



DISTILLING HOPE

12 STORIES TO DISTILL THE 12 STEPS

STORIES ADAPTED BY
BETH OHLSSON

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Linda D. Parkhurst, Ph.D.

Brian Morgante for TreeHouse Artists

Shea Geremia and Michael Finley

Bill and Barbara Paddack

Ted Parkhurst

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HOPE IS THE MESSAGE

*That's what we storytellers do.
We restore order through imagination.
We instill hope, again, and again, and again.*

—Walt Disney, *Saving Mr. Banks*

HOPE IS THE MESSAGE OF RECOVERY. In Twelve Step meetings around the world, people tell their stories of addiction and recovery, instilling the hope that anyone can live a sober life, a useful life, a life filled with love and joy. It is the classic heroic journey with its Road of Trials, the Belly of the Whale, the Return into the World, and Sharing the Gifts of the Journey. (Campbell, 1973) AA's first members “discovered that sobriety involved not only not drinking, it also required throwing out the old way of life—learning to follow a new map, a new way of life ... And that way of life, they discovered, could be learned and taught only through the process of telling stories (Kurtz and Ketchem, 1992, p.114).” People struggling with their addiction, be it substance or behavior, went to meetings and listened to these sober storytellers tell their stories, again, and again, and again. These stories were often full of horrific, gut-wrenching experiences that fueled an addiction and often resulted in severe consequences. But in each and every story, the hero/heroine emerged like a phoenix from

the ashes, willing and able to move back into the world to rebuild their life. Our sober storyteller was proof that one can change, and life can get better.

It is an oral culture, Twelve Step Recovery. It is an oral culture thriving in a digital world. Wisdom is passed on, passed down, through the sharing at meetings, working one on one with a sponsor, talking with others on the same path. Sharing stories of experience, strength, and hope sheds light on the path. This is great for people who go to meetings and work their recovery program in this traditional way.

Not everyone seeking recovery goes to Twelve Step meetings. There are many paths to recovery, not just the Twelve Step Model. But, every path requires a new way of living that leaves the pain, shame, stigma, and failure of the past in the past where it belongs. Sadly, many seeking recovery do not have the support, the internal resources, the paradigms, the beliefs, or role models to provide the necessary guidance for a different way of life.

How do these people navigate the recovery journey? Where are the role models, the guidelines, the wisdom, the encouragement to continue the path? That's a good question. It's the question that I have wrestled with since I found myself working in the addictions field in 2000. Several years before, I became a storyteller in the traditional sense. I was encouraged by other tellers to use traditional folktales, fairytales, myths, and legends in this new endeavor.

Why? Because traditional stories all have characters that experience a dilemma, make some not-so-good choices, or have

some not-so-good luck, and find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Then, something happens. The hero or heroine becomes able and willing to transcend the consequences and make their way back into the world no matter what it takes. If traditional stories could illustrate the recovery journey as an heroic quest, could they be used to illustrate the Twelve Steps as a design for living? Yes.

Traditional stories can illustrate the potential hazards of addictive behaviors, as well as the benefits of a different set of behaviors and attitudes. Some folktales contain constructs for persevering through pain and suffering, facing and conquering one's fears, and taking risks to love and trust. These are among the challenges one faces when choosing to abandon an addiction lifestyle in favor of a sober one. Ancient and traditional tales are useful in that they provide wisdom and model overcoming obstacles. Myths, folktales and fairy tales are infused with hope. Cultural norms, traditions, and values are illustrated and taught as they had been for centuries. More contemporary stories illustrate how to navigate and negotiate this world in which we live, and allow the exploration of perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, and consequences in a safe way. Happily, the use of story capitalizes on the way the brain remembers, indexes, and retrieves information. (Schank, 1990) It is clear from research that story is a potent influencer of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

That was the inspiration behind this collection of stories. Drawing on my own experience as a person in long-term recovery, my professional experience as a drug and alcohol counselor, and

my gifts as an educator/artist, I have paired each of the Twelve Steps of Recovery with a traditional story. Contained in this collection are cautionary tales, trickster tales, and inspirational tales, each chosen to touch the heart, fire the imagination, and spark useful conversation about how to live without relying on alcohol or drugs. Each version of the stories has been re-told from a recovery point of view in order to validate common experiences and introduce models for new behavior. The hope that the wounds can be healed, the soul can be soothed, a new freedom and a new happiness can be found, can be communicated through traditional stories. The power of stories to inspire change and infuse hope needn't be limited to the rooms of Twelve Step meetings. Somebody just needed to connect the Twelve Steps to stories universal stories that transcend time and place.

This book does just that. Enjoy!

Beth Ohlsson
Salisbury, Maryland
October, 2017

Each of the Twelve Steps quoted under chapter titles are used with permission from *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women have Recovered from Alcoholism*. 3d ed., New York, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976

HOW AND WHY STORY WORKS

To Clinicians, Educators, Clergy, and Artist Educators:

I FOUND MYSELF WORKING AS AN ADDICTION COUNSELOR in the year 2000, in a therapeutic community contained in a local detention center. My formal training had been as a secondary theater teacher. My informal training has been my own program of recovery, which started in 1991. My newly discovered passion was storytelling. I had no idea where the path would lead and how these three things would converge. I was about to find out.

I had just left public education after twenty-five years of teaching theater. I had been at storytelling workshops with various working performers and had just begun to tell stories professionally. I was nine years sober. I needed a job. My story coach, Susan Gordon, had begun working for the local health department as an addictions counselor. Susan encouraged me to apply for a job there. This was prior to today's credential requirement, so the most important qualification was being sober. "You'll be great. They need someone in the adolescent program." I got the job, but it wasn't with the adolescents. This job put me in the therapeutic community at the local detention center. There were fifty-two men ... and me. I had little in common with these men, and had no clue how to make recovery dynamics relevant to

them; much less make recovery a desirable lifestyle. Susan, who held a Master's Degree in the Use of Story in Therapeutic Settings, said, "Tell them stories." I wanted to respond, "You are out of your freakin' mind!" but trusting Susan, I began to tell stories.

I told the old stories, the traditional tales that I had loved as a child. I found new versions of those stories that spoke to the personalities, dilemmas, and challenges of these men. I realized that their worldview didn't contain the paradigms of "good conquering evil" or "money doesn't buy happiness" or "what goes around comes around." But the stories conveyed those paradigms in easy-to-digest morsels. I gave them the paradigms for sober living through story ... non-threatening, non-judgmental story.

Initially, the men responded to the stories as one would expect. The stories were considered child's play and met with disdain. However, it wasn't long before the men would ask, "Are you telling stories today?" If the answer were, "Yes," the men would rush into their cells, grab their pillows or blankets or both, and curl up like children, while I stood in the center of the Block. Often they went to sleep. These men, neglected and discarded before their time, shared with me that no one had ever read to them, or told them stories. They would apologize for falling asleep and missing the story. I was touched, but still had no idea what good this was doing. I went back to Susan Gordon with these questions. She explained the "story trance" and how the story was healing on some deep level. This "story trance" is a phenomenon that occurs when the listener experiences a complete immersion into the story being told. There are observable, physiological

changes in the listener as the storyteller captures the listener's attention and directs it inward. (Stallings, F. 1988) This "story trance" allows the listener to enter the mind and heart of a character, or enter a different world from their own. The experiences that listeners share as a result of this common experience of the story invite emotional growth and healing. Still dubious about all of this, I kept telling stories until I had that "Ah-ha!" moment that changed the trajectory of my life.

At one point I told "the Emperor's New Clothes" by Hans Christian Andersen, and one particular inmate had dismissed the experience as childish. I told the story to illustrate how easy it is to follow the crowd and not think for one's self, and how telling the truth took great courage. However, I have learned that what I intend and what the clients hear isn't necessarily the same. Several weeks later, this inmate was struggling to explain how he felt after responding to the aggressive and threatening actions of another. He had behaved differently, out of character, and avoided a physical confrontation, without being perceived as weak. He finally blurted out, "I felt like that little kid at the end of "The Emperor's New Clothes!" He had gotten the words he needed from the story. The members of that group session had experienced that same story, and had the same words. They now had a way to talk about feelings and experiences without being too vulnerable.

There was now a way to talk about new possibilities for responding to the world. I kept telling stories. I looked for stories that illustrated the Twelve Steps. I wanted to understand this power that story had so that I could use it deliberately and

with purpose. So, I went to graduate school to study story and its power to heal. My Master's Thesis explored the use of story in addictions treatment.

Years later, while working in a women's treatment center, I told "The Monster who Grew Small," a story from Ethiopia about facing one's fears and cutting that "monster fear" down to size to a group of young mothers. Many of these women were on methadone, which is a medication-assisted treatment for opiate addiction. Methadone is often prescribed for pregnant opiate addicts as it is less harmful to the baby than heroin. It is not uncommon for a methadone-exposed newborn to require medical monitoring while the baby withdraws from methadone, which places the infant in the neonatal intensive care unit. While attending her newborn infant in the neonatal intensive care unit, a young woman was berated by one of the nurses. She shared that while the nurse was putting her down for her drug use, the story about fear went across her mind. "I took a deep breath, looked that nurse in the eye, and said, "I can't change that, but I'm clean now, and I'm learning how to stay clean. When my son is five years old, and I've been clean for five years, this won't matter to him. What else would you like me to do?" She had a different way to respond, a way that was appropriate, assertive, and positive—which was illustrated in that story.

I was blown away by her story, and the courage that she had derived from a story I told.

This was powerful medicine. I kept telling stories. Time and again, clients would reference a story when talking about

a new behavior or insight. Connecting with feelings, creating community, exploring difficult topics, and making a point were easier within the context of a story. Clients remembered those stories and continued to draw strength and comfort from them, even years later. I knew this was too good to keep to myself, so I compiled this set of stories to illustrate the Twelve Step Design for Living. Regardless of the path that you may have chosen or believe in, these stories illustrate universal spiritual principles that all major religions of the world teach. Besides that, they're really good stories.

This book is the culmination of all that I hold dear—my recovery, the richness of a world shared through story, and the connections that are made as a result. What I have discovered in my own recovery journey is that I have a sacred obligation to pass on what was so freely given to me by those who came before me. I give it to you in the form of stories—stories that can be read, used, and dissected, and debated. Use the space provided at the end of each chapter to make notes, and/or follow the list of activities related to each story. Please take these stories and use them to suit your purposes, to expand what it is that you do with and for others, and to challenge yourself to work outside the box.