

# ***Cast out into the deep!***

## ***The Art of Daring to Teach Religion***

Megan McKenna

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Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.

Helen Keller<sup>1</sup>

It is often said that the best place to begin is with a story. Stories are the most ancient and revered source of wisdom, and absolutely necessary for passing on knowledge that is crucial for humans. Stories contain practical information gleaned over generations of experiences among a people in a specific geographical location, as with the Aborigines in Australia and other Native Peoples. And just as that information has warnings (where there are sink holes, quicksand etc), and indicators of physical realities (what water is safe to drink, which animal can be eaten, or which plants, herbs, etc. are for healing ailments), so the stories share communal wisdom that is just as crucial for human beings if they are to live, rather than merely survive on earth. Many peoples begin with creation stories – how the world was made, where we fit in the scheme of things, the vastness of the universe and who/Who is the designer/maker and keeper of all? Another set of creation stories are pragmatically called: ‘How did? or Why does?’, for example: Why does fire crackle or burn? Why does the kangaroo jump? Where did she get her pocket? How did the stars get up into the sky and why do they look like....? Or where did the birds come from?

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The story I will share as the opening of this article falls into this last category – where something came from and how does it fit into the larger scheme of things – along with us? I will share the title of the story at the end, so as not to spoil the telling (a story is so different on paper than in the mouth of the storyteller and the ears of the listeners, but this is close to how I tell it).<sup>2</sup>

Remember: all stories are true! Some of them actually happened, and when I say once upon a time, this story will happen to you! (First rule of telling.) And stories tell us the truth about ourselves, letting us see ourselves from other points of view – God’s, other people, the next generation, our enemies as well as our friends. And in telling us the truth, we are given the opportunity to make the story come true – or if we’re not happy with the way the story is going, or ends, then hidden in the story (text), are alternatives that we can grasp hold of and change the endings – as we incorporate this new knowledge into our lives.

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This story is from the North American Native tradition, from the tribes in upstate New York and along the Canadian border. The only pieces of information that will help in the understanding of the story are names. The Creator is the Great Spirit, the first parents are Father Sky and Spirit Woman, and the one who is summoned when the community needs outside help is Nanabush. Nanabush is a wisdom figure, and can be either a man or a woman, but every group has these individuals to call upon, who act as a source of new knowledge and ways of perceiving reality and what is happening in any situation. Now, for the telling!



Once upon a time, it was long, long ago when the earth was still young and creation was still being worked on and added to, the first parents gave birth to the first children: twins – a girl and a boy! Father Sky and Spirit Woman looked at the children, delighted, but then thought – how are we going to care for the children as they grow, and still finish the work we must do, travelling around the earth and finishing how the elements and all the creatures live and relate to one another in the order of the seasons, and live with humans etc? The animals and birds overheard the two parents talking, and immediately they assured the two that they would help take care of the twins – after all, they were already raising broods of their own and together they could take care of all the needs of the twins. Relieved, and after awhile, Father Sky and Spirit Woman left the twins in the care of the other creatures and went off to continue their work.

Immediately dog took over, and organised all that needed to be done on a daily basis and assigned each their role and tasks. Bear would provide warm furs. Doe would provide milk. Wolf would bring fresh meat and chew it up for the children. Otter and muskrat would provide fresh moss. The birds would sing and calm the children and help them fall asleep. The fish, along with otter supervising, would bathe the twins and teach them how to swim in the water. Dog watched over them all the time, playing with them and tickling their noses, licking their faces and making them laugh. And when they were bothered by gnats or mosquitoes he would ask for spider to come and rescue them, or he himself would jump and down and keep them from being bitten. The birds would sing them to sleep and awaken them. Dog would watch when the twins finally got tired and went to sleep. Then dog would put his head down on his paws, bless the Great Spirit and pray that they would stay asleep for long time!

This went on for months and the twins grew stronger and more playful, interacting with all the other animals and birds. Bear only came once in awhile, and on one of his visits he watched the twins and gathered all the animals together. Something is wrong with the children he told them all. What? They were all indignant. No, said Dog. Look at them. They are healthy and growing strong. We take very good care of them. They eat meat, have fresh milk, they are kept clean and played with – there is nothing they need. They're doing just fine. Bear waited and then spoke again. That is the problem! You have all taken very good care of them, in fact, you've taken too good care of them! Look at them! They are not acting like our own young. By now they should be crawling everywhere, into everything, pulling themselves up, curious about everything. And yet they don't move much – they don't even crawl. The other animals looked and had to agree Bear was right. But what can we do, they all chorused? And one of them said – we have to send for Nanabush. She'll know what to do.

And so they did. Nanabush agreed with them: something was wrong with the twins and they had all been doing too much for them, but what to do now? Nanabush told them she was going up the mountain to listen to the Great Spirit and ask for help, and learn what they could all do. Up on the mountain she sat still and listened after telling the Great Spirit what the problem was (although of course, the Great Spirit already knew). Nothing at first...and then Nanabush was sure the Great Spirit was saying that the answer was right there and to look around for it. She got up, and within moments began to notice bright shiny tiny stones everywhere, under bushes, larger stones, along the path – everywhere. How had she never noticed them before? She started collecting them and putting them in piles. And then sat again and looked at them wondering...what now? Again there was nothing, and she began to roll them in her hands, toss them into the air and catch them, even juggling a few at a time. Then when nothing else was said, or she couldn't catch anything, she got frustrated and started throwing them in the air in handfuls, and they came down on her! More and more she threw up handfuls and down they came, but on the third throw, nothing came down! Startled, she looked up, and there were fluttering pieces of bright color flitting around everywhere! She threw more and more handfuls into the air until the sky was filled with them. Quickly she put her hands and arms out and they landed on her!

Nanabush ran down the mountain, back to everyone waiting. Word spread through the birds that she was coming – with something! She came into the clearing – and the twins began to reach out their arms and laugh. The flutterbies swirled around the children and everything else, and they tried to catch them – to no avail. And in no time at all the twins were crawling – after the flutterbies and into everything around them. And then they started pulling themselves up on bushes, climbing stones and rocks – jumping in glee from them - and walking. *And then they danced – like the butterflies* (which is the name we now call the newly found bits of the Great Spirit's creations. They were here all the time, we just didn't know).

From the Wahwahskgone tradition

And so the animals and humans came to know that reaching for what you cannot grasp is as much a part of living and growing as any other skill we must learn to do instinctively. This is our way of living. We reach, we stretch, we crawl, we stand up, we walk, we climb, we leap, we dance – maybe even, we fly!

The story is enchanting and filled with layers of wisdom, but perhaps the most obvious is one of the hardest to absorb – how not to do too much for others; how to live, to care for

others and teach in such a way that we do not stifle growth, or hinder others from learning to risk, to reach and to dare as a normal part of being human. Another (among many) truth to learn is to look at Nanabush who identifies the problem, listens, senses that the answer to all things is right near us, looks, finds what she had never noticed before right under her nose, listens again, plays, tries different things, gets frustrated, even annoyed and then – is surprised by what is discovered! Perhaps

Nanabush is a model for teachers, especially anyone who dares and seeks to teach and share religious understandings with others.

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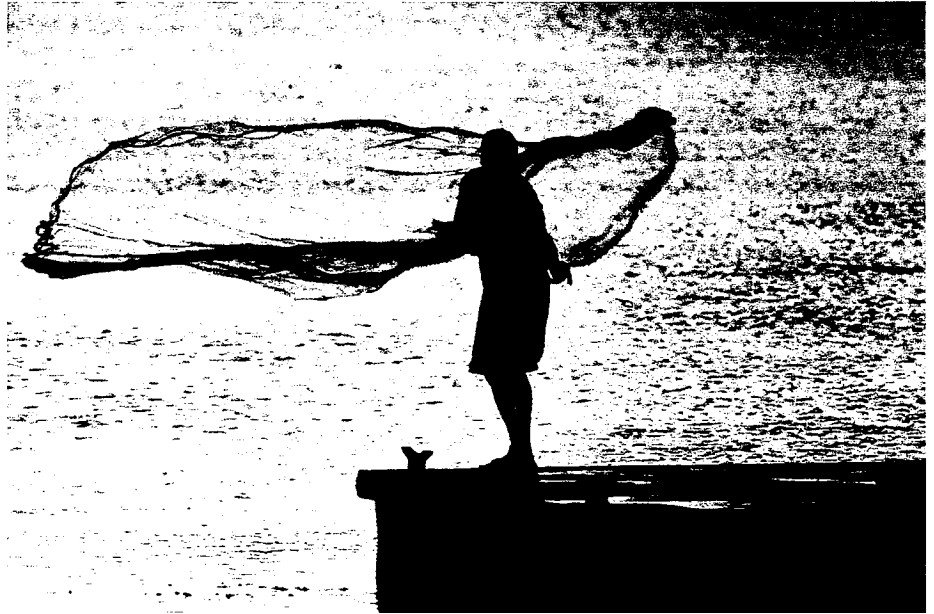
## For reflection

- *In the story of How and Why Butterflies Were Created, all the animals are intent on taking care of the twins – and they do it too well. Where in your teaching, classes and with your students might you be doing the same thing?*
- *Each of the creatures and humans in the story learn something. Which character are you most like? What do you need to learn? What does your whole class need to learn?*
- *Butterflies fly before and all around us to make us stretch and reach beyond where we are. How might you stretch to move beyond where you are in your teaching today?*

The Christian tradition, as people of the Book (The Scriptures, especially the Gospels), holds a fascinating story that presents similar challenges to this revelation of Native peoples. It is found in Luke 6:1-11.<sup>3</sup>

While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon: "Put [Cast] out into the deep and lower your nets for a catch." Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command [Word] I will lower the nets." When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were [in danger of] tearing. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner." For astonishment at the catch of fish they



had made seized him and all those with him, and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men [people]." When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

The Lake is situated geographically in a natural amphitheater, so Jesus is being pushed into the lake by the people who are hungry to hear his teachings, and get closer to him. And Jesus doesn't even ask, he just gets into one of the boats – for the fishermen who are getting their nets in order are listening to Jesus too. After Jesus finishes, he commands Simon (his name before he becomes a follower of Jesus), to 'cast out into the deep' or 'put out into the deep'. Simon's reluctance is couched with the excuse that they are tired from fishing all night and early morning (the best time to fish rather than in the midst of midday heat!) But is that the real reason? A little research reveals Simon and his friends' fear! They don't know how to swim, and the lake is deep and can be dangerous when storms come up quickly! But Simon, who has been listening to Jesus' teaching (found in the previous chapter when he preaches in his home-town synagogue on the Sabbath, Luke 4), obeys Jesus' word. And what happens? People call it a miracle – 'a marvelous thing to behold,' but in reality, it is just the natural result of fishing in deep waters where they have not gone before – big fish and lots of them!

Obedience to the Word of God as found in the Gospels nets amazing responses and

results – results that can awe us, instill fear in us and make us wonder at the power and presence of God that we have been unaware of before we obeyed and acted. Everyone by the lake is mightily affected by the great catch. The scene of a boat, about 6 metres long and 3 metres at the widest part, filled to the brim, in danger of sinking with Jesus sitting among the fish, and the fishermen all squished together, is hilarious. And even funnier – Simon crawls across all the fish, slip-sliding, and at the knees of Jesus declares that he's a sinner! Why? The word 'sinner' in Greek means one who misses the mark – much as one would try to shoot a basket, hit a ball, kick a goal...and miss! Simon suddenly wonders who Jesus is – and in turn, sees himself in another light – in the light of Jesus' word of what we are to do, and how we are to live. But Jesus ignores his declaration and instead invites him to change his life – to go fishing for people, in imitation of Jesus the Fisherman. And all this, because he obeyed Jesus' words and cast out into the deep – the unknown, the fearful and where he had not been before!

In teaching anything, but especially when exploring religious practices, beliefs and hopes, what matters at least as much as the content of our teaching, is our own belief and practice – our own style and way of being.

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Religion is a mystery, and the way we teach must allow for mystery to barge in, interrupt us, throw us into the deep, and push us to do things and go places we've not dared to go before.

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Those who are Christians are challenged to live the Word of the Scriptures and obey Jesus' commands, even when we think we've been doing it for years; even if we haven't had very positive results and not much to show for our efforts. The challenge to **cast out into the deep and lower our nets for a catch** is for everyone. And we must do it in the company of others – it is not a singular kind of activity. Simon and the others are shocked by what happens, and perhaps we will be too if we risk obeying! In the lingo of Star Trek, we must go where no one else has gone before with daring and courage, with others, and use all our resources to respond to what we encounter and what happens. Religion is a mystery, and the way we teach must allow for mystery to barge in, interrupt us, throw us into the deep, and push us to do things and go places we've not dared to go before. Holy Scripture is deep waters! The best and the biggest fish and even most of the fish lie out there beyond our grasp, but within our reach if we 'do not fear.'

## For reflection

- 1 *Jesus' invitation to 'drop the nets into the deep' can symbolize a similar invitation to drop below the surface and to live with more depth, consciousness and meaning. If you were to respond to this invitation, what would it entail in the concrete way in which you live your daily life?*
- 2 *What is deep for you? How might you be challenged to launch out further into the deep in your teaching? What in you may resist the invitation to 'go deeper'?*
- 3 *Simon and the others are 'seized' by the great catch. What experience has 'seized' you lately?*
4. *Let us go back to the quote at the beginning of this article:*

*"Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." Helen Keller*

*Do you believe this? How do you live it out in your life?*

**Megan McKenna** is a theologian, writer, preacher, teacher and storyteller who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico but travels extensively, listening and learning, and sharing the wisdom of the Scriptures of all religious traditions, with emphasis on the Judeo-Christian heritages, and the riches of stories from all peoples. She is the author of over 45 books on religion, scripture and storytelling including *Parables: The Arrows of God* (1994), *Keepers of the Story* (2005), *Harm not the Earth* (2007), *We Live Inside Story* (2010).

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### Endnotes

- 1 From *The Open Door*, Helen Keller (1957) copied from a poster in a half-way house in New York City.
- 2 The ideas in this article are taught, and talked about in various Christian traditions and amongst some Buddhist and Native peoples, but they are equally true in all religions. This article is the basis of a two hour presentation shared with many groups of teachers in the dioceses of New Zealand in 2013. I am grateful for all the insights and responses those teachers and preachers shared with me.
- 3 *The New American Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2004.

