Notes from April 29, 2005
Madronna Holden presentation at Healing Arts meeting

What Good are Stories? Telling and Healing in Traditional Cultures

This talk will illustrate the use of traditional stories for physical and psychological healing, in the process of their telling, in their structure, and in their content. It will discuss the theoretical basis of such healing, including the nurturing aspects of storytelling; the use of metaphor as conceptual bridge and opening of thinking, the “holding” and “revealing” of the shadow, the shift from victim to equal in knowing another’s story, and the physical and psychological benefits of ebbing immersed in listening. It will illustrate these ideas with concrete examples from storytelling in traditional cultures, with some intimation for their healing use in the modern age, drawing on my own experience as a professional storyteller.

Here is a conceptual outline of ideas that I have used in my classes and other presentations I have done:

Healing Aspects of Traditional Stories

Intimacy and nurturance

“Feeding” the young; giving means for self-protection
E.g. lullabies (Little Elf; Maria Warner’s work)
Non-intrusive; respect for audience initiative and freedom of thought
“Paying for stories”, bringing you to a place “where you can take care of yourself”.
E.g. “The Lion’s Whiskers”

Passing on of experience
Self-esteem
Entertainment, “relief”
Modeling mutual respect and dialogue as healing power: e.g. Karuk doctors telling herbs their own origin stories to herbs to in order to activate their healing powers.

Metaphor

Metaphor as “bridge” and flexibility
Metaphor and healing
Learning meta-language (Gregory Bateson)
 Stories told to schizophrenics
Increased sense of a “way out”, alternatives.
 Increased ability to develop perspective on self and own actions.
But only worked if stories told orally rather than read
Shifting victimization to empowerment: perspective as “owner of the story”
Hillman, “telling stories of our parents” as a way for us to reach maturity
Offering safe place to contain, “play with”, and balance energy
Release/transformation of negative energy: healing PTSD vets; “giving voice” to young women. Making unconscious conscious; bringing “shadow to light”.

Listening

Experience of involving whole self, concentration
Physical effects of listening
And group experience

Imagination

“Worst tragedy is to go unimagined” (Momaday) Add, “to be imagined by others.”
Mystery
    As on our side
    Trust of personal intuition and psychological “channels” of knowing
Restore largeness of our lives (Jung on gods becoming “diseases” without stories):
“I am the story of myself”

If we have time, I will tell some stories to illustrate these points: South African story of the necklace in women’s initiation, Pueblo “lullaby”, and/or medieval European tale, “What Does a Woman Want?”