

# The Secret Reservoir of Values

## The nature and uses of stories



### Future flowerings

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations. Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings — Ben Okri, *Bird of Heaven*, 1996

### Mystery and magic

The secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. That is their mystery and their magic.— Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 1997.

### Weaving our stories

In real life, unlike in history books, stories come to us not in their entirety but in bits and pieces, broken segments and partial echoes, a full sentence here, a fragment there, a clue hidden in between. In life, unlike in books, we have to weave our stories out of threads as fine as the gossamer veins that run through a butterfly's wings — Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees*, 2021.

### Cunning and high spirits

Fairy tales taught humankind in the past, and continue to teach children in the present, that the way to meet dark mythical forces is with cunning and high spirits — Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, 1936.

### Appetite for life

What stories ultimately satisfy is life's hunger for itself. Its desire to exist, its desire to be turned on, its desire to be given form and made able to flow. We consume stories most eagerly in infancy and then again in our adolescence at just the times, that is, when our appetite is at its strongest. We want to join the game, and stories form and equip us to do so — Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, 1991.

### Learn to give them away

'Remember only one thing,' said Badger. 'The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive, that is why we put stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves — Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*, 1990

### Old enough to start reading fairy tales again

My dear Lucy, I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realised that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you'll be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.' — C S Lewis, from the foreword of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, 1950.

### That sort of bear

'What about a story?' said Christopher Robin.

'What about a story?', I said.

'Could you very sweetly tell Winnie-the-Pooh one?'

'I suppose I could,' I said. 'What sort of stories does he like?'

'About himself. Because he's that sort of bear.'

'Oh, I see.'

'So could you very sweetly?'

'I'll try,' I said.

So I tried.

— A A Milne, *Winnie-The -Pooh*, 1926.

### Even longer

The end is simply the beginning of an even longer story — Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, 2001.

### Let Us Begin Again

Come. Listen. Become. Tell and retell. Come true. Come together, gift one another with stories that repair, heal and recreate, resource, restore, and even raise the dead. Come, let us begin again, as it is said: Once upon a time. . . . In the end, we are all just stories for others to tell — Megan McKenna, *Stories to Restore Our World*, 2024.

## Break the story

For journalists and for human beings generally, the elephant in the room has been there for a long time. It's not even the elephant: the elephant in the room is the room itself, the biosphere in which all life currently known to exist in the universe is enclosed, and on which it all depends, the biosphere now devastated by climate change, with far more change to come. The scale is not like anything human beings have faced [...] Climate change is here, and it is changing everything. It is bigger than anything else, because it is everything, for the imaginable future. [...] Future generations are going to curse most of us for distracting ourselves with trivialities as the planet burned. Journalists are in a pivotal place when it comes to the possibilities and the responsibilities in this crisis. We, the makers and breakers of stories, are tremendously powerful. So please, break the story — Rebecca Solnit, *Call Them By Their True Names*, 2018.

## By telling a tale

The Baal Shem Tov, when he saw the lines of communication with heaven were broken and it was impossible to mend them with prayer ... used to mend them and restore them by telling a tale — Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810).

**Source:** this set of quotations is an expanded and modified version of a similar set in *Inside Stories: wisdom and hope for changing worlds* by Angela Wood and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books, 1992.

The ceramic sculpture pictured at the start of this story is by the late Tony Ogogo and is entitled *The Storyteller*. It evokes one of the functions and responsibilities of teachers and counsellors, of spiritual and political leaders, and of elders in families and communities.

