

THE LAND, THE STORYTELLER, AND THE GREAT CAULDRON OF MAKING MEANING

by Patricia Spence

Part 1

Once upon a time in a land like ours in some ways and not like ours in others, there were great storytellers. Into each generation, century after century, a storyteller was born. The storyteller had a very important task. These stories kept the land, as it should be—operational and human. Everyone knew this deep down inside, although they rarely thought about it. Life went on with its joys, turning points, work and sorrows. All these things the storyteller wove together to create the richest of fabrics, and the fibers from which it was made were your own! Life made sense and you lived it, with your strengths and your weaknesses, but overall you tried to do your best. When the storyteller told your story you knew who you were and you knew you belonged no matter what.

The storyteller of each generation was just a little different from other folks, even as a child. The old people liked to try to figure out which child was

going to be the next storyteller. They were enthusiastic about this and from time to time even laid wagers—just to spice things up a bit. They watched for five things in a child. **First**, the child looked at things very carefully. **Second**, the child listened to things very carefully. **Third**, the child touched things very carefully. **Fourth**, the child had a wonderful imagination, and last, the child asked, “Why?” more frequently than anyone else, and especially more often than any of the adults. The trick was to catch the child doing these things and the old people kept very spy tracking the adventures of the children. However, the wager was not settled until the child disappeared one day. Then and only then was it certain to the old people. Others rarely noticed the child’s disappearance. He was so much a part of them, that when he was gone, it just didn’t feel that way. But because time was short, the old ones were more attuned to what was precious.

Well, when Zaddik was born, the old people did not even bother to lay wagers. It was clear to them from the start that he was the new storyteller. They kept spy following him around just because it was so much fun! When Zaddik looked he saw the smallest of details. When he listened no sound seemed to escape his attention. And when he touched the animals and birds, and the ladybugs and grasshoppers sat in the palms of his hands, he felt right into the heart of all these creatures so that he knew how it was with them.

On top of all of this Zaddik had an extremely vivid imagination, so it was no wonder he could tell a good story. When he spoke you could hear the hush of a bird’s wing or feel the tiny feet of a ladybug. One story everyone liked to hear over and over was the one Zaddik made up about how ladybugs came to wear tiny little, very minuscule, boxing gloves when they got mad so they wouldn’t

hurt each other. Zaddik said that ladybugs, those sweet looking creatures, didn't get mad very often but when they did - watch out! Zaddik frequently changed the names of the ladybugs to those of some of the adults he knew. The children howled and the adults grinned and went home thinking less of their grudges and more of themselves.

When he was twelve, Zaddik disappeared, like all the storytellers who came before him. He heard something calling him, and because this was destiny he had no choice but to follow the voice. No one but Zaddik, like all the storytellers who came before him, ever knew where it was he went. What Zaddik heard calling him was the *Oracle of the Great Cauldron of Making Meaning*. And it was to the place of the Cauldron that the Oracle guided him. This was the place the Oracle said where the heavens worked on behalf of all mankind.

The Cauldron of Making Meaning was so wondrous, so vast, with a glow like liquid gold that it took Zaddik quite a while before he could hold his eyes steady on it. But when he did the Oracle began to teach him. He was taught the sacred nature of stories, in that *without exception all stories were sacred*. He was taught to take the bare bones of any story, whether humble or horrific and to throw, to *hurl* them into the cauldron, without hesitation. The Great Cauldron in turn knew the essence of those bare bones and fleshed them out, until they were full of meaning, and leapt from the Cauldron dancing the dance of life, and the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the earth and all that lived there in and there upon danced too.

Before Zaddik went back to his home the Oracle had him practice throwing the bare story bones into the Cauldron. This was not as easy a task as might be thought. The Cauldron was so awe

inspiring that it did not feel right to put something in that seemed trite or foolish or mean or uneducated. But it was the storyteller's responsibility, the Oracle told him, not to leave anything out. His abilities to see, to listen, to touch and feel, to imagine and ask "why" were very important, but they did not count in the least if anything was held back. So when Zaddik hesitated, the Oracle would bellow, "Hurl, Zaddik!" scaring him half out of his wits, but it worked and Zaddik hurled.

A storyteller, whose job was to help people see the meaning in things had to put aside modesty or pride, assumptions and reservations, or any wishes he might hold for a particular ending. The story was its own law and was to be respected no matter what. Some very strange things indeed came out of the Cauldron of Making Meaning, when the storyteller took it into his head to omit one of the bare bones. Things like cows barking and dogs mooing and budgie birds who told you that you were stupid, which is not very nice even if it is true. Once the Oracle was satisfied with Zaddik's ability to "hurl," Zaddik was instructed to take a cup, dip it into the Cauldron, and drink every last drop. This he did. The liquid was bitter, sweet, salty, and sour all at once, but it was the most satisfying thing Zaddik had ever tasted.

"Now, said the Oracle, "a portion of the Great Cauldron lies inside you, and it will always be there as long as you allow every bone of every story to fall into the cup that is yours to carry. Do not forget the Law of the Story. Do not forget that the gods are working on behalf of mankind in the place of the Great Cauldron of Making Meaning. If you should ever lose your portion of the Cauldron, the Great Cauldron does not cease to be, even if it feels

that way. Go now. It is your turn to tell the story.”

So Zaddik made his way home, and when the storyteller who came before him said goodbye to the earth and hello to heaven, Zaddik took his place. The land seemed to glow more brightly with the wonder of his stories and the lives of people felt full of meaning and purpose. They loved it when Zaddik took their names and made them part of a story, just as he had done in the tale of the ladybugs. They laughed, they cried, and they learned. And everyone knew they belonged, no matter what.

Part 2

In time, something new came into the land from far away. It was very difficult to see the form of this new thing. When you looked for it all you could see was its shadow, and sometimes you could not even see that. This happened when *you were in its shadow, and you didn't know it had been there until it was gone*. The people asked Zaddik to tell them what this was, and he did not know what to say. He could not see or hear this new thing any better than they could. But when he got close to it, or it to him, he felt that this was darkness pretending to be light. It was sickness pretending to be health. It was senselessness pretending to be sense. But to Zaddik, worst of all, he felt that it was evil pretending to be holy. He told the people this but for the first time they could not understand what he was saying. As their confusion grew greater, the shadow grew darker. It went right inside people and they started to do terrible things, for which they felt great shame but they continued to do terrible things in spite of this. It was as if their eyes were not their own and the world looked bleak and strange. It was as if their ears did not belong to them anymore and they began to hear the sound of screams. But to the despair of

their souls their hands seemed to take on a life of their own and to move now in hurtful ways and not in the ways of love.

No one wanted to hear Zaddik's stories. To the degree that they had once loved to be part of his stories, they now abhorred the thought. They could not bear to hear their own names. They hid themselves where he could not look or listen or feel or ask why. Zaddik did remember the Law of the Story, that he was to leave nothing out, but what could he do when just about all the bare bones were hidden? When he threw a bit of a bone that he came across into the portion of the Cauldron that was his, the story that came out was so distorted it could not be understood. Zaddik did still have a supply of old stories and he decided that he would tell these. Perhaps the people would remember the old fabric of life and things would be as they used to be. So Zaddik walked the land and he told the old stories over and over. No one came to hear him but he told them anyway. He stood outside of buildings and houses and told the stories. He brought the old stories up from his portion of the Great Cauldron of Making Meaning hour after hour and day after day. Sometimes children or old folks would pause to hear him as if they wanted to catch his words, but they were so dispirited by the sickness around them that Zaddik's stories did not enliven them, and Zaddik wore out the old stories, just as we can wear out the soles of a pair of shoes. Eventually the entire sole will disappear, and eventually the portion of the Great Cauldron which was in Zaddik disappeared altogether. He continued to try to tell the stories but all that came from his mouth were echoing, hollow, terrifying sounds.

And then Zaddik began to weep, and he wept and wept and wept. His grief was so great that all

the people in the land heard and they too began to weep. The Oracle of the Great Cauldon of Making Meaning which lived outside of Zaddik heard his weeping and the weeping of the people, and called to him, just as she had done when he was twelve. So Zaddik went with his great grief to the Great Cauldron of Making Meaning, the place where the heavens always work on our behalf. The Oracle asked him why his cup was empty and he told her that a terrible thing had happened. He had not been able to put the bare bones of a single story into the Portion of the Cauldron that was his, and he had used up all the old stories and he had nothing. "Ah," said the Oracle, "but you have all the bones of nothing, Zaddik. You have the bone of the grief of nothing. You have the bone of the longing of nothing and you have the bone of the love of nothing. And you have your own story of nothing. You forgot about your own story. So, Zaddik, take all the bones of nothing and take your own story of nothing and throw those bones into The Great Cauldron of Making Meaning which lies outside yourself."

Zaddik bent down then and slowly picked up the bones which had been lying at his feet all the while, and the Oracle bellowed, "Hurl, Zaddik!" and Zaddik hurled with all his strength, and a great light rose from the cauldron, and a new story was born, a story of redemption beyond anything the land and its people and even all mankind had ever thought possible and the impossible righting of the most terrible wrongs became possible and the land glowed as it had never done before. It shone so brilliantly that the gods in the place of the Cauldron of Making Meaning saw, and danced a brand new dance which moved even the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the earth and all the creatures that lived therein and there upon with wild and boundless and immeasurable joy.

Biographical Note

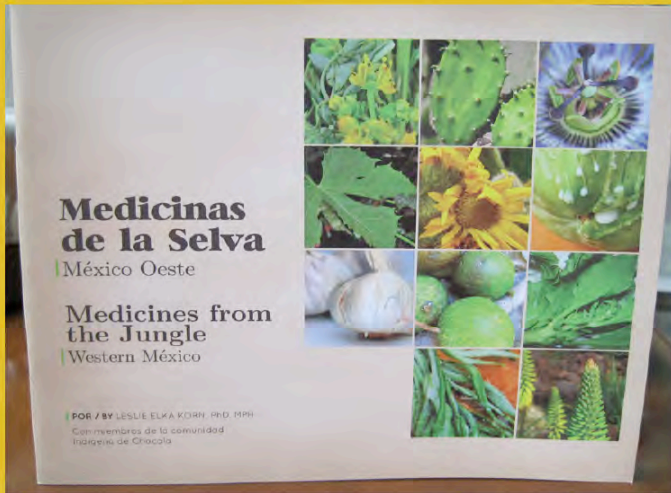
Patricia Spence lives in Riding Mountain, Manitoba Canada. She has lived and worked with the indigenous peoples of Northern Ontario and the Yukon for 35 years. She has been a special education teacher, social worker and mental health counselor and holds a Masters degree in Depth Psychology. She recently developed a curriculum entitled, "Sexual Abuse-the Shadow of Colonization in Canada. Ms. Spence is currently working on a book with her colleague Dr. Darrel Racine with the title: "Soul Loss and Colonization."

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