

# Joan Bodger Memorial Lecture

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Dan Yashinsky

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### INTRODUCTION

I'D LIKE TO thank the Festival for inviting me to give this year's Joan Bodger Memorial Lecture. It's one of the ironies of memorial events that the people who would most enjoy them are unable to attend. Joan, if she were here, would be sitting in the front row, wearing a cap of unique construction and something purple on her person, clutching her Druidic walking stick, and shining her inimitably grumpy, tender grin on the assembled company. She would have been pleased by many things tonight: that so many of the people gathered here remember her with love; that we're in the library built over her husband Al Mercer's ashes (that's another story — ask Ken Settington to tell it, he's the one who scattered them); that the Osborne, Bagshaw, and Merrill collections are right over our heads; that a successful Black businesswoman, artist, and friend may make some money through booksales (Joan was a great believer in artists making money); that one of her old friends was invited to speak tonight; but most of all that this isn't a performance but a lecture. Joan felt keenly that storytellers need to understand that we are part of a wider intellectual enterprise, a conversation that is taking place about the place of oral story in contemporary life. To join this

conversation as storytellers we must, according to Joan's way of thinking, engage with poets, musicians, psychotherapists, anthropologists, literary critics, scholars and carriers of myth, philosophers, folklorists.

The great African-American storyteller Brother Blue likes to ask people to tell him their soul-story, what the Flamenco singers call your *canto hondo* — your deep song. Tonight I'd like to talk about my soul-question, the one that has haunted me since I set out on the way of the storyteller, the question I ponder on long walks through Cedarvale Ravine, the one that keeps me up at night when I replay the day's news and wonder what I, as a storyteller and citizen of the early twenty-first century, can do to repair our broken, troubled world. The question is, Can we invent a new myth for the age we live in? My aim tonight isn't to answer this question, but to share it with you and hope you find it as entertaining and difficult as I do. I would like to kindle a question, not come up with a final say. Besides, whenever a good question pops up, we should remember the Jewish story about the student who ran to the rabbi demanding the answer to the burning question: what is the meaning of life? The rabbi slapped the importunate student and said, "How dare you exchange such a wonderful question for a mere answer? Questions bring us together, answers divide us."

I should be honest and warn you that my route tonight is a winding one. As Italo Calvino, one of the great literary mythtellers of the last century, said, "With myths, one should not be in a hurry." I do think we need to invent a new myth, although I'm not at all sure how this can happen, or exactly what the myth will be about. I've never found a manual that explains how humanity has invented the myths we have, at times in our long history, lived by; besides, I'm terrible at reading manuals. I do, however, have a few clues to offer *en route*. Some of the clues about the power, persistence, and possibility of myth we'll find by visiting the Yukon, two summer camps, and Mount Olympus. Then I'll take you on a guided tour of listeners — that is, listeners to oral story — I've known and loved. I'm convinced that a new myth, if it is coming towards us over the horizon of modern life, will be about how and why we listen to stories. I will even suggest that if the hero — or force, or medicine spirit — of our new myth needs a name, the hero could be called, simply, Listener. Listener is not, of course, new at all. Listener is one of the oldest spirits in the world, and is an essential part of our everyday lives. Storytellers in particular — from Homer to the African griot, from a granny telling fireside tales, to every teller participating in

this festival — pay professional attention to what makes people want to keep listening, and makes them want to know what happens next. But such listening is also part of the trading of anecdote, gossip, family lore, shoptalk that makes up our daily conversation; in fact, it is so common that we barely notice, let alone study, how extraordinary it is that someone can speak, and their words can traverse the air between mouth and ear and take root in the soul of the listener. We take the experience of story-listening so much for granted that we haven't even evolved a vocabulary to describe this enormously complex, subtle, and powerful process.

**B**EFORE SETTING OFF on the trail of my question, I'd like to give you a little background about my own beginnings as a storyteller. I came to this art almost ludicrously ill-equipped for a career that involves speaking aloud from memory to groups of strangers. When I first had the notion of being a storyteller, I was terribly shy, nervous about speaking in public, had a lousy memory, and didn't know any stories. Not an auspicious beginning for a young yarnspinner. I did have a few things going for me. I had grown up in a house where stories mattered; I'd fallen in love with Homer at university; and I'd seen the magic of summer camp storytelling around the campfire at Bolton Camp, a family service camp that worked with children from Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods. This magic was so powerful it could transform a pack of wild eight-year-olds into the world's greatest story-listeners. About my upbringing, because my mother survived the war as a Jewish child in fascist Romania and most of my parents' friends were also survivors of the Holocaust, I grew up feeling that if I didn't pay close attention to their stories and reminiscences, entire families and villages could be lost a second time, not through Nazi violence, but from my own forgetfulness. So I grew up with big ears and a small mouth. Homer I met at the University of California at Santa Barbara, along with Chaucer and Icelandic saga. I found the idea of the bards incredibly noble and cool, even though they operated in a world so distant from my own, where surfers headed to the beach outside the classroom where we talked about epic and where, after class, we pursued intensive extracurricular studies of herbal chemistry, female anatomy, and political resistance. The idea that people had once travelled around Greece telling magnificently long stories was the most romantic thing I'd ever encountered. At Bolton Camp, where I told my

first story, I realized that the fire where counsellors told their ghostly yarns to enthralled campers was the same fire where Homer had once chanted epic, where the Canterbury pilgrims had recounted their tales, where all storytellers in history had spun their yarns; and it was a great revelation that this fire was still burning in the late twentieth century, and that the art I'd read about at university had never really died.

I'm telling you this partly to give you a picture of how someone as unlikely as me — tongue-tied, forgetful, possessed of a paralyzing shyness, and with no stories in his head — could wind up as a storyteller. But my real point is that I began with the forms of storytelling — the campfire, a voice speaking in the quiet darkness, a circle of rapt listeners — long before I had a clue as to what kinds of stories I could or should be telling. My own personal journey — form first, stories later — echoes, I think, the experience of many people in the contemporary storytelling movement. I began by going through the motions, and only slowly and over many years, did I start to understand what kinds of stories suited my own voice, memory, and performance energy. Diane Wolkstein's book *The Magic Orange Tree* was a wonderful discovery for so many of us because she not only tells great stories in it, she also evokes the feeling and customs of a living oral culture, one where tellers ask CRIC? and listeners give back an enthusiastic CRAC! Back about 30 years ago, storytellers in Toronto were hatching 1,001 Friday Nights of Storytelling and the Festival; and we were beginning to hear news about other places, other tellers. An international renaissance was springing up, and in every place the forms of the art were being reclaimed at the same time — or even before — tellers developed their repertoires.

This leads to a thought I find truly startling. Alice Kane used to say that stories find the tellers they need. A lovely Gaelic proverb echoes this notion by saying, Every force evolves a form. What if we have reinvented storytelling here in Canada and around the world — created festivals, gatherings, talking sticks, CRIC? CRAC!, etc. — because a new story is on its way to getting born. What if we are the form the force of a new myth has evolved? Is it so farfetched to think that a new story may be trying to find the tellers it needs? Perhaps a fresh myth, one that reminds us of the value of listening, is beginning to coalesce on our tongues and in our collective imaginations.

But does the world need a new myth? We are, nowadays, doing what a Spanish proverb calls “making the path by walking it” — that is, we are trying to find and formulate the wisdom we need even as we sail out

into uncharted waters. We are living through a time of unprecedented and troubling change. For endless millennia, no human being ever experienced the things that assail us every single day. We have come to a crossroads where old and familiar customs break down, but the new moral frame and social structure we urgently need have not yet evolved. We step into the future with less connection to ancestral guidance than any human generation before us. Although we have invented amazing technologies for saving data, we are at risk of forgetting our personal, family, and cultural stories. We can hoard megabytes of information, but have never had fewer stories in our personal memories. We broadcast our voices over vast distances, but talk less to our neighbours. We have a multitude of communications technologies, but have less and less to say to each other. And, haunting these changes, are the spectres of continuing violence, planetary degradation, and above all the insidious danger that we'll come to believe the implacable message of the powerful — that resistance is futile. I'd like to suggest that we do need a fresh set of stories to navigate by as humanity proceeds further down a road our ancestors could not have imagined. I'm not saying we need new religions or creeds or dogmas or rules. I believe a new myth can be woven into contemporary life without forgetting or supplanting our old and familiar stories and religious beliefs. Yet it is also important to note that, despite all the real wisdom and beauty of our longstanding traditions and texts, they haven't given us the incentive to stop slaughtering each other, or condemning our neighbours because they are different, or destroying our natural habitat.

Before trying to imagine a new myth, I'd like to share a few observations of myth as I've encountered it in my own life. You will know, even without me saying so, that I am not speaking as a scholar, but as a storyteller. But I'm also speaking as a human being, and having a connection to myth, even if it is extremely attenuated, even if we've almost lost the signal in the static of modern life — some connection to myth remains as a birthright of human existence.

All humans seem to be endowed with a strong instinct for mythic narrative. We are story-tropic creatures, hardwired to turn to oral narrative the way a sunflower turns to the light. In Chinua Achebe's book *Anthills of the Savannah*, an elder gives an eloquent speech, rallying his fellow-villagers to a doomed effort of resistance against the reigning dictator. He reminds them to live by the values of their traditional stories. He says: "The story is our escort. Without it, we are

blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns and directs us." Even those of us who do not live in an oral culture, we feel the power of this description. In a story-based culture, traditional stories make up the moral and spiritual escort that gives human beings a sense of purpose, past, and possibility. They are navigational tools of unequalled power, maps that serve to guide us on what poet Robert Bringhurst calls "the paths between the worlds ... The paths, for instance, between the world of the village and the world of the forest; between childhood and marriage, community and solitude, and the paths between the worlds of life and death, and the worlds of waking and dreaming." In his book *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, Sean Kane, writing about hunting/gathering cultures, states, "Because a people coevolve with their habitat, because they walk the paths their ancestors walked, mythtelling assumes that the stories already exist in nature, waiting to be overheard by humans who will listen for them." He is describing a world almost unimaginably remote from where and when I live, in Toronto, Canada, in the early years of the twenty-first century. In my world not only do we not walk ancestral paths, we've almost forgotten what it means to have ancestors in the first place. The only things you're likely to overhear in our microsoftened, instantly downloadable, thousand-channel, media-blitzed environment are the beeps of MSN messages, the rush of traffic, the braying of television, and an automated voice that tells you your call is important to them.

Yet even though this intimate relationship to oral stories seems very distant from our own age, there's something immensely attractive — to me, and I think to many of us — about living in a world where stories could matter so much that they become our escort through life. Even here, even now we are drawn to myth like dowsers to a secret spring.

Children certainly feel it. At the most fundamental level, it explains why children are so eager to hear their life told back to them at bedtime. They love to hear the stories of their own lives, including the creation myth of how they were born. Then, at around nine or ten, a sense of the antiquity and, paradoxically, the immediacy of myth takes hold of the imagination. When I was that age I fell headlong into the world of the gods and goddesses, Greek, Roman, and Norse. Grey-eyed Athena was my favourite, but I also felt a kinship with Apollo and Hermes. Aphrodite was a bit intimidating. What I liked was the sense that these powerful beings once shared the earth with us, that they once shapeshifted their way into our lives, that human beings once lived next door to mystery.

Robert Bringham, in his study of Haida mythtellers *A Story As Sharp As A Knife*, writes: “To those who think the myths, the creatures who inhabit them are real and not fictitious” At that age, I thought Athena with all the passion of a solitary, shy ten-year-old kid growing up in the Jewish suburbs of Detroit. I also thought, rather ruefully, that it was unlikely I’d ever meet this magnificent, wise, Zeus-sprung goddess in my Jewish neighbourhood near Shafer and Eight Mile Road.

I went directly from an infatuation with the ancient gods to the more modern semi-divinity known as 007, who, like Zeus, had a predilection for earthly women, whose chariot was an Aston Martin, and whose nectar was a martini, shaken, not stirred.

Myself, I was shaken and stirred by these early encounters with myth, even in their literary form. Their stories ran in a strange parallel to my not-very-religious cultural background, whose single God was also quite real to me, and who I prayed to most nights with all the fervour of an only child, asking for protection for my mother, father, grandparents, and dog — a black mutt named Cerberus, after the three-headed dog that guarded the gates of Hades. I prayed that we weren’t blown up by the intercontinental ballistic missiles every American child of my generation grew up knowing were poised to launch in our direction. When one touches the world of myth as a child, it is like the experience of the girl in Alan Garner’s magnificent short story *The Stone Book*. One day her father shows her a secret passageway to a cave that generations of his people have known about. It is an initiation, and she goes to the cave only when she’s old enough to have the courage but is still young enough to still fit in the narrow passageway. When she lights her stub of a candle, she sees paintings on the walls around her, paintings of animals, including a bull being killed by an arrowlike mark. These are, although she doesn’t know it, neolithic paintings thousands and thousands of years old. She recognizes the mark as the same one her father uses for his stonemason’s mark. Then she looks down and is amazed to see thousands of footprints:

They were the footprints of people, bare and shod. There were boots and shoes and clogs, heels, toes, shallow ones and deep ones, clear and sharp as if made altogether, trampling each other, hundreds pressed in the clay where only a dozen could stand. Mary was in a crowd that could never have been, thronging, as real as she was. Her feet

made prints no fresher than theirs. And the bull was still dying under the mark, and the one one hand still held.

When she comes back out, her father says, “That’s put a quietness on you.” I noticed a similar quality of quietness and even awe with my Bolton Campers. Sitting around the fire, the counsellors would spin stories about Old Man Bolton, the limping ax-murderer said to haunt those woods. Afterwards, in the safety of the cabin, my campers — who had, by the way, witnessed things in their own young lives that could match any horror in a summer camp yarn — were well-pleased with themselves at their encounter with the camp ghost. They sensed that Old Man Bolton is, in fact, one of the oldest gods in the world, going by many names in many cultural traditions. They knew they had been in the presence of a myth-spirit, not just a character from a spooky camp legend.

Speaking of camps, I learned more about the amazing persistence of myth when I was giving a storytelling workshop to camp counsellors at a camp on Lake Couchiching. When I asked them if the camp had a resident ghost, they told me they didn’t go in much for scary stories. I asked if there wasn’t some kind of spirit haunting the woods, and the young counsellors smiled and said that yes, come to think of it there was a traditional camp spirit. Finnigan the Elf was said to live out there in the forest around the camp. Finnigan wasn’t a scary monster, but more like a leprechaun. He helped lost children and befriended lonely ones. They liked to tell the story of Finnigan to first year campers to help them feel at home there. Camp Couchiching is in Anishnabe territory, land that has been continuously inhabited for many thousands of years. When I heard about Finnigan the Elf, I remembered hearing Basil Johnston, a great Anishnabe storyteller and scholar, describe the *maemaegawaehnse*. They are “a little being akin to an elf, who dwells in the forest. This being bears a special kinship to children, coming to them to uplift their spirits should they be despondent, or conducting them back home should they wander away into the forest on their own.” The *maemaegawaehnse* have never left the forest on the shore of Lake Couchiching. They’ve simply taken on a different name. Robert Bringhurst writes in his introduction to Alice Kane’s *The Dreamer Awakes*, “[I] am amazed by the way stories and songs, and the words of which they are made, preserve their forms over hundreds of years and thousands of miles, just as animals and plants do over many generations. Stories are not copied; they are reborn, and each succeeding individual

is different, yet the species, for long stretches, is substantively the same.” The counsellors at Camp Couchiching were astonished to realize they had recreated a myth which had been told on that land, in those woods, by that lake since the beginning of time.

I also learned about myth when I met someone who still lived in a myth-framed world. Her name was Angela Sidney, and she was an elder from Tagish, Yukon Territory. She came to the 5th Toronto Festival of Storytelling in 1983, and I had several opportunities to see her in the Yukon in the years before her death. Angela knew a traditional story for every river and mountain in her homeland. She knew the family and tribal genealogies for many generations. She truly walked in the paths of her ancestors. Myth was so interwoven into her life that when anthropologist Julie Cruikshank asked her to recount facts from her life — for example, what it was like when they built the Alaska Highway — Angela would begin her answer by telling a myth. “From the beginning,” she writes, “several of the eldest women responded to my questions about secular events by telling traditional stories ... Each explained that these narratives were important to record as part of her life story.” Their lives, in other words, were inseparably interwoven with the myths they had inherited and kept alive.

I used to sit with her by the bank of the Yukon River and listen as she told stories about how Crow made the world. Crow, in her tradition, is a cosmic shoplifter, a trickster who subverts every attempt to hoard the essentials of civilized and planetary life. For example, when a sea lion chief tries to keep all the land to himself on his own private island, back when the world was covered with water, Crow tricked him into releasing some of it into Crow’s supremely generous care. Crow threw the sand out on the water and some of it floated. Then he called out, “Become a world!” The sand turned into the earth, and all creatures were welcome to tread, run, crawl, and walk upon it. He does this with every important natural resource, including the sun, moon, and stars. When he steals the light, he tosses it up into the sky and calls out, “Shine for everybody!” Angela’s people call the sun “your grandfather’s fire” after the high chief Crow stole it from while pretending to be his grandson. And while she told me these creation tales, I’d notice a real crow — black, impertinent, curious, fearless — hopping around on the grass by the river; and it would occur to me that Angela’s Tagish people had named the creator after an opportunistic and annoying blackbird, a bird they beheld every day going about its crowish, crowly business.

When I saw a crow hopping into earshot of the creation myth it starred in, I'd wonder if Angela — and her Tagish and Tlingit ancestors — look at that common, raucous, devious scavenger and see the Bringer of Light, Creator of man and woman, the Worldmaker? Does the spirit of the creator really live on in this embodiment? Is that crow-on-the-grass also the divine and cosmic Crow? And more than that, I'd wonder what would it be like to live in a world shoplifted and bodied forth into glorious existence by a cosmic force they named after an unpredictable blackbird. Angela and her fellow myth-dwellers had chosen to have a daily reminder that the world was brought into being by a force that was fabulously generous, ruthlessly intolerant of the greedy, and absolutely insistent that all citizens of the earth, animal and human and mineral, could partake in the world's bounty.

I suppose this is why you've never heard of any Yukon aboriginal going on a crusade to slaughter the infidel who doesn't happen to believe that Crow is the way, the truth, and the life. In a world framed by these trickster myths, no essential resource can be owned by only one person, country, culture, or multinational — not the water, the earth, the light, and certainly not the truth. Even now I'd like to imagine that Crow is planning to hack into and destroy the companies trying to patent and privatize genetic material, control water resources, and fill our few remaining public spaces with relentless advertising.

Angela managed to live in both worlds, the modern twentieth century and a world lit by a Crow-stolen sun, moon, and stars. Near the end of her long life, when Julie Cruickshank asked Angela what it meant to carry such a rich heritage of traditional stories, she answered, "Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story."

So the shy suburban kid meeting the grey-eyed goddess in his *Golden Book of Greek and Roman Myths*, and the kids hearing about the *maemaegawhensae*, and the wise Yukon elder who knew, through a chain of oral tradition many thousands of years old, the precise words Crow exclaimed on the dreamtime day the world was made; all of us were, in our own ways, citizens of the realm of myth. Although Angela Sidney and I represent extremely different relationships to oral tradition — she was part of a still-viable oral culture, I grew up watching *Batman* — we did share, as all humans do, the same ability to be attracted to and guided by stories, the same interest in living in a world where myth is a frame and force-field for the meaning of everyday life, where the story, in Achebe's wonderful phrase, is our "escort."

I'd like to move a little closer to our myth about Listener by exploring the nature of story-listening. When the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism and a renowned storyteller, arrives in a village marketplace and begins telling stories, Martin Buber tells us what happens. A man begins to listen; then: "a second man came up, soon after a third, then ever more and more, mostly servants and poor people who begin the day early. They all remained standing, listened eagerly and called over still others from the houses. As the hour advanced, the maids came with their water-jugs on the way to the fountain and stopped, the children came running out of the rooms, and the family heads themselves left their businesses and their pursuits to hear the strange man." (*The Legend of the Baal-Shem.*) The marvelous thing is that, wherever you entered the tale, you found its "red thread" (a wonderful German phrase for the inner life of a story): "His narration ... was so delightfully intertwined that whenever someone came up it seemed to that person to be at the beginning, and those who earlier had not been curious were now entirely concentrated on what would happen next and awaited it as if it were the fulfillment of their most precious hopes. Thus they all had one great story, and within it each had his own small and all-important story." And what do these spellbound villagers hear in the storyteller's intricately woven narrative? Buber answers somewhat mystically: "[I]t was no report of distant times and places that the story told; under the touch of its words, the secret melody of each person was awakened ..."

This way of describing an already-mysterious phenomenon only deepens the questions; yet there is something wonderfully accurate in Buber's phrase. With oral stories, it seems to me, we are always listening for a kind of "secret melody" — that is, a distillation and expression of our own experience — our lives reflected back to us with new understanding. In Kit Pearson's book *The Sky Is Falling*, there's a lovely example of how a girl hears her secret melody in a fairytale. A sister and brother are evacuated from the blitz in London. They turn up in Toronto. The little boy is so young that the memory of his home and parents fades as he is adopted by a Canadian family. The sister is just old enough to be keenly aware of her homesickness, of her huge responsibility towards her little brother, of the distances they've travelled, and of the terrible danger their parents are still in back in England. One day the children — who haven't been settled yet — are taken to Hart House to hear a storyteller. Although the teller isn't named in the book, some of you may recognize her in this description:

A small woman with very bright eyes sat on a low stool in front of the fireplace, watching them calmly ...

“And now, I want to tell you the story of Alenoushka and her brother.” Her tone had become sad and solemn and the rollicking atmosphere changed to hushed expectancy. “Once upon a time there were two orphan children, a little boy and a little girl. Their father and mother were dead and they were all alone. The little boy was called Ivanoushka and the little girl’s name was Alenoushka. They set out together to walk through the whole of the great wide world. It was a long journey they set out on, and they did not think of any end to it, but only of moving on and on ...”

The back of Norah’s neck prickled. She was pulled into the story as if by a magnet and she became Alenoushka, trying to stop her little brother from drinking water from the hoofprints of animals, and desperate when he did and turned into a little lamb ...

*O brother Ivanoushka*

*A heavy stone is round my throat*

*Silken grass grows through my fingers*

*Yellow sand lies on my breast.*

Norah didn’t realize her eyes had welled with tears until one rolled down her cheek. The story ended happily. Alenoushka was rescued from a witch’s spell, and when she threw her arms around the lamb he became her brother once more ... The haunting voice stopped and the room was still. Norah’s body was loose and relaxed. She felt the rough rug under her legs and Gavin’s warm thigh pressing against hers. The librarian stood up and left the room without acknowledging them or saying goodbye. It was as if the stories had used her to tell themselves. The children got up quietly and went in to lunch.

It is a striking image of telling and listening. The story, complex and moving, seems to have room in it for even Norah’s grief for her parents and bittersweet feelings towards her little brother. In *The Lord of the Rings*, a skeptical rider questions Aragorn about the existence of hobbits — “Halflings,” laughed the rider ... “Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children’s tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?” — Aragorn replies: “A man may do both ... for not we but those who come after will make the

legends of our time. The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day.” It isn’t so much that Norah the young refugee becomes Alenoushka the fairytale orphan as that the world of the story and the world she herself inhabits draw near, the borders open, and the two worlds become one. It seems we have the power to live on this green earth by daylight and by story-light.

Another example comes from J.D. Salinger’s short story *The Laughing Man* (from *Nine Stories*). Every afternoon, a gifted camp counselor tells his tribe of high-spirited nine-year-old New York boys a daily saga about a hideously deformed, miraculously good-hearted criminal mastermind known as the Laughing Man. The “Comanches” would gather at the front of the bus, as the storyteller “straddled his driver’s seat backward and, in his reedy but modulated tenor voice, gave us the new installment of ‘The Laughing Man.’ ... It was a story that tended to sprawl all over the place, and yet it remained essentially portable. You could always take it home with you and reflect on it while sitting, say, in the outgoing water in the bathtub.” The story infiltrates and guides the lives of these boys. They knew that they were the “twenty-five legitimate living descendants of the Laughing Man — all of us circulating ominously, and incognito, throughout the city, sizing up elevator operators as potential arch-enemies, whispering side-of-the-mouth but fluent orders into the ears of cocker spaniels, drawing beads, with index fingers, on the foreheads of arithmetic teachers. And always waiting, waiting for a decent chance to strike terror and admiration in the nearest mediocre hearts.” The story was their escort through the streets, parks, and apartment buildings of New York City.

These examples come from books, but I’m sure many of us can contribute our own life-experiences where hearing the right story at the right moment changed everything. Our second son was born very sick, and spent the first three weeks of his life in the neo-natal intensive care unit at the Hospital for Sick Children. At one point during that period, our neighbour came across the street and told me a story. She began, “I know it’s tough, and I hope everything works out. I’ve been meaning to tell you that I carry my own death certificate ...” “How is that possible?” I asked. This was her story. When she was born, in a country hospital in France, she weighed one pound. The doctor told her parents she would die that night. They insisted on taking her home to die. The doctor, not out of callousness but from being a hard-pressed doctor in a country hospital, asked if he could fill out the death certificate at the hospital,

knowing how hard it would be to come out that night to certify the death at the girl's home. They agreed. When they got home, the father took two big stones and heated them in the oven. He wrapped them in blankets, and put his dying, one-pound baby girl between them, just as he would with a sick lamb. She lived, and thrived, and has two adult children. And our son lived, too, and is sitting at the back of this hall tonight helping Itah sell books.

Even though we knew at the time our son's fate remained perilously uncertain, we found her story strangely satisfying. In the world of NICU, where doctors rule and the mother tongue is the BEEP BEEP BEEP of the monitors, it was comforting to think that her father's folk wisdom was more effective than the doctor's best efforts. More profoundly, there's something powerful about the idea of going through life with your own death certificate. The greatest riddle of life is how, though we must, like chimneysweeps, come to dust, we manage to forget this fact in the rush and flow and beauty and passion of everyday life.

I was travelling in Devon many years ago when I needed to find the right story for a difficult moment. My friend Ken Sprague took me over the hills to meet his neighbour, a farmer named Edward who'd recently suffered a calamitous loss. His only son had an unsuspected heart condition, and one day when Edward had been urging him to work harder in the fields, the boy had keeled over and died in front of him. When Edward and his wife heard I was a storyteller, they poured the tea, and asked if I could tell them one of my stories. I wondered what story I could possibly tell in this griefstricken farmhouse. Then this one (which I remembered hearing told by American teller Barbara Freeman but had never told myself) popped up:

A man was away from home for quite awhile. He ran into a neighbour as he walked into town. "How ya' doing?" he asked.

"Alright. How 'bout you?"

"Not bad. I've been away awhile. Any news?"

"Nah, it's been real quiet around here."

"Are you sure nothing's happened while I've been gone?"

"Well, now that you mention it, your dog died."

"My dog? How did that happen?"

"He got into the barn and ate some burnt horse meat."

"What was burnt horse meat doing in my barn?"

“When your barn burned, all the horses died in the fire.”

“You mean to say my barn burned while I was away?”

“Yep. Apparently a spark from the house caught it.”

“My house was on fire too?”

“They say it was the candles in the livingroom burning the curtains.”

“But what were candles doing in my livingroom?”

“They were all around the coffin.”

“You mean someone died while I was gone?”

“That would’ve been your mother-in-law. The shock carried her away.”

“What shock was that?”

“Hearin’ the news about your wife.”

“And what happened to my wife?”

“Oh, I guess she ran away with the gardener.”

“My wife ran away, my mother-in-law died, the house burned, the barn burned, the horses died, my dog died — and you said there wasn’t any news!”

My listeners laughed when they heard this tale of woe. It isn’t clear why, but it seems that the story spoke to them. Did they find in it a reflection of their own tragic history? Did hearing of someone else’s troubles make them feel less alone? Did it help them forget their sorrow for a moment with its preposterously backward revelation of the news? Perhaps for all of those reasons, it opened a window of glee that had been closed for a long time.

The greatest example of story-listening in all of literature comes from Homer. We are on the island of Phaiakia. We are in the court of King Alkinoos, and a guest has joined the company. Princess Nausicaa found a shipwrecked sailor and brought him to the king and queen. They offered him their hospitality, but strangely enough, he didn’t tell them his true name; just made up a yarn about a storm, a distant war, a bewitched island, a god-cursed effort to reach his home. Then Demodokos the royal bard enters the hall, takes his lyre from the boy who travels with him, tunes the instrument, and begins to sing an epic song about a warrior-king named Odysseus; and the mysterious guest, listening to Demodokos, weeps secretly behind his cloak. Only King Alkinoos, great host that he was, noticed those secret tears. After the banquet, there was track and field, then circle-dancing, then back for

more food and wine; and now the bard took requests. The stranger, after sending over a nice, crispy piece of barbeque — Homer's little reminder about how freelance bards should be treated — asked for another tale about that selfsame hero:

‘Sing only this for me, sing me this well,  
and I shall say at once before the world  
the grace of heaven has given us a song.’

The bard began to sing about the wooden horse Odysseus used to conquer Troy; and this time the castashore could no longer hide his tears. Finally Alkinoos demanded to know the truth: “You must not be secretive any longer! Come, in fairness, tell me the name you bore in that far country ...” To complete his hospitality, he promised his mysterious guest safe passage home on one of his magic ships, vessels that moved as swiftly as their navigators' dreams. The stranger begins by praising the art of the royal bard, Demodokos:

Alkinoos, King and admiration of men,  
how beautiful this is, to hear a minstrel  
gifted as yours; a god he might be, singing!  
There is no boon in life more sweet, I say,  
than when a summer joy holds all the realm,  
and banqueters sit listening to a harper  
in a great hall, by rows of tables heaped  
with bread and roast meat, while a steward goes  
to dip up wine and brim your cups again.  
Here is the flower of life, it seems to me!

Then he states: “I am Laertes' son, Odysseus.”

By the way, halfway through his epic tale — for Odysseus takes over the telling from Demodokos and goes on to tell his own adventures — Homer slips in a performer's joke. Odysseus stops and asks if his audience would rather go to bed than listen to the rest of the story. If you've ever tried to tell a long story to a roomful of tired, wine-sodden listeners or tried to give a one-hour lecture the day after we switch to daylight savings time, you know the situation. Alkinoos, however, the most noble story-host in the life or stories, showed his true greatness. He reassured the storyteller with words that still encourage all tellers and listeners nearly three thousand years later:

Here's a long night — an endless night — before us,  
and no time yet for sleep, not in this hall.  
Recall the past deeds and the strange adventures,  
I could stay up until the sacred Dawn  
as long as you might wish to tell your story.

When the story comes to an end, King Alkinoos completes his hospitality by giving the wanderer a dream-guided ship to carry him home: “Clear sailing shall you have now, homeward now, however painful all the past.” Odysseus heard not only the facts of his life sung back to him, but also the secret truth, the secret melody of his epic journey: before you can make the final journey home, you must land on the shore of your own story. Only after he is reunited with his own story is he finally qualified to sail to Ithaka.

The examples I've given so far involve humans listening to humans, but traditional fairytales give us countless examples of listening to voices beyond a human wavelength. In wondertales the ability to listen is as heroic as the ability to fight a dragon. You're a sophisticated storytelling audience, and I suspect you'd all know what to do if you were walking down the road in a fairytale, and you heard a voice down by your shoes say, “Friend, I'm hungry. Share your bread and I'll share a secret.” There on the ground, looking up at you, is a skinny mouse. The mouse is talking to you. What do you do next? The once-upon-a-time stories counsel you to stay your journey, no matter how urgent. Rest awhile. Share your bread, even if you've little enough as it is. Above all, don't show your surprise that the mouse is talking, or your shock that you understand its words. Those who ride haughtily by, too proud to listen to a dusty mouse, condemn themselves to dreary inconsequence; sometimes they get turned to stone, but mostly their terminal mediocrity is its own punishment.

Sometimes the voice comes in a dream, not from a beggar or a crone. In the Armenian story of *Kush Pari*, a version of the firebird story, the king goes blind. He tells his three sons that it is up to them to find a cure for his blindness. To do so, they must bring him something from a land so far away that his horses' hooves have never touched the ground of that place. The first two sons set out boldly and directly. The third prince shrugs and says he's not ready for a quest. He's a bit sleepy and wants to have his usual nap. So he goes out to the garden, curls up under his favourite apple tree, and goes to sleep. While he's sleeping he has

a dream, and in the dream he hears a voice, and the voice says: Go to your father and ask for the ring from his finger, the sword by his side, and the horse that he rides. He wakes up, goes to his father, and announces his own readiness for the quest. The next strange voice he hears, by the way, is the voice of his horse, when it tells him, “Do not, under any circumstances, pick up that beautiful, radiant golden feather you see lying in the path right in front of you! If you do, exceedingly dreadful things will happen to you!” But in this case, he completely ignores the horse’s advice. Luckily, he listens later when all the bad things start to happen because, of course, what prince wouldn’t pick up the golden feather? In the wonderful paradox of fairytales, because he took the time to listen to his dream, because he didn’t hurry off on his quest, he is able to travel much faster and further than his brothers. The third son or daughter in fairytales, so often the unregarded, lazy, attention-deficit-disorder, special ed, slower-than-most kid is always the one who proves to be the best listener and the true hero. The true hero, so the stories teach, is the one who is open to hearing new voices, even if they come from a weird mouse, a beggar, a crone, or a dream. Wisdom, according to the old stories, always speaks in unexpected voices. The trick is learning to listen. Your open-hearted listening shows that you have the quality to one day contend with dragons and discover firebirds.

The New York boys hearing about Laughing Man, Norah listening to Alice Kane (for that’s who the librarian was), Edward hearing the yarn in Devon, me talking to my neighbour on the street in the middle of our crisis, Odysseus hearing Demodokos the bard, the fairytale hero or heroine stopping to listen to their dream, or a mouse, or a beggar — these could all be chapters of a bigger story, a myth-cycle about the force that enables word-of-mouth stories to enter our lives so powerfully.

I’D LIKE TO END my talk by inviting you to imagine a new myth, a myth about Listener for an age that desperately needs to learn to listen in new ways. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien has a wise old tree-creature recall the way the ancient earth-people gained their extraordinary power: “They always wanted to talk to everything, the old Elves did.” That, it seems to me, could describe the heart of our new myth. The power to listen, the power to communicate beyond our customary bandwidth — these elven conversational skills could represent our greatest hope for survival today. Humankind has proven tragically adept at only hearing and repeating our own story, and if we

fail to open our ears to new and different voices, new and different stories, the consequences will be both dangerous and extreme. It isn't always easy to listen like this. We like our talk to come in familiar voices and from familiar places. After Socrates tells Phaedrus an ancient myth, Phaedrus scoffs: "It is easy for you, Socrates, to make up tales from Egypt or anywhere else you fancy." Socrates responds: "Oh, but the authorities of the temple of Zeus at Dodona, my friend, said that the first prophetic utterances came from an oak tree. In fact the people of those days ... were content in their simplicity to listen to trees or rocks, provided these told the truth." We don't go through daily life listening to mice, children, dreams, oak trees, or, in Harold Courlander's story *Talk*, yams: "Well, at last you're here. You never weeded me, but now you come around with your digging stick. Go away and leave me alone!" The farmer runs away screaming when he hears this indignant yam. In Jaime de Angulo's account of California's Pit River people, a shaman gives this advice: if you want to find power, you must be willing to hear about it from strange sources; go walking alone in the mountains; keep your ears open; sing your best medicine song: "The dragonfly came to me / with news from my home. / I lie in the afternoon / looking toward the hills." (*Indian Tales*) According to the old wondertales, when things begin to talk to you, break your journey. Share your listening as freely as you share your bread. Don't ride by proud and oblivious or run away screaming. Stay and listen. Maybe you'll hear an interesting story; maybe the story will be about you. Maybe even the dragonfly will bring you news from your home.

One of my favourite Hasidic stories is about a time the Baal Shem Tov and his faithful scribe went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The ship was becalmed, and the sailors turned on their Jewish passengers, assuming they had brought bad luck. Death seemed certain. The worst part of it was that the Baal Shem Tov had forgotten all of his mighty prayers, and couldn't call for divine help. His student implored him to try, but he remembered nothing. Finally, the great teacher and storyteller asked his scribe what he could recall. Slowly, painfully, he remembered something: the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. He began, tentatively, to murmur them aloud: Aleph, Bet. The Baal Shem Tov repeated the letters, and even these simplest elements of language had such power that they were saved from catastrophe.

The observations, stories, and ideas I've shared tonight could be part of our "aleph, bet". Perhaps we can discover in them traces of a bigger story, one that speaks to us about the value of conversing with

everything, like Tolkien's elves; of listening to all of the world's stories even if they come to us from the most unlikely sources. Myths, I'm convinced, are born from shared dreams. The Australian aboriginals call creation the Dreamtime, and their myths the Dreaming. It may be the world is ready for a great new dreaming. We don't need another authorized version of anything, or canon of official texts. What we need, it seems to me, is to begin to notice and name and narrate Listener's presence in our lives. We need to recognize that Listener is present whenever parents tell fairytales at a child's bedside; when children sit around the campfire hearing ghostly tales; when storytellers get together for jams and festivals. We need to honor Listener's presence at those rare councils where the poor and the powerful hear each other's stories, or when enemies hear a note of truth in each other's voices. We need to understand that Listener guides the work of scientists and researchers. Dr. George Salt, of the University of California, used to tell his students: "Like St. Francis, zoologists must speak with animals. The trick is to speak clearly enough that the animals hear, and to listen carefully enough to make sense of their response — and never to speak so loudly that the only response was fright." All of these things take place within the circle of Listener's mysterious and powerful blessing. If we put all of our stories of listening together, Listener's new myth will emerge. I think that, just as our scientists and engineers have given us new knowledge and unprecedented technologies, perhaps it is the role of our twenty-first century storytellers to imagine a new story and provide the means to express it. "Not we but those who come after," wrote Tolkien, "will make the legends of our time." If that great mythteller is right, then it is our grandchildren who may one day tell the story of Listener's beneficent spirit, and of a time when men and women learned again to hear our secret melody in the stories told by the wee mouse on the road, by our dreams, by each other, and by the earth itself.

