

A Story about Story

By Donna Washington

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There are many different kinds of stories. Some stories tell your friends and family what you did over the course of your day. Other stories are spooky. Some tales teach us how to do things. Some help us to remember important people and events from the past. Other stories help us to say good-bye. Some stories are therapeutic and can help us heal. Tales can even help us to remember who we are.

Storytelling is an old art form. It makes up the backbone for many things we do. Without it, we would have no books, no theater, and no television. We wouldn't even have computer games. It would be impossible to list all the different ways we use stories, so I'm going to name only a few.

Most people have at least one experience with telling stories around a campfire. Of course, most people tell these same stories at slumber parties or when they're out late on foggy nights. Stories around the campfire tend to be spooky tales of strange things. One of the most common is the story of the hook-handed man. The story goes like this:

Once, a young couple went out camping in the woods. It was very cold. The two of them sat in the car. On the radio, they heard that there was an escaped convict in the woods. He had a hooked hand. The two of them just laughed at the news. Then, they heard something in their camp. The young man got out of the car to investigate. The girl was worried that it might be the hook-handed man. The young man just shrugged her worry off. He went out into the night. The girl heard him scream, and then he ran back to the car. He jumped in and slammed the door. His face was as white as a sheet. He tore out of the campground and sped all the way home. He said not a word the entire way. When they finally got home, they sat in the driveway shaking. Finally, they opened the doors. They heard a strange clank. The young man looked down and discovered a bloody hook on the ground. It had been caught in the driver's-side door. They never found the hook-handed man. Some say he's still out there, waiting.

Stories aren't just for creeping out people on a moonless night. Some tales were told to help people deal with a world they couldn't understand. Imagine what life would be like if we didn't know why night fell. If we didn't know why night came, how could we be sure the sun was going to rise in the morning? What if we didn't know what made people sick, or what made them well? What if we didn't know why lightning struck or rain fell? The ancient world was one full of superstition and fear. People made up stories to help them deal with the things they couldn't explain. This made them feel as if they had some control over their surroundings. These stories are called *origin tales*. They try to explain why the world looks and acts the way it does. For example, consider this African story called "Why the Buzzard is Bald":

Arap Sang was part god and part man. One day he had to cross a great stretch of desert. Arap Sang was bald as an egg, and the sun beat down on his head mercilessly. He looked up and saw a buzzard. In those days, buzzards had a thick crop of feathers that grew out of the top of their heads. Arap Sang called to the buzzard, "Brother Buzzard, the sun is strong, and my head feels great heat. Will you shelter me while I walk to the nearest trees?"

The buzzard just laughed. "What should I care about you, old bald head?" Then the bird made an insulting noise and flapped away.

Arap Sang was furious. "Insult me? See how you fare with a bald pate!"

Later, the buzzard joined a friend of his by a carcass. He looked at his friend, and he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" his friend demanded.

"You are as bald as an egg!" laughed the buzzard.

"Well," his friend replied, "so are you!" And it was true. From that day to this, all buzzards have been bald.

In the past, some tale-tellers used stories to entertain royalty. *Bards* were storytellers who created epics. Their stories were spoken and sung and lasted for hours. Bards made up stories about kings and giants. They sang about glorious battles and faithful squires who died bravely at their masters' sides. Sometimes their songs were intended to make fun of others or to taunt the king's enemies. Today, bards aren't at many kings' courts, because there aren't that many kings.

Some storytellers use their gifts to pass on the stories and traditions of their cultures. African griots, American Indian shamans, cowboy poets, drum makers of many traditions, and old-world artisans all use stories. They remind people of today about the people and things in our past that we should never forget.

Just in case you don't think storytelling touches *your* life, consider what you do every time you share the events of your day. When you do that, you are telling your own story. You are preserving your own history. You are passing on information using the oldest form of art known to humankind.

"In one ear and out the other. My tale is done but there'll be another."

At the time of this article's publication, Donna Washington was a professional storyteller and author living in Durham.

