

The background of the cover is a light yellow gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs. Each motif consists of a short stem with two leaves, one slightly larger than the other, pointing in opposite directions. These motifs are scattered across the cover, with some appearing near the top and others near the bottom.

STORY MEDICINE

**Multicultural Tales of Healing and
Transformation**

Norma J. Livo

 *Greenwood*
PUBLISHING GROUP

STORY MEDICINE

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STORY MEDICINE

MULTICULTURAL TALES OF HEALING AND
TRANSFORMATION



Norma J. Livo

2001
Libraries Unlimited
Teacher Ideas Press
A Division of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
Englewood, Colorado

To Andrea and Brooke



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Libraries Unlimited
Teacher Ideas Press
A Division of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 6633
Englewood, CO 80155-6633
1-800-237-6124
www.lu.com

ISBN 1-56308-894-0

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for all the healers who have given of themselves throughout history. Also, I am indebted to Barbara Ittner of Libraries Unlimited for her perceptiveness and her caring for and encouraging of this book.

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FOREWORD

Upon learning that Norma Livo intended to write a book about medicine and healers, a smile came quickly to my face. Stories, cultures, traditions, legends, and even some myths are to be found in abundance when exploring the colorful history of the healing arts. Who better to explore them than Norma!

Storytelling provides a timeless thread that tethers us to both the past and to our current experience; it enriches a legacy we will pass to the future. This is just how the profession of medicine impressed me from my first day of medical school. Every lesson was a story, a discovery passed on by earlier healers, some stories traced to antiquity. Above all, medicine, then and now, has proven to be a study in humanity, in the very nature of persons and their brethren, and inevitably a revelation of spirituality as both patient and healer grow into the inescapable realization of their own mortality. Along the way, various elements of storytelling prove just as integral to the healing arts as they are to folk arts and legend. Norma Livo recalls “healing rituals,” and a day in my practice reveals many. An examination is itself something of a “story” evolving. From the prologue as a patient and I exchange pleasantries, to the introduction as I explain how to dress in one of my (always the wrong size) examination gowns, and then the flow of the story itself.

Each system examined unfolds a new chapter, as my battery of questions leads to the genuine ritual of the physical examination, often colored by anecdotes derived through the lessons of my mentors (who each had a story to tell). The completed evaluation will flow logically and coherently as a whole, yet each individual chapter holds great significance—both alone and as part of the whole. The practitioner then places this experience into a mental catalog of similar exams, similar stories, and incorporates the teachings of other storytellers. In this manner an individual patient encounter becomes a rich part of a doctor's own tradition—and a part of medical “folklore.”

As a story is told, it by necessity demands listening. As healers, we must be expert listeners. We are granted a passport into people's lives, a sacred bestowal of trust that derives from the traditions of our predecessors, and, ultimately, from the Hippocratic oath. I was touched that Norma included this most important instrument of my profession in this book. For this, I offer true thanks. Not infrequently all doctors should revisit this profound document, study it slowly, and realize anew the marvelous and solemn tradition it entrusts to us.

A smile and a cure are perhaps the most gratifying reward for a healer's toils. This is what the shaman seeks, what the medic risks all for on the battlefield, what the nun and priest, during medieval times, contracted the plague trying to attain. Trudging through a snowstorm to reach a bedridden grandmother, the general practitioner in Nebraska brings hope in a "little black bag." Yes, indeed, I agree with Norma when she recognizes stories worth telling hidden in the timeless chronicles of the healing arts.

James R. Regan, M.D.
President of the Denver Medical Society

A SHORT HISTORY OF MEDICINE

I have an earache—

- 2000 B.C. Here, eat this root
1000 B.C. That root is heathen. Here, say this prayer.
A.D. 1850 That prayer is superstitious. Here, drink this
 potion.
A.D. 1940 That potion is snake oil. Here, swallow this pill.
A.D. 1985 That pill is ineffective. Here, take this antibiotic.
A.D. 2000 That antibiotic is artificial. Here, eat this root.

Anonymous

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INTRODUCTION

How This Book Came About

It all started in the waiting room at the doctor's office one day. I was eavesdropping on the conversations of other waiting patients. There were remarks such as, "Dr. R. is a really good doctor, he listens." "Dr. R. is a really bright young doctor." "I went to another doctor who was too brusque with me." "Dr. R. tells me the truth every time." And so it went in quiet murmurs. As I listened, I thought of all the stories these people (strangers) were telling each other.

When it was my turn to see Dr. R. I told him that he had passed the waiting room test and told him some of the remarks. He laughed and told me a story about his elder, elegant, partner. It hit me! Here was the stuff of stories and a book about stories from the doctor's little black bag. I told Dr. R. what I had just decided and again he laughed and replied, "I'd like to read that one!"

I was subsequently sent to the lab to have some blood drawn for tests. I told Dr. R.'s nurse what brainstorm I had just had, and she started to tell me stories from the nurses' perspective as blood flowed from my body into glass tubes. Later that afternoon, I was picking up my new glasses at the optical office, and the same thing happened. The fellow adjusting my glasses, after he heard my comments about "I bet you hear a lot of stories as you do your work," told me the story of a great grandfather who got a thorn in his eye. Now this was back in the old frontier days and the man was left in the care of Yaki Indians. (Unfortunately, even with their herbs and salves, the eye got infected and had to eventually be removed and replaced by a glass eye.) There were stories everywhere!

I wondered what folk stories had to say about doctors, healing, and cures. Thus I began my research into this fascinating topic.

Actually, doctors are storytellers for their patients. We expect them to tell us the stories about our particular maladies, to predict the future and to know the endings for these—the prognosis. Research in medicine is story, too. It is a working out of a universal story from particular stories. What are the stories behind the development of vaccinations? The discovery of medicines? How did they figure out what works for what ailments?

In this time of so-called insurance reform, malpractice litigation, herbal and holistic treatment, health shops, wellness centers, doctors/shamans/*curanderos*, scientific advances, and new pharmaceutical discoveries, do the old stories of medicine, healing, and cures hold meaning? References to medical interests are everywhere in the news. You'll find them in cartoons, science reports, lifestyle sections, financial and business columns, sport stories, and religions. Media entertainment has given us *Dr. Kildaire*, *ER*, *Chicago Hope* and other medical programs.

How much has medical practice (do you love the word "practice?"), and our respect and reverence for healers in various cultures, changed or stayed the same? What is important? What is lasting? These are some of the questions I hope to analyze from folk stories. Just what does a doctor keep in his little black bag?

It is not only the medical profession that heals, our stories provide us vaccinations, preventatives, and cures, conferring some degree of immunity against social, emotional, and physical pressures. How is this so?

Purpose, Scope, and Organization

My intent is to explore folk stories and show how they can relate and contribute to the healing professions. Together we will examine how stories can be part of the doctor's little black bag.

Another purpose of the book is to provide stories as examples of healing and invite readers to see general and metaphorical similarities to their own lives and other stories. This book is designed to be used by readers and listeners of all ages. You may discover that stories have been part of your own healing, although you never recognized what was happening.

This book is divided into theme-based sections. After a brief discussion of the healing power of stories, what healing is, and how stories heal, I present stories with healing themes. These are grouped into sections on healing the self, healing relationships, healing the community, and healing the Earth. In the appendixes we explore some of the multicultural views of healing, including folk medicine and the roots of Western medicine (the Hippocratic oath and the history of the Caduceus).

I have selected stories from around the world to exemplify the different themes of the book. These tales illustrate physical, emotional, spiritual, and philosophical aspects of healing from a broad multicultural perspective.

How to Use This Book

How can this book be used? That depends on who is using it. Certainly parents, teachers, and people in healing professions or organizations devoted to furthering the wholesome development of individuals will apply their own specific points of view. Storytellers may want to select tales to share and discuss with specific groups they work with. For example, "Iron Logic" could provide a humorous springboard to a discussion on the topic of aging. Or a more serious approach to the same topic might be taken with "Abandonment Canyon" or "The Golden Cup," in which the contributions of the elderly are clearly conveyed.

Of course, educators looking for tales to complement social studies or environmental curricula can also use this collection. Students will also find this a rich resource for term papers and school reports on subjects ranging from history to science. For instance, the legend "Constantine, Emperor of Rome" is a natural for those teaching or learning about the Roman Empire, just as "Silver Heels" and "The Legend of Hackberry Hill" fit in well with the study of westward expansion in U.S. history. Tales in the "Healing the Earth" section are appropriate for environmental studies. They can be cited in reports, used for oral presentations, or simply read as a means of piquing student interest.

Psychologists, therapists, school counselors, and clergy can share such tales as "The Ugly Duckling" to broach the topic of alienation or "The Tiger's Whisker" to demonstrate the importance of patience and understanding in getting through tough times and relationship challenges. Many of these stories also can be used effectively as tools for "character" or "values" education. Consider the tale "The Wonder Doctor," which promotes an enlightened vision of the true healer and shows the effects of greed and dishonesty.

Finally, parents will find many tales to share and discuss with their children; general readers with an interest in folklore and healing will also enjoy and learn from this collection.

With each story, I offer a brief comment based on my own impressions and interpretations of the tales. These are meant to stimulate thoughts and discussion, not to restrict the story's meaning or use in any way. As you read and enjoy, I hope you will find other meanings and applications for the tales.

Each reader and listener is unique, and each reader or listener will develop his or her own thoughts as each story is read. This book is intended as a guidepost for the long journey that is the human enterprise.

In this era, when we sorely need healing on all levels—individual, interpersonal, social, and environmental—we also have the opportunity to draw on not only the wisdom of the past, but the wisdom of other cultures and peoples. The stories and comments in this collection are here for your enjoyment, nourishment, and education. Throughout history, people from around the world have known that understanding is the first step to healing. It is my sincere hope that these stories plant the seeds of understanding in the reader and stimulate further exploration and sharing of the wisdom and healing power of stories.

Part I



Stories and Healing



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THE HEALING POWER OF STORIES

Personal Stories

I became a believer in the healing powers of stories ten years ago at a storytelling conference I had organized. For two days, 350 people participated in the event, held by the University of Colorado at Denver. At the end of the conference, a sweet-faced, older woman thanked me. I asked her why she was thanking me so profusely. She replied, "I am the mother of the grocery store clerk who was killed by a robber at his store two years ago." She mentioned her son's name, and I remembered the murder.

"This conference has helped me more than anything else I have done since his death. That is why I thank you," she said. "The stories I have heard in the last two days have made me cry, laugh, and find that I am once again able to feel more than just deep depression."

If that isn't healing, what is? Stories, especially those told by a human storyteller, have the rich ability to touch people. What more can we do to heal than touch people and share our imaginations?

Another time, I had an opportunity to witness the healing power of stories within my own family. Some years ago, my brother Howard, who was two years older than I, was diagnosed with brain cancer. The medical profession could not do anything to help him. They tried several procedures, but his cancer progressed at a horrific pace. Howard's wife, Maxine, telephoned from Pennsylvania to tell me what was happening. She said they were keeping him in the hospital to document events because they really couldn't do anything for him. I flew back to Pennsylvania, and Maxine and I decided that between us we would get him back to his beloved home and farm and out of the hospital.

Maxine couldn't take any more time off of work because their health and medical insurance depended on her job. I went to the hospital and was directed to Howard's room. I found him sitting by a window, head on his hand, staring out. Our reunion was so touching. I told Howdy that I was going to take him home, and he cried. I went to the nurses' station and told them that I had come to take him back home. "But the doctor needs to sign off on that," I was told.

"Don't worry, I am a doctor, and I am signing him off," I told her. I proceeded to pack his things, and as we were leaving his room, a nurse came in with some releases for me to sign. I did, and we left hand-in-hand.

Back at the farm, Howard became animated. It was obvious he needed his family, his birds singing outside, and the comfort of his beloved farm.

Howard had married when he was 50, and he and Maxine became parents of a son, Daniel, the next year. Dan was now a teenager in a desperate home. It was summer, so he was out of school.

The stories started on the front porch swing. I told stories of the mischievous things we had done growing up. Howard's disease had damaged his speech, so he could only respond with facial and body movements. As I spoke, I could see that I had hit pay dirt. His spirits became livelier. He smiled and motioned for more stories. Dan was hearing family stories he never heard before. He was grinning now, too—no longer in panic and scared as he had been when we began. I told stories for a week. In the evening, Howard was able to build a bonfire in the spot where our whole family for years had held wiener roasts, told stories, and sung songs. Our four children considered these magic events. At this particular night's bonfire, Howdy indicated he wanted to hear some folk stories like we used to tell our kids around the fire. His responses on that night were so special for us all.

So the stories went for a week. Then I had to leave for Colorado, and I was aware that this might be the last time I would see my brother alive. Indeed, that was true, for very shortly after I left, he quietly died. The doctor and visiting nurse said they had never seen such a peaceful, gentle giant as Howard was at the end.

The stories had helped Howdy, me, Maxine, and Dan. Through our stories, Dan had heard so many different sides of his father that he had never known. I am convinced it was these stories and Howard's being home with his family that were the best medicine at this point of his life.

Storytelling has power. When you tell a story, the listener becomes an active part of the telling. Stories connect people. Storytelling transforms and transmits information to the listener and validates the teller's truth. It transcends time and orders events to make existence more sensible and meaningful. Storytelling brings a higher level of comprehensibility to the things we know and are learning. One of the

most important aspects of storytelling is the sharing of imagination—not only that of the storyteller but also anyone who is listening.

Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." He was, of course, right. The word *imagination* is related to *mage* (which means magician or wise man), magic, image. It is a special ability to see reality, fantasy, and possibilities. Stories help us to develop and share our imaginations. From my personal experience I know how effective stories and storytelling are to sharing, transforming, and making existence more meaningful. Today storytelling is being used in senior centers, with troubled youths, and in addiction programs. Therapists and psychologists have used storytelling as paths to wholeness for decades.

There is one more story I'd like to share to demonstrate the healing power of story. It is a personal story of how an experience combined with story helped me more than anything the medical profession had done up to then.

I had read and heard many stories related to blindness and accepted them easily. My favorite such story is "Jumping Mouse" found in *Seven Arrows* by Hyemeyohsts Storm (Ballantine, 1972), which is a story of the Plains Indian people.

In 1986 I woke one morning to horror—I was blind in my right eye! Absolutely and totally blind. Of course, I went to the doctor, who told me that I had a central retinal vein occlusion; the vein had burst and covered my retina with blood. (Subsequently, I received 2,000 laser shots to seal off the bleeding—it was that or physically lose the eye.)

The glorious fall weather was inviting to me after the initial blindness. I decided to take my Jeep and spend a day in the Colorado mountains. I had two purposes: I wanted to see how one-eyed driving went, and I wanted to take some photographs. Photography had been a pleasurable hobby of mine, and I was concerned because I had always used my right eye to focus my 35-millimeter camera. I realized I had several new habits to develop that my new vision limitations dictated.

I successfully (and with some growing confidence) drove up to the mountains. I took the steep, narrow shelf road to our cabin, a challenge even with both eyes working. After opening the cabin, I hiked up the road with my camera. The following story is an article I wrote about my amazing experience with nature and blindness. Aesop could have added to it with another fable, I am sure.



Getting Ready for Winter*

Harvest time is coming and the animals of the wild prepare carefully. The squirrels collect pinecones and other available goodies. The stellar jays raucously demand the crumbs and peanuts we place on the boulder outside our mountain cabin. We sit on the deck and watch them gather the treats and stash them away. The jays glide in, pick up their good gifts, and wing away to the trees by a nearby stream. They deposit their loot in the crotch of branches or under the tree bark and swoop back for more.

Late fall trips to Mount Evans find the mountain goats shedding their old coats for new winter ones. Their shaggy covering resembles that of some bag lady from downtown Denver.

The aspen trees get their leaves ready for their glorious seasonal binge of color and light. The leaves start turning nearest the trunk, and then the change spreads out to the tips of the branches. The golden offerings dance in the crisp breeze and are enriched by the deep blue of the sky. In these resplendent forests the elk bugle announces the coming of winter. They are advertising their territory, and their calls are another signal for us humans of the passing of the seasons.

Up above the 9,000-foot level, the marmots, or whistle pigs, are taking their last sunbaths of the season. When approached, they whistle a shrill warning to each other.

If you observe and are patient, many of these mountain creatures can be caught in the act of preparing for winter. During a recent October, I was treated to the food-gathering actions of a new, to me, small critter. I was hiking in the woods above Eldora, crunching leaves underfoot and absorbing the peace. I spied movement near a large boulder and went over to check it out. Hiding on the other side of the rock was a reddish brown weasel. He peeked out at me and then quickly ducked back. We skirmished around the rock and then he dashed up the hill. I hung around the rock and was pleased to see him returning down the hillside with a large vole (a small tailless rodent


that averages from four to six inches in length) in his mouth. When he again noticed me, he dropped his banquet and disappeared farther downhill. Now I had him. I had his vole, so I waited. Sure enough, he scampered back up to me but surprised me by continuing past me and the dropped vole. When I saw him again, he was heading downhill with a second vole in his mouth.

He returned shortly and headed up the hill again. And then raced down with yet a third vole. I was beginning to wonder how many voles he had stashed away. I felt certain that he would eventually be back for the vole I was guarding. Sure enough, this time he edged near to the rock and the abandoned vole. He stopped, stared at me with his pussycat face and prepared to battle this monster for the vole. He jumped behind the vole, and assumed an attack stance. When no attack came from me, he grabbed our vole and tore off with it.

Maybe somewhere this winter, up above 9,000 feet and under the snow, the weasel has again filled his larder and is surviving the winter by crunching on delicious vole bones and flesh. I'll also rationalize the fact that there are at least three voles that won't have to worry about where their food is coming from.

“Getting Ready for Winter” by Norma J. Livo. *Colorado Outdoors*. September/October, 1987, 23.

*This article makes no mention of my blindness and the need for this trip. However, this incident was an absolute gift to me. I shot pictures of the various events with the weasel and our vole. Awkwardly using my left eye to focus, I fumbled, but I shot pictures.



Yes, the pictures turned out less than sharp, but the weasel was distinguishable. I had these images blown up to twelve-by-sixteen inches and framed. This day, this trip, and this event gave me more therapy and courage than I could ever have dreamed of. I knew life would go on—it would not be perfect, but exciting surprises waited around every corner and rock. Aesop would have liked that!

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Since the story was symbolic for me in my new blindness, isn't it a coincidence that my weasel was stashing away voles? Voles have notoriously bad eyesight because they live underground! Experiencing the event and writing about it were definitely therapeutic for me.

My own experiences have shown me the healing power of story—of sharing stories. Perhaps you have similar stories of your own. I hope this work encourages you to share those stories and the story medicine of others, for in the words of a wonderful author and storyteller,

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories. That is how people care for themselves.

—*Barry Lopez*