

In Praise Of The Remembered Story

By Lorne Brown

One cold winter's day long ago when my father was a young man and working as a travelling salesman for Ganong's Chocolates, he checked into a hotel in Perth, Ontario. He was to visit a customer some ten miles away, and so he hired a horse and sleigh from the local livery. Five minutes into his trip, however, he realized that, despite being wrapped in bear rugs, he would soon freeze to death. He then jumped off and ran behind the sleigh the entire way. After he drew up the customer's order, he turned around and ran all the way back to the livery stable, to the amusement of all and sundry.

I was thinking of this story the other day as I read yet again in the newspaper the daily litany of hardships we face in these troubled 1990s—downsizing, plant closures, food banks, unemployment, the list goes on. For just about everyone, coping skills have assumed a monumental importance. It's a wonder that universities haven't started to offer "Coping 101" as a general interest course.

And it seems to me that we have lost an important weapon in our coping arsenal: the remembered story.

Family stories were an important part of my growing up. In the evening after the day's work, my family of seven would sit at the dinner table, and the stories would flow. Stories of what happened during the day gave me, the baby of the family, an opportunity to know what was going on out there in the "real" world. More importantly, I heard stories about my relatives, some long gone. Others, while still alive, were living in the Ottawa area, and I rarely got to see them. But the stories connected me to a tradition. I realized that I had a past before I was even born, and that I will have a future after I die.

My family didn't tell folktales, but my mother told me nursery rhymes, and with my grandmother, quoted various proverbs. Coming through the Depression, they lived what they preached. In the recession of today these old proverbs have a peculiar resonance. "A stitch in time saves nine," said mother as she darned socks on a Saturday night, listening to Foster Hewitt describe the Toronto Maple Leafs of Syl Apps and Turk Broda. "A penny saved is a penny earned," said grandma, putting a penny thoughtfully into the piggy bank. "Waste not, want not," said father, carefully flattening a tin can which he would then cut into thin strips, meticulously twisting them to make "tin can icicles" to hang on our Christmas tree. I didn't realize it then, but I was developing my coping skills.

Later, I found myself plunged into the world of the folk tale and the folk song. The old stories and songs became a part

of me, affecting my life in ways I never thought possible. I began to realize that, in times of adversity, the world's peoples had the resources of their folk culture to draw on. The slaves from Africa could bring no possessions with them across the ocean, but they always had their remembered songs and stories. In the face of unbelievable hardships, these stories gave them strength and hope. The grey goose who was shot, plucked, and roasted, could still go flying across the ocean with her goslings behind her. Br'er Rabbit, hand and foot stuck to the tar baby, could still outwit the fox into throwing him into the briar patch where he was born and bred instead of drowning him or boiling him in oil.

The natives of North America saw their land and their way of life taken from them by the white man, but he couldn't take away their stories. The Apaches, for example, still had their tales of Coyote, a trickster figure. They told this story: A white man on horseback comes across Coyote and asks if he is the clever Coyote who tricks people. "Not me," says Coyote. But the man insists on a match of wits, and begs Coyote to trick him. Coyote insists that he has left his trick medicine at home, and asks to borrow the horse to get it. While trying to mount, he deliberately jabs the horse, and says it won't let him mount because he's not dressed in the white man's clothes. The man obligingly gives him his clothes. Finally, all dressed and riding the man's horse, the trickster says, "You know it now, white man; I am clever Coyote."

In the Middle East there is a beloved wise fool with several names, Hodja being one. One day the Hodja, while walking along, discovered an old rusty coin lying on the road. Thinking it might be valuable, he took it to a coin dealer who gave him twenty pieces of silver. With his new wealth he bought quantities of felt at a good price, and was delighted to sell the cloth for one hundred silver pieces to the army who desperately needed new uniforms. A silver smith offered him fifty gold pieces for the silver coins, but unfortunately, on his way home, he was robbed of the gold coins. His wife asked him what he had lost in the robbery. "Oh," said the Hodja, "Just an old rusty coin."

Coping skills.

The famed psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim tells us how remembering fairy tales kept him alive during the holocaust. When the going becomes tougher for me, I remember the story of the Jew who lived with his family and in-laws in a cramped little house. Unable to stand the noise and confusion any longer, he went to the Rabbi for advice. The Rabbi told him to bring his cow, goat, and chickens into the house as well. The chickens made such a mess that he had to return to the Rabbi the next day for help, and was told to take the chickens out of the house. When the goat was causing so much trouble, the Rabbi told him to take the goat out as well. Which still left the

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cow, who was turning the house into a stable. "Take out the cow!" cried the Rabbi, and the next day the man returned to the Rabbi beaming, "My house is now so quiet and roomy and clean ... it's a pleasure to live there." And so I learn that things could always be worse.

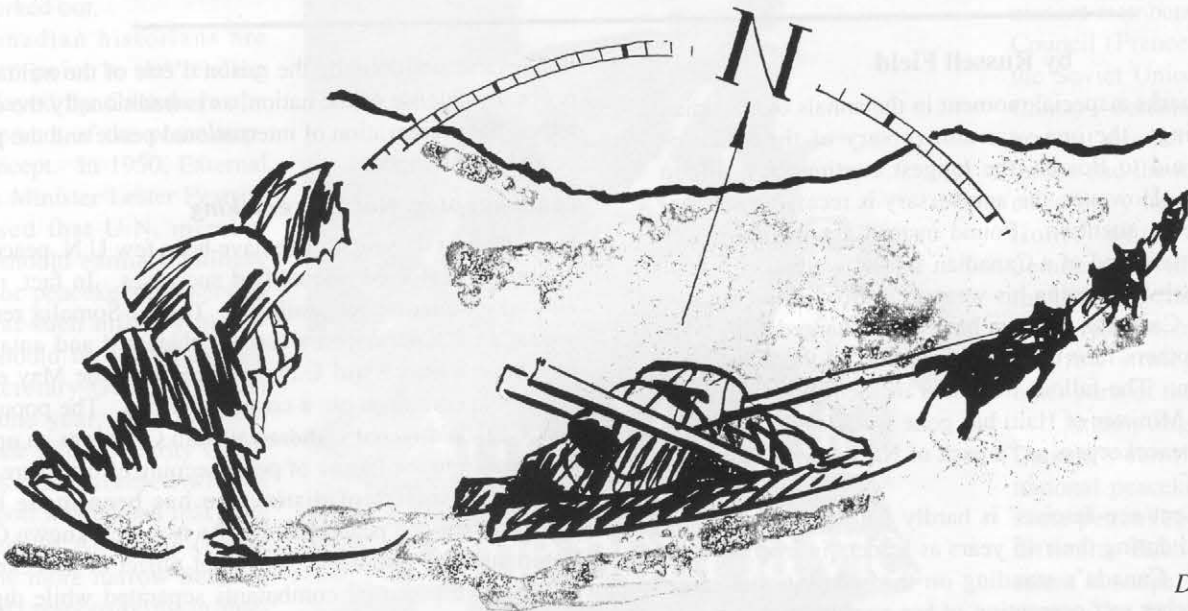
Coping skills.

When women hear the stories of the ancient goddess in her triple aspect (maiden, mother, crone) they learn the power of their gender and can come to terms with their lives. Rather than longing to stay forever in the maiden stage, as TV and magazine ads would have them believe, they can rejoice in each stage. Men hearing the same stories can appreciate women in ways undreamed of, and can understand how much the male culture has taken away from women.

Told and remembered stories, whether personal family tales or the universal folk tales, have been with us since the beginning of time. They have sustained and nourished us, have given us strength to cope in difficult times. But today we

can dismiss the whole story as a "fairy tale." The real Cinderella story, Tattercoats, Thousand Furs, whatever, is an inspiring coping skills story.

The remembered story has such power and beauty that it will never die out completely, but it is gasping for breath. So all hail to today's storytellers who are retelling the old tales. I find myself increasingly drawing on these stories to help me cope with a world gone mad. When I hear one economist or politician explain that we must spend our way out of the recession, and then another say that is wrong and that we must reduce the deficit at all costs, I am reminded again of the Hodja, who was once asked to settle an argument. After hearing one side, he said, "You're absolutely right!" The other person said, "You haven't heard my side yet," and went on to explain it. "You're absolutely right!" the Hodja said. Upon hearing this, the Hodja's wife rushed out of the house and said to him, "They can't both be right, you fool!" To which the Hodja replied, "You're absolutely right!"



David Wysotski

have families where both parents, or a single parent, are working so hard the family doesn't ever sit down together at meal time to share stories. Common "wisdom" tells us that with a TV and VCR, who needs stories anyway? Storytelling is only for children, they say, but even children are increasingly being fed a diet of pop culture. Will the Trumps get divorced? Who is Madonna's latest squeeze? Who is doing what to whom in the current soap opera? At a time when we desperately need the strength of the old stories, we are being told that they are unimportant, merely kid's stuff.

Worse, the great old stories that do make it into popular culture often get changed in fundamental ways. Cinderella is perhaps the most universal of folk tales, an inspiring story found everywhere from ancient China to our own Algonquin Indians. The cinder maid is really a princess to begin with, and through her own strength of character regains that which was rightfully hers, and becomes a princess again. But most of us know it from the Walt Disney movie, and Disney, despite his genius, never properly understood the fairy tales. In the screen version, Cinderella needs the help of a fairy godmother. Since most of us don't have such a magical creature to help us, we

And when I try to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, good luck from bad luck, the old Chinese story springs to mind.

A farmer's horse escaped from his stable one night, and the next day his neighbours commiserated with him on his bad luck. "It is not for me to know whether it is good luck or bad luck," the farmer said. Sure enough, the next day his horse returned, bringing a whole herd of wild horses with him. "What good luck!" the neighbours cried, but the farmer said again, "It is not for me to know whether it is good luck or bad luck." And the next day, his son broke a leg while trying to ride one of the wild horses. "Such bad luck," cried the neighbours, but the farmer said, yet again, "It is not for me to know whether it is good luck or bad luck." And the next day, the press gang came through the countryside, conscripting all able-bodied men into the army. Because of the son's broken leg, he was left alone. The story could go on and on, but a fundamental, comforting truth has been recognized.

Coping skills.

Like my father had when he ran twenty miles behind a sleigh to keep from freezing to death.