

The medicine of the heart

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Our holy space

ONE OF MY FIRST DAYS working at Beth Israel Hospital, I told stories to four patients in an airless room at the end of a hallway. Nurses sat with the patients. I watched everyone as the story began. "There were once three men who ..." Eyes that had been glazed over moments before, now turned outward from a preoccupation with self toward my voice. By the middle of the story they were listening. Through my speaking and my presence they were able to project themselves into the story and then backwards to themselves, imagining the unfolding narrative. Afterwards, I asked, "How did you feel about that story?" Since there was no right answer, each person's response took its own place in the room. Not only did they get to know a bit about each other and express their voices, but the small airless room seemed to expand through the inner space created by their involvement. An old man whispered to me, as he left, "It felt like our holy space."

Just as a mother sings a baby to sleep, the voice of the storyteller, when it resonates from the heart of one's personal understanding of the potency of the story and the listener's engagement, soothes by the lullaby of authentic presence. This lullaby does not put one to sleep, but numbs the power of the habit of negative or limiting ideas. The way of the storyteller is not about informing someone of possibilities or of giving

yet another explanation. It is about creating the space in which one feels alive and participating. One is meeting one's own truth, which is the natural state of listening and hearing. Hafiz, a Persian poet, once wrote, "If the light of the love of truth falls on your heart and soul, you will become lovelier than the sun in heaven."

The room of women

Another day in a four-person room: An elderly woman was too panicked to listen to a tale, so I sat down next to her bed. She told anyone and everyone her dilemma. I listened to what she was saying and how she was saying it. Her voice was filled with frustration, pain, terror, and anger. Had I not made the decision to be simply interested, it would have propelled me away like a bad smell. She had heard that she would not walk on her legs again. She had no family or anyone else to assist her. She was frightened and uncertain about her future. She began to weep. Her blue eyes were bright. I was as attracted to her eyes as I was dismayed by her voice.

After her complaint, I said, "You have beautiful eyes."

She angrily replied, "I have always needed glasses. My eyes are ugly. My sister never needed glasses. The kids in my class made fun of me." From what place did this anger arise? How far back was the origin of her sense of injustice and

ugliness, abandonment, and unfair treatment. I mirrored her dismay and began a story about a little girl who had beautiful eyes that were stolen by a bird. I made up the story. She listened. When I had no idea where to go with the story, I asked for her assistance — “And then what happened?” Caught up with the story, she gave me an answer — “The bird flew away with her eyes.” We made a story, incident by incident, on the energy of her dissatisfaction. The girl had lost what was most precious. The bird swallowed the eyes. We went on for 20 minutes until the story ended with the girl regaining the eyes when she was an old woman.

“So what is the meaning of that story?” the woman demanded, hurling her question at me.

I answered, “I don’t know. It’s just a story.”

She said, “But it isn’t true.”

“But it was a good story,” I replied.

Then she looked at me and said, “You have beautiful eyes.” I thanked her and told her that when I was little, an Austrian man, a survivor of the Holocaust, who always wore a three-piece wool suit even in the heat of August, said to me, “Remember those eyes of yours were given by God. Don’t become proud.” Then for some reason she and I burst out laughing. The whole illogic of the story, the energy of her complaint, the directness of our communication — in which I did not respond to her actual problem — seemed to break through her preoccupation and suddenly we were talking to one another.

The doctor arrived just at that moment. I was able to ask him to describe slowly, in my presence, the diagnosis he had given her the day before. With her mind more at ease, and with the doctor being asked a question without accusation, the answer could be heard. The prognosis was not as dire as she had assumed. That was the grace of the moment. He apologized for his rushing

through it the day before. He admitted guilelessly that he was too busy and tired. She was able to appreciate his apology and dilemma. It was a stunning moment.

When the doctor left, another woman demanded, “Couldn’t you tell me a story as well?” She wanted to participate. Another woman called out in a commanding voice from across the room, “If you speak a little louder, I can hear too.”

The woman beside the blue-eyed lady was a small, black-haired Spanish woman who had accidentally been poisoned during a blood transfusion. The blood was being removed and replenished. Her body was undergoing an unforeseen transformation through this frightening mistake. She had to lie in bed for days while new blood circulated from without to within. She had the look of a traumatized person. I told her we were making up stories. She said, “I like true stories.”

I asked her if she had any memories from her own childhood. She pulled herself up to a sitting position and told us, “I grew up in Florida beside a train track. My sister and I used to walk along the track to a circus where there were carnival games, animals, and magicians. We loved to watch the magician. My sister always wanted to go behind the scenes and find out how the magic really worked. I never wanted to know. I loved the mystery.”

This extraordinary memory arose naturally, it seemed. Intuitively, she had signaled her own healing strength through the realization that she was undergoing an inexplicable mystery. Everyone loved the story.

I said, “Let me tell you a story.” I told the Moroccan tale of the boy who sees a magician in the marketplace who can turn ordinary things to gold with the touch of his magic finger. No matter how much the magician offers to turn to gold, the boy says, “I want more.” Finally, the magician

asks, "What do you want?" And the boy answers, "I want the magic finger."

Another woman, who had been silent until that moment, spoke up in a British accent. She was wearing an elegant pink silk nightgown. "We all want to be mistresses of our destiny." The room of women asked me to come back the next day.

I returned and told a Turkish tale of a young prince's journey to three worlds beneath ours. In each world there is a demon or monster to overcome, until he arrives at the lowest world, where he confronts an eagle mother and is finally taken on her back up to his own world. As I told the tale, I realized that one way of looking at that story was as a symbolic journey of uncovering the root causes of one's illness. Each quest into another world led us back to a particular emotional event that occurred long before the obvious problem in the uppermost, surface world. But even when he touched the root of the problem, the prince's journey was not completed.

The prince's compassion was tested. As the eagle mother carried him, she lost her strength and feared that she and the young man would fall to their deaths. He took pity on her and cut flesh from his own leg to feed her. She did not swallow the meat. And his selfless kindness gave her strength. She took him all the way home, reminiscent of the shamanic stories of journey and return. It emotionally took us out of our present fixation on illness and outer events, and urged us within to the world of visceral imagination, where image is body and we live out the story that is being told within ourselves.

The African storyteller and healer Malidoma Some writes, "Primitive cultures normally deal with the physical world at the last stage. What goes wrong in the visible world is only the tip of the iceberg. So to correct a dysfunctional state of affairs effectively, one must first locate its hidden

area, its symbolic dimension, work with it first, and then assist in the restoration of the physical (visible) extension of it. Visible wrongs have their roots in the world of the spirit."

Just as the Spanish woman described her fear in the language of the soul and empowered herself with her own courage and sense of mystery restored, I told the Turkish tale not knowing why when I began. I listened to what was called for within the situation, and from within myself. The challenge of the storyteller is to know the right story to tell at the right moment and to whom. Or to know when not to tell a story, but to listen.

Befriending death

One day I walked onto the Planetree Ward at the hospital. No one wanted to hear stories. However, a man attached to an IV, dragging one leg and looking very weak and distracted, was leaning against a wall. I asked if he would like to hear a story. He turned and said, "I am in a lot of pain."

I said gently, "Perhaps I can distract you for a little while. If you would like to come and listen, I could arrange for you to be brought down the hallway." I think it was his desperation that made him agree.

He said, "I will come on my own." It took him 15 minutes to drag his leg and the IV down the hall. When he sat down he was exhausted. I was very moved by his pain and the effort he had made. My mind went blank. Suddenly I thought of a story that not only seemed bizarre, given the situation, but was also one that I hardly knew. I said, "I read a story the other day that interested me a lot, although I didn't understand it." He nodded, giving me permission to go ahead.

I began the story, tentatively at first. It was a Pawnee story about a girl who is abandoned by her tribe and ends up being captured by a skull in

a forest. She attempts to escape, aided by a spirit being, and is pursued again and again by the skull. She cannot get away. Finally, she takes refuge with five young men who go out to destroy the skull. The skull cannot be destroyed, but rolls back to the forest.

The young men feed her and she teaches them agriculture. She finds and plants seeds. Eventually, the young men turn out to be stars and go up to the sky. She follows. They are the Pleiades. She is there with them. And the seeds that she plants become the first corn.

The story took a long time. The man half listened, his eyes opening and closing. I hoped that he was able to get at least a little relief in the listening. When I was done, he said, "I liked that story." I was surprised. He added, "I understand that story. It is my story. I am also pursued by death and cannot get away from it. But it has a happy ending. She becomes a star. I always think that death cannot be final. And the seeds bring new life to the earth. I like that story." He left as laboriously as he had arrived. Later, in the hallway, he caught my arm and said, "Thank you. I needed to hear that. It gave me a chance to think about my death."

The power of story

There are so many incidents from my three years in Beth Israel. Each one was further proof of the possibilities of storytelling. Listening to stories took people out of themselves and then returned them to themselves. Listening promoted an instantaneous joining of mind and body and heart, without which there can be no peace of mind, nor any energy for actual healing. As listeners imagined the story, they enacted it psychologically within themselves. Even if there were a thousand people, each person would listen uniquely and feel as if the story were being told just for him or her. The very process of being in the story has its own satisfaction, for there is satisfaction of something that has a definite form: a beginning, middle, and an end. This form helps to give some meaning to an unfamiliar and scary situation.

For many in the era of managed health care, a hospital stay is a stressful or fearful event. It is exacerbated by the fact that how long one stays is determined not by the need of the illness or healing, but by how many days the insurance company is willing to pay. Some people need a long time for their healing, but can only stay for three days. The satisfaction of the story, which defies time and logic, and has form, becomes a stabilizing event.



A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR RETELLING STORIES

The process outlined below will help tellers learn stories quickly and heartfully, without memorization. The memorized story can stand between yourself and the listener, making the words of the story and the performance more

important than your relationship to the listeners and their inner experience of the tale.

- A. Read the story aloud to yourself as if you were telling the tale to your own mind.

Listen, feel, imagine.

- B. Ask yourself what moved you the most: a certain image or event? Write it down and then, as if it were a dream, free associate on that particular event. You are beginning to find your relationship to the story.
- C. Make an outline of the events of the narrative (without writing the text) so you can follow the thread of the sequence of events. The outline releases you from the written rhythm of the story.
- D. See the landscape of the story, either by walking through it as if it were an invisible pop-up map or by literally drawing a map of the places of the story to see where it takes place and what happens in each setting.
- E. Retell the story as you remember it to a friend, almost as if it were casual gossip. How does your friend feel about the story? What did you remember and what did you forget? Begin to find your individual rhythm and language.
- F. List the characters, the symbols, the objects, the animals. List the numbers that occur and repeat.
- G. What questions do you have about the cultural background of the story? Research these.
- H. Make a chart of the emotional roadmap of the unfolding story from start to end. Concentrate on the emotional changes each character undergoes.

Now, you are ready to begin telling the story. Remember that the most important story is the one that the listener hears — and *each person hears his or her own story*. So tell the story from the heart. Be present: don't disappear or melt into the narrative. In this way you can pay attention to both the listener and your telling. Try first with-

out any voices and special effects. Let the story inform your telling, and when you try voices, become familiar with the characters and the role they play in the tale rather than choosing caricatured sound effects. The story is not a cartoon, but a living reciprocal event that demands your willingness to bring it to life with dignity, feeling, and communication. Play and pay attention.

True-life stories can be approached in a similar manner. Our own life events can be a source of inspiration and comfort to others. Begin the tale in a specific place and time to make certain that your listener can easily create an instant setting.

Further suggestions for retelling sessions in health-related situations

- Ask people what the story reminded them of in their own lives, or if it reminded them of another story they might know from their own childhood repertory.
- Ask how they might want to change the story. Would they change the ending if they could? Enjoy the exploration with people without judgment and the atmosphere will be filled with trust and sharing.
- Engage someone in telling his or her own experiences simply and directly. This helps to relieve people from the loop of concern for the often baffling facts of their illness and situation. Since you will now be the listener, listen openly and you might discover a significant idea or feeling that cannot be verbalized, or the teller's own intuitive signals about what road to follow toward healing and/or self-acceptance.
- Listening is the most profound talent you can develop. Listening without bias or the need to do anything to change the story helps the teller to hear his or her own

story more clearly and make his or her own assessments. Questions about details can help the teller make more visceral and logical sense of the story and encourage the teller to be communicative.

- Retell the story back to teller in the third person, if you feel confident doing so. For example, "There was once a girl who ...". Listening to one's own tale is a luxury that is fun and affirming. It also allows people to hear what they might not have known about their own experience.
- Slow down the engine. When someone tells you the same litany of facts about a personal problem over and over, ask him or her to retell it to you slowly, almost in a

monotone. This makes it less stressful and allows the teller to hear it also. You can ask questions: What would you change if you could make anything happen? Bringing their voice back into their bodies, without the panic of repetition, can release creative energy much needed for rest and healing.

- If you are in a situation that allows it, write down someone's story or the tale you told that they liked, and make a collage about it with photos, drawings, and pictures in magazines. Then place the words of the story in a little box or in an area in that picture where they think it belongs or is safe.