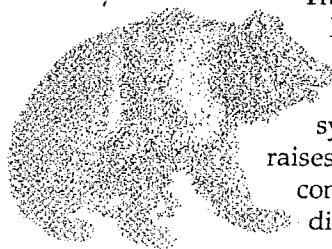


Exploring Feelings Through Storyimaging

by Tina Alston, Ph.D.

When the
bear of
emotional
turmoil
refuses to be
tamed, story
images can
help veterans
regain control.



SOMETIMES I STILL FEEL LIKE THAT BEAR WITH A man somewhere inside . . . and all I can do that day is just roar a little. Bears don't really know how to talk about what's going on. That Bear story ("Whitebear Whittington") is a perfect picture of my recovery from the war."

These words came from a Vietnam veteran who participates in a community-based veterans' recovery program called Base Center in Nashville, Tennessee. As a developmental psychologist at the camp, I conduct a storytelling therapy session each week made up of veterans who are—like Odysseus of Greek legend—still literally "coming home" from war. Many are homeless, chemical dependent, or suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder. All are struggling to re-enter the realms of home and community.

During these sessions, the veterans learn once again how to experience normal human emotions through a process called story-imaging.

This is a method of exploring feelings by listening to a story and recalling certain parts, then associating personal feelings with the story's characters and symbols. As a healing tool, story-imaging raises awareness that there are many, often conflicting, parts of the self, just as there are different characters in a story. The recov-

ering person learns that no one feeling is the whole person.

In this article, I give a step-by-step account of this technique. Although particularly suited to therapeutic group sessions, the methods could easily be adapted to a variety of situations, such as by teachers, school counselors, or group leaders who want to explore feelings or human behavior.

Begin with a folk tale

Powerful folk tales with a variety of characters and symbols work best for story-imaging sessions. "Whitebear Whittington" from *Grandfather Tales* by Richard Chase (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948) and "The Tiger's Whisker" by Harold Courlander from *The Tiger's Whisker and Other Tales: Legends From Asia and the Pacific* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959) are two of my personal favorites. Other good examples are "The Secret Son" (found in *Parabola*, IV, 3, 1979), a Nigerian tale of a young king who wants to father a son and "Lady of the Sea" from *The Magic Umbrella and Other Stories for Telling* by Aileen Colwell (Random House, 1981), a mermaid tale.

Avoid story collections especially designed for treating specific disorders. These tend to be shallow and have a "cookbook" approach. Instead, search out tales that tug at the heart and that speak first to you then to your audience.

Begin by leading your group in a five-minute session of guided relaxation. Then tell a folktale (see "The Tiger's Whisker" at right).

Do the story-imaging

After telling or reading the tale, select 10 to 15 important symbols (characters or key objects) from the tale (see worksheet on page 14). Then have participants use the symbols to complete the following phrases (silently or on paper):

I am the soldier's wife seeking help from the hermit, I feel _____.

I am the soldier returning from war, I feel _____.

At the conclusion of the exercise, emphasize that there are no wrong feelings or answers. Traumatized individuals often suffer from a numbness or depletion of emotion. Early in recovery, they may give only a few feelings, such as depression, anger, or excitement, but they will develop a broader range over time.

Use the worksheet

Individually, have participants place a star on their worksheets next to feelings that they consider most intense in the characters or symbols. As the individual makes his or her choices, have other group members call out their responses for the same item. For instance, one person may comment that the wife felt fear when she went to the hermit; while others may call out embarrassment, awe, or depression.

At the end of the session, have each participant repeat aloud his or her own list of words using the following statement: "I am _____ (real name), I feel happy, alarmed, worried, peaceful, and so on."

Recovery literally means recovering the ability to feel and act freely. This exercise may be viewed as a practice session for identifying feelings and for learning to appreciate the perspectives of others.

How story-imagining sessions work

Veterans and others who have suffered a deep sense of wounding often resist traditional modes of therapy. Experts, therapists, and other professionals who deal with families of veterans should respect this wounding and nurture the inner wisdom of their clients—giving them the psychic armor to go off and face their own tigers.

The storyteller in such groups, whether a spiritual guide, teacher, therapist, or peer leader, functions as a messenger from dream time—from the realm of the wise old hermit. The story is the message from the other world or from the unconscious. The storyteller is just the vessel—the means of reflecting what knowledge lies inside us all. I agree with Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta who once said that elders don't interpret stories, they only tell them and perhaps ask, "What did we learn?" Or, in the case of story-imagining, "What did you feel?"

Storytelling as a spiritual path

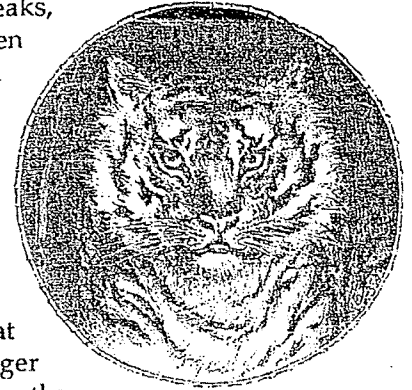
Story-imagining as well as other techniques involving personal stories are natural therapeutic tools, and they are commonly used in analysis. However, I prefer to use them as a means of building community and spiritual wholeness.

In his book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (Bantam, 1994), Ernest Kurtz recounts an ancient story that has no name. I call it "The Insignificant Story." At the end, the listener, who is a famous nobleman, begins to weep. He has just heard a

The Tiger's Whisker

A YOUNG WIFE JOURNEYS UP A MOUNTAIN TO VISIT A HEALER WHO lives as a hermit. Once there, she asks the healer for a potion to help her minister to her husband who has returned from a great war. The woman complains that her husband hardly speaks, angrily tosses food aside when she tries to serve meals, and sits looking out at the sea.

The hermit instructs her to pluck a whisker from the face of a tiger. Although dismayed at first, she finally comes up with a plan. She takes food to the cave of the tiger, remaining at a safe distance while the tiger comes out to eat. For six months, the woman takes food to the cave, each day coming closer to the tiger until she is able to pat the tiger's head. On the next visit, while the tiger cuddles his head in her lap, the woman tenderly snips a whisker and returns triumphantly to the hermit with her prize. Instead of using the whisker to mix a magical cure, the hermit tosses it into the fire. The woman cries out in alarm, questioning what seems to be a cruel and absurd gesture. The hermit replies, "A woman who has tamed a tiger has no need of a potion."



From The Tiger's Whisker and Other Tales: Legends from Asia and the Pacific by Harold Courlander (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1959).

wandering Jewish storyteller recount the story of a trip he once took to Turkey with his famous master, the Rabbi Baal Shem Tov. On that trip, the Rabbi requests a meeting with a bishop whose people had persecuted the Jews. This bishop is, in fact, a converted Jew who was experiencing great torment after having had a prophetic dream about the damnation that he would likely face because of his sins against his own people. At their brief meeting, the Rabbi counsels the bishop with these words, "When a man comes to you and tells you your own story, you will know your sins are forgiven." The nobleman, upon hearing the story, weeps with tears of recognition, for it is he who had met the Rabbi, the master of this wandering storyteller. When the nobleman (the bishop) hears his story,

he finally knows he will be forgiven.

It's no surprise that one Vietnam veteran, upon hearing this tale, remarked that he hoped someday to find that kind of forgiveness. When we hear our own story, even stories of our own betrayal, we see the light of healing.

courage. Finally, it is a way of finding and living one's own story—the Self. ❖

For further reading

Family Tales, Family Wisdom by Robert U. Akeret (Henry Holt & Company, 1991).
Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom by Marilou Awiakta (Fulcrum Publishing, 1993).
The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales by Bruno Bettelheim (Vintage Books, 1977).
 "The Use of Family Theory in Clinical Practice" by Murray Bowen in *Changing Families: A Family Therapy Reader* edited by Jay Haley (Grune & Stratton, 1971).
Iron John by Robert Bly (Vintage Books, 1992).
Grandfather Tales by Richard Chase (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948).
The Hero With A Thousand Faces by Joseph Campbell (Meridian Books, 1975).
The Power of Myth by Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, edited by Betty Sue Flowers (Doubleday, 1988.)
The Magic Umbrella and Other Stories for Telling by Aileen Colwell (Random House, 1981); "Woman from the Sea."
The Tiger's Whisker and Other Tales: Legends from Asia and the Pacific by Harold Courlander (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1959).
Women Who Run With the Wolves by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (Ballantine Books, 1992).
The Odyssey by Homer translated by T.E. Shaw (Oxford University Press, 1972).
Memories, Dreams, Reflections by Carl G. Jung, edited by Aniela Jaffe (Vintage Books, 1963).
Telling Your Story: A Guide to Who You Are and Who You Can Be by Sam Keen and Anne V. Fox (New American Library, 1974).
The Spirituality of Imperfection: Modern Wisdom from Classic Stories by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham (Bantam, 1994).
Recovering from the War by Patience Mason (Penguin Books, 1990).

Story-imagining worksheet: "The Tiger's Whisker"

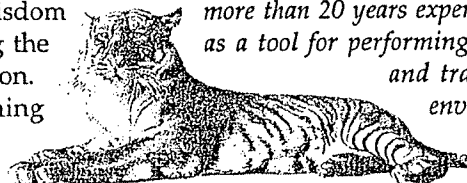
Directions: The leader calls out the sentence: "I am the [husband, hermit, woman] in the story, and I feel [give an emotion]." Have each listener complete the sentence silently, then fill in chart. Group leader will fill in names at the top of each column; individuals using this for a journal exercise may label columns with dates.

Symbol	Name or Date	Name or Date
Husband returning from war		
Woman going to hermit	<i>fear</i>	
Hermit hearing the story		
Woman bringing food to tiger	<i>anxiety</i>	
Tiger finding food		
Woman touching the tiger		
Tiger letting her pat him		
Whisker of the tiger		
Woman cutting off the whisker		
Woman returning to hermit	<i>hopefulness</i>	
Hermit throwing whisker into fire		
Woman crying at hermit		
Woman hearing his explanation		
Woman returning home		

Summary

How is storytelling a means of coming home? What is therapeutic storytelling? It is simply telling and listening to stories with awareness. It is teaching others to use stories for wisdom and healing. It is a means of igniting the mind to its real power: the imagination. When we hear our own story coming back to us from the mouth of another, we find forgiveness and

Tina Alston, Ph.D., directs the Special Children's Program at Base Camp, Inc., an organization that serves Vietnam veterans and their families. She has more than 20 years experience using storytelling as a tool for performing, teaching, counseling, and training in the corporate environment.



"Storyimaging"-- a workshop and overview of the book by Tina Alston

Storyimaging is a way of viewing a story as if it were a dream. Through Storyimaging a person can learn a story by listening to it and then by identifying with various images or symbols in the story. Within a storyimaging group listeners learn to project their own feelings and memories onto a template of story symbols after a leader tells the story and guides them through the symbols. While "storyimaging" can lead participants to discover more about themselves, it can also broaden their appreciation of diverse points of view. Bible stories, folk tales, and wisdom tales from any tradition work well. Just tell the story, select a few images, read them aloud with the "I am-format" (below), let each person fill out a simple worksheet with their own feeling, and invite discussion afterwards. Make sure that there is no "one way" of interpreting the story.

Learning Objectives: (Participants will...)

- Learn a story through an outline of images
- Deepen the sense of listening to one's inner voice through metaphor
- Get in touch with feelings & memories through storyimaging
- Discover varying points of view within a storyimaging group
- Explore ways of using these tools with all types of people--children & adults

EXAMPLE: From the Bible story in Luke 15:1-32 including The Prodigal Son.

1. I am the son who left home.....I feel _____
2. I am the lost son, eating the slop of that the pigs left behind and I feel _____
3. I am the Son, on the way back home and I feel _____
4. I am the Father seeing my son return and I feel _____
5. I am the older son, seeing the big party for my brother who was lost and I feel _____.
6. I am the prodigal son back home and I feel _____.

(Each participant fills out their own worksheet numbering from 1-6 and just writes in key words, such as those underlined, and fills in the blank with their own feelings.)