

MY STORYTELLER

Sometimes profound lessons come to us in the most unexpected of ways. The timeless truths that emerge following the purchase of a "broken and repaired" Pueblo Storyteller underscore the value to be found, not in the seeking of perfection, but in embracing imperfection and of the healing that can occur as we allow our stories of brokenness to be told.

BY DIANE BEUERLE

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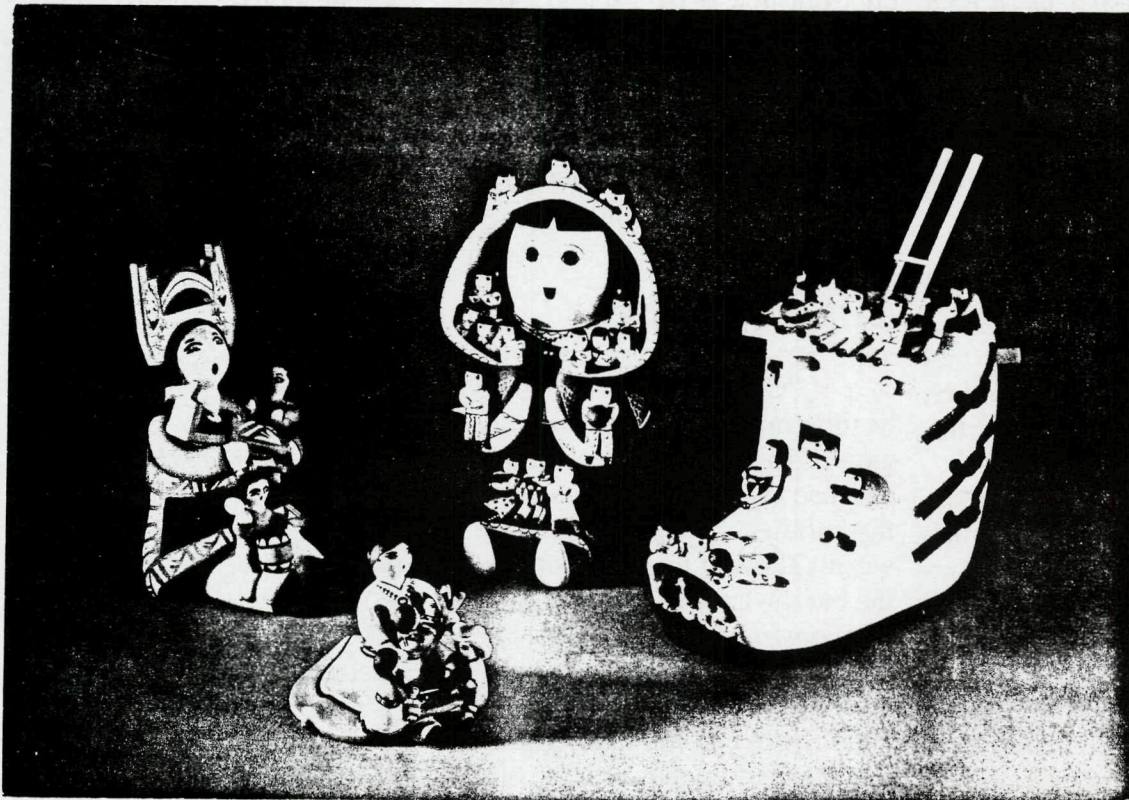
In the fall of 1987 my husband and I went on a weekend adventure in the New Mexico desert with a group of good friends. The event was called "Ropes Course" – a series of physical and psychological exercises that challenged us to push our limits, go beyond our fears and scale walls we scarcely knew we had erected. The things I experienced and the knowledge I gained about my own carefully hidden vulnerabilities remained with me long after that weekend. I wanted to take home a memento, a reminder of what I had learned.

When we stopped in Santa Fe, NM on the way home, I acquired something that was to become symbolic. Symbolic not only of the journey we undertook that weekend but also foretold the direction my life would take as my own path continued to unfold.

As we wandered around town, we went into many shops displaying pottery figurines... clay figures of a seated woman or man (a "singing mother" or "storyteller") with various numbers of children (or listeners) attached to them. These figurines or "story-

tellers" represented the oral tradition of the Pueblo Indians in which the history and traditions of their culture was preserved and recounted through the vehicle of storytelling. As Mark Bahti in his book, *Pueblo Stories and Storytellers* so beautifully explained:

During the long winter nights when the earth, plants, animals



and people were quiet and resting, awaiting the sun's return, story telling was a regular, even nightly event. The stories took the listeners on a journey that would bring a renewal of life. (p. 10) Many stories could only be told during this time, when one was safe from lightning and snakes slept. The old ones told the story as they had heard it when they were young from the old ones who had heard it from the old ones before them. Each generation saw to it that the oral traditions were passed on virtually unchanged for uncounted years. (p.10)

I liked these storytellers and decided to purchase one, but as I browsed, I was put off by many of the figures because they looked too modern... their faces somehow "anglicized" and new. At the time I didn't realize I was searching for something that spoke to a deep and ancient part of myself, a part that perhaps I had just begun to glimpse on that insightful weekend.

We came to a store that had a wide variety of storytellers when suddenly I spied one that greatly appealed to me.... It was a "singing mother" with five children attached to her... boys and girls perched upon her shoulders and arms. She was tucked back on a shelf. She looked old and she looked primitive, her coloring suggested that she had spent many hours around smoky fires listening to stories and weaving her tales. I was instantly drawn to her, but as the proprietor handed her to me, he explained that she had been broken and showed me a number of cracks and chips. On her underside a la-

bel proclaimed she was "broken and repaired." I was disappointed and agonized over buying her because she wasn't "perfect." Yet I kept returning to her, because her quiet serenity beckoned me. Feeling ambivalent, I went to other stores but finally realized I wanted her because she had been "broken and repaired," her seeming weakness had become her strength because her story was my story too.

Some time after I had purchased my "broken treasure," I learned that in some Asian cultures something that has been broken and repaired is considered even more valuable; breaks need not be hidden, but indeed, become an integral part of the piece. I had also begun to discover the value in brokenness, the value in repair. Being complete meant not to be perfect, but to be mended. It was not the breaks that were damaging but the loss of value ascribed to them.

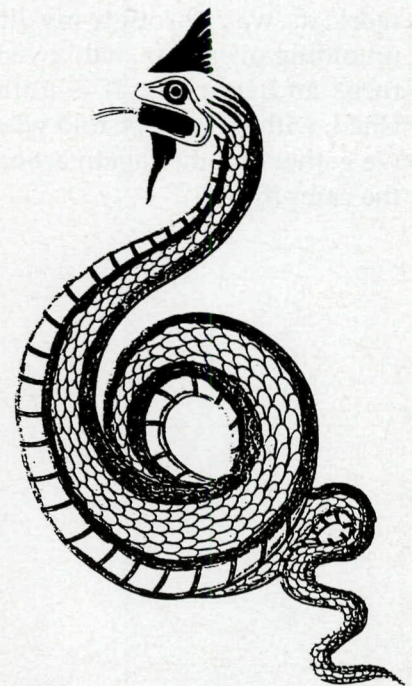
At the time my storyteller so innocently entered my life, I did not know that I would be entering a profession of story telling, I did not know that I would become a Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner and be a weaver and listener of tales, that my office would become a smoky campfire around which ancient stories could be told.

As I went through my training I learned that the most important part of the examination of a patient is the history. "If you listen to your patients, they will tell you what is wrong with them," we were told repeatedly. Sue Bender, in her book *Everyday Sacred*, underscores the fact in this way: stories move in circles, they

don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen." (p. 10)

I now understand that listening is a key ingredient in all storytelling; as the words are spoken, they must be heard. And the stories inside the stories and the stories between the stories must be discerned for the heart of the tale to unfold.

Since she has been with me, my singing mother has been broken and repaired several times; after all, she is of the earth, she is only clay, and her brokenness and repair continue to speak to life's ongoing processes at work in me.



I have come to believe that the storyteller was just sitting quietly, patiently, waiting for me. She has taught me many lessons as we travel together. She sits by my bed as a constant reminder of the tales I have yet to tell and of the stories I have yet to hear, stories spoken out only in places where one is safe from lightning and snakes are asleep.

The lessons and metaphors of stories and storytellers continue to reverberate throughout my life. I have discovered I am increasingly responsive to the hunger in others to tell their tales, to work through their brokenness, to find their way home.

As in the ancient days of the Pueblo Indians, in this mysterious process of words being spoken out and of becoming lost in the hope of being found, the journey leads to a renewal of life.

My own ongoing story with the singing mother, like all good Pueblo tales, continues to work its way through my life, unfolding over time with twists, turns and subplots. It is unfinished, with more to be told when we gather together again around the campfire. □

REFERENCES:

Bahti M. (1988). *Pueblo Stories and Storytellers*. Treasure Chest Publications: Tucson, Arizona.

Bender, S. (1995). *Everyday Sacred*. Harper Collins: San Francisco, CA.

*Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

Leonard Cohen

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