***Figures on a windswept shore***

***Catherine Heinemeyer***

*(Give out willow frameworks and yarn for making ‘dreamcatchers’)*

*It was a wild day of high winds in a little town clustered against a jagged shoreline. A young woman entered on foot from the road inland. She wore a shapeless dark-coloured dress but if you looked carefully you could see the swell of her belly. She knocked first at one door, then the next, but each of them closed in her face, until when she reached the far end of the town she gave up and stood for a minute looking around her, clutching her back. The time had come for her to give birth to her child and the pains were coming closer together.*

*She picked her way down onto the rocky shore, avoiding the slippery seaweed, feeling the slap of spray off the sea on her neck and face, and clambered over rocks until she found a platform sheltered by a boulder. She crouched down on her hunkers and it was not much longer until her child was born. A little boy, his cries almost drowned by the wind. She held him up for just one moment to see he was whole and hers, then quickly tucked him inside her dress, against her chest to keep warm, leaned her back against the rock and fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.*

Storytelling is a practice riddled with metaphors of ‘communitas’ (such as people gathered around a campfire), concretised by experience and titbits of verifiable fact. Often, when I’ve been among a storyteller’s audience, I have felt a convergence between me and those others gathered, a slowing of each person’s breathing rate and a confluence of focus on the images formed somewhere between the teller’s words and our own minds. Various studies assembled in a meta-study by Patrick Ryan (2008) have in fact proved this phenomenon, even to the extent that the heartrates of a group of story-listeners may converge.

The idea of a shared liminal state has been harnessed in therapeutic practice. It’s a powerful idea that listening to stories together may heal rifts, reconnect the isolated or divided, allow for moments of connection which bypass conventional social defences or even bring about shared epiphanies. During my two-year storytelling residency at Maple House, a mental health inpatients unit for adolescents, I used to aspire to offer workshops which would provide, metaphorically speaking, ‘another room’ within which each person present could safely meet. While each young person present was mired in individual issues, anxieties, fears, obsessions and depressions, I hoped they might fleetingly experience the possibility of real connection with others, within the safe fictional or even fantastical bounds of the stories I brought them. And I believe I did glimpse such moments.

Yet Maple House convenes a population which is usually too transient to be a real community – who often sense, indeed, that they are better off *not* forming one. Friendships did form, but cautiously and individually rather than tribally. Every week young people leave, new ones arrive, and states of mind vary so much that every day brings a new human constellation. Every crisis affecting one resident could sweep up others in its wake, and the contagion effect sometimes brought unpredictable threats to each young person’s journey of recovery. At other times, an easier atmosphere of cheerfulness would reign, but it could never be taken for granted. I wrote at the time that each week when I arrived for my storytelling session I felt like I was climbing the Faraway Tree – not knowing what land I would find at the top of it that morning, and what its rules would be.

It was accordingly rare to feel that everyone present was ‘together in the story’. Even gathering the group of young people to make a start was a delicate process - deciding where to sit, who was in, who was definitely out, who was listening with one ear but her eyes down and her back half-turned. Some warm-up games would form a fragile ring, and at some point I would usually tell a story – usually something either from long ago, or from far away. As it unfolded I would see or sense reactions. There was usually someone who liked the cadence of a storytelling voice while she was plaiting her friend’s hair but was possibly less interested in the story itself, someone who was fired up by a certain image in it, someone who was aggravated by it, someone who wriggled uncomfortably as if he wanted to get away. There were usually one or two who gave themselves over to the story or whatever other thoughts and memories it summoned up for them, gazing just past me as images formed in their minds.

Perhaps what I was providing was something more like a rock surface, with ledges and handholds for those who wished to hook onto it for a little while. In fact there was often a ‘windblown’ atmosphere, like a wide open shore, sparse, exposed, all of us aware of each other’s presence but wandering separately.

*When she awoke she was aware of a cold draught at her chest, and realised her baby was gone. She jumped to her feet and searched wildly all around the boulder, but all the way up and down the beach there was no-one to be seen. The waves were high and powerful, but still far off, and her clothes were dry. And so she had no choice but to make her way along the coast. Everyone she met, she asked if they had seen a baby, but there was never any news. By nightfall her feet were criss-crossed with cuts and she could not walk any further. She collapsed under a grassy outcrop, just in sight of a small fishing village.*

*Early the next morning she felt firm, strong hands lifting her to her feet, half-lifting her into a house, tucking blankets all around her in a bed, bringing some hot liquid for her to drink. She had no strength to do anything but comply. Kind women’s faces clustered around her, voices asking her questions, that she could barely understand. All she could do was repeat her question, have you seen my baby? Where is my baby? The kind faces now creased with discomfort and murmuring a name, the name of someone who might know, or rather who might be able to deliver a difficult message they did not want to utter themselves.*

*They brought her to a camp outside their village and to a tiny caravan where a very elderly woman was drinking tea. The old lady clasped the young woman’s hands and told her, you were perhaps not wise to give in to your exhaustion on that particular shore. There is the hill just along from there, where the Old Ones live, the ones you call fairies. They are beautiful but they are not kind and they cannot make anything for themselves, not even children. And so they take them from us. I can tell you how to find the mound, but you will not get your child back from them without giving them something of equal value in return.*

*The young woman was distraught - I haven’t got anything of value, not even shoes for my feet. I am afraid that is how it is, said the old lady, and repeated: the only thing you can do is bring them gifts of equal value.*

*The young woman stumbled out of the caravan and back down to the shore. It was still windy, bleak, rocky, nothing between the sea and the sky that could help her. Nothing but the bones of dead seabirds, feathers blown off their breasts, sticks of driftwood thrown up by the waves. Picking up the bones and sticks she started to play with them, forming them into the curved triangle of a harp. She grasped at the straw of an idea. She pulled down her hood and plucked out some strands of her hair – she had thick, long, red-brown hair – and started to tie the shape together into a firmer framework. She plucked more strands of hair and strung the framework like a real harp, pulling each one to the right tension.*

*She looked around her again and started to gather the soft downy feathers. Again with strands of hair she bound them into a kind of cloth, soft and warm and light. More and more of it she made until it was big enough to form a sort of shawl.*

It was on those occasions when we had crafts in front of us at Maple House that a cosy household atmosphere would develop. Sometimes the young people would bring in their own knitting projects, doodling, colouring or friendship bracelets, other times I would bring beans to shell or yarn to braid. The day I told ‘The Stolen Child’, which I am in the middle of telling you today, I brought willow frameworks on which I invited the young people to weave their own gifts for the fairies. I would tell a story, or listen to one of them do so, and rather than the intense interpersonal mood in which a story is often created between storyteller and participants, I would sense that we were holding a space for each person to be alone. I would not feed off their responses but look down at my hands as each of the young people was doing. My PhD supervisor came along one day to observe and said, you seem more hesitant telling to this group, you don’t give a confident performance, hold their attention, meet their gaze. I could not at the time explain why not, but I think I felt driven to mirror the tentative mood in the room, and to allow them to be alone, and to leave the story at any time.

There is of course no simple opposition between aloneness and communitas, as is honoured in the name of this conference, ‘Alone Together’. In another detailed study, Patrick Ryan and Donna Schatt (2014) interviewed adults aged 19-45 who had been part of the same long-running education programme at the Chicago Laboratory School, in which children were told stories for half an hour a week, every week, for many years. The interviewees, 10 or 20 or 35 years later, recalled that were never asked by their teachers to discuss or write about these stories. Nor did they recall acting them out in their playground games; indeed most of them could hardly remember the details of any of the stories they had been told. Yet universally, they had intense memories of the physical experience of these numerous storytelling sessions – the smell of the library, the feel of the mat on which they sat cross-legged to listen, the sensation of sitting there with others, being alone in their own heads. They were also unanimous in declaring that the storytelling they had experienced had impacted on them as people as well as on the culture of the school, influencing their interests and values, relationships and future careers in ways too unfathomable to track. Yet this experience was arguably a solitary one as much as it was a communal one, not ‘another room’ but a territory each listener mapped individually.

Petra Kuppers discusses a storytelling project she ran with a group of women experiencing mental illness in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy’s observation that “singular beings lean together” (2007: 35) – each participant was an ‘I’ in a kind of isolation, not sharing a story, or even an interpretation of a story, but leaning in towards it.

Emmanuel Levinas underscores this acceptance we cannot ever know another person, that we are in a sense trapped within our own selves. It is only in accepting this that we can sometimes transcend our own boundaries and thus grow and change, reaching towards other people to help us to do so:

We do not *need* to know the other person (or thing) as he is in himself, and we shall never know him apart from acting with him. But unless we *desire* this, and go on trying, we shall never escape from the subjectivism of our systems and the objects that they bring before us to categorize and manipulate. (1969: 18)

And moreover, paradoxically, it is surprisingly often that in storytelling, the very image of human community and communion, we tell stories of lone or lonely characters. In summoning up the heroine of *The Stolen Child* I am in fact sharing my own experience of aloneness with my listeners, because when we tell stories, even ones of long ago and far away, we invariably draw on our own repertoire of memories to form the images in our own minds.

I’d like to briefly describe another storytelling project to illuminate both of these points – the idea of leaning in, and the knowledge of aloneness that is expressed in stories. I started off a mental-health-focused project called *The Tale Exchange*, with four support groups for young people, by telling each group a story of the Siberian heroine Belye. I told how Belye isolated herself in a little house on a rock (to see if a lover would come?), how she was tormented by a family of brothers, how she rescued a little boy from their bullying, and then how she brought down the power of the waves to toss the brothers’ canoe and punish them. The purity of this tale, the utter self-reliance of this heroine, brought me back to certain moments when I realised that ultimately, I am alone in the world. Despite the love of family and friends, no-one could endure the pains of giving birth with me; no-one’s companionship is enough to give my life meaning at points when it seems to have none.

The *Tale Exchange* project acknowledged that essential aloneness both in its subject matter and in its structure. It resisted, or at least postponed, the usual remedy of participatory arts projects: the invitation to come together and collaborate. Rather than bringing all the young people together, I visited each group separately and told them this story of Belye. They then worked – in their own separate ways, collectively or individually as appropriate – with different artists, in different artforms, to make creative responses to it. Groups then posted their responses to each other, and if they wished, made a second creative response through visual art or creative writing. That is, we communicated around corners It was only later that everyone involved met in one room to share what they had made. We deliberately made no attempt to coordinate their perspectives on this strange story, to summarise or crystallise them, but only to exchange them. Young people stayed in their groups but sometimes crossed the room to each other’s tables, visited each other, showed what they had made, acknowledged each other’s experiences, expressed through their words or images.

One young woman received a drawing, sent by another group, of Belye calling out to sea, calling up the waves to save her and to punish the brothers. She chose to write in response to this, and the poem expresses a great sense of leaning in as well as essential aloneness. I’ll read an extract:

BELYE CALLING OUT TO SEA

If I call out to you, can you hear me?

Would you listen?

Options are few and you don’t know how much I need you right now. […]

As the sky and the sea merge together to become one shade of blue

I know I have you

I am filled with so many hopes and aspirations

I will not let this be my demise

This water will not produce unrelenting waves of devastation

They are mine

They are with me

They are on my side

So please don’t expect me to fall and crack

As I can withstand any attack

I am strong as I ask the winds to blow

To finish the event, the poet we had brought in to bear witness to the whole exchange gathered up all the threads that participants had brought into the room, and wove them into one poem, that made explicit the fact that each person was going away with their own version of the story, but that all had leaned in towards each other in the space.

*The young woman made her way along the shore to the fairies’ hill. She hid herself away to observe until she saw two figures enter, showing her where the door was. There she presented herself and found her entrance barred by an elegant young man. Nothing she could say would persuade him to let her in, until she held up the shawl she had made. His eyes glittered and he reached out to grab it, but she whisked it away until he understood he would need to bargain. He stepped to the side to let her pass, and she handed over the shawl.*

*She made her way down passageways that grew darker and cooler, before growing lighter and warmer again. Ahead of her was a warm glow and eventually she found herself emerging into a high-ceilinged chamber, full of people staring at her, the Old Ones, the fairies, beautiful but too wide-eyed, too beautiful in fact. In the midst of them all, on two thrones, the King and Queen, and on the King’s lap, a bundle – a baby – her baby. She caught her breath that was trapped in her throat, and pushed through the throng all the way to them. She lifted up her harp and began to play. A golden music filled the chamber and echoed from the walls. The King and Queen were entranced.*

*Give me my baby, she said.*

*Give me the harp, said the Queen.*

*You will give me my baby first.*

*And in the end her hand was on her child before she gave them the harp. She did not say another word but took her baby in her arms and walked out through the tunnels, back out into the daylight and straight down to the beach. There she lit a driftwood fire, sat down on a stone, and fed her child for the first time around their own hearth.*

There is almost always a moment of tension after a story, as everyone present knows the transition must be made back into normal time and – I suppose – out of being alone together. There’s a feeling that anything you say might be the wrong thing, or at least irrelevant, might undermine whatever the story had been for each one present. It is a necessary violence, but I cannot always face it. On this occasion in Maple House, the setting’s teacher sensed this, and stepped in himself, with the right words. I cannot remember any more what they were.

It was one young woman’s last day at Maple House. Luna had been there for many months and, as a keen creative writer and artist, had been one of the most faithful participants in all of my storytelling workshops. She had finished her dreamcatcher and brought it across the room to give it to me.

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