

Four Faces of Story

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Abstract

This presentation is a story. And, woven throughout are descriptions of four faces of story: ancestral memory, introduction, creative story, and written story.

Résumé

Cette présentation est une histoire. Des descriptions des quatre faces d'une histoire y sont entremêlées : la mémoire ancestrale, l'introduction, l'histoire créative et l'histoire écrite.

I want to begin in an honourable way and thank the creator for bringing each and every one of us here to celebrate in our learning and in this story you are building in the next couple of days of this conference. You are building a story. You are creating a story. You are living a story, so we should give thanks for that. On my way over here I heard that some people were concerned because they had a workplace that didn't have a place to pray. I thought that they should come to the Yukon because Yukon First Nations people, we pray all over, everywhere. In every little crook and cranny, on every river, mountain, and stream, little tunnel and hillside. This land is covered with these places, so we don't have to worry. We don't have to have a little isolated place to offer prayer. Now, I would like to say this little prayer. It is a prayer from the Bahai Holy writings and helps me a lot.

Is there any remover of difficulty, save God?
Say, "Praised be God."
He is God.
All are His servants.
All abide by His bidding. (Baha'u'llah)

The title of this talk, "Four Faces of Story," is apropos for the conference—"Telling Our Stories." Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever you do in your life, you're always busy telling a story—whether it's in your head, in your mind, in your thoughts, or if it's spoken word, or written word, or if you're reading. And as you're reading, another story's going on in your head. It's a continual thing, this telling stories. Also when you relate to your coworkers, when you relate to your family, when you relate to everyone around you, you're telling a story. And you're hearing other people's stories as well.

When I was first invited to speak I was thrilled, and I wanted to say that I'm very honoured also to be amongst some wonderful people who are going to be amongst you for the next couple of days. They are elders from the Yukon: Roddy and Bessy Blackjack, from Carmacks, and Stella and Paddy Jim from Takhini. Some of you went out to Kwaday Dan Kenji (Long Ago People's Place) with them and probably received a lot of wealth, a lot of richness from these wonderful people whom I look to as role models. Each and every one of them are power houses unto themselves. They are like walking universities, with several doctorates to boot!

When I was asked, I was quite pleased because stories are what I'm about, not just as a storyteller. I don't like to separate that. My life is a story. I don't know how many of you here have read this beautiful book by Angela Sidney called *Life Lived Like a Story*.¹ Auntie Angela was one of my teachers. She said, "Louise, if there is anything that I have told you, I hope you've learned one thing from me, from all the things that I have told you and shared with you—I hope you live your life like a story, so that when you go, people tell a good story about you." I thank her for that. And I try and do that; I try and make my life as interesting as I can. I live every moment of my life to its fullest. I think that that is what we are all here for. We are not here to half live. We are here to live; every cell should be vibrating with life. The Great Spirit has given us this life to live.

I broke this talk down into four faces of story as I see it, as I understand it, as I have come to learn. It hasn't been easy to break this down, because as I said, stories are what I'm about and what you're about. Sometimes teachers will say, "Do you just tell the stories at night when you're putting your children to bed?" They're quite shocked to hear me say, "No, I'm too tired." You tell stories anytime you feel that a story is needed. It's like what Remy (a Yukon songwriter and performer who preceeded this talk) was singing about—only take what you need. Sometimes you need a story; you need to be fed. And so a storyteller is always looking around for hungry people. There are many cues. This is how I share the stories with my grandson. I have two grandsons, one I have adopted. I share the stories with him as the cues come up. So maybe we're going out in the garage and I trip over his rollerblades or something. I will break into a little story about my childhood when somebody hurt their ankle really bad, then they couldn't go out picking berries and how they felt, and things like this. I take what teachers refer to as a "teachable moment," and that's when you would get the story. And that's how I shared stories of my life while I was a child.

The four faces of stories can be broken down. Of course each one is spoken, and is spoken with maybe a different face. As you all realize, a storyteller has to be everything in a story, including a rock, including a beaver, a river, a mountain. What does a mountain look like? What does a mountain say? How does a mountain move? In some of these stories you hear of a mountain moving. You hear how a mountain was created, how

people are transformed into stone. How do you become that? That is part of it.

Now, the foundation for all stories of Yukon mythology, the foundation for our stories here, I refer to them as stories from our ancestral memory. These are the myths. Now “myth,” according to the English language, means something that is not quite true. Well, I contest that, because these stories are true. This gives us a foundation. This tells us how the world was created and how every living creature on this planet was created. We have stories about that. And I’m sure that those who have been here for a few days realize that this blessed raven [referring to the Raven Blanket hanging on the wall behind her] had something to do with it. We know he brought the light to the world. We know that without light we cannot exist. He brought the moon and the stars, and all the living things, and then he went about his business tricking people to become people. Then he made the clan system. He was able to put fish into all of the lakes. He did this through a series of tricks; maybe that’s why people call him trickster. And we have a lot of other stories which I put into a very high category for Yukon mythology, I call these the Classics. You know, like the Greek Classics. Thank goodness Homer did that! He didn’t have a written language; we were in the same boat here. We didn’t have a written language and if you didn’t have a good memory you were out of luck. Everyone was trained. From before birth children heard stories. And these hearings, these opportunities trained the people to listen, to listen with the ear that would eventually help them to survive. Ears for surviving. It is my passion nowadays to continue that with children, children who are disconnected, let’s say, disconnected because of all the technologies perhaps, disconnected because of dysfunctional families, disconnected for many reasons. They need to be reconnected. I feel very strongly that it is the human voice that connects, human beings speaking to each other is the greatest connector.

When I go to the schools I help the teachers to realize the power of story. Then I begin by sharing these myths with them, these ancestral stories of a great distant past which establishes strength within our children, not just First Nation children, all children. Look around us; how many heroes do we have? The world is bankrupt of heroes. I grew up with heroes. I grew up with giant killers. People, and we were a small bunch of people, used to kill giant beavers, giant jackfish, giants!! I wasn’t really scared of anything. I figured, well, my great-great-great-great-grandpa did that, so I can handle it. But the children nowadays don’t have this. They don’t have the continuous training and education about how not to be afraid of what lies before you, what lies around you, what’s in your environment. And certainly they don’t have the training to be inquisitive about it, to talk about the fears they might have. Their teachings are embodied in the myths to dispel all those fears, so people realize that we can move ahead. That’s one of the first faces. I think that would be the face of ancestral memory.

The second face of the spoken word, and I've already alluded to that, is that people long to be with people for the most part. And as you look at our society we are sitting more behind things that are not people, right? Sometimes we are emailing around the world. Sometimes we long to know that person, what they look like, what kind of food they like, what kind of music they listen to, what kind of personalities they have. The spoken word is very empowering. How do we train ourselves to speak? How do we train ourselves? Some people, in order to get to know each other, tell jokes to break the ice, or they introduce themselves and tell a joke. They might tell a little story. That's how we break down barriers. So the second face of story is simply introduction—who you are, who I am. My name is Tsé Duna. My clan is the raven clan or the crow clan. And my mother, and my mother's mother before that, and my mother's, mother's, mother before that was from the same clan—since the beginning. So that is my bird; it's my winged spirit helper. And my grandmother gave me the name of beaver-woman. So that's my animal. My father and his people are originally from the coast. His grandmother was from Angoon, Alaska. They're from a killer whale Tlingit people. So that is my fish. All bases are covered—the sky, the earth, and the sea—that's who I am. Now I have this name Louise. That was my grandmother on my father's side, that was her name.

There was a beautiful tradition about names here. By the time the Hudson Bay Co. came in, the Chilkats had a pretty good trading system here with the inland people. They had it down pat for many years and here comes the Hudson Bay Co. with Robert Campbell. Robert Campbell was ambushed by the Chilkats. They didn't kill him outright; they burned down the store and the trading post. If you go to Selkirk you'll see it there, a big chimney sitting there to remind us of the story. What they did, and this might seem cruel, but I think they wanted to send home a message to him. They stripped him of his clothes, this time of year (July), lots of mosquitoes, so you can imagine being stark naked on the river with billions of mosquitoes around and no mosquito dope. They put him on a raft, not only did they put him on a raft, but they put him on a raft with no paddles, no poles, nothing, and said, "Good bye. Good luck. Adios amigo." He started floating down, and some wonderful people from the Selkirk First Nation, Northern Tutchone people, rescued him. They got a big pole and pulled him in down the river. They felt sorry for him, rescued him and gave him clothes. Robert Campbell gave that family his name "Campbell." Today you hear this name "Campbell." A lot of people did this. We have the name Dawson. George Dawson, some kind of a surveyor, a guy comes in here and does a lot of exploration in the Yukon. He left Dawson. There are lots of Dawsons right here in this Kwanlin Dun Territory. So that's another area of story: history as people remembered it, as they lived it, and as they continue to share it down the line.

The next face of story is a face that I am very active in promoting as well. That is the creative story. That story transfers itself into another medium

besides voice because storytelling is an art. So these stories then would be transferred to things like this beautiful button blanket. This is a story about how raven brought the sun to the world. It's a story blanket, telling us a story. On many of the First Nations people's clothes, they have these symbols, these emblems, these crests of who they are. So when you go to these big Tlingit gatherings particularly, they have their robes and they all stand with their backs to you. This tells you who they are, and of course if you're single, you're looking for the right clan. If you're a wolf, you're looking for crow. You're looking for the opposite moiety. I like to tease the young girls: looking around for wolf, huh! That's another form of story. That's another face of story that is rapidly developing here in the Yukon, which I am very excited about.

Seeing as you are at the college, have any of you been over to the sculpture garden? You'll see four stone carvings, huge sculpted pieces. One is a bear with a great, big giant turtle on his back. Another one is fish, and it has the killer whale and salmon and greyling and all kinds of fish. And then you'll see raven on the side. You have to figure out what the fourth sculpted piece is when you get there. The wonderful thing about this is that the man who sculpted these pieces is from the Tlingit Nation. That was not in their tradition, to sculpt stone; they were wood carvers. They carved into copper, they carved into silver and wood, but not stone. So this artist has now advanced his story which he chips out of huge massive pieces of stone. So, that's another face of story.

This last face of story, which I am going to end off with, is a face which is going from the oral tradition, the spoken word, speaking simply, maybe it's simply for some of us, from memory, from our own experience, from our own memories of people passing on information to us. Now we are getting into the written. Many First Nations people are moving into the fourth face of story, that's what I call it, and these stories are creative stories, possibly based on some elements of fact, something they heard that their grandparents told them so the story springs out of there. Possibly a reading of a poem that was inspired by some tremendous life experience. Songs, like the song that Remy sang. I know that the man that he was referring to, Art Johns, he's a composer, he writes songs, so that's his story. Songs have always been written, always. And songs have always been sung. Dances have always been danced. And those are different ways in which we express our stories, through the performing and now into the written word.

I want to end my talk with a beautiful piece from the Apache people. Maybe some of you have read it. When I am asked to speak to people, especially people from all around the world as you are, people who come here, I like to encourage you, because I realize your task is not easy. You are important to the world. I want to end with this beautiful piece. It's such an encouraging piece to me, and it's taken from a wonderful book, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (Basso, 1996). I will read to you.

When I was a little girl the only book in my grandma's house was the Bible. And because my grandmother couldn't read I used to read the bible to her. I became a very good reader. And she used to always say, "Gee, I'd sure like to be fishing with Peter in that big sea." Some time ago I went and I saw the Sea of Galilee and I remembered my Grandma. And I thought to myself, "Grandma, you'd be really surprised to realize that the Sea of Galilee is really not a sea. It's a big lake."

This book is by Keith Basso (1996). It's a wonderful book. He had been asking several people throughout his research, what is wisdom? That's a pretty loaded question, what is wisdom. It is really interesting that the older I get, the less I know about what that is. Now I know that when I have asked older people, what is wisdom, they just smile really hard, because you'll know what's wise and what's not wise. I just wanted to finish off with this beautiful poem, it's more like a poem than an actual telling of a story. He said:

The true wisdom, that's what I'm going to talk about. I am going to speak as old people do, as my grandmother spoke to me while I was still a boy. We were living then at Ták'eh Godzigé (which means Rotten Field). Do you want a long life? she said. Well, you will need to have wisdom. You will need to think about your own mind. You will need to work on it. You should start doing this now. You must make your mind smooth. You must make your mind steady. You must make your mind resilient. Your life is like a trail. You must be watchful as you go. Wherever you go there is some kind of danger waiting to happen. You must be able to see it before it happens. You must always be watchful and alert. You must see danger in your mind before it happens. If your mind is not smooth, you will fail to see danger. You will trust your eyes but they will deceive you. You will be easily tricked and fooled. Then there will be nothing but trouble for you. You must make your mind smooth. If your mind is not resilient, you will be easily startled. You will be easily frightened. You will try to think quickly, but you won't be able to think clearly. You, yourself, will stand in the way of your own mind. You, yourself, will block it. Then there will be trouble for you. You must make your mind resilient. If your mind is not steady, you will be easily angered and upset. You will be arrogant and proud. You will look down on other people. You will envy them and desire their possessions. You will speak about them without thinking. You will complain about them, gossip about them, criticize them, and you will lust after their women. People will come to despise you. They will pay someone to use his power on you, they will want to kill you. Then there will be nothing but trouble for you. You must make your mind steady. You must learn to forget about yourself. If you make your mind smooth, you will have a long life. Your trail will extend a long way. You will be prepared for danger wherever you go. You will see it in your mind before it happens. How will you walk along this trail of wisdom? Well, you will go to many places. You must look at them closely. You must remember all of them. You must remember everything they tell you. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it, and keep on thinking about it. You must do this because no one can help you but yourself. If you do this, your mind will become smooth. It will become steady and resilient. You will stay away from trouble; you will walk a long way and live a long time. So wisdom sits in faces, it's like water that never dries up. (p. 126-127)

Thanks so much. It's been a real pleasure.

Notes

- ¹ Mrs. Angela Sydney's stories are recorded in *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990), by Julie Cruikshank.

Notes on Contributor

Louise Profeit-LeBlanc is from the Nacho N'y Ak Dun First Nation and a well-known storyteller. She is co-founder of the International Storytelling Festival held each year in Whitehorse. At the time of this presentation, Louise was a Native Heritage Advisor for the Yukon Heritage Branch. She is now the Aboriginal Arts Coordinator at Canada Council for the Arts, in Ottawa.

References

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