

SOCIETY

And they lived happily ever after



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Susan Perrow, author of seminal works on therapeutic storytelling, on how stories can heal hearts and minds

When a six-year-old refused to sleep for days on end and was bent on forcing herself to stay active her mother was not only physically exhausted, she was clearly at her wit's end. This was not just a case of sleep deprivation. The little girl's father had died while she was asleep and ever since she simply kept awake through day and night. The attending psychologist requested Susan Perrow, teacher, trainer, parent educator and author of seminal works such as *Therapeutic Storytelling -101 Healing Stories* and *Healing Stories for Challenging Behaviour* to pitch in.

And Susan Perrow crafted a beautiful story whose central character was a lovely little ballerina – knowing the little girl's love for both ballerinas and dance. The ballerina lived in a tiny box and every time it opened she would dance and every time the box closed she would go back and earn some well-deserved rest. One day when a violent storm hit the village where the story takes place, the door of the tiny box flung open and the ballerina danced non-stop. But a passing Dream spirit sang a beautiful song and the door of the box closed and the ballerina went to sleep. The story worked like a charm and soon the little girl's sleep problems were behind her.

Says Susan Perrow who was recently in Chennai as a visiting co-host of the Chennai Storytelling Festival which focussed on Storytelling and Healing and was conceived and directed by Eric Miller, director, World Storytelling Institute. "We couldn't bring back the father, we couldn't do much in this raw stage of loss. The simple resolution that we were aiming for was to make the child want to go to sleep. And the therapeutic story helped the process of bringing an out of balance behaviour / situation back into wholeness or balance."

So how does storytelling therapy work? Having studied various learning theories Susan Perrow knows that there are different ways of understanding things. "We all have our rational side and our imaginative side. The latter is the door through which the stories

coming in might effect a change. Stories bypass the rational brain and speak to the heart. They sometimes just sow a seed or build resilience or offer hope or might not do anything at all.”

Ask Magdalene Jeyarathnam, director, East West Center for Counselling and Training and course director, Expressive Arts Therapy course at Women’s Christian College who is collaborating with Susan Perrow on programmes, to name medical and psychosomatic conditions in which Storytelling Therapy is helpful and she says, “Storytelling works both while dealing with psychosomatic issues as well as medical conditions. Stories could be used for practically any kind of medical situation – diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS, any long term illness and for coping with sudden events/natural disasters – death, loss of a limb, loss of a job, tsunami, floods, riots, rape etc with all the attendant emotions. Stories have no side effects and touch each person uniquely and exactly at each listener’s point of need.”

Explaining the different methods that can be used while offering Storytelling therapy Magdalene Jeyarathnam adds, “The psychotherapist can co-create a story with a client and this may help the client come up with answers and solutions he or she was seeking and puts him/her in a place very active in relation to their situation or challenge. A story that the client brings may help a therapist understand more about the client in ways that words cannot. The metaphors used in the story may help the client express themselves better.”

And the metaphor is what Susan Perrow uses to great advantage. When asked by a Japanese publisher to write stories for children affected by the tsunami of 2011 she chose the kimono for a metaphor which represented the destroyed soul of Japan. So where does one find all the stories? Susan Perrow’s collection is handy and her workshops are a good training ground for those wanting to write stories. “Everyone has a story in them,” she says.

Eric Miller says, “I am hoping storytelling and healing might continue to develop as part of local healthcare practices. It is time for storytelling to find a place alongside dance therapy, music therapy, art therapy and play therapy.”

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