

# WHAT'S IN A *story?*

Rosemary Morgan  
explains the worldwide  
renaissance in the ancient  
art of storytelling.

**S**tories mean reading for most of us, curling up with a novel to relax, or to explore other places, other times. Our appetite is insatiable and a vast flood of stories on paper, film, tape and TV pours out to feed it. With such abundance, why is there a worldwide renaissance in the ancient art of storytelling?

I went to a two-week symposium at Emerson College to find out, and met people from fifteen countries in this idyllic spot in East Sussex. I have always loved stories, and it was a joy to discover how fundamental and valuable they are, and how many talented people are using them to entertain, teach, help and heal others.

Simple stories are the common currency of our social lives. We say what has

happened to us and to others, emphasizing, omitting, choosing where to begin and end. This editing is the natural way in which our minds work to make sense of our experience and communicate it to others. Not surprising then, that Jesus and other great spiritual leaders seeking to lead us into greater awareness, should have used stories to teach.

Good stories are our birthright. Every country has a vast store of myths, legends, fairy stories and folk tales encapsulating the wisdom of ages in accessible form. Every episode is a symbol of human experience. So powerful are these teachings that a materialist adult society finds them uncomfortable and edits them for children.

The Brothers Grimm began this, turning wicked mothers into stepmothers, and omitting the twins that arrived nine months after Sleeping Beauty's awakening. Well meaning but misguided modern editors do worse. Say the hero has to learn to use his brains in order to defeat the monster. The point of the story is lost if the monster is just angry because he is misunderstood.

The same spineless attitude permeates many TV programmes, trivialising, burying truth. It seeps into our consciousness, trapping performers and viewers alike in a puerile culture that inhibits growth and understanding. TV has strayed from its original high ideals to educate and inform.

As channels proliferate, TV no longer even links us in great events. Millions live vicariously through sitcoms, cleverly written but an addictive starvation diet, unlike perennial stories that reconnect us to eternal values, reconcile our outer and inner worlds and give meaning to our existence.

## **Transformation**

As our everyday world changes ever faster, many are confused. We look in vain for strong leadership, for someone to tell us where we are going and what to do. In his book, *Leading Minds*, Howard

*Mythological journalist: Vayu Naidu, the well-known storyteller.*



## The Television

A man once left a television in an Indian village. The people had never seen one before. For some days, everything stopped and everyone watched it. But a while later, the man returned to find that the people had thrown it out.

'Why?' he asked.

'We threw it out,' they answered, 'because we have our own storyteller.'

'But your storyteller only knows a few stories! The television can tell you any number!'

'That's true,' they said, 'but our storyteller knows us.'

Gardner says that a great leader is one with the ability to tell a good story, one that touches us on every level and gives us purpose and courage.

Great world leaders such as Churchill and Gandhi transformed the sense of identity of whole nations. We have no such leaders today. It is time to learn to live in groups and find our way forward together, and storytelling is an ancient and powerful tool of transformation for us to use.

We make much of instantaneous communication, of global trade and finance linking us so closely that the realisation of one human race, one planet, is being forced upon us. But the other side of this is that children and adults alike are bombarded with crude images, flickering electronic text, canned entertainment.

Electronic communication is reactive but still impersonal. Noise is everywhere. Music on soundtracks drowns the spoken word; electronic voices answer the telephone; speech is being eroded. But speech is what makes us human – we cannot afford to lose it.

How can we keep it? By nourishing human contact. The story told in person is better than TV or reading because there is no dissimulation possible and the truth shines through. The right story well told evokes a focus of attention and a creative *silence* in which understanding and healing can take place.

What makes good storytellers? A willingness to journey deep into themselves, discover their own inner truth, and speak from that. The rest can be taught. They know how to listen to an audience, draw on their own experience, use their

voices, create atmosphere and use silence. They know about pace, timing, pause and pitch, about balancing drama and humour.

Storytellers don't learn by heart, they memorise a series of pictures and use whatever words are appropriate for the audience of the moment. They make the story their own, a little different each time they tell it. This keeps the story alive to work its silent, subtle magic, reaching into the depth of our being where we are all one.

Hearing stories from different areas of the world helps us to understand other peoples better. And they all bring their own qualities. From Africa, for example, comes presence, energy, a sense of belonging and place that can be stimulating to urban children denied spontaneity and freedom to roam.

### Expanding consciousness

Vayu Naidu, a well-known storyteller, sees herself as a mythological journalist, gathering the wisdom of the past and finding an accessible language – stimulating, poignant, humorous and profound – to convey it to the present. She uses word, sound, and image to provoke an expansion of consciousness in her listeners, and humour to keep them grounded. Her Hindu stories have resolved tensions in classes of English and Muslim children.

Stories can be told everywhere. Malcolm Green manages a country park near Newcastle-on-Tyne. He uses stories to add a heartbeat to information about the natural world and stimulate the powers of observation of groups of children. They discover new possibilities within themselves by creating their own stories. Unruly children are calmed as they listen.

Storytelling is basic to Steiner education. It stimulates the ability to listen and learn. Stories, carefully chosen for the age group, can also strengthen children, give them courage, develop a creative and healthy imagination. The profound wisdom of the old tales provides guidance and comfort through every stage of development, every challenge, loss and pain.

Nancy Mellon, a master American storyteller, creates stories for unhappy children. The child becomes princess or hero, able to say and do things beyond everyday capacity. Using all aspects of the child's life the situation is symbolically transformed and healed. This works for

groups of children too; the noisy argumentative parents at the root of one problem became crows in the story!

By the end of her workshop we had all created such a tale, drawing on the wisdom of our inner child and our compassion as adults. We told each other our tales and received valuable feedback. The experience of participants gave depth to discussions: how much hope should you offer to a child where none seems possible? The answer was: always hold out hope, but sometimes it has to be long term.

The elderly need to make sense of their lives too, and to talk about the past. These days few take time to listen, especially in nursing homes. Encouraging them to tell their stories not only brings them to life, it restores their dignity and sense of identity.

Working with mentally and physically handicapped adults and children, Jenny Pearson has found that the enactment of a story enhances its impact. She draws on her Sesame training to encourage patients to take on different characters and roles, and this deepens their

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## RESOURCES

### People & Places

Emerson College, Tel: 01342 822238 Fax: 01342 826055

Nancy Mellon: contact via Emerson College

Rising Sun Country Park, Tel: 0191 200 7841

Sesame Institute, Tel: 0171 633 9690

Vayu Naidu – Intercultural Storytelling, Tel and Fax: 0121 634 4504

The Society for Storytelling, Tel: 01734 351381

### Books

*Storytelling and the Art of Imagination*, by Nancy Mellon (Element Books 1992)

*Grimm's Fairy Tales*

*Leading Minds*, by Howard Gardner (HarperCollins 1996)

*How the Cadillac Got its Fins*, by Jack Mingo (Harper Business)

*The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, by David Whyte (Industrial Society)

*The Wisdom of Fairy Tales*, by Rudolf Meyer (Floris Books).

## What's in a Story?

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### Shared understanding

So there's quite a lot in a story! Many are ancient spiritual teaching tools. They have survived because they contain great truths about the human condition. They allow us to see our own experience in a larger context, giving us a sense of belonging, of shared understanding and aspiration. They are an imaginative way of expanding potential and of healing individuals and groups.

Storytellers are working their magic in schools, libraries, hospitals, prisons, day centres and residential homes. What about the workplace, all too often the scene of ruthless competition and of frustration for those whose ideas and needs are ignored? So many trapped in soulless

work yearn to be more creative, or to find some significance in what they do.

Good management has always known the importance of human contact with staff. Now more companies are realising that there is both human and economic value in developing the potential of every employee. Can storytelling help?

Three pioneers think so. Ashley Ram-sden, Director of Storytelling at Emerson College, Sue Castle, MBA and former general manager, and Bernard Kelly, a health and education consultant, started working together in the summer of 1996, and have already taken storytelling performances and workshops into the business world. They believe that to succeed in the future companies must work in a meaningful and empowering way with the whole person, not just the part that clocks in from nine to five.

From 12-18 July 1997 they are giving a 'Storytelling in Organisations' course for people in key positions who want to tap the creative potential of staff and humanise the environment in which they work.

At the simplest level of presentations

and marketing, the story provides a succinct way of bringing information to life. Storytellers also work with board members, using story to approach sensitive issues such as race or gender. Acting out the story allows individuals to examine the motives and actions of others without accusing or feeling accused. It is a very freeing process. An intractable problem can be explored in the same way, opening up new perspectives and possible solutions.

A company *is* a story, and if all the management and staff learned to recognise the divine spark within each other, what a joyful place that would be, what a force for good in the world, and what a story!

**Rosemary Morgan** is a spiritual psychotherapist, healer, heart-awakener and teacher. Her first book, *Emily and the Angels* will be published in 1997.

