

A Storyteller's Tale

Eric Miller takes his passion for storytelling to India

By Kamala Thiagarajan

Whether he's setting up a living museum in coastal Chennai, arranging storytelling workshops across the state, or training executives in the art of public speaking, Eric Miller (originally from New York) is at the heart of the modern storytelling revival that is sweeping through India.

In a popular bookstore in Chennai, I find myself a part of a small gathering of eclectic people. It's raining heavily outside but, despite the downpour, over a dozen of us are attending the storytelling session for children arranged by the World Storytelling Institute. A young mother with a four-year-old son says she's here on a mission—she wants to learn how to narrate bedtime stories properly. And then there's a computer programmer who wants to sharpen his public speaking skills, and a corporate executive who wants to communicate better. Mostly, there are children who just love listening to a good story.

As the author begins to read from her book, I find myself as captivated as the children are. The hypnotic quality of the storyteller's voice, the lyrical cadence of the story, the dramatic pauses in just the right places have a mesmeric effect. The narrative style draws us deeper into the tale and soon, reality merges seamlessly with a world of vibrant imagination.

An hour later, even as the storytelling session winds up, the magic lingers. I notice a tall unassuming man in the background who has been supervising the proceedings with quiet interest. And that is how I first meet Eric Miller, a Ph.D in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania. As the director and co-founder of the World Storytelling Institute (WSI), headquartered in Chennai, he formally trains people from all over the globe in the art of storytelling. Parents, teachers, and business and media professionals have all benefitted from his guidance.

It's obvious that for him, storytelling isn't just an activity you indulge in, but a way of life that allows you to effectively communicate your thoughts and emotions.

"A story can be a powerful instrument of change. Various forms of storytelling aid personality development," says Miller. "It's



a social activity that helps even strangers forge a bond. Stories, when told just right, can engage and entertain; can help you heal and deal with grief, and can teach you a lesson in a less didactic fashion that could stay with you for life. While narrating a story to a mixed audience, how do you keep everyone's interest alive? Also, storytelling develops plurality of thought and deed by allowing everyone, children included, to interpret the stories according to their own system of beliefs."

I couldn't help but be overwhelmed by Miller's passion for storytelling, especially when you consider the fact that in 1988, it was a powerful story that brought him to the shores of Chennai in the first place—thousands of miles away from his hometown in New York.

When a visiting scholar narrated the story of *Silappathikaram*, he admits he was intrigued by the tragic tale of young Kannagi, whose husband Kovalan is infatuated with a beautiful young dancer. Kannagi bears his betrayal with stoic endurance, but the liaison leaves the couple penniless. Determined to

forge a new life, they leave their hometown of Poompuhar (the ancient capital of the Cholas) and arrive in Madurai, the capital city of the Pandya kingdom.

There they are in desperate need of money, so Kovalan hawks his wife's golden anklet. In those days, anklets were filled with precious gems and this one had rubies. However, as the queen of the Pandya kingdom had just lost her own anklet filled with pearls, Kovalan is accused of theft and is executed.

An enraged Kannagi confronts the royal couple and proves her anklet is filled with rubies, not pearls. When he realizes that he has put an innocent man to death, the king is overcome with remorse and kills himself. His queen too dies, but Kannagi's anger knows no bounds. She requests Agni, the God of Fire, to burn the city of Madurai (but to enable animals and good people to escape). Agni burns the city, and Kannagi and some others wander to the western mountains, near (what is today) the border between Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

"I fell in love with the story, the characters—particularly the Pandyan king who

held himself so accountable, despite being in a position of unquestionable authority and who preferred to lose his life rather than live in dishonor. I longed to see the land in which this remarkable story was set,” says Miller.

Interestingly, Miller himself journeyed from Poompuhar to Madurai, and then from Madurai to the Western mountains—on foot—a journey of over 400 kms (approx 250 miles) through terrains including mountains and forests, just to trace the path of the main character of the story.

The stories told by one of the indigenous tribes who live in these western mountains—the Kani tribe—became the subject of his Ph.D thesis. He documented their nuanced ways of storytelling, especially the musical rhythm of their version of *villupattu* (bow song or musical storytelling). After his doctoral research was completed, fascinated with India’s colorful mythology and rich oral traditions, he decided to settle in Chennai. Together with his wife, Magdalene Jeyarathnam, a native of Chennai and a counselor who specializes in expressive art therapy (employing visual art, dance, music, storytelling and other art forms to effect healing), they co-founded the WSI. “I believe India is now seeing a storytelling revival, similar to the kind of revolution that first swept through the West in the late 60s

and 70s” he says.

Storytelling sessions, according to Miller are built on the premise that it is foremost an interactive activity. “As a storyteller, eye contact is important to draw our listeners into the tale. Engaging the listener is the primary goal. I train people in voice modulation and body language. Role playing and speaking as the characters in one’s story is important too. But in order to do this, one must analyze the story, choosing key moments or pivotal scenes, and exploring the characters whose situations we empathize with the most. Some people are natural storytellers, but certainly, it is a skill that can be developed.”

“I often ask people to narrate an episode from an epic story that had the most impact on them, a life-changing experience, and even their life story (in just five minutes). Effective storytelling is all about remembering, selecting and presenting. There’s plenty of introspection and analysis involved and the material can come from our own lives, just as it would in a biography. After all, 90% of human communication is storytelling.”

And since the rapid erosion of the folk tales concerns him a great deal, Miller always asks his students to narrate their favorite raja-rani stories. “These folk tales involve a unique oral tradition of storytelling,” he says. The need to preserve the legacy of these tales

has led to his establishing living museums (where the objects on display are in everyday use) with fisher folk in coastal Chennai, and with tribal people in the western mountains. These living museums document the local people’s rich folk tales that often describe their deep knowledge of, and struggles with, nature. With the help of videoconferencing, people all around the world can participate in discussions with the local people about their cultures. This is a form of interactive cultural anthropology.

To make storytelling a meaningful activity, inseparable from the very fabric of our lives, seems to be the primary motivation. “Sharing a story, especially of a traumatic personal event could be therapeutic and liberating,” says Miller. “It gives people a chance to re-visit the disturbing event with more objectivity and control. Helping them feel less vulnerable hastens healing and can be very empowering.” As modern India marches ahead, who would have thought that embracing its age-old stories while spinning new ones could be a most effective tool for social awakening. ■

Kamala Thiagarajan writes on travel, health and lifestyle topics for a global audience. She has been widely published in over ten countries.



The Gift and Invitation

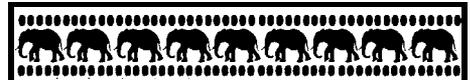
John 15:16 must be taken in context. In John chapter 15, Jesus refers to himself as The Vine and believers as the branches for a reason. For example, with an oak tree, the trunk and branches are separate. However, the trunk and branches of a grape vine are indistinguishable one from another. The vine is to symbolize our oneness with God through Christ. The shape of the Cross is critical for both. Neither grapes nor believers could thrive without it.

John 15:16 is about choice. His choice to give up Heaven, down to earth and pay a debt He didn't owe, so that we through Him might experience what is written in verse 16. He wants you to thrive beloved. John 15:16 says “You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you and I have appointed you [I have planted you], that you might go and bear fruit and keep on bearing, and that your fruit may be lasting [that it may remain, abide], so that whatever you ask the Father in My Name [as [a] presenting all that I Am], He may give it to you.” He chose us first, and we reciprocate by choosing Him back. All it's saying is we can't work hard enough to be saved. He already did all the work required on our behalf.

Consider Ephesians 2:8 - For it is by free grace (God's unmerited favor) that you are saved (delivered from judgment and made partakers of Christ's salvation) through [your] faith. And this [salvation] is not of yourselves [of your own doing, it came not through your own striving], but it is the gift of God;

So beloved, know that you're loved by the Creator of all. You don't have to earn it or work for it. Just receive it. God's love is a free gift...free to us, but paid for by His Son's body and blood. Just believe it and receive it! The work is DONE for you! If seeking salvation, confess with your mouth and heart: “Heavenly Father, thank You for Your love for me, for sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for all my sins. His precious blood washes me clean. You raised Him from the dead. He's alive today. And I thank You all my sins are forgiven. I'm righteous by the blood. I'm under God's favor. And I thank You Father that surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life from this day forth. In Jesus' name, Amen.” For more, visit:

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