A Study of a Knowledge Community's Perceptions of the Loss of Place

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Stories contain the wisdom of the world, teaching cultural values. Story builds community, celebrates cultural diversity, and preserves cultural identity. Where truth has been suppressed, story is an instrument of epiphany. Storytelling builds literacy skills, and develops metaphorical understanding. A storytelling center in Canada had been a cultural institution for 23 years and had cultivated the art and craft of storytelling in the members of its storytelling guild. When the center faced permanent closure, members were devastated. The theoretical underpinnings for this research study were narrative theory, place theory, and knowledge communities. The purpose of this study was to explore member perceptions of story, storytelling, and leadership. A phenomenological study was conducted to investigate the moment of this lived experience. Individual interviews with 9 participants and 2 focus groups of 3 participants each were conducted with members of the storytellers' guild. Audio recorded focus groups and individual interviews provided verbatim transcripts. Data analysis was inductive to discover categories and themes. Key findings indicated three dominant themes emerged: home, vision, and story. Findings also indicated that story strengthens both content retention and language acquisition. For the purposes of this paper, findings about story will be discussed.

Introduction

In speaking of "magic words", surely "Once upon a time" rivals "please" and "thank you" for effect. Toronto storyteller Dan Yashinsky (2004) expressed the import of storytelling with these words: "What I hold onto is the passionate belief that knowing stories by heart and telling them to a circle of listeners makes a haven for the human

spirit…Storytelling itself is, or can be, a tool for mending broken worlds" (pp. xiv, xvi). The 2012 announcement that a local storytelling center in Ontario, Canada was facing imminent and permanent closure provoked responses of shock, tears—even mourning. The storyteller members, and those who gathered every month to be transported by stories told aloud without benefit or distraction of text or visuals, solely the spoken word, were devastated by the loss. To understand the nature of the loss, one needs to come to an understanding of the role and value of story, and what the storytelling center meant and represented for the storytelling community and their followers.

Background and Research Problem

The loss of the Story Barn was the local problem, representing the loss of a significant local cultural institution that was strongly associated with storytelling and the art of storytelling that was learned and practiced there by the Storytellers' Guild. This study was timely because the largely unforeseen loss had recently occurred, and the first season in a new location had just begun. This study allowed an exploration of what the experience of the Storytellers' Guild in its original inception meant for those who experienced it. It also allowed an exploration of the role that the Story Barn played in the experience of the Storytellers' Guild as learners and as audience and critical listeners to Stories Aloud (also known as First Fridays), which also took place at the Story Barn. The study was fresh, of local cultural and historical significance, and captured the essence of the experience of the Story Barn. The unique intersection of storytelling, place and time, and a knowledge community presented an opportunity to encapsulate the moment of this lived experience through the eyes and hearts and voices of those who know it best.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual constructs underpinning the focus of this research, the Story Barn and its Storytellers' Guild, were three: narrative theory, place theory, and a conceptual framework understood as knowledge communities. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be narrative theory in its most familiar guise: story. Narrative theory, which characterizes storytelling, dates back to Aristotle, although it has been expanded and clarified by Augustine and Hegel (as cited in Speight, 2011). Narrative theory found 20th-century expression in the work of Paul Ricoeur (as cited in Smith, 2010) and Hannah Arendt (as cited in Speight, 2011), and in Michel de Certeau (as cited in Scott, 2011) and Gabriel Marcel (as cited in Tattam, 2010).

Literature Review

Story

The loss of a cultural institution is a problem. The loss of the Story Barn and the Storytellers' Guild (Wood, 2012) to the small Ontario, Canada town in which it had thrived for 23 years was a problem to both the storytellers and their loyal audience, as well as to the township that regarded the Story Barn as something of a jewel in its crown. To illustrate the significance of this problem, I will describe, through the review of relevant literature, the critical importance of story and storytelling, not just in small-town Ontario, but in this 21st century. Important for literacy and language acquisition (Dawkins & O'Neill, 2011; Elley, 1989; Sturm, 2008; Uchiyama, 2011), story is as important for disaffected urban youth (Nelson, McClintock, Perez-Ferguson, Shawver, & Thompson, 2008); as for the healing and restorying of Aboriginal youth and their communities

(Benson, 2003; Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T'lakwadzi, 2009; Coulter & Michael, 2007). Story is important for learners of English (Cho & Choi, 2008; Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011; Uchiyama, 2011; Wang & Lee, 2007), for literacy development for Aboriginal children (McKeough, Bird, Tourigny, Romaine, Graham, Ottmann, & Jeary, 2008), for social justice and culturally responsive pedagogy (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010) and for the preservation of linguistic dialects in diverse cultures (Mucina, 2011; Tossa, 2008). Storytelling is a tool of nurses (East, Jackson, O'Brien, & Peters, 2010), psychologists (Long & Perkins, 2007), social workers (Nelson et al., 2008; Carter-Black, 2007), anthropologists and social psychologists (Miller, 2009), teachers (Berkowitz, 2011; Kuyvenhoven, 2009), traditional healers (Benson, 2003, Porter, 2003; Profeit-LeBlanc, 2003) and researchers in numerous contexts.

Storytelling is the way that human beings make sense of the world (Bishop & Kimball, 2006; Scott, 2011): "Stories are the way we make sense of our lives: by telling them we tell ourselves who we are, why we're here, how we come to be what we are, what we value most, and how we see the world" (Colombo, Lisle, and Mano as cited in Caruthers, 2008). Stories reveal more than the teller realizes: a sense of humor, a sense of wonder, a political stance, even bias. Baskin (2005) maintained that "Storytelling is the most important, most uniquely human thing that our species does" (para. 2). Storytelling grants humans a status above animals. Scott (2011) agreed that "stories are the mark of the human, and the historian-storyteller is the muse of the humanities" (p. 206). Andersen (2011) noted that there is a certain nostalgia associated with storytelling and its current resurgence in Denmark, and she insisted that the word not be disparaged because its original Greek meaning is longing (or ache or pain) to return home. Black Africans, who

were brought to the Americas as slaves, as well as those in Black South Africa, cling to their stories, because the stories belong to them, whereas little else does (Carter-Black, 2007). Human beings define themselves through their stories (Bishop & Kimball, 2006). Both personal and traditional stories explain how we have become what we have become (Baskin, 2005). Sermeno (2011), in writing about international schools and international education, proposed storytelling as one means to encourage connection to other students, and to develop cultural sensitivity in the same way as Carter-Black (2006) advocated storytelling for students of social work.

The essential role and value of storytelling is recognized in diverse cultures. Hall, (as cited in Mucina, 2011, p. 6) explained that "stories enable the encoding of our embodied forms of knowing and learning." Stories are also the locus of memory, situated in all things.

> Africa breathes stories. In Africa everything is a story, everything is a repository of stories. Spiders, the wind, a leaf, a tree, the moon, silence, a glance, a mysterious old man, an owl at midnight, a sign, a white stone on a branch, a single yellow bird of omen, an inexplicable death, and unprompted laughter, an egg by the river, are all impregnated with stories. (Okri as cited in Mucina, 2011, p. 6)

Ubuntu stories themselves are structured with a response component: the teller prompts the audience with a phrase that calls forth an answer from the audience indicating that they are receptive to the tale that is about to be told. There may be a back and forth action until the storyteller is certain that the audience is ready and that attention is on the storyteller; that they are synchronized (Mucina, 2011). In oral Ubuntu storytelling, the

audience must be engaged through this formalized exchange. Storyteller and audience move together from comfort to discomfort, troubling their perceptions, and questioning their interpretations, yet listeners experience the story from varying individual perspectives.

The tradition of priming the audience, carried from West Africa in the memories of those who survived the slave ships, can also be found in Jamaica and the Caribbean Islands where the storyteller calls "Cric!" to which the listeners are to respond "Crac!" This call and response may be repeated until the teller is assured of the listeners' attention, but may be used as needed throughout the telling. Mucina (2011) stated that although the written word allows stories to reach a wider audience, "The dynamic engagement of live oral storytelling is so powerful it can never be surpassed by any other form of communication" (p. 8).

Story and the preservation of African American culture. Carter-Black (2007) cited Dance as she explained the importance of traditional stories to slaves from Africa who survived passage to the Americas, where life was unfamiliar and unsympathetic to their plight:

> Estranged from all remnants of familiarity, Blacks transported to the New World held onto stories and characters from the African folklore traditions. This was one of many survival strategies used by the Africans that allowed them to meet life head on even 'when you ain't got much to start with.' " (p. 43)

Recognizing that folktales reveal as much about the ethnography of a social group as personal stories reveal about "values, beliefs, customs, norms, rules, expectations, and behaviors" (p.46) of individual cultures, including religious, socio-economic, regional, or

racial/ethnic, Carter-Black (2007) advocated that students of social work, and social workers familiarize themselves with these narratives to better understand the clients with whom they work, and whom they serve, and that storytelling comprise part of the training for cultural competency.

The role of story in indigenous and Aboriginal cultures. Indigenous storytelling is not merely entertainment, but "Haa-huu-pah": "What we do when we get up every day to make the world good" (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 137). Haa-huu-pah might be described as lived values that describe the foundation of Indigenous governance and regeneration, core teachings to be passed on to the next generation (Corntassel et al., 2009). Without these stories, colonization would be the dominant story of indigenous peoples, therefore listeners are required to question. Corntassel et al., (2009) described restorying as the process of truth-telling, of giving voice to the stories that were suppressed and allowing the voices of the survivors of residential schools to be heard. Both the correction of false stories and the accounts of experienced pain and remembrance are components of the restorying process.

> Delmar Johnnie once said that it is such a shame that every time someone who went to residential school dies without telling his or her stories, our government and the churches look more innocent. Telling these stories is a form of resistance to colonization. […] I believe that storytelling respects and honours people while simultaneously documenting their reality. (Qwul'sih'yah'maht as cited in Corntassel et al. 2009, p. 147)

Land, community, languages, living histories and ceremonial lives are all intertwined for Indigenous people of Canada's west coast (Corntassel et al., 2009).

Yatta Kanu identified storytelling as a strategy for integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum that would benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, making abstract ideas concrete or providing an entry point to curriculum topics (Schools that leave, 2012). Kanu explained that stories are a traditional way of teaching and learning in Aboriginal communities, providing instruction in socialization and morality.

Storytelling for social justice. Stories can be part of a culturally responsive pedagogy that fosters sensitivity and appreciation for diversity (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Bishop and Kimball (2006) noted, in their report on teacher-librarians, that storytelling helps to develop awareness and appreciation of culture. A social justice perspective that includes multicultural stories and proverbs, especially those that honor the oft-ignored Blacks, Latinos, American Indians, and Asians serves to develop a positive sense of identity in ethnically marginalized students (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010). Asimeng-Boahene (2010) noted that history is recounted from the winner's perspective, and tales of the victors abound. Culturally responsive teaching requires that stories also be told from the minority perspective, about issues that involve underrepresented groups by using authentic storytelling, proverbs, legends, and myths to present an alternate reality.

Metaphor

Stories have the potential to provide a rich basis for metaphor that is unrestricted and evocative. As a porcupine has quills or a tiger, speed, teeth, and claws, the human being has storytelling as a "human survival tool" (Baskin, 2005). In the context of education in business administration, Dillard and Reynolds (2010) described stories as

the metaphor for the future, affording a moral education on which to establish an ethic of accountability. By imagining new stories, both for themselves and for their professions, they instructed business administration students, change is possible. This theme echoes the sentiments of social workers working with at-risk youth (Nelson et al., 2008). Citing Nelson's statement that "Through metaphoric knowledge stories are maps about life" (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 128), McClintock observed that "Storytelling lends itself to participatory change processes because it relies on people to make sense of their own experiences and environments" (p. 128).

The Role of the Storyteller

Storytelling has been described by Vermeule (2011) as a system of cooperation in which people's misbehavior is punished, narratively speaking. Vermeule (2011) postulated: "Telling stories is thus a form of complicated social monitoring, the goal of which is vicarious pleasure and pain in the altruism or selfishness of other people" (p. 237). The role of storyteller was formalized in West Africa, where the griot (gree-oh) serves as "genealogist, historian, royal advisor and spokesperson, diplomat, mediator, interpreter and translator, musician and composer, teacher, exhorter, warrior, witness, praise singer and key participant at the important village ceremonies such as namings, marriages, installations, and funerals" (Hale as cited in Ferreira-Meyers, 2010, p. 150). In other cultures, skald (Scandinavia), minnesinger (Germany), pinkerdd; mabinog (Wales), troubadour (France), and seanachie (Ireland) are just a few of the terms to describe the keepers and tellers of story (Sawyer, 1955). The best storytellers were chosen for their ability to remember and recount in a pleasing way the exploits and glorious past of the group, and this became their role in the culture, absolved of the requirement to hunt or

build or wage war that they might tell the stories of mighty deeds and conquest. The shaman, the chief priest, and the medicine man have their roots in the same practice, out of which developed hero cycles or sagas.

Record of stories in unlettered groups and tribes was preserved in various ways: beaded moccasins, wampum belts, woven patterns in fabric, embroidered motifs, rock paintings, totems, and quilts all safeguarded symbols embedded with story. Beads on a thread or chain, strings of shells, fibers knotted, sinews of seal or walrus tusk or fish bone, bear or tiger teeth: all represented a series of stories known to the teller that would be passed on to his successor (Sawyer, 1955). Similarly, storytellers of the 21st century create a link in their personal story chain each time they tell a tale, building not only reputation, but skill and repertoire, at the same time as they build a connection to the listener present in the telling; present at the story (Miller, 2009).

Storytelling as Truth

Memories that rise to the surface may be told or passed on, as were those of the residential schools (Corntassel et al., 2009) where as many as seven successive generations of children were removed from their communities and families and sent to residential schools, where they were often abused, physically, verbally, and even sexually, and stripped of their culture and their language as well. Young women of questionable repute and those thought to be too pretty for their own good were sent to the Magdalene laundries in Ireland, in many cases, never to return; in some cases, to be buried in unmarked graves, concerning which no records were kept (Smith, 2007). Eventually, sufficient morsels of memory present themselves, in fragments, to the listening heart of a storyteller, who begins to ask questions (never easier than in this

digital age). A story is born when the storyteller joins the dots of memory with understanding of how human beings are in the world. Recognizing the story, once it has been crafted by the storyteller (the fragments having been incomprehensible to those who held them), sister stories are born. Eventually, an event that had conveniently evaded history texts demands to be included and a missing perspective is shared (Scott, 2011).

Storying and Restorying

The word "storying" appears to have been coined to describe the act of creating or telling a story, and refers to an individual's oral story (Baskin, 2005; Carter-Black, 2007; Dillard & Reynolds, 2010; Kuyvenhoven, 2009; Russell, 2008). It differs from traditional storytelling in that there is no requisite preparation, and the existence of the story in written form would be highly unlikely. Restorying occurs when an individual or a group claims a story that was denied or repressed, or reclaims their story by presenting an unacknowledged perspective (Corntassel et al., 2009; Harley, 2012; Olson & Craig, 2005). In educational settings, there may exist a "cover story," an institutional "sacred" or canonical story that is oft-repeated, yet lacking resonance as it is not the story experience of those who reside within (Olson & Craig, 2005). Such stories may be used to absolve oneself of responsibility, or to prevent exposure of the real problem, and thus the need to address it. In business settings, storying may be employed to make sense of a rapidly changing environment, followed by restorying to create a narrative to justify the changes and to rationalize the restructuring of the organization (Rhodes, Pullen, & Clegg, 2009).

Restorying is described by Baskin (2005) as a feedback loop whereby humans make sense of the world first by storying, in which they make sense of the events as they see and experience them, and then create a new story to enable them to act upon the

events. The same process describes the way in which disaffected youths may become empowered by telling new stories (Nelson et al., 2008), and the way that business administration may be re-imagined for ethical practice (Dillard & Reynolds, 2010). The idea of restorying extends to the recurring cultural practice of recontextualizing stories as they are passed down through the generations (Miller, 2009), or to the way in which a story may be created to preserve a memory, or keep a loved one or homeland alive and present through narrative (Harley, 2012).

Trustori: Story Becomes Truth

In Hebrew, the term "dabar" refers to both word and event. Sidwell (2007) related this understanding to the way that stories, affecting listeners at an emotional depth beyond cognition, may inspire people to action in response to or in imitation of the word. Pierson (2011) described the phenomenon in which a fictitious story inspires imitation, thus becoming true. One example that Pierson provided was that of Tam Yang Bun, who may or may not have been fictional, but whose example was followed (knowingly or un-) by Swedenborgian John Chapman, better-known as Johnny Appleseed in America, and in England as John Barleycorn. In a turn worthy of story, these stories may or may not have provided the inspiration for Nobel Peace Prize-winning Wangari Maathai (2004) who, like Chapman, actually did plant trees. Pierson (2011) drew a parallel to the discovery that words attributed to Martin Luther were not, in fact, Luther's words at all: they were merely consistent with the sort of words that Luther might have used to express a similar sentiment; the words that one expected of him. Similarly, a story may be true in spirit, if not in detail, recounting what happened, what might have happened, or what could have happened (Harley, 2012). Storytellers have been known to begin a story by saying, "This

is a true story. It may not actually have happened in the way I tell the story, but it is true all the same" (Yashinsky, D. personal communication, September 30, 2012).

Suppression of Story

The importance and power of story emerges in the numerous instances where it is suppressed: in Aboriginal communities, particularly the residential school experience (Corntassel et al., 2009), in Ireland, as in the experience of the women for whom the Magdalene laundries became a prison (Smith, 2007), and in African nations such as Zambia where early Christian missionaries forbade and to the extent of their influence tried to prevent the recounting of Zambian folk tales (Carter-Black, 2007). By the end of the twentieth century, the Zambian government had taken steps to integrate the traditional cultural narratives into the country's curriculum. Similarly, Aboriginal leaders in numerous First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in Canada are making great effort, with the help of scholars, to recover the stories of their respective cultures. Stories are also suppressed in some educational settings where there is an official version and teachers and others are permitted to express only the "cover story" which is a contradiction of what the teller experiences as truth (Olson & Craig, 2005). In some business settings, the culture adjusts the experienced story to create a more palatable perspective that may attempt to justify some of the less savory details (Rhodes et al., 2009).

Story Comes to Place

Human activity transforms place by creating associations: "The place where…" While the associations may change from person to person, according to their connections and memories of a place, place intersects with narrative as we construct our experience

(Gumpert & Drucker, 2012). Consequently place, whether architectural (Najafi, & Shariff, 2011), geographical (Conyers, 2001; Mahoney, 2012; Waters, 2010), or geological, when there is something to say about it, once something has happened there that is remembered and articulated, becomes storied. In the Book of Joshua from the Judeo-Christian tradition, story intersects place and is marked with a symbol:

> Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God." (Joshua 24: 26-7)

New Orleans (Chamlee-Wright, & Storr, 2009; Le Menestrel, & Henry, 2010), a café (Oldenburg, 1999; Rosenbaum et al., 2009), a residential school (Corntassel et al., 2009), and even Irish laundries patronized by well-heeled and respectable members of the community (Smith, 2007) all intersect story, and take on greater significance when the stories are told. In this way, monuments remind visitors of the events there commemorated, whether or not the event occurred at that location, and battlefields recall the battles and the human stories of those who fought there, as do other historical sites and cultural institutions (Conyers, 2001).

Story Builds Community

Human beings are bound by stories. The dynamics of a family or group derives from the stories they tell about themselves, by the common values expressed in those stories, just as a culture is strengthened and defined and connected by the mythic stories of its organization or society (Baskin, 2005; Gottschall, 2012; Sidwell, 2007). Sidwell

(2007) described community or "communitas" as a coming together in equality where all are welcome and on an equal footing, and where the group engages in shared experiences that may be profoundly spiritual, as is storytelling. Human beings live by their stories and some are willing to die to defend their stories, justifying violence as an attack on their deeply held cultural, religious, or tribal myth (Baskin, 2005). The lynching of African Americans in 19th and 20th century America, the *Troubles* in Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants, the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all bear witness to this dark side of mythologized cultural identity that demonizes the "other."

Story builds community when listeners have the experience of the narrative together (Berkowitz, 2011; Kuyvenhoven, 2009; Lowe, 2007). Listeners have the unique experience of being in a particular place at a particular time where they are told a particular story in a particular way by a particular teller who is telling it them (Harley, 2012). Together they go a unique journey that will never be experienced in quite the same way with another telling, or teller, or in another setting.

Story builds social capital. Wente (2012) cited Putnam as having suggested that one of the most significant predictors of a child's success might be the amount of time that his parents spent reading *Goodnight Moon* to him, referring to the classic children's picture book by Margaret Wise Brown. Wente (2012) suggested that the immeasurable value of investments such as taking the time (allowing that this implies that the parent also has the luxury of time to spend) to read a book over and over (and implicitly, to tell stories) creates the "*Goodnight Moon* gap," referring to the growing gap between children who have and have not. However, the effect does not end in childhood. Citing

Putnam, Wente (2012) indicated that children who have experienced significant investment of parent time, reading *Goodnight Moon* being only one of the indicators, are likely to partner with those who have had similar advantages and pass the tradition on to their children, whereas children who have not reaped the double benefit of the oral literacy (Fox, 2002; Frostick, 2011) and attention are likely to select similarly disadvantaged partners, and pass the deficit to another generation.

Summary

Story permeates the understood lives of human beings; it defines us, directs us, comforts us, and inspires us. Stories told aloud to children first of all engage them and require that they become co constructors as they create mental pictures of the narrative. Stories told not only interest students in reading and motivate them, but also assist in both first and second language vocabulary development and oral and listening skills. Stories are used in myriad settings, in social work, business, nursing, Aboriginal healing circles, in law, and in religious institutions.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to explore member perceptions of the value of story and storytelling, leadership and knowledge communities, and place to the vitality of a storytellers' guild. The role of the place known as the Story Barn was of considerable interest to this study. Multiple perceptions were considered, representing many versions of the story experience of members of the Storytellers' Guild, narrated by many and various persons who were also storytellers.

Phenomenology, a qualitative design, was chosen for this study. Phenomenology is a method that has the potential to draw from a small, purposeful, non-random, non-

representative sample group perspectives that are authentic, subjective, and value-laden (Bednall, 2006). Multiple perceptions were considered, representing many versions of the story of experience of the Storytellers' Guild narrated by many and various participants who were also storytellers. Through the process of horizontalization, all participants are given equal voice, and all stories equal weight (Merriam, 2009). The objective of the qualitative design was to seek the insiders' perspectives and understanding of the experience of the Story Barn from the point of view of those who experienced it most keenly, and not just from the perspective of the researcher, although in this instance the primary researcher self-identified as both an insider and an outsider in the dual roles as storyteller and researcher.

All 23 members of the Storytellers' Guild were invited to participate, but not all members elected to do so. Two focus groups comprised of three members each were conducted. Additionally, individual interviews were conducted with nine other participants. Both the focus groups and the individual, semi-structured interviews were audio recorded on microcassettes and then transcribed verbatim, by the primary researcher, eliminating any concern about confidentiality that might have arisen with an external transcriptionist. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Following the audio recorded focus groups and the individual interviews, verbatim transcripts were created, read and re-read, and themes were color-coded using Microsoft Word. This initial key-word coding was followed by peer-review by an independent researcher (who had no association whatever with any participant in the research project) to enhance trustworthiness.

The guiding research questions were:

1. What are member perceptions of the value of story and storytelling, leadership and knowledge community, and place to the vitality of a storytellers' guild?
2. What is the *sine qua non* of a cultural institution such as the Storytellers' Guild?
3. What are member perceptions of the significance of the Story Barn to the Storytellers' Guild and Stories Aloud?
4. What are member perceptions of the Story Barn on their own development as storytellers?

Findings

Key findings indicated three dominant themes emerged: home, vision, and story. Findings also indicated that story strengthens both content retention and language acquisition. For the purposes of this paper, findings about story will be discussed.

Story

It makes perfect sense that storytellers would be individuals who like stories. "I love stories, people who tell stories, complicated stories—I don't mean that the content is complicated, but the language, syntax and the structure, I love all of that…the vocabulary," Sean enthused. Both Rhiannon and Jules described situations in which they noted that they were narrating their own lives; describing their lives or their actions as a story. Jules explained: "We make sense of our lives through story; we narrate our lives." We make sense of our lives and we remember. Connie recounted:

> By telling stories, people remember. Richard said to me once, "I preached for ten years. And I came to the Story Barn, and there was a woman who said, 'You told

that story ten years ago. I was here ten years ago and you told that same story.' And he said, 'I wonder who remembers my sermons?'"

Amber noted that it is the *stories* that people remember from school. The individual lessons are forgotten, but the memory of the story remains. Donna remembered a story from third grade that had made a powerful lifelong impression on her and spent years searching for the book so that she could retell and remain true to the story as she experienced it:

> My very first story that I wanted to tell come from an experience in Grade 3 when I was having a difficult time and it was a story I had read. I looked for that story for several years and my Aunt found it on the east coast. That story that I remember about the three giant brothers, there was something in that story that I knew would help me. So much of what she is saying rings true to me. The stories themselves can give you strength, support, guidance. All those pieces.

Donna is not the only one to speak of story as something that would help. In her early days with the Storytellers' Guild, Connie, not yet realizing that Stories Aloud was restricted to adults, brought her teenaged foster daughter once because she felt very strongly that the girl needed to hear a certain story. "Sonia" had come to Canada with her family as a refugee sponsored by Connie's church. Her parents struggled to raise their children in an unfamiliar culture, climate, and language, and "Sonia" became rebellious. When "Sonia's" father became ill, Connie, who had already raised her own children, took "Sonia" in. She wanted "Sonia," no, she was determined that "Sonia" hear the story of the Porcelain Man, and felt no remorse that she had gone against the rules to accomplish

this, even though she had been unaware of the strictness of the *adults only* rule at the time of her transgression.

> I was not sorry because I had brought "Sonia" for a very specific reason: because she needed to hear that story. One of the lines was: "Her father could control where she was but he could not control what she thought." And that was for "Sonia" in her own life: they could control where she was, but not what she thought, and she loved it.

That both Connie and Donna mentioned key stories that had the potential to help a person navigate difficult times is particularly interesting because that question was not asked in either of the focus groups and yet, there it was. The act of telling *necessary* stories is described by Angie as "guerrilla storytelling." Amber noted: "It is the responsibility of storytellers to tell the right stories. That's a really serious responsibility. You need to be completely committed to telling the right story at the right time." The idea of the power of story was expressed numerous times in just as many ways.

In the individual interviews, I asked about story as talisman—something possessing magical powers of protection from evil, and possibly to bring good luck and guidance, something to cling to in difficult times. Speaking of story as talisman, Rhiannon had this to say:

> There is some kind of central story that everybody has. Whether it is a story from their family, of their family, or whether it is a story that resonates with them very strongly, stayed with them, like a folk or a fairy tale or some other story, one that they cast their mind back to in times of stress or trouble or joy or whatever it

might be. We do that. We do it naturally. I think that we just don't recognize that we do.

Lynn commented on the hunger for story:

> You know, I think they are hungry for that, the talisman, that thing that they can take away. I think stories—I don't think that our culture has much faith in our children. We make everything explicit. We don't have the sense that their own brains are capable of working out and their own souls are capable of striving, and they're going to grow and change and go through things; they're going to go on a journey, will suffer, and experience great joy. Stories that impart that faith. Unwanted, unfortunate, impoverished, go a journey, be successful and find a different world. We don't have faith that any of these things are going to happen for our children. Parents don't give this message. I'm sixty, and it's a message my parents and certainly my grandparents gave me: "You're going to be okay."

Although the partner verb for *story* would certainly be *tell*, the telling of a story might often be considered to be a performance if it occurs in a more formal setting and if there were an audience to listen. The key word performance was infrequently mentioned in the interviews (and therefore the transcripts), especially in comparison to the value attributed to the stories. Storytellers appear to have been drawn to storytelling less for the sake of performing and more for the sake of the stories themselves. Amber explained it this way:

> Stories attract me because I think that is where everything resides. In this digital age, if everything crashed tomorrow, [computers] it would be the storytellers who carry the wisdom of the world. I do think all the wisdom of the world is in stories, the humor, the cultural values, the lessons we need to know about life. Each

> culture carries its own stories, its own lessons. How we do things in this culture, and what is okay and what is not okay.

Rhiannon and Mel both mentioned the way in which story listeners are said to breathe in unison as they journey into story together, although Rhiannon noted that exactly where listeners went with the story might vary:

> I can have in my head a vision of what it is that I am telling but I never know what each person is going to take away from it. Because when people listen if the story is well-told, they leave the present reality and go to another place. There was a study done many years ago, probably back in the 1980s I would guess, in which a group of listeners was hooked up with electrodes and things and they watched what happened while the people were listening to a story. Before too long, when the teller had really gotten into the story, the rhythm of the story, the listeners were all breathing in unison. It's almost like a trancelike state. Now they weren't probably all going to the same place with that story, but they were going someplace with that story.

Rhiannon has qualified her statement with descriptors: she specified that the story was a well-told one, and that the teller gets into the story and the rhythm of it. "Getting into a story" suggests two separate yet related concepts: first, that the story is well underway; second, that the storyteller is utterly involved with the story and completely present in the telling. The rhythm of the story could refer to well-chosen words, to repetition (a hallmark of some types of traditional tales), and it certainly forbids both searching for words and tentativeness. Memorizing is not the solution, as Wes explained, "They tell it

[the story] by heart, in their heart. We don't memorize. I've incorporated that into my own view of storytelling. A story needs depth beyond the words."

Jules explained: "There's some sort of invisible sphere and that's where the story occurs—co-created between the teller and the listener." Mel depicted the breathing and the rhythm as an aspect of oneness with the community, the place, the history, and the all the physical attributes present:

> But what happens is as you're experiencing the story, you're going to be—this voice, and the breathing and the rhythm, takes you to sounds and sights and smells and maybe feelings, in the course of the story, but also there is the—and the Barn, candle-lit, it was wood, and wooden walls that had aged, and had many lives, it was a shed, maybe it was a barn, it was certainly a woodworking room, it was a place where there were family get-togethers, so you've got that, and sometimes there would be the smell of the cider, the smell of the wood stove, the sound of train, as well as the sounds of people, so you've got that whole person experience, and very much together in a benevolent spirit. You know, like really a community of sharing, of looking for things on many levels.

This same awareness of one-ness emerged when Mel remarked on the many times throughout the storytelling season when serendipitously one story led to another, whether all on a common theme, or threaded one to another like beads on a chain.

> But to have a whole evening that is made up of really nothing but stories. And of course the sequence of stories following stories is sometimes you would have an evening where there is a, you know the agenda, of what stories were going to be told, I think some of it was synchronicity, that it turned out that a theme developed.

> People came with stories and it turned out that—sometimes it's obvious: if it's Christmas they're going to tell Christmas stories, and if it's October they might tell scary stories, but lots of times, you know, a theme started to develop. And then people would come up because they started to tell a story different than they were planning because it fit the theme, right, so there was that element, not just micro, story within the story, but macro level that the program developed as a result of playing off of one another.

In contrast, Angie identified a different kind of responsive storytelling: "guerrilla storytelling," to which Amber assented in different terms

> You need to be completely committed to telling the right story at the right time… the storytellers who carry the wisdom of the world. I do think all the wisdom of the world is in stories, the humor, the cultural values, the lessons we need to know about life. Each culture carries its own stories, its own lessons. How we do things in this culture, and what is okay and what is not okay.

Wes did not use the term "wisdom of the world," but he recognized the past when he explained, "I love connecting with the past, either the past in terms of stories that someone has written, or the idea that I am doing something that someone has done for thousands of years."

Discussion of the Findings

In the autumn of 2014, one of the long-lost ships of Captain Sir John Franklin, the HMS Erebus, was finally located, using a remotely operated underwater vehicle and substantiating the "recorded Inuit testimony in the late 1840s that claimed one ship sank in deep water west of King William Island, and one ship went perhaps as far south as

Queen Maud Gulf or into Wilmot and Crampton Bay" ("Lost Franklin", 2014). Western thinking and the scientific community would understand this as science proving narrative theory, the thinking being that science was reliable; storytelling, a little questionable. Aboriginal thought would be quite the opposite: narrative theory proved that this science was reliable. (Balzer, G., personal communication, October 14, 2014). Thus, when storytellers' perspectives on story mirrored the findings in the review of literature, was lived experience corroborating theory, or was theory being substantiated by lived experience?

Amber, a research participant, believes that a storyteller has the responsibility to tell the right stories at the right time and in the right place. This requires that the storyteller have a significant repertoire of stories, and presumably many of the key stories of the culture, or at least stories with universal themes, and also that the storyteller be proficient in the telling that the stories may have the necessary impact. Implicit is the requirement that the storyteller be sufficiently intuitive or attuned to the situation to know what was appropriate. Dion (2004) identified dual responsibilities: that of the listener to seek and find meaning in the story, and that of the teller to tell an appropriate story for the circumstances and the listeners. Bell (2005), an Ojibway storyteller explained that traditional First Nations storytellers were required to know the teachings of their own peoples and others and to share the wisdom and the words of the past with the present generation for the future. The history had been passed down orally, and before it ever was written down, the past and the traditional teachings had been learned word for word. The responsibility of the storytellers was to pass on the understanding they carried in their hearts and in their spirits in words that would inspire the next generations, the future

chiefs and leaders, “the future clan mothers, and the future mothers and fathers” (para. 3). In the far too numerous situations where generation after generation was removed from their family and village and culture and sent away to residential schools with the express purpose that the institutions would “kill the Indian in the child” (Campbell, 2013), such traditional teachings were not passed on. The stories were not told at the right time; the stories were not told at all.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2012) explicitly stated in their report *They Came for the Children*: “This is a story of loss. Residential schools disrupted families and communities. They prevented elders from teaching children long-valued cultural and spiritual traditions and practices. They helped kill languages” (p. 1). Such cultural and spiritual traditions and practices would have been taught through story. The loss is all the more critical because in many cases, the Aboriginal languages and dialects had not yet been codified. When the oral language was lost, the knowledge was lost along with it. The book describes the residential school experience and cites numerous FNMI individuals who share their lived experience. King (2003) credits Okri, a Nigerian storyteller with having said:

> In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (p. 153)

Guerilla storytelling is the way that Angie described necessary storytelling. Once again, guerilla storytelling requires that the teller have a somewhat extensive repertoire, and that it is most accessible, ready to tell at a moment's notice, again suggesting that a certain amount of storyteller competence is required. Clarkson (2004) described a situation in which he was invited to tell stories to a government sponsored group (CASCADE). His response to offer his pro bono services underlines the reason a storyteller tells stories in the first place: a storyteller believes in the power of story to heal the world. The coordinator was an experienced story listener who valued storytelling and story. The teller was an experienced storyteller (a requirement identified by several participants) with an extensive repertoire of traditional folktales and legends, as well as original work. While Clarkson (2004) did not use the word "magical," (although at least one participant did) he strongly implied that this was a serendipitous experience of being exactly where he was meant to be and telling the right story at the right time.

Educating through Storytelling

In Western thinking, direct address is used to communicate important ideas in education, important concepts that must be learned. As Lynn pointed out, educators learn to be explicit. The bulleting function on our computers is well-used as we present key ideas in point form, leaving no doubt as to the main concepts. In Aboriginal experience, stories are more incidental, and the listeners, if their families still keep some of the old ways, or participate in some of their own cultural activities are more greatly attuned to environmental learning.

> Storytelling is used to teach children who they are, where they are from, what their elders know about the world and how to behave in it. Storytelling is one of

> the primary means for teaching children about appropriate Tohono O'odham behavior, as many stories warn children about the consequences of misbehavior and the benefits of behaving appropriately. (Tsethlikai & Rogoff, 2013, p.570)

Tsethlikai and Rogoff (2013) described the benefits of "learning through attentive involvement and contribution to family and community events" (p. 575). They found that children who participated in traditional practices, which included listening to traditional oral stories and teachings had better recall for a story that was told orally, but indirectly. This recall is not attributed simply to the fact that these children might be considered to be experienced listeners but also to the fact that recent research seems to indicate that reading comprehension is enhanced by oral comprehension skills, as are oral and written expression (Berninger & Abbott, 2010). Experienced listeners would be anticipated to benefit most from learning through story, and hearing a story told by a skilled storyteller also enhances the experience, and leads to greater comprehension, impact, and ultimately, retention. Amber noted:

> Story is where we learn our lessons. You will remember the stories from Grade 1 but maybe not any other specific lesson. We learn our lessons too, because if somebody said, "So what did you learn in grade one in Math?" Well, you know, you probably assume that you learned to add and subtract. But what you are going to remember from Grade one is the stories.

You will remember the stories.

Implications for Social Change

If we remember best that which we learn through story, and if emotional memory is most intense, then story appears to be a powerful and undervalued vehicle for learning.

Kairos' Blanket Exercise is one such tool. In introducing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) history in Canada, some school boards are employing Kairos' Blanket Exercise, a narrative learning activity, to teach the impact of settlers to Aboriginal peoples. For generations, this knowledge was suppressed, this story unknown to most, and generally untold. Awareness of the historical events and treaties which led to the loss of Aboriginal land has the potential to build critical bridges between settler and Aboriginal communities. Six Nations elder and educator Rick Hill identified land claims as the most pressing issue facing First Nations today (Hill, R., personal communication, October 18, 2014). To understand important political issues such as mining and mineral rights, or the oil pipeline dilemma, an understanding of Aboriginal land ownership is essential. Story is one pathway to this desired and critical comprehension.

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