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## THE TALES WE TELL

*This article was first published in the Human Givens journal, Autumn 2006 and features extracts from the forthcoming book by Rob Parkinson, Transforming Tales (How stories change people) with additional material. At the time of writing, publication of the book was scheduled by Human Givens Publishing for Autumn 2006, though this was subsequently postponed indefinitely for extraneous reasons. Other publication arrangements are currently being made for a revised version of the book. The article explores the ways in which the stories we tell ourselves and others can powerfully change lives.*

There's an old story of the queen's storyteller, regarded as worthless by the warriors and statesmen alike – a mere entertainer and teller of tales of fantasy. One day, the queen was leaning over a deep pool in the palace gardens when her crown fell off and sank without trace. The queen and her servants splashed around trying to find it and then the warriors dived and the ministers fished, but all to no avail. Everyone was in a panic, since a vital state occasion was looming - until the storyteller suddenly began to tell a story of such power that all were soon stilled. As he concluded, the storyteller himself leapt into the water and a moment later, emerged bearing the crown, which he had been able to see clearly now that the waters were undisturbed. 'Perhaps,' he said modestly, 'a tale and a teller of tales may have some worth.'

Far from being mere peripherals, as the courtiers thought (and perhaps too many people to this day still think), stories are at the very centre of what it is to be human. The novelist, Ben Okri, memorably described the human race as *homo fabula*: storytelling beings. And, indeed, at the most fundamental level, we are

all tellers of tales. It is impossible to live without telling stories. For, while stories are marvellous, magical things, they are also, paradoxically, mundane and commonplace – because they are everywhere. We can't avoid telling them and making them. You yourself are a story: a story of how you have been and hope to be, of how you are and how you might be. You can't help it. It is a given of human nature that has evolved and has continued to develop, to help us to make sense of ourselves and our world.

When our needs are met, we tend to flourish; when any of them is persistently denied, we do not. Our many human faculties have evolved to meet those needs, including, very centrally, imagination. We know, from the fabulous creations of early man that survive in cave paintings and decorations, that, around 40,000 years ago, our ancestors began to gain a more conscious control over imagination. Then languages with subtle past and future tenses could evolve, as could the making of much more complex, symbolic artefacts, through to mythologies and the great classics of literature, as well as the jokes and legends we pass on day to day. Narrative became a vehicle for ideas about what has been, what is and what will be. Culture developed rapidly – many different cultures, with many different stories, oral stories, passed on in all sorts of ways through imagining and telling and imagining again and telling again, one person and then another. Some eventually were set down in the first great classics of world literature; others even became part of sacred texts whilst yet others remained part of vernacular phrase and fable, mutating and persisting generation after generation. From those days to these, stories of one kind or another have been at the heart of all cultures, whether or not thought of as fictions or records of purest truth: or indeed both.

That stories are a form of knowledge is scarcely a new idea – there are traditions from all around the world to this effect. But it is an idea that we have rather lost touch with in the modern age. The enormous emphasis on sequential, logical reasoning and science in Western culture (which has become the underpinning the 'universal' culture promoted more or less everywhere) has meant that stories

and metaphors have been relegated to entertainment or else given the elevated labels of art and literature.

### **A piece of knowledge**

*A man goes into a bar and he orders six pints of beer, three glasses of white wine, two whiskies and five bags of crisps. The barman serves him and then says, "Would you like a tray?" So the man says, "No thanks, I've got enough to carry already."*

It's an old joke. A comedian would throw it away for an instant laugh and then go on to another. But, if we put it in a different frame and call it a piece of knowledge, we might just give it enough time to notice a number of different ideas all presented at once, very economically. If you are a counsellor or therapist, for example, you might want to apply the story to a stressed person who refuses to take in that, say, calming down, doing nothing for a while or taking exercise might actually be 'trays' that will increase his or her capacity to 'carry' those stresses and pressures. In this sense, the story provides a very useful reframe applicable to many other circumstances. And, indeed, this way of using stories, developed to a high level in many oral traditions in the past, is becoming much better appreciated amongst communicators of many kinds today. You tell a story that manages to delineate metaphorically limited, ineffective perspectives and, simultaneously, to suggest, again metaphorically, a different, more productive way of looking at things.

There are several other possible angles on that same joke. For example, there are modes of thinking as well as of feeling and behaving in which we are rather like someone trying to grapple with a whole lot of glasses and packets and, because of this, treating things like trays or bags or cases – or indeed metaphors and stories – as just something else to carry, another encumbrance. For example, the blind, 'headless chicken' mode in which many of us attempt to sort out anything from our philosophical perspectives to our everyday lives in general –

the mode, in fact, the queen and courtiers had gone into in that opening tale, when they needed to calm down and allow the waters to settle. Looked at in this context, the tray (and, by analogy, the story) is something that functions on a different level, at which it is possible to connect those separate 'items'. To see and understand that, one has to make a leap to the level at which this 'overarching' function of the tray becomes clear.

### **Changing gear**

Stories change minds, take us to a different level of understanding and a different mode of thinking. To enter into the world of a story we have to change gear, change mode. The joke is all very well; one reason it survives in a world of ever increasing rapidity is that it is meant to be succinct – whilst, of course, it provides an immediate pay back in terms of a good laugh. But there are many other equally and sometimes more powerful forms that require time and a different way of thinking and being and, for this reason, many kinds of special language and other performance techniques were traditionally developed by tellers of tales. 'Once upon a time...' is one such way of starting a tale with which most people are rather too familiar: it has lost its effect through repetition to a point where it might sound almost patronising to all but small children. But how about, 'Once upon a strange and marvellous time when pigs flew backwards and politicians always spoke nothing but the truth...'? This starts to reclaim something of the function of those opening formulae: taking us away from the familiar and mundane towards the 'trance' of story listening.

Stories can literally entrance. There are many traditions relating to this in oral storytelling. In 1912, in the market place at Kordofan in Sudan, such a tradition was related by one Arakh-ben-Hassul, as part of *The Legend of the Destruction of Kash*, a story by chance recorded by German students of comparative mythology. According to the storyteller, the king asked for a story and Far-li-mas began to tell one:

*“The King listened; the guests also listened. The king and his guests forgot to drink, forgot to breathe. The slaves forgot to serve. They forgot, too, to breathe. The art of Far-li-mas was like hashish, and, when he had ended, all were as though enveloped in a delightful swoon. The king had forgotten his thoughts of death. Nor had any realised that they were being held from twilight until dawn; but when the guests departed, they found the sun in the sky.”<sup>12</sup>*

If you have ever stood in, say, a market place in Morocco watching the storytellers who still ply their trade there and noticed the extraordinary calm and stillness that falls on listeners despite the sheer din of an Arab city (or if, indeed, you have told stories to a room full of suddenly miraculously stilled and attentive seven-year-olds), you may be more inclined to accept the hypnotic power of storytelling. Brian Sturm, of the University of North Carolina, visited modern storytelling festivals across the US in the late 1990s, recording interviews with story listeners, comparing their descriptions of their experiences and finding many remarks that chimed equally with the experience of people in formal hypnosis and the audience of Far-li-mas. Typical remarks were, “I can completely forget about everything else except the story”; “Everything else around you just blacks out” ... “I just kind of fall into a different world.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Re-making the story**

Of course, many are familiar with this kind of absorption through being, say, wrapped up in a novel or a fascinating article. It can be much more intense with told stories, cannily chosen to suit time, place and person – stories which, on the page, may appear merely interesting and maybe only mildly engaging. Good storytelling is like making the story all over again. As a chance to experience something of this for yourself, you might like to try imagining your way through this written story frame, making your mental images as multi-sensory as possible.

- First invent and vividly imagine a story hero or heroine – the way he/she looks, sounds, acts, lives etc. You can base the person on someone you

know or the person be entirely fictional but try to make the character someone who is held back by a limiting belief and/or self-perception, and needs to confront difficulties and find new more fulfilling ways to be.

- Next make up a way that this character can be marooned for a time on a desert island or somewhere equivalent.
- Explore some of the surprises, difficulties and possibilities of this place and the ways your hero/heroine learns to survive in the new circumstances.
- Invent a specific lurking danger (a wild creature/hostile tribe, etc) and find a way the hero/heroine can curb/tame/limit this danger and flourish in new ways.
- Find a way the hero/heroine can escape or be rescued. How will it change her/his former difficulties/limitations etc?

This kind of frame, once it becomes familiar, is great for improvising new stories instantly – in just the same way that a traditional plot can be used to create new tales endlessly, as indeed most already have done as they have travelled to new cultures, spawning new variations on old underlying themes and motifs. (Take as an example of this an ancient tale introduced to aristocratic European audiences by the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French poet, La Fontaine. A dairy maid is carrying a churn of milk and she dreams of all the things that the wealth she'll get from this one churn will lead to – and eventually gets so wrapped up in the fantasy that she trips over and spills the milk. Elsewhere, she's carrying eggs; in the Arabian Nights, it's not she but he, the Barber's Second Brother, who has a tray of glasses which he eventually smashes; in a story from Russia, it's a hare a poor peasant dreams of catching and then scares away as he claps to the music of his imagined wedding. So on and so on from culture to culture, different surface, same essential plot and message.) One might do this story making simply for fun and personal exploration or perhaps to entertain other people. As a therapist or

counsellor or teacher one might take and tell the frame with a specific aim in mind for a particular person or group. The one I've supplied is obviously based on the same kind of underlying metaphor as Robinson Crusoe, but it can also be used as what I call a 'solution focused story frame': it subtly persuade clients to imagine their way through a solution to current concerns.<sup>4</sup>

Reframing is at the heart of the effectiveness of stories. We put together our personal stories largely unconsciously – the tale of what we are, what we can do, the ideas, behaviours, thoughts, emotions and images we find acceptable. All kinds of influences and experiences affect what we become, some of them apparently benign and possibly wonderful, some of them harrowing and even traumatic. But the most central element is how we view those influences and those experiences. This is the frame, the story, the angle. And it is more or less inevitably a limited perspective, which may be modified in time by new influences and experiences. The new story – the reframe – that is introduced to us at the right time in the right way provides that influence and experience quickly, extending our perspectives in a way that is unthreatening – since, after all, it's only a story.

### **The Mbala effect**

People who are told to change rarely do it as willingly or as effectively as people who decide to do it for themselves – or believe they have decided to do it themselves. Millions of smokers have coughed and wheezed themselves into an early grave, despite being told over and over again of the extreme dangers to health that go with the habit – and maybe even because of being told over and over again. Compulsive gamblers, alcoholics, sufferers from obsessions and compulsion generally know very well what they are doing to themselves, but preaching to them or getting them to preach to themselves may not be the most effective way to hack through the thicket of destructive habits because, from where they are standing, they can see no other way to fill the emptiness or need in their lives. For the same reason, we may know very well that the box of

chocolates or the hunk of cheese or whatever else takes our fancy will fur up our arteries or turn into undesirable cellulite in unfortunate places, but does it always stop us from having another mouthful? We are up against the Mbala effect, a term derived from a story.

*A zealous nineteenth century missionary was visiting an African tribe. He preached to them passionately about the virtues of religion and how they should change themselves and give up their wicked habits of polygamy and tribal warfare and naked dancing and see the one true light and live by the one true moral code in the hope of eternal mercy. His speech was translated by the chief, who had been educated at an English public school. At the end of each translated sentence, the tribe members would all shout "Mbala!" with huge gusto and apparent enthusiasm. The preacher reached the inspiring climax of his oration and the people were all shouting "Mbala! Mbala! Mbala!" over and over again, in a rhythmic chant.*

*The preacher was then shown to the guest hut by the solicitous chief. "I think that went quite well," he said modestly to his host.*

*"Indeed, old chap," said the chief, taking him by the arm solicitously as they picked their way through the village, along the dusty track and past the cows and the goats. "Mind, now, or you'll step in the mbala!.*

Something inside very many people is shouting out "Mbala!" whenever change is mentioned. It is, after all, much easier for any creature to stick with the ways it knows, which have been effective enough to date, as 'proved' by the fact that it is still alive. It has been known for centuries that, if you want to set up change, whether in individuals or in groups or even in whole societies, you do better to suggest it by stealth.

Storytelling is an extraordinarily powerful way of sneaking past the guards at the gate, as it were, and setting the power of the imagination free to do its work.

Telling stories can be thought of as quite closely related to guided imagery: a story guides the imagination. But whereas working with guided imagery, which usually involves some kind of ritual closing of eyes and conscious inward focusing, can raise barriers or simply be inappropriate or impractical for some adults, adolescents and young children, telling a story seems more natural and 'invisible'. Yet it still allows for all sorts of artful use of positive suggestions through language and incidental imagery. It can communicate just as directly with the unconscious levels of mind as any formal hypnotherapeutic induction without a hint of mumbo jumbo – as indeed the father of modern indirect hypnotherapeutic approaches, Milton Erickson, intuited decades ago.

### **Falsifying fiction.**

Moment to moment, we are telling stories in one way or another. This happens all the way from what neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio has called the wordless storytelling of the brain,<sup>5</sup> synthesising and creating the world we experience from billions of tiny neural hints, to the tangled webs of subjective self perception and the 'interesting edits' of our social self presentation. When our personal stories go wrong, when we make inaccurate metaphorical connections, we can find ourselves very much astray, the maps of who we are very much skewed. As a society, we are subjected to barrages of highly sophisticated but too frequently misleading images, spin and subtle myth making. Imagination is as much a deceiver and a spinner of falsifying fictions as a liberator. It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that almost all conditions brought to a counsellor or preventing a person learning in any setting will have elements of false personal narrative making and distorted imagination involved in them, stories and imaginings that can be re-told and re-shaped precisely through the same fantastical means that the deceptions themselves commandeered.

The paradox of fiction and narrative making is that, by means of fictions, it can show us what is true – or at least what is closer to the veridical. Here, by way of

concluding, are a few contrasting short tales from my forthcoming book, *Transforming Tales*.

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### **The Ploughman & the Snake**

There was once a ploughman who found a frozen snake in a field. As he was admiring the delicate patterns on its stiffened skin, he was amazed to realize that he could actually hear it speaking. 'Help me!' it hissed faintly and desperately. 'Pick me up and warm me... please!'

The ploughman was fascinated, but naturally wary. 'You are a snake,' he answered. 'Snakes bite!'

'You have my promise,' said the snake. "I won't harm you. Just warm me please! Otherwise I shall die.'

The ploughman felt sorry for the snake and privileged because he had been able to hear it speaking, so he gently picked it up. It was as hard and solid as a stick and he carried it with him as he went home, marvelling at the beauty of the thing and holding it against his chest so that it might revive. As he passed his master's house, the farmer himself came out and shouted at him: 'Put that down, you idiot! Don't you see what it is?'

'I do,' the ploughman insisted. 'But it has promised me not to bite and I feel sorry for the poor thing. We should after all do good to lesser creatures, should we not?' He strode off towards his own house purposefully.

But just then, stirred by the sheer heat of the exchange and the vigour of the ploughman, the snake began to squirm and a moment later it bit its benefactor in the neck, wriggled out of his arms and slithered away. 'Vicious creature! Why did you do that?' screamed the ploughman. A moment later, he sank to his knees, already affected by the deadly poison. As he did so, he heard the snake's voice again: 'Because that is my nature. I had no choice and no voices to tell me to do otherwise - unlike you!'

Based on a fable of Aesop

## **Pearls**

Even though swine may have trampled it in the mud, the pearl is still a pearl.

*Saying*

## **Two disciples and one guru**

*Two disciples would sit at the feet of a guru during the darshan (audience). The first would wash and anoint the right foot and the second would do the same to the left. Each thought that he did the better job. But one day the first disciple was ill and so the second did both feet. Unfortunately, he had to rush the job and, in his haste, broke the guru's right big toe. When the second one discovered what had been done, he broke the guru's left big toe by way of revenge.*

*(adapted from The Ocean of Story), 10<sup>th</sup> Century Indian)*

## **Simple arithmetic**

*There are three monkeys sitting under a tree and one of them decides he will climb up and get a banana to eat. So how many monkeys are left sitting under the tree?*

*The answer is three. Decision is just the first stage. After that, you have to actually do the climbing.*

## **Learning from experience**

*A man was walking along the street when he tripped and fell over. He slowly and ruefully picked himself up and walked on further, only to trip and fall over again. As he lay on his back looking at the sky and seeing stars that were not there, he said to himself, 'If I'd known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have bothered getting up last time.'*

*Chinese fable*

## **The Wealth of Kings**

*The glories of the court of King Croesus were beyond comparison and his wealth is legendary. Nevertheless, his land was conquered and he was captured by Cyrus the Great of Persia, who treated him well, allowing him to attend his own court as an adviser.*

*Day after day, Croesus watched in amazement and increasing disbelief as Cyrus dispensed justice humanely and even-handedly, giving to all who asked according to their need. 'Why,' he demanded to know at length, 'do you not hold back your wealth? Your palace and your court are nothing compared to mine. One day all your treasure will be gone if you carry on in this way. Only think what splendours you and yours might enjoy if you ceased to give so freely.'*

*By way of answer, Cyrus had the court scribe take down from dictation a letter to all of his friends and house-holding subjects, explaining that he needed to raise a large amount of money for the immediate defence of the realm. Soon gifts were pouring in from all quarters until the pile of gold and jewels and precious artefacts at that court was ten times greater than any the captive king had seen in his life.*

*'Now this is a portion of the true wealth of my kingdom,' said Cyrus, when he had given orders for the return of all the treasure to the donors. 'Do you imagine that I could command such respect and loyalty if I kept everything for myself?'*

*Ancient legend*

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