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YOUR BODY DOESN'T KNOW IT'S A STORY

Rob Parkinson discovers mind-body connections in storytelling

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About five years into my career as a professional storyteller, I began to experience some alarming physical symptoms. It started with pins and needles in the fingers and toes and developed into a variable numbness in arms and legs that sometimes made me unable to walk without limping. I'd seen enough of some serious degenerative diseases not to be concerned; on the other hand, whether it was my natural optimism or a more informed intuition, I'd a shrewd suspicion it wasn't as serious as my mental sirens were suggesting. I didn't, however, make any immediate connection with the work I was doing.

Tell people you make a living by telling stories and they may probably assume it's a doddle. You potter in to see some kids in a school or some arty folk at a festival and tell stories! What a cinch, what a pushover!.... The reality is somewhat different, as quite a few Storylines readers will know. Yes, it's fun a lot of the time; yes, it's creative and absorbing; yes, it's better than nine to five in a bank or night shift on a production line. It's also (even in these days of instant redundancy) less secure and stress-free it certainly ain't.

For a kick-off, the phone has to ring quite a few times before you've made the basic salary Ms. and Mr. Regular Employed take for granted. Eerie silences on the telecoms front can be unnerving when there are bills to be paid. Then there's simply travelling to places, struggling along increasingly congested roads

maybe or coping with the usual public transport delays, to say nothing of not entirely uncommon insensitivities and inefficiencies of organizers when you finally arrive. But maybe those are things storytellers have in common with other kinds of freelancer; there are forms of stress that are more specific to the yarn-spinning life.

I duly trotted off to see the doctor I was registered with at the time, a man notorious for his belief that three minutes was a rather generous allowance of time for any patient. On the whole, he preferred one and I always suspected he'd have been happier conducting that at a safe distance through a loud haler. Anyway, he listened vaguely to what I had to say and suggested that I give up tea and coffee - apparently apart from caffeine and tannin, there's xanthenes and also theophalin in tea and people can become allergic to any or all of these. This turned out to be reasonable advice - if not guaranteed to improve one's social rating: turning up at a gig wafting a fruit tea bag around doesn't always disabuse people of the assumption that a teller of tales is likely to be a little precious and peculiar. Reasonable advice, but not exactly near the nub of things.

I'd never really intended to be a professional storyteller. My career had just taken off unexpectedly from what I'd initially thought of as a part time involvement, an extra string to the bow of a musician and writer. There was quite a demand for this 'new' storytelling thing in the 'eighties and not so many people there to meet it, so I'd found myself travelling here there and everywhere. I recall it as a heady and exciting time, a time of constantly learning new tales and finding new ways to integrate my musical and song writing skills, a time in which new kinds of audiences and venues were offered to you almost daily. What I lacked in finesse and skill, I made up for in hard work, energy and enthusiasm - I hurled myself at my listeners, demanding their attention, acting out this or that character or creature or emotion or thought, continually improvising new and more fantastic details, unable to stand the notion that anyone might be distracted or bored or thinking about anything

other than tale in which we were all supposed to be immersed. And just because it was so much fun and just because I felt really good doing it and, when I wasn't, there were all the incidental tasks involved in PR, administration or talking to this or that person on the 'phone, I didn't notice the effects on another level.

Now if you're catching my drift, you might well say that the kind of over-involvement I'm talking about still isn't specific to storytelling. In one form or another, it's the classic modern path to stress: a lop-sided focusing on an outward-going 'worldly' activity and an ignoring of basic physiological needs for rest and recuperation, perhaps an ignorance of the 'inner person' in general. Since experiencing the crisis I've been talking about, I've noticed a similar pattern in people in a variety of walks of life, a pattern of intoxicating involvement in work followed eventually by a time when, as it were, the piper has to be paid. Indeed, comparing notes with people in professions similar to mine (performance poets, writers heavily into the schools circuit, musicians, actors, street performers etc.), I've found several examples of four or five year 'honeymoons' like mine, followed by physical and/or psychological difficulties of varying (and sometimes even life-threatening) severity.

So what, then, do I mean by specific forms of storytelling stress? Well, for me the clue came from a chance remark by a masseuse acquaintance of mine. My path in treating what did eventually turn out to be stress-related symptoms following that visit to the doctor did involve massage amongst other forms of alternative, 'holistic' therapies but as it happened this lady wasn't treating me. She knew my style of storytelling and just happened to be perceptive I suppose. Rather casually and as if it were of no importance, she said simply something like this: 'Your body doesn't know it's a story, you know. When you are being all these demons and dragons and scared people, your body doesn't know it isn't real.'

There was so much packed into that remark, so much that made a lot of sense to me then, so much that ought to make an awful lot of very important sense to storytellers in general I think. And I'm not just talking about dire warnings of possible harm; there's a very positive and fascinating side to it too, a side which argues a lot for the hidden power of storytelling to heal and transform as well as to produce troubling and bothering side-effects, so maybe you'll allow me to spell some of that out.

There's a lot of evidence around now that what we experience in fantasy is not at all physically weightless. In one rather neat little study, a first group was involved in an exercise programme to improve finger strength whilst a second simply imagined the exercise in a regular way; a third group did no exercise at all. The result was a 30% improvement in 'finger fitness' for the first group, none at all for the third but an astonishing 22% improvement in actual finger strength for the second group who didn't move a muscle. In some extraordinary way, the brains of those people had fooled their bodies. Findings like these are now inspiring techniques used by, for example, sports coaches: it's increasingly recognized that sportsmen and women have to play their game mentally as well as physically to reach a peak level, rehearsing not just their physical fitness but backhands, goal kicks, stride length, take-offs, landings - you name it. Popular ideas for developing skill and treating problems in other kinds of performance, from public speaking through musical instrument playing to examinations, interviews and even sex, similarly make use of advance imaging.

Now a concomitant of visualization work is a kind of trance state, an inwardly focused condition in which the outer world becomes relatively unimportant and inner signals are turned up. This could reasonably be called a form of hypnosis and (though I should say that the notion is not at all without its controversies) hypnotic states are reckoned to involve heightened suggestibility. Theorists of hypnosis such as Ernest Rossi have produced convincing models for the practical mechanics of how mind communicates with the body through, for example, the endocrine and immune systems, particularly in this kind of state. All

of which may seem to have nothing at all to do with storytelling, but there are some findings that suggest that storytelling also involves trance.

Brian Sturm of the University of North Carolina observed and interviewed a lot of people at storytelling festivals in the States and believes that many go into what he terms 'the storytelling trance', a mildly altered state of consciousness in which (again) the world narrows down. Last I heard, he was taking his research further and planned to use brain wave measurement during story listening, but I guess if you think about it, you probably scarcely need positive research findings to validate the idea - if you love stories, you probably enter the imaginative world of the story, see the pictures, taste the tastes, move partly into the world sketched for you by the storyteller. Putting that another way, you willingly comply with a series of extended suggestions. Personally, I strongly suspect that this is a good reason why, when you really 'get into' a story, it can feel so meaningful: the conscious, critical mind is just about switched off and the metaphorical language of the story can hence become a lot more resonant. You enter a kind of 'waking dream' - and the world of dreams is a world of analogues and intuitive 'pictures'.

Now you'll have to excuse this rather superficial gallop through territory that deserves better exploration and explanation than I have space for here. But how, you might well be asking, does all this connect? Well, from my experiences back at the time I was telling you about, I came to understand firstly that my vigorous style of storytelling was putting me constantly into the 'fight or flight' mode. The effort involved in reaching and holding often quite large audiences and the simultaneous immersion in wild fantasy of one kind and another was triggering all kinds of automatic physical reactions; excesses of tea and coffee were maybe providing the extra shove which produced some of my symptoms because cutting back on those certainly helped. But the real discovery came through understanding how mind and body relate in storytelling. This resulted in my gradual development (o.k. I'm still working on it!) of a more centred and focused style of storytelling and the ability to really relax deeply before, after and

even quite a lot of the time during performances. I still can't stand inattention and work as hard as ever to 'get through', but at least some of the time I can recall that there are other methods than brute force.

But that's by no means all. These days, though I'm still much involved in the art of storytelling performance, I'm also as deeply absorbed in using stories in brief therapy in which context I work with a wide range of problems and challenges, very much including stress and performance problems. And it's in that area I've come to see the really positive power of stories and storytelling. Because the storytelling trance for both listener and teller can have many really positive sides. Your body doesn't know that it's not real. The tale can become vividly realistic and, when it's the right story, chosen because it has the right kinds of metaphors suggesting what are potentially the right kinds of solutions to problems, when the trance is deepened so that mind and body become the continuum they naturally are, it can make a huge difference. Because whatever the conscious, rational mind might think, somewhere deep down we maybe all want to believe in stories.

**First published in the Society for Storytelling's Storylines newsletter/magazine in 2003. Rob Parkinson is a former Chair of the Society and was the first Storylines editor. He has teaches various courses on the connections between storytelling and therapy and has written and published extensively on the subject. Some of Brian Sturm's research on the storytelling trance can be found on the internet (http://ala.org/aasl/SLMR/vol2/imagination.html). The finger strength study is quoted in Mind Sculpture by Ian Robertson (Bantam Press 1999) p. 37.*