

Book Reviews

Stories to Light the Night

Susan Perrow

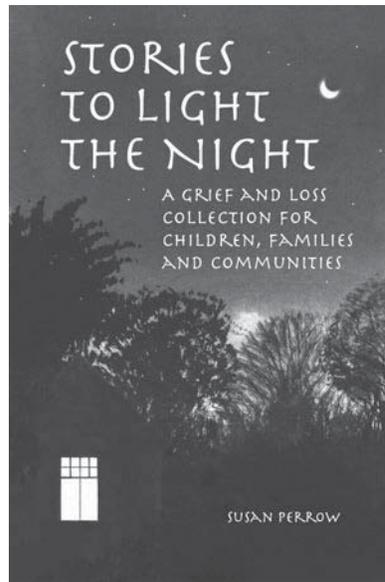
(Hawthorn Press, 2021)

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

Whenever a new collection of therapeutic stories by Susan Perrow comes out, it is a welcome event. The most recent volume, *Stories to Light the Night*, could not have come at a better time. These 94 stories are focused on addressing grief and loss for children, families, and communities. Grief and loss, whether caused by enormous catastrophes or by quiet, nearly unnoticed disappointments, are affecting humanity worldwide. The pandemic has brought illness and death, loss of jobs and homes, and loss of nourishing human interactions with enforced isolation in many forms. The globe is now also beset by extreme and devastating weather, fires, and more, as well as by war and violence in many places.

This is a book to remind of us of hope and give us tools to share this hope in story form. It does so by acknowledging that loss and grief come to us all as a part of human life. There is no denial or avoidance of the subject. In story form, death and loss are pictured truthfully in a compassionate and artistic way where grief is acknowledged as natural and even necessary. We have to confront our grief to make the journey through these difficult events, coming through loss to a different balance of mind and heart.

Please enter this therapeutic story-telling world through the foreword and introduction before moving on to the stories. Susan Perrow gives a clear and practical introduction to her global work in helping teachers and parents, physicians, therapists, counselors—people from all walks of life and experience—to find their story voice. She describes the therapeutic story framework of Metaphor, Journey, and Resolution (or Open-endedness). The situation to be dealt with is posed in a pictorial way through the



use of metaphor. Understanding what metaphor is and how to invoke its healing potential is urgent for our time.

Metaphor is explained as “using the medium of picture imagery... [which] speaks directly to our imaginative faculties, bypassing our rational brain. Such metaphoric byways and pathways enable us to explore the ideas, forces and powers that lie behind or beyond our rational thought.” Ken DiBenedette calls them “poetical intuitions that incarnate into thought and language through the skilled manipulation of familiar concepts.”

We live in a time when rational, logical, literal thinking dominates our approach to life. Perrow goes on to say, “Metaphoric language lives in the realm of imagination, which is as valid for learning and knowing as the realm of cognition.” And as Albert Einstein famously said, “Logic will get you from A to B; imagination can take you anywhere.”

Literalistic thinking has us trapped in the grayness of the daily mundane world, increasingly dimmed by our experiences of loss and discouragement. To move on through challenges and disappointments, humanity must be able to imagine behind, around, and inside of what is seen in the sense-perceptible world.

Susan writes further, “Stories speak to our imaginative intelligence... The ability to imagine was once celebrated as the *heart of humanness*, but now, with the emergence of science as the dominant worldview, the significance of imagination has sadly been diminished and devalued.” Our vision without imagination yields a skewed and imbalanced picture of the world. Imagination opens the door to explore the mysteries of human life and biography that we feel and intuit but cannot name in exact language. Stories with metaphor provide a balancing element.

Many of the stories shared in *Stories to Light the Night* were created by inexperienced story tellers. What motivated them was deeply wanting to offer

some comfort and care to others suffering grief and loss. To find their way into the pictures, they were interested and observant and “listened” literally and figuratively into the situation.

In the section on Imagination, Susan includes advice on how to nourish and strengthen our imaginations. Here are many practical and inviting suggestions for how to soften our thinking and feeling to find the right story pictures. These suggestions can help would-be story tellers take the first steps.

The stories in this collection cover many types of loss—of a loved one, family connection, a pet, of health and well-being, and of place. Environmental grief and loss—a heavy burden on the souls of young and old together—is addressed, as well as other examples of change and transition. For the most part, the stories are short and are arranged in each section with the simpler stories for young children coming first and then increasing in complexity for older children,

adolescents, and adults. There is wonderful story food here for everyone. The book is easy to pick up and read two or three stories at random. Each has its special situation and encouragement toward finding a way forward toward the light. Two simple stories that stood out for younger children were “Grandmother’s Cloak of Light” and “Sylvie and the Stars.”

The world is out of balance. Susan Perrow has given us tools and inspiration to help restore balance—no matter how little a story might seem to offer. The creation of these stories is a gift for both recipient and author. Every imagination created out of this selfless motivation to lighten the load and sorrow of another—and to sometimes heal oneself—brings *Light to the Night*.

Thank you to Susan Perrow and her story collaborators for providing us with these inspiring and encouraging examples to motivate our own steps into the therapeutic story realm. ♦