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JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS:
The Story-Listening Trance
by Fran Stallings

> *"A storyteller is like a tour guide. You invite your listeners to come along with you to some place they may never have visited before. 'And over here, on your left, you will see …' But they must be able to trust that you will not abandon them in some dark and snaky place. You are responsible for bringing them back out into the light."*
>
> -- Elizabeth Ellis.

The metaphor of story as journey comes naturally to listeners. One woman described her favorite teller as "like a bus driver. When you get on her bus you know you're going on a good trip. You don't know exactly where, but it'll be good." All stories invite us on a "journey of the imagination". But sometimes we go farther and deeper.

Paul Zweig describes how men listening to a storyteller in a marketplace of Kjama el Fna in Marrakesh, "sat like pools of quietness in the pushing and shoving of early evening." He says that they "seemed to have turned their backs on the world, creating a circle of vacancy with their slumped bodies and expressionless faces… as if the men were not wholly there. And that is, in fact, the truth. They are inside the story, having been transported inward on a journey so elusive and sudden that a man could search for that road everywhere over the earth and still not find it." (Zweig 1974 pp 84-85.)

You may have seen such listeners, adult or child, going so far into a story that you wonder if they are still present in the same room with you. They sit so still that they hardly seem to breathe. Their faces fall slack; their eyes grow large and luminous, seemingly focused not on the teller but deep within. As a listener yourself, you too may have experienced that transport. Describing storytelling events, reporters often toss in words like "entranced, mesmerized, hypnotizing"; but this journalistic hyperbole overlooks the fact that sometimes storytelling's magic does indeed literally *entrance*.

"If you ever decide to give this up," said a listener, "you could go to work as a hypnotist. Your voice has a very special cadence. I 'woke up' after a while and wondered where I was, but I hadn't missed a word of the story."

Where had she been? In the story-listening trance.

Zweig comments, "Transport of this kind is probably what distinguishes storytelling from other uses of language. A story does not primarily require thoughtfulness or critical judgment from its audience; it requires self-abandonment, an act of depersonalization. To enter a story, one must give up being oneself for a while."(Zweig 1974, pg 85)

Even for a simple "bus trip" across town, travelers must trust their driver. When we journey deeper, into the self-abandonment of the story-listening trance, the guide bears a correspondingly deeper responsibility. The stories people cite as "entrancing" often touch on some of our deepest human fears: loss, abandonment, emotional annihilation, death. They show us dark corners of the soul. Listeners depend on those who lead that journey into darkness to go with caution and respect. And the guide had better know the way back out again.

Why should storytellers learn about trance?

Although some listeners and tellers say they have never experienced the story-listening trance, others to whom I have spoken recognize it and describe it as a profound and moving experience. Some tellers say that they consider entrancement the highest form of the storyteller's art, a gift which they frankly seek so that they may share it with their listeners. If storytelling can be studied as we study other arts, this especially intense form of the art demands our attention. What skills or techniques render a performance entrancing?

The story-listening trance is rare. Hours of fine tales may be skillfully told without once evoking trance. Nor does trance always come, even for an experienced teller with a story which has evoked that power many times before. Yet, beginners can sometimes transfix their listeners with a gut-wrenching tale. Apparently most tellers discover their own entrancing power by accident. ("Wow. What *was* that?") If entrancement needn't depend on the teller's intentional craft, how much comes from the story itself, the audience, or the setting? These aesthetic factors can be studied.

My own motivation was not aesthetic analysis but fear for my listeners. When psychotherapist Dr. Cheryl Kaufman diagnosed my audience as "in a light trance state", I worried about their vulnerability -- and my corresponding responsibility. I had to learn more about what trance is, and how listener and teller participate in its creation, before I could resume telling those powerful tales which I loved.

The story-listening trance is more than an awesome accident or a virtuoso display of performance skills. It can profoundly move and disturb people. Many tellers believe that if storytelling can indeed claim healing power, this is where it happens -- and hypnotherapists who use stories might agree. I think we need to understand the story-listening trance, not just as artist-performers but as responsible guides. Some tellers consciously seek to evoke trance; others do not, but it can befall them nonetheless. I think we should all be prepared. An ancient healers' oath warned, "Above all, do no harm." This warning may apply to storytellers, too.

What is known about the story-listening trance?

When I set out to learn about the story-listening trance, I expected to find scholarly treatises written long ago, analyzing and explaining this widely recognized phenomenon. To my surprise, I found almost nothing. In the literature about storytelling, and in travelers' tales like Zweig's, authors often cite anecdotes of the story-listening trance as evidence for the "power of story," but they seldom question how it happens. Anthropologists and psychologists discuss altered states of consciousness in detail, and some therapists regularly use story with trance, but I found no studies of entranced story-listeners except in a laboratory or clinical setting. My first article about "The Web of Silence: the story-listening trance"(Stallings 1988) suggested simple, non-intrusive ways to investigate audience response and teller technique in a normal audience setting. Apparently no one has tried these yet.

If scholars and researchers provide little help, what can we say for sure about the story-listening trance? First we can review the only genuine data we have: anecdotes of tellers' and listeners' experiences travelling in the realm of the story-listening trance. We can compare those descriptions with clinical hypnosis and with trance states in other cultures, looking for clues to what evokes the story-listening trance and what happens there. We can look at structured research that *has* been done: none of it exactly fits our situation, but it shows that research is possible and suggests some answers. We can step cautiously into neighboring fields of speech/communication, linguistics, and neurophysiology seeking more clues on what skills the teller must have, and what other factors affect the listener. Then we can speculate, but our ideas must await testing by some lucky grant recipient. Meanwhile, we will consider master tellers' advice about how to be a respectful, responsible guide.

What happens during the story-listening trance?

"My goal as a storyteller is silence," says Massachusetts teller Tom McCabe, "the silence that slowly envelops a room as children become swallowed up in a tale. As this silence overtakes the room, a fabulous transformation occurs. As they grow intent upon the story, the children's faces sag, their jaws drop open, and their eyes grow glassy. Suddenly, I am transported to a coral reef and my audience has been replaced by a school of attentive fish. I derive my greatest joy as a storyteller from peering into each of the faces of my 'school.'"(McCabe 1993)

"The kids in the audience don't have any itches, they're not coughing," says Houston teller Sally Bates Goodroe. "Teachers say afterwards, 'I've never seen these kids sit so still.' It's because they're not noticing their bodies." Goodroe, who has herself experienced therapeutic hypnosis, describes it as "a profound state of relaxation, a feeling of lethargy. Your body is just kind of there, but you're feeling in your mind rather than in your body."

Salem MA teller Tony Toledo told a personal story to fifteen prison inmates and "pulled them out of themselves". He says, "For one hour, they were not behind steel doors. They were with Andrew mowing the grass, and with George rappelling down the cliff, with me at Aunt Margaret's funeral… in that trance state."

These immobilized audiences seem unaware of external distractions or physical discomfort, from passing trains to hard chairs. Seattle storyteller Pleasant deSpain told an interviewer about an elderly woman, hospitalized in pain, who had "made up her mind to die" but happened to tune in his storytelling program. "She got so caught up in the story, she said, that for thirty minutes she felt no pain at all." Hanging on from week to week in order to hear more, she gained strength and determined to live. (Kimbrough 1982)

Many tellers hope listeners will visualize during stories of all types, but entranced story-listeners often report images so vivid that Massachusetts teller Susan Klein likens them to R2D2's hologram projection of Princess Leia in *Star Wars*. Houston storyteller Jeannine Passini Beekman recalls hearing Jackie Torrence tell "Honey Boy", a story often cited as entrancing: "I became aware that I had been hallucinating," Beekman says. "I had clearly seen Jackie moving around in the scenes on stage, and yet she never left that piano bench." Storyteller/author Jane Yolen described story-listening hallucination in *Touch Magic*: "And when the storyteller came to the part where the hero held up the head of the Gorgon Medusa, she held her own hand aloft. I could have sworn then -- as I can swear now -- that I saw the snakes from the Gorgon's head curling and uncurling around the storyteller's arm." Yolen continues, "At that moment I and all the other listeners around me were unable to move. It was as if we, and not Medusa's intended victims, had been turned to stone." (Yolen 1981, pp 41-42.)

The hallucination can be so real that the storyteller completely disappears from the listener's conscious awareness. Elizabeth Ellis cites a listener who thanked her for telling a tale which had actually been performed by Gayle Ross. Rhode Island teller Len Cabral recalls beginning work at a city park summer program. "You came telling us stories last year," insisted one child, "but last year, you was white." The teller's invisibility was recognized in other cultures and times. Liu Jinting (1587-1670), considered to be the originator of the modern art of Chinese storytelling, was described by a contemporary: "The characteristics, voices, behavior and gestures of each role are so vividly rendered that his listeners feel as if they are in the story with the characters while the story-teller has silently faded away from the scene." (Zhenren, 1985).

All of the above physical and subjective phenomena are familiar to the scientists who study trance. Clinical hypnotists diagnose trance by: "a flattening of facial expression, staring, absence of blinking, and almost complete immobility" (Rosen, 1982 pg 27). A more technical list cites: "pupil dilation, flattened cheeks, skin pallor, lack of movement, slowed blink and swallowing

reflex, lowered and slowed respiration." (Lankton & Lankton, 1983 pg 66.). They could be describing McCabe's "school of fish."

"Hypnosis, or trance, is erroneously thought of as a mystical state in which the hypnotist mysteriously mesmerizes the subject. It can be more properly defined in the following ways: an altered state of consciousness (including unconscious awareness); total focused attention/ concentration in which learning is maximized; a state of more receptiveness; internally focused attentional absorption; and the suspension of normal conscious reality testing," summarizes psychologist Mark S. Carich. "The underlying common theme is the internally focused concentration or the absorption of the person's awareness." (Carich,1990).

The ability to enter alternate states of consciousness is a normal, adaptive human trait. Alternate states range from moments of daydreaming or "absent"(*sic*)-mindedness to hypnosis so deep that surgeons can operate without anaesthetic. We normally maintain several levels of awareness at once: for instance, driving a car, watching for road signs, reviewing arrival plans and conversing with a passenger. When we become especially absorbed in one of these levels, we may selectively block our perception of other things, including the passage of time: for instance, missing a highway exit because we got involved in conversation, on a three-hour trip that seemed to take minutes.

But trance goes beyond mere absorption. When we focus awareness internally, so very hard that we "go away" (dissociate) from our bodies, then trance occurs. A driver reported having to park when he heard me telling "*Tsuru No Ongaeshi"* ("Crane's Gratitute") on the radio. "I realized I wasn't safe on the road," he confided, "but I didn't want to turn it off."

Altered states of conciousness are recognized worldwide. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon, introducing a scholarly review (Bourguignon,1973 pp 9-11), wrote, "The presence of institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness in 90% of our sample [of 485] societies represents a striking finding and suggests that we are, indeed, dealing with a matter of major importance, not merely a bit of anthropological esoterica." Anthropologists have studied shamanistic trances, ecstatic states during religious ceremonies, and the mass trances induced by Balinese ritual theater presentations. Anthropologists also study storytelling. However, I have not yet found anthropological studies of trance during story-listening situations specifically.

Anne Pellowski's worldwide survey of storytelling cites the traditional Kuna people, of the San Blas Islands near Panama, who use healing chants which her source described as "mentally and physically relaxing."(Pellowski, 1990, pg 119) She mentions Polynesian cultures in which sleep or sleepiness is the desired outcome of good storytelling (p 152). Pellowski also says (p 147) that "The *byliny* singers in Russia, as reported by Sokolov, 'performed leisurely, smoothly, with few changes of tempo. The long-drawn monotony of the melody not only does <u>not</u> draw the attention away from the content … it soothes the listeners, harmonizing exceedingly well with the tranquil measured accounts of distant times." We may wonder whether these relaxed, sleepy, soothed listeners are perhaps in trance. Note that the word "hypnosis" was derived from a Greek word for sleep, applied because at one time practitioners thought they had to induce a sleep-like state in order to get the desired degree of relaxation: "Your eyelids are getting heavier…" Now it is realized that while the eyes may close and the body slump, hypnotized people are in fact very alert and focused -- *internally*.

Anecdotes, oral and literary, testify to the occurance of the story-listening trance. Psychology and Anthropology confirm our diagnosis of trance symptoms, and tell us that trance is a normal alternate state experienced worldwide. But how do storytellers produce the intense inward focusing of attention which results in this dissociation of mind and body?

Studies of trance and storytelling.

Although I found no structured research on the story-listening trance itself, some studies came close. I review them here as examples of what is known and how it can be investigated. Readers with less interest in research may procede directly to THE ART OF ENCHANTMENT, page (9).

Work with children: There are many studies on the effectiveness of storytelling in library or school settings. Generally focusing on how children's comprehension or application skills (ability to retell the story, write a related version, etc.) were affected by the mode in which the story was presented to them (storytelling *vs*. read aloud, silent reading, cartoon), these studies seldom took note of listeners' behavior *during* the presentations.

However, psychologist William C. Crain and colleagues studied "The Impact of hearing a fairy tale on children's immediate behavior" (Crain *et al* 1983). Observers, scoring composure and concentration of urban 9-11 year olds after a telling of "The Juniper Tree," noted strikingly subdued and self-absorbed behavior: "They seemed lost in their own thoughts." The control groups watched a Popeye cartoon or were told an emotionally "trivial" literary tale (both chosen to equal the Grimms' tale in gore and mayhem). In contrast to the first story group, the other groups of children afterwards rushed to the toy table and played actively together. A second study, of suburban first-graders, found almost as striking differences using "The Goose Girl". Tellers were watched to assure equal enthusiasm in the performance of both folktale and "trivial" tale, but the researchers observed the children only afterwards, noting with surprise that "the contrasting behavior patterns were evident the instant the stories or films had ended." It's no surprise to me, especially considering the dark folktales used: those children sound as if they were slowly coming out of trance. But the researchers neither described nor studied students' behavior *while* listening.

Steven Rosman videotaped youngsters during his tellings of cumulative folktales (Rosman, 1992). Interested in storytelling as an interactive, transactional event, he documented how listeners' responses were elicited by his gestures, story content and repetitive devices, responses of others, and banter with him. He also documented nonverbal responses (yawning, fidgeting, looking around) and noted that they did not necessarily signal disinterest. This video format might work very well in the study of the story-listening trance. Rosman doesn't mention entranced behavior; but the stories he told were not of the powerful type used by Crain *et al*.

Child psychotherapists use stories and storytelling in a number of ways (see Brandell, 1984). Nathan Kritzberg developed therapeutic board games using story metaphors to help children 7-13 years old express and process troubling themes. Richard A. Gardner accomplished similar objectives by encouraging children to tell him an original story which he replayed to them on tape; then he retold it in a form which reframed the problem or offered alternate solutions (Gardner, 1971). Although the therapists who use these methods watch their patients carefully, I have not found mentions of trance-like behavior during these sessions.

The power of the story-listening trance with younger children (3-7 years) was demonstrated by Canadian clinical hypnotist Leora Kuttner, who worked with leukemia patients needing painful bone marrow transplants (Kuttner, 1988). Local anesthesia was often ineffective (or equally distressing), and general anesthesia risky. Interacting closely with patients, Kuttner learned their favorite story and then during the operation told it back to them, with their help, while watching for signs of trance and monitoring the procedure carefully. She found that the story-listening trance worked better than either "standard medical practice" (information, reassurance, support) or attempts at distraction with toys and conversation. The favorite story was immediately effective in relieving both pain and distress. Even patients who reported awareness of pain, experienced very little distress indicating that painful sensation had been dissociated into something distant and not upsetting.

Studies of Adults: Researchers in Speech/Communication regularly videotape speakers in order to study what factors affect listeners' evaluation of credibility, persuasive power, etc. But these researchers usually use questionnaires to measure listeners' reactions, rather than observing their behavior. Nor do they study anything remotely like the story-listening trance.

One person who is studying adult story-listeners is Beverley Grace, University of Toronto. Experienced veterans from the audience of Toronto's weekly Thousand-And-One-Nights storytelling evenings have helped Grace investigate "what is it that we do when we are really listening well? How do listeners participate in the co-creation of the story?" Although she has used videotape of the teller to provide a fixed material for listeners to react to, and she records listener talk-back sessions on audiotape for later transcription, I do not believe she has simultaneously taped teller and audience in a way that would document precisely what the teller is doing when (if?) listeners respond behaviorally. Participants' insightful comments suggest that they may have experienced the story-listening trance. It is not, however, the subject of Grace's investigation.

Many psychologists, psychotherapists, and hypnotherapists use metaphor and/or story with their adult patients. See Anne Pellowski's chapter "Hygienic and Therapeutic Storytelling" (Pellowski 1990, pp 115-245) for a review of historic worldwide references to storytelling's value in refreshing listeners and keeping them mentally healthy, and in aiding modern psychotherapies. Listener trance is not mentioned, however, even when Pellowski discusses hypnotherapy pioneer Milton H. Erickson.

Hypnotherapists believe that "In trance, patients often intuitively understand the meaning of dreams, symbols, and other unconscious expressions. They are closer to what Erickson called 'unconscious learnings,' less involved with thoughts and issues. They may accept the hypnotist's suggestions with reduced critical sense." (Rosen,1982, p 27.) Although Erickson was noted for his ability to entrance people *by means of* telling paradoxical stories, more typically hypnotherapists induce trance (or teach patients a self-hypnosis method) *prior* to telling the story,

Followers of non-hypnotic therapies place great importance on hearing patients' stories, both dream and waking. Therapists may use story and metaphor themselves to introduce information, elicit discussion, model alternatives, etc. Despite their skeptical (even hostile) attitude toward the use of hypnosis as a therapeutic tool, there is some evidence that therapy settings are conducive to alternate states of consciousness: in other words, some trance work may occur whether the therapist intentionally introduces it or not (Buckley & Galanter, 1979; Holroyd,1987).

There exist audiotapes and videotapes (made from early films) documenting the work of many of the great innovative therapists. Erickson's audiotapes are said to retain his fabled entrancing power. It should be possible to study these records, evaluating a patient's trance symptoms in parallel with the therapist's actions. So far as I know, this has not yet been done.

I was hoping to find research which documented teller and audience behavior *during* story listening. If we compared moments when many audience members are entranced with other times in the story, could we find significant differences in teller behavior (technique), story content, conditions in the room, etc? These differences would suggest causal factors which we could study as we study any other art form.

Ethnomusicologist Sally Childs-Helton used videocameras to document changes in musician and adult audience behavior during concerts where one piece of music differed in style from what listeners were expecting. This technique is exactly what I had envisioned for studying both storyteller and audience in a natural setting (auditorium, festival, classroom, library etc), without disrupting the performance or disturbing the listeners. But I have found no work like this

on storytelling with adults. Studies of storytelling with children seldom document audience response during the story, let alone even mentioning trance.

Therapists use hypnosis as a healing tool but seldom do research on it for its own sake, seemingly content to pass along methods they have learned through trial and error. For example, Gail Gardner and Karen Olness' textbook on child hypnotherapy touches on using story (Gardner & Olness1981, pp 65-66) and paradox (pg 73) to induce trance, but says that these methods depend so heavily upon the therapist's individual creativity that they cannot be taught.

Therapists' work (with or without intentional trance) clearly demonstrates the power and effectiveness of storytelling; but we don't know whether the intensity of one-on-one, custom-crafted tellings in a therapist's office or operating room has any relevance to our usual performance venues. Simple as it would be to prepare videotapes of teller-and-audience for analysis, apparently no one has done this yet.

It is reassuring to find that some researchers are working close to our subject. With small changes of focus, their work might have answered our questions about what happens when trance occurs: what is the teller doing, what is the audience doing, where in the story does it happen? Until such studies are performed, we can only gather anecdotal data and speculate. Information from other fields will help us evaluate these guesses and suggest further ideas.

THE ART OF ENCHANTMENT

The tourguide is responsible for the success of the trip.

By virtue of calling ourselves artists, we undertake a responsibility to the audience. Richard Bauman, in *Verbal Art As Performance*, writes that an artist assumes "responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence." The performer -- in contrast to a casual conversation partner -- is subject to audience evaluation of skill and effectiveness. The audience expects an enhanced experience, enjoyed not only for its content but for "the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression itself." (Bauman,1977 page11).

When we invite others into the story-listening trance, however, they rely on us for more than technique. They need guides who have journeyed in this inner darkness before, and can find the way back out.

WHAT THE TELLER DOES

Trust: A storyteller must first engage an audience's trust in order to lead them on this tour. Reputation and/or an impressive introduction can encourage listeners to invest their trust in a teller's competence. A Boston listener recalled, "My first clear experience [of the story-listening trance] was Jay O'Callahan because I felt I could trust him. Because he was quality, I felt I could do that."

Speech/communications researchers have studied specific techniques which speakers use to convey an impression of competence, allowing the audience to relax and accept their statements. Textbooks on nonverbal communication list persuasive strategies such as "an image of authority, expertise, or power"(Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989. pg 429). Initial impressions (grooming , dress) play a part. Then the speaker must continue to act in a way that confirms these initial good expectations. In experiments, vocal cues such as tempo, volume, intonation changes, and verbal fluency influenced listeners' judgement of the speaker's credibility. Gestures and facial expressions played a role in conveying impressions of sociability, composure, dynamism; so did behaviors which implied relaxation and intimacy. Kinesics ("body language"), gaze, use of space and touch were important (see Burgoon chapter 13, Social Influence & Facilitation).

The speech/communications researchers used factual speeches, not stories. Their listeners apparently never experienced anything remotely like the story-listening trance. Such studies suggest, however, some techniques that skilled tellers may be using to gain -- and keep -- listeners' trust in the competence of their guide.

Rapport /synchrony: A teller must then establish rapport with this trusting audience, as a hypnotherapist does with a client. How is this done? Therapists have suggested "mirroring" the client's rhythms of body and breathing, tone and tempo of voice, to make contact with the client and demonstrate empathy, thus "establishing a conscious, and more importantly, unconscious affinity with him[her]." (Lankton, 1980. pg 59.) Although such mirroring sounds more feasible with one patient than with a crowd, a number of storytellers' anecdotes mention "breathing together" as one of the memorable effects of the story-listening trance. Jeannine Beekman, quoted above, has herself entranced listeners. She recalls a class of discouragingly apathetic eleventh graders: "Gradually they began genuinely *seeing* me. Then they were leaning forward. They began breathing together," she says, "with shared inhalation and exhalation." Beekman believes that listeners often seem to be breathing in synchrony when the trance holds them.

Wichita KS librarian/teller Judy Nichols points out, "Teachers say things like, 'I've never seen anything like it before. They were so tuned in, all together in their response -- as if they would sway together.'" She says, "The connection gets so tight that you are reluctant to get to the end of the story. Everybody's breathing together." Jane Yolen, too, said, "Sometimes it's as if the whole audience has taken a collective breath, and they don't breathe out again until the story is over."

What arts were used to establish this feeling of synchrony? I have noticed exquisitely sensitive timing and pacing: the teller pauses precisely long enough for the audience to breathe in (literally, "in-spire") a phrase before speaking the next. It is like gently pumping a swing, adding just enough energy at just the right moment. The teller seems able to feel the audience's pulse. How?

This phenomemon of audience synchrony has not yet been studied, although it would be simple to document on videotape. In the 1970's, researcher William S. Condon began using video to study "interactional synchrony" in mother-infant dyads. The work has been replicated cross-culturally, including studies of adult dyads during conversation, but they have not studied story-listening audiences.

Russian linguist Mikhael Bakhtin says that all human communication is an interactive process, rather than a simple matter of coding/decoding messages: the speaker anticipates the listener's reaction and tries to shape what is said so as to produce a desired response (Bakhtin,1986). Storytelling is perhaps the most interactive of oral performance arts. But I was unable to find statements by Bakhtin addressing the live storytelling situation. Nor do speech/communciation researchers seem to have studied interactions between a performer and an audience.

We may readily believe that a teller who can lead an audience into rhythmic synchrony might engender feelings of empathy and rapport. Until someone studies this, we can only speculate on how it is done.

Voice quality, vocal techniques: Listeners have noticed that some tellings convey entrancing power from the first words spoken, long before the serious nature of the story's content can come through. Other stories begin in a lighter tone, but the audience freezes when the tale takes a different turn which is typically accompanied by a change in the teller's voice. What are the vocal techniques employed?

There is a special "storytelling voice" which experienced tellers unconsciously lapse into. "I didn't do it right at first," notes sixth grade teacher/storyteller Sharon Gibson, "but after a while I picked it up from listening to other storytellers. It's a tone of voice that says, 'Here's the story'."

The "storytelling voice" can be recognized even when we don't understand a word of the story. Science fiction author Ursula K. LeGuin invented the "Kesh" language for her novel *Always Coming Home* (LeGuin, 1985), published with an audiotape of Kesh songs, poetry -- and storytelling (Barton & LeGuin 1985. Side A band 7). A listener has no doubt which material is story, even without understanding the language.

How does an entrancing voice differ from the already special storytelling voice?

My earlier article discussed the ritual-like style of many entrancing tellings, and quoted some tellers' personal theories that this style derives its power from ancient ceremonial roots. Linguist S. I Hayakawa claimed that "…the general *air* of saying something important [is] affective in result, regardless of what is being said." He continued, "we allow ourselves to be … swayed by the musical phrases of the verbal hypnotist." He adds that "some human beings like to be verbally stroked… a gentle inward massage that the *sound* of words gives them." (Hayakawa, 1964, pg 119.) The serious, soothing *sound* of this stately style may hold the secret to its effectiveness.

The traditional Kuna people, whose curative chants were mentioned earlier, sometimes perform these long memorized pieces simply for aesthetic enjoyment and to help the bearer stay in practice. Pellowski's source says, however, that on those occasions they employ a voice quality different from that used in the healing ceremonies, which was "repetitive, incantatory and euphonic" (Pellowski, 1990, pg 119). Note that incant/enchant literally means "to cast a spell by singing." Likewise, we may speculate that the sleep-inducing Polynesian tellers' "not particularly animated" style and the Russian *beliny* singers' "leisurely …monotony" may have helped lull listeners into a trance.

Psycholinguist Suzette Haden Elgin insists that "the creation of the listener trance state is most heavily dependent on speaker skill, and primarily 'nonverbal' language skill (including intonation of the voice). With sufficient skill on the speaker's part, a telephone book will serve as well as a story." Although Elgin acknowledges the importance of factors such as ambient distractions, listener interest in the story's content, listener familiarity with story format, etc., she notes that "It is important to be aware of the trance induction potential -- in the formal sense of hypnotic induction -- in good storytelling."

Hypnotherapy pioneer Erickson is said to have used "pauses, smiles, and piercing upward glances… mastery of voice and tone…" (Rosen, 1982, p 26). Hugh Gunnison writes,"The subtle change of voice inflection and tempo, the change of grammar and of syntax, and the changing of the structure of language (not the content) can have startling results. Erickson, like Adler, became a master of these verbal skills."(Gunnison,1990) By contrast to the printed word, Gunnison claims, "The spoken word can be supplemented by accent intonation, a gesture, a smile, a significant pause. Language allows one to access unconscious processes through hypnotic patterns."

A late audiotape of Dr. Erickson (Erickson,1976) documents sessions in which he teaches a new patient to experience trance. His aged voice, shaky and cracked, calmly gives direction -- and permission to ignore him, assuring the patient that another part of her mind will continue to hear him. His manner is low-key, measured, soothing and warm, with long breathing pauses between sentences. The pauses may allow time to access those "unconscious processes".

Psychologist Martin T. Orne and co-workers paid a radio announcer to tape a trance induction script they had written for laboratory experiments testing hypnotic susceptibility. "He just read the words with proper expression, and it worked," colleague Earnest R. Hilgard told an

interviewer (Wilkes 1986). Orne says that this tape "by now has hypnotized more people than anybody in the history of the world." (Gelman *et al* 1986). These psychologists claim that all it takes is a clear, pleasant voice -- and the right script. Hilgard even tells (Wilkes 1986) about a stage hypnotist's skeptical assistant who had to understudy his sick boss. Although the assistant thought the performace was all fake, he had watched so often that he was able to mimick his boss perfectly. To his amazement, participants became hypnotized.

The psychologists agree that a pleasant voice is necessary, but insist on the importance of an induction script. The linguists contend that voice alone can do the trick, independent of content. Author Jacques Lusseyran warns,"If the time should ever come when greedy and unscrupulous people mastered the art of the human voice, knew how to decipher it and modulate it at will, all that is left of liberty would be lost." (Lusseyran, 1988 Pg. 5) Elgin has voiced similar concerns.

Is it, then, simply a matter of technique? Is there a risk that a skilled storyteller will hypnotize listeners against their will?

WHAT THE LISTENER DOES

Trance is a skill of the listener. Not everyone can be hypnotized. Psychologists who study hypnotic ability find that while 5-15% of the population can go into trances deep enough to allow surgery with little or no anesthetic, another 10-15% *cannot be hypnotized at all* (see review by Nadon, Laurence, and Perry, 1987). Personality traits associated with hypnotic ability include imagination, absorption, vivid imagery, creativity, fantasy-involvement: they sound like an ideal audience for storytelling! We may wonder whether the non-hypnotizable 10-15% choose not to attend our storytelling festivals. This figure may also suggest an explanation for the indifference of some audience members in venues where listeners are not self-selected.

Researchers feel that hypnotic ability depends on a person's ability to dissociate one level of consciousness from the others which we ordinarily experience simultaneously. Hilgard coined the term "Hidden Observer" for that part of the mind that "registers things that are going on, while another part is occupied with something else and is unaware of what's going on," as if "part of you is on this stage and part of you is out in the wings watching" (Gelman *et al* 1986). It is the "on stage" part which goes along with hypnotic suggestions. But Hilgard insists that the Hidden Observer will not allow a person to act against one's basic value system. "If you're instructed to do such a thing, you simply come out of hypnosis."(Wilkes 1986).

Trance, then, is not a condition imposed by the hypnotist but a skill belonging to the subjects. Experiments have show that this skill can be strengthened by training and changes in attitude (Spanos, *et al*, 1987), but it remains under the control of the subjects. The hypnotist can only invite them to come along. Their voluntary cooperation is similar to a reader's "willing suspension of disbelief". Jane Yolen has called fiction "an unnatural act committed by two consenting individuals -- writer and reader"(Yolen 1981, pg 63). A comparable consent is necessary for trance to occur.

This is probably why trust and rapport are so important. The story-listening trance may be evoked by the teller, but it must be granted by the listener. Without the listener's willing cooperation, no one will go anywhere.

We have already mentioned that listener expectations affect the establishment of trust and rapport. Listener experience and sophistication also play a part. Many people, recalling their deepest listening, pick one of the first tellers they had ever heard. We may suggest that, like a first kiss, it may be memorable *because* it was the first and not necessarily because it was the best. However, listeners also comment that accumulated experience can actually inhibit "that abandonment of self". Distracted by details a novice wouldn't even notice, admiring and

dissecting the guide's skills, the sophisticate may be left behind when the tour group drops into the dark.

Listeners contribute meaning to the story. The audience's mental and emotional involvement is a factor mentioned by numerous tellers. My earlier article discussed theories that the special power of entrancing stories may arise from their ability to engage listeners in deep emotional work. These stories open "storehouses of memory" in which each listener muses privately.

Listeners must contribute to the creation of the story. Jay O'Callahan told an interviewer, "It's not me performing and them in the audience, but rather we're all together … If they're not willing to do half the work, to enter the world and shape images, then it does not work. … If they are willing to trust you, somehow that invests your storytelling with something very special." (Gross, 1984 pp43-45).

The part played by listeners' active interpretation of what they hear was clearly illustrated when O'Callahan told "The Herring Shed" at a festival in Denton, Texas. This story, often cited as entrancing, was probably familiar to some members of the audience but others were hearing it for the first time. The audience sat relaxed and attentive during the early scenes where Maggie describes her wartime village and her adventures on her first job. But when the young rector arrives to say, "Maggie, could you come outside?" a chill filled the tent. Maggie's description of the rector had been brief, barely mentioning that he had "the worst job:" relaying bad news from the war department. O'Callahan portrayed him with a gentle, shy manner. Yet in those few words, we realized the portent of his visit. O'Callahan had led us to it, but we took that step into tragedy before Maggie herself could react.

Listeners visualize. O'Callahan mentioned his conviction that listeners must "shape images." Many tellers feel that the trance only happens when listeners are visualizing, creating their own internal images of the story. Susan Klein's analogy to a hologram projection has been cited. Anecdotes showed listeners "hallucinating" scenes which they saw in place of the teller on stage, and tellers "disappearing" from entranced listeners' conscious awareness. Similar phenomena have been studied during hypnosis,

Trance researcher David Spiegel says,"People who are hypnotized can tune out what is actually coming to their eyes, and instead focus on an internally generated image." Electrophysiological and neurochemical research indicates that these visualizations affect the brain like "real" ones. Spiegel's experiments showed drops in visual cortex activity (EEG) when hypnotized subjects were told a box was blocking their view (Spiegel *et al.*1985). Imaginative people don't even have to be hypnotized: researchers, studying changes in blood flow and oxygenation in the visual cortex while subjects stared at flickering lights, also found these changes when subjects were told to *imagine* a bright light (*Science* 1992). When story listeners say they saw something appear or vanish, they may be reporting the literal subjective truth of the trance state. Visualizing certainly happens during trance.

Listeners decode teller's nonverbal behavior. If the listeners' internal images are so powerful, does it matter what they see the teller doing? Do facial expressions, gestures, mime, etc. contribute anything to the trance state?

A scholarly workshop on the story-listening trance is perhaps the worst conceivable place for experiencing that phenomenon. Afterward, a skeptical listener told me that he had expected all the analytical discussion to put him so "out of the mood" that he would not experience trance, even when I told my most reliably entrancing story. "And it didn't work," he insisted solemnly, "until you spread your wings and flew up into the falling snow."

It seems that the trance caught him at the moment when my outstretched arms evoked an internal image so vivid that I vanished, replaced by *Tsuru* the crane. The gestures helped to engender trance.

A teller's actions and facial expressions can certainly contribute to the emotional impact of a story. Researchers in nonverbal communication (see Burgoon 1989 for a good review) have shown how subtly -- but powerfully -- we are pursuaded by the emotional messages conveyed in body language and facial expression, even when a person's words deny them ("That's okay … I'll be fine…"). A skilled teller can use gesture, posture, and facial expression to reinforce or even replace spoken information about the story's emotions. It seems that, just as skilled readers can decode print while generating their own internal images, the audience can watch the teller while visualizing. The visual cortex of the brain works overtime on these twin tasks. Meanwhile, other portions of the brain are busy decoding and interpreting the nonverbal nuances. We may suggest that all this activity helps to keep attention focused inward, into trance. The listeners are certainly doing their share of the work!

Movies, picture-books or theatrical productions provide us with external images so vivid that they may supercede or interfere with our internally generated images. An overly dramatic storyteller can do this, too. Listeners mentioned times when they had to look away from the stage to avoid visual overload: "If you're too busy watching the teller, it distracts you from the pictures in your head." Perhaps less is more, at least for entrancing stories. The secret may be to use only enough visible effects to evoke an image in the listener, a style Jim May calls "minimalist" storytelling.

Once internal images become so intense that the teller "disappears," however, do the teller's further actions continue to affect the listener? Hypnosis research indicates that the brain continues to receive visual data even when it does not perceive them consciously. In fact, highly hypnotizable subjects, experiencing hypnotically suggested "blindness", insisted that they could see nothing -- yet they made use of visual information to perform tasks in a test situation. (Bryant & McConkey, 1989.) This work on "implicit perception" suggests that listeners continue to receive visual cues from the teller's behavior, even though they may have no conscious memory of "seeing" them.

Listeners use other sensory modes. Is visualization essential to the story-listening trance? What about people who "don't visualize"? Can you be entranced by a story if you can't, or don't, visualize?

New York teller Robert Rodriguez, blind since birth, has experienced the story-listening trance.

Houston storyteller Sally Bates Goodroe, quoted earlier, insists that she does not visualize even in dreams or under therapeutic hypnotic suggestion. Yet she has experienced the story-listening trance.

Boston musicologist Pat Kristan says, "Entrancement happens to me through the ear. It often happens in the dark around a campfire. The dark cuts off the visual channel and allows you to open your ears. I can trust nature not to assault my ears, which are very sensitive." She continues, "I am easily entranced, and therefore must be very discriminating. I have been assaulted by the ringing words of a teller. I am very vulnerable through the ears. I am learning to defend myself by using my visual channel." She says she sometimes intentionally seeks a visual distraction when she feels "assaulted" through the ears.

We typically favor one of our three main senses: Visual, Auditory, or Kinetic (motion and touch). For a summary of John Grinder & Richard Bandler's sensory mode preference theories, see Eligin (1980 pp 214-220). Smell and taste, processed in the less-conscious areas of the brain,

can be powerful triggers for memories but we seem to have difficulty communicating about them.

Auditory mode, verbal: The entrancing power of stories heard on radio or audiotape attests to the strength of the audio channel alone. But what do listeners do with this information, if they do not use it to visualize?

Goodroe says she never experiences the "movie in your head" described by listeners who visualize readily. Thinking back on a festival, the most she recalls is "glimpses: the girl carrying the ox up the many stairs, the woman with the 'capacious bosom' sitting in a rocking chair, the Blue Wind Boy and White Horse Girl standing at the edge of the world with their hair blowing. These are not whole images, but merely impressions. I never see faces, nor do the images (no matter which sense they speak to) last for long." When a story is especially powerful, however, she experiences "such a tangible emotional atmosphere to the story that I felt submerged in it, experiencing it as the girl does." Touch and sound become real: when something happens in the story, "I can feel and hear it."

Goodroe remembers how Donald Davis said in a workshop that "a smell can bring you back to a place." She takes this as "you don't *see* yourself there, you *are* there." "Likewise," she says, "I don't *see* it in front of me, I *feel* it as if I'm there. Not outside like seeing a movie, but experiencing it myself."

Goodroe suggests, "Taking the listener to this place is not easy and involves not just the visual, but also other senses." She appreciates O'Callahan's use of sounds such as the wind at the cliff edge, and Heather Forest's vivid evocation of the smell of baking bread. "If the trance state goes deeper than the superficial experience of just listening to a story, it must be that the teller has triggered emotional images with sensory ones. Tellers have definitely carried me there -- past superficial listening to truly experiencing the story (past the images and to the meaning?). I just went a different way; the visual doesn't take me there."

Auditory mode, music: Many tellers and listeners have noticed the subtle but powerful effect of music in storytelling, helping to set a conducive mood for entrancement. Goodroe says, "on the one story that I tell that begins with a song, the listeners seem to achieve a deeper listening almost immediately. I believe the music gets past a barrier faster than words can."

The ancient Greeks wrote learnedly about the distinctive moods they felt were elicited by the different modal scales. We recognize different qualities in major and minor keys. Chords of A minor and E minor, used in a slow rhythmic background for my version of "Shingebiss and the North Wind", generally bring a quiet hush over the most restless audience before I even say a word.

Musical tones and rhythms convey emotional information in a powerful nonverbal format. Psycholinguist Elgin recommends the research of Manfred Clynes, who has attempted to study and quantify this for various composers with listeners from many cultures (Clynes & Nettheim, 1982, pp 47-82). The tonal and rhythmic communication of emotions may suggest an explanation of the power of "the storytelling voice" and "the entrancing voice."

With music in storytelling, as with physical action, one can do too much of a good thing. When the story becomes a virtuoso one-person opera, the listeners may focus on the astonishing performance rather than on their own internal experience.

Kinesthetic mode: Some audience members' favored sensory mode may be kinesthetic. Active, physical audience-participation stories may appear to be anything *but* entrancing, yet Linda Marchisio's research on "Movement Assisted Storytelling" (Marchisio,1983) confirmed earlier work in Britain indicating that some children could concentrate better during the story, and recall

better afterward, if they were encouraged to mimic the teller's pantomime actions *during* the story. Clinical hypnotists working with preschool children find that physical activity and trance are not incompatible (see Gardner & Olness, 1981; Kuttner 1988). It is conceivable that school-age children also may experience light trance during active participation stories, but I found no studies on this subject.

Nonverbal communcation experts have told us that physical messages can convey emotion with a power far beyond that of words alone. We know that dancers can tell a story, not only moving through its actions but vividly conveying its emotions with their whole bodies. "Choreographers just touch with their fingertips that world where there are no words for anything," says Jerome Robbins.

Adult listeners do not mirror a teller's gestures, body language, and facial expressions as blatantly as children do, but you often catch a faint reflection in the adult audience. Some researchers believe that the mirroring of such nonverbal signals can generate a faint internal shadow of the emotions being copied (Zajonc1985). If that happens during story-listening, it would intensify the emotional experience of the story. This kinesthetic channel would contribute vividly to creating the "emotional image" Goodroe describes.

The individual listener's age may be an important factor. Storytellers who work with children under the age of six may not be surprised to learn that the symptoms of trance are different in this age group. Preschoolers seldom show the transfixed, slack-jawed appearance characteristic of entranced older children and adults. Clinicians note that young children can slip into trance states much faster and easier than their elders -- and back out again, many times during a session. Furthermore, their entrancement is not facilitated by the quiet soothing manner typically used to entrance older folk. "An active absorbing participation in an informal manner" seems to work better for the clinical induction of trance in young children (Hilgard & Morgan, 1976). This may explain why storytellers seldom immobilize the smallest listeners, although we can hold their attention with either soothing or antic tales.

Perhaps our squirming preschool audiences may be having no less profound a story-listening experience than their transfixed elders. I have never heard a teller claim that a young audience was entranced during a lively active-participation story, but clinical hypnotists' experience with small children suggests that it's possible.

With older children and adults, tellers often use lively active-participation stories to help a restless audience "let off steam" in preparation for the physical quiet of an entrancing story. It is conceivable that participation in synchronous actions and noises may also create a rapport which paves the way for the synchronous breathing sometimes noted in group trance.

WHAT THE GROUP DOES

An audience is more than the sum of the individuals present, and a venue is more than people in chairs. One of a guide's most critical skills is the ability to judge whether this particular tour group is ready to go *anywhere*.

"You can tell whether it's going to happen when you first meet the audience," says Alabama ghost-teller Kathryn Windham. "I guess it's a kind of chemistry."

When tellers "pay their dues", gaining experience by working in widely varied situations, one thing they learn is an ability to sense the mood of the crowd. A planned program may have to be scrapped and replaced with -- what? How do you pick stories to fit the audience's level of readiness? How do you judge whether an entrancing story will be appropriate, and how do you lead up to it?

The most useful on-your-feet system I have found is one taught since at least 1983 by Dallas storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. In her workshops on the gentle art of "Making a Connection"

with audiences, she suggests that stories can be sorted into four types, each appropriate for a different part of the journey.

##

ELIZABETH ELLIS' PROGRESSION OF FOUR STORY TYPES

1. "Ha-ha!" Stories.

Listeners unfamiliar with a performing storyteller must be set at ease from the very start of your program. Their closest analogies might be the roles of Preacher, Teacher, or Stand-up Comic. Of those three, the latter is probably the most relaxing because the other two may tap old memories of guilt, authoritarian behaviors, etc. So it is recommended that you start your program by telling a funny story.
Sharing a laugh together helps to get the audience on your side: this stranger must be someone we can trust, someone akin to us, because we can laugh at the same things. Humor itself also helps to relax the audience, helps them set aside their barriers of critical thinking and skepticism.

2. "Aha!" Stories.

A story with a plot twist, a tricky bit of logic that makes everything fall into place, or a surprise ending, will further delight your listeners while encouraging them to engage their minds actively. Plain humor can be received passively, but the kind of story whose full enjoyment demands a little work will get your audience ready to use their imaginations in the next kind of story.

3. "Ahhh..." Stories.

These are the quiet, deep stories. Listeners have to meet the teller at least half way, supplying images from their own hearts and minds. Whether they involve extreme flights of fantasy (magical transformations, godlike powers) or touch deep emotions (love, loss, devotion, yearning), these stories take listeners far away from that present reality where they sit on hard chairs. They go deep inside themselves, gently led by the teller -- who has a responsibility for leading them back out again.

4. "Amen" Stories.

While "Ahhh" stories may end tragically, "Amen" stories confirm our best hopes for humanity and the future. Having led the audience on a journey into the dark jungles or deep caverns of human experience, the teller has a responsibility to lead them back out again into the light. They must be gently wakened from their internal reverie and prepared to re-enter the mundane world, refreshed and confident that things can turn out alright after all.

##

Ellis points out that not all audiences (or venues) will be appropriate for the full progression of four story types. There's nothing wrong with a program of "Ha-ha!" and "Aha!" stories, especially for the light-hearted crowd at a busy festival. But if you do want to offer an "Ahhh" story, Ellis cautions that you must prepare the way by first travelling through the preceding two types. And you should bring the listeners safely home with an "Amen."

What if you are presenting not a long solo concert, but an olio of many tellers? In general the same principles apply. If an "Ahhh" story will work at all, its way needs to be prepared by the other tellers offering lighter types of tale. I find, furthermore, that the teller whose luck it is to lead the "Ahhh" part of the journey is well advised to first say a few words which amuse and/or delight the audience (in effect retracing the sequence in miniature) before beginning to cast the

story-listening trance. And somebody had better be waiting in the wings with an "Amen" story, or the audience may stumble out still half-entranced.

We should note that some long stories can cover several types of territory, starting light and gradually (or suddenly!) shifting into the deeper Ahhh type before resolving in a satisfactory Amen. These can sometimes stand alone, solo or anywhere in a program. Donald Davis' autobiographical fictions exemplify this all-terrain type of story.

We must acknowledge the audience's contribution to our successful journey. None of our skill or planning will avail without their cooperation, and when conditions are bad we will certainly go nowhere without their generous help. This is perhaps most dramaticly illustrated when an audience falls entranced despite the most inhospitable conditions. Judy Nichols says, "I have noticed [the trance] most with groups where you are not expecting it, for instance young adults in a large school where you might expect rowdiness." Sally Goodroe says,"The noisy class on the other side of the divider didn't matter. That's why the teacher was so amazed." She continues, "It's often most dramatic with kids who aren't used to having that kind of an experience -- can it be that nobody has ever really talked to them?"

Beginner's Luck (You Don't Need Skill): The importance of the listener hints at why an unskilled speaker can sometimes entrance a (willing) audience. A number of tellers say that their initial casting of the story-listening trance occured at the very first performance of a new story, either a powerful ancient tale new to their repertory or a freshly crafted personal experience story being told in public for the first time. We expect a skilled performer to do a good job even with new material, but some people admit that they were rank beginners when this happened. Obviously skill was not a major factor. What else was going on?

It can happen even when the teller's English is broken and difficult to follow. Boston teacher/ storyteller Barbara Lipke recalls a 6th grade student, daughter of the Israeli consul. For a Civil War project, she chose to retell in first person the story of the child of a Black freedman, harassed by whites who burned the family farm and killed a sibling. Despite the skepticism of classmates who knew her shyness and ineptness in English, she held them spellbound up through the climax: "Daddy, why do they hate us so?"

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross spoke at the University of Oklahoma's Lloyd Noble Auditorium, which seats 10,000 and usually echoes with basketball games. Norman OK resident Molly Griffis says, "This frumpy little woman with a thick German accent sat on the edge of a table swinging one leg -- a terrible speaker -- telling about her work with child survivors of concentration camps, investigating how children do not fear death. It was a struggle to hear and to understand her." But no one in that huge crowd, Griffis says, moved for two and a half hours. People sat on the edge of their chairs. The usual rustle of crossing legs, etc., was absent. They leaned forward, hardly breathing, "so as not to miss what was coming next." These behaviors resemble the symptoms of light trance states.

In these two examples, the teller's lack of language skill hardly seems to matter. We may guess that despite poor fluency in English, both speakers made unconscious use of universal vocal skills such as intonation, pauses, pacing etc. learned in their native languages. They may have used gestures and facial expressions which helped focus and hold listeners' attention. It is also conceivable that the very difficulty of understanding these speakers made their listeners work extra hard, thus contributing to the focused attention state of trance.

Notice, however, that both these cases involve very serious subjects: the death of children, threats to the survival of whole groups. Listeners are bound to take this material seriously, whether or not it is spoken with Hayakawa's "general *air* of saying something important". These are stories which ask us to look at some very "dark and snaky places." So it is with many of the

gut-wrenching personal experience stories which transfix listeners the first time they are told, no matter how awkwardly. We hold still in the dark.

WHAT THE STORY DOES

Story itself has the power to captivate attention.

Story is a peculiarly *human* thing. Although our primate cousins can use language symbols to convey information, cuss, and even create poetic neologisms like Washoe's "candy drink" for "watermelon", a scientist studying them at UCLA wrote, "As far as research that has been done to date, chimpanzees do not relate narratives, and rarely refer to events that are not in the immediate present." (Vogel, 1990)

My earlier article reviewed research on story schema and its amazing power to command attention and enhance comprehension even in people with severe neurological damage. Story form seems to be "wired in" to our human brains at a very fundamental level. Story itself, in spite of an awkward telling, can absorb the listener. That focusing of attention, which invites us to dissociate our consciousness away from the physical reality around us, is a natural reaction to story and a necessary prelude to trance.

I think, however, that the "darkness" of many entrancing stories deserves special attention. Here is a list of a few of the tellings cited to me by listeners, with tellers' names in parentheses:

Honey Boy (Jackie Torrence)
The Herring Shed (Jay O'Callahan)
Aunt Laura & the Crack of Dawn; A Different Drummer; others (Donald Davis)
Winter Wife (Mary Hamilton)
Elijah's Violin (Peninnah Schram)
Janet and Tam Lin (Janet Kieffer, Sally Goodroe)
The Bedouin's Gazelle; White Seal Maid (Jane Yolen)
Greyling (Jane Yolen, Pat Nelson, Fran Stallings)
Non-European Cinderella variant (Brother Blue)
Vietnam veteran stories (Judith Black, Joe Bruchac)
West African version of the Prodigal Son (Elizabeth Ellis)
African variant of Beauty & the Beast (Jeannine Beekman)
Tsuru no Ongaeshi /Crane's Gratitude (Fran Stallings)
Shingebiss & the North Wind (Fran Stallings)

Some of these stories involve death. Some hinge on separation, loss, or the threat of emotional annihilation. Some involve supernatural transformation between animal and human, or facing unknown and unknowable powers, or asking unanswerable questions. Although many include lighter moments, all are predominantly "serious" stories. What they have in common is an insistence on making us look at things we cannot explain away.

When we travel into stories like this, we are more than merely absorbed. There is an undercurrent of dread as we realize we're going to visit places full of lurking things which we don't look at in the light of day. While not necessarily evil or dangerous, they may still threaten our assumptions, our security-through-denial. Stories like this command more than ordinary attention, whether they are told by skilled performers or by beginners.

Psycholinguist Elgin acknowledges that the serious content of such stories will hold listeners' attention. She points out, however, that sincere tellers may unwittingly use vocal and physical cues that transmit a powerful nonverbal "metamessage": their own conviction that "THIS IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE." The audience instinctively picks up this metamessage underlying the words, and responds to the teller's conviction no matter how awkward the performance.

Maybe a skilled hypnotist (or radio announcer with the right script) can induce trance whether he believes in it or not. Maybe actors and psycholinguists can convey the metamessage "This is absolutely true" without believing a particle of it. But it seems that we storytellers must hold the belief in order to convey that message.

Storytellers agree that you must love a story in order to tell it. I think you can't love a story unless you can believe in it. Whether it's a real personal experience or a supernatural fantasy, you can't tell it well unless you can truly believe it -- or at least maintain suspension of disbelief -- for the time it takes to tell. This basic requirement for any story applies all the more to entrancing tales.

Oklahoma City storyteller Lynn Moroney insists, "You have to be bewitched yourself by what you're telling. It has to bewitch *you*. You have to be attuned to the magic or it becomes just another technique." She warns, "Magicians believe in their magic; tricksters just use it."

In other words, it seems that the teller has to be entranced, too.

THE INCOMPLEAT ENCHANTER: the story-*telling* trance.

Many tellers describe experiencing an altered state themselves when they entrance an audience. As Jay O'Callahan was quoted saying earlier, teller and audience must be "in there together."

Tony Toledo describes it: "Suddenly, almost as though I was out of my body, I 'saw' the story as a living thing between the listeners and the teller. At that point all self consciousness had vanished. There was no nervousness in my soul. A sense of peace, and excitement, and giving welled up from within me and spread out like ripples on a pond. I was the pebble."

Susan Klein remembers beginning a program for a small but appreciative audience; then, people were applauding. She looked at her watch and discovered that two hours had vanished. She says she was so totally "in the story space" that she couldn't remember telling any stories. It was as if she had stepped out of herself and sat on the edge of the stage while some other part of her did the show.

Although we assume that these tellers did not show typical physical symptoms of trance (immobility, slack face), their descriptions match subjective feelings in therapeutic trance. A clinical self-diagnosis was made by Ericksonian hypnotherapist Lee Wallas, who noticed an altered state of consciousness in herself when she told healing stories to her clients (Wallas,1985).

How do tellers entrance themselves?

Many seem to do it by visualizing. Ellis puts her metaphor of the tour guide in visual terms: "And on your left you will see …" Klein says, "A storyteller projects an image so listeners can see it. You have to have the images to project them. Imagery enables you to invite others along that ribbon of journey." Many of us recognize "movie in your head" as a fair desciption of the way we re-experience a story each time we tell it. We step into those scenes and walk around, and tell you what we're seeing.

But it is equally clear that you don't have to visualize, in order to tell a powerful story.

Legend says that Homer was blind. Storytelling and music were trades traditionally plied by blind individuals in many cultures. Japanese professional storytelling has time-honored specialties for blind men, *biwa hoshi* (Hearn 1968) and women, *goze* (Ruyak, 1992).

Teller Goodroe, who claims never to have experienced the "movie in your head" of visualization, none-the-less has held school assemblies spellbound despite noisy, distracting conditions. She says, "It's creating *emotional images* in people. Maybe because I'm not visual, I have to just *feel* it."

Psycholinguist Elgin, who insists that the visual is the least favored of her own sensory modes, explains that "Ideally, language skill is auditory rather than visual. You have to be able to *hear* your characters talking, and you have to be able to speak for them -- with all the appropriate intonations." When the teller experiences the tale as "ABSOLUTELY TRUE", that nonverbal metamessage comes across to the listener whether through visual, auditory, or kinesthetic modes.

In order to take listeners on a journey, the guide has to go, too. And the more powerful the truth, the deeper the teller goes -- taking the audience along.

Travelling in the dark: Can we learn about the story-*telling* trance from what anthropologists and travelers have written about shaman-storytellers who undergo trance? Paul Zweig states that "The literary theme of the fantastic voyage may well be connected to the family of trance tales told by shamans; adventure and action literature -- including folktales, epic, and myth -- may well be attempts to objectify the vertigo of inward disorder which is our most intimate knowledge of the unknown. It is possible that in man's early experience, the psychic unknown and the outerworld unknown seemed related, each supplying a means for experiencing the other." (Zweig 1974, pp 29-30).

`The parallel between entranced shaman and entranced teller is intriguing. Note, however, that the shaman typically enters trance alone. His initial experience of trance may be catastrophic: sometimes unsought and sudden, often so deep that others may take him for dead. Cataleptic trance of this depth and duration (hours or days) differs extremely from the light trances we experience in storytelling! Afterwards, telling about his adventures in the spirit world for religious or healing purposes, or simply for aesthetic enjoyment, the shaman takes his listeners on a vicarious trip there; but I have found no indication that the audience is entranced, even when the shaman re-enters a (lighter) trance while telling. In fact, folklorist Megan Biesele says that during the healing trance dances of Bushmen shamans, other people present typically chat, smoke, laugh and otherwise make no attempt to enter into the trance state. "Everything is going on at the same time," she says. Although the people she studied "reliably and regularly alter their conscious states," this does not occur during their storytelling which she characterizes as "very matter-of-fact narrative."

Traditional peoples sometimes regard victims of uncontrolled deep trances as "possessed." The difference between victim and shaman is that "the shaman learns to possess the possessor."(Zweig p91) Zweig says that "His skill lies in his ability to enter the magic countries, and then return. Ordinary people are victimized by the perils of the invisible world … Only the shaman knows how to go, and then come home." (Zweig pp 28-29)

It appears that the trance experiences of shamans are many orders of magnitude deeper than what entranced storytellers have described, nor are the shaman's listeners necessarily entranced. But, like a shaman, the responsible storyteller must remain in control in order to serve as a guide rather than a victim.

Your have got to do your homework. The shaman cannot lead others on a vicarious voyage to the spirit world unless he has first survived the trip himself. A trustworthy tour guide must know the route, being aware of all potential dangers and the safe ways around them. Responsible tellers must be sure we can "then come home" into the light.

Susan Klein says of preparing personal experience stories, "The emotional homework takes a lot of time. You have to cry at home as much as you need to. There comes a revelation moment about two-thirds of the way through the work when you realize it's a story you *can* tell. You can take it to the stage because it puts some piece of your life in perspective. You now have a way of stepping back from it. You can see it as a standing piece, something you now own -- that doesn't own you."

It is only through this careful preparation that the teller can hope to "possess the possessor" as Zweig says, to remain in control of the powerful story even though entranced along with the audience. Although "you lose yourself in the story," Klein warns, "there is a part that has to stay behind." In perfect parallel to psychologist Hilgard's "Hidden Observer" terminology, she says, "Your 'editor' and your 'stage manager' have to stay while the rest of you goes away into 'story space'."

Even a beginner with no foresight or preparation at all, can entrance an audience with the genuine conviction that THIS IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE. The more gut-wrenching the story, the more the teller herself may be in the grip of trance. Perhaps this situation resembles the novice shaman's first trance experience where he is more "possessed" than "possessor". The danger is that a novice guide can easily lose the way. We have seen unresolved anguish erupt in tears which overwhelmed the teller's efforts to continue.

Elizabeth Ellis says, "When you lose emotional control of the story, you abandon the listeners to fend for themselves. It leaves the audience feeling as though *they*'re supposed to take care of *you*." Klein would agree that the audience trusts you to stay in control so they can feel safe: "If a teller's emotional homework isn't done first, and the audience feels they have to take care of the teller, it is not a safe journey." It's permissible to get choked up on the last line, Klein says, but you must "stay and take care of the audience." Ellis has said that crying is one of the differences between art and therapy: if the story makes you cry, *you* should be paying the *listener*.

What about the therapeutic value of storytelling? Klein says any therapeutic effect for the teller happens as a by-product of doing this emotional homework -- *before* taking the stage. "Telling your own story is callisthenics for the soul," she says, but on stage, [a teller is] "responsible for the safety of the audience: I don't need to be abused by somebody who doesn't know how to take care of me. I avoid swapping grounds because I don't want to be subjected to that kind of emotional abuse by tellers."

A listener adds, "Sometimes you can see that someone really needs to tell a story; but as a member of the audience, I don't need to hear it."

For the listener, the therapeutic effect of the whole vicarious journey depends on a safe return. "If there isn't any redemption at the end," Klein says, "our emotions are left hanging ragged. There must be a coming home at the end of the story, a coming round." The inexperienced guide may be unable to find that safe road back into the light.

Traveling in the dark can be risky, even for trained therapists. Hilgard & Olness (1981, pg 96) describe "professionals participating in hypnotic induction as part of hypnosis workshops. Although the hypnotic suggestion was simply to recall and enjoy a pleasant experience, two persons developed unexpected grief reactions and a third developed a mild paranoid reaction." Group therapeutic hypnosis requires an experienced leader who can help the occasional victim of what in the 1970's might have been called "a bad trip". Such unexpected reactions have been seen, in lesser degree, by storytellers: the woman who flees "Greyling" in tears, the man who berates the teller for sexual innuendo only he has heard.

New research findings suggest an additional responsibility for the conscientious guide. Some members of the audience most vulnerable to trance may be the ones most at risk of bad reactions. Psychologists had noticed that people suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and from Multiple Personality Disorder are unusually susceptible to hypnosis. Hypnotherapists were grateful for this coincidence, which facilitates treatment; but accumulating evidence suggests a causative link between their disorders and their knack for hypnosis. Normally, the ability to dissociate consciousness may function as a sanity-saving survival mechanism when a person is subjected to trauma (war, accident, torture, assault) or childhood abuse: "It's not happening to me; the real me is somewhere else." Repeated or intolerable suffering, however,

apparently triggers uncontrolled dissociations from reality (Speigel & Cardena1990). As in auto-immune disorders, when a normal self-defense mechanism over-reacts, it causes trouble.

These dissociation dysfunctions exist in other cultures, although some traditional peoples interpret them as "spirit possession". Recent doctoral dissertations (Castillo 1991, Collins 1991, Davis 1992) describe other cultures' alternate interpretions of dissociation and the creation of special social roles -- including shaman -- which make a virtue of what we call psychopathology.

A storyteller may have no way of knowing whether an audience includes someone with these tragic reasons for vulnerability to trance. It is sad but true that statistics on child abuse imply that any school auditorium is likely to contain a few youngsters who may be at risk for developing MPD. Although I have not yet found studies of abused children's reactions to stories, I have often noticed the unusually deep trances induced by certain tales when I tell to the otherwise nervous, distractible children at our local domestic violence shelter. When I began to recognize similarly haunted faces in schools, and the teachers confirmed my suspicions, I began to think long and hard about the journeys I was inviting the whole group to join.

No one has studied the hypnotic responsiveness of adult story-listening audiences, let alone their pre-disposing factors, so we cannot even guess whether adults with MPD or PTSD are more or less likely than other folks to attend storytelling events. But those of us who love and respect entrancing stories, must be aware that for some members of our audience the story-listening trance is not simply a recreational drug but a medicine that may cause bad reactions if administered carelessly. We must try to guide all our guests safely through the inner darkness and back home into the light.

Stay humble: All the preparation and care at your disposal can't anticipate everything with these powerful stories. Even when you have done your "emotional homework" for a powerful story, even when you have told it respectfully and responsibly for years, sometimes "even old pro's can let something slip up on you," warns Ellis. "Something happened between point A and point B: *you've* changed, and even your oldest story can catch you unawares."

I had told *"Tsuru No Ongaeshi"* since 1978, always rejoicing in the crane's break for freedom: a wild thing can't stay captive, even to love. Increasingly aware of the story's entrancing power, for a while I set it aside until, in 1991, a friend asked me to perform it as a special favor. I gladly brought it out of exile, unaware that meanwhile my daughter's transformation from child to young woman would now cast her in the crane maiden's role. As I described *Tsuru* I suddenly recognized Rebecca, poised to leave our nest and never really return home again. Suddenly I was on *obaa-san*'s side of the story. The whole thing was tilting under my feet, the slant made more perilous by several recent deaths in the family. I held onto my voice to the end of the story, but couldn't talk clearly for an hour after. It took a year before I felt ready to tell that story again.

Belden Lane described stories as having a "Heraclitean quality" (Lane,1986), ever-changing like the famous river you can't step in twice. Klein says that personal stories have "an evolutionary truth" because their meaning continues to evolve as long as you're alive. You can count on such changes emerging in any story you tell long enough. It's only upsetting when they "slip up on you" in mid-performance.

Several tellers recall being in the middle of old familiar stories which suddenly "come out of a place they've never been before," as Ellis describes it. "The 'bite' was there before, but about issues which had been resolved; now the bite is in a different place. Your life turns around and something comes at you from left field." You're walking through those familiar scenes, but they've shifted somewhere else. A character suddenly stands for a different person close to you, and the dialog takes on new layers of meaning even as you speak it. "When this happens it can

be very powerful for teller and audience" says Ellis, "but if it's out of control, it feels dangerous instead of thrilling."

Despite the homework and those years of uneventful telling, when a story catches you unawares you are back in the shoes of the beginner who thoughtlessly poleaxes an audience with a raw tale. Such an emergency can test the difference between an accidental tourist and a responsible guide. Do you run for the nearest exit, or stay and take care of your tour group?

The audience comes first. Who are we doing this for, anyway?

We have heard tellers shatter their listeners' trance by injecting clever but distracting sound effects. We have seen them blow it away with antic full-body movement. "Listen to ME! Look at ME! I'm wonderful!"

Yes, wonderful. But not as wonderful as the story which died a-borning in listeners' hearts and minds.

If we're in storytelling because we want the attention, fine. There are countless wonderful tales to perform with bells and whistles, juggling and cartwheels, mime and glorious sound effects. But if we want to tell entrancing tales, we must back off. Leave room for the audience to step inside. Let them do their share of the work. On this special kind of journey, the teller is only the guide. The travelers must follow under their own power.

Some tellers frankly admit that they're in storytelling because they love the attention. They were "table dancers" as children, and they want to remain the object of admiring eyes. Obviously there is a place for them in storytelling, especially in telling what Ellis calls "Ha Ha," "Aha," and "Amen" type stories. But attention-seeking tellers should understand a peculiarity of the entrancing"Ahh" stories: when you tell them right, *you disappear*.

"They're not looking at you, they're looking at the story." I tell that to my students to help alleviate self-consciousness, but also because it's the plain truth. When your listeners are entranced, they no longer see you. When you yourself go into the story-*telling* trance, self-awareness also disappears.

Earlier I quoted Tony Toledo's description of his loss of self-consciousness when the trance descended during a personal story: "There was no nervousness in my soul. A sense of peace, and excitement, and giving welled up from within me and spread out like ripples on a pond. I was the pebble." He continues, "That story pulled me out of myself. With the fairy tales I tell, I know them by head, not by heart. I present them well, yet with a different depth, not so deep as to pull me into a trance. It is a great effort that must be expended by the storyteller to lay the foundation for the possibility of the trance. For it occurs seldom with me, yet it is the goal, the highest gift I can offer to my listeners, to serve them."

To serve the audience.

Susan Klein says that her first profound experience in the story-telling trance alarmed her so much that she asked some colleagues if they had ever experienced something similar. They told her, "You just discovered what is important: the audience."

"Storytelling should not be an egocentric experiece," she says. "When you stop thinking of yourself, it allows for an energy shift at that point. Your job then becomes serving the audience and -- as Jay O'Callahan says -- 'serving the story'."

If you have done your homework with the story, if you focus on the story and the audience rather than on yourself, then "Your ego can be mobile, can calm itself down and 'go someplace'." At that point, she says, "The ego is strong enough then to know that although it is not the most important thing in world, it can have confidence that it can go away and will be welcomed back."

Psychologists say trance involves a dissociation of consciousness into the voyager who follows hypnotic suggestions and the Hidden Observer who stays behind. Zweig said the story-listening trance "requires self-abandonment, an act of depersonalization. To enter a story, one must give up being oneself for a while." The story-*telling* trance requires this too.

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The power of the story-listening trance tempts new tellers who yearn for the experience. Experienced tellers who believe they owe their audiences an emotional roller-coaster ride may be eager to wield it. The beauty and awe of it can tempt all of us to reach for this gift in order to share it.

There is much we do not know about the story-listening trance. Appropriate research methods exist, but have not yet been applied to normal performance situations. I hope it is only a matter of time (and grant funding) before some of the questions raised in this chapter begin to be answered.

Some tellers consider the story-listening trance to be the highest form of our art. As performing artists, we need to understand more about our craft.

Meanwhile, I believe we must all be aware of the responsibilities we undertake. Although a beginner can blunder through this territory, responsible guides owe our guests a high quality trip -- and a safe one. We will prepare with care and humility, willing to reserve our flashiest techniques for other kinds of story, willing even to forego this tempting destination if we sense that the audience's comfort or safety is at stake. We will anticipate the dangers of "dark and snaky places," including some traveler's unexpected reaction or a sudden shift in long-familiar terrain. And we will know the way back out into the light.

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