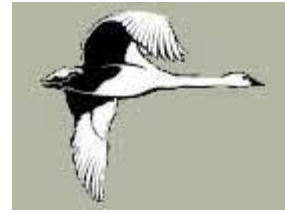


# **The Trumpeter (1998)**

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## **Uncovering the Wisdom In Story: An Important Component in Wilderness Education**

**Sheryl Kent**

Stories are in their oldest sense a healing art.... Story as medicine is different from story told for amusement only. Story as medicine drums itself up through the teller's bones. It comes fluttering through the dark unbidden. No gold lies above ground. It is all mined in the farther reaches of psyche. It is toiled toward, not picked up. It is lived, not memorized.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

### **Introduction**

With these wise words, Estés invites each of us to participate in the active healing journey that telling our stories can provide. The following story is a reshaping of Keigo Seki's version of a modern classic Japanese fairy tale, *The Armless Maiden*. I have moulded it to more accurately fit the current Western cultural experience and to share some of my personal story. A primary motivation for its selection is that it brilliantly illustrates a common theme in folk and mythical literature: nature as a transformative agent in the human experience. After its telling, I spend some time deconstructing its meanings, because they have implications for wilderness education curriculum. Ultimately, I believe that stories are not only important medicine for personal healing, but for the healing of Earth as they help us to reconnect to ourselves, other people and the Earth.

### **The Story**

It was a shining point in human history. Miracles seemed to be happening daily. Civil rights were starting to be won. Man had landed on the moon. Peace and love had been brought to the forefront of the American mind by a generation of youth bent on this goal. As if heartened by the mood of the world, a child slipped gently into the world on an early June morning, offering giggles and gurgles to all who witnessed the birth. The father kissed his wife's forehead and thanked God for their good fortune. The doctors marvelled at the ease of the delivery and the nurses prayed that the rest of the child's life would be as charmed. Only the grandmother noted the shadow that passed before the sun as the child emerged.

Friends and family rushed to meet the bundle of laughter and love. The child welcomed each visitor with a heartwarming grin and clasped her tiny hand around their extended fingers. She never cried when strange hands picked her up or unknown kisses landed on her cheek. Instead, she revelled in the tiny gifts of love. Everyone who met the child loved her.

During the child's first five years hardly a moment passed when mother and daughter were not together. They laughed and played the days away and made frequent surprise visits to the father while he worked. The mother had taken to having the child spend nights sleeping in the curl of her body or both fell into fits of despair. It seemed as if nothing could spoil their perfect world.

For the child's sixth birthday, a huge celebration was held. The mother stayed up late at night writing invitations and creating decorations, but most importantly, the mother worked on the child's gift, a beaded amulet bag in which she placed a map and a key. Gift-bearing guests flocked to the party to partake in the festive celebrations the mother had come to be known for throwing. Some of them noticed that the mother's colouring was slightly pale and her energy a little low. They speculated about the cause, perhaps even another blessed pregnancy, but arrived at no solid conclusions. They said that all she needed was a little rest.

As winter closed in, the father began to worry as his wife's health did not improve. Doctors could find nothing wrong, yet her condition rapidly deteriorated. The child spent every moment at her mother's side, holding her hand and wiping her heated brow. Tragically, no amount of love or care could rally her health.

One morning in the depth of winter the mother awoke early. The child breathed relief as her mother seemed more vibrant than usual that morning.

"How are you feeling mother? You look like you feel better."

"Come here, my love. Sit on my lap."

She thrilled at the sign of strength from her mother and gently climbed into her lap.

"Do you remember the gift I gave you for your birthday this past spring?"

"Yes. The bag I wear around my neck with all the pretty colours."

"That's it. Yes, I made that bag to safekeep its contents for you. Don't lose them for they will help you in your time of greatest need."

"I don't understand."

"Not now, but you will at some point. Call it mother's intuition. Just promise me you will never lose the bag. Can you do that for me?"

The child nodded solemnly and waited for her mother's next words.

"I'm going to be leaving you soon. But I want you to know how much I love you and that I'll watch over you, always, no matter what."

"Leaving me? Where are you going?"

"I'm sick, my child, very sick, and I'm going to die. Even now I can feel myself fading. Please enjoy your life and don't stop believing in yourself. That's all I ever wanted for you."

"No! You can't go away. You can't leave me. I won't let you. Please mother. Stay with me, please."

The mother laid back on the bed and wrapped her body around her sobbing child. Within a few minutes the child's sobs subsided as she succumbed to sleep. The mother looked at her beautiful child one last time and then closed her eyes for the last time. When the child awoke she shook her mom, but felt no response. She felt a sharp chill and began violently shaking her mother. She howled out in grief and rolled into a tight ball nestled against her

mother's lifeless body.

Years passed and life changed dramatically for the child. After a few years her father remarried, probably more from loneliness than love. The woman was not very warm or caring toward the child. In fact, in many ways she seemed almost fearful of the young girl. Often times the older woman would avert her eyes from the child's and she had never once tried to touch her. After so many years of constant affection, the child felt starved for touch. One day she asked the woman why she would not touch her. The woman looked as though she had been struck and called her a nasty little girl.

Things at home became worse. The girl's father started working longer and longer hours and the time that used to be filled with neglect and silence from her stepmother slowly transformed into terror. Her stepmother's moods became more erratic and the girl grew to fear the sickening medicine-like smell the woman exuded with more and more frequency. At these times she feared the woman most. She would tell the girl how ugly and stupid she was and that no one would ever love her again. One time the young girl retorted that she thought the stepmother was the ugliest, meanest woman who had ever lived. In a rage, the stepmother opened her hand and struck the girl's face. It was as though a cork had been released on the woman's temper. The beatings grew worse and worse. Sometimes the girl even blacked out.

The child made several attempts to tell her father what was happening, but he refused to listen. He shut her out as he had everyone else since his first wife had died.

Time passed in a torturously slow manner. The once outgoing and loveable girl retreated into a shell. She felt different from all the other children who seemed only to want to laugh and play. The girl could not remember the last time she had smiled. Every once in a while she would hear a certain quality of laugh from down a hall at school or in a grocery store and it would remind her of her mother. A shock of pain and grief would rush through her and she would block out the memory as quick as possible. After a while she stopped remembering her mother at all.

The young girl tried everything she could think of to please her stepmother. She brought home straight "A" grades from school and did all of her chores without complaint. She cooked and cleaned and never spoke a word out of line. Even so, the stepmother always managed to find fault with the girl, some reason to vent her rage on the unprotected child. Nobody ever noticed the bruises she managed to cover up or the quiet tears she sometimes could not stop when she saw her body in the gym mirrors. She felt as though she did not exist.

On a crisp autumn day during her second year of high school, the girl slipped quietly into her home as usual, trying to avoid the attention of her stepmother. She tiptoed upstairs and opened her bedroom door soundlessly, sucking in her breath as she did. The venomous face of her stepmother whipped around to greet her from inside the room. Everywhere she looked, empty drawers laid open, closet hangers hung bare, and surfaces were wiped clean of her belongings. Everything she had was in a heap in the middle of the floor.

"Your father's dead. A car hit him on the way home from work. I don't owe you anything. Take what you want and leave! Get out!"

"Dead?! He's dead?! How can that be? How? Why does everyone die on me? Why?!"

"You miserable brat. You make everyone miserable. They die to escape You! Get out of my face. Get out of my sight! Now!"

Without looking back she ran down the stairs and out the door. Tears streamed down her face and her hair caught in her eyes. The wind whipped around her and rain dashed to the ground. She tripped and fell to the pavement, scraping her hands and knees, but got up and kept running. Headlights veered and a horn sounded as she darted across the town's main street and headed toward the nearby highway. She blindly ran toward the overpass and without a second thought vaulted herself over the wall and fell to the traffic below.

The broken girl laid in a heap on the ground crying her heart out. The pain in her hands and arms was unbearable. People began to approach her, but were too scared to come near. A truck rolled slowly by the accident scene, the driver's eyes falling on the young woman. He slammed on his brakes and rushed to her side. He reached down and brushed the hair from her eyes and gently kissed her forehead, just like her mother used to do. She fell in love with the kind stranger instantly.

She raised her head and looked doefully up at him. Her gaze captured his heart with its innocence and pain, with its vulnerability.

"Help me please. I have no where to go."

"Everything is going to be okay," he said, "I'll take care of you. Trust me."

The broken girl did not remember much of the next few weeks except that she was surrounded by a warmth that never wavered. She even heard herself laugh once or twice and was shocked by the joyful sound she could still make.

Clarity slowly returned to the broken girl. The doctors told her that they could do nothing to save the use of her hands and arms. Her love cradled her and told her not to worry. He told her that he would take care of her. She looked into his eyes and believed that this was true. Every night he fixed her dinner and lovingly fed it to her while they talked and laughed. He refurnished the entire house for her ease and had special appliances made for her use. The loving man cherished the close of each evening when he would comb and braid her hair and then tuck her into bed. He lavished her with affection, but was careful to respect the boundaries suggested by her youth and condition.

When she finally turned eighteen, they were married with much celebration. The love her new husband had showered her with over the past few years had slowly won over the young woman's trust. Soon, her heart was healed and she poured out the love she knew as a young child. All who met her were charmed by the joy she shared despite her debilitating situation. On their wedding day her new mother-in-law told her, "I always wished I had a daughter as adoring and loveable as you."

After some time, the young woman gave birth to a healthy baby boy. While her love for the child was immeasurable, she was secretly sad that she could not pick up her son and cradle him in her arms. She wistfully watched her husband and mother-in-law use their hands to feed and caress her son. After several months, her husband explained that he would need some time to travel abroad in order to handle some matters about the family business. He told her that he would miss her every moment that he was away. She bravely accepted the news and was cheered when her mother-in-law moved into their home to help the young woman care for herself and the baby in her husband's absence.

Meanwhile, the stepmother heard tale of the young woman's good fortune. Unable to tolerate the thought of the other woman's happiness, she went to work plotting her stepdaughter's demise. She enlisted the help of a friend who happened to work for her stepdaughter's husband. Together they created an official confidential cable that the stepmother then delivered to the home of the young woman. She knocked on the door and an older woman answered.

"I have a message from overseas for you. I believe it's from your son. It arrived at the office this morning with a request for strictest confidentiality. Nobody has read it."

The woman did not hesitate in opening the missive. It read:

I have reconsidered the life choices I made while insane with love. I cannot imagine an entire life hampered by a handicapped wife. I need your help to undo this mistake. Please take steps to send my wife away. Love, your son.

The mother reread the telegram, hardly believing her eyes. She dismissed the woman and spent the afternoon trying to contact her son, only to learn that he was in transit at the moment. She decided to wait until he returned. Meanwhile, the stepmother sensed that the first telegram would not be enough and that she would need to write the mother again. The second cable read:

I will not return to the States until I know the coast is clear. If you want to see me again, get my wife out of my life. Thank you in advance for your help. Your loving son.

His mother was truly shaken by the cable. She adored and pitied her daughter-in-law; however, she loved her son even more. If he could not stand the sight of the girl, she must be sent away. She showed the broken girl the two cables. Her heart and spirit were broken by the cruel language and lack of love her husband reported. The mother asked, "Do you have anywhere you can go?"

"No! That's how I ended up with my husband in the first place. Oh god! What will I do now? Why does everyone always leave me?!"

The despondent young woman ran to her room and cried herself to sleep. In her dream, her mother told her that it seemed like she was in a time of great need. She awoke with a start and thought of the amulet bag she still wore. She called to her mother-in-law and had her empty the bag. Inside were the key and the map that had always been there. The mother-in-law examined the map and said, "Oh my. This is unbelievable. What good luck! It's a map to a cabin in the woods in the Northwest. This must be the key. That is where you must go."

"But my arms are useless," the young woman weakly protested.

"You will find a way to survive. I will help you."

Seeing no other option, she dejectedly packed up her few personal possessions, taking nothing her disloyal lover gave her. The mother helped the young woman strap a carrier onto her back for the baby and brought her to the bus station.

A long and tearful cross-country bus ride ended in a high mountain pass in the Northwest. The young woman caught a ride to the trailhead indicated on the map. She began to walk according to its directions. After a few hours of walking with her baby strapped to her back, she realized that she was lost. She tried to backtrack, but in her panic, could not remember the way and recognized no landmarks. She grew hungry and tired and thirsty. Her pulse quickened. She knew that no one knew where she was and that most likely no one cared either. She fell on the trail and began to cry. "What did I do that was so wrong to end up like this? Why me?!"

The young woman began to stumble around the forest helplessly. With no mind to where she was going, she pushed through unblazed terrain until she could not go on anymore. She saw a lake ahead and rushed toward it. In her excitement to take a drink after so

many parched hours, she forgot the precarious position of her son. As she bent over to drink, he slid into the water and sunk like a rock to the bottom.

The young woman panicked, knowing she could not lift him from the water. She screamed for help again and again, but the birds could not use their tiny beaks to pull him from the water. The fish could not propel him to safety with their tails. The deer could not swim to the bottom to reach him. There was no one to help her. All the animals gathered around to watch what would happen. The girl spent only another instant in helpless inaction and then dove into the water.

At first, she too plunged to the bottom like a lead block. As she did, instead of crying for help, she began to demand that her hands work. "Move damn you. Move. I said paddle. Paddle. Now. I want to live. I want my baby to live. You won't take him from me as well. Move fingers. Move wrists." As she watched the shimmering image of her hands in the water, she saw her pinky flinch. Then her thumb. Soon, she could control the movement. With powerful strokes she reached her son and scooped his quiet body off the bottom and catapulted toward the surface.

The healing woman laid her son on the shore and helped him breathe. In a few moments he was sputtering and coughing, then crying. She knew he was going to be fine. The woman cried the first tears of release she ever shed.

She spent the next few weeks in the woods. She never found the cabin, but instead, crafted a shelter for them underneath a canopy of pine branches. She gathered berries and leaves for food and they drank from the lake often. The healing woman felt strength flood her. Every day she sang to the birds and painted with berry juice on high rock walls. Every night she danced naked for the moon. One morning she awoke with the deep knowledge that she had grown to love herself and that she was ready to return to the world.

The woman strapped her baby upon her back, chose a line of travel and set out for civilization. After two days of hiking she found herself on the road where she started her healing journey. She put out her healthy thumb and soon hitched a ride into town. The woman headed for a local pub to catch some dinner and see what was going on in the world. After dinner, she pulled out the key and noticed a crack in its surface. She went to brush it away and found an inscription hidden beneath a painted layer.

It read:

Wouldn't life be easy if we always had a map and a key.

The woman walked to a pay phone on the nearby corner. As she reached her hand out toward the receiver she glanced back over her shoulder at the moon and gave it a wink (adaptation of entire story from Seki 1963).

## **Conclusion**

There is a famous Greek expression, "The fairy tale has no landlord." This is an open invitation for us to see ourselves in any story we hear. Storyteller and educator, Michael Meade, concluded that "Unraveling pieces of fairy tales and myths causes people to reveal hidden pieces of their personal stories and experience the emotion of living through them again" (1993). Meade used African teaching stories in order to help people identify the places in their lives in which they were stuck and to strategize ways to move forward.

In writing this story, I spent many nights reworking the themes that are consistently

presented in *The Armless Maiden* tale, regardless of the telling. They include: loss of parental love and care, an abusive substitute caregiver, a violent loss of ability to care for oneself, and a transformative experience in nature. I realized that the reason I had chosen to focus on this tale was that I could relate to all of these themes in powerful ways. Reflecting on the growth of the young girl helped me to realize how far I had travelled in my own life. I spent many of my young years in hiding trying to avoid the consequences of my family members' unpredictable temper. Yet, despite several feigned attempts at running away, I always felt trapped at home, because I did not know where else to go. It was not until I was older and I began living for myself that I began to feel alive and powerful as did the armless maiden at the end of the tale.

Stories should not be viewed as unique experiences, however, but as shared ones. Marie Louise Von Franz, Jungian scholar, offers this: "Fairytale is the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes. They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest and most concise form" (1975). To this end, I suggest that storytelling cannot only loosen up the pieces of our lives that hold us back, but can connect us to those around us and help us to feel less isolated as we struggle through life's challenges. This idea is central to the healing that occurs upon sharing our stories. Part of the pain of existence comes from isolation. Often our loads are lightened simply by knowing that others have experienced similar pain or challenge.

Isolation is a common occurrence within many abusive families. The abuse becomes an unspoken secret, with violence the threat that keeps it quiet. These types of secrets tend to alienate those who carry them. I spent many silent years feeling different than all of my schoolmates, keeping quiet so that my secret would not slip out. Reading stories like *The Armless Maiden* has helped me to see how common this secret is and how important it is to bring it into the open to diminish the isolation I felt.

This story, and my own, highlight the importance of caretaking in a person's development. In this story, the child is thrown from one situation to the next, with responsibility for her care transferring each time. First, her mother, then, her father, stepmother, lover, and finally her lover's mother cares for her. Several opportunities for her to assume the role of caretaker are provided, for instance, when her father dies and when her husband seems to be leaving her. She chooses not to take advantage of either of these opportunities. Until she accepts responsibility for her own care, however, one hurt after another is hoisted upon her. She finally begins to heal once she chooses to help herself. Stepping away from the role my family had established for me and embracing a life of my own determination was the beginning of my healing journey.

Both my story and the tale I have shared highlight another important feature of many teaching stories and that is the role of nature in initiating transformational experiences. Whether as a backdrop or the actual challenge, wilderness seems to provide a strong stimulus for self-reliance. The emergence and success of numerous adventure and wilderness-based therapy programs over the past twenty years supports this observation. Preliminary research in the field suggests the same (Bacon 1983; Gass 1994; Cole, Erdman, and Rothblum 1992). The words of Susan Griffin echo in my mind as I think these thoughts.... "As I go to the Earth, she pierces my heart. As I penetrate further, she unveils me. When I have reached her center, I am weeping openly (1992)." It is no surprise, therefore, that nature appears as the initiator of transformation in the tales that hold our human wisdom.

Looking at this story and others like it, including my own, has helped me to understand the value that I place on the wilderness as a transformative agent. Until I began to fully experience myself as a wild being, I felt fettered and blocked, small and worthless. Here, I use the term "wild" to indicate when a life is fully expressing its innate potential. Authoring my own story started when I was clinging to the face of the rock wall waiting for my friend's hand to come over the top to save me. I was not roped in and the rocks

below were sharp. His hand did not come and I was losing hold. I had the choice of life or death, as did the broken girl. I chose to slam my leg into the wall and create a foothold out of hardened stone so that I did not fall. That was the first time I ever chose life with such force. I had the shocking realization that life was actually a choice that I could make and that I had just chosen with some force to live it.

This experience opened a chain of events in my life that has brought me six years later to a master's in environmental education and a planned career in wilderness education. The transformation I experienced, however, primarily occurred in a less aggressive engagement with nature. I have lived outdoors for nearly four of the last six years and most of my time in the wilderness involves sitting quietly, doing yoga, sleeping, sailing, hiking, or laughing. I believe living outdoors provided me with the impetus I needed to heal my relationship with myself. Concurrently, my relationship with other people and nature improved as well.

Perhaps, there is another reason why an inherent link exists between wilderness and storytelling. While princes and maidens living in the woods are now more fantastic than real, their archetypal representation still feels intuitively accurate. These archetypal characters formed in our consciousness over millions of years, most of which were spent living in the woods. Just as our language developed from the textures, sights, sounds and smells of the land (Abram 1994), so have our stories. Abram argues that loss of diversity and wilderness is diminishing the ability for language actually to communicate and connect, because it no longer has resonance with the land. I would suggest that the same may be true for our stories when we separate them from the land. Including storytelling as a component in wilderness education may be the perfect medium for sharing the wisdom held in stories that have been passed on for thousands of years. Doing so in the backcountry may begin to restore some of their former power through this resonance and allow a crucial healing experience to be reintroduced to our ailing culture. As was true for me, this type of healing experience would also promote a healthier relationship with Earth.

Telling a story is expression. Expression is sharing. Healing comes from being heard and from having our truths heard and accepted, if not agreed with. In my own search for personal peace, I have found the strongest tool within my grasp is to tell my own story. It is my belief that wilderness provides resonance for these stories and may facilitate the process they inspire. It is my hope that storytelling can become a more common component in wilderness education and that the wisdom that is locked up in stories that are being lost can be rediscovered and shared. I have dedicated myself as a wilderness educator to beginning this process and hope that other wilderness educators may become similarly motivated.

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