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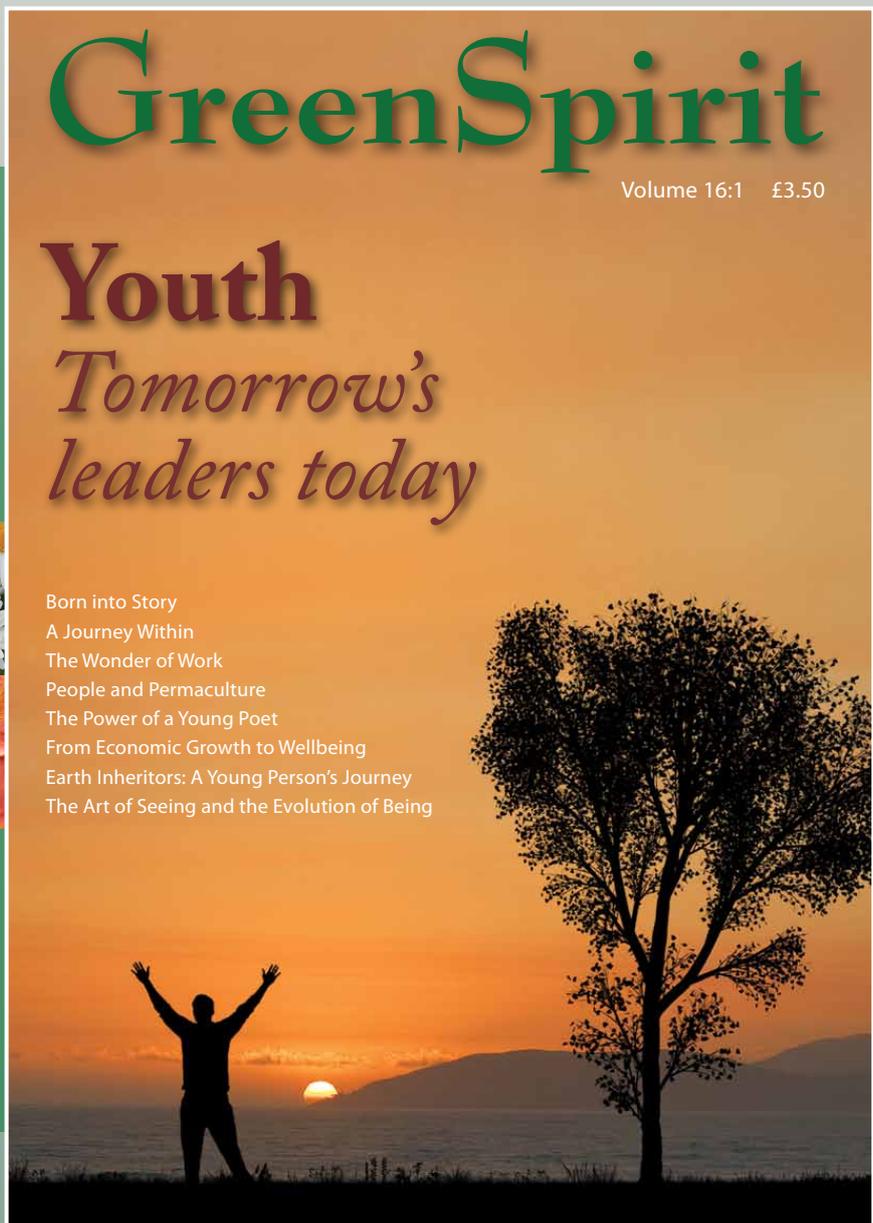
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Born into Story - *the power of narrative in a changing world*

KANADA ELIZABETH GORLA

I was just eight when I learnt how powerful story is in shaping who we think we are, in helping us in meeting life's challenges, and in understanding our place in the world. In this case a classmate, with brutal honesty, observed that she was very pretty and that I definitely was not. Now it was true that I was an odd looking child by the norms of the day - eyes the colour of honey, lips too full for my child's face - but I had read *The Ugly Duckling* many times over, and I knew intuitively that somehow this story was my story. And so when the arrow labelling that little girl 'ugly' came hurtling towards her, story had equipped her to catch the arrow and let it fall harmlessly to the floor. 'Yes, I know,' my little girl said, 'but one day I will be beautiful.'

Through the years my ear has become tuned to the underlying narratives we live by - many of which are opposing or mutually exclusive, some of which we easily flip back and forth between in one conversation. These narratives shape the activities we do, and the beliefs, thoughts and feelings we hold about our present circumstances and of the future we anticipate. They influence the degree of anxiety or optimism we have, our sense of power or powerlessness, and the isolation or connection we experience day to day. Perhaps most importantly they limit and define the choices we see as available to us. They lead to expressions like 'that's just the way it is', 'get real', 'that's human nature', 'grow up' and the one that most makes my heart sink, 'that's all very well Kanada, but in the real world...'

So, what does it mean to be born into the times we are living in? What are our stories?

An 18 year-old friend moved into the cabin in our then back garden some years ago as a first step into adulthood. What a great first home I thought - your own place with communal gardens and people who care about you close by. After two weeks I asked Alexander how he was getting on and was surprised by his reply. "Oh Kanada, it's awful, I don't want to be an adult". "Why ever not?" I asked. Here was a young man with everything going for him - gifted, intelligent, engaged... "I don't want to be busy all the time and go into debt!" - he said.

Sadly this is what he understood it means to be an adult in our society, and who could blame him for drawing such

a conclusion? It sits firmly within one of the dominant narratives of our day, of wage slavery, consumption and debt. We are, after all, living in the time of 'Austerity' following the recent near-collapse of the banking system with its attendant consequences.

Over the years I have noticed recurring themes among the now hundreds of 16 -30 year olds with whom I have had the privilege of working as they stand at the threshold of adulthood. From the outside they are intelligent, capable, accomplished people living full lives - working, travelling, falling in love, learning, experimenting and so on. Underneath the mask of 'I'm fine' - which by the way is a perfectly sane response to what they see around them as everyone else is going about their business as though everything IS fine - is an underlying anxiety that 'it must be only me who is feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges facing humanity'. Typical concerns include a sense of powerlessness, isolation, fear of failure, lack of elders in the lives, anxiety, grief over the ongoing destruction of ecosystems, hopelessness and depression. Quite a list to be dealing with at any age.

These fears often remain undisclosed to friends and family and it is perhaps no surprise then that in the UK suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death among girls and young women and the 2nd leading cause of death among boys and young men.

In times where a society's narrative is firmly in place it just seems like reality, and it is almost impossible to imagine it could be otherwise: The world is flat and if you go too far you'll simply fall off the edge. Everyone knows that. Someone who challenges the prevailing worldview does so at considerable risk, as witness Galileo who broke with the prevailing religious narrative of the time, was tried by the Inquisition, found 'vehemently suspect of heresy' and forced to recant. He spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

Our times are different in that alongside the dominant story there are springing up a multiplicity of narratives competing for our conscious or unconscious buy-in. It's important to stay awake and alert. It's so easy in such a time to fall between two narrative stools, succumb to the pressure of conformity or lose one's way in the labyrinthine threads of the stories on offer.

So ours is a very fluid time, and this fluidity creates an opening for us to consider the inherited stories we find ourselves in and consciously co-create a narrative that would enable us to feel proud to be an adult human alive today. At its essence this is a question of leadership. What troubled me most about Alexander's conclusion was that it hadn't occurred to him that there could be a different story of adulthood, one where his gifts as a singer, songwriter and dreamer were valued and had a place at the table.

The foundation narratives of the post-Industrial global world are shifting like tectonic plates. The ways of seeing which make up the Newtonian rationalist materialist worldview we inherited have loosened their hold and are beginning to unravel.

Which begs the question what stories are emerging to take their place? What is our deepest understanding of who we are? What is our place in the unfolding universe? What would constitute a life of meaning and purpose today?

My work with young people brings them together in safe and creative spaces to connect with others, the world and their own leadership potential. They are invited to drop their masks and when they do they discover many commonalities. They question the narratives that form part of our cultural inheritance. They share their gifts and strengths, their passions and dreams. They explore the questions that really matter to them and envision what it could mean to be a man or a woman today.

It is not enough to understand the stories that have shaped us and that we have been born into. We must also understand that if the narrative we have inherited doesn't serve us then it is not we who must change but our relation to the narrative itself. Yes, it is true that we are born into a story, and we are writing the story as we go, with our very lives.

Through our choices each of us either shores up an existing narrative or contributes to the creation of a different story. That we can and do shape our story represents one of the most profound opportunities of our times. We have the power and I would add, the responsibility, to craft a story that serves the whole.

In certain circles our times are called 'the Great Turning' a phrase coined by the activist Joanna Macy and others which describes the shift from an industrial growth society to one that is life-sustaining. Many indigenous elders speak of this time as the long foretold and eagerly awaited 'Earth Changes', a time when humans restore right relationship with ourselves and the rest of the community of life. Now here are some narratives worth investing in!

The question is not whether we are leaders. The question

is what are we leading ourselves and others towards? Leadership, in my view, is therefore intimately bound up with narrative, and the work of developing leaders, if it is to be relevant, must concern itself with the wider context of the narratives we find ourselves in and the ones we are creating with the choices we make, which is why the two most important leadership capacities needed today are in my view 'imagination' and 'choice'.

Imagination to envision a world where life is sacred, where social and environmental justice is more important than profit, where old people step forward as elders (not retire as golfers) and young people have a place in society.

Choice to make it so.



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