

Some reflections on the use of narrative ideas as a doorway

by Marcy Rivas¹

Through many generations of people of different nations, different tribes, different clans, different families, this is the way it was.

In the old ways, a person who is so inclined and capable, on occasion, sits and tells stories. These stories are woven of elements that take you on a journey through the ritual tradition of the story-teller's people. They are spoken to make relevant points to some listener who is about to make a mistake or who has some difficulty to resolve. The stories are meant to hold the listener's attention so that they can experience a sense of belonging to a sturdy and strong tradition. The strength and sturdiness of that tradition reflect the strength and sturdiness of a people.

For all of us, Indian or not, stories are a major way we make communal meaning out of our human experience. What moves a person, touches a person's heart, what instructs a person and what enables a person to rise above the limits of everyday concerns, are largely culturally defined matters.

Native people express their experience in the telling of stories out of our tribal traditions and also by telling our stories into them. New experiences must be woven into existing traditions. Imagine you are part of a gathering of a number of people who like to share stories they have heard, stories that pertain to a theme or a group of themes that have come up in conversations. Everyone contributes to the common story pot, it is a narrative pot-luck (in which everyone brings something to the table).

New experiences must be spoken into tradition so that we can understand how today's events connect to the past and the future for our community. This is how we explain ourselves to each other and how we see where we fit into the scheme of things. The 'scheme of things' does not refer to the world according to western Anglo culture, rather it means our common tribal reality as told through the ages through our traditions.

Those of us from communities who have been interacting with narrative approaches, ideas and practices have been very interested in how these ideas may be able to act as a doorway through which we as

Indigenous people can pass from our tribal traditions out into non-Indigenous world, and from the non-Indigenous world into our tribal traditions.

Part of why I am drawn to narrative work is that aspects of it resonate deeply with something within my own cultural traditions. But although these resonances occur, I am very aware that narrative practices are not Indigenous practices, they come from very different cultural traditions.

So how can we best engage with them?

How can narrative ideas act as a doorway through which we can pass from our tribal traditions out into the non-Indigenous world? How can they assist us to tell our stories in the non-Indigenous world in our own way so that they retain their power and clarity? This power and clarity derives from where these stories come from - the land and the people - as well as how we compose them, or structure them, so that they give meaning to us.

I am also interested in what I can bring back through the doorway from the non-Indigenous world, that might be of service to my people. And this brings many questions:

- Are there ways in which narrative ideas can be used by cultural communities to reclaim / retain their own ways of healing?
- While engaging with narrative therapy or other approaches of healing that draw from western culture, how can care be taken to ensure that distinctions remain clear around what are traditional knowledges?
- How can care be taken so that we as Indigenous people share only that which we wish to share?
- How can care be taken to ensure that what is appropriate in one cultural context (for example the asking of direct questions of a personal nature) is not assumed to be appropriate in other cultural contexts?
- As some narrative practices resonate with some

indigenous ways, how can we best make meaning out of this connection? How can we ensure that this connection brings vitality for native peoples?

Right relationship or right kinship is fundamental to Native Americans' lives and is largely dictated by custom within a given tribe or cultural grouping. But everywhere amongst native people, right relationship is characterised by considerations of harmony, balance, and belonging to community. How can we ensure that we establish right relationship between narrative practices and Indigenous practices?

It would be my hope that the sharing in this circle of our stories of our people - what we share in common, and even what we don't share in common, would contribute to the widening of the doorway, that it

would be large enough to include all of who we are, that we might bring all of who we are to our reconnection with our histories, with our healing in the present, and our vision for the future.

Note

1. I am a social worker. I am a mixed blood descendant of the Nez Perce People of Oregon and Idaho and of non-indigenous Canadians. I work as a counsellor, trainer and consultant in Seattle and am currently working to organise gatherings in support of parenting knowledges in marginalised communities. I can be contacted via Dulwich Centre Publications.