

A story isn't just for Christmas



WORDS by Elaine Pearce

Alex has recently started going into care homes in the area, working with the elderly to give people a chance to engage with each other and share experiences, or to tell a story of their own. "The root of problems in so many people's lives is based on some sort of loss: the loss of their confidence and self-esteem, their childhood, their home or what might have been." Alex also works with bereavement groups. "An underlying sense of loss can touch us all at different times of our lives and at different levels. A story can allow us to explore and challenge these issues.

"Medication might keep us from being extremely unwell, but on the other hand, it can also keep us where we are and people do need to be able to move on and embrace their lives, realising that life is a wonderful gift and the pain of loss that we all experience in our lifetimes is testament to our capacity to love."

Find out more:

Visit: www.story-well.co.uk

Contact: Alexandra M. Simson, MA Ord.

PGDip

Email: info@story-well.co.uk

Telephone: 07980 197737

Alexandra Simson tells stories, stories that have been around for millennia; myths and folk legends of the world that have stood the test of time. They still speak of the human condition and that is the *raison d'être* behind what she does. Hence the name of her practice, 'Story-Well', a small business run from Dunster where Alex weaves magic with stories, to offer a unique way of exploring all kinds of themes and issues. Conceived in 2011 after she was made redundant, Story-Well emerged from a love of stories and over 20 years' experience working as a teacher, trainer and therapeutic practitioner. Using traditional storytelling in a wide variety of settings, from children's groups to health and business sectors, Alex offers bespoke workshops and events to help engage with people, businesses and services and enable them to achieve their objectives and potential more easily.

While teaching at a West London primary school, Alex observed there were some children experiencing difficulties which were not connected to their cognitive ability but more with their personal development. "Confidence and self-esteem underpin so many issues in people's lives," Alex explains.

Realising that she needed (and wanted) to do more than 'just teach', she embarked on a post-graduate diploma studying the 'Sesame' method of drama and movement therapy at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. This appealed strongly to her, particularly as story and myth played such an integral part, and she qualified as a therapist in 1996.

"Participants don't have to explain themselves – people can become tired talking about their personal issues. This method allows people to explore and express through a uniquely creative process. It is a gentle and non-confrontational form of therapy."

In a Sesame session, an hour or a day is spent working creatively through drama, movement and sound to meet whatever aims have been set by the client/group. It always begins with a circle, allowing people to settle and come into that place, leaving their problems at the door. Participants introduce themselves to one another and then a group dynamic of building up trust is achieved through games or movement to music which, in turn, allow people to open up and become more expressive. There is no 'right' or 'wrong'. At this stage Alex might

begin to get her participants ready to work with drama and movement by introducing selected images from a story that she will bring in later in the session.

Alex does not add the flesh to her stories. When working as a therapist, she explains, it is unhelpful to place too much of her own interpretation or bias on characters: people must be allowed to add the detail themselves.

After telling the story she will ask the group to share any images which appealed to them but says: "However, participants don't have to explain themselves – people can become tired talking about their personal issues. This method allows people to explore and express through a uniquely creative process. It is a gentle and non-confrontational form of therapy."

Then, depending on what the group wants, Alex will encourage them to re-enact the story. "Sometimes you need to go to a different zone, away from the whole thinking side of things and allow your imagination to identify with different elements in the story." By engaging their imagination, people are encouraged to relax and express themselves. The intended result is physical, mental and emotional relief as participants access their own personal and inner resources to promote healing and change.

Alex remembered a group she ran for young mothers who, for whatever reason (usually lack of confidence), struggled to play with their babies. Alex asked the mums to lie down, close their eyes whilst listening to relaxing music and told them she would keep an eye on the little ones.

As the mothers started to relax and let the music take them to where it would, the atmosphere changed palpably and the babies, at first a little grizzly and restless, "became like bear-cubs", climbing onto their mothers' tummies and falling asleep: learning that they don't always need stimulation from the outside world.

Alex has a keen interest in mental health and has run workshops showing how to resolve conflicts in the workplace – such as bullying – and how to support employees with mental illness.