

A Storyteller And His Art

By N. SCOTT MOMADAY

THERE IS ONLY ONE STORY, AFTER ALL, AND IT IS ABOUT THE PURSUIT OF
MAN BY GOD, AND IT IS ABOUT A MAN WHO VENTURES OUT TO THE
EDGE OF THE WORLD, AND IT IS ABOUT HIS WIFE, WHO IS FAITHFUL OR
UNFAITHFUL, AND IT IS ABOUT THE HUNTING OF A GREAT BEAST.

– *THE ANCIENT CHILD*

To tell a story in the proper way, to hear a story told in the proper way, this is a very old and sacred business, and it is very good. At that moment when we are drawn into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and we are created. That existence in the maze of words is our human condition. Because of language we are, among all the creatures in our world, the most dominant and the most isolated. Our dominance is supreme, and our isolation is profound. That equation is the very marrow of story. It is a story in itself. We have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant.

But there are stories and there are stories. Our spirits are appropriately buoyed by story. Children delight in stories which excite the imagination, whether they disturb the peace of mind or not. Stories are sometimes informed with great delicacy and wonder. We are shaken and soothed in turn by stories. One of the principal rules of storytelling is that a balance must be struck. Perhaps the central function of storytelling is to reflect the forces, within and without us, that govern our lives, both good and bad. This is a very simple notion, but it is profound. Stories are pools of reflection in which we see ourselves through the prism of the imagination.