

STORY TELLING MAKES A COMEBACK:
ABORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESS

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Everyone, young and old alike, likes a good story, especially stories that amuse as well as instruct. A few years ago three of our young grandchildren spent the Christmas holidays with us while their parents were away. As a special arrangement each evening after supper we gathered around the fireplace and told stories to each other—made up stories. Everyone took part, including the five year old, and everyone agreed later that it was the best Christmas they ever had! Everyone likes to listen and probably even tell stories. As Mark Twain noted, “the telling of a story is as significant as the story itself.”

Years ago, when our children were small they sometimes grew restless when traveling long distances in the car. One of the more successful games we invented to keep them from getting bored was called, “Name that Town.” Everyone would read the highway map together, get the name of the next few towns we were going through, and tell a made-up story about how each town got its name. Sometimes we carried a book of place-names with us to obtain the real story about how the town got its name, but the made-up stories were always more interesting and the miles simply flew by!

The study of Native legends can be a very rich source of learning. Traditionally, legends appear to have been told for a variety of purposes, both formal and informal. Formal storytelling was usually connected to the occasion of deliberate moral or spiritual instruction. In fact, some legends were considered so sacred or special that their telling was

restricted to the celebration of a very special event such as the Sundance. Others were told only during specific seasons. On these occasions, only recognized or designated persons could engage in their telling. Nearly anyone could engage in informal storytelling, and such legends were usually related for their entertainment or instructional value.

Many tribes had among them recognized individuals who would go about them from lodge to lodge (or teepee to teepee), amusing the residents with traditional tales, histories of the wars and exploits of their ancestors, or inventions of their own, which were sometimes in the form of allegories or parables. The stories were intended either to teach some moral or spiritual lesson or comprise an extravagant invention having no other purpose but to excite wonder or amazement (Clark, 1971: x). Among Crow storytellers, a narrator might expect to stimulate an occasional response from his listeners, and failing that he or she might assume that listeners had fallen asleep. The Iroquois had a method to verify a listening audience. Every once in a while a storyteller might shout “Ho” in the midst of his or her story, and expect the audience to respond with “Hey.” If there was no response, the storyteller would conclude that everyone was indeed asleep. Some Iroquois storytellers also had a unique way of selecting stories to be told by carrying with them a bag of props. When it was time to begin a story, they might reach into the bag, pull out a prop (such as a doll, toy, bone, or feather), and make up a related story. With this method, the process had a way of surprising both the storyteller and the audience.

Informal story telling in traditional Aboriginal communities usually took place in family homes during winter evenings when there was little

else to do. The family might gather indoors around the fire in a teepee, lodge, wigwam, longhouse or an igloo, and listen as someone spun a tale. Familiar or not, it was always enjoyed. Sometimes when the men were away on a hunting party, and the women were cooking, cleaning, or sewing, an elder might gather the children around and amuse and instruct them with stories. In some tribes, legends were never told during the summer months because the animals were about and might hear them and be offended by references to them in the stories. During the winter many animals hibernated, and the spirits too were deemed to be asleep, making it safe to tell stories.

Our recently departed friend and mentor, the late Chief John Snow of the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) First Nation of Morley, Alberta, used to tell about two frogs that fell into a vat of cream. One frog gave up trying to stay afloat almost immediately and soon drowned. The second frog swam and kicked and paddled around in the cream, even managing to float from time to time. After several hours he was delighted to discover that the cream had turned to butter and he was able to leap from the vat using the hardened butter as a springboard. Chief Snow used the story to illustrate the fact that Native people should never give up in their struggle to gain equality and justice.

Somewhat enamored of the Aboriginal penchant to make a point by telling stories, when we were recently awarded a sabbatical leave from the University of Calgary, we spent our time touring Native American communities and gathering stories unique to their tradition. We spent most of our time in the southwestern region of the continent, traveling from Alberta to California and western states, partially to fuel our interest in Plains First Nations cultures. We spoke to friendly informants,

visited art galleries and museums, and purchased an impressive collection of used books about and containing legends.

A Once Universal Habit

Legends have sometimes been identified as one of the most common means of transmitting First Nations cultural values and beliefs. As part of the oral tradition, legends, along with music, dance, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, customs, and material culture, comprise the folklore of a particular population. Legends are probably the principal means of transmitting cultural beliefs and values. There was a time when all cultures relied solely on the oral tradition before there were written forms of communication. Legends or stories shared between families and within communities conveyed important belief systems, ceremonial rituals, and cultural symbols. Their primary purpose was to instruct the young as well as transmit cultural history, knowledge, and values. As the bountiful supply of legends attests, Aboriginal bands specialized in the use of this medium.

A similar situation existed in the Hebrew culture of centuries ago. Many Bible stories, for example, particularly those told by Jesus, although called parables, are much like moral legends. Jesus often started His stories with phrases like, "A farmer went out to sow his seed..." The kingdom of heaven is like..." (Matthew 13:3, 24), or "There was a man who had two sons..." (Luke 15:11). Stories like these, told centuries ago have been passed down to a time and place far removed from the rocky hillsides of Palestine and the Pharisaic observance of the Mosaic law. In the intervening years these parables have undergone extensive analysis, repeated interpretations, and critical redaction as to sometimes render their messages a bit more convoluted than was originally planned by their

giver. Generally speaking, the intent of Jesus' parables was clear, even though probably less than five percent of His audience was literate (Napier, 2002: 87). That fact mandated that the meaning of Jesus' stories be readily understood by His hearers. The stories allowed Him to reach a portion of the heart and the intellect that could not otherwise be accessed (Marshall, 2003; Buttrick, 1988: xvii-xix).

Today one can track a wide variety of stories or legends based in the oral tradition from almost every continent and culture, and there is a marked similarity among many of these stories or legends. Basically Native American legends dealt with the origins of things, spirituality, performances of religious men and women (anthropologists call them shamans), the bravery and single-heartedness of warriors, and a vast array of cultural beliefs and practices. For the most part telling legends was traditionally the responsibility of grandparents or elders in Native American communities, and they were regarded as repositories of cultural knowledge. Legend content was most frequently either informative or moral in tone. Some Plains tribes held in store a plethora of both adult and children's legends, and if the adult legends were to be shared with children, they required sanitizing because of sexual explicitness. Native storytellers have always been greatly respected because of their sagacious knowledge, eloquence of delivery, and powers of invention. They used to occupy preferred places in teepees and wigwams, and were offered the choicest of food wherever they went (Clark, 1971: x). They were often relied on to help preserve tribal histories and spiritual knowledge. More than that, as Mark Albert Blackfish once stated, "Legends are not about living things, they are living things!" (Norman, 1990: xiii).

Valuing and sharing legends comprised only part of a tribe's spiritual structure, which also included ceremonies, rituals, songs, and dances. Physical objects such as fetishes, pipes, painted teepee designs, medicine bundles, and shrines of sorts together comprised the huge vat of cultural knowledge, all of which was inculcated by memory and through experience. Viewed together, these entries represented spiritual connections between people and Mother Earth, which with appropriate care, resulted in a lifestyle of assured food supply, physical wellbeing, and the satisfaction of the needs of societal members.

Legend Themes

Storytelling played a significant part in the spiritual realm of the Indigenous people and functioned as an avenue through which elders could speak with voices that reflected individual vision and the wisdom of the ages. In telling legends, storytellers usually stuck to the main theme of a story although they would at times provide details to their own personal preference. There is a Sioux saying that legends are like weeds that originate from the same stem and western logic should not be used to evaluate them.

A study of Indian legends is, for the present generation, a way of learning about the customs, habitat, and principal occupations of the First Nations that have preserved them. Legend content reveals some of the inner workings of the Aboriginal mind, the people's beliefs, hopes, and fears, and what they lived, fought, and died for (Macfarlan, 1968: ix). As Erdoes and Ortiz (1984: xv) note, "Legends are the magic lenses through which we can glimpse social orders and daily life; how families were organized, how political structures operated...how religious ceremonies felt to the people who took part in them..."

Nature was always a common theme in traditional legend telling because the livelihood of the First Peoples depended on respecting the rhythms of Mother Nature. Beyond that the content of legends among many Plains tribes featured four specific motifs—solar, astral, animals, and plants. In the first two types, the heavenly bodies played a significant role, particularly as sources of transcendent power. Animals were perceived as capable of mediating powers to humans that were associated with their unique characteristics—speed, vision, wisdom, or cunning. They were also employed in adventuresome and comic tales related for entertainment purposes (Underhill, 1965). Animal stories were always told as though animals were friends of humans; stories were not related about “wild” animals.

Sioux hunters traditionally studied the habits and qualities of animals so they could become more effective hunters. The lessons they learned were passed on to the next generation in the form of legends. Brown (1997: vii-viii) observes that Aboriginal people regarded the inherent nature of animals to remain relatively true to who they were in characteristics and spirit, regardless of change and the passing of time. The continued interaction between humans and animals was essential as human relationships with nonhuman beings could help define what is human. It was also believed that the means by which to understand the Great Power (Great Spirit) was by studying the workings of nature, particularly animals. Animals were also believed to carry messages of spiritual import. Intercepting the horizontal dimension to the world of appearances, there was always for the Indigenous mind, the vertical dimension of the sacred, and in this sacredness there was the sense of “mystery.” In this worldview, animals contain within them power that

points to the sacred. Sioux elder, Chased by Bears emphasized the importance of relating to animals in this way; “The birds and beasts, the trees and rocks, are the work of some Great Power. Sometimes people say they can understand the meaning of the songs of the birds. I believe this is true. They say that they can understand the call and cry of the animals, and I can believe this is also true, for these creatures and people are alike, the work of a Greater Power...we believe that Wakan Tanka is everywhere” (Brown, 1997: 1).

Some years ago we were privileged to work in the Stoney community, many of our activities were connected to local community organizations. One Sunday morning as we stepped out of the local church building, several members of the congregation noted an eagle flying overhead. Immediately smiles broke out as an elder observed, “The Creator is smiling upon us. He has sent his messenger to tell us that we will be blessed.” It was a beautiful way to connect spiritual meaning to our temporal world.

The sacred number four occurs in many legends since it figures in so many Native American practices. There are, after all, four directions, four faces of the human being—the face of the child, the adolescent, the adult, and the aged. There are four kinds of things that breathe—those that crawl, those that fly, those that are two-legged, and those that are four-legged. There are four things above the earth—sun, moon, stars, and planets, and there are four parts to green things—roots, stem, leaves, and fruit (Friesen, 1995: 119). The medicine wheel symbolizes the four directions and four components of the human makeup—spiritual, mental, social, and physical—in its very composition and in the rituals connected to it.

Local topography was a frequent theme in Indian legends. Eastern Woodland agriculturalists, for example, told stories about corn, beans and squash; west coast Aboriginal cultures had stories about whales and fish; Plains tribes told stories about the buffalo; and, desert cultures told stories about desert animals and birds. Plants played a less dominant role in legend telling, albeit among the Crows, for example, the cultivation of tobacco was connected to their origin story. For them the ritual of the Tobacco Society is a reenactment of the creation story that renews the people and their world (Harrod, 1992).

The Native American renaissance of recent decades (Lincoln, 1985) has motivated writers of both Aboriginal and nonAboriginal backgrounds to record and publish Indian legends. A pioneer in this undertaking, Ella Clark (1988: vii) took it upon herself to conduct some of the first research in this area, lamenting that many Native legends had been lost or amended from their original form because of outside influences. Louis Bird (2005: 50-51), a Cree storyteller, suggests that cruelty inflicted on animals during the fur trade era changed the way animals were viewed and later described in legends. The fur trade also introduced new items that influenced hunters to rely more on their tools—steel axes, traps, and guns—than on their relationships with the natural animal world. New forms of weaponry also changed the life patterns of wildlife that began to regard humankind in a new, more enemy-like manner. Still another unfortunate development originates from the fact that after the European invasion many newcomers developed a form of appreciation for Indian legends, so some storytellers began to modify their stories to suit European tastes. New legends also emerged, somewhat different in form than traditional tales, and new subject matter

also crept into their content. Awareness of these factors has fueled additional energies to be poured into the project of preserving traditional legends in written form.

It is not easy to appreciate the complexity and reliability of oral tradition, since in traditional times word of mouth enjoyed the same primacy as a medium of knowledge and means of religious practice as the written word and the Scriptures fit in the Old World. Valued knowledge, particularly sacred knowledge was originated and perpetuated by most everyone in society, not just the privileged few. Oral tradition among the First Nations of North America was regarded as sacrosanct, in the same manner that transmission of textual materials was regarded in old Europe. Among the highest-ranking individuals in a tribe were the elders who were skilled in making tribally specific markings and intertribal protocols. Information was regarded as fact if the individual offering it made a statement as follows; "I am telling you this from my heart." As Chief Cochise of the Ciricahua Apache people once stated, "You must speak straight so that your words may go as sunlight into our hearts" (Friesen, 1998: 50).

This generation is very fortunate in being able to access Native legends, thanks in large part to the reliability of oral tradition. Appreciation for the preservation of these tales must be extended to several sectors, particularly elders who took upon themselves the responsibility of maintaining their vitality during times when their people were under siege to abandon traditional ways. These guardians of revered knowledge have been successful in keeping many of their valued beliefs and practices alive through very turbulent times. Adherents to the written word who first came into contact with Indigenous cultures, such

as traders, missionaries, and anthropologists also rendered a valuable service by committing to writing many stories they learned from their new found acquaintances.

Native legends have a unique identity. They are truly Indigenous stories, and as such they constitute the oral literature of each particular tribal cultural configuration. Indian stories are pictures of Aboriginal life verbally drawn by Indigenous storytellers, showing life from their point of view. Legends deal with spirituality, the origins of things, and various kinds of individual behavior. Legends are often entertaining and they may convey a vast range of cultural knowledge including folkways, values and beliefs. Legends often outline the very basis of a particular cultural pattern, and often utilize the sacred number four.

Types of Legends

It is possible to classify Indian legends into four categories (with some degree of overlap), each of which has a special purpose. The four types of legends are as follows.

(i) Entertainment legends. Aboriginal legends in many ways are like Aesop's fables or the tales of Greek mythology. Often they teach lessons, but they can also be quite entertaining. Entertainment legends are frequently about the trickster, who is called by different names among the various tribes. For example, the Blackfoot call him Napi, the Crees call him Wisakedjak, the Ojibway call him Nanabush, the Sioux call him *īktōmni* (*Iktūmnî*), and other tribes have different names for him like Coyote, Tarantula, Rabbit, or Raven. There is a bit of difference in the way the Mi'kmaq regard their trickster character, Glooscap, because Glooscap was involved in creation was not primarily a negative character. He was always kind to his people and cared for them, and provided for

them.

Stories about the trickster are principally fictional and can be invented and amended even during the process of storytelling. Almost anyone can tell an entertainment legend, and even amend details as the story unfolds. Trickster stories often involve playing tricks. Sometimes the trickster plays tricks on others and sometimes they play tricks on him. The trickster appears to have the advantage on his unsuspecting audience, however, since he possesses supernatural powers, which he deploys on a whim to startle or to shock. He has powers to raise animals to life and he himself may even die and in four days come to life again. Aside from being amusing, trickster stories often incorporate knowledge about aspects of Aboriginal culture, buffalo hunts, natural phenomena, or rituals, or the relationship between people and animals. In this sense trickster stories can also be instructional.

Zitkala-Sa (1985) relates the amusing Assiniboine story of îktômni (the trickster) and the muskrat. One day, îktômni was hungry and chanced to meet Muskrat who was just coming out of a lake ready to eat a meal of fish. Instead of waiting for Muskrat to invite him to eat, which was a plains custom, îktômni ventured forth with a challenge.

“Say, my friend, let us have a race and see who wins the pot of fish which you have cooking. I shall carry a large rock on my back to slow me down, and that will make the race fair. What do you say?”

Knowing that îktômni was up to no good, Muskrat began to object exclaiming that he was a swimmer not a runner, and îktômni would easily beat him. îktômni persisted, and Muskrat even helped put a large stone on îktômni’s back. The agreement was that each of them would run one side of the lake and meet again where the fish were cooking. îktômni, of

course, ran as fast as he could, unaware that Muskrat had doubled back and hidden the pot of fish. When îktômni returned to their starting point and discovered this, he was very angry and spied Muskrat deep under water, holding his pot of fish.

îktômni scolded Muskrat, but it did no good. He begged Muskrat to give him at least a fish bone, and when Muskrat did so, it lodged deep inside Îktômni's throat, almost choking him to death.

Then Muskrat issued a warning to îktômni. "Next time," he said, "Wait until I invite you to share my food with you before you start issuing challenges!"

(ii) Instructional or teaching legends are basically told for the purpose of sharing information about a tribe's culture, history, or origin. These stories explain things. They often use animal motifs to explain why things are the way they are. A child may inquire about the origin of the seasons or the creation of the world and a tale about animal life may be told. For example, a child may ask, "Where did our people come from?" or "Why are crows' feathers black?" Stories told in response to these questions could include adventures of the trickster. West coast artist and story teller George Clutesi (1967: 9) put it this way; "Quaint folktales were used widely to teach the young the many wonders of nature; the importance of all living things, no matter how small and insignificant; and particularly to acquaint children with the closeness of humans to all animals, birds, and creatures of the sea. The young were taught through the medium of tales that there was a place in the sun for all living things."

Dee Brown (1993: 26-28) tells the Caddo story of why dogs have long tongues. It turns out that dogs used to talk, and a man named Flying

Hawk had a dog who particularly liked to gossip. In fact, every time Flying Hawk went on a hunt, the dog scurried back to camp before Flying Hawk and told the villagers all about Flying Hawk's hunting adventure. Flying Hawk determined to cure the dog of his habit by taking him on a very long hunting expedition, and warned the dog before hand that whatever happened on this particular trip was strictly between the two of them. He even threatened to cut the dog's tongue out if he so much as whispered a word about the event before Flying Hawk had opportunity to do so.

After hunting successfully for several days, Flying Hawk loaded up his pack horses in preparation for the trip home. He looked around, but his dog was nowhere to be found. Severely disappointed, since he was sure the dog had heeded his threat, Flying Hawk made his way to the Caddo village only to find the dog sitting under a tree telling everyone about the hunting trip. Flying Hawk was so angry he grabbed the dog by his tongue and pulled it as hard as he could. At the same time he whipped the dog, but the animal's tongue had stretched and continued to hang out of his mouth.

From that day to this, dogs have had long tongues.

(iii) Moral legends are intended to teach ideal or "right" forms of behavior, and are employed to suggest to the listener that a change in attitude or action would be desirable. Since traditional Indian tribes rarely corporally punished their children they sometimes found it useful to hint at the inappropriateness of certain behavior by telling stories. For example, the story might be about an animal that engages in inappropriate behavior and the listener is expected to realize that a possible modification of his or her own behavior is the object of the telling.

An example of a moral legend comes from Erdoes and Ortiz' book (1984: 417-418) American Indian Myths and Legends. Elders from the Cochita Pueblo used to tell the story of two bird mothers, Crow and Hawk. It seems that Crow Mother had laid eggs in her nest and neglected to sit on them. She was always off doing something else. Hawk Mother noticed this every time she passed by Crow Mother's nest. No one was sitting on the eggs, so she decided to do the job herself.

In due course the eggs hatched and the little crows thought that Hawk Mother was their mother. Crow Mother returned to the nest and demanded that Hawk Mother return her children to her, but Hawk Mother refused. "You neglected your children," she said, "and now they are mine!" She refused to give up the little crows.

Crow Mother decided to take Hawk Mother to the highest court, which was presided over by Eagle, the King of the Birds. Crow Mother insisted that the baby birds were hers, but when Eagle asked the young crows who they thought their mother was, they chose Hawk Mother. After all, she was the only mother they ever knew.

Eagle, the King of Birds made his decision and awarded the young crows to Hawk Mother. "You neglected your children," he stated, "and so you have lost them to someone who cared for them. This is my decision." Crow Mother was very sad, but she learned her lesson.

(iv) Sacred or spiritual legends can be told only by a recognized elder or other tribal approved individual and their telling is considered a form of worship. We have always tried to respect that practice, although we have sometimes related origin stories if we first found them in published form.

In traditional times, spiritually significant stories were never told to

just anyone who asked anymore than they were told by just anyone. In some tribes, sacred legends were considered property and thus their transmission from generation to generation was carefully safeguarded. Selected individuals learned a legend by careful listening; then, on mastering the story, passed it on so legends would be retained for succeeding generations. In some instances storytellers might change aspects of the story to suit their own tastes. The amendments would center on a different choice of animals or sites referred to in the story as preferred by the teller.

Conclusion

Although we live in a world principally governed by constantly changing technological advances, the human touch has not yet been replaced by these. Everyone still likes a good story, preferably told and perhaps animated with appropriate sounds and gestures. According to our experience in working in First Nations communities near Calgary, Alberta, over the past decades (Blackfoot, Cree, and Stoney), we can attest that storytelling is alive and well in these communities. Children are still being informed of cultural data through stories, and they are gently reprimanded in the same manner when they engage in inappropriate behavior. Once in a while, as we have experienced, legends are even related to nonNatives for the same kind of purpose—to inform, amuse, and even to correct. The latter purpose is carefully accomplished using the indirect approach so that the individual engaging in inappropriate behavior or breaking protocol, may save face. Sometimes it takes hearers a few days to “catch on” that their behavior may have been off-course, but when they do catch on they may utter a suitable, “Aha, they mean me!”

Perhaps the elders of old were right in their belief that there is in some legends something higher than a mere tale, for there pervades in it the yearning common to all people, the desire for an intimate knowledge of the meaning of life, especially for the future of the human soul and its life after death of the body.

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