

Introduction

For thousands of years, the storytellers and philosophers of India have shared the image of a boundless net stretched across the skies above the palace of Indra, the supreme ruler of the gods of ancient India. At every crossing point of this net shines a jewel. Each unique jewel mirrors every other jewel. The tale of Indra's net tells us in mythic pictures what science is discovering today: that all is connected within us and outside us in the greater universe. This book invites you to experience your body as a whole through stories, and to discover that each part is in continuous communion with all the others, with your whole soul, and with far-reaching spiritual dimensions of who we are all together in an evolving universe. It is a celebration of the very evolved and inspirational community within us all.

Because every part of the body is closely connected with every other part, this book is intended to be read as a whole. As humanity grows closer together, everyone's body listens to the unfolding human saga in order to discover new pathways to mutual acceptance and understanding. Our organs are gathering places of wisdom, continuously cooperating below the surface of our consciousness. I believe that it is very important for us to listen more closely to all of them. Organized and perfected over long cycles of time, they are the physical-spiritual crucible for our personal and communal human evolution. Each organic pattern can awaken vast new understanding and inspiration for relating to ourselves and to each other.

Another purpose of this book is to develop understanding of how storytelling is a healing art that can draw out the innate wisdom within us. Stories make us more aware of ourselves as part of feeling, creating, laughing, crying, curious, courageous humanity. Together they have a cumulative effect, broadening our inner knowing, our compassion, and our sense of self. They

can also help us to nourish the body's natural intelligence by speaking directly to and from the intricate weave of our bodies.

Human consciousness is a whole-body experience. By working through the chapters of this book, you will learn to commune directly with the vast intelligence at work within you. As you collaborate more consciously with the creative genius by which your bodily life evolves, thrives, and heals, your relationship with yourself and others will evolve with it. No matter with what satisfaction or dismay you see yourself in the mirror, you can perceive all your parts, and everyone else's, with new wonder and respect. The body is far more than something attractive to be adored, or to be exercised in health clubs; more than a chemical genetic factory to be studied; more than an apparatus with parts to be taken out and replaced or repaired in a bustling hospital or clinic. I believe that the mechanistic view of the body is but one step in human awareness.

Each chapter in this book is devoted to an organ and begins with a description of its physiological role in the body, presented from both Eastern and Western perspectives. The chapters present the fundamental meridian energy patterns known for many centuries in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), followed by simple physical exercises to experience these fundamental energy patterns that stimulate a more artistic, creative, and globally oriented relationship with life. Each chapter also explores the soul physiognomy that resonates with each organ territory. Examples of individuals who embody these organic characteristics, often drawn from my therapy practice, are described, together with stories from many traditions that illustrate themes arising from each organ.

The "Transformational Storytelling" portion of each chapter offers you an affirmation to support the health of the organ and invites you to summon and to activate the storyteller within you that resonates with each organic territory. Transformative story patterns that have served storytellers for centuries portray the dance of positive and negative energies through protagonists and antagonists, and illustrate how bodily awareness can enhance the art of storytelling and support self-development. Each chapter also includes a variety of creative exercises for exploring the energies of each territory, as well as dance, music, and yoga asana selections to further expand your awareness.

The organs described in this book are living entities that carry us ingeniously through our lives. Each of these inner bodily territories communicates with great sensitivity with our unique individuality. Each shapes and forms lively relationships with the others as it mediates specific energies. A hugely responsive flowing, drumming, cascading, leaping conversation is continuously taking place amongst them and influences our daily conversations with ourselves and others. We sometimes sense these organic relationships in our dreams and in imaginative pictures in our waking hours. They lift us up or weigh us down as they give rise to inner characters and landscapes. As soon as we connect intentionally with one or another of these shaping energies through creative expression, we enter zones of excitement and risk.

You will feel more immediate affinity with certain of the organ realms and their stories, and less with others. Yet as you incorporate all the chapters in this book into your everyday perspective and let them stimulate your own creative expression, you can profoundly change the way you experience your body and soul. Like reagents in a chemical experiment, their different characters and plots can rearrange your attention, bodily energy, and spirit for life.

World conditions today, more than ever before, summon us to greater awareness of ourselves as whole and evolving human beings who are able more fully to awaken to the vastly dynamic wisdom that intimately plays within each of us.

STORYTELLING IS A HEALING ART

When I was a teenager, I worked one summer in a hospital to explore whether or not to pursue a career in medicine like my parents and my great grandmother, who was one of the first women MD's in the U.S. As I was helping babies to be born, I was also privileged to attend an amazing operation that allowed a man who had been deaf for many years to hear again. This was a turning point for me. I realized then that I wanted spend my life opening listening, and bringing new life to the spoken and the written word.

My journey with transformational storytelling began in an international Waldorf school that nurtures the arts as the foundation for learning. Standing before a class of children each day to deliver stories from a global curriculum, I quickly found proof that well-spoken stories build life forces. Sometimes as I made up and told stories, and looked out to see the children's eyes shining as they lit up from head to toe, I would feel my whole body resonating like an orchestra. Later, when I became less involved with classroom teaching and was completing my training as a psychotherapist, I was invited to work in a clinical setting with adults who were recovering from a broad range of chronic physical and emotional illnesses. I decided to experiment with storytelling, and I was fascinated to see positive results right away.

This launched me into a surprising new career. It was the beginning of the many storytelling classes, workshops, and courses I have continued to give during the past two decades. I often open these sessions by saying to tired and discouraged people: "We are going to work with that part of your mind that is creative and loves stories. Every one of us has the ability to make up wonderful healing stories. During our time together, you will tap into that part of yourself that is a playful yet very wise storyteller. Spontaneous storytelling resembles dreaming, yet allows you to be awake and to participate in the healing process." During these sessions, as dull eyes brighten, cheeks lose their pallor, and backs straighten, I observe with great wonder and pleasure how illnesses readily respond to the energy of the creative self and its inherent drive to health on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.

My goal from the start is to encourage movement in a healing direction. "Slowly take some good, deep breaths," I say. "As you inhale and exhale, sense a listening space in your heart. Let

your whole body relax and listen. Breathe with your whole body, as if you are a healthy child. As you relax more deeply, your critical analytic mind can rest and your creative mind will awaken to speak in ways that may surprise you. Great storytellers reach out with their voices to sense the dreams and struggles of human beings and of all living things. Like countless storytellers before you who have experienced the healing and organizing power of stories, you can breathe beyond the barriers of mere reasoning and clock time, into depths of creativity.”

As participants relax and listen more openly, I explain that imagination thrives when it is given specific tasks. I invite them to imagine that they are opening a large and magnificently illustrated storybook. “On the first page of your book, envision a hero or heroine who embodies a quality that you esteem in other people and in yourself, such as courage, kindness, contentment, or playfulness. Visualize the picture in detail: how the character is dressed—notice the colors, shapes, and textures. In what era and environment does he or she seem to be living?”

Traditional tales often end with a positive sense of celebration. To encourage group participants to liberate their hopes, I continue: “Protagonists often set out to find greater love, health, power, joy, and happiness. In your beautifully illustrated book allow your imagination to show you a picture of a place of fulfillment and happiness. Let your breath take you to this place. Is it by the sea, a mountainside, a valley? Is it in a town or a city, or perhaps on another planet? As if you are a child studying a superb illustration, notice the plants, creatures, and architectural structures. What fragrances, sounds, and colors do you associate with this picture? Enjoy the details you see or sense, and remember them well.”

A sense-filled search for positive beginnings and endings stimulates creativity and allows worries and doubts to rest. Truth contained in the core of the personality emerges, penetrating sinews, muscles, heart, and soul with wisdom beyond ordinary conscious thought. In my workshops, these hopeful endings are usually shared with a partner, whose only task for a while is to listen openly like a child and to share in return. Afterward the groups sit together, savoring the images that have emerged. Stimulated by storytelling imagination, genuine empathy and understanding flow more freely. A sense of endings and new beginnings flourishes. A woman who had been depressed for as long as she could remember imagined with wonder a family that expressed much love for a sadly neglected child. The woman had found within herself at last a positive imaginative response to her childhood yearning for love. An exhausted man gratefully resonated with the landscape his imagination presented to him: a quiet green cove where his hero would live in peace and harmony. A depressed father, after describing a king who was very devoted to his subjects, clearly saw himself making more time to spend with his daughter.

Harnessing the imagination to the body can reveal unknown obstacles, and awaken new solutions and resolutions to health. When they are pictured in the context of a story, physical symptoms often lessen, or even disappear completely, sometimes permanently. Having stimulated positive, creative beginnings and endings, I then encourage other rhythmic story patterns. When

working with the body, I give yet another task to the storymaker: “Even your most troubling problems or illnesses can be seen through the eyes of your imagination as a landscape or a character. Include your physical or other struggle in your story either directly as a character or as a sound, color, or landscape.”

Using this technique, a woman emerging from a prolonged depression envisioned herself as a beautiful fictional character: “Penelope was curled up in an earthen den. She had been there, it seemed, for a long time. She would awake, and sensing that nothing had changed, she would return to sleep. She was wrapped in her long, shining hair.” A man who was resolved to release himself from a habit that had clouded his life since childhood pictured a story character in a dark cave, bound hand and foot with ropes. As his character began to move and call for help, the ropes turned into dust.

BASIC STORY ELEMENTS

Myths and stories often resonate with specific internal processes. This reliable pattern invokes well-being and resilience in every cell of your body:

Setting Out: The protagonist sets out in quest of greater love, strength, justice, wisdom, and happiness.

Trouble: One or more obstacles and/or antagonists interfere with the journey.

Help: Wise and benevolent help comes, often giving a gift.

Positive Ending: The protagonist fulfils the quest with joy and celebration.

THE POWER OF CREATING AND SHARING A WHOLE STORY

I have never met anyone who was not able to tell a whole story from beginning to end. You might think you can't, but in working with the storytelling exercises in this book, just go forward and tell your story in honor of the multitudes of courageous storytellers who have gone before you. You will be following a reliable pattern utilized by countless storytellers throughout the world.

Stories can provide paradigms for the process of healing. The main character in many fairy-tales and myths sets out on a journey and eventually finds new love, health, power, strength, and happiness. When the time comes for your protagonist to be in deep trouble, especially remember to keep breathing. During the story you will tell, allow the richness and truth of your soul-life to bring forth help whenever it is needed.

In stories, anything is possible. Animals speak. Stones and gems with benevolent powers work magic. Angels may appear in many forms and disguises. A tree or flower may say exactly what a character needs to hear in order to proceed on his or her journey. Welcome whatever helpers are presented to you by your imagination, even if they greatly surprise you. Allow these kind,

ingenious, powerful helpers to work with you. At the end of your story, remember the positive ending that you have just made up. Let your ending be a celebration.

TRANSFORMING BODY AND SOUL THROUGH STORIES

In one of my storytelling classes, an especially profound response to the storytelling process came from a woman who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. At the start of the session, I suggested she might bring her illness as an imaginative picture into the story. Though distraught and pale, stretched out on a couch beside her worried storytelling partner, she nevertheless willingly followed the directions. First she envisioned her protagonist, and then a positive ending. Still collapsed and weak after she shared her first images, she listened closely as the others also shared theirs. When it was time to assemble a whole story, she sat upright beside her partner and launched into the telling. When her protagonist reached the obstacle zones, she brought her cancer directly into the story. She described it vividly as an amorphous dragon-like creature with shifting eyes and edges.

Then an angel came into her story. It fought with the monster, and prevailed. The woman triumphantly rose to her feet and told her story to the group, recounting the battle that occurred in her story. Her voice became increasingly clear. Her face shone brightly as she spoke and she seemed to have shed many years. Bewildered and filled with joy, she asked, “What happened? I was telling a story and then I was filled with light. I have never experienced anything like this before.” A concurrence of events had brought from deep within her a comprehensive spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical transformation. She experienced a profound improvement in her health by accepting the help that came through the gates of her imagination.

How do stories bring about such transformation? Was this a once-in-a-lifetime experience? As if to help me explore these questions, a young woman who had been diagnosed with leukemia attended the class in the early days of my experiments with storytelling as a healing art. She, too, worked with extemporaneous storytelling in a larger group and afterward asked to continue the process. During her private session, she confided that she sensed there was an emotional story behind her physical illness. I knew very little about her personal history at that time, but I wanted her to have as positive and healing an experience as possible during our brief time together. I asked if she would like to create a new story and place in it the greatest obstacle to her health.

In a meditative reverie, she told in metaphor the story of recurrent physical abuse that had occurred several years before the onset of her illness. I offered to write down her story as she spoke. When I finished reading back to her, she exclaimed through her tears, “This is not a bad story!” Speaking at the imaginative level helped her to remember her real-life story and to speak openly through pictures about the traumatic experiences she had endured. Following the rhythmic story pattern had helped the images arise freely. In a brief time, she was able to revisit her

own pain, and to realize through the story she told how unawakened were the people who had caused it. This was a strong response that she had not expected.

“I have just now really experienced a healing from hearing how my story ended,” she said quietly. “The abuses happened out of ignorance. When one gets to a certain level of consciousness, there is no way one could do anything like that.”

Flooded with forgiveness for the ones who had caused her so much distress, she said that she wanted to let go of her illness completely and to begin a new life. She sensed with more clarity than ever before that her illness had been connected with her feelings of helplessness, fear, and rage. She clearly knew that she needed to be of service to others as a part of her healing path. Expressive and aware, she felt more focused and free, and new energy flooded through her whole being. A few months later, I learned that there was no trace of leukemia left in her body and that she had begun pursuing a new career in the healing arts.

HOW I BEGAN TO LEARN THE ORGANS’ STORIES

Such comprehensive healing experiences inspired me to continue exploring the power of storytelling. I had worked for many years with the ancient Greek system of diagnosis and healing through the elements of earth, air, water, and fire. I wanted to expand my knowledge to include the traditional Chinese medical system, with its cosmic understanding of the human body that is thousands of years old. On this quest, in 1991, I met Bob Cooley, a brilliant and hilarious former mathematics instructor who was busy at that time developing his Meridian Flexibility System in Boston, Massachusetts. Slowly and tenaciously, Bob had put himself back together after suffering a life-threatening accident. As he vigorously explored the ancient sciences of yoga, traditional Chinese medicine, kinesiology, and modern psychology, I discovered how specific muscles and meridians (the body’s energy channels identified in Chinese medicine) connect with specific organs to support the whole human being. After a few early morning sessions at his Meridian Stretching Center, I wanted to understand the healing dynamics I was witnessing in Bob and in the people who gathered at his studio.

As Bob guided us into astonishing experiential group research, he shared his questions and discoveries, encouraged individualized exercises, and helped us to push further. Stretching this muscle group and that, and attending to the effect, my whole life became more flexible and aware in each organ domain. I began to realize that our fresh inquiries into the energy patterns of the body were adding present-day picture language to the ancient imaginations that are taught through traditional Chinese medicine. As a great variety of often completely unexpected thoughts, images, and sensations tumbled through us, I frequently could not scribble notes fast enough to record all that was happening.

Practicing various yogic stretches, I discovered that intensive stretching along specific meridian lines sometimes released whole personality patterns from within me. In Bob's studio and my home practice, as marvelous and fascinating casts of distinct realities emerged spontaneously from within me, I acted them out to experience and understand them more fully. As my consciousness expanded with schizoid glee, I studied these patterns quite methodically from within myself. My ability to experience these distinct personalities was enhanced because, as a writer and teacher of creative writing, I often meet surprising characters that develop during the creative process. As a performing artist, teacher, and puppeteer, I had directed, written, and acted in many plays. As a psychotherapist specializing in the healing power of the creative arts, I was also interested in all possible therapeutic benefits.

Yoga is a path of integration. After a particularly vigorous session of stretching one early morning, I stood up to catch my breath. A rush of new awareness flashed through me as I recognized that all the world's story patterns and characters are inscribed within the human body, and that someday I would write this book.

In 1992, I attended a storytelling performance of British-born Ashley Ramsden during one of his tours in the United States. He was busy embodying a broad realm of characters through the spoken word, and becoming well known as the extraordinary storyteller he is, with a growing repertoire from around the world. By that time, I had worked with storytelling as a healing art for many years and Ashley invited me to teach at the storytelling school that he had recently founded at Emerson College in Sussex. Eventually, his curiosity, too, was piqued by the resonance between stories and the body.

In January 2000, as the twentieth century ended, we began working together in search of the stories that resonate with each organ realm. This book is the result of our quest. As I gradually described to Ashley what I was experiencing through the various organs, he told stories that resonated with them from his immense memory trove. Exploring the reciprocal patterns of organs and stories often felt like learning to recognize unfamiliar planets or constellations. As the search continued, many workshops and courses about the body's eloquent design evolved. We marveled with others at how all the organic realms generate and respond to particular stories, and how nature and the greater universe support the storytelling process when it is in the service of truth and well-being.

Each organ carries out its own function diligently and enjoys its life. Each is a gateway of spiritual activity with its own intelligent mind-soul that is very sensitive to whatever is going on in our lives. In this tour of these inner organic realms, as there is such a need for greater heart wisdom in our present world, let us begin with the heart.