
January 1995

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Recommended Citation

Estes, Clarissa Pinkola (1995) "Story as Medicine," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol28/iss2/3>

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Story As Medicine



ESSAY BY **CLARISSA PINKOLA ESTÉS**

Here I will try to lay out for you some of the storytelling tradition I come from ...

Whenever a fairy tale is told, it becomes night. No matter where the dwelling, no matter the time, no matter the season, the telling of tales causes a starry sky and a white moon to creep from the eaves and hover over the heads of the listeners. Sometimes, by the end of the tale, the chamber is filled with daybreak, other times a star shard is left behind, sometimes a ragged thread of storm sky. And whatever is left behind is our bounty to work with, to use toward soul-making. The time for story is most often dictated by inner sensibilities and outer need. Some traditions set aside specific times for telling stories. Among the pueblo tribes, Coyote stories are reserved for winter telling. Certain tales of Eastern Europe are only told in autumn after harvest. In archetypal and healing work, we weigh when to tell stories. We carefully consider the time, the place, the person, the medicine needed. But most often, even these measurements are frail. For the most part, we tell stories when we are summoned by them, and not *visa versa*.

In my traditions there is a storyteller legacy, wherein one storyteller hands down his or her stories to a group of "seeds." "Seeds" are storytellers who the master hopes will carry on the tradition as they learned it. How the "seeds" are chosen is a mysterious process that defies exact definition, for it is not based on a set of rules, but rather on relationship. People choose one another, some-

times they come to us, but more often we stumble over each other, and both recognize the other as though over eons.

In this tradition, stories are considered to be written like a light tattoo on the skin of the one who has lived them. The training of *curanderas*, *cantadoras y cuentistas* is very similar. It comes from the reading of this faint writing upon the soul, the development of what is found there.

Also in the *cantadora/cuentista* tradition, there are parents and grandparents and sometimes Godparents of a story, and this is the person who taught the story to you, or gifted you with it (the mother or father of the story), and the person who taught it to the person who taught it to you (the grandparent of the story).

I think this is as it should be. The crediting of the tale is very important, for it maintains the genealogical umbilicus; we are on one end, the placenta is on the other. The Godparents of the tale are usually those who gave a blessing along with the tale. Sometimes it takes a long time to tell the ancestry of the story before we come to the story proper. This listing of the mother of the story and grandmother of the story is not a long, boring preamble, but spiced with small stories in and of itself. The longer story that follows is then like a second course.

Storytelling is bringing up, hauling up; it is not an idle practice. Though there are story trades, wherein two people exchange stories as a gift to one another, for the most part they have come to know each other well; they have developed if they are not born to it, a kinship

relationship. And this is as it should be.

Although some use stories as entertainment alone, tales are, in their oldest sense, a healing art. Some are called to this healing art, and the best, to my lights, are those who have lain with the story and found all its matching parts inside themselves and at depth.

In dealing with stories, we are handling archetypal energy, which is a lot like electricity. It can animate and enlighten, but in the wrong place and wrong time and in the wrong amount, like any medicine, it can have no desired effect. Sometimes people who are story-collectors do not realize what they are asking when they ask for a story of this dimension. Archetype changes us; if there is no change, there has been no real contact with the archetype. The handing down of story is a very big responsibility; we have to make sure people are wired for the stories they tell.

In the best tellers I know, the stories grow out of their lives like roots grow a tree. The stories have grown *them*, grown them into who they are. We can tell the difference. We know when someone has grown a story and when the story has grown them. It is the latter that my tradition is about.

Sometimes a stranger asks me for one of the stories I've mined and shaped over the years. Relationship is all. As the keeper of these stories, I can give them or not. It depends on no five-point plan, but on a science of soul, depending on the day and the relationship.

The mater-apprentice model provides the kind of careful atmosphere in which I have been able to help my learners seek and develop the stories that will accept them, that will shine through them, not just lay on the surface of their being like dime store jewelry. There are

ways and there are ways. There are few easy ways, and there are many much more difficult ones. Absolutely, one is enabled in the story, in the medicine, by the amount of self that one is willing to sacrifice and put into it.

In the *cantadora* tradition of storytelling, as in the *mesemondók* tradition, there is what is called *La Invitada*, "the guest" or the empty chair who is present at every telling. Sometimes during a telling, the soul of one or more of the audience comes and sits there, for it has a need. Although I may have a whole evening of material, I often change it to mend or play with the spirit that comes to the empty chair. "The guest" always speaks for the needs of all.

I encourage people to do their own mining of story, for the scraped knuckles, the sleeping on cold ground, the groping in the dark and the adventures on the way are worth everything. There must be a little spilled blood on every story if it is to carry the medicine.

I hope you will go out and let stories happen to you, and that you will work them, water them with your blood and tears and your laughter till they bloom, till you yourself burst into bloom. Then you will see what medicines they make, and where and when to apply them. That is the work. The only work.

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés is a senior Jungian analyst who has practiced and taught for 20 years. Her doctorate is in multi-cultural studies and clinical psychology. This excerpt was the afterword from Women Who Run With The Wolves, by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Copyright ©1991 by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. It was reprinted by permission of Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Incorporated.