

TELLING STORIES
ABOUT TRAUMA:
TRICKSTERS AS HEALERS AND OTHER
CONTRADICTIONS

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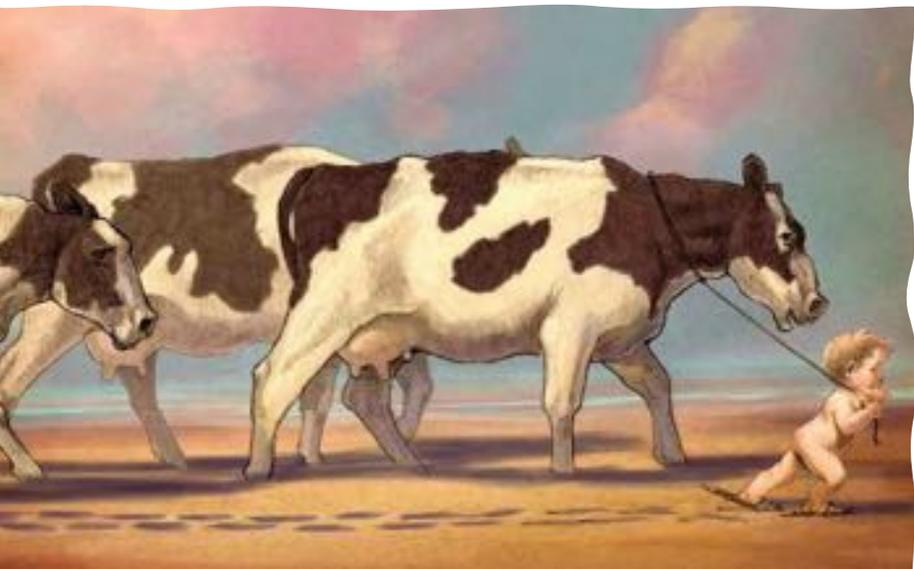
- What is a Trickster?
- How trickster stories can help with personal trauma
- How trickster stories are the key to navigating cultural trauma



TRICKSTERS

The Trickster Archetype appears in stories, folklore and myths all over the world. Marvel movie fans will know Loki from Norse myth. Here in Greece, Hermes is another example. Other well-known tricksters include Anansi the Spider, Brer Rabbit (who inspired Bugs Bunny), and Coyote.

Fairy tale tricksters include the tailors in "The Emperor's New Clothes", "Puss in Boots", and several characters in "Fitcher's Bird."

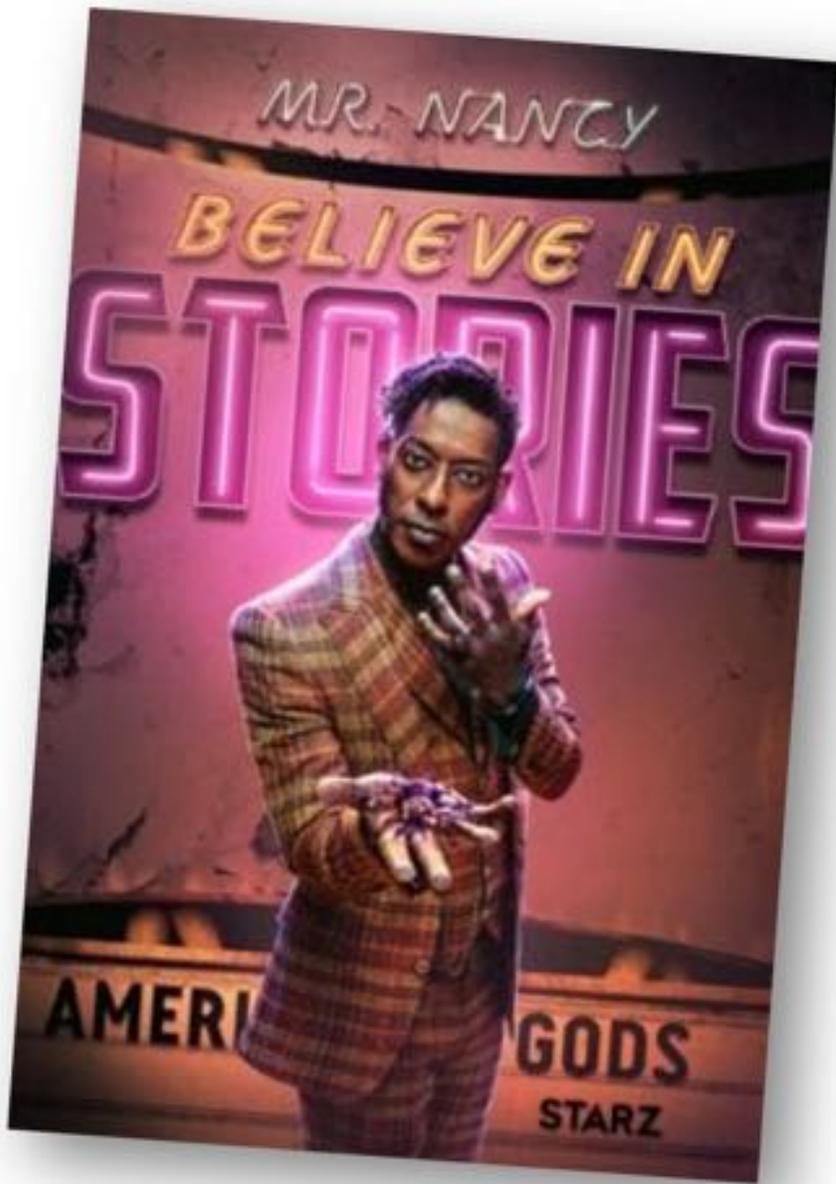


A FAIRY TALE TRICKSTER: FITCHER'S BIRD

"In the story of Fitcher's Bird, the evil wizard gives the bewitched wives the key to their own rescue" (Kalsched 188).

The Fitcher's Bird fairy tale, collected by Wilhelm Grimm from Friederike Mannel (Paradiž, 62) features not one, but two Trickster figures - a violent but self-destructive wizard, and a wily youngest daughter.





SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRICKSTER

1. Ambiguous and Anomalous
2. Deceiver and Trick-Player
3. Shape-Shifter
4. Situation-Inverter
5. Messenger and Imitator of the Gods
6. Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur

(Doty, 33-45)

“TRICKY STORIES ARE THE CURE.”

(THE CURE TO WHAT?)

(Vizenor as Quoted in Blythe, i)

TRAUMA

Trauma is any event that the psyche is unable to process or metabolize.

Charcot described it as "the results of having endured unbearable experiences." (as quoted in Brandell, 1).

"Trauma, by definition, is unbearable and intolerable." (van der Kolk, 1)

It's important to note that the inability to *process* or *metabolize* the trauma is key to the definitions of trauma. While the exact same event may result in trauma for some, it does not do so for others as a result of their ability to process the events.



MEANING-MAKING AS METABOLISM

Narrativity is a tool to Create Meaning

- Kalsched describes the effect of trauma as "The psyche cannot metabolize its own experience and render it meaningful" (23).
- Narrative is the means by which we process events in our lives.
- Human minds naturally sort disparate events into narrative form:
 - To enhance memorability, teaching, learning
 - To make sense of the events

Creating Meaning allows us to Process

- The job of poets is to wrap words around the indescribable. By wrapping words around something horrific, they make it portable, re-tellable, possible to turn into narrative
- "...the job of therapists is to help people 'acknowledge, experience, and bear' the reality of life." (van der Kolk 26)

PERSONAL STORYTELLING FOR TRAUMA IS MAKING THE STORY BIG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS

CBT Approaches are all Storytelling

- CBT models to treat PTSD include goals like "Development of a cohesive and emotionally engaged trauma narrative," "reframing", and "cognitive processing, restructuring, or meaning-making". (Brandell, 29).

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

- The CISD approach has relatively loose data surrounding the theoretical framework of the benefits of retelling the story of a traumatic event within 48-72 hours of the event's occurrence. Whether in a group or individual setting, CISD works by making the memory one of telling the story, rather than vivid, un-mediated memories of the event itself.

“THE TRICKSTER IS IDEALLY SUITED TO BE AN AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION BECAUSE HE/SHE CARRIES BOTH SIDES OF A SPLIT IN THE PSYCHE....

SHAPE-SHIFTING AT WILL, HE/SHE IS THE TRANSFORMER WHO ALSO GETS TRANSFORMED.”

(Kalsched, 189)

HOW CAN A TRICKSTER HEAL PERSONAL TRAUMA?

Mediating Role in the Psyche

- "In those psychologies and mythologies where the mediating Trickster has not yet materialized, the benevolent and malevolent aspects of the Self are split into two figures, black and white, while a third intermediary struggles back and forth to create a whole" (Kalsched 189).

In Deception, Truth is Revealed

- With tricksters, story listeners are offered symbols and metaphors to help us understand and see through facades, like the tailor-conmen in "The Emperor's New Clothes"

Messenger of the Gods

- The trickster is able to translate messages from the gods into memorable (humorous, sacred, lewd) images that help us create meaning.

“TO ATTAIN TO THE FULL ITS CONSOLING PROPENSITIES, ITS SYMBOLIC MEANINGS, AND MOST OF ALL, ITS INTERPERSONAL MEANINGS, A FAIRY TALE SHOULD BE TOLD RATHER THAN READ....

THE TELLING OF A STORY TO A CHILD, TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE, HAS TO BE AN INTERPERSONAL EVENT, SHAPED BY THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE IN IT.”

(Bettelheim, 150-151)

HOW DO I USE IT?

It doesn't matter who tells the story

- Because this technique is speaking the language of the unconscious, as long as the person who needs to hear the story listens to it (or tells it), it can serve its function
- It is ideal for the teller to "know" the story and its deeper meaning, and to "know" the listener

Interpret the Story like a Dream

- Apply the symbols and situations to the person's current situation and life in the same way that you might a dream image. (see Kalsched)

Play with the story and its symbols without interpretation

- Daydreaming, reworking, retelling and sitting with a story can do the work without actively analyzing it.
- Both Bettelheim and Idries Shah write extensively on this.

“IT MUST BE NOTED ALSO THAT MANY OF THE MOST POWERFUL MEDICINES,
THAT IS STORIES, COME ABOUT AS A RESULT OF ONE PERSON’S OR GROUP’S
TERRIBLE AND COMPELLING SUFFERING...

AND YET, PARADOXICALLY, THESE VERY STORIES THAT RISE FROM DEEP
SUFFERING CAN PROVIDE THE MOST POTENT REMEDIES FOR PAST, PRESENT AND
EVEN FUTURE ILLS.”

(Estés, 4-5)

HOW CAN A TRICKSTER HEAL CULTURAL TRAUMA?

Example of Living Outside of a Social Structure

- For people whose cultural trauma includes the violence of colonialism, and the removal of individuals from a cohesive social structure. Trickster stories are among the only ones that explain how to survive and mediate that separation

Situation-Inverter Names Injustices

- Via a tool of laughter, by depicting and naming injustices, the trickster story makes the trauma more "portable".
- As "Other", the Trickster speaks to those who experience systemic injustice

Guide and Inhabitor of the Liminal state

- Kalsched describes the Trickster as "concerned with mediating two sides of a paradox" (197).
- Hermes among other tricksters is a psychopomp

“FOR WOMAN, IN HER “OTHER” POSITION, TRICKSTER IS A
POWERFUL SOURCE. PEEKING, PEAKING, THROUGH THE
INTERSTICES, DISRUPTING THE PATTERNS, WIDENING THE
CHINKS IN PATRIARCHAL CONTROL DEMANDS A MOBILITY FOUND ONLY
IN THE TRICKSTER FIGURE.

TRADITIONALLY, THE TRICKSTER
INCORPORATES MULTIPLE AND OPPOSING TRAITS, DEFYING CULTURE,
AND YET BENEFITING IT WITH SUCH ACTS AS PROVIDING FIRE OR BASIC FOOD
SOURCES.”

(Reynolds, 53)

HOW CAN WE USE IT?

Keep Telling and Creating Tricky Stories

- Vizenor describes the tricky stories told by present-day Native Americans to be the "cure" for approaching the conflict between native identity and the forced assimilation into the colonizer culture. This is also his recommended approach for analyzing these texts.

Tell Stories that You Know

- A key rule in storytelling is that the teller may only share stories that they "know". Speak from within lived experience and understanding.

Speaks to the Unconscious

- "...fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time."

(Bettelheim 6)

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

- Tricksters are transformative, liminal characters who can represent the "Other" in society. They show how to exist within the bounds of a culture, and how to transgress them at the same time.
- Storytelling and Narrative are often used for the healing of personal trauma in therapeutic settings, to help a patient metabolize a traumatic event. For personal use, telling stories that are full of relevant symbols and playing with them can also be of help.
- While groups of people who experience intersections of social norms and repression are struggling with cultural levels of trauma, Trickster stories, in particular, should be a focus of our creativity and expression to help speak to this.



THANK YOU



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