

The gift of storytelling

A story with a strong narrative, depth and unforgettable message, is the best spiritual master one can have, says **Preeti Bapat**

There is a story of a sage named Kanakadasa. When he was a student, his teacher gave him and other students a fruit each, and told them to eat it in utmost secrecy so that no one would see them. Each student devised his own way of maintaining the secrecy, except Kanakadasa. He came back and returned the fruit to the teacher saying, "I could not find a place where God is not present."

This remembrance of the omnipresence of God was termed by Guru Nanak as 'Surati', which is a very fine, gentle recollection of His all-pervasiveness. *Surati* strengthens our faith and helps us maintain a strong connection with Divinity.

Spiritual stories envision and impart the greatest values of human life.

Once a story has begun, something deep within the human psyche wants to know what will happen next. There is no culture without some form of storytelling and the cravings to know 'what comes next' has been felt by every human being regardless of age, gender, culture or geography. Story is central to human understanding – it makes lives liveable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, and no other. The story provides the framework for understanding the past, engaging in the present and envisioning the future. We are moved by stories more than by instructions.

Storytelling and spirituality

Storytelling when linked with spirituality is an experiential moment in which one learns something about the world and one's own self. It is an important tool to assist in teaching of ethics, values and cultural norms and differences. Guru Granth Sahib, the holy

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book of Sikhs, describes the eternal truths. And though the gurus referred to themselves as ordinary people but *Bani*, their compositions, were divinely inspired. The Gurbani says that living in harmony with God's creation is equal to being in heaven, and living in disharmony with it is like being incarcerated in the hell of one's own being. *Babar Bani* composed by Guru Nanak, is a narration of the invasion of India by Babar in 1524. It relates the moral desperation of the times rather than providing a chronicle of events. Guru Nanak draws a lesson that the lure of power divides men, and violence when unresisted, tends to flourish. It cannot be wished away. Yet, a corrupt and inhumane rule always ends in dissolution.

Finding the scribe

Storytelling predates writing and in many ancient cultures the oral tradition was the essential way of communication and recollection. But gradually the tradition of keeping records came into picture, which again is well documented in the scriptures. The Vedas are 4000 year old repositories of ancient wisdom and recording of the earliest meditation by humankind. The story behind why Lord Ganesha has only one tusk has a strong narration on keeping promises. Ved Vyasa wanted to compose Mahabharata and was looking for an intelligent scribe. He prayed to Lord Brahma, who in turn asked him to request Lord Ganesha to do this job. When Vyasa approached Ganesha, he agreed, but on the condition that he would write non-stop. It is believed that his pen once broke but to keep his word he broke one of his tusks and started writing again. The symbolism attached to Ganesha's stories or chanting Ganesha mantras before the start of every Hindu ritual signifies the single truth that one should have total commitment to finish what one has started.

The insight from the learned

Christ told parables, Buddha recounted episodes from past lives. Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), the founder of Hasidism, revived Eastern European Judaism, infusing it with holy joy, and also revived storytelling. One of the ways he and the rebbes who followed him, attracted people to the new movement was by storytelling. According to Hasidic teaching, storytelling is a holy activity equal to Torah study or prayer. Sufi masters would instruct disciples through tales and even the Zen masters had a narrative form. Drawing on Rumi (13th century), as well as the rich storytelling traditions of Central Asian Sufism, reflect on how stories become containers for meaning, lenses for perception, and multidimensional symbols for the education of the soul. One of the keys to comprehending Sufi stories is to be aware of the context, the spiritual universe assumed by the storyteller. And yet each story adds something new to that context, expanding our

awareness of the soul's journey and the spiritual nature of reality. Some stories reflect back to us the subtle ways in which our ego distorts reality while other stories give us hints of what it must be like to live in a state of divine realisation, free from the domination of the false self. Some stories are derived from the history of our tradition and its spiritual heroes. Others are pure allegory, meant to be held consciously in our hearts, viewed from different angles, transferred to our deeper mind in order to become a perpetual source of meaning. The stories told by Jesus Christ are studied as stories of redemption and reconciliation. The spiritual leaders seek to share their religious and spiritual experience through the framework of a story.

Once a highly successful businessman, running a health insurance company was getting ready to go to his office. When he reached his car and opened the door, a stray dog sleeping under his car suddenly leapt out and bit him on his leg! The businessman got very angry. He quickly picked up a few rocks and threw at the dog but none hit the animal. The dog ran away.

Upon reaching his office, the businessman called a meeting of his managers and during the meeting vented the anger of the dog on them. The managers also got upset by their boss and vented their anger on the employees working under them. This domino effect continued till the lower rung of the corporate ladder and finally reached the office peon.

Now, there was no one working under the peon! After the office got over, he reached his home, and his wife opened the door. She asked him, "Why are you so late today?" The upset peon, gave one slap to his wife and said, "I didn't go to the office to play football, I went to work so don't irritate me with your stupid questions!"

Now the wife got upset. She took her anger out on her son who was watching TV and gave him a slap, "This is all you do, you have no interest in studying! Turn off the TV now!" This made the son very angry. He walked out of his house and saw a dog passing by. He picked up a rock and hit the dog in anger and frustration. The dog, getting hit, ran away barking in pain. This was the same dog that had bitten the businessman early in the morning.

This story easily depicts how life is a vicious circle and one reaps what one has sown.

Zen stories are the ancient words and deeds of Zen masters, passed through the ages, crossing dynasties and cultures of forgotten peoples, originating with the Buddha himself. The insights these stories seeded, as time rolled on, flowered into invaluable instructions for those wanting to reach liberation.

A martial arts student went to his teacher and said earnestly, "I want to study your martial system. How long will it take me to master it?"

The teacher's reply was casual, "10 years." Impatiently, the student answered, "But I want to master it faster than that. I will work very hard. I will practice everyday, 10 or more hours a day if I have to. How long will it take then?"

The teacher thought for a moment, "20 years."

This story with great simplicity signifies that the fastest way to achieve something is to do it patiently, dedicatedly and carefully, and not by rushing headlong into it.

Mastering the art

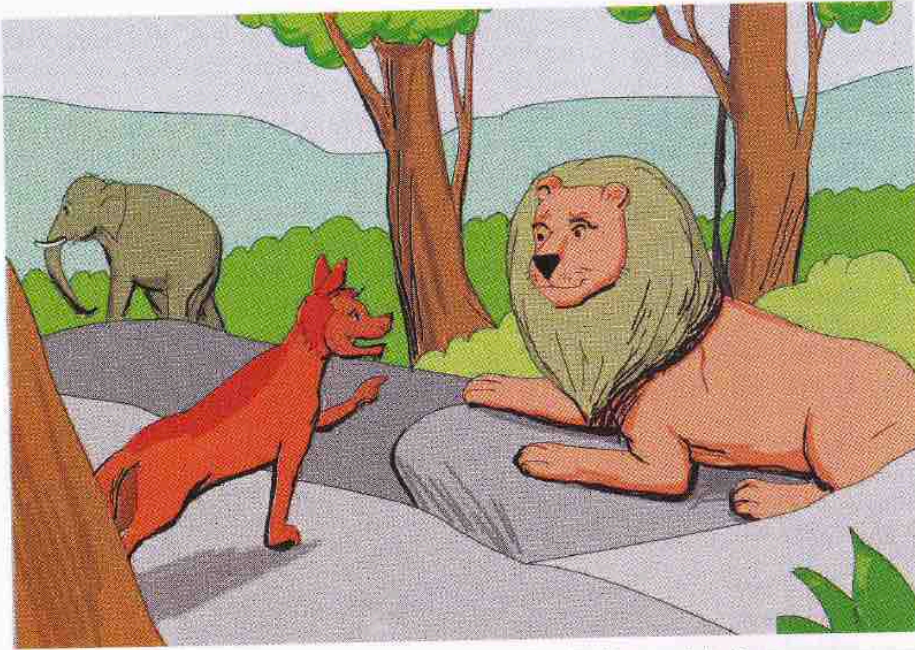
Storytelling is a universal form of discourse. Stories have been used by spiritual leaders to instill faith and learning in the masses and many have been transformed by listening to them. The seers use simple chants, poetry, dance, drama and music to effectively convey their message to the people. This method leaves the listeners spellbound, facilitating a

shift in their attitude, values, and behaviour. 12th century's *Hindavi Dastangoi*, is an oral art of storytelling. Once Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya fell ill. To cheer him up, Amir Khusro, his disciple started telling him a series of *dastans*, (stories) *Qissa-e-Chahar* and by the end of the stories, Nizamuddin Auliya had recovered. Delighted, he prayed that anyone who listens to these stories should also get cured. Vanashree Ghate, Director, Holistic Expression and Abilities for Living Foundation, and trainer for Anantaraa, arts based therapy course, takes into account the neuro-scientific impact of storytelling. A passionate storyteller, she has a strong belief in the power of stories for learning and healing. She widely uses *Jataka* tales, to enunciate the teachings of Buddha.

Explaining to children the perils of being in bad company with a story is more impactful than simply telling them not to go around with someone. This is very beautifully explained in this *Jataka* tale.

One day, a young lion was roaming in the jungle alone when he spotted a wolf in the bushes. The wolf also saw the lion and feared that if he tried to run away, the lion

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Impressed by the oily talk of the wolf, the lion did not pay heed to his parents' advice

would surely kill him. So, he himself walked up to the lion and said, "Dear Sir, you look very kind. If you take me to your den, and let me live with your family, I will help you in doing your household chores." He further added, "I have never seen such a majestic, young lion ever before in my life and it would be a pleasure to serve you and your family."

This young lion had been repeatedly told by his father and mother not to make friends with any wolf. But he was flattered by the oily talks of the wolf and decided to take him to his den.

The lion's parents did not want their son to be hanging out with the wolf but there was little that they could do as the young lion had grown very fond of the wolf. They feared that someday the lion would land in trouble because of the wolf. And they were absolutely right in thinking so!

One day the wolf had a strong craving to eat horse meat. He approached the young lion and said with folded hands, "Sir, there is nothing that we have not eaten except fresh horse meat. I have heard that it tastes divine." The young lion was also tempted to eat horse meat and asked the wolf to take him to the place where they could find some horses.

The wolf took the lion to a pond where some little ponies came to bathe. The young lion hid behind a bush and catching hold of a fine pony, ran back to his den.

His father warned him, "My son, those ponies belong to the king! He has many skillful archers. If you steal another pony, you will endanger your life." But the young lion soon became addicted to the taste of horse meat and started killing pony after pony. The wolf was also having a gala time savouring the juicy flesh of the young ponies with his friend.

Soon, the king heard that a lion was killing the ponies

when they went to bathe in the river. He got a tank built inside the city to keep his ponies safe from the lion, but the lion somehow sneaked in the city and killed the ponies as they bathed in the tank. The king then ordered his men to keep the ponies in the royal stables, thinking that the lion would not dare to enter the royal stables. But the lion went over the wall, and killed the ponies in their stables too.

At last the king called the most skillful archer and ordered him to shoot down the lion.

The next day, when the lion sprang over the wall of the royal stables, in search of a pony, he was shot by the archer. He called out to the wolf in pain, "My friend, help me!"

The wolf was waiting for the lion to return with a pony, but when he heard his cry for help, he understood that the lion had been shot. Without wasting any time, he fled to the deep forest. The young lion breathed his last, repenting not heeding to his parents' advice.

Telling a story is a nurturing act both for the listener as well as the storyteller who are connected with each other through the story. Attention to timing, pace and rhythm can guarantee a successful outcome.

Stories lend a structure to our otherwise scattered life. They derive value, lessons, purpose and meaning from what was otherwise a mundane existence.

A story turns us into the heroes and heroines of our own life saga. And a storyteller interprets the vision of the Divine to his listeners. Can there be a nobler work than this?



Preeti Bapat is a storyteller based in Navi Mumbai and can be reached at storyspace_kharghar@yahoo.com

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