



Moonrise, Mono Lake © 2020 Ed Callaert

Stories May Save Us Yet

by Kristine Zeigler

Please, stop what you're doing and hop in. I am going to take you to Mono Lake, one of North America's oldest lakes, transporting you with my words to the other-worldly tufa towers poking out of the water, the volcanic craters like sentinels overlooking the basin, and the Sierra range, a wall of granite rising more than 7,000 feet from the shore. With all my heart and my abilities, I will endeavor to convince your brain that you're there, right now, wading in water that's more than twice as salty as the ocean. It isn't hard to do. As a human, you can't help but be pulled into a story.

But I'm not going to go on in that vein, showcasing the landscape, or posing rhetorical questions about animal behavior such as—*did you know that the California Gulls you see at the beach are probably hatched at Mono Lake?* I'm not going to make this a treatise on why a balance needs to be struck between the natural world and our own.

Descriptive nature writing that captures hearts and minds is not sufficient for the times we are in. Love of nature and its wonders is not enough, even though I appreciate nature writing and our nation's great authors such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau. The best nature writers evoke wonder, astonishment, and reverence for the natural world, for wild places where salmon spawn to savannas where lions roam. But let's face it—nature writing isn't doing a great job of saving nature.

Nature writing needs to change. And the new nature writer must answer the question posed by poet Mary Oliver—how will we love this world? The new nature

writer must embrace an elevated role, not just as poet and interpreter, but as wielder of neuroscience and storytelling. It's time for nature writing to evolve to its grandest possible purpose: to illuminate the path from a world in crisis to one of solutions and sustainability. Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams have laid that groundwork.

The new nature writer need look no further than the story of how Mono Lake was saved—how activists and attorneys alike used stories rich with emotion and data in order to influence policy makers, judges, and supporters like you.

The new nature writer recognizes that the natural world and the human-built world are connected. All of it—the majestic places like Yosemite, and the freeways and skyscrapers in Los Angeles or Beijing, is our home. It's a home where information about public health, poverty, climate, and the economy can be shared faster than ever before. The new nature writer recognizes that the written word, the spoken story, contains a primal power to create social change. Indeed, it always has, since storytelling has been around. As it turns out, storytelling and Mono Lake are the same age.

Picture this: Some one million years ago the first story was probably being told around a campfire in Africa. Meet our ancestors, *Homo erectus*. They just learned to make fires and cook meat from animals they hunted. Because of this, they need to talk at night and figure out what time of day they will go out to hunt, which tools they

will use, and the role each person will play. That takes double the size of brain than what their predecessors, *Homo habilis*, had, from 500 to 1,000 cubic centimeters.

See that tall teenager with a spear? He is telling the others about how he killed the antelope, step by step. See how he pretends to hide in a tree, then jumps down and jabs the unsuspecting antelope at close range? See the little children watching? They want to know how it's done. The young man with the spear starts over again. He is *telling a story*. It's one of the first stories ever told.

According to writer Ursula Le Guin, a story is something moving, something changing. But stories also have an evolutionary starring role in the history of humanity. Stories build cohesion between us, bring order to chaos, and warn us about danger—like animals that can hurt us, or plants we shouldn't eat. About 300,000 years ago, with the harnessing of fire, the meat, and the increasing amount of collaboration required to hunt, our cranial capacity jumps to 1,300 cubic centimeters. *Homo erectus* becomes *Homo sapiens*. Us.

Come, let's go to the year 1978, a classroom at Bishop High School. The guest speakers are a young couple. Hear that clicking? It's a Kodak Carousel slide projector. That's a picture of Mono Lake's seagulls and tufa. Normally these high school students are half-asleep, today they are asking questions. The lake, the man says, is in trouble. The woman says the odds of its survival are practically slim to none.

How are they going to save it? They won't save it by themselves. They need to

tell more stories, to more people. The woman organizes a base of operations. There's risk that no one will believe them. But neuroscience tells us that people are unable to resist stories. True ones, made-up ones, we take them all in. We are alive as long as we tell each other stories.

When I was a girl growing up in the Owens Valley, I thought we would be living in a space station orbiting the Earth by the year 2021. I feared our planet would be uninhabitable after nuclear fall-out. Thankfully, the Cold War ended, but with climate change, pandemics, droughts, and catastrophic fires from California and the Amazon to Australia, the need for a new nature writer is clear.

My advice to the new nature writer, or to anyone who wants to create a new way of doing things: imagine the change needed, link it with neuroscience, figure out how the brain makes decisions. Build your time machine, test out your story. Take heart; you are the only animal that envisions a better future and figures out how to get there.

Kristine Zeigler is the author of Cover This Country Like Snow and Other Stories. A conservationist, she has worked for The Nature Conservancy, Yosemite Conservancy, and Conservation International. Zeigler is co-founder of New Nature Writers, which encourages, mentors, and supports nature writers. Her favorite shop to browse and buy fiction, regional guides, maps, gifts, and a diverse selection of nature writing titles, is the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore on Highway 395 in Lee Vining.