

Interview with a Storyteller: Tracy Chipman

Lisette: [00:00:00] Hello everyone. This is Lisette Alvarez with an interview with a storyteller on the Tales from the Hearth Podcast. I have with me a very special guest and I would give her the opportunity to as the next storyteller on this. Series to introduce herself.

Tracy: Thanks, Lisette. So my name's Tracy Chipman. I am an oral storyteller and writer based on Anishinabe lands in northern Wisconsin.

And I've been storytelling in going into my 28th year of storytelling as a [00:01:00] storyteller out in the world.

Lisette: Art we. All out in the world. It's a, being out in the world is a brave act. Being a storyteller, isn't it?

Tracy: It is. And yet, I think because I have such a connection to it and such a desire to engage in that conversation of story, it's a risk.

And yet it seems like I, I couldn't not do it, if that makes sense.

Lisette: Oh, yes, it definitely makes sense. I think that a lot of fellow storytellers be like, yeah, we can't not do this. As someone who can't not just tell stories. What we usually do on this first part of our interview is open an invitation for you to tell a story, any kind of story, a fictional story, a semi-fictional story, a true story, something that happened to you recently, something that happened to a friend.

I am going to give the storyteller their hearth for five minutes.

Tracy: All right. Wow. Wow. Here we are. We are here. We are [00:02:00] here in the cave of story, and that's exactly where we're going to begin because once upon a time, once upon a time, and just last week, there's a cave at the end. At the edge of the world, this cave of basalt birthed in fire and tempered by water and wind.

Now this cave opens into a sea of the unknown, but in the cave there's a fire. Because there is always a fire, and on the fire is a great black pot bubbling and boiling, and inside this cave there was a carpet of moss and 10,000 spiders spin

and the drip. Drip of water. Inside this cave, there is a loom because there's [00:03:00] always a loom, and at the loom she sits.

An old, older woman, her hair as white as the moon, runs like a river down her back. Her hands are gnarled and her face is lined with what some would call wrinkles but are called stories, and each one. It's good. And she sits at the loom and beneath her there is a pile of thread yarn, wool, cotton spun flax silk, dirty old rags, and she spins down and in and up and out.

And again, she can never remember a time when she wasn't in this cave [00:04:00] spinning and weaving, and if she were to stop, the world would certainly come to an end. So as she spins, as she weaves, images appear in the tapestry, images become stories. Your story mine, the story of the Sun King and the Ice Witch.

And she spins and she leaves. And sometimes the stories make her laugh and sometimes she cries and sometimes she swears. Sometimes she's so angry. She goes to the mouth of the cave and she hos. So there she is, lost in the weaving, lost in the stories when she smells something. Burning. We've all [00:05:00] been there.

The pot on the fire, she's meant to be tending to the pot and stirring it, but she forgets. So she jumps up and she runs over to the pot and she stirs. And her muscles are straining and sweat is beating on her lip and she's praying. Please don't let this bruise spoil. And while she stirs with all her might, there are two black eyes watching her.

These two black eyes are watching and they launch from, The crack in the wall, and they belong to Raven, and raven flies across the mouth of the cave and lands on the loom. Raven looks at the tapestry and all the stories and begins to pick and pull and destroy until everything is shredded. The old woman eventually saves the brew.

Raven flies back to her crack in the wall. And she sees what [00:06:00] Raven has done, destroyed everything, all in tatters. The old woman weeps until there are no tears left. And then she watches a spider land on a thread, the color of crimson, which she pulls. It's the most beautiful thread she's ever seen. And with that, she stands up, sits onto the back on the loo, and begins to weave again down and in and up and through.

The beginning.

Lisette: What a rich beginning. Thank you for that. This is probably one of the biggest questions those of us in this craft are asked, and I always begin with this question after asking to the storyteller to tell a story, which is. Tell me, why do you tell [00:07:00] stories?

Tracy: I tell stories as I said earlier because I can't not tell stories, but I tell stories because I think, I believe my experience is we are made of stories.

I think it's Muriel Rucker said The world is not made of Adams. It's made of stories and. Stories are their connection. They're the closest thing between experience and a conceptual knowledge. So if you don't know what a strawberry tastes like, and if you tell somebody a, all the details, all the facts about a strawberry, they'll know more.

And if you can't give them the taste of that strawberry, if you tell them a story about that strawberry, It's going to bring it alive and yet another deeper way. And I think stories at depth. I think there's a desire to tell our own stories. There's a desire to listen to stories because stories [00:08:00] invoke and enliven our imagination.

They help us become better, more active listeners, and whether they're personal stories, whether they're traditional stories, whether they're deep. Myth of the archetypes that humans have been soaking in literally for hundreds of thousands and thousands of years. Why I tell stories because I can, and I don't have a choice.

Lisette: I feel that it seems like in my darkest times, it seems like the only thing that I have left are stories. So, On top of that, the pathway to being a storyteller starts, I think, in some way with that just innate need. But that's not, that's only, like you said, it's just the beginning. So let's talk a little bit more about what.[00:09:00]

In your experience, uh, in your years of exploring this craft and this journey, what a journey of being a storyteller looks like for you? What kind of helped mold you into actually approaching this as a craft? Was it a mentor? Was it a book? Was it, uh, uh, a hero of yours? What, what helped push you along this path to actually taking it

Tracy: as a path?

I think the way so much of the way that I work is there's often like some little glimmer of something that charms or delights, and then time goes on. Whether I

follow that path and then there's, in hindsight, there becomes even more. Things that were there shimmering under the surface that I may not have even been aware of at the time.

So I think I've always been charmed by stories. I was a slow reader, so the images were really rich, and the images, when there was an image, it helped me. Develop a way of being with the [00:10:00] story. When the words were obstacles to the story, there were mentors along the way. A beloved high school teacher who was a great storyteller, and there was a book, the book, the Wise and Foolish Tongue by Robin Williamson many years ago.

And then I think there was place in my. Twenties. I traveled and found myself in Scotland and I found myself just immersed in the richness of landscape in its connection to story in some places and living in the United States, living in America, the place. It, there's a, a disruption. The people of this place.

As a European descendant, my ancestors came and arrived to a place carrying their bag of, of stories from Europe to this place called America. And it had stories, but as we know, the genocide and the tragedy just. Really created a [00:11:00] disruption. So I think it was a combination of those events. And I also reached a point in my life as I moved closer to 30, I had a life, one of those mortality moments where I thought, shit is this it?

This is, what am I gonna do with my life? I was a teacher and I love my teaching. But I was just so curious and so charmed by story that I just created myself as a storyteller. I was living in Eugene, Oregon, and I was very clear that I didn't want a mentor that I, and I love education and I love to seek out teachers, but in this case, there was some kind of intuitive knowing that I needed to find my own voice.

And that at some point there would be teachers that would come, but I needed to find my own voice first and then let those men have teachers show up. And it was a real interesting intuition, really. And that's [00:12:00] how it all began. And that's, yeah,

Lisette: that's so interesting because when I've asked this question before to others, I have yet to find a storyteller who said I had a mentor.

And that includes myself. And I think that is such an interesting, especially like when we're, when we talk about starting on the journey of being a storyteller, that there's, we talk about the hero's journey as an archetypal way, that there is a mentor, there's some kind of wise person to show the, the, was it the guideposts

storytelling seems to be different in that the guideposts you're in, starting to find your own voice.

There's. There doesn't seem to be a guidepost or you're not supposed to find that. What do you think of that? That's, it's something that I've been thinking about, but I'm curious of what your thoughts are to what that means.

Tracy: I'm fascinated that you talk to more storytellers and ask these questions, so it's interesting your [00:13:00] experience of, it's not uncommon.

It's an inner mentor. It's an inner guide. On whatever that means. There's some inner impulse to navigate this, to explore this, to answer the call, and taking it back to the hero's journey. There's a call. What? Mm-hmm. A call that called me onto this path, this in this inexpressible kind of, I couldn't ignore this urge to just do this and explore this and become this, and I needed to find my own way of being.

Because storytelling in my experience isn't about acting. It's not about taking on a role. It can be. It's about being myself and allowing a story to pass through me. I don't know. I

Lisette: That's a real, I would agree with that. As someone who has acted and has written stories, there's, there is absolutely a difference.

It's a different role. It's a different orientation to craft or [00:14:00] creativity or the arts. You did mention that you did have teachers along the way, or you read books that in helped guide you. What has been a surprising lesson along this path? That you have, especially I would say, either early on or midway through, not at the very beginning, but what have you found on this path that is a surprising lesson to you about storytelling?

Tracy: When I began storytelling, I was primarily working with children. I was an early childhood educator at the time, and storytelling was a just a natural. Became a natural part of my classroom and I did festivals, and it was always aligned with an experience with children and then maybe about, and sometimes there'd be adults that enjoyed it too, and that was great.

And then maybe about 10, 10 plus years ago. I started getting curious about storytelling with adults, [00:15:00] and I lived in pockets of places where that was like, okay. Oh, okay. Yeah, that, that, that happened. I lived in the Northeast where storytelling is just super rich, Vermont. It's not just a children's. Craft.

And then I moved to other places where people are like, you don't, adults don't do storytelling. And then I started to stumble upon certain teachers that were working primarily with adults. And this was obviously, I was well aware of Joseph Campbell's work and had been steeping in that even while I was working with kids.

So I began working with adults and the interesting thing that I feel like I've found over the years is that at children, They love stories. They are so right there with you. How many times that I've surprised the teacher, the librarian, the parent who said, oh, my kid won't sit for more than 10 minutes.

And seriously, 45 [00:16:00] minutes later they're still, they're just there eyes wide, right in the story. So if children love story and they're just naturally ready to drop, right? In my experiences at adults, Desperately need. They're the harder ones to get to the table. It's harder for them to pay attention, to put down the devices, to stop looking at their watches and actually allow themselves to come in through their imagination, to hone their listening so that they can enter into the story in their own body, and that when they do, it's a pretty remarkable and often profound experience for them.

And so adults need, children are naturals and they love, but boy, oh boy, grownups sure need that experience. That's my experience.

Lisette: Oh yeah, I think that's it. It's something that is, I, I think it's, we know this [00:17:00] consciously that that adults should connect with their inner child, should nurture that. That's something that we hear a lot in mainstream culture in one form or another, is to tap into the inner child, but, I think that is a really important point.

It's still difficult. You need to have someone skilled to be able or to be able to bring that audience in, and I think that's something that many writers, storytellers are seeking to cook their audiences in and explore the way that their own voice can do that. One of the things that I also wanna.

Continue on. This is when you look out into kind of the landscape culture. I mean you, you talked about get, forcing people to put down their devices. Obviously that's, that is something fairly new in terms of actual technology, but attention people have always been people. But I do want to ask you is in the years that you've looked at this and have been immersed in it, [00:18:00] what have you seen in the culture?

And, and when I say in the culture, I mean in, in United States culture, in Western culture specifically that you see regarding storytelling that you feel no one is really talking about or not enough people are talking about. Why do you think people aren't really talking about it and what are you doing about it?

Tracy: I think, yeah, and I'm not sure if this is gonna answer it. It might be back door kind of answer. Let's just see what happens here. Once upon a time. People sat and listened to stories. They had time, there was spaciousness in their schedule. Um, they worked hard, but at night or in the winter, there was time devoted to just sitting and listening, being comfortable listening as an act of act and imagining.

As an active thing because the world [00:19:00] was full of mystery and there were questions and mysteries and time went on things. It's overtly simplifying it to say we became busier and technology robbed us of many things, and I'm not dissing technology. But something shifted along the way. In certain cultures, when I think about my time in Scotland and out in the outer Hees, people listen to stories.

It was something that whole families did. It was community led and that has shifted and I don't know exactly how it happened. And here in, in the US it's certainly, that's, It's less, or you find, we find stories elsewhere. Stories will always slip in. They come in through tv, they come in through film, through theater, right?

Through writing, through books. They're always there. I think it, what am I doing about it? So if that, what am I doing about it? It's, I think part of it is presenting. People, [00:20:00] grownups, adults to that there's a wealth of transformation. There's some deep alchemy possible listening to stories and engaging with stories, and working with stories.

Whether you're gonna do deep, inner, psychological, emotional work, which is totally possible, or you just wanna have like this bath, this relaxation of a story told well. And understand that your active listening and your active imagining is it's co-creative. A story will never be told the same way twice.

It's always fresh. There's always some little nuance, some little shift, some little change that's different. So I don't know if that answers your question, but. I think once upon a time, stories were a lot more lively and for intergenerationally, and I think that's changed, and I think so much of my role looking back at these past [00:21:00] many years is educating people.

This is possible. Let me not tell you about it. Let me tell you a story and let's go there together and see what your experience is.

Lisette: I wanna follow this thread because there's something interesting that I have also been hearing in various conversations, and it's come up I think in a lot of ways, especially after the pandemic, which is about this idea of the third space or public spaces, it's the shrinking of the commons, right?

And so many cultures, the stories that were told were in the commons. When there's, when a story was going to be told, it was going to be told in those third spaces, in those commons, not the private spaces, not the government space or governing spaces, but rather that third communal space. And as a culture, those spaces are shrinking.

And I wonder if. What impact the pandemic has had in one, exposing that lack [00:22:00] of public space of third spaces, and two, how storytellers have, and we've seen this in the booming of streaming surfaces and now the writer strike. That's happening now. Right? You know how all these things. Fit, and I'm not sure if you have any insights into where this leads or what things that you have been doing.

If storytellers in some ways are trying to open up that third space by hell or high water, like you said, in coming up in books or television or what have you, to bring that back. Yeah. At least

Tracy: from the lens of oral storytelling. Okay. Which is different than. Written storytelling or visual digital storytelling from a perspective of, or as an oral storyteller.

I think for better or worse, and for now, the common space has become what we're doing right now. [00:23:00] And it's the good news cuz there's something and it's, is it the bad news and is it even a one or the other? It's just part of the process of how story is shifting. And what's gonna happen? I don't know. I feel at the same time that now we have virtual communal space, there are movements in storytelling that I see more so in Great Britain.

There are storytelling festivals. Great. Britain is a small, relatively small island. It's a mighty island, but it's a small island in comparison to, you know, north America. Okay. Okay. And there are so many, I can think of just five. Six, seven storytelling festivals that are established and also like popping up, like creating themselves and, and of course here in the states we've got Jonesboro.

We've got this big storytelling festival that's happened historically over quite many years in Tennessee. That happens annually, but. We're a big country. [00:24:00] There's so much liveliness there. It's an adult experience. It's a kids' experience. It's more robust. That's my experience, having a foot in each world, so to speak.

Literally, they're going over there just staying connected to the storytelling movement over there, and I, but I think more awareness is popping up and you think about. Looking back at some of the people have, who have helped bring story to this country in a profound way. Looking back, of course, Joseph Campbell, I think about Mark Twain.

I think about Dr. Clarissa Pinola. Estees. I think about Dr. Mark Shaw. I think about Dr. Sharon Blackey. I think about Michael Mead. These are folks that are stimulated and have. Stimulated the American consciousness in relationship to story, and if you haven't heard of them, I think there's, it's well worth exploring because it is part of the juiciness and the aliveness that I see happening over in [00:25:00] the uk, across the pond.

There's also Martine Protel, another storyteller, mytho poetic kind of character that's doing good work down in the southwest. Again, I don't have that answers. I think things are shifting and changing and while our common spaces physically, geographically are shrinking and changing somewhat, or at least in a state of like morphing shape, shifting as virtual reality becomes a shared space, I think that there's a conversation that's brewing.

And I'll be curious to see what's gonna happen with storytelling movement, oral storytelling in particular in the next five to 10 years here in this country.

Lisette: Yeah, I agree to your point. These models that you know do exist and have existed for a while in other cultural contexts. I think that this is something that I've also been interested in, which is how to, how to.

Get people engaged, get the [00:26:00] community. What's the communal investment in storytelling? And I think oral storytelling has this. Very ancient piece, that seed that goes back generations that I'm curious of how that plays out across cultures, how it comes forward, how is, how it leaves and it seems like because of these conversations around the commons and, and for me, what's top of mind for me right now, cuz.

Uh, for people who listen much later, the current writer strike in 2023 in May is happening right now. And that idea of what is our responsibility as storytellers?

What is the type of responsibility to our craft, to equity, to having these spaces where. Where creativity can happen and is what funded or, and is respected.

So that's, that's the, sorry I'm doing a whole pitch right now in the wga, but I am, I'm all in for them to, to [00:27:00] get what they need. Cuz I think it does affect, I think it does affect all storytellers. Is it when these big groups of storytellers shift the culture?

Tracy: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think there's something about a sense of, I wanna, the word I wanna that's coming up is displacement, and that's partially geographic, and it's partially just where we're at in time with being a human in this world and what's going on here in the us.

But there's something, a desire for deep collaboration amongst storytellers and for me, particularly amongst oral storytellers. How can we come together? We're a big country and yet we're all made up of pockets of communities. We're stronger together. That sort of energy and. Support our way into stirring up something, whether it's pop-up experiences, whether it's micro festivals, whether it's community evenings, and then there's the question of funding.

How do we make this happen? And that's a [00:28:00] whole nother the path

Lisette: of a storyteller. I think, uh, in any artist often feels very isolating. And I think there's a reason for that. And, and like you said, there's the a reason why the first impulse isn't to find a mentor, but rather to sit within self and understand our own stories and what stories we wanna tell.

I'm gonna shift gears a little bit, but I think this is related. It's going back to that, turning to this internal. With, obviously there's so many thing. Finances are all o, often a big sticking point when it comes to insecurities in any artist, but also isolation, self-doubt, identity, all those things, quality of work, everything like that.

Can you talk a little bit about a time. One time where you have doubted your ability as a

Tracy: storyteller. What's rising up right now is maybe five, six years ago there was emerging in the [00:29:00] storytelling world. Maybe it was park connected to moth. Okay. The whole moth experience and also part connected to seeing the word storytelling showing up in pretty established theater circles and where storytelling was shifting from being this traditional craft or this artistic expression into something that was more like, Exponentially larger, big

performance storytelling experiences, and people were coming through the lens of the stage.

And I'm not anti that. It's been pretty blended in now. But I think my role coming from more of a traditional storytelling background, not really telling really personal narratives up until maybe. [00:30:00] 10 years ago. Um, I think that had me doubt the, sort of, the subtlety of the craft and my way of relating to it is being more subtle.

It's, it wasn't about big amplification, it wasn't about big performance style. And, and again, not to make one path or method wrong, but I think that there was a period of time where, I doubted my relationship with story, even if it was years and years established and constantly growing, it created some doubt.

How did you

Lisette: resolve that for yourself and how are you

Tracy: resolving? Yeah, I think continuing to put myself out there, you just continue. And again, I can't not do what I do. And learning and befriending the enemy kind of energy, right? What am I afraid of? So they're coming from this position. They're taking on [00:31:00] a role and I'm not taking on a role and found.

Then you find allies. You find little breadcrumbs along the way. You find these a book or a mentor type energy, someone that you can relate to and just carry on, right? It's just what happens. Both can exist. So that was both can exist. I'm a more traditional story, oral storyteller, and I can perform next to a big performance style teller, and we can respect one another's work and nobody's wrong, and any doubt isn't really necessary, but you just have to go through it.

Lisette: Yeah, there's a meme online that I've seen before of an artist e essentially, uh, who it's someone like who made a cake in its, ah, but my cake is not as good as that. Like beautiful like wedding style cake. And then you give both to the audience and, and the audience members. Wow. Two cakes. Great. And I think there's something about that that, and one of the things that I've been [00:32:00] talking to people about his, with all this talk about economic downturn and the pressures of on creatives, on artists, To walk the path that we're walking there.

There really is always a hunger for stories, for new stories, for more stories, for different kinds of stories. It's just, it's unending. So feeling like that you, you're

limited in how you decide to walk your path or how you craft your stories, or there's just always a need for more. Because I think that we are just human in that

Tracy: case.

Yes. And I would add, I think along those lines, there as many stories as there are stars, and the way a story is told is as unique and singular as the teller, and it's culturing that in our audiences as well. [00:33:00] It's culturing that one. It's not about. This or that? It's about including it all. And what is it like to experience it this way?

And I think back to storytelling with adults, there's the devices, there's the attention span, there's the passive listening and overcoming that. But there's also the fatigue. And often adults will fall asleep. And I've made that, okay. It's not even about me. They're freaking tired. They're relaxed and that is like a win.

So they're so they fall asleep, right? So there's room for that. There's room for all of us, and we can culture that in our audiences as well, so that we can all come together and there's plenty of stories and there's plenty of everything for us to be together. I. In this conversation.

Lisette: Absolutely. And that's something that, it's funny, I had a conversation with someone last year about how they use horror podcasts to [00:34:00] fall asleep using stories to fall asleep.

That's a tale as old as time. That is also a very useful tool. And to, to that point for you, I know I've done my job when someone falls asleep, but when do you feel like you've done your job? As a

Tracy: storyteller, when the audience and me, the me, that is me, when we lose ourselves. And we're just all there together, but we're almost without identity, if that makes sense.

That we just lose ourselves, we lose our worries and our day-to-day and our struggles, and we just. Are in the story together. We're having our unique individual experiences based on our own experiences and our imagination or our listening, but we're also having this collective experience and we just move together.

Not necessarily literally, but we're [00:35:00] together. We're in sync. There's a sort of, what's the word? The zone, we go into the zone together and that's when

I know that I've done well. And afterwards people might say something, oh, I, but it's, I feel that connection that we're moving together. And that makes me pretty excited.

Lisette: It is a beautiful feeling. It's the same thing when you're writing and you get into that same flow. It's like you, you lose part of yourself and you're just in the story. It's, uh, but you're do it when you do it with other people. That's a, it's a whole other, it's this, it's a similar but very, I think that's a beautiful way to describe when you feel satisfied with your work.

So I have one more question and it's the most important question, which is, Once again, tell me why do you tell stories?

Tracy: I tell stories because stories are living wild. Trickster [00:36:00] beings. We are indigenous stories and stories are indigenous to us as human beings, and it's an art and a craft, and it's an honor to be engaging in the play of that with others who show up and are curious to.

Hear a story.

Lisette: Thank you, Tracy. That's a beautiful answer and beautiful stories that you've told today. I hope that everyone listening here checks out Tracy's work. I will be obviously linking her bio in the show notes. I will also be linking a couple of the books that you mentioned as resources for those who want to dive a little deeper.

But do you have any final words for us?

Tracy: I guess the final words are, so I'm an oral storyteller. I've been doing this for almost 28 years, and this year I published my first book, so right now, I'm so curious, and I've been writing for years in various capacities, but I'm really [00:37:00] interested in the play of orality imagination and the written word, and how we're culturally so hardwired to that linear on the page experience.

And that we've lost something as we've turned away for all the reasons from the oral magic that can happen and one's not better than the other, but both have their absolute value and place in, in a whole way of being as humans.

Lisette: I know I'm going to be checking that out. I will be linking that as well to the show notes.

I think you are also talking to the right people of people who are interested in oral storytelling and audio storytelling. Yeah, everybody should check that out too. Thank you again, Tracy. I appreciate your time and your stories. I hope you have a wonderful rest of your week and everyone else, I hope you enjoyed your time by the Hearth with, with the two of us.

[00:38:00] Thank you so much for listening.

Tracy: Thanks, Lisette.