

Therapeutic Storytelling

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners and honour their strength, resilience and aspirations for the future.

I have found over the years that many people have an idea that storytelling is for kids and the idea that it can change the way people think about themselves and their world is not on. So a bit of backstory is necessary before I present an example of a healing story for a community yearning for change.

About sixty years ago the British government wanted to try out some new bombs and as there is nowhere in Britain without people, they chose the desert in South Australia. They sent out a team to make sure there was nobody around the area of the bomb going off. The team came across some desert people that had never seen white people, and when the ABC did a documentary on these people recently, they interviewed an elderly woman who was a girl at the time. She described the event: "I saw something in the distance and ran back shouting 'there is a white rock rolling toward the camp!'" Now, she had never seen a truck before, the closest thing in her mind was a rock, and she had seen them rolling across the ground. So the images she used to make sense of what was happening were 'white', 'rock' and 'rolling'.

This is how we make sense; matching what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell with a file or pattern already in our brain. It is called 'pattern matching', and without a pattern we use the closest one that sort of matches, or we can't make any sense of it. I could gather a group of young men from community in Melbourne or the Top End and after a while talk to them about the violence and damage they are living with, propose a better way and likely they would nod their heads quietly. Agreeing that is, in language and thinking, and a couple of nights later the draw of the gang would mean that the understanding they had and the agreement they had made meant nothing. The patterns we are talking about - their sense-making process - takes place at a primal level, before language and before thought. It is the emotional part of the brain, and if the emotion is high enough, it hijacks the rational thinking part of the brain and provides the script that these young men play out. Agreeing with an old white guy does not make new patterns to drive better behaviour so the excitement of broken glass, bloodshed and burning cars makes sense to them. So, keep in mind this idea of making sense of our world using the patterns we have, and to have different behaviour we need new patterns.

I suggested an old white guy talking to the young men in the community, and immediately we have a problem: different culture, different age, different aspirations, different backgrounds. The chances of me not making sense is very high. And it is not just this old white guy, I am sure you have issues with differences too, gender, culture, race, language and so on. However, what if we had a set of ideas that are not based on these differences, ideas or laws that apply to every human regardless of anything else. We do. I will give you one:

Every living thing interacts with its environment to get its needs met

No exceptions. If it is alive this law applies. It applies to all cultures, all genders, black or white, rich or poor – everyone.

Let's talk about human needs because they are important for all of us. There are two types:

Physical – good food, safety and security, quality sleep

Emotional, such as:

- connectedness (we mean something to mob and community)
- control (I can make decisions and my choices matter)
- meaning (our world makes sense; we understand our place in it)

If these needs are being met appropriately, we humans don't just stay alive, we flourish. Similarly, if these needs are not being met appropriately, problems arise. I say appropriately because needs can be met, but not in a good way, and if this happens, it reduces the chance of other needs being met. For example, hunger may be fixed by a diet of chips and coke but the brain will be starved of nutrients and reduce the chances of good decisions. And, sleep is another one. Some people get plenty of sleep, but it is not restorative sleep, and instead of waking up ready for the day, they wake up tired and unmotivated. Our youth from the community may get his sense of connectedness in the gang, but it means his need for intimacy will hardly be met without force.

This understanding of human needs helps us avoid the hand wringing and teeth sucking with the question "Why do they do it?" We understand that behaviour is needs-driven. Our young men from the cities or the bush are getting needs met, that's why they do it. The gang fighting is prevalent because the quickest way to get several important emotional needs met is through violence. It meets the need for belonging, brings status, gives a sense of control and being a somebody. The young men are no longer irrelevant and on the sidelines, but centre stage in an exciting and dangerous drama. It makes sense to them, but people get hurt and stuff gets broken. The cycle will continue even if new homes are built and work for the dole schemes are extended; it will only change when those needs can be met with a better engagement with life and purposeful action. And those things will only come about with equipping them with a new repertoire of patterns – a new way of seeing themselves, their world and their part in it.

Understanding that patterns are part of the primal or emotional brain means that I wouldn't just sit down with these young men and talk to them about it. I have to impact them at the pre-language, pre-thinking level. My only option is storytelling to create new patterns through which they can see themselves differently and engage with life with a passion for purposeful action. Let me give you an example, a story within a story. It was prepared in answer the question from a health care worker at the end of several training days including new insights from the Human Givens approach: "What would it look like in our communities if these ideas took off?"

People ask me how come this community was able to beat violence, grog and gunja and have one of the best health care clinics in the territory. My answer is simply “I don’t know”.

It was a RFDS nurse who told me about the community, for she had been there lots of times, for you can’t have fighting without bad injuries. The little I do know comes from her, for, like me, she is white and to understand something we have never seen - the change from dysfunctional to flourishing, is probably beyond us. What we both do understand is that community health is less about treating disease and more about how they feel – like feeling enough is enough, and that they can make a difference. We also recognise that the change was like some great primal creative force was stirred and in a language of the heart only they could understand, it gave them back something taken from them years ago – dignity, and reason to stand as a proud capable people again.

Many in the community trace the beginning of the changes to when Emily came back from Katherine after some training days. It was mostly about first aid which Emily had been doing for years but there was something else that she didn’t talk about much. Whether it was because she didn’t feel confident in explaining it, or something much deeper is hard to tell. It was like some secret knowledge, like missing phrases of a song cycle or perhaps, now I think about it, like a page missing from the great story that had caused so much misunderstanding and confusion, now made sense. Complete sense.

Perhaps the reason Emily didn’t talk about it much was because she wasn’t in charge of the clinic. The person who was didn’t show much concern for missing pages, to her it was business as usual. People showed up, she cleaned the wound, gave them a bandage and a few pills and sent them away without asking questions. The idea that things could be a lot better was not one she entertained. “It is what it is” she said. Whatever that meant was also something she didn’t bother about.

Emily, however, had been bothered for a long time. She knew deep inside that the community despair was a disease of the worst kind that no bandage could fix. What could fix it, she believed, was what she learned at the training day. That humans have needs beyond food and shelter, and if their emotional need for meaning was not met, life became pointless and nothing mattered, not even death. And, also, that if the way people made sense of their world and place in it was dysfunctional then everything else would be too. No amount of talking and tablets would make any difference. They would only get better if their sense-making was restored, and the way that could happen, was the missing page Emily had found.

Emily did talk to people she trusted. A regular church-goer, she didn’t believe much of what was said but she did believe in the power of connection with a small group of women she had known since school days. It took a while but they came to like the things Emily talked about, and even if they didn’t grasp them fully, they knew that Emily had been influenced by something profound and that was enough to convince them. As they talked over the ideas they came to realise that expecting different behaviour required a shift in the way people made sense of their world, and that to make that shift meant getting back to the way things made sense years ago. It had to

involve the Great Creator Spirit, the dreaming, and the gifts of law for the country and their people.

“Our eyes have become diseased; we need new ways of seeing the gifts of country and mob” Emily said often to her family of friends. It sparked one friend to exclaim “Remember when we were just kids and we used to dance with our mothers, aunties and grandmothers, that’s when we last saw clearly, when the dreaming helped us make sense of everything”. They each agreed, and they reminded each other that that was until the teachers made them feel guilty for being part of the women-only ceremonies. Teachers saw themselves as ‘knowledge-keepers’ and didn’t have any respect for things they themselves could not understand, and ceremony was certainly one of those things. The girls didn’t understand the terms used to make them feel guilty, terms like ‘heathen’ or ‘pagan’ or ‘old rubbish’, but it occurred to them now, all these years later, that a vital part of how they made sense of things was destroyed with nothing to take its place. It was the language of the heart that told them a great loss had occurred.

Emily and her friends knew what they had to do. With no mothers and grandmothers to ask, they realised the stories had to be created afresh. It must have looked strange, but this small group of determined women took off one night and they were missing for several days – only three husbands knew where they were and they held the information tight. At their insistence, no search was made, and the women immersed themselves ‘in country’ to listen to the spirits of the land talk to their hearts. They didn’t want so much for the old stories to come back, but new ones from country to speak for the present times. For they knew that the spirits were troubled at the confusion, the aimlessness, the loss of dignity, and despair and would speak new law into the chaos. For most of the time, the women kept from speaking with each other, it was only toward the end of their isolation that they talked over what they had heard in heart language.

What they had heard was simply astounding. As each one started to recount something the others seemed to already know the rest of the story. The stories came from the trees who stood so tall and strong; the birds who were so free and happy; the animals that were doing what they do since the dreamtime. Each spoke with an ancient wisdom to the women with vital lessons for the times. The women were excited, and couldn’t wait to engage the rest of the women of the community for it was the grandmothers, aunties and mothers that had carried on so bravely in spite of the terrible violence. Emily and her friends gathered these women together in a ceremony of stories, of dance and healing. A new vigour and sense of purpose spread through the community – it was like the dawn of a new era. The church pushed back, because they didn’t want a return to the ‘old ways’ but Emily had prepared for this. With help from an indigenous leader high up in religious circles, she was able to talk about Jesus as creator of all things, and just as grieved as anyone about the rise of dysfunction and despair among the mob. But most persuasive of all, was her recounting of how the Great Creator Spirit of the land spoke to the women, gifting a new vision and stories of hope. The church hadn’t spoken anything like that for years.

Now comes the really incredible part. The three husbands who stayed the search for the women were wanting to know what had happened that made such a difference in their lives. Emily had prepared for that too, for she realised that the tradition of men not listening to women was part of the 'old ways' that had survived. No one is quite sure how this was handled, but word has it that the men agreed to a weekend in country as children completely dependent on their mothers. It must have worked, for it became obvious that they had been profoundly affected. Called the 'New Trinity' – a term the church didn't approve of – the men gathered together with the elders of clans, gang leaders, and even some uncles from down south, and had ceremonies for men and boys. It lasted for weeks, and what amazed everyone was how the three men were able to revive the power of lost stories in the elders. It was like the beauty and clarity of the dreaming had been restored.

Not everyone was happy to be involved. Some wanted the Land Council in Darwin involved, others wouldn't be part of it unless extra police were there, and of course there were some who opposed it for reasons only they knew about. I did hear that some men were against it simply because Emily was seen to be a trouble-maker with her new ideas. White society isn't the only one that has difficulty letting women lead. Fortunately, or perhaps the Great Spirit was so powerful, those opposing it were outnumbered and either drifted away or became swept up in the enthusiasm.

The changes in Wadeye were almost immediate, particularly among the men and young boys. People seemed to infect each other in a good way, and a sense of purpose and purposeful activity spread everywhere, the clinic, the school, the store, even the club – it nearly closed but the men wanted it to stay as a place to hang out. They still drank, but nothing like before. And, the part of the story that most people cannot believe is that the violence settled down and gunga and petrol sniffing disappeared. Believe it or not, a new community was born.

Now, as I say to people who ask me how this happened, I say "I don't know". But that is not altogether true. The last time I was there I had to go to an outstation and Tony, still a teenager, wanted to come with me. He had been away from school for a long time, and had returned, along with his mates and had found a real purpose in being there. However, he felt he needed a day off 'to clear his head' he told me as we loaded the Toyota. I wasn't expecting it but after an hour or so, he started to talk. This is how I remember it:

The Owl is a keeper of ancient wisdom, wise things from the Creator Spirit our fathers and mothers knew from a long long time ago. When someone asked the owl if that was still true – if he was more wise than the cockatoo or goose. This is what he said:

The cockatoo and goose, like you, sleep when all is dark and dangerous. Night is when the owl stays awake, our eyes are big and clear – we see when all is dark. Cockatoo and goose, like you mob, sleep when danger is everywhere. Wisdom is like the owl staying awake to guard ancient knowledge. We sleep when it is safe, when there is no darkness. This is still true even though people don't know or don't care.

You mob have lost ancient wisdom. Danger of grog and gunja and porn is everywhere but you sleep then wake up stupid and fight each other instead of fighting danger.

Have you ever noticed campfire smoke? It does four things: stings your eyes so you can't see; follows you when you try and move away from it; makes you cough instead of breathe properly; and it turns you into walking crazy-people, head down tripping over things and falling down.

Whole camp is like that. Mob can't see properly; can't get away from it; head down and can't breathe properly. Smoke everywhere, mob all stupid crazy-people.

Tony felt so much shame because what the wise old owl said was true. Camp smoke, stinging eyes and crazy-people, he could feel it all. The owl went on.

You haven't asked me and I don't usually speak when people don't ask. But I can see you are a good young man. You have a good heart and I can see you know what I have said is true. Let me show you a way forward, listen carefully with your heart not your head that is always distracted. Be more like an owl than a cockatoo, more like a snake than a rabbit.

The camp smoke is because the fire has gone out. The flames that let you see in the dark and warm you on cold nights have died. That's why there is so much despair and sadness. The spark of light and the breath of life have gone out and now just that awful smoke following you everywhere. You can't see and you can't get away from it.

Tony had been listening like the owl, like the snake, not distracted, just feeling the deep vibrations of ancient wisdom from country where things like this were known long ago. But then he asked the owl how we can get the spark of life back so we don't all die so young. The owl didn't answer straight away, he needed to think about an answer from the wisdom of long ago and he wanted Tony to be listening from his heart again. When the owl was ready, his big bright eyes full of ancient visions he said:

The spark of life and the flames of light come from three things in your life;

- 1. someone to love – for when you love someone you become part of the big cycle of life, you also take pride in yourself and stand tall.*
- 2. something to do – for people doing nothing have to put up with what happens, nearly always bad stuff.*
- 3. something to look forward to – for this gives hope and keeps the fire in the belly, the flames bright, the spark of life alive and that rotten smoke away.*

That's the wisdom of our mothers and our fathers, our aunties and uncles of long ago and I have kept it alive by not sleeping when everything goes

dark and danger is everywhere. I know it is true because it is the wisdom of country from the Great Creator Spirit.

From the owl story the young kid talked about his love for Shanika: “I want to be a good man for her, she cares for me in a way the gang never did. I want to stand tall and strong not looking to the ground in shame. I have something to do, that’s why I am back in school”.

“I look forward to working in community someday – a mechanic or truck driver, a teacher assistant helping kids, or even in the clinic with nurses. When I look forward to something like that it gives me hope, and not just me. A lot of us young fellas are like this. It is like there is no smoke following us around and we can see stuff like we’ve never seen before. It’s like fire in our belly not smoke in our eyes”.

Thank you for listening. I wonder how many of you feel like you have just had a dream. You see the emotional brain is where dreams take place, and if we are to add new patterns with which to see ourselves and our world, we must simulate the same process – deeply relaxed, and sneaking under our rational thinking brain are powerful metaphors that get embedded in our subconscious brain. In this dream-like state, Owls can talk and the smoke is real. Age, race, culture or gender doesn’t matter because all humans dream even if some can’t remember them.

On another matter the three keys to happiness, someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to, may seem trite or corny. Let me tell you it isn’t. In many years of private practice I have used that saying more than any other. I believe its impact is because those three things will ensure three vital emotional needs are met: loving brings connectedness, belonging and ‘other’ focus; doing stuff brings a sense of control instead of being overwhelmed, and looking forward brings a sense of meaning into our lives, it gives us hope. Hope is the anchor to the soul and when storms blow and the tide is against us, we have something secure to hold us. What an asset in a crazy world.

Finally, there is a copy of this story on my website and I encourage you to read it again. You are welcome to use it, and adapt it to suit your situation. There is also a breakdown of the story to help you identify important aspects that will help you creating stories of your own to help bring about change for the better. Finally feel free to contact me anytime.

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Merv is a teacher, trainer and therapist. In 1997, he became the first Australian to hold a Human Givens Diploma. Merv also has trade, teaching, business, and workplace training qualifications and a Degree in Social Science. In 1993 Merv was awarded the Outstanding Contribution to Education Award at Government House for his work with young people. He has conducted workshops and presented at many conferences in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. In his role as principal of a boarding college for indigenous teenagers, Merv visited many First Nations communities in the Top End, and later became involved as a consultant with Building Indigenous Communities in Katherine developing training materials for remote area health workers. He describes his current role as a 'non-practising retiree', dividing his time between pro-bono therapy and consulting, speaking engagements and coordination of an online certificate course in psychotherapy for professional associations.