

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

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Why Folk Tales?

“They are so good they won’t go away!”

by Simon Brooks © 2016

I am sometimes asked to tell personal stories, yet I don’t. Well, very rarely. There are a growing number of venues which are very successful with personal stories. It seems, to me, that it is the only type of aural storytelling being talked about in the general public.

Some of the intimate, personal stories I have heard made me wonder about doing my own personal stories. Sure there are tales I could tell about my past, about disturbing things which have happened, interesting, or funny things! But why, when the older folk and fairy tales, the myths and legends, are so much better (in my mind)? At the very least they have been told for thousands of years for a reason: they are so good they won’t go away! How many of these personal stories are good enough to be around in 100 years? 10 years even? Personally, I want to give the Old Stories the light they deserve, the voice that they need. I have nothing against really good personal storytellers and their craft, I love what they do, and enjoy it. There is a place for them. I just choose not to do it myself, except in my teaching role to open people up, or in very rare moments. The Old Stories need to be told, too, and people need to hear them.

I have seen some awful personal storytellers and I have seen brilliant personal storytellers. My first experience of hearing a personal story was one told by Meg Gilman. She set the bar pretty high, so for me, others need to be very much *on*. Since then I have heard many others. Some are great, others feel like a psychotherapy session, or bore me. I feel the same with the Moth (although I am never bored, but sometimes made uncomfortable). The Moth stories are brilliantly told, but some of the stories are not anything I feel the teller would want to share with the entire world! I love the fact that the MOTH is out there and people *are* sharing their personal stories. Some of the stories are powerful and resonate deeply, and we can identify with them. Some are side-splitting funny. Some give us primary source history. But some don’t have a reason to be shared, embarrass listeners, or make us feel uncomfortable because they are too raw.

With folk and fairy tales that edge of “raw,” that power, has been honed and polished. What is left is a commanding story which people can empathize with; a story which can make some sort of experience, or memory easier to deal with because it is a step removed from *reality*. Folk and fairy tales, for the most part, can be less emotional than personal stories and more psychological.

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When you use/tell folk tales, there is a layer of separation, and it is this which allows the audience to identify safely with the stories. People can see issues and difficulties second-hand through the stories (acting as a buffer) whether the audience is elderly and the story is about death, or the audience are middle school kids who are trying to deal with bullying.

The Old Tales, the folk and fairy tales, myths and legends have been passed down from generation to generation, during which cultures change, ways of life change and the stories also change. Yet they still have the core value, the core lessons in them, if you will – their essence and strength. These stories are powerful, yet adults and kids are not getting to hear them. These stories are so deep that we need to get them out to adults as well as to young people.

Some of these tales have a lot of ‘red meat’ in them – real blood and gore: stories of infanticide, cannibalism, murder. You would not tell these tales to a group of kindergarteners. Not all folk and fairy tales are like that, but a good number are. And there are stories about life, love, growing up, and death. They are all entertaining in different ways and it saddens me that most adults think this is stuff for young kids. These meaningful tales are not meant for books, but meant to be told. We should be giving these ancient stories the air time they deserve and need, and keep them around for another few thousand years. These are stories whose power lies in being that we can ALL share them and pass them on. We can put our own spin on them to convey a message, if we want. You cannot really do that with personal stories. If you were, passed on personal stories become gossip.

I was once a children’s librarian. I knew a 6 year old child who lived in a town which was home to a registered sexual offender. The child saw the offender at the bottom of her driveway, which was about 250 feet long. The girl went inside and called the police. Her parents had told the child what to do, what to be aware of, etc. so she was fine. (The family were renting and moved shortly after this.) This child told one of her best friends about this incident and how she felt – frightened and threatened. This made the friend worried and anxious herself. This friend found a copy of a book and began reading it daily. It was *Little Red Riding Hood*. This friend read *Little Red* for about a month. At first I had no idea why, but then, when I heard about the incident, I realized that this was a child trying to process what had happened in a safe way.

One of the profound things about folk and fairy tales, is that in finding different versions of the same story, as professional storytellers we come to know the tale inside out. We pick over the story, and knowingly or not insert our own life experiences, to make sense of the story as we see it as individuals. We put a spin on the story reflecting this. In a way we have put ourselves into the tale. These old, old tales have become, on some level, personal stories. I end up sharing *my* experiences *through* the old tales.

As a race of silly old human beings we need to know we are all the same ("If you prick us, do we not bleed?/if you tickle us, do we not laugh?/if you poison us, do we not die?"-William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, Act 3, Scene 1) – now more than ever. We need to know we are not alone in all this; our stories *are* different yet connect us to each other, and the world we live in. Some people do a brilliant job through personal tales, but I choose to do it through the tried and true: speaking

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my experience artfully and thoughtfully through folk and fairy tales. We must also remember, we need to listen with compassion to any tale.



Simon Brooks began telling tales to the public in 1991 and became a professional storyteller in 2003. In 2015 he released his fourth storytelling CD, and has recorded a number of audio books for Audible.com.

His storytelling CDs can be found at CDBaby:
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