

Story as Healing Medicine: The Journey of Tunuri and the Blue Deer

~ Caitlin McGinn-Nice

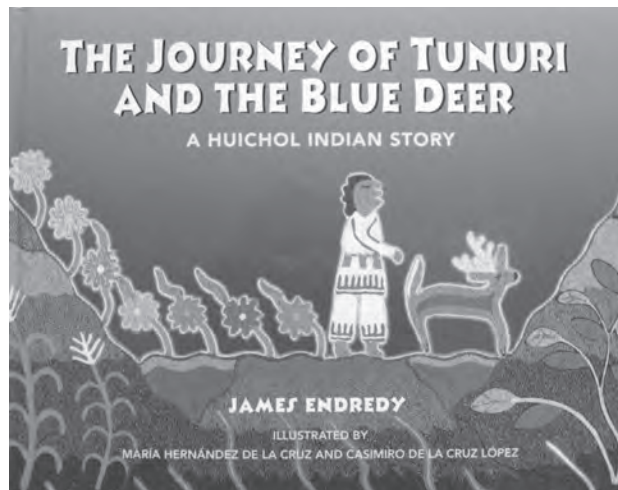
The Journey of Tunuri and The Blue Deer: A Huichol Indian Story, James Endredy's interpretation of an indigenous tale, is a lovely story I discovered in our classroom. As part of our rest time curriculum, we offer books with beautiful illustrations and imagery to our rising first graders when they begin to feel a bit restless. I was at first struck by the vibrant colors, and wonderful, textural imagery. After reading the story, I was ever more taken by this exquisite folktale from Mexico about the experience of a young boy named Tunuri.

The illustrations, by María Hernández De La Cruz and Casimiro De La Cruz López, are photographs of traditional Huichol yarn drawings, an artistic process that includes “drawing” on pieces of wood with beeswax and yarn. The story takes place in Wirikuta, an area in the state of St. Potosi, in central Mexico, where the indigenous Huichol people live in the mountains. Their traditions and way of life are deeply tied to the nature and spiritual forces that surround them. The most sacred elemental spirits in the Huichol tradition are the sun, earth, water, air, and fire.

The story follows Tunuri on a journey through the woods after he is separated from his family of villagers. The boy encounters a blue deer who promises to help him find his family. Tunuri follows a trail of blossoming flowers left by the blue deer, until he reaches each of the sacred elemental spirits: sun, earth, water, air, and fire. Each element offers solace to the uncertain child, reassuring him that he is safe and loved by the nature around him, just as he is cherished and cared for by his human family.

I think this story is important to bring to children because it speaks to the humanity of a journey, with all of its doubt, fear, surprise, connection, disconnection, inspiration, and beauty. All children can relate to Tunuri's experience of being separated from his family as a result of his own curiosity and adventurous spirit.

There is a powerful healing element to the story of *Tunuri and the Blue Deer*. The therapeutic power of stories was a theme throughout our summer



intensive work that really spoke to me—so much so that I changed direction with my final project, and began writing my own healing stories and circles. At the WECAN conference in 2017, Susan Perrow talked about our approach to creating therapeutic stories for children as one “that offers a picture, an imagination, that leads toward balance and wholeness...through a therapeutic story we find a metaphor to describe a journey that will lead toward reestablishing equilibrium” (Perrow, 2017). I believe that through the incarnation process for children *and* adults throughout our lives, we can all find ourselves lost. Having trust in the world around us, be it through nature, spirit, or other human beings, is what helps us find our way forward and our balance once again.

Most important to me is how this story speaks to the experience of being lost and found, a universally human experience that will happen time and time again throughout our lives on this earth. What also strikes me as beautiful and universal about the story of Tunuri is the idea that you are actually never lost or alone. Personifying the figures of Father Sun, Mother Earth, Sister Water, Brother Wind, and Grandfather Fire gifts the reader with the faith that Tunuri will continue his solitary journey with the guidance and protection of these sacred elements.

The Journey of Tunuri and the Blue Deer unites body, soul, and spirit through its beautiful picture language. The story reiterates the idea that children can be reached through language and imagery that are connected to nature, plants, and animals, through metaphor rather than literalism. In an article in an earlier issue of *Gateways*, "Speak Pictorially," Rie Seo wrote about the importance of finding the words and images that speak to children, language and pictures that bridge the gap between the spiritual realm and our earthly existence. In the book *The Creative Word*, this idea of soul resonance is discussed with great weight. Author Daniel Udo de Haes writes about the unification of heaven and earth for children, and how the stories we tell can act as a gate between the spiritual and the earthly: "Firstly, it is not the mother or grandmother, or even the teacher, who brings the first stories; this task is performed by none other than Mother Earth. For as we have seen, it is this greatest mother of all who tells us, in tales that may be read only by the dreamy soul of the child, that the source of all that surrounds us lies in the spiritual world" (p. 25).

I remembered the beautiful tale of *Tunuri and the Blue Deer* when I read these words, because so much of the wonderment in the story belongs to the soul/spirit connectedness that Tunuri has with the natural elements of the earth. Tunuri felt so thankful for Mother Earth's kindness. He stretched out on the ground to embrace her. "You are so beautiful and kind. I am glad you are my mother!" (p.21). Tunuri's body is metaphorically held by the earth; he experiences gratitude in his soul and well-being of spirit. Tunuri's whole being is felt throughout his encounters with the sacred elements through using imaginative picture language.

Lastly, I want to emphasize, as Stephen Spitalny does in another *Gateways* article, "Reimagining Story," that as teachers, it is so important to bring

stories outside of our own experience, in addition to the traditional Eurocentric tales of the past. "I think it is essential that a teacher offer stories that meet the diversity of the world around us. People from everywhere are everywhere." I believe there is a comforting and soul-affirming awareness we can offer children by offering them stories about diverse experiences. We are all different, we are all the same. As the story of *Tunuri and the Blue Deer* tells us, we are all held by the same earth, sun, wind, water, and fire, and all will help us find our way when we are lost. ♦

References:

- Endredy, James. *The Journey of Tunuri and The Blue Deer: A Huichol Indian Story* (Bear Cub Books, 2003)
- Perrow, Susan. Address at WECAN February Conference, 2017.
- Seo, Rei. "Speak Pictorially" in *Gateways* Issue 75, 2018.
- Udo de Haes, Daniel. *The Creative Word* (Spring Valley, NY, WECAN, 2014).
- Spitalny, Stephen. "Reimagining Story" in *Gateways* Issue 80, 2021.

Caitlin McGinn-Nice will graduate from the WECTE program at Sunbridge Institute in July. She is a Waldorf parent, as well as a support teacher at the Acorn Waldorf School in Accord, NY. Come September, she will be a lead teacher in the Saplings nursery at Acorn Waldorf School. Caitlin is honored to be a part of the Waldorf community, and grateful for the opportunity to nurture a foundation of love and kindness that will hold our little ones throughout their lives.