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One of Humanities Oldest Art Forms – Storytelling

By Tracy Chipman

Storytelling is one of the humanity's oldest art forms and has existed since the birth of language. In this ancient art the storyteller uses language, vocalization and gesture to convey the elements and images of a story to a live audience. Stories are shared as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation and to instill values and beliefs. Every culture and every age of civilization has participated in this extraordinary craft. Because storytelling is spontaneous and experiential, because it is a dynamic interaction between teller and listener it is more difficult to describe than say, the script of a movie, or the lines of a theatrical performance. Storytelling emerges from the interactive, cooperative and coordinated efforts between the teller and audience. It is a live, in the moment experience and without one part of this dynamic duo the process and art form cannot exist. With each telling the interplay between the teller and listeners creates a new experience, a new story. With each telling comes more inner satisfaction and more understanding of the mystery of our humanity - something more powerful than a string of words and phrases is gleaned, digested and absorbed.

The earliest forms of storytelling were spoken word combined with gestures and expressions. Traditionally these stories were passed from generation to generation, and survived solely by memory and the desire to share and hear them. Early storytelling may have shown up as simple chants in praise of nature, to express the joy of life, to explain the deeper mysteries of creation and to ease the drudgery and boredom of day-to-day life. Early forms of story transmission are also evident in rudimentary drawings such as the artwork scratched onto the walls of caves and carved on to stones and the trunks of living trees.

During the Middle Ages storytelling expanded into the art of the traveling troubadour and historian. This bard journeyed across the land combining their stories with poetry, music, and dance. They were welcomed in castle, court, and the market place. They gathered the news, conveyed the best tales, and were expected to know the favorites in each region. Their position as bard was highly regarded in societies and they often spent many years in training before their travels began. In this way professional storytelling was born. The development of print publishing led to reading replacing listening, and some say to the decline of storytelling. Technology also made it possible to record, transcribe and share oral

tradition over wide regions of the world. In spite of rapid modernization there are still cultures today where some part of their living history and folklore is perpetuated by their vibrant oral tradition.

Recently there has been a rekindled interest in the art of storytelling. Professional storytellers tour the United States and Canada performing at festival, coffee houses and community spaces. Storytellers of today prepare a story to present to their listeners, perhaps researched from written material, collected from other story and tradition bearers or even created on the spot from their own imaginations. Folklore stories such as myths, epics, legends, wonder tales and fables continue to be favorites.

Joseph Sobol, storyteller and historian on the American storytelling revival in "The Storytellers' Journey", says:

"Storytelling is strongly dependent on the power of personal presence -- of the trance-inducing interaction of live performer with live audience, and the direct transfer of narrative imagery from mind to minds. Whether within a traditional community or a contemporary performance context, storytelling tends to be prized precisely for its im-mediacy."

There are countless "classics" - books, films and television programs that will entice you into a good story, so good you may return to them time and time again. In fact more than ever the "personal narrative" is finding its way into these forms of arts and entertainment. However, nothing beats the live interchange between teller and listener-- eye to eye, mind to mind and heart to heart and March is a wonderful month to enjoy the power of story. With the wearing of the green on St. Paddy's day there's sure to be plenty of stories a' flying as storytelling is a fundamental element of Celtic culture.

Tracy Chipman has been telling tales professionally to ages 3 to 93 since 1995 at cafes, bookshops, libraries, schools, parties and performance spaces in pockets around the country and in the UK. She also founded The Hebridean Folklore Project in 1996 where she has gathered folklore in all seasons from Scotland's Outer Hebrides islands.