

# Weaving the Wisdom of Folktales into Therapy

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You may ask, 'How might it help a client to hear a short, therapeutic folktale, where a hero is facing challenges and finds a way forwards?' What happens when we sit back and hear a story? Do you recall such an experience from childhood? Stories spark our imagination, which we need to discover new ways to address old problems.

I have researched this topic, practiced this approach and have gathered a broad range of short therapeutic stories that can be introduced in counselling, or the classroom. I share some of these stories at my training workshops with *The Sydney Centre for Creative Change*: <https://www.artandplaytherapytraining.com.au/>



This handout offers you a brief introduction to the who, what, why, when, where and how of storytelling therapy.

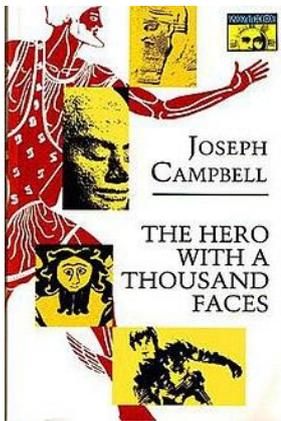
Recent research (see p.7) has demonstrated that there are psychological and biological processes that occur during and after listening to a story. A listener can experience sensations and thoughts that transport them for a few minutes to another world, another place where a central character is enduring and then overcoming significant challenges on their journey. A different part of the listener's brain is engaged, where dream images are created that are resonant and meaningful for their situation.

## The Origin of The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell researched comparative mythology and found most stories had a common structure which he described as an archetypal 'hero journey'. He even helped George Lucas use this in the Star Wars scriptwriting. He also knew the hero went through their darkest times before transformation occurs. Clients usually reach out for help in their moments of despair and hopelessness. We can show them the map and hear the story of where they are at:



In his 2007 book, *Story Proof*, scientist and storyteller, Kendall Haven reminds us that the story is not the content, but the scaffolding upon which the content is attached. The metaphors in the story are the magic. So when a person hears a folktale, they firstly hear and picture the contents: the character, the plot and the sequence of events over time. Then they can be guided to bring their own problem-saturated story, filled with their helplessness and chaos, and talk about how they have survived big challenges, and why they chose to take agentive action, guided by their own values. The Hero Journey template becomes a treasure map for understanding life.



Joseph Campbell tells us that stories can provide the individual with “inspiration for aspiration.” He was influenced by Carl Jung’s analytical psychology, and became renowned for his best-known work: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* published in 1949, writing:

*“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day  
into a region of supernatural wonder:  
fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won:  
the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure  
with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”*

## The Hero

At the beginning of any story, the hero isn’t a hero yet, they may even be a reluctant hero: Luke Skywalker wanders the sand dunes of his aunt and uncle’s farm in Tatooine and Harry Potter is locked under the stairs...

Then, something arrives into the central characters’ lives to call them out of their ordinary, everyday existence onto a path that changes both their place in and understanding of the world. Their journey leads to inner growth.

Initially, the hero may refuse the call. The path into the unknown that lies ahead may look too frightening and uncertain. Harry doesn’t believe he’s got the stuff to be a real wizard. Luke doesn’t think he could possibly be the hope that Princess Leia is looking for. We understand their reluctance. Their journeys are going to involve leaving home, stretching boundaries, trusting unknown helpers, and mastering new tools for the difficulties ahead. The going gets rough and there are always moments when our heroes wished they had never left the safety of the familiar.

This possibility to see life as a Hero’s Journey can give a framework and meaning to the chaos and challenges of life. Folktales, where the hero journeys into the unknown and takes intentional actions can spark the possibility of order, moving forward in time, hope and purpose for the client.

Later, looking back at changes they have made can reveal transformation to a new sense of self, and opportunities to share one’s lived, wisdom experience with others.

*“A hero is a man or woman who has been able to battle past his/her personal and local historical limitations, and return to us, to teach the lesson s/he has learned of life renewed.”*

**Ref: Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949**

## Personal Reflection:

Who were the heroes from your childhood: from movies, books or sporting? What did you see in them that invited you to revisit their character and hero journey again, and again, and again? Was there someone you were looking up to who has inspired your career or family values?



Think of recent books, films and autobiographies you’ve heard of lately. What is it about the story that has stood out as important to you?

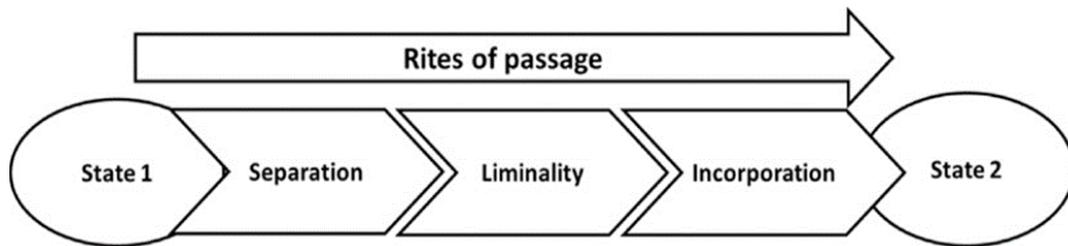
We go looking for people whose values and struggles align with ours. We feel we can understand them. This is often how empathy develops. Stories raise our awareness of how others suffer and how others find ways to hold onto hope and get through hard times.



Catherine Roberts speaks about Neil Armstrong's influence on her at the Women in Leadership Digital Summit.

A senior Royal Australian Air Force officer whose childhood idol was Neil Armstrong will become Australia's first space commander next year.

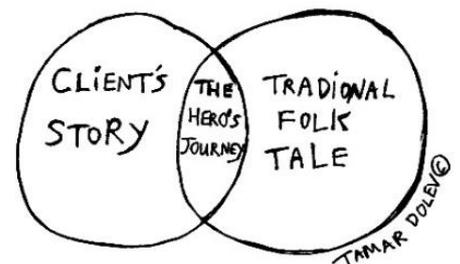
**Stories often follow a pattern** of three main phases, and in the middle phase (being in the forest etc), there can be a painful experience of disorientation or uncertainty (Think of COVID or waiting for some test results). The sense of self may be lost for a time. This can be described as being 'in limbo', from van Gennep's 1960s Rites of Passage research:



Rites of passage can involve multiple losses, such as loss of control or a complete letting go of the past. Helpful metaphors include the changing of the seasons or how a caterpillar surrenders to what happens in the chrysalis. There is a full disintegration of the caterpillar, and in this liminal space, a new winged form emerges, built from the old cells, but re-aligned and connected magically in new ways by a new biological template.

**Identifying patterns in a client's story** and experiences can be helpful:

1. A challenge is confronted (shock and fear)
2. No success immediately (discouragement)
3. Struggle (hopeful, effort, energetic action taken)
4. Find allies and powers (encouragement)
5. Confront evil (bravery, cleverness)
6. Taste defeat - dark night of the soul (despair)
7. Leap of faith (hope reborn, vision of outcome)
8. Persistent effort (conviction - often the 'third time' brings success)
9. Victory (peace, forgiveness, acceptance and justice)



In folktales the hero leaves their 'known' world behind. The Hero Journey map provides a template or reference for most life changes, both intentional and unintentional. Central characters, like our clients then adapt to the 'unknown'.

Even where new life directions and experiences are chosen (e.g. we choose to go to university, or marry), the new situation may have unexpected, multiple complexities that we had not considered or imagined. Other times, the Cosmos delivers an unsolicited problem (e.g. COVID or floods). When we then open that Amazon package that was left at our front door, we may discover our lives are never the same again, yet we have to adapt.

The therapist can support a client to recognise where they are in their own journey and how they are processing the experience and what new meanings may be arising. Change brings new possibilities. This may lead to the person narrating their own change story in a way that holds central what they think is important in life. In narrative therapy, this is called 're-authoring'.

The map can be shared with a client and used as a guide to the various stages. Each stage offers an opportunity to share what was happening, and who were the helpers then? It is available as a free PDF from the resources page of my website: <https://kimbillington.com.au> and is adapted from Joseph Campbell's 12 stages to suit therapeutic reflections in my work. Question prompts for each stage are also there, on a free PDF.

## Which stories may be helpful?

In therapy I prefer to choose short 2-5 minute folktales. I have a few dozen stories I have found helpful, and share these in my training workshops. Fables are more obviously 'teaching stories' depicting personal qualities and weaknesses, modelling moral ways of living. Fables come with an explicit message, and do not leave the person free. Fairy tales mirror the psyche, and the archetypal characters represent the deeper workings of the Self and the struggles of the ego (Bettelheim, 1984; von Franz, 1995). Some selected fairy tales may be helpful, but some are quite graphic and could trigger trauma.

Story Medicine has many distinct aspects: the art of selecting and telling the story, the implicit messages woven into the story, the listener's emotional connections to the characters, the 'turning over' of the story in their mind, and sometimes the magical 'ah-ha' of a new understanding of how to address a problem. As Milton Erickson said, 'it's not what you do, it's not what you say, but what the patient does, what the patient understands' that matters (in: Rosen, 1982, p. 154).

A client's preferred stories are cues for our therapeutic approach, and hint at the ongoing activity of a person's developing identity, even into adulthood. What films or books do they enjoy? Who are their pre-existing league of heroes? Perhaps a child has an 'Evil Empire' bullying problem as in *Star Wars*, or identifies with Matilda's oppression in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Perhaps they are a tomboy who delights in the hard-won triumphs of the heroine disguised as a soldier in the Chinese legend, *Mulan*. What resonated with them in the *Encanto* movie?

## A Case Study with an Adult Client

As part of my Masters' research into the therapeutic possibilities of folktales in therapy, I recruited adults who were open to sharing their journey using story therapy. J (55) had endured a lifetime of trauma, including the deaths of two sisters to leukemia when J was still a young child, followed by ongoing struggles with depression and anxiety. On top of this, a close family member's addiction troubles were overshadowing what could have been a joyous time of life with her grown-up children and an exciting circle of friends.

J did not want the domination of the problem of depression in her life, or the huge feelings of 'being a failure' and 'self-blame' that she was not able to change and put the depression behind her. When I proposed a story in therapy, J raised an eyebrow, and later said she had been 'a bit confronted' and somewhat 'taken aback' by this idea.

However, after hearing the story: *The Servant* (see p. 56 of my book: *A Counsellor's Companion*), J woke up a few days later picturing one particular part of the story: the image of the servant removing the stone that was blocking the fountain. J straightaway connected to the metaphor and image from the story which helped her gain an unexpected influence over the problem.

J saw the stone as a vivid metaphor for a new possibility. Picturing the servant removing the stone, she felt sure that she could also make a similar, small act: of putting her feet on the floor and getting out of bed. This changed how J saw her relationship to depression, and was energized by this epiphany. J had taken over this folktale and made it her own.

Three months later, as my co-researcher, J gave feedback to share that when the story idea was proposed initially she thought to herself somewhat cautiously, "Ok, I'll listen to this story. It's just a story, I'll let it speak to me, there's no risk." Then after the story, she reflected, "It was good that I was not expected to compare myself (to the character), which is what sometimes people say to me: 'Look! She did it. So can you!' It was freeing just to listen to the story, without any shoulds or pressure."

Five months later, J said the image of the stone "is still with me, it's become part of my resourcefulness ... I made a connection in my mind to lift that stone every morning and start living for the day... it represents 'blockage' of energy and fresh motivation... and how a small act... and this little, tiny stone being removed can give life to this huge force." J said passionately, "That's how I love to live. There's so much I want to do." J spoke about some future steps she was taking, applying for a position as a volunteer as a women's family violence intake worker. J had also begun to promote



## There are many ways a person can hear the story

- Heard aloud in person, after the therapist has rehearsed it
- Read aloud in session by the therapist
- Given as a printed copy for the person to read at home
- Created into a puppet-style play
- Recorded onto YouTube by the therapist, so it's a story for anyone
- Recorded in session by the person on their phone



**Interpretation** is an important element and is best not to be shared by the therapist. Interpretation is for the person listening. Storytellers have a golden rule: don't explain the story to your listener:

*Does the fruit seller peel and eat your banana for you?*

Rob Parkinson says stories are lavishly embroidered tapestries and that if you start picking out the threads, the integrity and magic is lost (Parkinson, 2009). Every good story will have multiple layers and meanings hidden in metaphors and symbols, and over time we slowly learn more about each story we tell.

**After Story Question Prompts** can be helpful for the person to reflect and share some resonant or personal connection with the story. Maybe only one or two questions are asked, never all like a checklist! The following are sculpted by my narrative practice, and may assist the person to look at their response to the story and have them share what they found important or interesting:

1. What in the story stands out as **important to you**?
2. In what ways did you **connect with the identity of the hero** of the story?
3. In what ways did you **relate to the journey** of the hero?
4. What understandings about your **own predicament** have you drawn from the story?
5. In visualizing the story, which **scenes or characters** were you most drawn to?
6. How might you now be feeling about **hope, or future possibilities** after hearing the story?
7. What effect has there been on any **identified personal issues** after listening to the story?
8. In what ways might aspects of the hero's experience be **validating** of your own heroic journey? (i.e. loss, isolation, jealousy, hopelessness, fear, anger, shame, despair, inferiority, outcast, unfairness, resentment, new courage, forgiveness etc.)

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**Storytelling as a therapeutic intervention** is an ancient medicine and has been pivotal in the achievement of positive outcomes for many people where they are transformed through their journey.

Story provides a bridge from the outer world, or what you have seen in a movie, or heard in a counselling session, to the inner world, where there can be chaos and stuckness. Question prompts carry the power to elicit life's meanings.

Folktales, with their hero journey structure do not stagnate, but keep flowing. Hope is kept alive. Suffering and challenges can be seen as universal and existential. There may be personal shame, hardships and isolation followed by the central character's 'return' as the Hero's Journey ends. These together can become a sparkling conversation of identity renewal for a client.

**Evidence and research** include anecdotes such as an elderly woman who was hospitalized in pain, and had “made up her mind to die” (but) she got so caught up in the story being told in a group therapy setting, she said, that for thirty minutes listening to stories, she felt no pain at all. Hanging on from week to week in order to hear more, she gained strength and determined to live.

Kuttner worked with leukemia patients needing painful bone marrow transplants (Kuttner, 1988). Local anaesthesia was often ineffective (or equally distressing), and general anaesthesia risky. Interacting closely with patients, Kuttner learned their favourite story and then during the operation told it back to them, with their help, while watching for signs of trance and monitoring the procedure carefully. She found that the story-listening trance worked better than either “standard medical practice” (information, reassurance, support) or attempts at distraction with toys and conversation. The favourite story was immediately effective in relieving both pain and distress. Even patients who reported awareness of pain, experienced very little distress. (Stallings, 1988)

**2021 Research: Storytelling increases oxytocin and positive emotions and decreases cortisol and pain in hospitalized children** in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*

<https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/118/22/e2018409118.full.pdf>



“During storytelling, something happens that we call the ‘transport of narrative’, that is, the child, through fantasy, can experience sensations and thoughts that transport them, momentarily, to another world, another place, different from the hospital room and, therefore, away from the aversive conditions of hospitalization,” says study first author Dr. Guilherme Brockington, from the Instituto D’Or de Pesquisa e Ensino (IDOR).

**Boosting the ‘love hormone’** The study finds storytelling increases levels of oxytocin, called the “love hormone.” It also helps to reduce cortisol, a hormone released during stress. Cave art shows storytelling dates back to our prehistoric ancestors. It spans at least tens of thousands of years through speech, writing, and imagery. Today, films and books captivate audiences through the same mechanism, moving people from one reality to another.

Driven by imagination, researchers say storytelling can create empathy for events and characters. It also fluctuates according to the interpretation of each individual.

“Until then, the positive evidence of the act of telling stories was based on ‘common sense’, in which interaction with the child could distract, entertain, relieve some suffering. But there was a lack of a solid scientific basis, especially with regard to underlying physiological mechanisms,” explains co-author Dr. Jorge Moll Neto.

**Storytelling is twice as effective as playing games** The team identified the psychological and biological processes that occur during and after listening to a story. They selected 81 children between two and seven years-old in a Sao Paulo hospital with asthma, bronchitis, or pneumonia. Researchers randomly selected half the group, who had storytellers read to them for about 30 minutes. The other children were given riddles offered by the same professionals for the same period of time.

Study authors collected saliva samples to measure both hormones. The young participants also underwent pain examinations before and after the sessions. The team then confirmed the results using a word association task in which the children were shown seven cards. These depicted a nurse, doctor, hospital, medicine, patient, pain, and book.

Researchers report that the outcomes were actually positive for both groups, since both interventions reduced cortisol levels and increased oxytocin production. They add sensations of pain and discomfort also dropped, according to the children's own reviews. The Brazilian team adds that the only major difference is that the impact of storytelling was twice as strong as telling children riddles".

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App - Stories to Grow By with Whootie Owl: <https://storiestogrowby.org/bedtime-stories-app/>

The Storytelling Resource Centre: <http://www.thestorytelling-resource-centre.com/>

World Stories: <http://www.worldstories.org.uk>

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/weaving-wisdom-folktales-therapy-kim-billington>

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