

# Getting the story right: How some wounds are finally healing

Janani Sampath  
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*The oral tradition of storytelling which is entwined with culture has several applications – corporates are banking on them to convey messages to their workforce, while counsellors are finding ways to help clients speak their mind or help overcome addictions when others' stories mirror their lives. | Photo - iStock*

Ritwick\*, an eight-year-old boy, was frequently picking up fights with his peers in a Chennai school. He would often beat them up and every other day, he was being pulled up by teachers for his misdemeanour. The school's psychological counsellor realised that Ritwick was unable to articulate his anger and frustration.

She narrated a story to him in which the main character, an eight-year-old boy, was extremely quarrelsome and had no friends. She then asked Ritwick to guess why the boy was not getting along with anyone. And he came up with the reasons: "Probably, because he was feeling lonely and his parents were not spending time with him. Both worked till late in the evening and he was often left yearning for their company."

For a boy who was always bellicose, the story of someone else helped him open up. Ritwick now understood himself better.

The oral tradition of storytelling, which is entwined with culture has several applications – corporates are banking on them to convey messages to their workforce while counsellors are finding ways to help clients speak their mind or help overcome addictions when others' stories mirror their lives. In a more contemporary situation, infertile couples are finding solace in storytelling sessions, when they realise that they are not alone in the struggle.

## Storytelling and therapy

Magdalene Jeyarathnam, psychodrama therapist, says that storytelling is not a new form of therapy. "When someone tells us their problems, they are actually narrating their story. As a form of therapy, the difference is only in the way it is applied," she says.

Through the projective technique – when the person is made to see their own story when narrated as someone else's – it is easier to find a solution.

"Each of us gets clouded by our own stories. But when someone tells the same as theirs, you see it clearly and can even offer solutions," she says.

Magdalene, who has been working with inmates of safe homes in Delhi, where young men serving sentences for rape and murder are lodged, shares her experience of using storytelling technique along with psychodrama to bring about a change among inmates.

The safe homes have men aged between 18 years and 24 years serving terms for crimes against women. "They tend to believe that women are meant to cook and wash clothes. To bring about a change in such attitude, I narrate the story of Sita from Ramayana and ask them if the people of Ayodhya and Lord Rama were right in asking her to walk through the fire to prove her chastity. In the beginning, these men often opine that he was right, and then when I narrate the story and as they play the role of different characters, they see Sita's dilemma and then change their stand, and defend Sita. They say she shouldn't have bowed down to the command of her husband and the people around," she says.

"I then tell them to see women as they see Sita to make them realise and change their attitude towards women." Magdalene says, adding that the same story can be used to counsel a woman who is having issues in her marriage due to pressure on her.

Eric Miller, a psychologist who founded the World Storytelling Institute, talks about helping clients overcome addiction through stories.

"It is about making them talk about their issues, in this case, the addiction to alcohol. Later, the person is asked to think about a movie or narrate another story of a different person, whom he thinks has suffered from a similar problem and then create a story of their own, an imaginary character dealing with a problem like theirs and how the character solves his or her problems," he says.

Miller observes that the stories they create on their own helps them realise that they are not alone in facing such a problem. "We also encourage them to go back to grandmother's stories and look at proverbs to reflect on their own issues," he adds.

Talking about a client who battled depression, Miller says that the person came up with a story of how he was in a castle and the invaders were trying to attack him from outside. "The invaders were nothing but the depression; it was just that the attack in real life was happening from inside and not outside," he adds.

The Story of a Story

- Storytelling evolved through visual narration as drawings in caves
- Chauvet cave in France has drawings dating back to 30,000 years
- Hieroglyphs, pictographic form of storytelling, developed in ancient Egypt
- Across cultures, chanting, singing and narrating epics have been forms of storytelling
- The Iliad by Homer is considered to be the oldest surviving work in Greek
- The Thirsty Crow, a popular fable by Aesop, was actually the Greek storyteller's message to the king about how slaves like him suffered due to lack of access to water
- Every part of India has its own history of storytelling in different forms like kathas, purana pravachana, katha kalakshepam and folk narratives
- Poet Jean de La Fontaine used the basis of Panchatantra and fables to address the peasants to keep them aware and alert about things happening around them

## Finding answers in tales

Namrata\*, an IT professional, in her early 30s and married for over six years has been trying to have a baby. She has visited four doctors in two cities. She was told there was nothing wrong with her or her husband. A case of unexplained fertility, they do not know what they are up against. They have to go step by step and can't go for an IVF directly. It was an excruciating and frustrating wait for the couple. Namrata's story has given hopes to many like her, who battle unexplained infertility.

With infertility clinics mushrooming all over, author columnist and storyteller Sudha Umashanker wanted to reach out to childless couples.

A semi-formal conference titled 'I want to have a baby' which has had three editions so far in Chennai and Trichy, delves into the stories of those who undergo similar struggles to have a baby, amid poking questions from family members and society.

"The stories help reduce their burden, apart from being cathartic. We share stories that we put together about such struggles and we also have couples talk about their own journeys and the struggle in trying to have a baby. There are medical and non-medical aspects of it, apart from helping them open up initially with a lighter session," says Sudha.

She adds that once they are done describing their problems, they begin to look at it differently and can arrive at a solution.

Sudha has been collecting stories, talking to different couples and to doctors, for real-life anecdotes.

She says that procedures like in-vitro fertilisation or intrauterine insemination can be difficult for people to understand. "When these are narrated through a story, it is a great relief for them. Not knowing what is happening and being put through it, is scary for them," she says. "Couple are very lonely in this journey and they should have spaces like these to express and understand their issues better."

She explains the bigger challenge of discussing male infertility.

Anil\*, a 34-year-old has a hormonal issue that has denied him and his wife from having a baby. Sudha says that these are issues that many men struggle to discuss.

"Sometimes, I find them willing to share their stories because they want to help others like them," she says.

### **Stories and corporates**

Did you know that Panchatantra and Hitopadesha tales could be adapted for a corporate setting? And why not, as Geeta Ramanujam, storyteller, trainer and academician at Kathalaya, explains how she uses the wisdom in the stories exhaustively in her sessions with companies.

"The Panchatantra tales is about the five stages of administration. It talks about being intuitive and avoiding enemies. If you look at these stories, each animal has a distinct characteristic. A frog is shown as thoughtful, the turtle is wise and the crow is portrayed as cautious in Hitopadesha. I use the same set of stories to talk about aptitude, attitude and behaviour."

She observes that the biggest problem in companies is that there is a communication gap between departments. "There is rigidity and fear and presentation skills are a big issue," she adds. "Therefore my stories should be able to help them balance both emotional and academic intelligence. Storytelling attracts as it holds the attention and it can be converted to address a subject like thinking out-of-the box, an issue or a problem concerning management, design and structures."

Surekha Raj, founder and managing director of Skylark HR Solutions, has a story for every situation, at her office.

"I deal with youngsters who have stepped out of lecture halls where they always listened to long speeches. If I have to retain their attention, I need to grab their attention and hold it for long," she says, adding how stories for her employees are inspired by real-life situations.

She talks about commitment to targets by telling them a story about a son who volunteers to open a bottle his father was trying to open. When he returns it without accomplishing the task, his father tells him, he can't go back on his words. He can either open it or break it.

"It is the same with targets, I tell them, you cannot come back and tell me by the end of the month that I am unable to achieve it."

She also describes the difference between mission and vision through the story of a person trekking. "The person wanted to reach the top, but couldn't as she forgot to see the huge stone in front of her and slipped on it, breaking her toe. Therefore, while the mission is always in the front and you keep focusing on how to go towards it step by step, vision is in the back of your mind," she says.

*(\*Some names have been changed to protect privacy)*