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ELY, ENOCH & THE ENCHANTING BIRD OF TRUTH

Traditional storytelling and therapy: some connections

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Ely has had quite a spat with Enoch. The two of them haven't spoken for days and then Ely sees his chum walking along on the opposite side of the rode and he decides to patch things up. "Is that yo' mate," he calls out. But Enoch is having none of it; he hasn't forgiven Ely at all and he sticks his nose in the air and says sulkily: "No!" So Ely thinks for a moment and shouts back: "Well it ain't me, neither!"

It's a little story with a very big theme, but I'd guess anyone involved with therapy of any kind would scarcely need a storyteller to tell them that. It's from a set of oral tales still more or less in currency, especially around the West Midlands and particularly the Black Country where Ely and Enoch are supposed to live. (You can't hear the accents on the page.) A Birmingham-based paper evidently used to publish them regularly. I've told it here, roughly as it was told to me by a friend of mine with roots in the area, because, given a little reflection, it's easy to see how much there can be in a story like this one. In a lot of conflict situations, people really are 'not themselves'; understanding that can be an important starting point.

As the fourteenth century Persian poet, mystic and fabulist, Jalaluddin Rumi said, 'A tale, however slight, illuminates truth.' It's something I've seen again and again in more than sixteen years experience as a professional teller of tales. Working day after day with a huge variety of stories, telling them to equally varied audiences, leaves you with an enormous respect for the largely anonymous makers and transmitters of the tales that form the oral traditions of the world. And I'm not talking only of the short, illustrative anecdote-cum-joke like my friend's Ely & Enoch story, nor of the tale of more obvious moral instruction, though by the same token, I wouldn't want by any means to underestimate those. If you have already come across the stories of the Mulla or Hodja Nasrudin¹ (Goha to the Arabs) popular in the Middle East or the many short Zen tales², you'll already be aware how much a short, seemingly slight tale can 'carry'. If not, I can thoroughly recommend them.

But stories in tradition come in all shapes and sizes. There are, for example, myths, legends of all kinds, wonder tales, fairy tales, fables, tall tales, hero stories, trickster stories, ghost tales, teaching stories, oral histories and all sorts more. Of course, the categories shade into each other; a tale of this or that historical figure turns up elsewhere as part of a mythical cycle or a fairy tale; one man's fable becomes another's joke. People of ancient times travelled far more than is commonly thought. When they did so, they took along their invisible luggage of tales, which they shared along the road or by the campfire. In pre-literacy days, people perhaps had better listening skills, better memories and perhaps, on the quiet, less need to be fettered by 'authenticity'. In any case, somehow or other stories not only stuck but were told and re-told and, in the process, dressed themselves in local costume, became part of widely differing cultures. Because oral storytelling was very much part of life: people told stories in all sorts of contexts - at the loom, in the field, with needle or adze or brush in hand. It's what you did. And alongside the ordinary folk, professional tellers of tales of all kinds told tales in market place and palace.

So what was so attractive and important about stories? A simple question with a huge, ramifying answer there's not space to do justice to here. But basically our world is far more shaped by the stories we tell and repeat than we realize, something that's as true in our twenty-first century media-dominated world as it was a thousand years ago. Stories show life as it might be, should be, shouldn't be, never could be. Basic social values, skills, wisdoms and all show up in stories but so do all sorts of other things on many different levels. It's no accident that the founders of religions have been storytellers. Christ had his parables, Mohammed his teaching stories, the Buddha his Jataka tales. It's also entirely natural that the many of the first great books that form the cornerstones of literary cultures across the world have been books of stories brought together from oral tradition - the *Panchatantra* from India which became *Kalila & Dimna* in the Islamic world, the *Alif Layla wa Layla* (Arabian Nights), the *Decameron*, the *Fables of Aesop*, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* to name but a few. English literature more or less begins with Chaucer's '*Tales of Canterbury*', essentially a book of stories told on the road.

All of which is very interesting and intriguing, but where's the relevance? Why bother with old tales from old worlds when we have hundreds and thousands of new ones made to measure for today at the flick of a switch? Isn't oral storytelling today a bit like a sort of verbal Morris dancing - very quaint and folksy no doubt, but hardly challenging and contemporary? Why give it all a second thought other than as a 'heritage experience'?

I think it was some time in the mid to late 'eighties, I don't recall exactly the year. I'd been 'at it' as a storyteller for a few years anyway. A friend turned up at the door at 5.30 a.m. looking wild and strange. Apparently the sky had been coming in through his head all night. It was an early episode in what was later diagnosed as schizophrenia, but it wasn't my job to tell him that even if I'd had the background and training, which I hadn't. All I could do was to sit him down and tell him a story which is why, I suppose, he might have chosen to come by since he liked listening to my tales. Well, I went for something you might think of as

obvious, a version of the 'genie in the bottle' story from the Arabian Nights. If you remember, the fisherman has found a bottle and opened it, but the genie inside turns out to be not the wish-giving kind at all, more your murderous bastard in fact. He allows the fisherman only the chance to ask one question after which he'll kill him. The fisherman elects to know how such an enormous spirit could possibly have fitted inside the bottle and, when this very powerful but fortunately stupid genie demonstrates by shrinking and hopping back inside, he corks it up again. He then has the option of throwing the bottle back into the sea, keeping it by him corked up or letting the genie (who now promises wishes and all sorts) out again.

In folklore (as also in different 'arrangements' of the *Nights*) there are all sorts of versions of what happens next and all sorts of treatments of the same fundamental plot motif of the 'trapped being of power'. It might be worth mentioning (since these things sometimes get in the way) that, in different tellings from different cultures, the fisherman figure changes gender and class, time and place whilst the genie becomes devil, demon, ghost and all sorts of other things. But I suppose, however it is dressed and wherever or whenever it is told, there is an essential element that communicates, makes metaphorical sense, perhaps particularly to someone going through what my untimely visitor was going through. Anyway, listening to the tale calmed him down at least, part of the power of storytelling. Afterwards he swore that it had made a huge amount of immediate and practical sense too, maybe partly because, on that occasion, I left the ending open in the manner of what is called a dilemma story and we talked about the fisherman's options.

There are two themes I'd like to draw out of this instance. The first is around the story itself and tales like it. As I've already suggested, it's one of many so-called 'universal' tales - it crops up in many different cultures in different disguises. It's a short example; longer tales are often made up of various shorter plots and motifs as it were stitched together in different ways. Many of the fairy tales we grew up with are examples. For instance, hundreds of variants of the Cinderella story

have been recorded around the world. In 1893, Marian Roalfe Cox abstracted 345 (mostly European) variants in a study for the Folklore Society hailed as the first 'scientific' investigation of a tale and its variants, and her list has been much augmented in the century since with studies of Cinderella in other cultures.³ The trouble with folklore study though, at least in its more old fashioned orthodoxies (modern folklore study is different), is that it's a bit like Victorian butterfly collecting. Specimens caught, preserved and 'pin-stuck under glass' as it were. A marvellous colourful display but you can't always guess that the 'items' were once alive, much less imagine how they were alive.

Traditional stories are often loaded with potent imagery; it's again not hard to see how this might be so with the Cinderella story. The most interesting and enduring tales cross cultures, move easily between widely different mind-sets not just because people happened to have them in their rucksacks and dumped them off by accident, but because they mean and always have meant something that transcends culture and time. Whether or not they carry traces of this or that ancient civilization, way of thinking or whatever, they can say important, useful and resonant things about what it is to be human here and now, offer solutions, strategies, new chances at the same time as feeding the imagination and sense of fantasy. They have to be a rich seam to mine for anyone interested in human development.

At which point, I ought to add a couple of incidental caveats. Tradition has carried along all sorts of stories and by no means all are worth it from the perspective I've outlined above. That's a complex and difficult subject, but from time to time you come across objections to traditional stories per se on the grounds that they are sexist, racist, reinforce stereotyping and all sorts. Now it's not hard to find examples to support that view but it's also too easy to throw out a lot of healthy babies with the muddy bathwater. There are not a few people who would dismiss the Cinderella story from serious consideration because of the class structures that dominate the foreground of the familiar Perrault version

Then again, some may identify what I've already said about the value of traditional stories with notions around Jungian archetypes. Though those theories can be very interesting, I'm not sure one needs to be that complicated to get valuable insights from traditional material.

But back to *The Fisherman & the Genie* and my second 'theme'. Actually it's not very much of story, especially summarised briefly in the way I've done above. Set down in this 'bare bones' form, it could well seem slight, amusing maybe but lacking the kind of depth you might expect from a 'real' story. It's very easy to apply the wrong kind of standard.

We are used to an 'urtext' model of literature: there is one original and ideal model for the story somewhere, recorded in words or whatever. Performances may attempt to interpret that model, but don't change it essentially. But this kind of thinking doesn't or shouldn't apply to the oral tale, because it's really a bird in flight, not a stuffed one. In other words, part of the meaning and sense of the story is situational. It's what the teller and her/his listeners add to it that makes it live. The sense my early morning visitor and I made of *The Fisherman & the Genie* was something in a way unique to that occasion and time.

When you bring a story out and tell it, perform it for an audience even if that audience is made up of only one person, you spin it out and improvise on it. The way it develops on the day depends a lot on your interaction with your audience and how 'right' you can make it for the time and place. Of course if you are a professional like me you draw on a knowledge of traditional ways of embellishing and extending tales as well as having a few tricks of your own up your sleeve. I'm a musician, a trained guitar and lute player in fact, and I also know my way around a range of unusual ancient and ethnic instruments, all of which can help to establish the right kind of mood for listening. And of course professional storyteller figures of many cultures (*rawis, kathakars, griots* et al) have been bards and minstrels, probably because music (or even sensitively

used raw sound) can enhance listening and imagining. On the other hand, I've seen storytelling combined very effectively with conjuring, juggling and even paper folding.

Now what a professional does with a story in a situation that's really about entertainment (or just possibly art) might seem very different from what a therapist or a counsellor or for that matter an educator would do, but there have to be common threads. Amongst these, I'd identify particularly the real need for empathy and respect between audience and teller combined with improvisation that is related directly to improving communication and developing real attention, not there just as a frill. I'd also rule out of any effective storytelling interaction any hint of the ham thespian and what I'd call (in a shorthand I think you might just understand) "getting off" on a story; insincerity of any kind is not usually helpful to human relationships.

The thing is that any kind of storytelling situation is, at least potentially, alive. There are discoveries to be made for both teller and listener. In a way, the distinction people make between 'telling your own story' and telling a tale that comes from tradition is false because we're all always telling our own story. As the poet, James Berry, once wrote when signing his book of Anansi stories for me: "A storyteller wants to be all his characters - or knows he's all of them."

Anyway, to conclude, here in brief summary form (I know several long versions that can take up to an hour to tell) is the main part of one of my own all time favourite fairy stories. For publishing purposes, the copyright of this 'arrangement' of the traditional plot is mine, so at least consult me on sources if you want to reproduce it in a text.⁴ But you're very welcome to take it off the page and adventure with it and make as much oral use of it as you like, because I reckon there's a fair amount in there, both in terms of plot and incidental motifs. And, unlike Ely and Enoch, that *is* me talking.

THE ENCHANTING BIRD

Two brothers and a sister each set off in turn to find the Enchanting Bird of Truth. They are orphans left in the woods as babies and brought up by charcoal burners, so now they want to find out about their origins.

Well, the oldest brother sets out, leaving a knife to be watched over. If it rusts, he's in danger; if blood appears on it, he is dead. He stops in a city and finds out from a storyteller telling tales in the market place that there is a mountain twenty one days' march away. On this mountain, it seems that the Enchanting Bird of Truth perches. To reach it, he must follow the 'heart road' and not leave it, though he may look to the right or the left at wonders he may see as he passes. When he reaches the shadow of the mountain, however, he must look straight ahead and up towards the bird and not be distracted. The huge white bird will look back at him, fixing him with a fierce gaze. At its feet on the mountain peak are two piles of dust, one white and one blue. If he looks away, the bird will fly up into the air and drop the blue dust on him and he will turn to a blue stone on the mountainside, where he will stay forever unless someone rescues him. But if he manages to get all the way to the top without being distracted, then the bird will drop white dust on him and he will have the truth and the bird itself will turn into a white sparrow and perch on his shoulder.

This is what the storyteller tells him and he listens, but he doesn't listen to the story the storyteller tells that day in the market place. He's too busy preparing and then setting off on the heart road, which he follows, seeing to his amazement to the right and the left of that path enchanted gardens, flying palaces, dragons, giants and all kinds of strange things. He stays on the road and reaches the mountain, but as soon as he steps into the shadow and begins to climb, voices are calling out to him all around, begging him to turn this way or that. What's more, the bird seems huge and its eyes seem to burn him and, in the end, he's unable to resist turning his head as a voice

offers a short cut. Instantly, the bird flies up and drops the blue dust and he turns to a blue stone.

Back in the woods, rust appears on the knife, so the second brother sets off leaving behind a rosary of pearl. If the pearls stick, then he's in danger; if they form a leaden lump, then he's dead. Of course, he finds the same storyteller, hears about the same Bird of Truth and sets out along the heart road. Like his brother, he doesn't bother to listen to the storyteller's story. Like his brother, he sees wonders of all kinds, reaches the mountain and looks straight ahead as he climbs. Like his brother, he hears all kinds of voices calling him here and there, one of which is his own brother's voice. Like his brother, he can't resist turning and he too becomes a blue stone.

So then it's up to the girl. Finding that the pearls are sticking, she sets out, finds the same storyteller who tells her about the bird on the mountain. Off she goes, but not before she has listened well to and marked and inwardly digested the storyteller's story. She travels the heart road, sees incredible wonders, reaches the mountain and walks up it to the top, where the bird flies into the air and drops white dust on her and perches on her shoulder. So then she has the truth, can know that she is a princess cheated out of her inheritance by wicked aunts who imprisoned her mother. Her brothers, whom she now rescues along with a thousand other young men turned to stone on the mountainside, are princes. They set off to set wrongs to rights and what happens next is, more or less, another story.

What about the story the storyteller told in the marketplace, you may well ask? Well, it's complicated and if I see you some time, I might tell it to you in full if you remind me. But the main thing to understand is the little trick it suggested to the girl. Because when she climbed the mountain, the voices were all around but she didn't hear them. She'd stuffed her ears with cotton wool, you see.

Which just goes to show you that, however many lies they might tell you along the way, storytellers are only doing it so you can get to the truth.

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¹ For example “The Exploits of the Incomparable Mullah Nasrudin & The subtleties of the Inimitable Mullah Nasrudin” by Idries Shah, published in one volume by Octagon Press ISBN 0 863040 40 3

² For example “Zen Flesh, Zen Bones” compiled by Paul Reps (Penguin Books 1971)

³ c.f. The Cinderella Story - The Origins and Variations of the story known as ‘Cinderella’ - Neil Philip (Penguin 1989)

⁴ Two analogues for comparison are ‘Farizad of the Roses Smile’ from “The Thousand Nights and a Night” (Arabian Nights - most full versions including Mardrus & Mathers four volume set, RKP paperback 1986. There are doubts about whether this is an authentic ‘Night’ or was added by Galland, the first translator of the Nights into a European language) and ‘The Fine Greenbird’ in Italo Calvino’s ‘Italian Folktales’ (Penguin 1982) p.315