



## A Storyteller's Story

Joy Pitt

I was born in 1958 in a large, damp Victorian house in Portsmouth which belonged to my grandparents, and we lived with them until I was ten.

My grandfather, Edward Pitt, had fought as a boy soldier in the first world war, been a fire watcher in the blitz during the second, and had travelled extensively through India and China in between. During the dark winter afternoons of my childhood, he would sit in his favourite chair by the fire and I would sit on the hearthrug at his feet and he would tell me story after story. I was utterly enthralled and enchanted. He held me in the palm of his hand and there was no other place I wished to be. When he wasn't telling me stories, my mother or my grandmother were reading to me; Winnie-the-Pooh, Wind in the Willows, William, Milly-Molly-Mandy, Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm.

When I was about seven, I was allowed (if I had been particularly good and my hands were clean) to look at my mother's treasured pre-war pictorial knowledge encyclopedia. This was a wonderfully illustrated set of about ten hefty volumes and in

them I discovered the Arthurian legends, Robin Hood and the Odyssey. It was an almost religious experience. I felt as though I had glimpsed the face of God.

There were books everywhere in our house, and we went to the library almost every day. I lived in stories and magic crackled in the air. My mother at one point tried to curtail my reading on the grounds that too much was unhealthy... 'Put that book down and come and watch telly! Benny Hill's on..!'

But I was unstoppable. I already knew that stories are the fabric of the universe and that I was born to be a storyteller. Therefore it was obvious to me that my life would be extraordinary. How could it be otherwise? Life always is in stories.

And so through life I have followed the golden ball of thread wherever it has led me. I have always taken the path that seemed most magical and

exciting, gathering stories on the way.

When I left school I spent three years at art college, then trained as a nurse. I worked as a mosaicist and mural painter for a while, became a Marie Curie nurse, ran a well woman clinic, was a school nurse for children with special needs, trained and practiced as a healer and had my own business as a costume designer.

I have lived on a boat for seven years, without running water or mains electricity, grown vegetables in a clearing in the woods, eaten pike and eels (poached from the river), danced naked in the rain, made love in the sea and in the mountains, traded stories with a gypsy for peacock feathers and a recipe for cooking hedgehogs, and lived by selling home-made bread, carvings and paintings from my boat.

I have held the dying and the newborn in my arms, and breastfed my 3 children for nine and a half years. I have loved deeply and been deeply loved. I have walked my life bare foot on the earth with my head in the stars. My life has indeed been extraordinary.

I have been a professional storyteller for around fifteen years now, ever since I realised that one could actually do it for a living! It had never occurred to me that such a thing was possible, and once I knew that it was and people did, there was no going back.

I have told stories all my life for as far back as I can remember. To me they are the distillation of life itself, our link as human beings to the past, the present, the future and to each other. They are the light in the darkness, and the darkness outside the circle of light that the campfire makes on the snow. They can be funny, beautiful, tragic and haunting. They can be true or they can be purest fantasy. They can be vehicles for healing and they can change our lives.

Stories are food for the soul and fuel for the imagination. They are a way in which we can make sense of life and of our feelings. I have witnessed their magic and curative powers again and again.

In 2004, I formed, together with my husband David (storyteller, woodcutter and chainsaw sculptor), a small company called Tales from the Heartwood, which links storytelling and puppetry with arts and crafts. We work in schools, libraries and in a wide range of community settings from prisons to hospices and a rich vein of our work lies in reminiscence with the elderly. One of our great loves and most magical experiences has to be storytelling for adults with special needs and mental health problems.

We have not yet found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but life is rich, and we make people happy... Everyone loves a good story!

*You can see more pictures of Joy's wonderful puppets at [www.talesfromtheheartwood.co.uk](http://www.talesfromtheheartwood.co.uk)*