

TRICKSTER TALKS

by Pat Perrin

The figure had been lurking around for a long time, though never clearly seen. Only glimpsed, only sensed, it was undeniably *there*—a blur of gray, the flick of a black and shining feather, an ugly snickering sound when everything else was quiet.

Even so, it took me a while to confront it. Prowling the back alleys of my mind rather than those of my town made it no less menacing. As far as I'm concerned, a lurker is a lurker—always uninvited and with intentions entirely too unknown.

On the day that I finally brought it into sharper focus, I saw an unimpressive gray animal—a coyote¹ with dirt in its tatty fur and one bent ear.

“You have a rather lopsided look about you,” I said.

The responding raucous cackle came from a huge black raven.² The thing had mutated right before my eyes.

“Are you making fun of me?” I demanded.

¹Coyote is the primary trickster in many Native American cultures, especially popular among the Plains nations. Even when there are other local trickster figures, Coyote is often a fellow mischief-maker.

In true trickster-fashion, Coyote is a clown, rebel, and troublemaker, but is usually also a culture hero. He may create the world or humans, bring the gift of fire, teach crafts, or provide life lessons for human beings. On the other hand, he indulges in lechery, cheating, poaching, and destruction. Like most animal tricksters, Coyote talks and behaves like a human being and may take human or animal form or something in between.

Erdoes and Ortiz (335) comment that “Coyote and his kin represent the sheerly spontaneous in life, the pure creative spark that is our birthright as human beings and that defies fixed roles or behavior. He not only represents some primordial creativity from our earlier days, but he reminds us that such celebration of life goes on today, and he calls us to join him in the frenzy. In an ordered world of objects and labels, he represents the potency of nothingness, of chaos, of freedom—a nothingness that makes something of itself.”

²A raven is considered an ill-omen in much European, Slavic, Scandinavian, and some Arabian folklore. Among some Native American Apache groups he is a sorcerer concerned with whether or not there is death in the world. However, Raven is the chief Indian trickster in the North Pacific Coast area, a creator/culture hero/transformer who appears in both bird and human form.

“Laughter is a lot of things,” said a bright-eyed fox.³ The voice was quite mysterious, dry and whispery, which I was sure was contrived just for effect. “If you only understand it as meanness, as satire, you’ve lost the feel of it.”

“You can’t even make up your mind which trickster figure you want to be,” I said, beginning to feel a little belligerent by now.

“You’re the one who’s hung up on consistency,” it replied. “You and your cronies have just about trivialized, dichotomized, and sentimentalized me out of existence.”

“If we’ve managed to do all that,” I asked, “then why are you hanging around here harassing me now?”

“Because I’m a natural-born pest,” said the large and fuzzy brown spider.⁴

“Well,” I snapped, “I don’t know what your complaints have to do with me. Or with my ‘cronies,’ as you refer to my culture. Aren’t you essentially an image devised by primitive people who lack control over their own lives?”⁵

³Foxes enter into the folklore of most countries where they appear, often as shape-shifters who can assume human form. In western Native American mythology, Fox appears as a the companion of a trickster, such as Coyote or Raven—and Fox often tricks the primary trickster.

Reynard the Fox is the trickster hero of the medieval French beast epic, *Roman de Renart*, dating from about 1150 to 1500. The stories were developed by unknown authors from a variety of beast fables, including those of Aesop. In 1148, an anonymous fox of early stories was named Reinardus in a collection by Nivardus. After 1175, the Reynard stories became the most popular of the animal fables in French, Flemish, and German literature. In France, the word *renard* came to mean *fox*.

⁴Spider, Spider Man, Spider Woman, and Spider Grandmother are powerful characters in Native American mythologies of the Plains, Southwest, and West. Their roles are usually beneficial. In some cases Spider is a creator or a teacher of weaving and other skills.

Spider Man—called Iktome, Ikto, Unktomi, and by other variations—is a trickster in Sioux traditions. Sometimes he appears as a companion or rival to other tricksters, such as Coyote.

In a great body of West African mythology, Spider is a culture hero and creator, as well as a crafty trickster who survives through his wits. Perhaps the best known name is Anansi. He is often a shape shifter—able to become human but reverting to spider in times of danger. The African spider trickster is also well known in the West Indies, Suriname, and other parts of the New World. “Anansi and the Gum Doll” is the African source for some versions of the African-American “Tar Baby” story.

⁵The *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (1123) states that “psychologically the role of the trickster seems to be that of projecting the insufficiencies of man in his universe onto a smaller creature who, in besting his larger adversaries, permits the satisfactions of an obvious identification to those who recount or listen to these tales.”

Carl Jung (Radin 209) says, “The trickster is a collective shadow figure, an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals.”

“Hah! You admit it then! You’ve reduced me to folklore,” he yelled, changing into a more human form.

“Well, we found you in folklore.”

“It wasn’t folklore to those who lived the stories,” objected Hermes.⁶ His winged sandals flapped angrily, threatening to overturn him. “It was all quite real, believe me.”

“Of course it was.” I made an attempt to be soothing. “And we all love stories about real-life flim-flam men . . .”

“Mere entertainments!” he snorted.

“Perhaps a bit more than that. Wish-fulfillments, at least.”

“Fulfill your wishes yourself!” exclaimed the coyote, back again. “I’m not interested in your desires. You’ve messed me up with all your meddling. More than once!”

“Nobody has wanted to hurt you. In fact quite a few people are interested in studying you.”

“Exactly!” He sat on his haunches and sniffed the air. “You’ve constantly contrived to make me respectable.”

Yet again, there was something different about the creature. It was still a ratty-looking coyote, still dirty. Even smelly I noticed, somewhat alarmed that more of my own senses were getting involved in this experience.

“You’re a female,” I observed.

“A bitch. An alpha bitch of course.” She grinned. “That means I lead the pack if I want to. And that’s why I get to bitch.”

“But I thought that tricksters were always male.”⁷

⁶The shape-shifter Hermes is a trickster in Greek mythology. He wears winged sandals so he can travel faster in his role as messenger of the Olympian gods. Hermes is a god of cunning and of thieves. He is master of the way to the land of the dead, roads, boundaries, communication, and commerce, and is credited with the invention of fire.

Her only response was a raucous rendering of a song . . .

Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight,

Come out tonight . . .

“Okay,” I grumbled, as she broke into a wild stomping, four-legged dance. But she just clogged on, singing louder.

And dance by the light of the moon.

“Of course I’ve read Ursula Le Guin,”⁸ I yelled over the racket. “But that’s just fiction.”

Coyote stopped and stared directly at me. “Fiction? Is that a question you really want to get into here?”

Subdued by the memory of other essays which had gotten entirely out of hand, I murmured, “No.”

“Fiction, truth; male, female; fool and clown,” said a robed woman with a saintly smile. “Unfortunately, my dear, you’ve dichotomized me without really understanding anything about dichotomies.”

“Dichotomies? Division into contradictions? Either/or seems simple enough to me.”⁹

“I am a fool *and* I am a magician,” continued Pope Joan.¹⁰

“Like those two Tarot cards?”¹¹

⁷Although some authorities say that Coyote, for example, is always male, female coyotes do show up in Native American stories, particularly among the Hopi (see Malotki and Lomatuway’ma). Sometimes Coyote Woman, as Coyote’s wife, participates in his adventures. In other cases, stories are specifically about Coyote Woman.

⁸Ursula Le Guin’s *Buffalo Gals Won’t You Come Out Tonight* features a wonderful female Coyote.

⁹Pelton (Hynes and Doty 138) comments that since the Reformation, Western Civilization has been “unable to imagine the doubleness of life—holy and ordinary, rooted yet open to transformation, mortal and enduring. . . .”

¹⁰Pope John VIII, who became pope about 855 AD, is now better known as the legendary, fraudulent Pope Joan. As the story goes, she pretended to be a man and was elected to the papacy, only to be assassinated after she gave birth during a solemn procession.

“You aren’t paying attention. I am a gluttonous buffoon *and* I am a Promethean fire-giver.¹² I am the sentimental white clown and the anarchic Auguste. I am a sinner and a saint.”

“Those may, of course, be various aspects of you,” I suggested. “All images engendered by the same archetype.”

“Archetype! Hmph! Isn’t that just another way of distancing me? I am all those characters and hundreds of others, too. I spring from no universal figure. I spring from necessity—from a need that’s starting to get pretty desperate in your time and place.”

“It seems to me,” I objected, “that you’re the very last thing we need just now.”

“Then you’ve never heard of chaos theory?” a rabbit¹³ snarled. “Don’t you ever wonder why your culture, such as it is, has so much trouble with the notion of the unknown, of change? Think of your images. Think of your heroes.”

“Our heroes overcome chaos. They bring us back to stability. To safety.”

“And that’s just your problem. Your heroes haven’t the courage to stand on the edge of the abyss. It’s chaos that drives things toward a more complex kind of order. It’s undecidability that opens up new passageways.”

“I really don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense.”

¹¹The Fool and the Magician, representing zero and one, are tricksters in the tarot.

¹²Many tricksters are credited with creating the world or the people on it and with giving fire to humanity. In Native American stories, Coyote, Raven, and others steal fire from the gods and give it to animal people, or human beings. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to the humans he had created. Campbell (279) comments that “The Greek Titan, a sublimation of the image of the self-reliant, shamanistic trickster, who frequently comes off badly at the end of an adventure, is neither condemned in his intransigent defiance of Zeus nor mocked as a fool by the Greek playwright, but offered, rather, as a tragic pattern of man’s relationship to the governing powers of the natural universe. Whereas the Bible, in its spirit of priestly piety, recognizing equally the tension between God and man, stands on the side of God and breaks not only man’s will but the serpent’s too.”

¹³In stories from many cultures, rabbits outwit larger and stronger animals or people. Rabbit and Hare are trickster figures in both African and Native American traditions. The African-American trickster Brer Rabbit is derived from African stories. Some elements—such as the “Tar Baby”—also appear in Native American tales, indicating an interchange of storytelling.

The rabbit snickered. “But that’s exactly what I get to do. I get to say the thing even the king doesn’t want to hear, but needs to hear. Why do you suppose the old guys liked me so much? They were just as rigid as you are. But they sensed the beauty of contradiction . . . of dichotomies . . . of . . .”

The grinning black god disguised in rags¹⁴ wandered off, murmuring, clearly taking delight in the sound of his own words. As he faded into the distance, I could see a Japanese storm god buffeting the earth and sea with winds.¹⁵ And then, to my dismay, I caught a glimpse of the Apostle Peter looking back at me, laughing heartily.¹⁶

But these days, Trickster seems to have lost interest in trying to explain things to me. Coyote doesn’t lurk around here anymore. I haven’t seen Legba or Fox or Spider, or even Pope Joan lately. A great relief, of course.

And yet I know that they are right. Trickster—the fantastic figure common to virtually all cultures—is virtually invisible in our own. For what are European/Americans to make of sacred beings so obscene, heroes so undignified, power figures who fail as frequently as they succeed?

¹⁴Legba is a West African trickster god in the Dahomean oral tradition, generally pictured as an old man who walks with a stick and is dressed in tatters. He is also known as Elegba, and as Eshu to the Yoruba. His story is found in African-based cultures in South American countries and Cuba, as well as in the voodoo cults of Haiti and New Orleans. In Haitian voodoo rituals, he is called upon to open the gate so that the ancient gods can merge with their followers in the new world. Like Hermes, Legba serves as a messenger for the gods and is associated with roads and boundaries.

Like all tricksters, Legba delights in subverting authority. He is often held responsible for quarrels among humans and between humans and gods. According to some stories, Legba was responsible for the creator deity’s decision to move away from the world and its people.

¹⁵In the Shinto creation myth, Susa-no-wo is sometimes described as the storm god, sometimes the moon god, but generally considered troublesome. Some scholars include Susa-no-wo among the trickster figures. (See Robert Ellwood’s essay in Hynes and Doty’s *Mythical Trickster Figures*.)

¹⁶Hynes and Steele (Hynes and Doty 160) describe the appearance of the Apostle Peter as a trickster in the Christian folklore of The Yaqui, Spanish, Mexican, and New Mexican cultures of the American Southwest. They comment that “mainstream Christianity, largely intolerant of disruptive behavior in general and of the seemingly chaotic activity of the trickster in particular, often passes over the trickster elements in the scriptural portrait of Peter as anomalous to Peter’s real character. . . .” They go on to note that popular Christianity is “more disposed to appropriate the trickster potential in Peter.”

Italo Calvino also includes stories featuring the apostle-as-trickster in his *Italian Folktales*, as do the Grimm Brothers in their collections.

We do trivialize them. We explain them away as “folklore.” Tricksters are seen as “local heroes,” if they are acknowledged as heroes at all.

We do dichotomize them—and we remain oblivious to the interrelationships of dichotomies.

We do make them respectable. The wonderfully wayward Yahweh becomes the dignified Jehovah;¹⁷ the mischievous Prometheus becomes Aeschylus’ tragic and tormented Titan¹⁸—and one hardly hears anything about Epimetheus¹⁹ any more. Even Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp starts off rough and scrappy, then winds up sweet and sentimental.²⁰ And, if our tricksters are especially effective, we often turn them into villains, into badmen.²¹

¹⁷Jung comments (Radin 196): “If we consider, for example, the daemonic features exhibited by Yahweh in the Old Testament, we shall find in them not a few reminders of the unpredictable behavior of the trickster, of his pointless orgies of destruction and his self-appointed sufferings.” Jung, however is more interested in the trickster’s “gradual development into a savior and his simultaneous humanization.”

And Bloom (281) notes that “Believers—whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—prefer an invisible Yahweh above the clouds, a kind of troublesome but remote gaseous vapor, or failing that, a tyrant suitably enthroned. J’s lively Yahweh commences as a mischief-maker and develops into an intensely nervous leader of an unruly rabble of Wilderness wanderers.”

¹⁸Prometheus laughed at Zeus behind his back and also defied him. As noted in *The Reader’s Encyclopedia of World Drama*, (682), Prometheus is “elevated by Aeschylus, before our eyes, from the status of petty comedian, which all earlier Greek stories has assigned him, to a Titanic spiritual status, which he has retained to this day in the Western imagination.”

¹⁹In some accounts in Greek mythology (Hamilton 68) Prometheus—whose name means “forethought”—and his brother Epimetheus—“afterthought”—were given joint responsibility for creating human beings. But the scatterbrained Epimetheus gave away all the good gifts to the animals (strength, swiftness, courage, cunning, fur, feathers, wings, and shells), leaving nothing for the people. So Prometheus gave humans the ability to walk upright and gave them fire, which differentiated them from the animals.

²⁰McDonald, Conway, and Ricci (12-13) comment that, “Before Chaplin became the universal ‘little man,’ he was the Trickster. In the Keystone comedies, and at certain times in all of his later pictures, he was the simpleton who was also a clever rogue, with talents near to genius His misadventures echoed stories known all over the world: the trickster tales, which have been among the ones best liked.”

The Keystone comedies were made in 1914. In 1915, pathos enters into the story of *The Tramp*. The character doesn’t get what he wants and, for the first time, we see him walking down the road alone at the end of the picture. The character is increasingly sentimentalized in the features that follow.

²¹Roberts (221) concludes that “. . .the path which leads to understanding of the personal attributes and actions of black folk heroes has been one along which survival has been precarious, both individual and collective well-being always in jeopardy, and conflict continuous. Along this path, black folk heroes have traveled as champions of African Americans who have been forced to negotiate the American landscape by being quick of wit and adept at detecting sleight-of-hand. To those who have traditionally looked to black folk heroes for models of behavior, the terms trickster and badman are not value judgments but rather

We assume that tricksters play their games without affecting anything much, that everything will go back to normal after the game is over. Or we try to believe that bit of wishful thinking. Does anyone really think that our world is going back to anything that it used to be?²²

It seems to me that we can make good use of that trickster metaphor. For ours is the time of the trickster, more than any other ever was. In the age of information, 0 and 1 are sacred numbers—corresponding to the tarot Fool and Magician. Like primordial cultures, ours is uncertain and dangerous. And new communications media make new thought processes not only possible but inevitable—even if uncomfortable.

For nearly all of our century, artists, writers, physicists, and philosophers have confronted us with images we first interpreted as fragmentation and disintegration of order.²³ But now we need to comprehend the nature of invisible relationships (sometimes made visible by scientists . . . artists . . . writers).²⁴ And we need to comprehend the nature of a network in motion, rather than that comfortable old cosmos of hierarchies.

descriptions of folk heroes whose characteristic behaviors have historically traditionally served as models of and for behavior among people of African descent in America.”

²²Hynes and Thomas J. Steele (Hynes and Doty 171) question the assumption of a return to order after the trickster’s antics. Instead, they say, “tricksters can prepare the way for adaptation, change, or even total replacement of the belief system. They are in this manner potential preludes to social change.”

They add (172), “Without disrupting the enfranchised traditions, there can be neither the exhilaration of exception nor the fecund power of intermingled categories. In short, the creative production of new possibilities resulting from the playful transgression of borders by tricksters is foreclosed to those who view only the one side of Peter attending neither to his more disruptive side in the New Testament nor to his more expanded tricksterish personality in popular Christian folklore.”

²³Perrin (176) notes, “Beginning before the turn of the century, artists attempted to develop ways of representation that could forge a new mode of thought. At the same time there were new scientific descriptions of the world at the microscopic and macroscopic levels, and new everyday experiences of it. The changes that took place in the arts also contained an emerging view and represented a search for an entirely different definition of unity.”

Hayles (1990, iv) explains that “Different disciplines are drawn to similar problems because the concerns underlying them are highly charged within a prevailing cultural context.”

²⁴Hayles (1984, 25) says that a set of cultural ideas “is as capable of informing literary strategies as it is of forming scientific models.” It is also irresistible to note that, using Hayles words again, “to suppose that such parallels require direct lines of influence is to be wedded to the very notions of causality that a field model renders obsolete” (1984, 22).

In fact, two new interrelated sciences reflect the two sides of our trickster dichotomy: Chaos/the Fool, Complexity/the Magician.²⁵ The trickster is the “local hero” of the global village and we need to hear her story.

Maybe that’s why now, I’m having a little trouble sleeping nights. Sometimes I hear the chatter of a dozen voices . . . more . . . hundreds . . . and they are not the same. This is no archetype, no monolithic figure, but an idea, a move toward fulfillment.²⁶

From the babble a single voice speaks, and subsides again into the sea of chaos. Then—forming around what strange attractor for our own time?—another figure emerges. Is a new trickster spirit about to be born, to reveal something of ourselves we never suspected? Is some such image rising from our own culture, but still incomprehensible and immeasurable with our existing tools?

A magician or a fool? Perhaps I won’t be able to tell. Perhaps the very dichotomy creates the necessary indecision.

The trickster leads us along the edge of chaos, the creative edge where choices can be made—indeed must be made—but not for all time, not absolutes. And here is

²⁵The study of order within or emerging from chaotic systems was called “chaos theory.” Hayles (1991, 2) comments: “As the term gained notoriety, chiefly through James Gleick’s popular book *Chaos: Making a New Science*, it lost credibility within the scientific community.” The further study of complex systems, generally called “complexity theory,” has involved multiple sciences—thermodynamics, meteorology, biology, among others—in making powerful new definitions of reality. Inherent in chaos theory and complexity theory is the recognition that the world is in a state of flux—an important change in metaphor from the notion that the world is or should be in a state of equilibrium. And, of course, science does give us metaphors and stories—just as it responds to metaphors and stories in the general culture.

Waldrop (318) describes physicist Doyne Farmer’s view of science: “At heart, he says, science is about the telling of stories—stories that explain what the world is like, and, and how the world came to be as it is. And like older explanations, such as creation myths, epic legends, and fairy tales, the stories that science tells us help us to understand something about who we are as human beings, and how we relate to the universe.” And Waldrop (327) quotes economist Brian Arthur, “Nonscientists tend to think that science works by deduction. But actually science works mainly by metaphor. And what’s happening is that the kinds of metaphor people have in mind are changing.”

²⁶Radin (126) proposes that Trickster brings us benefits out of his own needs, rather than from any sense of altruism: “Why should a deity wish to bring culture to mankind? I think the answer must be that if he does so, this is not his primary purpose. It is incidental to his desire to express and develop himself.”

Which seems as good a reason as any.

where the excitement lies, where the sense of wonder can be aroused by new perceptions, by new alignments of old ideas.

Somewhere a voice laughs the deep belly laugh of aliveness—of consciousness of aliveness—that joyous sound that bursts from neither heart nor brain but from the gut.

Then I awake with questions rolling around in my mind. What trickster will rescue us from our old dichotomies? Will we find her in time?

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²⁷This comprehensive reference book includes general entries on the Trickster and on the Culture Hero, as well as several individual trickster entries (and other topics) written by Pat Perrin and Wim Coleman.