

## Story, Archetype and Healing

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### Abstract

In this article, parallels are drawn between story and archetype and then archetype and therapy. The common element in story and therapy is the archetype. It is through the transformative archetypal energy that change and healing takes place. Archetype contains the numen of transformation for healing whether it be contained in story, or in the lives of our clients or within our own lives. It matters not whether archetype is enlivened via story or the story of our own lives, the impetus and strength to heal and change is enlivened. It is the archetype which brings the healing. In this article, a personal letter from the teacher to a student is presented with commentary.

### Text of the essay

In the Jungian tradition, myth and story cannot be separated from therapy and healing. Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes in "Women who run with the wolves" is both a Jungian trained therapist and a cantadora "keeper of the stories" within her Hispanic and Hungarian family of origin tradition. She writes of "story as healer".

Joseph Campbell, who spent his life studying the commonalities of myth across civilizations, believed that all lives are worth a novel. In his book, "The hero with a thousand faces", he addresses the common themes appearing again and again across civilizations.

Story may even be the reason why the Christ spoke and taught in parables and story. The parables of Christ are so deep; the meaning can only be accessed through story (Van Zandt, 1995). Not "mustard seeds" or "fowls of the air", but kindness, courage and acceptance (Luke 13:19). Within the Christ story, could there be metaphors for universal hints into individuation and healing? As a counselor educator and therapist, the search for universals is an imperative. Again and again, I return to story to convey both message and meaning. It is through story that we are able to touch that slender thread that connects all of us.

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## Introduction

Dr. Estes writes in dealing with stories, we are handling archetypal energy, which we could metaphorically describe as being like electricity. This electrical power can animate and enlighten. Stories contain the archetype.

Archetype changes us. Archetype infuses a recognizable integrity, a recognizable endurance into the story and into the hearer (1992, p. 509).

## Permission to tell another's tale

Dr. Estes writes gaining permission to tell another's tale and the proper crediting of that tale, if permission to it is given, is absolutely essential, for it maintains the genealogical umbilicus; we are on one end, the life-giving placenta on the other. It is a sign of respect, and one might say, of befitting manners in one properly raised in story is to ask and receive permission, to not take work that has not been given freely, to respect the work of others, for their work and their lives together make the work they give out. A story is not just a story. In its most innate and proper sense, it is someone's life. It is the numen of their life and their first hand familiarity with the stories they carry that makes the story "medicine" (p. 508).

Dr. Estes describes the best story teller/healers among us as if their stories have grown out of their lives as roots grow a tree. The stories have grown them, grown them into who they are. We can tell the difference. We know when someone has "grown" a story facetiously and when the story has genuinely grown them (p. 509).

## Application

As a counselor and counselor educator, sometimes I discover a "story within a story". Let us begin by looking at "The Thank You Letter". This is an actual letter written by a teacher to a student. (Reprinted here with permission.)

August 11, 2004

Dear Rick,

Thank you so for the caricature sketch. I just love it.

I apologize that your "thank you" is computer generated instead of "handwritten". I have a story to share with you, so I thought I had better use the computer...

The moral of the story is that "teachers teach for 'teacher gifts'". Bear that in mind...

Here goes:

My first teaching appointment was with Mineral Springs Public School teaching 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> English and social studies. When we returned from Christmas Break, one of my students met me at the door with the "biggest ole' apple and orange" either of us had ever seen. Now what you have to know to appreciate the story is that she and her family were probably one of the poorest (financially) in the district. I am sure that

Jackie brought me “the biggest and best” that she had... I was absolutely moved to tears.

I tried to refuse it and it almost hurt feelings. I realized quickly that I needed to accept this “Gift of the Magi”, say “thank you” and honor her wonderful and generous gift.

That 8<sup>th</sup> grade child taught me a great deal about “being poor”. She was anything, but. She was generous of spirit and knew a great deal more about giving than her teacher... Now twenty years later, it happens again...

When I got to the office yesterday afternoon, the sketch was laying on my wooden file cabinet. I was once again in awe of the generosity of one of my students...

I have “toted it around” and shown everyone I know. I am writing this letter from “the Clinic” and “all here” have admired your work, your ability, your graciousness and the gift...

The amount of time it must have taken... When I showed the sketch to “Dr. Shuff”, he said, “He sure captured you, didn’t he?”

We went to Wal-mart last night and found a gilded wooden frame with a pre-cut mat. So, it is already matted and framed. Jim thinks it will “look better” if he “custom cuts a red mat”... So, I’m sure it will be matted in Henderson Red” (to match my gown) before long.

I have a “place of honor” already picked out for your sketch. It will rest above the rocking chair to the left of the “highboy”. Please come by and admire it with me.

All I am really trying to say is “thank you!”

The “truth of the matter” is that we teach for “smiles from our students” and “teacher gifts”. You have helped me to remember this...

All we really want to know is that we have been heard and that we helped in some way...

One of your spiritual gifts is your art... To use “the best that you have to offer” and give that freely to someone else is priceless... I am just in awe...

Thank you for reminding me of “life lessons” that I thought I knew.

Thank you so much!

Up until yesterday, that “biggest ole’ apple and orange” was my most favorite teacher gift. Now it has a companion...

As always,

P. S. When you are “rich and famous”, I will have a “Rick Etheridge original”.

### **Synthesis of the story and our experiences**

Dr. Estes tell us to “Look to your people, your life. It is not by accident that this advice is the same among great healers and great writers as well. Look to the real that you yourself live. The kinds of tales found there can never come from books. They come from eyewitness accounts” (p. 511).

Dr. Estes concludes her essay on story as medicine with the following passage:

The authentic mining of stories from one's own life and the lives of one's own people and the modern world as it relates to one's own life, as well, means that there will be discomfort and trials. You know you are on the right path if you have experienced these: the scraped knuckles, the sleeping on the cold ground—not once, but over and over again—the groping in the dark, the walking in circles in the night, the bone-chilling revelations, and the hair-raising adventures on the way—these are worth everything. There must be a little, and in many cases, a good deal of blood spilled on every story, on every aspect of your own life, if it is to carry the numen, if a person is to carry a true medicine.

I hope you will go out and let stories, that is life, happen to you, and that you will work with these stories from your life—your life—not someone else's life. That is the work--The only work (p. 511).

### **Conclusion**

When dealing with archetype, the energy seems to be paradoxical. Characters are bigger than life, either “gods or demons” (Zweig & Wolf, p. 280).

My training in mythology as an undergraduate English major was excellent preparation for my current professional endeavors as counselor educator and therapist. To quote Joseph Campbell, “the latest version of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ is standing at the corner of Main Street waiting for the light to change” (1988, p. 19).

As we wrestle, the difficulties in our lives, the archetype is called. As we work through our difficulties, the archetype is enlivened. Story contains, calls and enlivens the archetype. Again and again, as I am teaching a psychological truth within a “teachable moment” with my counseling students, I draw upon story and myth. Students have noted that without client stories, there are no “teachable moments”. Bach in “Illusions” invites us to be “fictional” for awhile. “You will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with bodies and heartbeats” (p. 103).

We contain, we call and we enliven the archetype.

We, are the story—the only story.

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## Biography

Linda G. English is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education. She has taught at Henderson State University since 2001. Prior to returning to her alma mater, she taught for three years at Valdosta State University, Valdosta, Georgia. She served for twelve (12) years within the public schools of Arkansas as a teacher and counselor. Currently, Linda serves as clinical director within the Department of Counselor Education and has a part-time private counseling practice with Prescott Family Clinic.