

Riding Out the Storm

Category: Stories

written by Dan Yashinsky | February 2, 2018

Dan Yashinsky ~

In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, if a blizzard keeps you in your neighbor's house, they say you've been "storm-stayed." I first learned this term from a storyteller in the Maritimes, and it's come to hold special meaning for me and those I work with.

I am the storyteller-in-residence at a research and teaching hospital for the elderly, in Toronto. My work here, known as "storycare," reflects the institution's philosophy that literature and storytelling are essential to health care.

Every week, I work with clinicians and therapists to bring storycare to patients in the palliative-care, rehab and long-term-care units. Twice weekly, I head to the fourth floor to co-lead storytelling circles for the geriatric psychiatry patients.

The men and women on the fourth floor suffer from severe depression. They are indeed storm-stayed, and the psychiatry ward is their temporary haven. Many stay on the unit for weeks or months at a time.

Storycare, in this context, means creating a time and space where stories can be told, heard, imagined and remembered. The patients often tell me that they've lost the thread of their own life stories: They can barely remember their pre-hospital lives and find it hard to imagine what might happen next. On a good day, storycare helps them to reclaim their sense of wonder and suspense—and, surprisingly, laughter—even in the midst of their suffering.

Sometimes I bring props to spark new stories. A Russian nesting doll launches stories about our hidden and invisible selves. A small wooden spoon stirs up memories of kitchens and beloved grandmothers.

Once, after telling Stone Soup—the traditional folktale about a soup that starts with a stone and ends up nourishing the whole community—we created an imaginary soup from ingredients the patients suggested: hope, improved memory, peace, kindness, happiness, energy, deep and restorative sleep.

Another time, I passed around a silk butterfly and asked them to imagine what a caterpillar might say to the butterfly.

"I wish I could fly like you," came one response.

"Be patient," someone replied. "You will, one day. You will become me. You will fly."

Sometimes I tell fairy-tales full of adventure, quests, dangers and transformations. Then, like Scheherazade, I'll stop at the most exciting part

and, despite their good-natured protests, leave the next chapter for the following week.

The patients tell me that our storytelling group is a welcome break amid the clinical routine.

“This is a hard place to show strong feelings,” someone commented one day. The others concurred. Their illness, and the strong medications they take, can muffle their emotions and silence their words.

As they spoke, I was struck by the sheer, sometimes desperate bravery it must take to step away from your everyday life and come in for treatment.

“You’re far braver than any of the characters in the stories I’ve been telling you,” I said. “I would like to honor you for your courage in being here.”

As it happened, one of the patients, Dr. O, was an acclaimed writer and educator who had done social-justice work around the world.

After the session, I asked him if he’d work with me to create an honoring ceremony for the fourth-floor patients. Fragile and ill as he was, he agreed.

At the outset, he and I decided to avoid the terminology of illness and treatment. Instead, we referred to the patients as travelers, and to depression as the terrifying, all-consuming storm that had forced them to seek sanctuary.

We often discussed what it meant to be “storm-stayed” in a psychiatric unit. Dr. O described in heartbreaking detail how his illness had derailed his sense of purpose and belief in himself. Because the fourth-floor unit fosters a strong sense of community, we crafted moments in the ceremony that would recognize the ways in which its members support each other.

Dr. O and I met weekly until we had a draft that we liked, then test-drove it with the group. Afterwards, people said how much they appreciated being recognized and honored as travelers rather than as patients.

“Travelers have the ability to move on,” one said. “They have the hope of new adventures.”

The ceremony evolved based on the patients’ responses. When it was finished, I began to use it regularly to open the storytelling circle. Participants often report that the ceremony has given them a new way of understanding both their illness and their journey towards healing.

For Dr. O, writing it became part of his own gradual creative reawakening. He has since gone home, but the ceremony is his legacy—a lasting gift for anyone suffering from depression. It affirms that, in his memorable phrase, we can “go forth even in darkness” to seek our lost or hidden stories.

In the hope of helping storm-stayed travelers wherever they may be, here is the ceremony:

(Ring a bell to begin)

Invocation

The ceremony we are about to do is an honoring of your life—
of who you are,
who you were,
and who you will become.

We gather to honor your courage in being here,
and to remind ourselves that we are not alone on this journey—
Welcome, Travelers, and thank you for joining this circle.

The Storm That Brought You Here

We know the storm that brought you here,
The storm of depression
That takes away your sense of purpose,
Your pleasure in life,
Your ability to move forward.
You are storm-stayed now,
And this can be your sanctuary until you're ready to travel again.

Four Blessings

Here are four blessings for you—
We invite you to respond after each blessing with these words of affirmation:
Let it be so.

May you find your path of healing through this darkness.

Let it be so.

May you move your life on to new and fulfilling challenges.

Let it be so.

May you gain wisdom from your season with depression.

Let it be so.

May you share your wisdom with others who need it.

Let it be so.

You Are Not Alone

Now that you have found a haven,
You will have an opportunity
To recover what you have lost in the storm
And to one day travel
To new destinations.
You are not alone;
Many have been lost in this storm,
Many have sought shelter here,
Many have traveled again when they were ready.

End of Ceremony

(Ring bell)

With the sound of this bell,
We remember that, though we feel broken,
We will keep trying to mend.

(Ring bell)

With the sound of this bell,
We remember that we may go forth even in darkness.

(Ring bell)

With the sound of this bell,
We thank you for gathering and dream together of the possible wonder of new beginnings.

(Ring bell)

About the author:

Dan Yashinsky, the storyteller-in-residence at Baycrest Health Sciences, Toronto, is the author of [*Swimming with Chaucer: A Storyteller's Logbook*](#) and [*Suddenly They Heard Footsteps: Storytelling for the Twenty-First Century*](#). He also edited the *Baycrest Wisdom Book*, a collection of stories by the center's patients and staff. The Baycrest ceremony has been shared at a Storytelling in Health conference in Swansea, Wales, and with members of the [*Healing Story Alliance*](#). Information about storycare can be found at tellery.com.

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