saving the world from the mess left by the baby boomers. You're our heroes, that's why we're yanking you into the future. You made a wonderful civilization. Now, could you help us save it?"

Neil Stephenson of course, he's a fantastic, wonderful fellow. He and several others and the ASU group have all been involved in this notion that the simplest way, and I talk about this in *Vivid Tomorrows*, the simplest way to get your heroes in pulse-pounding jeopardy is to assume everything's rotten. And I mentioned the four positive messages of Hollywood Sci-Fi, suspicion of authority, tolerance, diversity, and eccentricity. There are two very, very destructive messages. No institution can ever function, and your neighbors are all sheep. Because if the heroine is in danger at a certain point and can call 911 and get actual professional help, that messes up your story.

If she can knock on a neighbor's door and say, "I have a problem," and the neighbor says, "Joe across the street, he'll help you." You knock on Joe's door and Joe says, "Hold on a second, let's go," then a good writer can get around the problem of functioning institutions and functioning neighbors, can write around that handicap, that difficulty. But poor writers, they simply go with this really destructive propaganda that all the institutions that our ancestors built are useless, and your neighbors will be of no help, whatsoever. And I think that's terrible.

DSW: Well, let me initiate the wrap-up round here. This has been so great, and I think one purpose of this is to continue interacting with each other. So, this is not really the end. I wanted to say a little bit more about the Science of the Noosphere project, which is embedded in a larger project called Human

Energy. And Ben Kacyra who's the founder of that project talks very much in terms of the third story. What he means by that the first story traditional religions, the second story materialistic science, and the third story some kind of value-laden science that's close to what Teilhard was about with all of his writing. So, the idea that it does have to be a story, it can't just be science, it has to be science portrayed as story is what we're all about.

What I'd like to end discussing is just how do we do this. One is to make science available to the current generation of science fiction storytellers. This science is very new. It needs to be spread far and wide, including the artistic community basically, and that becomes their raw material. And then is there any other way to facilitate storytelling? So, how do we actually bring storytellers into this project? It's a scientific project. It needs to be a storytelling project in order to actually work towards global cooperation, the global good, call it the noosphere. So, what do each of you have to say about that? David, why don't you go first and then we'll end with PJ.

PJM: To me, all culture as much as science informs culture, all culture actually comes from the arts and humanities, in that how we communicate the science, how we communicate what reality is, is what makes the impact. One of the things I did briefly was I used to talk to scientists, like JPL and other places and try to get them in a frame of mind to understand that even their fellow scientists wanted to hear why this mattered to them, why does this matter to the audience, what is this connection through story, that can make an impact on their science being communicated more broadly. I think that everyone has to learn how to be a storyteller.

We are naturally whether people realize it or not, but there must be for the third story by definition, you literally called it the third story then. By definition, we have to find that synthesis. It's not STEM, it's STEAM. You need to have the arts in the middle of all that analysis, because you have to make sense of it. As David said earlier, fiction often makes more truth, more sense than the data we accumulate, because we're able to see the bigger context, multiple contexts, bigger pictures that the scientific inquiry by definition is not really supposed to do. It's supposed to go down the silo, whereas the art can go across silos.

And that's where the third story comes in for me personally as a storyteller, because it is that synthesis of where do we find value and meaning and where do we find the hopefulness to drive us to a better future.

DB: I am in awe and I don't know what I could add to that. I mean I would rather leave that as the last word, but I will say that the ability to spread oneself...When I give keynotes at universities or commencements, I talk about how human beings can be many. PJ mentioned Robert Wright's Nonzero. You can be many. You can have a pastime. Scientists are the first priesthood to encourage amateur science to compete with each other to get on PBS, and explain what they're doing. And when I was in grad school, we were worried that specialization would get narrower and narrower and narrower with time and the exact opposite happened. Scientists today talk to people outside their field more than they ever did before.

Computer literature searches played a large role in that, but the ability to be eclectic, the ability to grasp that which is outside your field, even if it's on an amateur level, but to get the essence of what's going on all around you is in my opinion one of the greatest examples of the positive sum game. And I encourage everyone to not feel limited. That doesn't mean that the narrative we're hearing of hatred of scientists and of do my own research. No, a certain amount of humility is called for. If all the experts agree on something, then you might bear the burden of proof. But—but to keep asking questions, that's another story. And it's to some extent as PJ said, it's all about story.

DSW: Awesome. Okay, that's a great way to end up. Thank you both of you. That was just awesome.

