

PART ONE THE CAMPFIRE

The campfire...

For thousands of years, storytelling was a mechanism for teaching. While it was not the only mechanism, it was (and is) an important one. Through storytelling, the wisdom of elders was passed to the next generation. Good stories have always embodied a blend of the cognitive and affective domains — in fact, in story, there is no separation between the two. For example, one version of a creation story told among the indigenous peoples of the Northwest American Continent has Raven bringing light to the planet after it had been hidden away by Grandfather. He had hidden the light because he wanted to believe that his daughter was the most beautiful creature in the Universe, and could only hold that belief if he never saw her. Through trickery, Raven steals the light and, through mishap, creates the sun and the stars. This one story embodies not only the cosmological aspects of the people's belief, but also the metaphorical aspect of "being kept in the dark."

This quality of nuance and multiple interpretations is common to storytelling. It is one reason that adults and children can enjoy the same story together — each age takes from the story the elements that are appropriate. The power of storytelling is so great that even in more recent times (c. 250 BC,) we find Socrates responding to his students on occasion with the Greek equivalent of "That reminds me of a story."

There is a sacred quality to teaching as storytelling, and this activity took place in sacred places, typically around the fire or under a tree. The focal point of the flame, the sounds of the night, all provide backdrop to the storyteller who shares wisdom with students who, in their turn, become storytellers to the next generation. In this manner, culture replicates itself through the DNA of myth. The often tangential nature of storytelling, its use of metaphor, its indirect attack on a topic, all combine to make storytelling an effective way to address topics that might be too confrontational to address head on. Story crafts its own helix around a topic. As Robert Frost said, "We sit in the circle and suppose, while the truth sits in the center and knows."

And so, from an archetypal perspective, the campfire represents an important aspect of the learning community. It does not stand alone, however.