

# The Salmon of Knowledge



Stories for Work, Life, the Dark  
Shadow, and OneSelf

Nick Owen

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Dark Shadow, and OneSelf*

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# Prologue

## *Beneath the Surface of Things*

The land is parched and a man digs a well to find water for his gardens. After working for several hours in a place recommended by the water diviner he finds nothing and gives up in disgust. He has dug about four metres.

As he sits dejectedly on the great mound of soil he has dug, a traveller passes by. The traveller laughs at him for digging there, and indicates a much more likely spot. So the man starts a new well, but after digging for five or so metres, he has still found no sign of water.

Getting tired and despondent, he finally accepts some different advice from his old neighbour who assures him that he'll find water in yet another place. After he's given up on that one too, his wife comes out of the house and says, 'Where are you, man? Have you lost your brains? This is no way to sink a well. Stay in one spot and go deeper and deeper there!'

The next day, having slept well and recovered his strength, the man returns to the first hole and spends all his time and concentration in that one place, and finds abundant water deep below the surface.

The more disarmingly simple a story, the more abundant and rich are the possible interpretations that lie beneath the surface. A brief inventory here might suggest the following incomplete list:

- Follow your outcomes through to the end.
- Don't give up too easily.
- Don't get distracted.
- Don't get dejected if things don't work out at first.
- Don't dissipate your energy on too many projects.
- Advice is cheap and often unreliable.

- Some people know what they're talking about; find out who they are.
- Practical people make good partners.
- Pay attention to quality feedback.
- Trust your own judgement and stick to your guns.
- Take responsibility for your own actions.
- Meditation isn't about losing yourself; it's about focusing on and attending to one thing at a time in great depth.
- The richest jewels lie in the deepest seams.
- Wisdom is attained through struggle with yourself and the world you inhabit.

The stories in this book, collected from storytelling and wisdom traditions around the world, offer deep wells of insight into ways in which we might consider how to live our lives with greater wisdom, understanding, intelligence, serenity, and success.

It is the central tenet of just about every major wisdom tradition in the world—whether spiritual, secular, pagan, or humanist—that if you wish to know God, The Buddha, True Nature, or the Truth then first you must study yourself. And that is what this book is about: studying ourselves and our human condition, on a planet inhabited by myriad other living systems, through the medium of story.

Between these covers are stories that embrace time and space. They are ancient and modern, spiritual and secular, short and long, spoken and written, and originate from all points of the compass. Some are based on lived experience; some are deeply metaphorical. All of them offer ways of looking at our 'reality' from different, unusual, or humorous perspectives and which may, if we are open to the possibilities of change and redirection, allow us to become more awake, more energised, and more connected to ourselves, other people, our work, and our planet.

I particularly resonate with stories that stretch the bounds of imagination, that offer challenging and provocative perspectives, that enquire into the conventional order of things, so that having read or heard such a story, I might feel a great desire to laugh out loud, or change something within, or see the world in a refreshingly new light, or be opened to something previously hidden within myself.

In particular I'm attracted to stories that are irreverent, insightful, and which offer the hidden promise of wisdom to be uncovered at the bottom of the well.

Such stories are found everywhere, in all societies, within all cultures, among all traditions, across all time. Great stories have no boundaries, and in a sense belong to no one for it is the nature of stories to be told and shared. And in each new telling they assume a new shape, a new identity, a new meaning until in the end no one can tell whether it is the teller shaping the story or the story shaping the teller, or the context in which the story is given and received that shapes story, teller, and receiver too.

And that is exactly as it should be because each one of us has our truth to discover, our story to tell, and our pathway to tread.

## *Tir na n'Og*

There is an old Celtic legend about a man who chooses eternal youth, the fullness of his heart's desire, the love of a beautiful woman ... and then lives to regret it. But the story also speaks of loyalty, comradeship, service and—the sting in the tale—the courage to defy convention by staying utterly true to what lies in the innermost depths of one's heart and spirit.

The story tells of Oisín<sup>1</sup>, son of Fionn Mac Cumhail, leader of a band of the Fianna, warriors who roamed the length and breadth of ancient Ireland, doing good deeds for the common people, and doing whatever it was that warriors loved to do. He's happy and he's content and his fame is spreading far and wide ...

But it's one thing to be content, another to resist magic. For as he was sitting on the seashore one bright summer's day minding his own business, Niamh of the Golden Hair saw him from far across the seas where she lived in Tir na n'Og, the land of Eternal Youth. And she made a resolve there and then that she would have him for her lover.

And so on her magical white mare she crossed the wide sea to Oisín in less time than it takes to blink an eye and made her proposal.

She offered him not just herself, but all the things a warrior could desire: fighting a-plenty, gold and silver, feasting and drinking, music and good company, and—just as a clincher—eternal youth.

Yet still it was a difficult choice for Oisín to give up the companionship of his band of warriors, to let go of his deep attachment to his native land even for a beautiful woman and the gift of eternal youth. He agonised the whole night before making up his mind. And then he went with Niamh who whisked him up on her horse and off they went to Tir na n'Og in a blink of the other eye.

And it was all that he had been promised and more. He fought all day, feasted and danced each evening, and coupled all night with the resourceful Niamh. But after a few months Oisín began to grow distracted and more than anything he missed his friends and the great forests of ancient Eire.

'Let me go back just for a day, just to see how they're all getting on,' he pleaded. At first Niamh refused, knowing that he hadn't yet understood that time passes differently in Tir na n'Og than in the marketplace world that you and I inhabit. In fact the three months that had passed for Oisín in Tir na n'Og were exactly three hundred years here in the world of impermanence.

'Oisín,' said Niamh, 'your friends are long dead, everything has changed. It can never be the same.' But Oisín, not entirely believing her, pressed until Niamh relented. She gave him her white mare warning him in no uncertain terms that he should not dismount.

\*\*\*

Oisín arrives in Ireland to find everything has changed. The forests have been replaced by pastures, and the people who live there are surprisingly small, scarce half the size of the men of his day. Searching for traces of his old life, he finds a group of men trying to move a huge stone. 'Do you know where I can find Fionn Mac Cumhail and the Fianna?' he asks. The men laugh, 'He's just a leg-end that our grandmothers used to tell us. It's all ballox.'

Oisín is hurt but he still knows his duty. 'Can I help you with that stone?' 'Sure,' they scoff, 'if you can.' Oisín bends over, picks it up

with one hand, and raises it high. And just at that moment with a loud snap, the girth of the saddle breaks and off he falls. No sooner does he touch the ground than his years in Tir na n'Og overcome him. His skin cracks, his hair greys, his teeth fall out. As for the mare, it skips back across the sea to the land of eternity.

'What have I done?' cries Oisín. 'I had it all and gave it up just to see my homeland once again.'

Now news travels faster than the speed of lips in Ireland. Within a day or so St Patrick arrives to find out more about this triple centenarian with a magic horse. He orders his monks to write down Oisín's story, and all the tales that Oisín can remember about Fionn Mac Cumhail and the Fianna. And a good thing too for in so doing the monks immortalised Fionn and the Fianna, keeping them in our memory eternally young.

But above all the good Saint Padraig's going to save Oisín's soul and convert him to Christianity before imminent death inevitably takes him. 'I'm going to baptise you in the name of Christ,' says the Patriarch, 'so you can be saved and go to Heaven with all the Blessed Saints.'

Oisín thinks about this for a moment and then asks, 'What happened to Fionn and all the warriors? Were they baptised in the name of Christ?' 'Indeed not,' replies St Patrick loftily, 'they were sinners all; they died unrepentant and went to Hell.'

'Well in that case,' retorts Oisín, 'If Heaven's not good enough for Fionn and the Fianna, then I'm damn sure it's not good enough for me either.' And with these words he died and went to join Fionn and the band of brothers. And whether he joined them in Hell or in Tir na n'Og no one can tell. At least not in this life.

## *Stories as Connectors*

One of the attributes of good stories is that they are great connectors. They remind us that whoever we are, in whatever context we live, we're not really so very different from people living in other cultures and even in eras other than our own. The issues that are

addressed in the story of Oisín and Niamh, issues that were presumably hot in third century Ireland, are universal themes that each of us has probably considered and faced up to in some way or another at different stages of our own twenty-first century lives.

In fact, this story is particularly rich in archetypal themes, and demonstrates just how effective story can be in expressing complexity in simple and elegant ways. The story takes the heroic dream of Youth—that Death can be fought and overcome—and counterpoints it with the inevitability of Death that we must all accept in later years. It compares different ideas of Eternal Life from both pagan and religious perspectives. It warns us against the danger of wanting everything and not being content with the gifts we are given. And it also celebrates the quality of the person who can recognise and own what is *really* important in life and death, and stay true to those values whatever the consequences.

Like all great wisdom stories—whether from pagan, secular, or spiritual traditions—the story of Oisín and Niamh expresses deeply complex universal ideas with simplicity and elegance. It also includes some of the key themes that are explored in this book: Work, Life, the Dark Shadow, and OneSelf.

## *Four Key Themes*



### *1. Work*

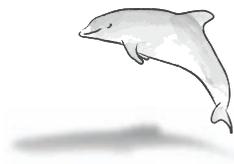
For Oisín, at least before he meets Niamh, work is a deeply satisfying expression of what he loves to do, what he does well, and what gives him sufficient challenge to learn and grow. At the same time, his work allows him to make a significant and valuable contribution to the band of warriors he leads, and the community he serves. As a result he feels happy and fulfilled within himself, while others praise his actions and build his reputation.

People of our own time may spend upwards of forty years in work and many get nowhere near the satisfaction that Oisín enjoys during his time with the Fianna. The stories in this book do not offer answers, but they do put forward various perspectives for looking

at the nature of work and the contribution it enables us to make to ourselves, others, and our world in a variety of different ways.

The stories explore possibilities for deepening the personal and professional satisfaction we can derive from our work, enhancing the level of contribution we can make at many different levels, and recognising that the more we notice the systemic and interconnected nature of the world we inhabit, the more we can make wiser and more mature decisions and choices.

Above all, the stories suggest that the more of ourselves, particularly our core values and beliefs, that we bring into the workplace the more we and our work are likely to thrive and flourish.



## 2. *Life*

It is sometimes said that there are two great adversaries golfers must face when playing: the course and *ourselves*. That strikes me, a non-golfer, as a particularly good metaphor for life.

Another way of saying it is that life is a dance between what happens to us, over which we have no control, and how we respond to what happens to us, over which we appear to at least have some control.

As with Oisín, life offers us a constant series of opportunities and challenges that we have to navigate as best we can. We make choices, some easy, some difficult, and then have to live with them. And even if we recognise that everything we do will have consequences, it's very hard to see far enough ahead to predict what some of those consequences might be. This is Oisín's reality and our own.

The great test for Oisín, which is primarily a test of his personal integrity, comes at the end of his life when he is required to choose between one set of values—salvation in Christ—and another set of values—salvation in kin, clan, and community. It is not important which he chooses for anyone else but himself; what is important is that he knows what his own values are and remains steadfastly true to them. This is an act of supreme courage and integrity.

The stories in this book on the theme of life raise important existential questions like: Who am I? Why am I here? What's my purpose? What and whom do I serve? They also encourage us to laugh at ourselves, to treat ourselves and others with greater compassion, and to explore some of the great paradoxes of life—such as coming to terms with our twin and seemingly contradictory blessings of magnificence and insignificance, wisdom and foolishness, rationality and intuition, and many more besides. What wisdom might we gain, the stories enquire, through working to integrate these great opposing qualities that possess each one of us at different times in our lives?



### *3. The Dark Shadow*

Symbolised by his escape to Tir na n'Og, the Land of Eternal Life, the great Dark Shadow for Oisín is Death. Oisín thinks he can cheat death and gain immortal life. He is even prepared to forsake what he holds most dear—kith, kin, clan, and community—to achieve his victory over death. But much as he feels at home in Tir na n'Og, the mortal world still calls to him; some deep part of Oisín feels incomplete, and he determines to return to the ordinary world 'just for a day'.

The story itself is unusual in that it combines an archetypal Youthful Hero story with elements of mid-life and late-life stories.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the tale is typical of a Youthful Hero story. In the first part of our lives we tend to be idealistic and think of ourselves as indestructible, even immortal. Death exists but as a distant figure, one that can be fought if necessary—especially in the service of a noble ideal—and conquered. I can think of several times in the earlier years of my own life when, having overcome serious illness or narrowly avoided a nasty accident, I arrogantly thought of myself as powerful and resourceful enough to cheat and overcome death. Why else would I have delayed paying into a pension fund till I was forty! Death was something that happened to others.

It was only in mid-life that I fully began to accept the truth of the graffiti I once saw painted on the side of an Austrian railway carriage: 'Life is a near-death experience.' Mid-life is the time when

we stop counting the years since birth and begin wondering how much time remains till the exit strategy. Death is recognised at this point, indeed it is acknowledged as ever present, and can even seem attractive—a dancing partner that gives greater meaning and piquancy to life. And so at this stage in our personal development it is not uncommon to want to explore more deeply into ourselves; to start finally being more truthful with ourselves and about ourselves. It is time to face up to our own Dark Shadow.

The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung was the first to bring Western attention to the idea of our Shadow but its origins go way back. The story of Milarepa [Story 5.13], the Buddhist yogi, is one such example. Since Jung, the Shadow has been written about and explored extensively. It is central to archetype theory and psychotherapy, and it is essential in any approach to spiritual practice or in simply deepening awareness of oneself.

The ‘shadow’ consists of those parts of ourselves that we find hard to come to terms with, the bits we don’t much like about ourselves, the parts we suppress or ignore. In extreme cases, we refuse to even see these qualities in ourselves, no matter how much our friends and our enemies can! We can live in complete denial of them: ‘I’m not competitive.’ ‘I don’t do anger.’ ‘I’m not narcissistic.’<sup>3</sup>

Unless we fully own these parts of ourselves, parts we spend a huge amount of energy suppressing, and hiding from the judgement of convention, we cannot begin truly to know ourselves or liberate ourselves from the ‘stuckness’ of our pretence. It is only, for example, when I truly own the narcissist that exists within me that I can truly begin to love and appreciate myself just as I am, which in its turn frees me to love others unconditionally too. When I fully own this or any other shadow voice, it no longer runs me, and it no longer emerges covertly. That, I find, is both liberating and empowering.

Sometimes we even deny our most positive and most nurturing qualities. Fearing to be the nail that stands proud of the floorboard, we disown our unique perspective, our personal wisdom, our insight, our deep sensitivity—anxious as we can sometimes be not to be seen as ‘special’ or ‘clever’ or ‘powerful’ by others.

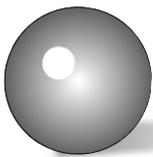
The stories in this book on the theme of the Dark Shadow invite us to take a step back, to a safer more contemplative space, and look at ourselves with greater serenity and compassion, to laugh at our ridiculousness, and to open ourselves to new possibilities of self-honesty and truth.

\*\*\*

When Oisín falls back to earth and becomes mortal once again, the storyteller is offering us a simple truth: that as a human being Oisín has access to two separate yet interconnected worlds, the finite and the infinite, the relative and the absolute. When the girth of his saddle breaks, Oisín returns from the eternal, absolute world represented by Tir na n’Og, to the relative, messy, finite world of struggle and death.

But even now, at over three hundred years old he still remains reluctant to move on. He becomes temporarily as stuck in the material world as before he was getting stuck in the eternal world. It takes St Patrick to offer him a choice, a choice that reconnects him with what he truly values—his old comrades and the warrior codes—that finally allows Oisín to own his shadow and embrace death as a welcome friend, a gateway to absolute reconnection to that which he holds eternally enduring and important.

In finally owning the shadow with style and humour, Oisín validates the integrity of his own unique, separate, and mortal self, and at the same time becomes one with everything he holds sacred and good: not a denial of his individuality but an empowerment of it.



#### *4. OneSelf*

The idea of the One and the Self—*OneSelf*—has fascinated humankind way back to the beginnings of time. It is the notion that perhaps other worlds, or parallel worlds, or interior worlds exist as well as the one we so materially inhabit. This is a notion that exists not only in the spiritual, contemplative, and wisdom traditions, but also in a great deal of modern scientific thought: particularly in quantum physics, relativity, systems theory, and

*The Salmon of Knowledge* contains over 140 stories, from ancient to contemporary, from all points of the compass and organised by theme.

These stories invite us to wake up, stop taking ourselves so damned seriously, look at the world from perspectives other than our own, and recognise that only by changing ourselves can we reconnect with what is truly important in life.

I loved this book, it is full of wisdom. It brought me joy, and quiet illumination. May it lighten your way.

Adrian Machon, Director, Executive & Leadership Development, Corporate Leadership & Organisation Development, GlaxoSmithKline

This book of bite-sized stories, anecdotes and metaphors provides a wealth of

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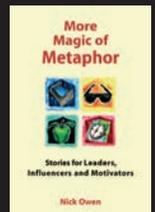
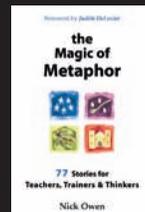
Keith Bellamy, Independent Futurist

*The Salmon of Knowledge* is compelling reading - whether in its entirety or as a coaching, leadership development and personal development aide.

Richard Coulthwaite, Finance Director, Underwriting, Brit Insurance



Nick Owen is an experienced trainer, consultant and coach. He has also enjoyed successful careers as a professional actor and theatre director, radio and print journalist, writer and storyteller. He combines work in the corporate and professional sectors with work in the arts and education, bringing a broad range of creative and innovative perspectives to the work at hand. He is the author of two bestselling books on creativity, personal development, and leadership, *The Magic of Metaphor* ISBN 9781899836703 and *More Magic of Metaphor* 9781904424413



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