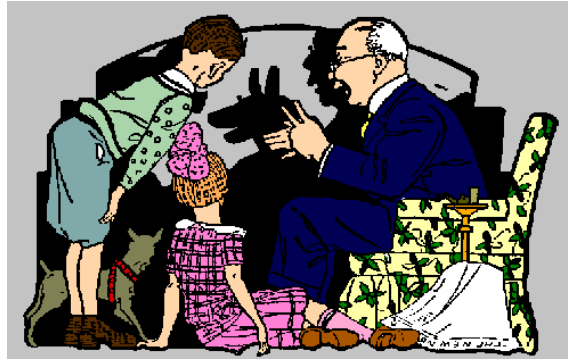


Are You Sitting Comfortably, Then I'll Begin Using Stories to Explore HRD Issues



Introduction

Do you remember those stories you were told as a child? From "Once upon a time" to "and ".....they lived happily ever after."

When I was small and TVs were not in everyone's life; each weekday afternoon at 1.45, we were asked "Are you sitting comfortably, then I'll begin?" I would settle down with my favourite stuffed animal "Horace" and listen to the story of the day. Stories would range from the familiar ones to new ones offering windows on a world filled with imagination and possibilities. Fifteen minutes each day was set aside for "Listen with Mother" with a distinctive signature tune that I can still hear in my head but cannot recall its title. Also, beloved Grandparents would add to these magical moments by sharing stories from their childhood and giving wise explanations as to why the milk soured when thunder was in the air and why you needed to turn your money over when the moon was full.

In those days, listening to someone tell a story was very much part of our life. It still is in many places in the world. Storytelling is an ancient craft, representing the traditional way that legends, tragedy and morality was handed down from generation to generation. Before Gutenberg invented the printing press and books began to become generally available, storytelling was the way we learned about the past, tried to comprehend the present and predicted the future.

Every culture in our world has an oral history tradition - a resource most of us take for granted, which can be tapped and made into a delightful and important part of life - a resource that crosses cultures and demonstrates our connectedness.

With the advent of the study of Scientific Management in the 20th Century, much of the earlier explanations of why things and people are as they were discounted. Our century has seen a relentless search for scientific and psychological reasons for individual behaviour. While these have value, we can miss important parts in our total understanding. We need to look back throughout history to garner a fuller meaning and appreciation for different cultures. Stories, folktales, myths, legends, allegories and fables can be a valuable addition to our knowledge.

History

Until 1846, the term 'popular antiquities' was used to describe what William John Thorne coined into *folklore*. Today folklore has come to be regarded as part of the human learning process and an important source of information about human life. Throughout the 19th Century, various scholars were interested in the collecting of folklore materials especially within the Western World. The research of the 19th Century German philologist and Sanskrit scholar, Theodor Benfey formed the basis for all later comparative studies in the field. His works with Lang's "Custom and Myth" (1884) and Sir James George Frazer's Golden Bough (1890, expanded to 13 volumes 1915) were landmarks of the so-called anthropological school of folklore study. The German philologists, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm created great interest in the early 19th Century by the publication of Household Tales (2 volumes 1812-1815, translated in 1884). Their work encouraged many others including Hans Christian Andersen to publish and retell similar materials from their own cultures. Common themes were identified across cultures and interest expressed in these adjacencies. The American folklorist, Stith Thompson, classifying the plots of a variety of folktales created a catalogue known as the Type-index in the early 20th Century. Freud and Jung exerted considerable influence on the interpretations of these stories and they used the term "myth" in a more

Are You Sitting Comfortably Then I'll Begin?

27th IFTDO World Conference, 22-24 July, 1998, Dublin - © Jane Durant, April 1998

generalized way than defined here. This awareness of the common threads of story and myth became part of general consciousness and today, one can easily find stories from almost anywhere in the World. Typical standards texts include Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend (revised 1972). In the workshop we will use stories from many of the countries represented at our Conference including our host - Ireland!

Genres

Folklore can be separated into five general areas: - ideas and beliefs, traditions, narratives, folk sayings and the folk arts. Folktales tend to be one of a kind of narrative prose found in the oral traditions of the world. We hear and remember folktales -consequently there are often many versions of the same theme, passed down through generations -for example, how the creation of the world occurred. The main kinds of folktales are myths, legends and *Märchen*. or fairy tales. Many of these terms tend to be interchangeable but often carry an implication of falsehood and incredibility. Other forms include animal tales and fables, tall tales, formula tales, jokes and anecdotes as well as cante fables (folk stories in song and verse)



Fables usually convey a cautionary or moral truth; some of the most famous fables are Aesop's. They were originally orally transmitted but were later written down. Other important collections of fables include the more than 200 versions of Sanskrit collection known as the Panchatantra, probably from the 3rd Century AD. In France, La Fontaine was one of the most famous creators of fables between 1668 and 1694; Contemporary writers include James Thurber and William Saroyan.

Allegories convey symbolic meaning parallel but distinct from and more important than, their literal meaning. This meaning is often expressed through personifications and other symbols. The art of allegory reached its peak in the Middle Ages (5th to 15th Centuries, especially in the work of Dante and Chaucer. Later important works include Pilgrim's Progress (1678). A modern example is Orwell's Animal Farm (1945)

Myths when strictly defined are folktales that are religious and explain the universe and its inhabitants. Such stories are considered true by both the narrator and the audience and tell of the creation and regulation of the world. With a series of offspring and companions, the deity gives form to the world and introduces life to it. Then the being proceeds in a series of adventures and struggles in which he or she does things such as liberating the sun, the moon, water or fire; regulating the winds, originating corn, beans or nuts; defeating monsters and teaching mortals how to hunt and plough. The being may take human form or animal. It may frequently change shape (see Raven the Trickster in Native American tales or Anansi the Spider, the trickster-hero of a great body of West African tales).

Legends are folk history, which tell about what has happened in the world after the period of creation is over. They also are believed and encompass a wide variety of subjects; saints, werewolves, ghosts and other supernatural beings; adventures of real heroes and heroines; personal reminiscences and explanations of geographical features and place-names.

Fairy Tales or *Märchen* are fiction. They take place in a wonderland filled with magic and strange characters that are believed neither by the narrator nor the audience. Fairies are not a requirement, but a typical plot involves an underdog hero or heroine who is put through great trials or must perform

Are You Sitting Comfortably Then I'll Begin?

27th IFTDO World Conference, 22-24 July, 1998, Dublin - © Jane Durant, April 1998

seemingly impossible tasks, and who with magical assistance secures his or her birthright or a suitable marriage partners. Fairy tales often begin with "Once upon a time" and end with "They lived happily ever

after". *Märchen* have become popular with children, although originally adults were part of their normal audience.

Many of the above forms overlap and for the purposes of this paper they are provided for background interest and as a guide to where to find appropriate stories for using as tools for Human Resource Development.

Using Stories

What is so important about stories? We find that stories carry shared beliefs, culture and history of a group. As human beings we all have many similar life experiences within the differences and stories from many cultures speak to our similarities and the importance of the value of the differences.¹

Stories do not have to be "old" to be valuable. Much of literary fiction and biography provides us with the ability to relive the story and relate it to our life in a meaningful way. In fact, one might postulate that every successful book, film, soap opera and drama is successful to a large part because of the connection of the story to the audience.

Can YOU use stories? Yes, you can, you do already. Telling a story to others is a slightly different process to the usual type of content delivered in organizational intervention. The tempo is different and the placing of a story needs added sensitivity to the group. (But then so do most of the other things we do with groups!) If you have never told stories, you might consider taking a storytelling course so you can practice and learn the techniques for making your stories wonderful in the telling for the group. Self-awareness is one of the most important skills in understanding the magic of story telling. *My* Experience is *my* experience not *the* experience - but often my experience is your experience and then we may have synergy and meaning. In our lives, we are always in the middle of stories, albeit several stories at the same time. Our own story is our interpretation of what happened. People outside us interpret "our story" using their "story" and they may see a different story from the one we tell. Then there may be the story of our life that we don't tell or even understand. Many of the legends talk about this journey of discovery - the Hero's Journey, the Odyssey, the Lord of the Rings, etc. We are also on such a journey and the stories we tell can exercise a peculiar sort of power. Using these stories, we can offer some alternative options for understanding the way we work with others.

As Jean Houston says in her book, "The Search for the Beloved".²

"Story is living and dynamic. Stories exist to be exchanged, They are the currency of human growth"



¹ see *Why the Platypus is Special*, in "From the Dreamtime" Australian Aboriginal Legends collected by Jean A Ellis, Harper Collins, Victoria, Australia 1991

Are You Sitting Comfortably Then I'll Begin?

27th IFTDO World Conference, 22-24 July, 1998, Dublin - © Jane Durant, April 1998

Bibliography

- Abrahams Roger D., African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library
- Aesop, Fables, Penguin Classics, London
- Armstrong, David, How to Turn Your Company's Parables into Profit and Managing by Storying Around, Doubleday
- Bushnaq, Inea, Arab Folktales, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library
- Campbell, Joseph, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Mythos: Princeton /Bollingen Series in World Mythology, Vol 17
- Carter, Angela editor, The Old Wives Fairy Tale Book, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library, 1990, New York, Random House
- Eisely, Loren, The Star Thrower, 1978, New York, Random House
- Ellis, Jean A. From the Dreamtime, Australian Aboriginal Legends, 1991, Victoria - Australia, Harper Collins
- Ellis, Jean A. This is the Dreaming Australian Aboriginal Legends, 1994, Victoria - Australia, Harper Collins
- Erdoes, Richard & Alfonso Ortiz, American Indian Myths and Legends, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library
- Fang, Linda, A Collection of Ancient Chinese stories retold, 1995, Toronto, Harper Collins
- Frazer, Sir James G., The Golden Bough, 1890
- Funk and Wagnalls, Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, revised 1972
- Glassie, Henry, editor, Irish Folktales, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library
- Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, translated by Jack Zipes, 1992, New York, Bantam
- Jagendorf, M.A. & Weng, Virginia, The Magic Boat and other Chinese Folk Stories, 1980, Toronto, Gage Publishing
- Microsoft, Encarta 1998 Encyclopaedia
- Ramanujan, A.K., Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages, Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library
- Randall, William Lowell, The Stories We are - An Essay in Self-Creation, 1995, Toronto; University of Toronto Press
- Shea, Noah ben, Jacob the Baker, 1989, Toronto, Ballentine Books
- Shea, Noah ben, Jacob's Journey, 1991, Toronto, Ballentine Books
- Shea, Noah ben, Jacob's Ladder, 1997, Toronto, Villard Books
- Tata, Mrudul, Favourite Tales from the Panchatantra,

Presented by Jane in person at the 27th International Federation of Training and Development Organizations World Conference, 22-24 July 1998, DUBLIN, Ireland

Janedurant.com/Are you sitting comfortably:2007April

² Houston J. 1987. *The search for the beloved; journeys in sacred psychology*, Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher