

Peer Mentoring via the Internet: Shaping Story Programs by Sharing Ideas

Over the last decade, E-mail has allowed storytellers to exchange stories and thoughts with each other across the country and around the world. We can now collaborate on developing ideas for working with specific topics and audiences, while planning story programs that help explore these themes. The following articles combine three different storytellers' experiences in this peer mentoring process and some of the wonderful ideas that were generated. KAC

**The Art of Healing Stories
By Karen A. Chace**

“Do you know any stories about healing?” The question came as a surprise. Kari Vincent, Director of the New Bedford Art Museum in Massachusetts, had invited me in to discuss ways to incorporate storytelling into their summer series and this was not what I had expected. She then explained that the museum would be exhibiting “body image ~ body essence,” the works of local artist John Magnan, and asked if I would do a storytelling presentation, offered free to the public, to compliment the exhibit.

Mary, the artist's wife, had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer two years earlier, Out of their shared journey and through the extensive maze of treatments and medical evaluations John created an incredible exhibit. Using various mediums of bronze, leather, wood, photography and even human hair, he had assembled a metaphorical tribute to the life and death struggle his wife and many other women face.

I visited the exhibit to understand more fully the message and the essence it conveyed. The array of artwork evoked a myriad of emotions, disturbing, strong sorrowful, joyful, and yes, even humorous. The stories behind each piece are as difficult to confront as cancer itself, difficult to hear as not all of them end happily. But surprisingly within each personal story and struggle lived the messages of hope, healing and celebration.

The artwork caused me to reflect on the different types of healing people experience during their lifetime and I decided to seek out stories that spoke not only about the physical aspect of healing but the celebration of the human spirit. I began my research by asking for advice and suggestions from STORYTELL, an Internet listserv discussion group, and from members of the Healing Story Alliance, a special interest group of the National Storytelling Network

I wanted the tales and the words to echo John's message of comfort and hope; however, I could not ignore the stark reality that unlike Mary, some women do not survive. Cancer forces us to grieve before a death as well as after. We struggle with loss and feelings of abandonment when a loved one dies. As part of the healing and restorative process I wanted to include a story that dealt with these issues. Storyteller Rose Owens of STORYTELL suggested the tale Nadia the Willful by Sue Alexander (Dragonfly Books/Knopf, 1992). The story, an Arabian tale, is a thought provoking and dark, yet inspirationally redemptive tale.

Nadia, a fiercely strong and independent young woman, known for her stubborn nature and angry outbursts, finds her own way through the inexplicable grief and pain caused by the death of her beloved brother. Nadia teaches her father, who has been consumed and embittered by grief, how to keep his son's memory alive by sharing the stories of his life. In doing so she is transformed into Nadia the Wise.

Content compiled by **Karen Chace, Professional Storyteller & Web Researcher**

East Freetown MA 02727 • (508) 763-8565 • Info@StoryBug.net • www.StoryBug.net

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John Magnan's work explores the upheaval, the emotional transition women experience as their physical baffle rages on. The story of Nadia mirrors this struggle. She discovers her inner strength and learns to channel her anger and rage, and like the women honored in the exhibit she discovers her indomitable spirit.

I thought about illness and how it affects us not only physically but also psychologically. One of the most significant things we lose when illness overtakes us is control. We may be at the mercy of doctors, lab technicians, pharmacologists and radiologists. Even the drugs that might save us sap our strength. For a time, we may have to relinquish physical control, and the ability to decide our fate. Our loved ones suffer along with us. They also experience feelings of helplessness against seemingly indomitable odds. By welcoming and acknowledging the support of loved ones we can reinforce the important place they have in our lives and gain strength from them as well.

And so I chose the story "The Magic Pomegranate" by Penninah Schram (from *Ready To Tell Tales: Sure-Fire Stories from America's Favorite Storytellers*, edited by David Holt and Bill Mooney, August House, MA 1994). I had told the story many times before to children. It has many elements of a fairy tale: adventure, magic, a royal palace, and a beautiful princess who needs rescuing but I realized that it would be an appropriate addition for this venue. In this story the princess is not rescued from a fire-breathing dragon, but from death: because the youngest man performs the greatest mitzvah or good deed by giving up something that belongs to him. He restores her to health, yet it is the princess who ultimately chooses her fate, deciding who she will marry, thereby reclaiming and reasserting control over her life.

Mr. Magnan's exhibit also addresses the difficulties family and friends face when a loved one is ill. Texas Storyteller Mary Grace Ketner, from the STORYTELL listserv, wrote me to suggest her adaptation of "Chien Nang," (see Mary Grace's Web site at: <http://talesandlegends.net/Chien.html> under "Storied Women") which Mary Grace described as exploring those inner conflicts and the struggle to maintain a level of normalcy.

Mary Grace shared the background of finding this story and how she came to recognize the message at a time in her life when she needed it the most. Her mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and she had to divide her time between caring for her mother, who lived a distance away, and caring for her family. As a result, she felt conflicted and emotionally divided. It was then that the story of Chien Nang returned to her.

Chien Nang was a woman who put herself in two places at once, magically dividing herself for the men she loved, her father and her husband. When Mary Grace tells the story she doses with these words: "The wise men of China have debated far decades which was the real Chien Nang and which was the changeling, but you and I know that sometimes it is necessary to be in two places at once."

Her adaptation of this Chinese tale is poignant and representative of the gifts our loved ones share in our times of need - a fitting tribute to the caretakers of the world and to the patients who allow their friends to help.

The healing process must include not only the restoration of the physical being but the spiritual as well. Storyteller Allison Cox, of the Healing Story Alliance suggested Elisa Pearmain's book *Doorways to the Soul* (The Pilgrim Press~ Cleveland, Ohio, 1998). There I found "Old Joe and the Carpenter," a

signature tale of Pleasant de Spain. "Old Joe" is a simple yet eloquent story of two elderly men and their lifelong friendship, a friendship that is threatened by a foolish argument. It takes the wisdom of a stranger, a young carpenter, to restore their friendship by building a footbridge across the creek that divides not only their property, but them as well.

Just as Mr. Magnan's work enlightens us to the struggles, triumphs, and death of ovarian cancer patients, these stories mirror the powerful strength of our will, courage, and fortitude in often devastating circumstances.

During my telling of "Nadia the Willful" I witnessed the power of story. A very dear man was in the audience, the father of my childhood friend. His wife had died very suddenly about eight months earlier. As I was telling the story I looked over at him and saw that his head was bent down. I realized how hard this story was for him to hear. There was a very personal reason for him to be at the exhibit and to stay for the stories.

The question, "Do you know any stories about healing?" had started a journey that would become its own healing story. Throughout my search for stories, guided by my exposure to the incredible and indelible works of John Magnan, I found the elements of the kinds of stories, which restore us all. They encompass support, hope, trust, struggle and the acceptance of life and death. While some stories may be difficult to tell, they have the power to console and comfort us through life-altering situations.

In his exhibit catalog Mr. Magnan quotes Isak Dinesen from *Sorrow Acre*. All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." When illness silences self-expression, art and stories can each play their part in defining our voices.

My thanks to the members of the STORYTELL and Healing Arts listservs for their suggestions and support throughout this process. For further information on the exhibit ~body image ~ body essence" visit <http://www.bodyimage-bodyessence.com/>

Karen Chace, a professional teller, has presented her workshop, Researching Stories on The Internet at conferences around the country. She is the author of the CD, Researching Stories on the Internet: A Webliography of Storytelling Resources <http://www.story-lovers.com/productschace.html> and is co-publisher of Working smARTS, an online e-magazine for performing artists, <http://www.workingsmarts.com/>. She also writes a regular column, Stor E Telling, for the Storytelling Magazine and is LANES board. Karen can be reached at Storybug@aol.com