

# Three stories

## nick drury

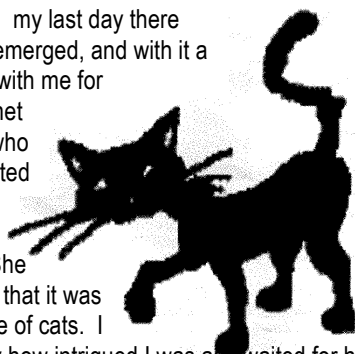
### 1. a broken tale

Recently I was in the supermarket when I noticed a woman staring at me, trying to catch my eye. When I smiled she came over and asked if I remembered her. It was Margaret. I had seen her and her husband 25 years before when their marriage was in trouble following the birth of their second child. We adjourned to relax in a nearby coffee shop and catch up with each other. Both of us now had three grandchildren and plentiful grey hair to show for the years. She asked if I still told the story about the cats: it was one that she and her husband Tony still fondly recalled from those times. A kaleidoscope of memories came tumbling back.

#### bali

Many years earlier when I was in Bali I noticed a peculiar phenomenon that piqued my curiosity immensely. All the cats I saw seemed to have either broken tails or stumps for tails. At first I just thought it was one or two, but as I began to look around I noticed that it was widespread. (These were not the Siamese and Javanese cats one sees in cat shows called 'Balinese cats'.) How peculiar. I began to ask people for the reason: was it a language problem I was encountering? Or did I sense some sort of embarrassment with locals? Other travellers said they had noticed it too. Some said they had noticed it throughout this part of S.E. Asia.

It was not until my last day there that an answer emerged, and with it a story that stuck with me for many years. I met a local woman who had been educated in Australia, and thus spoke good English. She explained to me that it was due to the nature of cats. I remember today how intrigued I was as I waited for her to go on.



#### story telling in therapy

Sitting in the coffee shop with Margaret I was also pondering the changing nature of story-telling in therapy. Twenty-five years ago a large number of us were attracted to family therapy and were studying systems theory, searching for strategies to help people change. These were the Bateson-Erickson years (e.g. Bateson, 1972; Erickson, 1980). Harry Goolishian was still writing his paper inviting us to be 'not knowing' (Goolishian & Anderson, 1987). Because the stories told then were driven by a strategic impulse, they tended to colonize

the clients with our values, rather than invite reflection and further conversation.

Back then I conceptualised Margaret and Tony's marriage being in trouble because of problems of dependence. I might have even thought 'co-dependency'. With the mobility of Tony's work and the demands upon Margaret of two babies, they had become socially isolated and, increasingly frightened, they were holding each other back. Today I would be more influenced by Phil and Toby Zeigler's *Recreating Partnerships* and collaboratively fleshing out the 'preferred future pictures' in a solution focused manner; because, looking back, this is what this couple could be said to have lost sight of.

This story of the cats in Bali, I still tell today, but not for the sole purpose of 'treating' the symptoms of 'co-dependence,' which I perceived as the problem then, but rather as a conversational aid in the development of preferred narratives of identity.

#### cats and dogs

The Australian-educated Balinese woman continued: 'If you can understand the fundamental difference of the nature of cats and dogs, a little of our religious history, the cats' broken tails will make sense to you. You see, the dog is a pack animal. They hunt in packs, bonding with other dogs in a very dependent manner. It's as if they had some sort of internal message that said to them 'Hey, I can't make it on my own'. They hunt by bothering their prey from several sides and then go in for the kill. It's a group thing. So dogs bond in this very dependent manner. If you own a dog, you know what I mean. You can't go away and leave them for any time, they cry and whimper and fret so. You can treat them really badly and they still hang around. Don't you say 'It's a dog's life' or 'To treat someone like a dog'? But a cat is a solo hunter, so it bonds in a quite different manner. Country people will say, 'We don't own the cat, the cat owns us.' They tend to come and go as they please, and never develop that sense of dependency you see in dogs.'

I began to reflect on what she was saying and thought about how a cat loves to be stroked when she wants to be loved, but god help you if you try to stroke some cats when they don't want to be loved. But dogs are always available for loving. They don't seem to have the same sense of boundaries. As I thought about this, I began to reflect on whether this difference applies to human relationships. Didn't we say in the 1960s that someone was 'cool' as a 'cat'? 'But I still don't see how this relates to their broken tails,' I replied.

#### milton erickson

One of the notions about story-telling that emerged from the hypnosis work of Milton Erickson, and was later

made newsworthy for therapists by Steve and Carol Lankton (e.g. Lankton & Lankton, 1983) was the idea of embedding stories within stories. When a tale is broken, part of our mind goes on hold, a tension is generated waiting for the closure of that story. Telling stories within stories can entrance us deeply. According to the Ericksonian folk, the deeper the trance the more a direct suggestion can be made. In a post-colonial world what are the ethics of that?



Max was a bright 14-year old referred to me by his school counsellor because of his truancy and a proclivity to engage his teachers in verbal sparring matches which they considered disrespectful and abusive. He was certainly eager, as was his soul mother, to find ways of spending less time in both detention and the headmaster's office. In the course of exploring with Max his preferred narratives of himself, which included stories of his leadership role in the boy scouts, I asked if he would be interested in hearing my story of the Balinese cats. In discussing the differences in nature between cats and dogs, Max offered the difference of the sensitiveness of cats in making their way across a cluttered table without knocking anything over versus the tail-wagging friendliness of dogs, which knocks all sorts of things over. He then went on to offer that he had been 'barking' at his teachers and not dealing with them sensitively when he felt an injustice had occurred. In turn this allowed us to open up the conversation to talking about the difference between cats and humans, and placing some limits on the power of this metaphor, without denying its usefulness.

### culture

'Well', she continued, 'it has to do with our culture. You see, we are a mix of Buddhist and Hindu mainly, and we believe in reincarnation. This belief says to us that you remain on the wheel of samsara (death and re-birth) until you become perfect, until you have Buddha-nature and then you go to heaven. Now, the cat has Buddha nature, because it has discovered an art of love – it can love without becoming dependent. So the people realize that they are not perfect yet, and have a few more laps to go before they get to heaven. They think to themselves: 'Who the hell wants to go to Heaven and find the place littered with cats?' So, in order to stop heaven being full of goddamn cats, they break their tails, guaranteeing that they will have to make another lap.'

I laughed.

### margaret

I asked Margaret how the story of the Balinese cats had been helpful. She told me that it had freed them up to develop friendships and interests apart from each other and to trust the marriage itself more. She said

they became more sensitive to each others' concerns, but they didn't find themselves taking responsibility in a guilt-inducing way as much, and so could help each other explore their own solutions. When I asked about a shared dream, she noted that it had returned following the severance of their dependency. She went on to talk of how it had changed over the years, and of how they were off to Europe the following month to search their genealogies.

P.S. I have heard that there is a genetic basis to the S.E. Asian cats' tails. But this tale is more fascinating, is it not?

## 2. seasoning the soul

When I first saw Rangi, a decorated New Zealand Maori veteran from the Vietnam War, he had been diving over hedges when cars backfired or the sun glinted through the trees, and frequently woke at nights on finding himself scrambling beneath the bed. As he gradually exorcised these demons, and placed icons of the defeated phantoms upon his mantelpiece, a peace and tranquillity returned to his life. However, he returned one day to report that he had now been taken over by a deep melancholy. He described how a few weeks ago he found that the beauty of the gardens and homes he enjoyed viewing on his daily walks began to fade, how the world seemed to gradually grow darker, until he had reached a point where he no longer felt like getting out of bed in the mornings. Days had passed sitting in a chair staring idly at the walls. Meals were missed. He reported that the ghosts from Vietnam had not returned, he was just feeling really down.

### the alternative story

In a post-colonial therapeutic world, the function of therapeutic stories is to thicken the counter-plot of the alternative story to the problem-dominated one. Through the use of unique outcome and exceptions questions, a coherent and substantial counter-narrative emerges. However, the freshly developed counterplot all too frequently has a way of fading between therapy sessions, often because it is overshadowed by the old plot. By asking family and significant others to keep track between sessions of sparkling moments that confirm the counter-plot, this can be reduced. Significant others, however, are not always readily available, and a powerful plot pervades our culture that supports the problem-dominant narrative about so-called depression. At such times, many clients have reported that the following story was helpful in thickening the counter-plot.

I asked Rangi if anything had changed in the past few days leading up to this appointment. He said that he felt like a bit of a fake, because he had slept well the previous night, and had awoken with some ideas about a fishing venture that morning. He attributed these changes to the fact that he was coming to see me, as it had helped in the past in dealing with the ghosts from Vietnam. Nevertheless, he said he also feared that this 'depression' would come back unless he could get on top of it. I asked him to describe how this 'depression' had changed since first noticing it. He began by speaking of the loss of aesthetic pleasure in the world; the avenues he strolled down daily had begun to turn into tunnels with him focusing only on getting to the end of the next one. Gardens he had once paused to admire

racing without focusing on anything in particular. At first, these dark clouds over the aesthetic landscape of consciousness were brief and fleeting, but gradually they became all-consuming. Then, about two weeks ago, as he sat in his chair staring at the walls, he found himself beginning to cry about the years wasted since Vietnam, years spent avoiding going out more than he had to, and the marriage that had ended when his wife could no longer be supportive.

### the story

I told Rangi that many years ago I had met a woman who said that she had never been depressed, and asked whether he would be interested in hearing her story. He looked at me with one eyebrow raised, a sign I had come to read as inquisitiveness in him, and nodded with a smile.

She was a *kuia* (New Zealand Maori meaning a 'wise old woman') from the Tuhoe tribe\*, and I was treating her daughter who was having some difficulties adjusting to city life. The doctors had diagnosed her daughter as 'depressed', and as she was visiting she had decided to attend the appointment with her. She lived all her life in one of the tiny villages deep in the forest of Tuhoe country, but had spent four years at a city university many years back to get a degree and teaching qualification. When she said that she had never been depressed I asked her for her secret.

'Many years ago my *nan* (grandmother) taught me, and I will tell you this in *pakeha* (Non-Maori) terms, that our moods came with the seasons. You might like to think that they evolved with the seasons, if you want. In 'summer' we are enjoying the pleasures of life, lost in this or that project, and seemingly oblivious to the idea that one day, this might all come to an end. But with 'autumn' it does come to an end. It can go from sunny and smiley to dull and tearful, and back again many times in a day. The wind howls, and the mind races. The aesthetic splendour of summer disappears. The leaves die and fall from the trees. And then comes 'winter' when I disappear into my heart-cave, and a stillness comes over the land. In 'winter' things crystallize. The days are so short and the light seems to be going out in the world. However, 'winter' is always followed by 'spring', and in 'spring' nature is very prolific; thousands of new shoots, new inspirations arise, only a few of which make it through to 'summer'. Because I have total faith that 'spring' will come (even the ice-age had its thaw) I have never been depressed.'

'I've certainly known my share of winters,' she continued, 'and each one of them has led to a deeper understanding of the transience of all life as truths crystallize. The trouble with you *pakeha*, is that you are surfies and want an endless summer. You can't give yourself to the flow of life. As soon as autumn beckons, your doctors rush in with these anti-depressants that my daughter has been given. But maybe if she is to live in the city she will have to become a shallow person like the rest of you?'

I avoided the lure of her question, and asked instead if this was a process of metamorphosis she was describing. 'Yes, yes,' she replied, 'it is a *kirihoko* (a process of renewal).\*\*

### the first signs of spring

During the next ten minutes, Rangi tracked his own experiences to this theme, concluding that the thoughts of the fishing venture this morning were the first signs of spring. The depression he decided was no more than a mourning of the lost years. He then re-called a couple of other new ideas he had this morning on his way to my office with regards to his children and art.

When I saw Rangi again two weeks later it was clear that spring was fully here, although there were a few lingering frosts in the morning.

\* Sometimes this tribe are called 'children of the mists' – they live in very hilly forested country, often covered in cloud.

\*\* According to Bruce Chatwin's account of the largely verb-based language of the Yahgan people of southern Patagonia, the word for 'depression' is a process word meaning 'the sloughing of skin' (like a snake).

## 3. no-sword swordsmanship

Here's a story I love to tell when successful conflict resolution has begun to emerge in a client's narrative. Like other stories, this one has the potential to thicken an emerging counter-plot to the problem-saturated story. I will present the story here with a great deal of background information, but in practice I generally use just parts of it, depending upon the audience.

### rituals

Not so long ago, when societies were much smaller and valued a different sort of wealth, there were rituals to assist boys make the transition to be men. As we became larger and moved towards a global village, these rituals were gradually forgotten, and with them, well-known ways for inviting our men to responsibility were lost. Small cultures didn't have the luxury of affording people who did not pull their weight, as there was seldom enough grain in the silos. Today this small planet can no longer afford cowboys mining its wealth and leaving a trail of slag heaps in their wake. There is no invisible hand taking care of the whole. In these earlier initiation rituals there was a transmission of 'special knowledges'; often, knowledges claimed to be only known to men. The function of these 'knowledges' was to invite men to think of themselves as having a special place in culture, often as the police of cultural mores. Are there knowledges that will invite responsibility today? Let me tell you a story from the East.

### swordsmen

By the time Japan entered her 'teen years' (i.e. the thirteenth century), the court had lost its position of power to the military families, who were now equipped with well-armed warriors. For the next few hundred years, the rural aristocrats pitted their armies against each other in the quest for domination of the country. From China the Confucian ethic of loyalty had permeated Japan, resulting in a philosophy of service as a warrior, that meant no transference of allegiance, even if one's lord was felled in battle, and a preparedness to commit *seppuku* or *hari-kari* without demur if required. Amongst the warriors, none were mightier than the swordsmen.

The sword was the soul of the *bushi* (warrior), signifying a noble ancestry dating back to the gods, who used blades to chastise wrong-doers in forming

the country. So sacred was the sword that even touching the scabbard was considered an insult that had to be punished. Many a commoner lost his head, literally, as a result of unfortunate accidents in the market-place; but a more common punishment was to take out the ligaments at the back of the knees. Such was the status of the bushi, that by the seventeenth century they were exempt from taxes and had the right to kill a disrespectful commoner on the spot. But honour also prevented him from refusing a challenge, regardless of the issue.

After the victory of one of these warlords in the seventeenth century brought peace, the swordsmen started to become something of a social problem. Although some took their duty to protect their lord others preferred to spend their time drinking or in brothels. Some were let go following a disgraceful act, and others lost their masters in battle and did not perform *seppuku*. Many of these wandering swordsmen, known as *ronin*, frequently became mercenaries, endangering the peace.

A number of these swordsmen formed schools of swordsmanship, which increasingly took on codes of ethics, limiting the use of weapons to specific contexts. However, sooner or later questions would arise as to which was the superior school; a matter usually settled via *taryu-jiai* – a duel between at least the two top students. The outcome on occasion was the generation of even more troublesome *ronin*. These schools, however, were coming under the influence of further Chinese thought, notably that of Buddhism in the form of Zen.

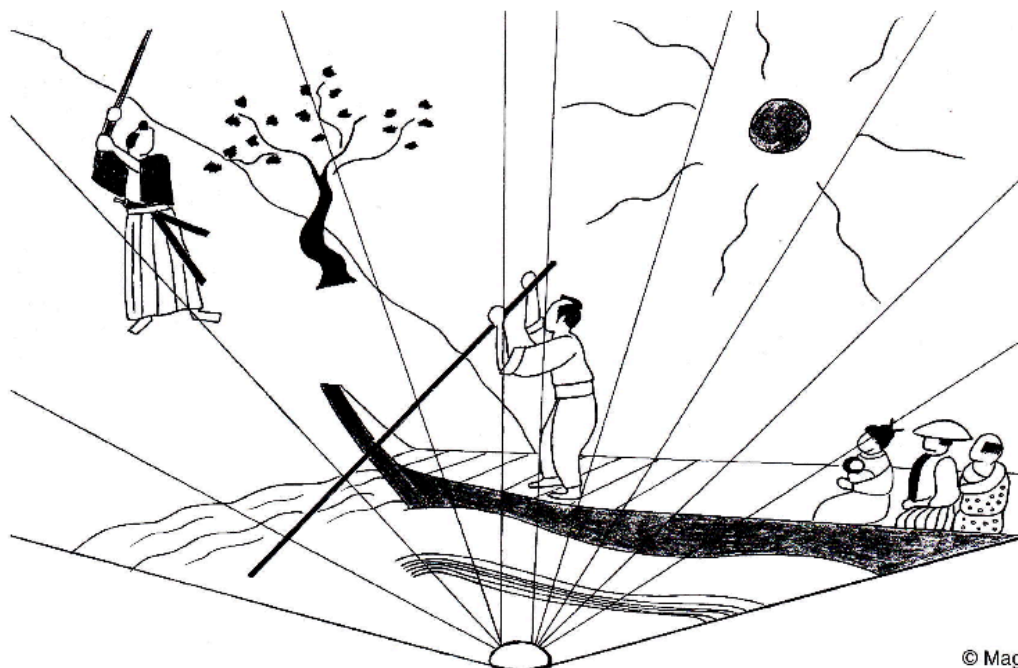
### zen

Zen was particularly attractive to the swordsmen, as it taught one to treat life and death with equal indifference (and thus have no concern with self-protection or self-preservation) and never look back once a course of action is decided upon. This was a spiritual development that fostered the advance of a

(mind of no mind). Through the development of painting, poetry, calligraphy and other arts, this form of being, that allowed one to transcend a particular swordsmanship technique, could be enhanced. This movement towards swordsmanship as an art form and spiritual activity opened the door for the emergence of *kendo*, a sport with bamboo swords, in the eighteenth century. With the establishment of *kendo*, the sword became banned in the nineteenth century, except for soldiers and policemen on duty.

However, there is one school of swordsmanship first appearing in the sixteenth century that is of particular interest to those interested in conflict resolution. It is the school of 'no-sword-swordsmanship'. Today those attracted to *kendo* follow the nineteenth century statesman Teshu, in interpreting this idea as meaning engaging in swordsmanship or *kendo* in the Zen spirit of having no-mind about winning, or even of having a sword and an enemy. The original idea however, as expressed by Tsukahara Bokuden in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, has a far more literal meaning.

The most famous story about Bokuden situates him on a ferry boat where a drunken samurai was terrifying passengers by bragging about sword fighting. Noticing Bokuden, the boasting warrior asked him what school of swordsmanship he belonged to. 'Mutekatsu-ryu' (winning without using arms) was Bokuden's answer. 'That's an impossible absurdity' came the reply, with a challenge to fight. In order to allay the fears of the passengers and calm his protagonist, and perhaps through not being able to resist the honour of challenge, Bokuden accepted the challenge on the condition on the ferry boat where innocents could be hurt. He then suggested to the young samurai that the ferryman take them to a nearby island. On reaching the island, the young samurai ran up on the beach, sword drawn, screaming for Bokuden to join him. Quickly Bokuden grabbed the ferryman's pole and pushed the ferryboat away from the beach, leaving the young samurai stranded. To his shouts of protest, Bokuden shouted back, 'This is



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sixth sense so to speak, so that one was totally spontaneous, acting without thought, *mushin no shin*

sword haven't I?\*

We also find glimpses of this idea in stories about other swordsmen in Japanese history. The seventeenth century warrior Miyamoto Musashi was claimed to be the greatest swordsman of all. After the age of 30, however, he is reported to have stopped using real swords in duels, having heard of *mutekatsuryu*. In a famous duel later in his life, with a young swordsman, Musashi defeated him with a broken boat oar. However the real challenge of no-sword swordsmanship is to achieve victory through creative strategies, without the use of violence. It requires humility and a chilling clarity whilst looking inside oneself for the enemy. Musashi says that it was in his fiftieth year that he finally came to understand strategy.

Bokuden and Musashi may well have been influenced by another ancient Chinese text which found its way to Japan. This is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Possibly written about 500 B.C., it is considered by many to be the greatest book of strategy ever. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), texts such as the *One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies* were compiled based upon Sun Tzu, and circulated widely.\*\* Amongst Sun Tzu's many principles is the notion that it is wiser to convert enemies into allies, as they may be useful in encounters with others later. Perhaps it is the influence of these texts that gave rise to the notion of no-sword swordsmanship, for Sun Tzu claimed that the greatest skill is to win without fighting.

A number of swordsmen have said that the essence of great skill lies in giving up any notion of striking down the opponent; and if one is too concerned about their own safety they will be unlikely to win a fight. These are of course the teachings of Zen no-mindedness (*mushin no shin*). However, not only Buddhism and Confucianism arrived from China, there are a number of martial arts that trace their roots back to Taoism. In many of these martial arts the centre of being, the seat of the soul, was in the lower part of the abdominal region (*tan t'ien* in Chinese, *tanden* in Japanese). In *seppuku* or *hari-kari* this region is cut open, for the warrior is exposing the purity of his soul for all to see as a final act. Most oriental martial arts begin by getting the student to centre on this point; perhaps by getting them to bend at the knees a little and adopt the posture of sitting on a horse. Centred in the *tanden* the fighter is not so easily thrown off balance, and can recover quickly, perhaps by rolling with the punch as in *ju-jitsu*. A bad fighter, overly concerned for their own safety or in defeating their opponent, has shifted their *chi* or energy upwards towards the head. They are breathing from the top of the chest instead of low in their belly. Hotei, the fat laughing Buddha, sold in curios shops everywhere, is obviously centred low in his belly.

The great boxer Mohammed Ali knew that if his opponent got angry and over-emotional he would not be so effective, so he would go into the contest

constantly winding his opponent up. Some psychologists would say that when the *chi* is high, the person has lost the use of the right hemisphere of their brain; their creativity is no longer there. Holes will appear in their defence, and the calmer fighter will have greater potential to spot these.

So part of the art and discipline of being a no-sword swordsman is to remain centred, for the strategies for dealing with potentially conflictual situations will become more apparent. Personally, I have found it particularly useful at times to slow potentially conflictual situations down, or introduce humour, so that everyone becomes more 'centred', and win-win solutions can be entertained.

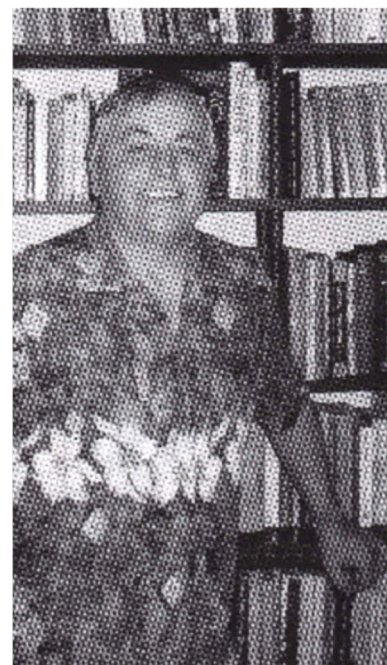
I would be particularly interested in hearing from you of any tales in dealing with situations in a no-sword swordsmanship manner.

\*Bruce Lee fans will recognise a similar scene in *Enter the Dragon*, where he leaves a challenger adrift in a rowboat.

\*\* Ralph Sawyer, a Chinese military specialist, made the first English translation of this text a couple of years ago. *One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies* was published in 1998 by Westview Press, Oxford.

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