

The power of three

Storytelling and bereavement



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Storytelling has always served an important function in all societies and cultures. Janet Dowling describes how she uses this traditional art therapeutically to help bereaved people interpret and understand their responses to loss.

'The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves ... are the theories with which to think forwards ... and understand backwards.' So writes Fred Inglis (1993) in his book on Cultural Studies.

I am a storyteller and a social worker by training. I have worked as a therapeutic storyteller in hospitals and hospices in the UK, and as a Cruse bereavement volunteer. I use traditional stories, personal stories and original stories to help people explore their own experiences and feelings to help them make sense of what has happened for themselves, and decide how they want things to be in the future. This article is about the process I use and that I teach in workshops, and my experience of the use of traditional stories in other countries.

Personal narratives

When working with the bereaved, the most important story is the one they have to tell – the story of their lives, loves, and hopes, their trials and tribulations, their joys and their celebrations. There is growing interest in the importance of personal narrative in counselling and medicine and the effectiveness of working with this approach (see, for example, Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998; White & Epston, 1990; Strug & Podell, 2003; Charon, 2008; Valentine, 2008).

However, sometimes people are unable to tell or explore their own story. Sometimes it is too distressing for them and they cannot bring themselves to remember. Sometimes they are too fearful of what the future may bring. Sometimes people just need to hear a story that tells them that they are not alone, that their experience is universal, across time and cultures. This is when storytelling can be a useful tool to help people move forward.

The story can act as a metaphor, so the person does not have to directly address their own experiences. But, in drawing on their

Editor's comment: Spotlight on Practice articles showcase promising innovative practice. The use of storytelling in the ways described here makes sense, but needs to be subjected to systematic, controlled trials before it can be accepted as of proven value. **CMP**

own experiences to explore their responses to the story, they may understand these experiences better, and be able to change their responses to their situation.

Metaphor and storytelling

There is increasing and well-documented use of metaphor and storytelling to enable people to make changes to their personal stories. Gersie (see Gersie & King, 1989; Gersie, 1992) laid the foundations for the use of storytelling to work with bereavement. Lahad's later research (Lahad, 1992a) suggested that using metaphor and storytelling with people with post traumatic stress, for example, enables them to address the emotional content of their experience without having to relive the actual traumatic moment. Ayalon (in Gersie, 1992) emphasises Bettelheim's belief (1976) that it is through 'language, myth and ritual that we attempt to explain and cope with the potential threat of death. The acknowledgement of death is paramount to the full awakening of the person to adult maturity, symbolically portrayed in myth, legend and folktale'. Subsequent writers and storyteller practitioners (see, for example, Gignoux, 1998; Lawley & Tompkins, 2000; Dent-Brown & Wang, 2006) have built on and developed these foundations.

Ayalon (in Gersie, 1992) argues that 'story provides the safety by containing in it the two seemingly contradictory elements of distancing and involvement'. Distancing comes from time and physical distance in setting the story 'once upon a time' and 'in a land far, far away', and use of fantastical characters such as royalty, animals, or the supernatural (fairies, witches, giants, superheros). Involvement comes from the identification with the emotional state of the characters. As a character feels, explores and changes their emotions, so the listener draws on their own emotional state in the same way. Using storytelling to explore different responses to a given situation allows people to explore different options and opportunities without having to risk their fragile emotional state by taking on new challenges. Dramatherapy also uses this process, and Jennings (1992) gives many examples of its effectiveness.

Using stories

I have explored many traditional stories and have found that a few drawn from different traditions and cultures are helpful in facilitating someone struggling to tell their own story of bereavement. They include Death and the Nut (European), The Mustard Seed (Buddhist), Gift of a Cow Tail Switch (West Africa), and This Too Shall Pass (Jewish) (see boxes).

One thing that I take into account is that, no matter what the story means to me or what moral, judgement or conclusions I might draw from it, no matter even what my intention is in telling that particular story, the person listening to it will have their own ideas and responses. It is therefore important that I do not lead them, but ask open questions that allow them to explore it in their own way. This is not about interpretation; it is about facilitating the person to explore their own interpretations of the story.

When I finish telling a story, I pause for a short time to let the listener take it in. Then I might ask some or all of the following:

- What do you feel drawn to in the story?
- What images came up for you in that story?
- Is there anything in the story that reminds you of something you have experienced?
- What memories or feelings did you experience as you listened to the story? And, when you remember that, how do you feel?

The focus is always on what happens in the story. Sometimes people who have found it difficult to talk about their own feelings find that the story enables them now to explore their own story directly. However, continuing in the story allows some exploration of alternative points of view and the relationships between different people. In exploring the relationships and feelings of the different people in the story, the person can also be exploring and developing their understanding of their own relationships and feelings, at one remove.

Story-making

Sometimes, when one of the traditional stories does not seem to be what the person needs, I create a story for them. I will then tell them the story and we will explore it in the same way as we would with a traditional story.

Death and the nut

Jack lives with his mother. She is in pain and dying. She asks Jack to leave while she waits for a visitor. Outside Jack sees Death and realises that he is his mother's visitor. Jack tricks Death into being trapped in a nut. However he finds that, with no Death in the world, no one can eat, and the sick and the old have no relief from their pain. With his mother's help, he comes to understand that death is a natural part of life, and lets Death take his mother. He celebrates her life with their friends and neighbours, and starts on a new adventure.

The mustard seed

A woman goes to the Buddha to ask that her dead child be restored to her. The Buddha says he can do nothing until she brings him a mustard seed from a house that has known no sorrow. After much searching, she returns to him to tell him that she cannot find such a seed, but now she realises that everyone has experienced sorrow, and that they find different ways to overcome it.

There are various traditional story formats. I base my stories on a very basic eight-part version of the Mythic Structure that I loosely derived from the work of Joseph Campbell (2008) and which I find fits most (but not all) situations. (Subsequently I discovered that Gersie (1992) and Lahad (1992b) both devised a similar, six-part story framework to serve the same function, and this form is now commonly taught in dramatherapy courses (Dent-Brown & Wang, 2006).)

Stories begin with the Initial Situation, in which we are introduced to the main characters and the setting for the story. Then something happens – the Problem or Change – to which the hero is called on to respond. Typically, there may be something dark to overcome, or a



The Three Billy-Goats Gruff is typical of the 'three' story format, where a challenge or obstacle requires three attempts to overcome it. Photo with kind permission of the Theatre of Widdershins (www.theatre-of-widdershins.co.uk)

Table 1: The storyboard

Initial situation	Problem/Change
Preparation for the quest Skills, advice, helpers, magical objects	TRY Challenge, obstacle, hazard
TRY Challenge, obstacle, hazard	TRY AGAIN Challenge, obstacle, hazard
Transformation/Sorted	Resolution/Celebration/Maturing/Change

partner to be wooed and won. The hero will then make Preparation for the Quest, when they may be given advice, meet helpers, find magical objects, learn skills – or do nothing at all. Then arise the Challenges, Obstacles or Hazards that have to be overcome in order to achieve Transformation, where what needed to be addressed is resolved. Transformation then leads to a final Celebration of success.

But the story does not end there. The outcome of the Celebration (often a marriage) becomes the new Initial Situation and the cycle starts all over again. My eight-part model differs from Gersie and Lahad only in that I give separate emphasis to each of the challenges, obstacles and hazards, rather than considering them all together.

Most people are familiar with the importance of the number three in stories – the three bears, the three little pigs, the three billy-goats gruff. The hero or heroine often has to overcome three challenges, obstacles or hazards before they can reach their goal. And there is a reason for this. The person is developing experience over time when they approach an issue in three stages. It is very similar to signal theory in psychology, and its three Rs – register, recognise and remember. When you first experience something, you register that it has occurred. The second time it occurs you recognise it, because it has occurred before. The third time it occurs, you recognise it and remember that it has happened before and can start to anticipate what happens next. With anticipation comes learning, and with learning comes the potential for change – or transformation. The spirit of try, try, try again is also the power of three.

I use a storyboard (see Table 1) to create a story that involves characters and problems that are similar to those experienced by the client, but not the same. The key is to attend to the emotional situation with which the person is struggling, and the metaphors that they themselves use to describe it. If their experience is about loss, then a story will be about a well-loved object that goes missing. If they are feeling low, I will ask what that feels like. If they say ‘A dark cloud’, then the story may be about a dark cloud that encompasses

a village, linking directly with their metaphor. If I know the transformation the person wants to achieve, I can then include the skills, advice, helpers, etc that they may need for their story quest, but also for their real life journey and the kinds of challenges, obstacles, or hazards they have to face (in threes) and overcome in real life.

Storytelling in other cultures

In September 2005 I successfully applied for a Fellowship with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to visit the US and Canada to research storytelling in the care of the dying and bereaved. In the autumn of 2006 I spent eight weeks travelling in the US and Canada, and met and learned about the work of many different storytellers and shared experiences.

I met Allison Cox, author of *The Healing Heart* (Cox & Albert, 2003), who uses storytelling in her work with young prisoners. She finds that bereavement is often an important factor in their life experiences. We visited the local remand centre, and the boys asked me to tell the oldest story I knew. I obliged with a short version of Gilgamesh. The story is 5000 years old, and focuses on the relationship between Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu. Enkidu takes a blow meant for Gilgamesh and dies. Gilgamesh’s grief takes him to the underworld and back, before he realises the value of life and death. The boys in the remand centre related this story both to their gang experiences and to their personal experiences. One lad talked about the death of his mother for the first time, which allowed staff to work more with him on that.

I also met Darryl Babe Wilson, who is a Native American and won the 1999 Wordcraft Circle Writer of the Year award for his autobiography *The Morning the Sun Went Down*. This describes how he was removed from the Native American culture after his mother died, and so missed out on many of the rituals and rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood, and only came to them later in adult life. He explained how Native Americans see life as continuing past death into an altered form. They talk of ‘going on ahead’, when someone ‘changes worlds’. He told me:

‘... I come from a long line of storytellers and dreamers, who have the history, and have given the history to me. And that has kept me going very good. I have had a lot of pain and aggravation, and I got a lot out of the stories I was told. I had a foundation of a life situation that never entertained death as something to be fearful of, or shudder in front of.’

This too shall pass

King Solomon aims to trick an arrogant soldier by asking him to bring him a ring that makes a sad man happy and a happy man sad. He thinks it is an impossible task. After much searching, the soldier finds an old man who inscribes a plain ring for him. He takes it to King Solomon, who reads: ‘This too shall pass.’ King Solomon realises that everything changes over time.

Disabled by a stroke, and mindful that his own death was nearing, Darryl found the traditional Native American stories reassuring and was concerned that those reassurances are not available to younger generations who do not have the opportunity to hear, learn and respect the traditional stories too.

More recently I have been to Israel and Palestine where I worked with a group of bereaved parents of people killed in the conflict. They were a mixed group of Jews and Arabs (their own definitions), who worked together towards peace. They went into schools in pairs – one Jew and one Arab – and told their own personal stories of grief as a way of demonstrating the impact of the conflict on ordinary people. They had found that sometimes the experience was too overwhelming for the listeners, and wanted to explore with me ways to deal with this. As we discussed the kind of stories I used and why, they realised they had the material they needed within their own cultures – their own traditional stories. Balancing a traditional Jewish story with a traditional Arab story and a story from another, neutral culture would, they felt, equip them better to deal with emotional responses as they arose.

And so I end as I started. 'The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are the theories with which to think forwards and understand backwards.' Storytelling allows people to explore different explanations for what has happened and their responses to it, and different possibilities for moving on. ■

Gift of the cow tail switch

A man leaves his wife and four sons to go hunting. He is killed by a lion and his bones are scattered. Some time later the youngest son asks his brother: 'Who is my father?' The elder sons go looking for him, and find the scattered bones. The three sons use magic – one to restore the bones as a skeleton, one to put flesh on the body, the third to breathe life into it. They return home to much celebration. The father starts carving a Cow Tail Switch (a much-prized object), and says he will give it to the son who did the most to restore him. The elder sons compete for the switch but it is given to the youngest son – the one who asked for the stories about his father. For, as long as you tell stories about a person, no one will be truly dead and forgotten.

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