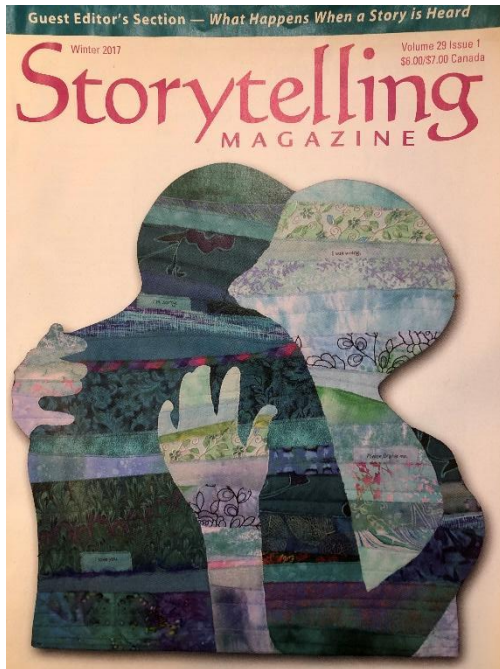


WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A STORY IS HEARD

Lani Peterson

Guest Editor: Storytelling Magazine, Winter 2017, Volume 29, Issue 1



At first I didn't recognize the young woman waving madly at me from across the street. As she got closer, I knew, I knew her, but couldn't place her.

"Hey Lani, it's me, Rosie!"

But the Rosie I remembered from a storytelling class at the women's shelter had long weaves of tight braids piled high on her head. This woman had short-cropped hair but the same infectious smile I remembered.

"Rosie, what happened to all your hair?"

"It had to go. It was weighing me down, and I don't have time for that no more," she replied. "Oh, and the man's gone too."

I remembered that Rosie had been in a difficult relationship, dangerously imitating the abusive family situation she had escaped.

“After I graduated from storytelling class, I told him that I was the hero of my own story. He started laughing until I shut the door behind him. I know now that he was weighing me down too. Now I’m only choosing to be with people who can see me for who I am and support me in where I want my story to go.”

For the past fifteen years I have had the privilege of being a “story midwife” to people whose marginalized stories might never have reached the airwaves. Through my ten years of work with Boston City Mission’s Public Voice Program: *Storytelling for Social Change*, I have witnessed tellers grapple with their personal stories of being in prison, being homeless, of dealing with poverty, violence, and racism. I’ve watched them emerge from isolated places of shame, anger, and despair to find renewed inspiration, peace, and empowerment. These courageous storytellers have become my teachers. They have helped me to expand my storyteller identity to include story listener, and realize the depth of healing, transformation, and change that can occur when previously concealed stories are shared, heard, and valued. Here’s some of what I have learned.

Listening to Others

When our hearts and minds are open to receive a story from another, we can’t help but be changed. Through listening generously, we become aware of where our stories both overlap and are different from another’s, opening the way for insight and empathy. Through exploring the meaning and emotions that get stirred within us in, we are empowered to wrestle what we’ve heard and what we think we know, expanding our understanding of both self and other.

Being Heard by Another

I am often moved by the depth of personal wisdom each of us carries and the immensity of pain experienced when a personal story is not valued or at least honored as one’s truth. For people whose stories have been judged or silenced by others, the process of finally being heard and validated can be life changing.

Listening to Oneself

Whether listening or being listened to, both actions invite us to learn about ourselves in new ways. Story reflection can lead us to explore: What do I value and why? What early stories do my guiding truths and values evolve from? What stories do I carry within that either motivate me, or hold me back? How do I want my future story to unfold?

Every part of this story journey can lead to new ways of seeing ourselves and our world, giving us choice about how we want to bring ourselves forward into our ongoing story.

Story Listening is an Act of:

- **Generosity**—showing up with full presence and engagement.
- **Trust**—allowing another to guide you on the story of their journey, which may bring you deeper into your own.
- **Growth**—opening to new thoughts and feelings.
- **Courage**—challenging yourself to be touched and changed by the words of another.
- **Surrender** ---accepting others as experts in their own stories; yielding to a reversal in the power/privilege differential.
- **Responsibility**-- bearing witness to another's story to support, empower, or heal.
- **Social justice**—gaining insight, understanding and empathy, being moved to action.

Story listening is an act of love.

Through this work I have come to believe that healing storytelling is a mixture of daring to listen and daring to be heard. The ensuing gifts are there for anyone ready to engage two ears, a curious mind, and an open heart. I have invited fellow storytellers and storylisteners who are doing incredible work, to share their experiences of what happens when a story is told and heard. I hope you will be inspired.

Note: The entire issue with articles in the Guest Editor's section can be accessed here:

<file:///C:/Users/Lani/OneDrive/Documents/Arzen%20Group/Website/Lani%20Peterson%20Webiste%202020/2020%20Website%20Design/Articles/Storytellng%20magazine%20winter%202017.pdf>