

STORYTELLING—THE ORAL TRADITION

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Today, storytellers, practice an ancient art that is as old as our species. Jack Zipes*, a folklore scholar of renown, quotes Mario Vargas Llosa: “Talking the way a storyteller talks, means being able to feel and live the very heart of that culture...” (Llosa: The Storyteller, 1989), a culture that is represented through the stories of its people. Today, our modern society offers an abundance of stories: TV, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, social media. There is a suspicion, however, that something is lost; have we lost the gift of storytelling? **The power of story is the passing on of wisdom and the building of a genuine sense of community.**

So, why storytelling and why does it matter?

Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or ...catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.**

Back in time before recorded history:

Primitive and ancient peoples told stories around campfires, in caves, near water holes for entertainment, shared experiences and eventually, to express values, teach heritage, survival, standards of behavior, create purpose and meaning to their lives, impart wisdom. Stories were told as part of rituals and ceremonies that generated a history to be shared, and led to identity with tribe. Tribal elders speculated on “how things came to be” giving rise to many **CREATION STORIES.**

Continent of Africa: Storytelling became commonplace as amusement at the end of a work day. These were ebullient in style with much interaction between teller and audience. Certain areas—such as Gold Coast—promoted the character Anansi, the trickster spider/man: Many stories from the “owner of all stories,” (the tale of how Anansi stole all stories from the story God) to tales of con schemes where he sometimes won and also lost terribly; stories of great warriors,

kings, hunters committing great feats of bravery. Children of Ghana were not considered educated unless they had heard the “Glivo” a collection of animal stories intended to teach courage, kindness, obedience, etc.

China: Ancient folktales of creation, and celebration of their culture and contributions to the world, like silk and firecrackers or the origin of rice. Fairy tales contained characters of superhuman traits: giants, demons, emperors, warriors, beautiful women and peasants. A social theme in Chinese stories was attacking the bureaucracy of the government. They would perform outdoors in the marketplace and request contributions.

India/Asian storytelling has been thought to be the oldest creator of epic tales, religious stories, and mythical extravaganzas: Including pre-bible, Panchatantra, Ramayana, Mahabharata—great epics tales of Gods and power in India. These are still told, usually by a one man shadow puppet show or troupes of shadow puppets and theater performances. (Sita Sings the Blues: A magnificent animated modern story of the Ramayana with torch song blues and hysterical shadow puppet narrators, all composed on the computer by American film writer Nina Paley. This is accessible on the internet for download or viewing. I highly recommend it if you have the time: about 1-1/2 hours—just google it by the title—try to watch in 1050HD—sensational!)

Greek/Roman Mythology: You know these. Look up Joseph Campbell et. al.

Then, of course, the Bible, old and new, contains and references many folktales, oral, and finally, written.

European Folk tales: Very diverse in subject matter and supernatural plotlines derived from deeply religious and pagan beliefs which might combine with Christian origins. Germany, France and Denmark (Grimm Bros., Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson—18th&19th c.) were first to write down folktales which they collected from the peasant classes - mostly nursemaids and servants. These gave rise to much criticism from the academic community as being unworthy. They were animal tales, romantic fairy tales and humorous stories—geared toward children—although many were violent, gruesome and

frightening.*** Once the Grimm Bros published their “Household Marchen” between 1812 and 1855. They eventually sold out, and the stampede was on. That same century was the heyday of collecting and publishing folk and fairy tales from all over Europe, Great Britain and Russia. (English collectors: Joseph Jacobs and later, Andrew Lang) Strangely enough, although Russian Folktales were very popular, because the Russian tradition only allowed the collecting of sacred and religious tales, they were collected and published in England—and many were mistaken for English origin. The fairy tales were mostly identifiable by wonderful descriptions of damp, black, dense forests, deep snow and wooden peasant huts. No little people or supernatural characters like the Irish. Princesses (the 12 dancing) and smart women, like the Lute Player are distinctly Russian. The most well known character was the witch Baba Yaga, a scary one, to keep children in line.

Scandinavia produced stories of the Viking heroes, trolls, gnomes and Norse Gods. From Ireland, Scotland, Wales came goblins, witches, bogeys, kelpies, brownies, leprechauns, mermen and mermaids. In Ireland there were ancient cycles of storytelling (by seanachies) who traveled the land telling histories by way of myth, legend, and romantic tales, usually with tragic endings. (Frank Delany’s novel Ireland tells a heartwarming story of a boy who is inspired by a traveling storyteller, and provides details on such a life, as well as a darn good yarn.)

In South and Central America and West Indies, folk tales—especially creation stories, came from the Maya, Aztec and Inca Tribes as well as Native Americans. Explorers, traders, slaves, migrating to the new world, brought stories that were then reshaped by mingling, updating and exchanging.

The United States has produced the most extensive and varied collections of folk tales due to a diversity of population: American Indian myths, African folk tales, sea chanteys, legends of American Folk heroes, and those told by immigrants from many lands. Unique heritages produced regions of commonality through tales in the Appalachian Mountain regions, Ozarks of Missouri and Arkansas, Louisiana Bayous, and New England, included the French influence from neighboring Canada.

Some storytellers today learned tales from parents, grandparents or other members of their families and communities; others through scholarly pursuit and collecting: (Jack Zipes, Jane Yolen, Roger Abrahams, Diane Wolkstein, Heather Forest, Pleasant deSpain to name just a few) Today there are thousands of storytellers, many of whom have gained national reputations by performing at festivals and schools and in community activities around the country and overseas. (They travel to find work not unlike the minstrels and troubadours of the middle ages who found great favor with the kings, noble families and emperors and performed ballads and storytelling, receiving payment as a way of making a living.)

Telling stories is a powerful way to arouse interest in cultures and countries.(How many people traveled to Greece after seeing “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” or “Never on Sunday”? or England after reading Harry Potter books? Or even a Lower Manhattan bus tour during the run of “Sex and the City”)

Today’s millennials have their own take on the “tradition” of storytelling. The advent of “The Moth” has become quite popular in cities throughout the US. They usually consist of a competition at a designated venue, where people tell personal stories (10—20 minutes each) without the use of notes, based on a pre-determined theme. (Lena Dunham’s final episode of “Girls” last season ended with a Moth competition)

Through stories there is the opportunity for greater understanding of history, foreign populations and ideas, and the environment; much more so than being told lists of dates and facts, graphs, charts, or other compilations that never touch the heart of human experience.

Students who are taught about Native Americans usually learn about teepees, canoes, moccasins and baskets, but the rich heritage of creation stories and legends, which reveal their central value system and attitude toward property and possessions, is largely ignored.

The possibilities of storytelling are endless. Stories will entertain, interpret, communicate ideas, heal, educate, and motivate. They bond listeners in a sharing experience.

For those who would like to see storytellers in action the magic of **Youtube is available:**

▶ [Lorraine Hartin-Gelardi - Truth and Story - YouTube](#)

▶ [Jay O'Callahan: The Power of Storytelling - YouTube](#)

[How To Tell A Story -The Seanacháí \(Eamon Kelly\) - YouTube](#)

[International Storytelling Conference \(2013\) Many Stories but One World - Diane Ferlatte - YouTube](#)

Each of these videos will refer to others if you want more. Many books provide further information about folk tales of foreign lands. Any book of folk tales from a specific country published by **Pantheon or Anchor** includes an introduction that is quite extensive illustrating the place and power of stories in that culture.

A few examples:

Roger D Abrahams: African American Folktales, 1985

Aleksander Afanas'ev: Russian Fairy Tales, 1945, 1973

Italo Calvino: Italian Folktales, 1956, 1980

*Jack Zipes, Tales worth Telling, Utne Reader Sept-Oct 1997

**Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces,1949

***For a really interesting examination of the Grimm tales and the background of their modification from gruesome to more child friendly, See: Joan Acocella in The New Yorker: "Once Upon a Time" July 23, 2012 <https://www.google.com/amp/www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/23/once-upon-a-time-3/amp>

As preparation for this seminar, please think about the following:

What is the role of storytelling and how has it been replaced?

What are some examples of individual and collective (cultural) stories and how do these become the basis of modern culture?

What is the relationship between the storyteller and listener?