

Storytelling in Singapore: Mentoring the Storytelling Revival

By Sheila Wee

This article was commissioned for the January/February 2008 edition of Storytelling Magazine. (USA).

Storytelling in Singapore is thriving. We have just had our seventh Asian Congress of Storytellers and our second Singapore International Storytelling Festival. Storytelling is taking root in schools, museums, parks, community centres, theatres and businesses. In fact, storytelling has become something of a buzzword.

But in 1998 storytelling was just a memory, a fading vision. Back in the 1950s the last professional storyteller plied his trade on Read Bridge, beside the Singapore River. In the 60s and early 70s people tuned into the radio by the thousands to hear Lee Dai Soh tell Chinese folktales and sword fighting epics. But times changed, the pace of life quickened and no one had time for storytelling any more.

Various international storytellers did come through Singapore, and give workshops, but none had a really lasting impact. Then in 1999, Cathy Spagnoli arrived. Cathy who is based in both Vashon Island, near Seattle in the U.S. and Chennai in India, has a wealth of knowledge on Asian storytelling.

In late 1998, my friend Kiran Shah and I attended a three hour workshop given by Cathy and came out inspired. For me, it was a validation that the storytelling I had been doing informally since childhood was a legitimate form of expression and even a profession. For Kiran, a Singaporean whose family originally came from Western India, it was a wake up call. How could this American woman know more about her culture than she did?

Cathy was our first mentor and perhaps in many ways the most important. For if she had not made the effort to give us encouragement, we would never have had the confidence to take our storytelling further. Being a mentor now myself, I am always surprised that it is sometimes the simplest word of encouragement, that makes the difference to people.

We soon discovered that mentors don't necessarily have to be there in the flesh. Another important mentor to us in the early days of our storytelling was the Storytell Listserve. The tellers on the list, made us feel very welcome and the on-line discussions jump-started our storytelling education. What was most important though, was the fact that we were no longer alone; we had found a community, a very generous community. We could go on-line and ask any question and we would get both answers and encouragement. At times we felt overwhelmed by the generosity of these people, who lived halfway across the world, but would take the time out of their day to help us.

I try to remember that experience when I get emails or phone calls from people who are interested in starting out in storytelling. One such moment sticks in my mind. I received a phone call from a young teacher, just two months out of teacher's training college. She was in quite a panic, as her principal had just told her that she must start a storytelling club in the school. She had no experience at all of storytelling and the principal was expecting her students to enter, and to win, a nationwide storytelling competition, that would be held at the end of that term. I remember I was very busy that day and I really didn't want to talk on the phone for 30 minutes, still less have this young woman over to my house that evening to look at my resources and discuss ideas. But the note of desperation in her voice and the fact that she had the gumption to track me down persuaded me to make the effort. I am so glad I did, for she went on to become a champion of storytelling in the school system and since leaving full time teaching, has become one of our most trusted freelance storytelling trainers.

The Storytell Listserve brought us another important mentor, Margaret Read MacDonald. Margaret, in turn put us in touch with Anne Pellowski. These two remarkable women have visited Singapore many times, often at their own expense and have provided us with training, encouragement and inspiration. Their passion ignited ours.

In 1999, Kiran and I founded a storytellers circle. There were only four of us at the first meeting and two of those admitted to being only there for the food. But gradually membership increased. The food remained important; we still have a potluck dinner before every meeting. This time for sharing and eating before the meeting helped us to create the warm supportive atmosphere that helped to nurture and mentor beginning tellers.

By 2001, Kiran and I had formed a storytelling company and had gone professional. But, even as we were building our own storytelling careers, we always tried to keep a greater goal in mind - reviving the art of storytelling in Singapore and in particular repopularising Asian folktales. We couldn't do this alone, so mentoring other storytellers became a priority.

Although we were only a couple of steps ahead of them in experience, through the Storytellers Circle we now had a growing band of beginning tellers to mentor. One of the ways we tried to do this by creating the opportunities for them to tell. At first, this was at small community based events. Later as their skills developed, we sent them out into schools to do both performances and training.

Looking back, I am slightly aghast at how early in our careers we started teaching storytelling skills. This was not by choice, there was really no one else more experienced to do it. Overseas tellers came though and helped, but Kiran and I were the only ones there all year round. Running courses for both teachers and the general public helped us discover more people with the interest in storytelling and expand the number of active storytellers. Once we had a critical mass of active storytellers, the mentoring load was shared. People began to mentor each other. Tellers would rehearse together before a performance and give each other encouragement during crises of confidence.

We also started networking like crazy, because only if storytelling was known, would there be opportunities for us and our mentees to tell. While we had to put our storytelling business first, we tried to work on the premise of expanding the "storytelling work pie" rather than cutting it. This strategy worked and by 2004 we had a team of freelance tellers doing training and performances in schools and community performances for children and families.

Other opportunities were created when the Substation Arts Centre asked us to do a series of adult storytelling performances. At that stage we had only limited experience of telling to adults, but we jumped at the chance and pulled in about eight people we had previously trained. Working on these storytelling evenings, planning and rehearsing brought us much closer together. We learned what each needed to bring out the best in their performance. We supported each other when things went wrong and cheered each other on in our moments of triumph. We were able to be mentors for each other.

Looking back over the last seven years, two things stand out as being important in advancing the storytelling revival in Singapore. Firstly, the fact that the early leaders of the revival were natural mentors. I think this was partly due to our personalities, but also perhaps due to our backgrounds in social work (Kiran) and early childhood education (both of us). Secondly, we were also natural networkers. These two attributes, combined with the fact that Singapore is a very small, very highly connected nation, magnified our efforts to restore storytelling to its rightful place in the lives of Singaporeans.

I see mentoring in the same way I see stories. You send a story out into the world to do its work. You never know who will take your story to heart; who will remember it and send it out into the world again. You just keep on telling the stories, knowing that some will hit home and some will not, but also knowing that if you don't tell them, then nothing happens at all.

In the same way, mentoring is a hit and miss affair, sometimes you may spend a lot of effort mentoring someone and very little comes of it. Then sometimes, you will be rewarded. You will see your mentees grow in skills and confidence and make a real impact on their society. That makes all the effort more than worthwhile.