Introduction

Early in 1950 Laurence and Lorna Marshall arrived with their teenaged children, Elizabeth and John, in the Kalahari Desert, a vast, nearly trackless semi-desert region spanning what is now Namibia and Botswana in Southern Africa. Laurence Marshall had researched the indigenous people formerly known as "Bushmen". He organized a family trip to find the people who piqued his curiosity. One visit grew into multiple trips back to the Kalahari. Each family member created a unique role and relationship with the people and the culture. Laurence was the expedition leader and explorer documenting with photographs and film the Jul'hoansi. The Jul'hoansi are one of the indigenous San groups who still populate Southern Africa. Lorna Marshall worked as an anthropologist; John Marshall, like his father, became a filmmaker; Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, became an author introducing to the world the daily life and culture of the Jul'hoansi.

For thousands of years before the construction of the long, seemingly interminable fence now dividing Botswana and Namibia, Jul'hoansi lived in the Kalahari, which spanned what became the two countries. A place that seemed inhospitable to nearly everyone else supported the hunting-gathering lifestyle of the Jul'hoansi. Like most of the world's remaining hunter-gatherers, Jul'hoansi struggle with near cultural devastation brought on by their inevitable brushes with Western materialism, free-market capitalism, and colonialism's harsh legacy. The arbitrary border fence dividing Namibia from Botswana keeps big game away, altering ancient game migration patterns. Hunters cannot always find food for their families. Frequent droughts reduce the availability of bush foods that make up most of the Indigenous diet. Governments have set up big game parks, driving out Indigenous people and taking away their land. The list of hardships is long. Other ethnic groups have introduced cattle and goats that overgraze the fragile

desert ecosystem. Some parts of Botswana resemble the moon, barren hills of drifting dry sand threatening to bury any vehicle daring to enter. The Jul'hoansi continue to persist in the face of this ongoing fracturing. In the twenty-first century, many still hunt and gather and identify as hunter-gatherers despite claims that their lifestyle no longer exists.Since the Marshall family arrived and developed their decades-long relationship with people who became like family, countless others have followed and documented their time and relationship with the Jul'hoansi. Among these visitors/scholars are zoologists, anthropologists, folklorists, archaeologists, musicologists, linguists, filmmakers, and botanists. Many of these scholars wrote books, made films, and recorded the varied, haunting, joyful, and plaintive music of the San of the Kalahari. Yet, until 1990, no one had come to solely study the educational system of what is one of the oldest practicing democracies on earth. Jul'hoansi, and other San groups, practiced democracy long before recorded history.

In reviewing the long and, until the last three hundred years, successful tenure of hunter-gatherers, one can infer that the preservation and perpetuation of their hunting-gathering culture is a result of a remarkably successful educational system. The form of government Jul'hoansi practiced these thousands of years is a form of extended-family- and community-based social democracy. Questions instantly form in the mind of an educator: What is the relationship between education and democracy in this nonmaterialistic society? What is the relationship between the individual and the group? How does one become an active participant in the group? How does the individual take on roles in this family-based democracy? Who are the teachers? What is the ratio of students to teachers? Is there a system of formal education? How is learning defined in this culture? What are the attitudes toward learning? What happens when Jul'hoan children are sent to Western-style public schools?

I am a retired public teacher-librarian. Teaching is not, however, how my relationship with Jul'hoan culture began. It began in 1978 with a storytelling course that I took—twice. The first time was in order to complete my master's degree in early childhood education. The second time was because I was smitten. I left the classroom and set out to become a professional storyteller. It began, also, in 1981, when one of my closest friends sent me an article about the stories of the !Xam San of South Africa. These stories reached into my heart and signaled, quite simply, a feeling of "home." I began researching everything I could lay my hands on about the San. Fortunately, I'd already become good friends with the librarians in the town where I lived. So, between

caring for my two small children, I spent every spare moment interlibrary loaning books on the San. With bliss that comes from ignorance, I simply began telling these stories, filling in for the audience what I'd begun to learn about San culture. Audience reaction varied from total shock to wild enthusiasm. I kept groping forward, trusting my instinct to keep telling these stories.

One day, in the Bear Pond Bookstore in Montpelier, Vermont, I found the late Marjorie Shostak's book, *Nisa: The Words of a Ju|'hoan Woman*. My life changed. Forever. Not only did I have a firsthand account of a contemporary San woman, but I also had addresses of people to write to and ask my many questions. I contributed the money I earned telling Xam stories to the Kalahari Peoples' Fund, and it was through them that I finally found the person I needed: folklorist/anthropologist Dr. Megan Biesele. We began a correspondence that evolved into a lifelong friendship and shaped my storytelling career, eventually directing me back into education.

Meanwhile, a friend and mentor, Richard Lewis, founder and director of the Touchstone Center, sponsored a program at New York's Museum of Natural History. He invited Marjorie Shostak to give a slide lecture, followed the next day by my storytelling concert. Marjorie's lecture was riveting and enlightening. She let me know she'd stay to hear my storytelling. It was one of the most terrifying moments of my storytelling career. Would she think that I was a fraud? Was I a fraud—a white, middle-class woman telling these ancient hunter-gatherer myths?

Marjorie was kind, encouraging. She told me and later wrote to me that, while the stories certainly worked for a Western audience, the Ju|'hoan storytelling style was much more matter-of-fact, much earthier, filled with humor and raucous asides. She let me know, too, that Megan Biesele was the person who would help me the most: "Her sensitivity is nearly palpable," said Marjorie. It was—is.

Eventually, as Megan and I corresponded, our focus began to shift from storytelling to childrearing practices. Suddenly, the educator in me woke up from what seemed like a very long sleep. While stories do not serve as a direct reflection of a culture, they make oblique commentary on what a culture values and how a culture views itself and the world. Over time, it became clear to me that something unique was going on in this culture and parents' relationship with their children—something that was of a piece with their storytelling and childrearing practices. This was of more than casual interest to me. I was awake, at last, and observing closely.

Like many storytellers and teachers before me, I discovered that storytelling is an exceptional educational tool. I observed the positive

impact storytelling had on children who were marginalized by poverty and race. In the early 1990s I worked as a storyteller in schools with large populations of homeless children or children marginalized by extreme poverty. I'd tell stories only once. The children would retell them, act them out, or put on skits based on the themes. Astonished teachers commented on the tremendous potential storytelling revealed in children who were at risk. A growing certainty of how storytelling tapped hidden potential in marginalized children drew me to question more deeply what was happening in our American educational system, which so easily let these children fall through the cracks so that many of them dropped out—or as a younger colleague stated, were pushed out—by high school.

I, too, had been a child at risk. My mother's first husband, and father to my older sister, was killed on Iwo Jima at the end of World War II. There was little in the way of grief counseling in those postwar days. My mother, at twenty-eight, was told she should be proud to be the widow of a war hero. Unconvinced and grief-stricken, Mother left her toddler with her parents and went back to school to earn a teaching degree. She returned, scooped up her daughter, and left her eleven siblings and her parents' farm in Winder, Georgia. Without telling anyone, she bought a one-way train ticket to San Diego, California. She chose to return to where she was when her baby was born and where she'd last seen her husband in the hospital cradling his infant daughter. Mother needed to start over. Some years went by. She interviewed for a teaching job with the newly hired principal for a small school system on the central California coast. My mother got the job and moved herself and my sister to Monterey, California. She began teaching home economics and married the man who had interviewed her—and, when they moved to a house built for them, put the house in her name—which turned out to be fortunate.

Mother was pregnant with me by the time she realized the mistake she'd made. My biological father was a sociopath, showing the world an urbane, cultured side but a cruel and condescending nature to my mother and sister. He was also embezzling money from the school system (which, my mother later learned, was a practice that had gotten him fired from his last job). I was four by the time he was sent to prison—not for embezzling but for breaking his parole by gambling and womanizing. I never saw him again. Our mother, having lost her teaching job in the high school where he worked, was hired as a cocktail waitress, until she was fired because the boss's girlfriend realized he was paying too much attention to this new young, attractive waitress. She had our house and little else. My sister's grandmother came

from Tennessee to care for us while my mother desperately sought other work. Finally, she found employment as an educational counselor at the local army base, Fort Ord.

My first day of kindergarten, I clung to my mother's brown tweed box-pleated skirt, reciting my new last name, hoping I could remember it and not betray my true identity—the daughter of the imprisoned high school principal. My mother had gone to court and changed our last name to my sister's father's last name. When my teacher called that new last name, I answered, unaware that some deep part of my soul was silenced.

There was still a difficult stepfather to come, five years of him. The legacy produced in my mother a lifelong battle with depression. For my sister and me, it meant learning to parent ourselves at an early age. As my sister was seven years older, I had the benefit of her tender care. I was born with a best friend. We both struggled enormously with emotional scars that made going to school and learning difficult for us.

The result for me was a passionate commitment to marginalized children. It is work forever altered by my encounters with the Juǀ'hoansi. Once the educator in me woke up, interested once again in educational theory and practice, specifically of Juǀ'hoan educational theory and practice, I knew how to correct and set my own course as a storyteller and educator. In 1990 I traveled to Namibia to join anthropologist Megan Biesele and her staff of the Juǀ'hoan Bushman Development Foundation (JBDF, later to become the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative and, still later, the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia) on the first in-village literacy project in Nyae Nyae in February of 1990.

It is an odd thing, culture shock. Friends asked if I suffered from it. I did—at Kennedy Airport upon my return. In this respect, I don't know if I was different from other visitors to the Juǀ'hoansi. Juǀ'hoan stories had already made a home in my heart. Everything I read about the Juǀ'hoansi inspired a deep desire to know them, to learn from them. I cannot speak about why so many others have ventured into the Kalahari to live, work, and observe the Juǀ'hoansi. I only know that Juǀ'hoan culture struck a chord deep within me. I wanted to learn how they viewed children, how they raised their children. I wanted to learn storytelling from these masters and view our world through their eyes, their hearts, their culture. I wanted to know if there was any way that Westerners might learn a different way of educating and protecting their children—a way that would allow fewer children to fall through the cracks. It was as though I'd been searching for the Juǀ'hoansi all my life. Like my mother, I wanted to start over again. Since 1990 I

have been involved in Jul'hoan education, both in teacher education, preschool education, and library outreach.

The Jul'hoansi practice an authentic, or original, democracy reaching back thirty-five thousand years. Jul'hoan democracy predates Greek and other Western forms of democracy. *Democracy* is a Greek word, describing a form of governance of a state. The literal translation is "people rule." In the United States we have a representational majority rule democracy. Jul'hoan democracy, one person/one vote, (i.e. nonrepresentational) means consensus must be achieved to move forward. Jul'hoan democracy was practiced long before any modern term was coined and used to describe democratic values and practices. Scholars have spoken about Indigenous democracies as "proto-democracies" or "micro-democracies." But as the late Kxao Moses responded: "We never wanted to represent our communities. That was a white people's idea in the first place." In recent correspondence about this question of what Jul'hoansi call their social organization, ǀAiǃae Fridrick ǀKunta replied via email, "'ǁKoaǁkae' That's my idea about democracy, because everyone is equal and must work together." He made a compound word out of *work* and *together*. As I am writing for a Western audience, I use the term *democracy* because it is a word we all understand—more or less.

In June 2008, riding on the train into New York City for my annual storytelling performance at the Hans Christian Andersen statue in Central Park, I was thinking about my Nyae Nyae experiences. I opened a notebook to a random page and found something I had written years ago: "The degree to which a culture will succeed is the degree to which it supports its families." I paused, drew in a deep breath, and gazed out at the blur of late spring green. How long a journey I'd taken to discover this profound, but simple, truth. How long I'd spent trying to spread this message from the Jul'hoansi. All these years later, it struck me all over again how few people wanted—or knew how—to hear it.