

The Web Of Silence: Storytelling's Power to Hypnotize

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from: The National Storytelling Journal Spring/Summer 1988

"It comes in through the top of my head and flows down through my body and out my feet. It spreads out through the audience and spins a cocoon around us, a web of silence. It creates a sacred space." -- Elizabeth Ellis

I. ENTRANCED BY STORIES

"Entranced . . . complete absorption" . . . captivated
. . . total attention . . . "; . . . completely enthralled . . .
"; . . . mesmerizing . . . hypnotic . . . "

We hear such descriptions of storytelling events so often that we hardly notice the words. The authors may intend little more than poetic hyperbole. All stories have a "magic" about them, and all good tellings create a special experience for teller and listener alike.

But sometimes it goes much deeper than that. Sometimes those descriptions are literally, scientifically true. Certain stories, told by some tellers, can induce an altered state of consciousness verging on hypnosis: the "storylistening trance."

Have you seen the faces? A columnist for The New Yorker, reporting on a Central Park festival, wrote, "...when people are listening to stories they like they sit very quietly, their breathing relaxes, and their eyes look big and luminous." (1) Wrinkles melt, lips part, even elderly faces glow like the youngest. An audience can fall so still at a powerful telling that the space between bodies seems wider, for no one moves until the story's end.

A teacher was so impressed at her class' storylistening behavior that she exclaimed, "I just know they're learning listening skills!" But were those dreamy faces even in the same room with us? Clinical psychologist Cheryl Kilpatrick came to observe and made the diagnosis:

"Quite normal," smiled Dr. Kilpatrick, "they're just in a light trance state."

The symptoms she diagnosed are those recognized by hypnotherapists in their patients: "a flattening of facial expression, staring, absence of blinking, and almost complete immobility" (2). A more technical list cites: "pupil dilation, flattened cheeks, skin pallor, lack of movement, slowed blink and swallowing reflex, lowered and slowed respiration." (3)

Do you recognize the symptoms? Have you felt them yourself? This magic spell under which we can fall, literally "entranced" by words not just spoken but spun, is an awesome experience we share with our ancestors.

Ancient storytellers described the storylistening trance. In "The Legend of the Destruction of Kash", which Joseph Campbell suggests may echo historical events of perhaps two thousand years ago, Far-li-mas the storyteller was commanded by his king:

"Far-li-mas, today the day has arrived when you must cheer me. Tell me a story." "The performance is quicker than the command," said Far-li-mas, and began. The king and his guests forgot to drink, forgot to breathe. The slaves forgot to serve. They, too, forgot to breathe. For the art of Far-li-mas was like hashish, and, when he had ended, all were as though enveloped in a delightful swoon. The king had forgotten his thoughts of death. Nor had any realized that they were being held from twilight until dawn; but when the guests departed they found the sun in the sky! (4)

Far-li-mas and the king's sister began holding nightly trysts while he kept the court thus entranced. Later he wielded his hypnotic power to destroy the corrupt priesthood and save his own life, his beloved, and his king.

A modern storyteller may flinch at Far-li-mas' exploitation of the storylistening trance and hope such feats are as fictional as flying carpets. As pointed out by collector Leo Frobenius, the teller Arach-ben-Hassul spoke in a florid style reminiscent of the classical period of the Arabian Nights -- whose plot also hinges on storytelling's power to entrance. No doubt the original tellers exaggerated for the sake of the plot. But if you've felt something like this yourself, if you've seen the faces, you know what inspired their tales.

This power is not to be invoked lightly. An ancient oath of doctors cautioned, "Above all, do no harm." If storytellers are to wield this hypnotic power respectfully and responsibly, we must try to understand what we are doing.

Surprisingly little guidance comes from anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, poets, and folklorists who allude to the storytelling trance in their writings but don't explain it. They rhapsodize about the teller's skill and the special bond between teller and listener; then they change the subject. But what is happening? Why does it happen sometimes, and not other times? Can such a powerful experience be dangerous?

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"In helping a patient enter a trance, the therapist captures the patient's attention and directs it inward, leading him to an inner search and a hypnotic response . . ."

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We can find research in related fields which may begin to suggest some answers. From studies of medical hypnosis and hypnotherapy we can learn to what degree the storylistening trance resembles other hypnotic states. Then, to understand what makes the storylistening trance happen, we must study its elements: the story, the teller, and the listener. Each contributes to storytelling's special hypnotic power.

II. TRANCE

Aside from Dr. Kilpatrick's class visit, no researchers seem to be studying the storylistening trance in a natural (audience) setting. We can draw analogies, however, from studies of medical hypnosis. Of special interest are the followers of psychotherapist Dr. Milton Erickson, who use both hypnosis and a kind of storytelling with their patients.

Only late-night movies still associate hypnosis with swinging pocket watches and villains gloating, "You are under my power." Trance is anything but a passive stupor, despite the derivation of the word "hypnosis" from a Greek word for sleep. Relaxation and trust are important; sleep-like behavior is irrelevant. Medical scientists now believe that trance is a normal and very common alternative form of consciousness, an intense form of focused attention. People in trance are relaxed but alert, physically motionless but mentally active, concentrating very hard.

Trance, like storytelling, occurs worldwide. An amazing proportion of peoples not only recognize trance but formalize it in their cultures. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon reviewed studies of 485 societies in all parts of the world: "The presence of institutionalized forms of altered states of consciousness in 90% of our sample societies represents a striking finding which suggests that we are, indeed, dealing with a matter of major importance and not merely a bit of anthropological esoterica." (5)

Not everyone is equally susceptible. Medical researchers find that although at least 75% of patients can reach a trance deep enough to eliminate the need for anaesthetics during surgery, from 5 to 10% of all people cannot be hypnotized at all. Can these individuals be entranced by stories? No one has tested them. It is true, however, that not everyone finds stories equally fascinating. The school auditorium will have a few children who continue to wriggle and bother their classmates; at the Civitans' meeting one or two gentlemen in the back may sit with folded arms and closed faces. Yet when a truly powerful story casts its spell, the web of silence seems to fall upon every one in the audience. Perhaps the exempt few, overwhelmed by the experience of the majority, merely hold still out of politeness -- or awe.

Dr. Martin Orne of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School told an interviewer, "Many of us are convinced that the ability to enter hypnosis is the skill of the subject, not the hypnotist." (6) Medical hypnotists characterize a good subject as someone "willing to trust", with "a practiced ability to concentrate". Psychologists studying the traits of highly hypnotizable subjects (7) found high capacity for deep absorption, expanded responsiveness and awareness, greater childhood involvement in reading and fantasy play, and high levels of imagination and creativity. They sound like an ideal storytelling audience for storytelling.

Both hypnosis and storytelling require a setting which fosters good concentration. People must be comfortable enough to relax, and there should be a minimum of distractions. However, even when the audience sits on creaky bleachers in the hot sun and jackhammers pound across the street, as happened at one ill-starred outdoor festival,

certain powerful stories can still conjure a wall of silence within which the magic happens.

Methods of opening and closing are important to both. Some hypnotherapists use verbal techniques of trance induction which curiously resemble traditional story openings. "In helping a patient enter a trance, the therapist captures the patient's attention and directs it inward, leading him to an inner search and a hypnotic response," writes Sidney Rosen, describing the work of Milton H. Erickson, M.D. (8) . The school of hypnotherapy founded by Erickson treats hypnotized patients by telling them custom-composed stories. As in Sufi tales of an older healing tradition, Dr. Rosen explains, "therapeutic suggestions are interspersed in stories whose content is far removed both from the patient's concerns and the therapist's overt focus."

Although some of Dr. Erickson's followers now use taped routines to train their patients in self-hypnosis, Rosen says that Erickson often talked his patients into trance by chatting about apparently irrelevant and illogical things which seemed to misdirect or confuse, like the paradoxical openings of some traditional tales:

"There was a time, and there was not a time, when the sky was green and the earth was a thick stew..." (9)

"Somewhere beyond the Red Sea./ Beyond the Blue Forest./ Beyond the Glass Mountain, and beyond the Straw Town./ Where they sift water and pour sand..." (10)

"Once upon a time/ And twice on a time/ and all times together/ as ever I heard of,..." (11)

"Once upon a time/ and a very good time it was -- / Tho it wasn't my time/ nor your time/ nor anyone else's time..." (12)

Stephen and Carol Lankton, also students of Erickson, found that paradox alone could induce brief trance. They suggest that a high speed mental search of the unconscious occurs when illogical logic temporarily overloads the conscious mind. (13) The patient's intense inner attention produces the outward trance symptoms.

A different model of the brain, which speaks of "right/left hemispheres", suggests that a logically preposterous phrase sends the left hemisphere (typified as verbal and logical) off chasing its metaphorical tail while freeing the right hemisphere (the one characterized as visual and associative) to travel in fantasy. In medical hypnosis, Dr. Orne has noted: "Work that is still in progress suggests, but has yet to prove, that during hypnosis there may be changes in the way the two hemispheres of the brain are activated." (6b) One could imagine that during trance -- or while listening to a powerful story -- both hemispheres are kept fully occupied so that distractions are less likely to interfere. Thus, attention remains intensely focused; the listener is entranced.

At any rate "Once upon a time" is paradox enough to signal English speakers to send their ordinary rules of logic on vacation. "How", asked a serious child, "can you be upon a time?"

When the story is over, the teller, like the responsible hypnotist, reorients the listener to the everyday world. Traditional taglines like "And the person who last told this tale is still alive, as you see" ("The Bremen Town Musicians", brothers Grimm) or "Snip, snap, snout, my tale's told out" work like fingers snapping to break the spell. Hypnotists may ease patients out of trance with a standard "When I say _____, you will awaken." Dr. Erickson often added, "... and my voice will go with you.",

When a story has been especially powerful, many tellers are reluctant to jolt listeners with an abrupt shift to a different activity. They especially avoid immediate discussion of story meaning or symbolism. Ericksonian therapists feel that the story they've given their patient must slowly "set" or "gel" in the subconscious. They believe that premature analysis of symbols may turn a subconscious problem into a larger conscious one. (14) Bruno Bettelheim, from a very different therapeutic school, wrote eloquently about the value of certain stories for children's emotional development but cautioned that the stories "may be compared to a scattering of seeds, only some of which will be implanted in the mind of the child." (15) These must remain undisturbed "until the child's mind has reached a state suitable for their germination".

Our ability as listeners to see pictures in our heads and ignore images falling on our eyes implies another similarity between hypnosis and storytelling. Recent research at Stanford University Medical Center found that hypnosis can change actual patterns of EEGs (brain wave activity) associated with watching bright displays on a video monitor. Normally when a person looks intently at something, a certain EEG pattern appears in the visual cortex of the brain. But when David Spiegel's hypnotized subjects were told to visualize a cardboard box blocking their view of the screen, the EEG peaks caused by looking at the video display were much weaker, especially in the right hemisphere. Earlier work had suggested that hypnotized people rely more on the right hemisphere. Dr. Spiegel told an interviewer that these results imply "people who are hypnotized can tune out what is actually coming to their eyes, and instead focus on an internally generated image." (16)

This sounds a great deal like what we experience when we visualize while listening deeply to a story. Afterward we may remember the pictures in our heads, but scarcely remember seeing the teller. Dr. Spiegel's research suggests that our brains in fact did not "see" the teller.

Can hypnosis be dangerous? The evil hypnotist Svengali never lived, but modern therapists can swap a few horror stories of cases improperly handled. Frank McHovec, PhD, reported to the American Psychological Association on his work with "hypnosis casualties". (17) Ill-taught practitioners, he warned, may improperly hypnotize groups too large for individual supervision. An image intended to relax all may terrify one: a sunny beach scene was traumatic for one near victim of drowning. Improperly reoriented to reality, accidentally left with uncorrected suggestions, subjects have suffered seriously.

There have been no scientific studies of the storylistening trance, although Dr. Kilpatrick characterized it as "light". Professional hypnotists intentionally put their patients much further "under." All hypnosis, furthermore, requires the subject's cooperation. When we sit frozen in stillness for long seconds after the story ends, our immobility is strictly voluntary. "This kind of story leaves people quiet," observes storyteller Finley Stewart. "They don't want to come out."

Vivid as the experience may be, we are never helpless like Far-Li-Mas' fictional victims. Ernest R. Hilgard, pioneering researcher in hypnosis, explains that "you simply come out of hypnosis" if asked to commit deeds against your principles. Dr. Hilgard feels that hypnosis depends mainly on the ability to absorb oneself in fantasy to the extent that they "set ordinary reality aside for a while". He calls this phenomenon of dissociated consciousness "the Hidden Observer". Subjects often smile when told a forearm is too heavy to lift, he says, because the Hidden Observer knows this to be absurd although another part of the mind calmly plays along with the suggestion. Dr. Hilgard points out that multilevel processing of information goes on in everyday life too; hypnosis exaggerates it. (18)

Thus, even while most of your mind is rapt in stories, the Hidden Observer still hears the jackhammers, notices that your foot has fallen asleep, and wonders how long until the next bathroom break? You are mesmerized, entranced, transfixed, so long as you choose to ignore the Hidden Observer; yet you could break away at any point.

The unusually deep stillness which can fall upon storylisteners appears to be a true altered state of consciousness, the storylistening trance. There are many coincidences between the handling of hypnosis and the procedures of storytelling. The kinship between the two arts is striking.

Deep hypnosis, which may be beneficial or potentially dangerous, requires highly trained practitioners. The storylistening trance is a much lighter form of divided awareness and intense, focused concentration, with after effects no worse than a bad dream -- or a touched conscience. It is not dangerous in the medical sense, but it is certainly awesome in the spiritual sense.

But how can we tell when it's going to happen? Where does the entrancing power come from?

"And when the storyteller came to the part where the hero held up the head of the gorgon Medusa, she held her own hand aloft. I could have sworn then - as I can swear now - that I saw the snakes from the gorgon's head curling and uncurling around the storyteller's arm. "At that moment I and all the other listeners around me were unable to move. It was as if we, and not Medusa's intended victims, had been turned to stone..." "...It was simply the power of the teller and the tale. "We were there, all of us, caught up in the centrifugal force of the spinning story. And we would not be let go until the teller finished and the tale was done." -- Jane Yolen (19)

Anthropologists, folklorists, poets, and other writers eloquently describe the storylistening trance. Little, however, has been written about what causes or controls this distilled essence of story magic.

One need not analyze the storylistening trance in order to experience it. Yet if we are to share this awesome hypnotic power responsibly and respectfully, we must try to understand its special elements. The story, the teller, and the listener each contribute to the power. All must work together to invoke it. The weakness of any one can spoil the spell.

III. THE POWER OF THE STORY

"Hear and attend and listen; for this befell and behappened and became and was, O my Best Beloved, when the Tame animals were wild." -- Rudyard Kipling (20)

Stories in themselves have a special power. They compel us to "hear and attend and listen" in a way that other forms of speech do not. Public speakers, from pulpit to politics, know how an anecdote can make an audience's ears perk up.

Master teachers use stories to help students absorb, understand, and remember effortlessly. "Without Story, information is nothing but a lot of bricks lying about waiting for someone to make constructive use of them," wrote Aidan Chambers (21) Facts may be the smallest units of information, but a story is what makes the facts make sense.

"Story form" has, by Aristotle's classical definition, a beginning which sets up expectations, a middle which complicates them, and an end which satisfactorily resolves them. Educator Kieran Egan, who especially advocates using story form to teach all subjects to young students, notes that a story "is the linguistic unit that can ultimately fix the meaning of the events that compose it." A story creates a whole "within which meaning and feeling are bound together and ultimately fixed." A story not only makes sense to us, it makes us care.(22)

Researchers disagree whether our ability to interpret and use story form is a learned skill, or something innate in the human brain like our use of language syntax. Arthur Applebee and Brian Sutton-Smith (23) studied the increasing complexity of children's original stories as a function of the teller's age, and concluded that their story-handling ability was learned. Jean Matter Mandler (24) , taking a different approach, found little difference between five year olds and adults in their ability to understand and remember stories they heard. She even presented scrambled story elements and found the listeners remembered them into proper story form ("story schema") order, regardless of age, education, or cultural background. If the ability to use story form is not actually innate, we learn it very early along with other fundamental skills of language. Story form seems very basic to human thinking.

Even severe neurological impairment does not destroy it. Storyteller Pat Nelson reports that a young mentally handicapped student repeated one of her stories verbatim. Startled teachers insisted that this student, not even classified as "educable" but merely "trainable," was "not supposed to be able to do that with his IQ!" Psychologist Renee Fuller (25) worked with severely brain-damaged children, IQs of 20 and 30, who were "suddenly able to gain reading comprehension because they were fed stories instead of a disjointed series of facts." Dr. Fuller suggests that a "story engram" may be built into the human brain. Individuals with an "IQ of 30 have only the barest inkling of language, knowing fewer words than the signing apes do. That these could understand stories implies that story comprehension is so basic that it survives severe neurological damage." The human brain has a special affinity for story form.

There may even be something specifically "human" about the use of story form. Chimpanzees and gorillas can learn to communicate in language symbols, although psychologists still argue whether they use syntax as humans do. In signs and symbols our primate cousins can cuss, lie, and invent poetic neologisms, but they can't tell stories. Psycholinguists agree that primates are incapable of narrative beyond simple report such as "Cat fell in water, cat all wet, poor cat." A human toddler quickly surpasses this, moving on to complex and fantastical make-believe.(26) Storytelling, more than language use, may represent the watershed between primate and human.

All stories do not, however, have equal hypnotic power. Jokes and cracker-barrel yarns are fun, but they lack this power. Fables and satires can both entertain and instruct, but seldom have the power. Adventures both comic and swashbuckling rarely do.

If you have attended any major storytelling festival you surely have fallen under the web of silence at least once. Some stories, told by some tellers, spin the web almost from the first words spoken. Other tales change tone, shifting from wry to awesome in mid plot. But amidst hours of wonderful stories there may be many excellent tellings where this particular, peculiar depth of magic does not happen. What makes the difference?

Many authors have puzzled over the uncanny power of some stories. The special fascination of fairytales for children of a certain age apparently inspired Bruno Bettelheim to write *The Uses of Enchantment*. (13b) Although he gave lip service to the importance of oral telling, for the book he analyzed only printed texts. With his clinical experience and neo-freudian perspective, he interpreted many motifs and plot elements as being fraught with symbolic import for the growing child's psyche. He felt the listener was busy doing intense "emotional work" both during and after a story, digesting these symbols and using them to make sense of their own feelings. A story, according to Dr. Bettelheim's view, will hold deep attention to the extent that it stimulates emotional work.

Storyteller Ramon Ross attributed a story's power to its ability to "act as a latchkey to a storehouse of familial and cultural memories."(27) He pointed out that each of us brings unique individual experience to our interpretation of story events and motifs. A story may suddenly remind us of things long forgotten. Faces and scenes from the past fill each listener's private version of the story. A story may hold deep attention to the extent that it

opens this storehouse of memories. Hypnotherapist Sidney Rosen, too, believes that during the hypnotic response patients obtain access to their own "vast storehouse of learning" (2b).

Jane Yolen (28) quotes Diane Wolkstein's observation that "not every story will strike that kind of chord with every listener. But she can tell, just by the faces, when she has hit the story for a particular person. And that is because the listener is immobilized, paralyzed by hearing his or her particular truth spoken aloud." Yolen continues, "These are the kinds of tales which force a confrontation with the deepest kind of reality." A story may hold a person's deep attention when it speaks their particular truth.

Different people will respond differently to the multilayered motifs of stories, but it seems that emotionally meaningful story content may help to focus our concentration inward.

In addition to the private, personal meanings of their content, the literally entrancing stories often proceed with their narrative in a special style.

They may contain bewildering, unexplained events. Suddenly a new character appears, dramatic things happen, and as quickly the character vanishes from the plot. Wishes come true. People change into animals, and vice versa. Mainstream fiction and waking reality don't proceed this way, but nightmares, daydreams, and entrancing stories can. If a teller tries to "make sense" of these fantastical elements by belaboring them with explanation, the power runs out of the telling: the dream evaporates. "Dreams shade into hypnagogic imagery, and then into daydream, and then into hallucinations during trances," writes anthropologist M. Stephen (29). A story may hold deep inner attention to the extent that it imitates dream.

"Magic" plays an important part in many of our entrancing stories. The simple gimmicks (never-empty pocket, cap of invisibility, seven-league boots) and unlikely events (a hillside opens, a sausage sticks to a nose) may affect us in much the same way as the paradoxical openings do: they disarm everyday logic and allow the other mental faculties to range freely.

Supernatural motifs have even greater power. Animal/human transformations; brushes with the infinite; attempts to answer the unanswerable: all let us know, as Rod Searling used to say, "You are now entering the Twilight Zone..." where everyday realism cannot constrain our awe.

Sometimes a story entrances because of what it doesn't say. Myths and fairytales often spin along with a telegraphic brevity that defies easy comprehension. They are like poetry, like the lyrics of some songs. Students froze in the aisles of a university bookstore the first time "Eleanor Rigby" (30) came over the PA system: struggling to catch every word and simultaneously understand, they fell into trance. Similarly during these condensed stories, while our logical faculties analyze what we have heard, our

subconscious stretches to fill in what we haven't. Such stories may hold our attention by making us work hard to complete them for ourselves.

The storytellers interviewed for this article all recognized the storylistening trance. All cited their own favorite examples of powerful, entrancing stories. Several offered suggestions about where the power comes from.

The storylistening trance "has got to be tied to the effectiveness of the imaging", insists Jim May. "If they're not imaging, they're not in trance." Pura Belpre, now a storyteller herself, told *The New Yorker* about the tales she grew up with in Puerto Rico: "The stories were like kisses from my grandmother, and I loved them, because when I heard them my mind was nothing but pictures." (31) The connection between visualization and hypnosis has already been discussed. Some stories have more visual elements than others. A story may foster trance to the extent that it encourages visualizing while we listen.

In the stories these tellers listed, certain plot elements kept recurring. They were generally serious stories, wistful, poignant, even tragic.

The most powerful stories attempt some sort of answer to the eternal questions. Who are we? What should we do? Where did we come from, where are we going? When? and why? But these questions are eternal because they have no answers. There is a captivating paradox, a heart-rending poignancy in the attempt.

Loss of a chance, loss of a loved one, the threat of irreparable change, the threat of death: the entrancing stories touch deep fears we all have. Ed Stivender suggests that the most transfixing stories are those which partake of ritual elements. He notes that many of Laura Simms' awe-inspiring wonder tales, for instance, are myths or legends of ancient cultures whose rituals may have left traces in the tales. Stivender believes that "the near-death experience" lies at the core of religious sacrament. Thus, these ritual traces may fleetingly speak to our fears of death. The story's plot need not require physical death. Separation and loss can threaten annihilation at the emotional level. Telling/hearing such tales could be akin to a religious act, a vicarious participation in the "near-death experience", according to Stivender.

Indeed, stories which change tone in the middle often shift on the sudden threat of death. Finley Stewart told "Fire Extinguishers," Woody Guthrie's remembrance of his sister's fatal accident, to gradeschool children in Stillwater OK. This story, which starts with a rollicking brawl between brothers, had the audience smiling and laughing until the words "Woody -- it's Clara." Instantly a chill wind swept the room. Faces froze; nobody moved. They hung breathless on Stewart's every phrase, desperately hoping the little girl would recover. He interprets audience change to mean that "suddenly they know it's serious." double bar

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Stewart believes the emotional catharsis is not only valuable, but also enjoyed and appreciated by listeners. Jim May, a former counselor, agrees. The shared fun at the beginning establishes trust; this trust allows us to look at death together.

You can probably name other examples of tellings which change suddenly from light to transfixing. The emergence of a serious issue often marks the change.

Trance is an intensely focussed attention state. Everything about a story which attracts attention and focuses it inward, will contribute to the story's power to entrance.

Story form compels attention and may have a special affinity for human thinking/feeling. Different stories content will have profound emotional importance to different listeners; people may slip into trance while caught up in their own deep, private concentration on these meaningful elements. Some stories' illogical, condensed style disarms waking logic and unleashes the subconscious, perhaps helping to hold our inner attention. The story that touches on our deepest fears with ritual gravity will have the power to entrance.

Yet the story's contributions, while important for the storylistening trance, may not of themselves be sufficient. Consider: many of the most powerful, wholly serious stories do not reveal their themes until a few minutes into the text, and yet they cast their spell from the first words spoken.

Listen to Jim May tell Richard Kennedy's "Come Again in the Spring."⁽³²⁾ The first paragraphs give no hint there will be a visit from Death. Yet the instant Jim May says softly, "There was snow on the ground, and Old Man Hark was behind his cabin feeding the birds," an eerie hush falls upon the audience. They already know it will be a "serious" story. How is that?

How can the story cast its spell before enough words have been spoken to reveal its form, content, or style? Perhaps what the teller does is as important as what the story says.

IV. THE POWER OF THE TELLER

"She told her tales in a quiet, mysterious voice, her face close to mine, gazing into my eyes with dilated pupils as though she were pouring into my heart a stream of strength to support me." Maxim Gorky (33)

The story contributes the words; a skilled teller brings the words to life.

Through voice tones and inflections, pauses or breathless speed; through eloquent facial expressions; through gestures and subtle changes in posture, the teller can support the spoken words or slyly contradict them. The teller can elaborate beyond the words and even paint in meanings which words need not tell. A powerful oral story can die in a

book. Print records only the words, the strictly verbal part; perhaps the life bleeds out when the nonverbal elements are lost.

Of course the teller works with words, too, concocting fresh phrases for each retelling. Author Stephen Kimmel heard a live storyteller for the first time: "It's like writing out loud," he quipped "-- except you can't edit." The story's power depends for its transmission on the teller's choice of vivid, appropriate words.

Storytelling vocabulary and style often differ from those of everyday speech. There are "storytelling words," extinct elsewhere, which survive only in the narrow niche of once-upon-a-time. But the teller's voice and manner, even more than the choice of words, set storytelling apart from ordinary speech. Telling friends "about" a story you've heard is different from telling the story. Novice storyteller Sharon Gibson, a sixth grade teacher in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, noticed: "There's something about my voice that tells the class, 'Here's a story'. I didn't do it right at first but after a while I picked it up from other storytellers. You probably couldn't write it down."

That "something" is nonverbal communication.

Linguists agree that in face-to-face communication, much of the information travels nonverbally. The emotional content, in particular, may depend more on voice qualities, facial expression, and body movements than on words alone.

Researchers studying face-to-face encounters estimate that as much as 90% of the information is conveyed through nonverbal means. If this sounds outrageously high, the authors of the textbook *Nonverbal Communication: Survey, theory, and research* (34) suggest an experiment. Try saying, "That's just great" to mean "I'm really happy for you"; "Why you, and not me?"; or "Another fine mess you've got us in, Ollie". Since the strictly verbal (word) message was the same in each case, the different meanings had to come through other (nonverbal) channels of voice and body.

Research shows that an actor's different nonverbal messages can elicit very high levels of agreement in an audience of people from the same culture. Even amateurs can transmit clear emotional messages around simple words or phrases: in my storytelling classes, not just adults but children as young as ten have used "Well, I guess that's it" to communicate anger, delight, sadness, fear, anxiety, etc. They needed no training in how to send or how to decode these nonverbal messages. Years of daily interactions with other people had refined their skills.

Psycholinguist Suzette Haden Elgin suggests thinking of face-to-face communication as a performance in which strictly verbal content writes the "lyrics"; voice adds the "music"; face and body do the "dance." Professionals coin terms like "paralanguage," "paraverbal effects," "kinetics," or "body language." Unfortunately, they disagree on which term covers which combinations of voice or action.

Rather than compound the confusion, let's simply talk about "vocal nonverbal effects" (everything the audience can hear) and "physical nonverbal effects" (face and body, what the audience can see). How important are these vocal and physical effects in storytelling? To what extent do they determine a teller's power to entrance?

Vocal Non-Verbal effects

Our ancestors attributed great, even magical powers to the human voice: to enchant literally means to enspell by singing. Modern linguists agree. Elgin believes that "the creation of the 'listener trance' state is most heavily dependent on speaker skill, and primarily 'nonverbal' language skill (including intonation of the voice)." She joins other linguists in claiming, "With sufficient skill on the speaker's part, a telephone book will serve as well as a story."

A telephone book did, according to anecdote, serve as Richard Burton's script when he demonstrated his pure histrionic ability to a TV talk show audience. Burton could also run the gamut of human emotions using only the alphabet, as he did on Sesame Street, but this is not the same as inducing the storylistening trance. Anecdotes tell of political speeches equally empty of meaning, with which a great communicator can nonetheless sway the crowd. As S. I. Hayakawa dryly states, "...the general air of saying something important [is] affective in result, regardless of what is being said. ...we allow ourselves to be as excited, sad, joyous, or angry as the author wishes us to feel... swayed by the musical phrases of the verbal hypnotist." (35)

The followers of psychotherapist Milton Erickson treasure anecdotes about his power to hypnotize by voice alone. More than once, chatting disarmingly from the podium to lecture halls packed with disbelieving critics, he quickly swept all into light trance within minutes. Dr. Erickson used "pauses, smiles, and piercing upward glances... mastery of voice and tone..." (36) worthy of a skilled storyteller. Tapes made during his hypnotherapy sessions still entrance listeners today, many years after his death. Erickson was clearly a man of intense and unusual charisma which echoes in the writings of his disciples. Yet he trained a diverse group of practitioners to use the techniques he had devised.

Other medical and psychotherapeutic hypnotists regularly use audiotape recordings to entrance their patients. Some of Dr. Erickson's followers (37) now use taped routines instead of paradoxical conversation to induce hypnosis. Martin Orne and his colleagues in hypnosis research, mentioned earlier, once paid a Boston radio announcer to tape their trance-induction script so that they could use an identical procedure for every experiment. Orne told an interviewer that the tape "by now has hypnotized more people than anybody in the history of the world." (38) They claim anyone with a clear, pleasant reading voice can do it - with their script.

The storylistening trance, too, can be cast by voice alone.

Years ago I rashly told one of my most powerful stories on a radio broadcast: "Tsuru-no Ongaishi" ("Crane's Gratitude"), a variation on the Japanese crane daughter motif. When I had told this same story at a noisy outdoor festival, I had noticed how people strolling into the field of the sound system slowed down, turned toward the stage, and froze until the story's end. In the studio audience I saw a similar reaction: late arrivals slipping in, unbuttoning coats, went into slow-motion in the aisles; they sank half-aware into their seats, unable to look away, coats forgotten until the story finished. I knew the magic was working. I did not hear about the effect on radio listeners until later:

One woman had tuned in as she gave haircuts to squirming sons ages seven and four. During that story they held perfectly still.

Another woman noticed that her restless granddaughter, who during other stories roamed the room and interrupted with questions, groped for a chair and sat motionless.

People listening on car radios told me they had to pull over until the story finished. They could not safely drive. I heard of no accidents, but I won't broadcast that story again.

Although I had seen the storylistening trance many times in live audiences, these reports showed that the story could work its magic through voice alone. "Tsuru-no Ongaishi" is a wholly serious story of honor, promises, love, and loss. None of these themes appear until several minutes into the story; yet the paralysis of the storylistening trance fell upon the audience within the first few words. At that point it could not yet be the story itself (the strictly verbal component) which transfixed listeners. Something about the vocal telling had already begun to weave the web of silence which immobilized them.

The vocal elements of nonverbal communication happen "between the lines" of the strictly verbal (word) content. A textbook list of vocal effects includes: pitch, loudness, intensity, repetitions, intonation changes, unfilled and filled ("...uh...") pauses, speech rate, drawl, and non-word sounds. (39) Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz, in their *Storytelling: Process and Practice*, suggest notation systems for writing about some of these effects.(40)

Storytellers consciously use these vocal elements in character voices and sound effects. They may use changes of volume and pace to communicate mood. Phrasing, of course, is basic for oral punctuation, a classic example being the difference between "What's for dinner, Ma?" and "What's for dinner: Ma?" (39).

Which of these vocal effects characterize the tellings which entrance? Observations of many tellers at work match the insights they report during interviews: the seriousness of theme tends to be reflected in a seriousness of style, sometimes evident from the very first sentence.

double bar

Slow delivery and pauses breed distraction only if we're not fully occupied by the material we have heard so far. As seen earlier, story form organizes thought and holds attention better than non-story speech can.

double bar

Experiments demonstrate that when words say one thing and voice tones imply another ("What an...unusual tie"), we believe the voice. How much more convincing it is when the voice supports and amplifies what the words say. In storytelling, even before the verbal content reveals thematic seriousness, the vocal qualities of the telling can prepare us for it.

Jim May recognizes in these tellings a special rate of speech, even more unrushed than in standard storytelling: deliberate, measured. Ed Stivender notes the "ritualistic" quality in these tellings. They have a very special cadence.

A stately delivery such as Laura Simms' may include weighty pauses during which time holds still. But not all storytelling pauses are alike. Ideally, the listener always waits with bated breath. Whereas in jumptales, however, we look outward waiting for the big surprise, in entrancing stories we sink further inward with each profound silence. These pauses are not just for anticipation but also for reflection. They are gaps to be filled by the listener's heart and mind.

People who teach "listening skills" warn against a slow delivery and consider pauses dangerous. Ralph G. Nickles of the University of Minnesota, a pioneer in listening research, used special "compressed speech" tape recorders which could speed up playback without distorting pitch. Normal speech is about 125 to 150 words per minute. Nickles found, however, that people readily comprehend over 225 words per minute and can manage up to 500 with a little practice.(41) This gap between speech speed and thought speed can leave the mind idle enough to fall prey to distracting thoughts, until we're not paying attention at all. Thus these experts might expect the ritually deliberate telling of a serious story to lose listeners' attention. Why doesn't that happen?

Slow delivery and pauses breed distraction only if we're not fully occupied by the material we have heard so far. As seen earlier, story form organizes thought and holds attention better than non-story speech can. Story content can help focus that attention inwards, to search for personal meanings. Above and beyond the verbal content, furthermore, the teller's vocal effects hold and focus our attention. The deliberate, stately delivery imparts Hayakawa's "general air of saying something important." Emotions, vividly conveyed through vocal effects, knock on the listener's "storehouse of memory" and help draw subconscious connections as in dreams. Listening to both words and voice, we respond not just with waking logic but with the rest of the mind and heart as well. Perhaps we don't wander during those dramatic pauses because we're too involved where we are.

Are vocal effects the sole and adequate explanation for the power of especially entrancing tellers? Psycholinguist Elgin states, "My own position is that vocal intonation

is the single most important part of nonverbal communication, but not everyone agrees with me." She claims that a skilled speaker does not even need a story to tell: voice alone can hypnotize us, regardless of the speech's verbal content or the speaker's belief in it.

Storytellers insist that sincere emotional commitment makes a difference. The magic of the storylistening trance is not a cheap stage trick but a shared, deeply felt experience. Says storyteller Lynn Moroney, "You have to be bewitched yourself by what you're telling. It has to bewitch you. And if you are not in awe, you cannot communicate awe to other people. You have to be attuned to the magic or it becomes just another technique." She warns, "Magicians believe in their magic; tricksters just use it."

Technique, or belief? There is no contradiction here. Trained actors and hypnotists may consciously manipulate vocal effects to produce trance. Few storytellers have or want such training -- nor do they need it. Their normal human nonverbal skills, honed through sensitive reaction to listeners' responses, unconsciously achieve the same vocal effects; but it only happens when they believe in the story.

These are stories about which the tellers feel deeply. The first words seldom reveal the story's nature, but the teller already knows what it will be, and that knowledge pervades the telling. The ritual cadence and voice intonations, even when not chosen consciously by the teller, may signal this emotional commitment to others in an unstated, convincing, contagious way. The teller cares, and invites us to care too.

Those who praise the story focus on its verbal power to entrance us. Psycholinguists argue that the story may be both unnecessary and insufficient. It seems that no one has studied the "telephone book" trick objectively, nor has anyone studied storylistening audiences. Lacking facts, at this point informed opinions can only debate whether either the story or the voice could cast the spell alone.

Meanwhile, in storytelling practice, story and teller always work together. They can certainly entrance us through the ears, as shown by our experience with audiotapes and radio. Our experience also shows us that physical effects, too, contribute to the teller's special power.

Physical Non-Verbal Effects.

If you have tried to record a story on audiotape you know that some stories die in the purely vocal medium. "They only work with a live audience." What have they lost?

All the things the audience can see are the physical effects in nonverbal communication. These include not just gestures and mimed actions but facial expressions, eye contact and gaze, postural changes, and the use of space around the teller. At the same time that we listen to the words and to the teller's voice, we must also watch very carefully in order to understand everything the teller means.

In experiments where words/voice say one thing and facial expression says another ("Thanks," he winced, "it's just what I wanted"), people usually judge by the face. The research supports our experience that a teller's eloquent facial expressions can speak volumes to us, above and beyond what we're hearing.

Facial expression is an especially vivid channel for emotion, a silent language implicitly understood by humans worldwide. Researchers such as Paul Ekman, at U.C. San Francisco, and Carroll Izard, at the University of Delaware, find that faces expressing happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear were universally meaningful, regardless of culture or education. American, New Guinean, Japanese, and Brazilian adults identified them with at least 90% accuracy, and did almost as well with surprise. Contempt, interest, and shame were reliably identified by some groups as well.(42)

Tiffany Field of the University of Miami Medical School studies newborn babies (43) . She finds that even 36-hour-old premature infants can recognize and imitate the expressions of happiness, sadness, and surprise. The interpretation of facial emotion must be very deeply engrained in humans.

Maxim Gorky, quoted earlier, remembered the importance of eye contact and physical presence when his grandmother told him stories. Even videotape cannot capture the genuine intimacy of a live audience and a live teller. When faced with another human being, telling something to you, clearly targeted by eye contact and held by significant gazes, you must work to pull away.

Other physical effects can add even more to the telling. Movements of the head, hands, feet, and legs provide information less specific than that given by vocal effects or facial expression, but they nonetheless tell us a lot about the characters and actions of the story.

Jane Yolen (quoted earlier) remembers the gestures of a storyteller who evoked, with just a raised arm, images of Perseus holding the Gorgon's head. The visualized snakes still writhe in the writer's memory. Patterned, culture-specific gestures can replace words: a finger drawn across throat; a finger circled beside the head. More often, gestures set mood and pace by accenting and punctuating speech. Mimed actions can illustrate verbal descriptions.

Postural changes and adjustments of arms and legs can convey broad feelings such as confidence, anxiety, aggression. Like facial expression, these movements can support or contradict verbal/vocal messages, "leaking" information about true feelings. Researchers find that we unconsciously take account of these subtle cues and weigh them heavily, although we may be unaware where our "hunches" come from. A nervous teller may keep voice and face calm, but as we watch him wringing hands, wiping damp palms, and continually adjusting garments, we suffer vicarious agony.

Physical effects communicate swiftly. Pressed for time, the teller can replace a lengthy verbal description with a vivid alteration of face and body reflecting another character's reaction. In the traditional Arthurian tale "Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady", instead of

telling every detail of the hag and making the listener piece together a verbal jigsaw puzzle before imagining how one might react, the teller can show King Arthur's disgust, horror, and pity in all their nonverbal intensity.

The successful use of vocal and physical effects need not be studied -- or even intentional. Many library-trained storytellers value the verbal text so much that they discourage nonverbal additions, preferring a very straight delivery. Yet as a librarian warms to a story she loves, not only her face but her hands come to life. Even her shoulders and spine may join the story. When you believe in the story, sometimes the story "tells" you. Sometimes the lyrics and music, to recall Elgin's metaphor, invite even a strictly verbal librarian to dance.

How does all this relate to the storylistening trance?

Trance is an intense, actively focused attention state. Everything the teller does to hold our attention and focus it inward will help spin the web of silence.

Vocal and physical nonverbal effects supplement the story's verbal content. By enabling the teller to "tell" more than words alone can say, they amplify all the entrancing power contributed by the story. Furthermore, the skilled teller certainly keeps our minds fully occupied. Listening to the words alone is not enough. Listening to the vocal effects "between the lines" is not enough. The teller holds our eyes as well as our ears, and requires our complete attention. And at the same time, in order to interpret what we're hearing/seeing, we must turn inward for memories, empathy, and imagination. We are too busy to let attention flag. Focusing intently inward, ignoring "everyday" reality, we entrance ourselves.

Perhaps this is why experienced tellers lament, "There's really no rehearsal for storytelling. It doesn't happen until you add the audience." The third, essential element is the listener.

V. THE POWER OF THE LISTENER.

"The best, the truest storytelling transports us because it is the real thing, not an imitation. What we experience as we listen to true telling is not the suspending of disbelief. Rather, it is an altered state of mind which teller and listeners share. It is as if we were participants in a different reality." -- Ramon Ross (44)

Everything that has been said so far is true only to the degree that the listener responds, both actively and willingly.

The story's power has been attributed to its form, content, and style. Information in story form "fits" our brains in a special way, learned or innate, special to humans, but effective only if we listen. Story content is important, but it has power only if the motifs and themes are personally meaningful. The story's fantasy style can invite us to visualize, to leave logic behind and step into a waking dream, but we must do the stepping.

The teller brings the story to life for us only to the extent that we respond to nonverbal messages. Whether a story shifts from light to hypnotic, or entrances from the beginning, nonverbal effects convey the special tone long before the words mention it. To the extent that a story's ritual quality or "seriousness" are essential to the storylistening trance, trance depends on the teller's use of nonverbal communication. And the teller depends on the listener to listen, watch, decode, and interpret all of these implied messages.

The listener contributes huge amounts of information. Cognitive scientists such as David E. Rumelhart, UC San Diego, point out that language comprehension depends as much on recognizing what is left out or mutually understood as on receiving overt verbal content.(45) The illustrations of nonverbal communication used in this article ("What an...unusual tie. Thanks," he winced,"it's just what I needed") depend on the reader to recognize a familiar comic scenario and fill in the rest.

It's also the listener who interprets words in story context, supplementing them with personal experience. The simple words "Woody -- it's Clara" could have many different meanings. Who is at the door? Who won the contest? What did you name the baby? But the listener takes the words in the context of the story, recognizes the teller's vocal and facial emotions, and realizes that something terrible has happened.

Trance is defined as an intensely focused attention state. In all the above ways, the teller nonverbally requires the listener's very close attention. Only part of that attention is directed to the teller; the rest focuses internally. The listener must look inward for the material which invests the story with meaning. The teller invites the listener to visualize, imagine, remember. Working hard, paying intense attention, the listener slips away from "everyday" reality.

Medical and therapeutic hypnotists believe they merely teach patients to hypnotize themselves. Susceptibility varies throughout the population, and the traits of imagination, trust, etc. which predict high hypnotizability resemble the characteristics of good story listeners. It is, very likely, we listeners who entrance ourselves.

The listener must work very hard during the storylistening trance. What is the listener actually doing? A number of the explanations quoted in this article talk about the listener's mind as though it was composed of separate parts which make different contributions to the storylistening trance.

Hypnosis researcher Hilgard, for instance, talked about the "Hidden Observer" monitoring everyday reality while a different aspect of consciousness believes an arm has become too heavy to lift. He thinks the capacity to dissociate like this is essential to hypnosis.

Those who use stories to teach and heal talk of reaching different "parts" of the mind. As author Gwyneth Cravens puts it in her review of a collection of folktales, "The best and deepest learning about how to manage the kingdom of the self often occurs in the back of the mind while the front of the mind is being skillfully entertained." (46) . Therapists

regularly credit the fantasy aspects of story with distracting or pacifying our critical faculties so that the story's message can get through to the subconscious part of the mind. The explanation for paradoxes' power to entrance also depends on a model of separate "logical" and "illogical" parts to the mind.

These are useful metaphors for thinking about thinking. Some research on brain function indicates that the "different parts" to the mind may in fact coincide with distinct activity in physically different areas of the brain.

Over a hundred years ago, doctors began finding evidence that the left hemisphere of the brain controls speech while the right hemisphere works with many spatial and visual abilities. The distinction has not turned out to be as clear-cut as it looked. Neurophysiologists and linguists working with deaf signers have recently found that although right hemisphere strokes can destroy many artistic or map-reading abilities, the visual/spatial abilities used in signing were not affected. A left hemisphere stroke, however, badly impaired signing. They conclude that the left hemisphere specifically controls grammar, syntax, and vocabulary regardless of whether the language is spoken, or signed (visual/spatial).(47)

Neurophysiologist Diana Van Lancker of UCLA confirms that the left hemisphere handles the strictly verbal details of language, but finds that the right hemisphere makes inferences beyond the literal meaning of words. (48) It is the right hemisphere which recognizes context, interprets idioms and metaphors, recognizes vocal emotional tone, and decodes facial expression. These functions are all essential to the nonverbal aspects of language, which as we've seen can convey up to 90% of the meaning.

It is tempting to apply these findings to storylistening. The left hemisphere, we might suggest, decodes the literally verbal content of the story; the right hemisphere works out the underlying meanings of words in context, as well as interpreting all the nonverbal effects added by the teller. Both hemispheres would have to work hard, and both must work together.

Some cautions are in order. First, nobody has studied storytellers or storylisteners, and unless you fancy trying to enjoy a story while festooned with electrodes under the glare of video lights, you may prefer things this way.

Second, the most meticulous researchers warn that their generalizations apply only to average right-handed adults. The brains of left-handed adults, many of their right-handed relatives, and all children are less predictable and less distinctly specialized. When walking in the unfamiliar field of brain research, we must step carefully.

With these warnings in mind, what might we guess about the implications for the storylistening trance?

If storylistening puts demands on both hemispheres of the brain, perhaps the bilateral activity not only fosters but also improves attention, thereby enhancing the trance state.

The involvement of both hemispheres, furthermore, may contribute to the subjective feeling of storytelling as a full experience which exercises intellectual, imaginative, and emotional faculties all at once. It will be interesting to follow the research on brain activity during hypnosis, because it seems to indicate that the right hemisphere becomes more than normally active. At any rate, this work confirms the importance of the listener's active involvement.

Storylistening takes willing cooperation as well. Jay O'Callahan told an interviewer, "It's not me performing and them in the audience, but rather we're all together... If they're not willing to do half the work, to enter the world and shape images, then it does not work. The entire performance is an effort. If they are willing to trust you, somehow that invests your storytelling with something very special. There's always something very powerful in that."(49)

Listeners' expectations and attitude always affect our response to the telling. The International Listening Association lists ten common "Listening Problems": inattentive, defensive, impatient, interrupting, disinterested, insensitive, self-centered, uncaring, distracted, over-emotional.(50) All of these imply a negative attitude or negative preconceptions about the material, all of which get in the way of hearing what it's really about.

On the other hand some people may feel positively drawn to storytelling because, as Susan Klein suggests, "Storytelling is a very palatable way of going to the doctor." Wise therapists know that the seeds of healing must be planted gently, under cover of fantasy or entertainment. They also know the message will germinate only in its own time.

When a listener is not yet ready, she may refuse to come listen to stories as did the woman who hung back for fear the teller would repeat Jane Yolen's "Greyling" (51) . Months before, hearing it for the first time, she had cried uncontrollable, cathartic tears. Whatever the woman's wound, however, this day she did not feel ready to have it treated again.

People cannot be hypnotized against their will. And listeners, too, must be particularly willing in order to come along to the special, deep level of the storylistening trance. Tellers know how difficult it can be to get people strolling at noisy fairs or shopping malls to settle down for a long or serious story. Such settings warrant other excellent types of storytelling which can entertain, and often teach, but seldom entrance.

Once in trance, however, we can show a stubbornness about staying there that has unnerved even experienced tellers. Findley Stewart philosophically observed, "This kind of story leaves people quiet; they don't want to come out." Laura Simms so deeply mesmerized four hundred Tulsa Unitarians with her poignant legend of the young Bal Shem Tov that they resisted continuing with the rest of her program, until she roused them with a funny singing game. Other tellers may use music or rambling monologue to ease the audience's emergence from trance. We enjoy the stillness; we like it in there.

The storylistening trance requires the listener's active and willing cooperation because its effectiveness depends on how much work the listener is willing to do.

Perhaps that is why, in storytelling, nonverbal effects may have the greatest entrancing power when they are used most subtly. "More" is not necessarily "better." Trance will be fostered by a telling which requires the listener to work very hard. If the teller does too much for us, we may do too little.

"There should be balance in the telling," cautions Laura Simms. "One can overplay, overdramatizing the narrative, so that the listeners are relegated to the role of observers watching the performer's personal enactment of his or her drama." (52) The storylistening trance is not passive. The most compelling storytelling is not a one-sided performance, but as much a creation of the listener as of the teller.

Visualization, so important to trance, may proceed more freely when we have less to look at. Carolyn Samuelson relates, "A young boy was listening to a story on the radio. When it was over, his mother asked him which he liked best, radio or TV. 'Radio,' was his reply, 'because the pictures are better.'" (53) A teller who acts out a story in full pantomime may keep us busy watching the stage instead of visualizing for ourselves. More subtle motions, which merely suggest and evoke mental images, can create memorable pictures in our heads.

Props, puppets, costumes and music have important and time-honored places in storytelling. They may, however, detract from its power to entrance. The teller's delightful additions may usurp the role of the listener's imagination, so vital to trance. Furthermore mere reality can fall short of the wonders called for by the story. A storyteller added harp music to his version of a tale about the world's best harpist. Although Harlynn Geisler says he played quite well, "Music described in a story as magical is always better than music actually played. Your audience," she cautions, "may make the comparison and find your music wanting." (54) In storytelling the beauty, sweetness, immensity, or hideousness are limited only by the listener's imagination.

The essential thing is to get us listeners to do our share. Jim May suggests borrowing the term "minimalist" for the style which he feels is most hypnotic. Not only must we pay intense attention and do our share of the work, but we are forced to turn inward for materials. The effort focuses concentration; the search takes us inward. Trance results.

Jane Yolen quips, "Literature, of course, is an unnatural act committed by two consenting individuals - writer and reader." (55) Perhaps the storylistening trance is a supernatural act committed by two consenting individuals -- teller and listener. Or it may be a fundamentally natural act for human beings.

Never forget that the teller is a listener too. Susan Klein confides that during her most hypnotic tellings, "I completely come out of my body and sit on the stage and watch. We go somewhere together. I feel like I've been used for a vehicle and something has come shooting through."

The teller is not a manipulator of this power, but its servant, its privileged observer. Elizabeth Ellis, whose description of the "web of silence" opened this article, concludes:

"I do not know how to make that happen. I cannot force it. I can only invite it. I prepare myself to be a vessel for this power. To begin with, I take off my shoes."

"I could tell you a lot of stuff about why I do that. But, I'm not sure how much you really want to know. For me, removing my shoes is a gesture of willingness and humility. It represents my willingness to listen for guidance about what to tell, and to follow that guidance wherever it may lead me. It represents my acceptance that I do not create this experience alone. It is the mutual creation of every listener in the room, myself included."

****ADDENDUM****

This article has tried to describe and discuss something as old as the human race, something so obvious that everybody recognizes it. And yet I found so little written about it, so little work done on it, that there remain more questions than answers.

I offer you this collection of facts and opinions tracked through neighboring fields, tantalizing bits which point the way but do not take us there. I invite you to explore further into the untouched field of the storylistening trance. Here are just a few of the directions a researcher might take:

*Develop criteria to document occurrence of the storylistening trance. Correlate its incidence with: story content, teller's nonverbal behavior, listener's hypnotic susceptibility, etc.

*Study physiological activity in brain hemispheres during storylistening trance.

*Study how storylistening trance is experienced by people who are blind (no imaging?) or hearing-impaired (immune to vocal effects).

What have been your experiences in the web of silence? I would like to hear your comments and suggestions. Please write:

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FOOTNOTES

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