

# ANIMUS, ANIMA, ANIMATION

by Mary Medicott

When I was asked to give 'a provocation' at this year's Symposium at the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling, I knew immediately what I wanted to talk about. The Symposium theme was Storytelling and Gender. Marina Warner would be giving a keynote on magic and transformation in the Arabian Nights. I wanted to talk about what I see happening in the storytelling world today and why I believe it is falling short of some larger possible achievements.



Storytelling has grown enormously since the early days of the revival. Much has been accomplished. In 1989, excited by what was going on around me, I proposed a TV series to Channel 4. Preparing the booklet to go with it, I realised how few things could be listed that people could go to or join. The College of Storytellers existed. The Crick Crack Club was in its early days. The Edge had the only other storytelling club in the country. Several major storytelling festivals had taken place in London but none happened on a regular basis. There was a Directory of Storytellers and, already, a good number of working storytellers. The National Oracy Project had had a significant influence in developing storytelling work in education. A diversity of community storytelling projects was beginning to be seen.

But what a difference there is today. Storytelling clubs up and down the land; regular storytelling festivals; a Society for Storytelling now over 15 years old; storytelling projects all over the place: awareness of storytelling is now widespread. Yet overall I see a distinct imbalance that I think may be holding development back. The imbalance is between the recogni-

tion and emphasis given to performance storytelling and that afforded to the kind of storytelling work that goes on, for example, in education. The imbalance pertains as much in public understanding and general awareness as in status and funding. In all kinds of ways and for all kinds of reasons, the major focus is on the performing and, in consequence, on being or becoming the person who tells the stories. Much less attention is given to ways of working with people who may never wish to become professional storytellers but may gain greatly from exploring and telling stories in their day-to-day lives.

To work in a storysharing kind of way, you have to be able to tell stories. But how do you do that in such a way as not to disempower the people you are working with, not to get them thinking 'I can't do that' or, worse still, 'I don't have anything to say'? What skills of

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listening are required? What storytelling techniques can be used to inspire creativity in others and enable them to share their creative ideas? I believe much more attention needs to be given to the rationale for this sort of storytelling, the methods by which it is carried out and the potential for what it can achieve.

Some of the reasons for the imbalance I perceive are not specifically to do with storytelling itself. Ours is a celebrity culture. It glorifies the performer. It likes to market the excitement and glamour of the single attention-getting event. Obviously it is easier – and possibly cheaper – to publicise specific occasions and write them up afterwards than to track and trace what happens on lower-key, longer-term projects involving lots of people in a multiplicity of responses. On those kinds of projects, purposes and gains are inevitably more diverse. Filtered through many different minds, going in many different directions, they are harder to capture and quantify.

Other reasons are to do with the kind of funding structures in place today. It's not only a one-off kind of world. It's hierarchical and, in many aspects, dominated by male ways of thinking. Especially

in the arts, organisations are not keen to commit to ongoing projects. I remember my sense of outrage a few years ago when Lambeth Libraries finally chopped for lack of money the storytelling scheme on which I'd cut my teeth in the early 1980s along with numerous others who had likewise discovered their sense of vocation there. Here we are in a period when government and teachers alike lament the lack of speaking and listening abilities in the country's children. And what do we do? Summarily dispense with one of the most valuable – and probably most economical – ways there could be of developing not only children's love of language but their creativity and imagination too.

But I also wonder – and this was the main point of my provocation – if some aspects of imbalance also exist within the storytelling world as it has developed, and specifically between its 'animus' and its 'anima'. I am not a psychologist or a psychotherapist. I do not claim to understand the ideas of Jung at any depth. Yet I have found many of his ideas to be extremely helpful in understanding things to do with story. Of all of the founders of modern psychology, he was most attuned to the powerful forces of myth and legend in human minds.

In Jung's psychology, the animus and anima describe the sense of the opposite sex that is carried by, respectively, the female and the male. Where animus is not well integrated in the woman or where anima is not well integrated in the man, the results include the tendency in the woman to bossiness, in the man the tendency to bitchiness. The years of maturity, according to Jung, are the time when men and women alike have the opportunity to rebalance these psychological forces within themselves.

Could this also be useful within storytelling? Simplifying Jung's ideas of animus and anima enables us to talk about male and female principles as they operate in the world. The male principle is generally associated with action, reaching forward, striving onwards, the female with relatedness and nurture. It is clearly possible to associate these principles with the two main different types of storytelling work, namely performance work vs. the kind of storytelling that involves story sharing. They can even be seen as symbolised in the ways in which chairs are arranged on storytelling occasions.

Storytelling in this country can now be said to be entering its maturity. It would be crass—and anyway wholly inaccurate—to put male storytellers on the performance side and female storytellers on the other. Most of us storytellers do some of both. However, I do believe it's time for all of us, men and women, to look again at what we value and speak up more loudly for the kinds of work that currently get less often described. Sometimes when I go to a school for the one day in a year when they have a storyteller, I think about what happens all the rest of the time. Teachers these days do not generally tell stories. When they are taught to do it and learn how much can come from it, it invariably transforms their work with children as well as their perceptions about themselves. Storytelling has enormous potential for children and adults. For instance, I would like to see all teacher-training students learning not only how to tell stories but how to use that skill to develop children's storytelling. This is not 'applied' storytelling as some people describe it. To me, it is quite literally sharing with others the fundamental principles, skills and values of storytelling itself. And I would like to see enormously more national attention and funding given to it.

My 'provocation' now is therefore the same as at the George Ewart Evans Symposium. It is to challenge all of us who care deeply about storytelling and its potential to take a new look at what we want to see happening over the next years. One respondent to my Symposium talk said—to many cheers from the women present—that what I was really talking about was a thoroughgoing feminist revolution. Another said it required us all to look inside ourselves: the important step was the kind of rebalancing that can take place internally. Yet another person expressed a sense of alienation from the whole discussion. This made me consider, too, how easy it is for those of us who make our lives and living in storytelling to separate ourselves unwittingly from other people who do not see themselves in that way. Many people outside what I have here described as 'the storytelling world' also work with stories; in all kinds of different ways, they are helping people, whether adults or children, to enrich their lives through stories. The rebalancing I am calling for is at least partly about that very problem.

Let us not do less than we could because we have unwittingly put great barriers around ourselves with massive labels plastered over them identifying us as 'the storytellers'. Storytelling is one of the most powerful forces in human life. It is one of the things that animates us as people. Let's get it right. Animus, anima, animation.

# NOVEMBER LOVE

A poem by Jan Oskar Hansen

He was around thirty, dressed in a grey suit, but he had  
no arms, (accident) zip open, a man desperate and drunk,  
came into my café, wanted a beer with a straw, that's  
what I gave him. He needed a pee; I had things to attend  
to in the kitchen, a woman, his age, said she was a nurse,  
helped him; back from the loo he looked respectable.  
In her company he was more at ease and joked about his  
plight, asked the time, had to take a ferry home as he lived  
on one of the islands. Ten to nine the nurse followed him  
down to the docks, she didn't return; but took the ferry  
too, I think, and became his arms, lover and caring wife.  
She had left a plastic bag behind, it was full of crumbled  
up bread and stale cakes meant for the ducks; I went to  
the park next morning and fed them crumbs of love