

The Storyteller's Quest – A Treatise

Prologue

The Storytellers Quest - or how a skilled healer joins forces with a blithesome bard to rescue a band of children from an evil enchantment, thereby restoring to them the power of the spoken word.

In fairytales, quests are undertaken with the express purpose of rescuing another from enchantment, imprisonment or servitude. The successful quester must employ the virtues of generosity, courage and resourcefulness at each challenge met along the way. Goodness is always rewarded and evil punished.

The Storyteller's Quest is a metaphorical guide for artists, educators and health workers undertaking a collaborative journey. It is based on the *Tales for Terrific Talkers Project*, undertaken by Port Macquarie Community Health Centre speech pathologists and storyteller Morgon Schatz Blackrose.

This story, in the form of a literary fairytale, was presented in conjunction with 5 oral stories at the *CEIEC Conference 2002 - Honoring the Child*.

The purpose of the oral stories was twofold; to highlight particular aspects of **The Storyteller's Quest** and to offer a positive experience of storytelling.

I introduced the presentation with *The Marriage of Two Masters*. It is a North African tale of a young woman who is not understood, because she speaks in metaphors. A fitting analogy given that many of the children participating in the *Tales for Terrific Talkers Project* had difficulty in being understood because of their speech and language problems.

I told four subsequent stories to address four key issues that underpinned the success of the project: priorities, purpose, expectations and empowerment.

The Sweetest Melody is an Afghani story that highlights the practical considerations that must be met when working with young children, before any healing can take place.

Bird Woman affirms the commitment to knowing your purpose, which is integral to any project's process. I have included *The Storyteller's Purpose*, at the end of this paper, which I wrote to understand my priorities, clarify my role in the project and also inform the participants of my philosophy.

The Two Pickpockets is a traditional story that shows how children will live up to and beyond our expectations.

The Swahili story, *Tongue Meat* expresses the power of storytelling to heal, to teach and to entertain.

The Storyteller's Quest

'Language helps develop life as surely as it reflects life. It is a most important part of our human condition'. Jane Yolen

Once upon a time a bard and a healer chanced to meet at a festival. There they passed the afternoon swapping tales and laughing at each other's jokes. But as the sun set and night draped her dark veil across the sky, their talk took a serious tone. Did the bard know what was happening to the children?

*It addles their brains and tangles their tongues,
Obscures their speech and renders them dumb*

The healer nodded her head. For some time she had been engaged in the rescue of village children from the wicked enchantment. She and her trusty team worked hard, and with some success. But for each child they brought out from under the spell, two more became bewitched. Without reinforcements they would never be able to save all the children, let alone plan a way to break the spell.

Month after month she petitioned King Clean-Bill to open his coffers, but her entreaties fell on unheeding ears. The Chancellor of the Exchequer advised the King who informed the President, who announced to the Minister who communicated to the Secretary, who reported to the Palace Guard, who took great delight in publicly addressing her on the palace steps.

Didn't she know that children should be seen and not heard?

Wasn't she aware that children were the responsibility of their parents?

Surely she realised that children didn't pay tax and until they did so, would not receive additional treasury funds?

Therefore the King's coffers would remain closed until the next round of supplicants was assessed. She was then summarily dismissed from the presence of the Palace Guard.

The bard had heard this story before. In her experience a wise and just King was as rare as hen's teeth. King Clean-Bill was like so many she had encountered, lacking in vision, pinch fisted and surrounded by sycophants. She sympathised with the struggle of the healer.

She herself had chosen the traditional path by which her craft could sustain her, travelling from place to place, telling her stories and relying on the generosity of the people. In this way she was not beholden to any King.

Listening to the healer, she was certain that their united efforts could release the village children from the spell... but who would pay her? Stories may be food for the soul but telling them should never be done on an empty belly.

And the bard had her own children to feed. The matter of sustenance was discussed over large pieces of spinach pie, apple cake and a pot of tea.

The healer's budget was accountable to the King, via a succession of palace minions, each one pettier than the next. All the treasury money was earmarked for causes King Clean-Bill and his cohorts deemed worthy. To divert treasury funds to the bard's pocket was an impossible task. Another source of revenue must be sought.

Those who needed their combined skills most were least equipped to pay for them. The King's adoption of the User Pays Scheme ensured that only the rich could afford immediate consultation with the best healers in the land. The poor would have to wait...forever if need be, until they could be seen by the community healers, who were overworked and under resourced. The parents of these children had barely enough coin to feed and clothe them, let alone pay for a bard and a healer.

As the midnight hour approached the pair had exhausted all but one possibility of funding. They would petition the King's cousin, The Duke of Bohemia, to support their cause. Although of royal blood and philanthropic sentiment, his coffers were a far cry from the King's. However they were determined to secure even a scant amount of money to begin their quest. Before leaving the table, the two made a pact. They would join forces and not only attempt to release as many children as they could from the enchantment but raise a direct challenge to its power.

In the weeks that followed the healer and the bard discussed strategies, devised a plan and drafted their request to the Duke. As it stood, any money from the Duke would automatically go to the Palace Secretary to administer, which in reality meant the Palace treasury. It would then have great difficulty finding its way back down through the Palace hierarchy to the bard and the healer. The only way they could ensure that money was used for their purpose was to bring in another authority to auspice their work.

An independent group of healers, respected by the community and supportive of their quest, agreed to dispense any funds that the bard and the healer could raise. So saying, the submission was put to the Duke.

Three moons passed before word reached the ears of the bard that their request was successful, but the healer had gone. She was called to a distant land to look after her ailing mother. Although her heart remained with the quest, her body could not. Thus her team of worthy companions were entrusted with the task.

The healers had mapped out the routes to take, allotted times and drew up the guidelines for each rescue attempt. At first meeting the bard was introduced to the team leader, who shared her knowledge of the enchantment and the specific ways it entrapped children and their families. The bard listened, eager for more information on how the enchantment manifested itself. She would learn what she could from the healer, for her knowledge would be necessary to create tales and rhymes specific to the healer's purpose.

That evening, after the children were fed and put to bed and her husband was well occupied with his own thoughts, the bard sat and pondered on the meeting she had with the healer. What was her purpose? According to the healer, the bard's words were to reinforce her teachings. If the parents and children practiced daily the rhymes and songs, and followed the healer's teachings, then they could break the spell. The logic in the healer's reasoning did not escape the bard.

*The joy of singing and the magic of rhyme,
the freedom to dance and the rhythm of time
free the spirit to laugh loud and long
and open the heart to hear the bard's song.*

It was the bard's song that the healer had no experience of. How could she know the power of story to speak directly to the listener's heart, if she herself had not received the gift?

The bard kept her stories on the tip of her tongue, in the deep recesses of her memory and embedded in her heart. They were like tiny seeds ready to spring to life at the first sign of nurturance. And then they would flourish beyond the boundaries of intellect and purpose, like wild flowers self-seeding in the imaginations of all who heard them. Once the healers heard the stories with their hearts, then they would understand the bard's purpose - for everyone in the presence of storytelling to be touched by its magic. Only when this occurred would their first challenge be met, to forge a bond of trust and respect between the healers and the bard. A strong alliance between them underpinned the success of the quest. The leader had shown her foresight in assigning a different healer for each group. In this way the knowledge and experience of the healers would be shared and each would come to realise the power of story for herself.

In the weeks that followed the healers explained to the bard where they would meet, whom they could take in each group and how the healing would work. It was integral to their work that the parents understood their time together was therapy, their chosen method of healing. This was their greatest challenge, to dispel the myth of the magic wand.

Many of the parents expected the healers to wave a magic wand and their children would be free of the enchantment. Convincing them that the magic lay in their own abilities to work with their child was no mean feat. If they were reluctant to engage in playing time and saying rhyme with their child, the healing would never take place. They needed to understand that the rhymes and songs were the tools that they could use to free their children.

In the bard's experience scepticism could only be countered by trust. In the four weeks they had to execute the children's freedom, she was certain they could establish trust with them. But the children needed continued guidance from their parents, who had to take on the dual roles of bard and healer, to sustain their release. It may take a month or a year to have a successful

healing, but it could only be done with the parent's collaboration. Therein was a task far greater than the first.

The bard submitted the stories, songs raps and rhymes she would perform. Each session must open with a traditional story. This was the key to enabling the heart to receive any healing or teachings. The stories contained meaning for the child; presenting problems and ways to solve them, heroes they could identify with and good always triumphed over evil. They would listen with their hearts as well as their ears. Only then would they be open to the healing.

They gathered at the healer's meeting room. It was not ideal, but it was contained, a quality both the bard and the healer would appreciate in the course of their work. At the end of the first session the healer and the bard looked at each other in dismay. There were children whose enchantments were so strong they could not be reached in this group. There were others who the bard needed to run and jump with before they could sit still enough to listen, and others who needed to be gently coaxed from their silence. A few were aggressive towards other children. There were parents who slapped their children, others who showed disdain and those who were desperate to heal their child. And then the bard foresaw the embarrassment that derived from parents comparing their child to others. Those with children that ran non-stop romanticized those whose children sat in silence and to some extent vice versa. A group with such diverse behaviours invited such destructive comparisons.

The bard and the healer talked of the group and how it would run. A healing environment could not tolerate violence, but pointing this out at the next session could embarrass the transgressors. Instead they would monitor the group and in the following groups explain that precept. The healer could not take one child, as the type of healing they employed for the quest was not suitable for her enchantment. As for the others, they would persevere.

In the following four weeks their mettle was tested, but bard and healer had forged a strong alliance and they could see the effects of their work. In the following groups the bard and the healers followed similar patterns of working. They moved to the library for the next two groups and the Sea Scouts hall for the last. It seemed that the first group presented the most challenges, from the diversity of the children's enchantments to the paucity in some parent's abilities to support their children in their healing. At the same time there were children who blossomed with the guidance of their parents in their surrogate roles of bard and healer. In each group the bard sensed the changes in the children's abilities to communicate their feelings and thoughts. By the last week in every group all the children were participating in their own healing.

*With baited breath and eyes that sing,
Each word a vine from which they swing,
The children hear the story told
The children know this tale of old.
Three bears, three pigs, Red Riding Hood.*

*The Wolf is wicked the Grandmother good.
They sing, they clap, they speak the rhyme,
And live happily ever after, once upon a time.*

There was success and there was not. Bard and healers knew that this would be so in any case. As to the extent of the healing then this was the linchpin in meeting the final challenge. Persuading the healers and everyone else, all the way up to the King, that the Palace Treasury should fund the quests of the Bards and Healers Alliance would be the most difficult challenge of all.

The first step was to assure the healers of the merit in continuing the Alliance. If she could not convince them to strengthen and expand the Alliance, through directly pressuring the Secretary, then they would return to their traditional methods of healing. This, she knew was not an easy choice for the healers. To perpetually justify their work took time away from those that needed them most, the children and their parents. They were under constant pressure to continue to perform the rescues.

They knew it was unlikely that King Clean Bill would heed their requests if the standard procedure for justification of alternative, additional or administrative funding was not complied with. 100 reports, assessments, faxes, emails, drafts, submissions, files, profiles, representations, conferences, papers, documents, duplicates, endorsements, memorandums, accounts, statistics, evaluations, meetings and phone calls must be adhered to in the proper order before the allocation of monies.

Without further funds the quest would be considered a novel approach, unscientifically tested and therefore invalid. The evaluation would be shunted away in some palace clerk's drawer, to be forgotten. Only the power of the quest would live on in the hearts and memories of those who entered upon it. The bard refused to be daunted by the third challenge. There was a time to confront and a time to circumvent. Before the bard and the healers made a direct confrontation they would seek out the support of their peers. Forming their Alliance had required an understanding and respect of their different ways of working. It now required an understanding of their different ways of evaluating success. From the outset the bard was aware of their differences. Although the bard and the healers spoke in the same tongue they related in different idioms. She spoke the language of story, idealistic, metaphorical, visionary, whereas the healers were adept communicators in the dialect of King Clean Bill. They used terms, she used words, they relied on proof, she on faith, they evaluated outcomes and she sensed each moment.

These differences however, could be utilised to the advantage of all, if the dominant dialect honoured the validity and equity of the language of story. A more holistic approach and assessment of the quest's success could be undertaken if the combined perceptions of bard and healer were employed.

With the healers committed to the alliance they could then impress upon their colleagues the virtues of forging further alliances throughout the land. This then would be the path the bard and the leader of the healers would take.

The bard was heartened by the ability of many of the parents to adopt the role of healer and bard. If they could do it then so could others.

The healer agreed that they could take a dual path, teaching the carers of the children what they had taught the parents. In this way they could gather more and more people working to free the children from their enchantments.

And so it was, that the healer left her place of work to join the bard on their next quest, but that is another story.

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An alternative understanding of The Storyteller's Quest

Therapy treatments for children with speech delay and specific language impairment are constrained by the demand for services. In some areas of the Mid North Coast of NSW, children wait up to a year before they receive therapy with a Community Health speech pathologist. This is not an uncommon occurrence in rural Australia. At Port Macquarie Community Health Centre, children are offered a block of therapy sessions, four x 1 hour sessions over 4 weeks. Alternatively, they may participate in small group therapy. At the completion of their therapy they will be returned to the therapy waiting list if required.

To address the lengthy wait for therapy services, the speech pathology department at Port Macquarie Community Health Centre and myself developed the *Tales for Terrific Talkers Project*, which aimed to trial storytelling as a therapy technique for the treatment of speech and language delays of children aged 2 to 8.

Funding was applied for through the Hastings Council Community Grants Program 2001 –2002 and \$2,500 was secured, through the Catalyst section, specifically to support artists working in the Hastings community. The project was auspiced by the Port Macquarie Early Intervention Centre. This decision was based on the difficulty of having Community Health administer the funds.

Four specifically targeted groups of parents and children attended four ninety-minute storytelling sessions, jointly run by a community health speech pathologist and myself; a toddler language group, a preschool speech group, Kinder – Year 2 language group, all drawn from the client base of Port Macquarie Community Health and a preschool group open to the general public. The project focused on the following aspects of treatment: providing specific therapy techniques and strategies to parents and children, empowering parents through demonstrating and teaching storytelling techniques, and collaboration between health professionals and artists to provide a service delivery option within the community.

The storyteller and speech pathologist worked in tandem to introduce and explain speech pathology techniques and demonstrate them through the medium of storytelling. At the end of each session the storyteller read aloud to the children, giving parents the opportunity to discuss their child with the speech pathologist. Parents were given copies of the raps, rhymes, songs, and techniques used in the storytelling sessions and encouraged to incorporate them into their daily routines with their children. Each session

provided time for parents to feedback on their storytelling experiences, as well as discuss story reading. The raps, rhymes, songs and stories are currently being made into a book with accompanying explanations on speech therapy techniques for parents, and early childhood workers.

Epilogue

From 2003, speech pathologist, Kerrie Murphy and myself will be offering workshops to early childhood workers and speech pathologists in Australia, based on the project. Our findings indicate that storytelling builds trust, fosters self-esteem and strengthens family bonds, in addition to developing children's oral and aural language skills. Combined with the raps, rhymes and songs created for the project it is also an effective speech therapy technique. More than a fix it model, the *Tales for Terrific Talkers Project* is suitable for working with any parents, teachers, children and early childhood workers. The proviso being that particular children may require differing approaches or presentations depending on their specific, if any, speech and language needs.

The Storyteller's Purpose

The best of the old stories spoke to the listener, because they spoke not just to the ear, but to the heart as well.

Jane Yolen

The *Tales for Terrific Talkers Project* offers all participants; children, parents, speech pathologists and storyteller, the opportunity to experience the power and wonder of storytelling.

In addition to developing and expanding language development and oral skills in children, each session can strengthen family bonds and provide social interaction between different parents and children.

Parents, children and speech pathologists are both teachers and students in this project. Following are my aims and objectives as the primary storyteller in this project.

- To create a positive experience of storytelling for children, parents and speech pathologists.
- To develop self esteem in children through creating opportunities for them to participate in the creation and presentation of stories.
- To empower parents through teaching storytelling skills that will enhance their desire and ability to tell stories to their children.

- To incorporate speech pathology techniques into a storytelling format to develop language and pre literacy skills in children.
- To resource parents with a repertoire of songs, rhymes and stories to tell to their children at home.
- To inspire speech pathologists to incorporate storytelling into their practice
- To model storytelling as an accessible, therapeutic and entertaining medium which everyone can learn.

Sources

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