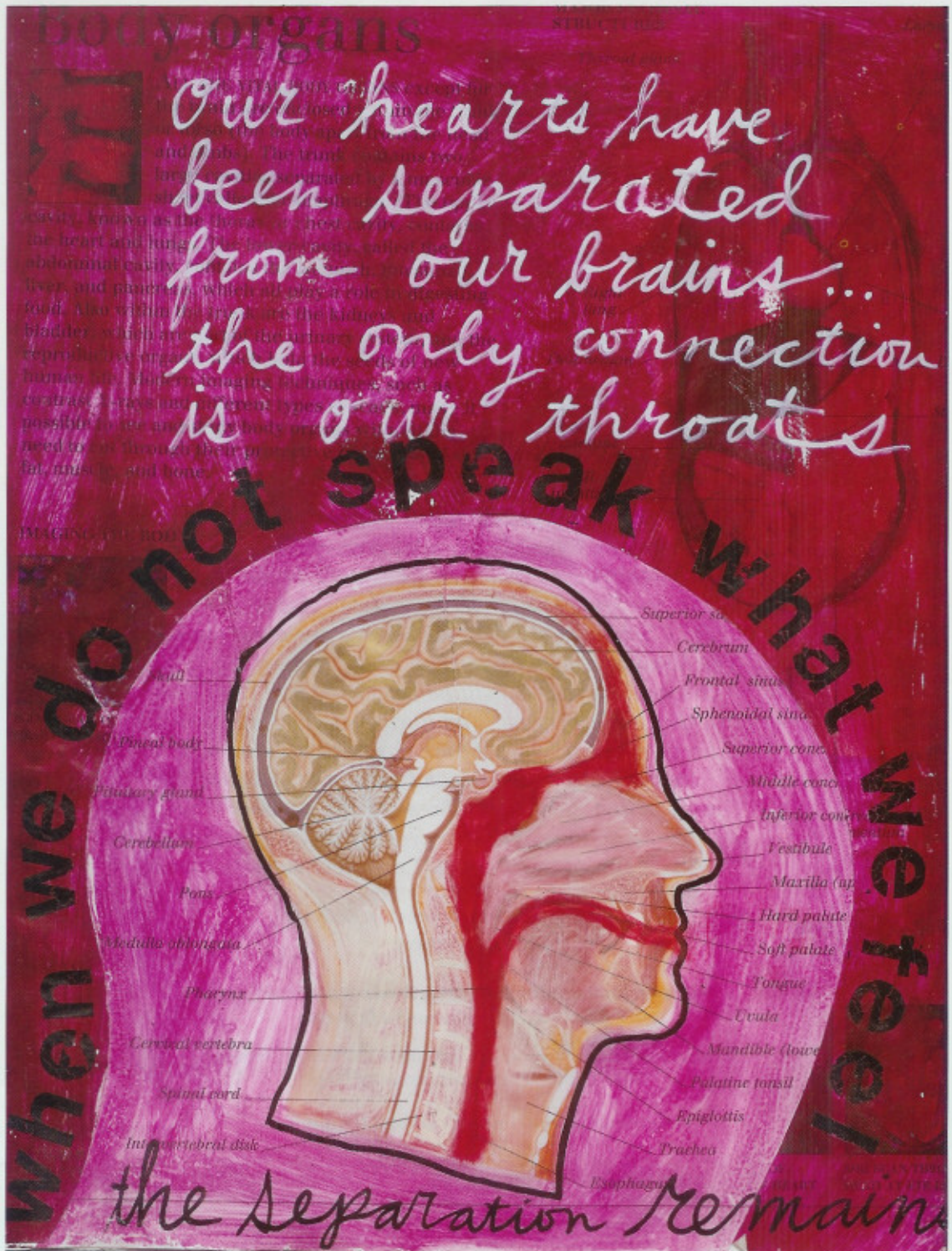


Storytelling

MAGAZINE



Storytelling and Aging

A Family Tradition of International Storytelling



Florence Ferreira

“... Ils étaient très gentils et m'ont dit qu'ils aimaient beaucoup les enfants...”

As my grandfather Pépé went on and on with the fascinating account of his encounter at the beach a few minutes earlier with two “little people,” time stood still for my brother and me. Eyes wide open, we hung on every word, hardly breathing, envying Pépé’s luck and wishing we had taken the beach walk with him.

I felt a slight shadow of suspicion as I stared at the “little people,” two lead soldier toys in Pépé’s hand, but I did not let that thought even sprout. I would not sabotage my desire to believe in magic. Above all, I did not want to spoil the precious connection with Pépé. The deliciousness of being the object of his attention, of sensing his love, of savoring his melodious Portuguese accent, and of inhaling his familiar scent was precious. It was a rare treat too, since he lived in France, and we were always traveling the world. I do not have any other memory of that vacation in Valencia, Spain. I could not describe the beach or the place where we stayed. I cannot even remember anything else about that time at all, my fifth or sixth year of life. However, somehow, breaking through the blur of my early memories, that magical moment has remained intact.

My daughter Allison was born the year after he died, and I cheerfully watched her Peruvian grandmother feed her soul with stories. These were different, more anecdotal. Everything going on called for a story, usually about a family member, dead or alive. This is how Allison learned about her ancestors, going back to the first Spaniard to set foot in Peru. Today, not only does she have a broad picture of her family’s dynamics in the historical context—which in turn helps her to understand past societies and their motives better as she participates in her history class—but she also developed a privi-

leged relationship with her grandma, as well as a strong respect for elders.

In traditional collectivistic cultures from Portugal to Peru and Namibia to Laos, storytelling is the main means by which elders pass on wisdom to the younger generations. Differences in style abound. In some parts of Cameroon, children and adults gather at sunset under the village baobab tree to play a game called Yan-Koloba. Players move wooden blocks simultaneously and rhythmically, while chanting an accompanying song. The leader, usually an elder, will stop the movement regularly to tell a segment of the story, until the story is finished.

In the plains or *llanos* of Venezuela, families, friends, and neighbors also gather after the day’s activities for a session of *contrapunteo*. Two or more singers take turns telling improvised verses—which usually relate to life in the plains or any specific episode of the day—as they accompany themselves with a harp, a small guitar, and maracas.

I have been lucky enough to experience firsthand the way community storytelling, whether fictional, anecdotal, or genealogical, fosters bonds and continuity. Regrettably, even in traditional cultures, TV, radio, and battery-operated games have made community and family gatherings more and more infrequent. Elders are increasingly suffering from a sense of worthlessness, and youngsters are growing rootless. I hope that the revival of storytelling will eventually reach these communities, if not in the traditional ways, then through organized activities. After all, “little people” are scarce on the beaches these days.

Florence Ferreira (f.ferreira@speakglobal.net) is the founder of SpeakGlobal. She is an international, trilingual (English, Spanish, French), cross-cultural communication consultant who integrates cultural differences by reaching the human soul and consciousness. She is a member of the Palm Beach County Storytelling Guild.