

The Handless Maiden: Recovering from Abuse

Interview with Andy Frank



I wonder if you could tell me how you were drawn into the story of *The Handless Maiden* to begin with. What were the circumstances?

Well, I was drawn in because I was in the middle of a self discovery phase in my early 40s and through various attempts at therapy and other things, I finally came to realize that somehow I was going to access what it is that was bothering me, or the issues that I was facing at the time, through art. So I tried every form of art. I basically threw every possible art at the wall to see what would stick. And eventually, I came to writing and I met you. When we got together in a group for your Storytelling Journey workshop, you asked us to select a card from a whole series of cards that you laid out around the room. They were pieces of art that depicted various different fairy tales, and the piece of art that drew me in was the drawing of a young woman whose hands were missing. And the look on her face and the fact that she had these stumps immediately drew me in. I guess I felt an empathy—I didn't know why at the time.

The picture of *The Handless Maiden* was drawn by Alexis Gurst. So you hadn't read the story before you encountered the card?

No, not at all. I had read very few of the fairy tales, frankly. But I certainly knew of the Disney version of various different stories, I had certainly never heard of this one, no. Then I recall that you recommended a book, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, by Clarissa Pinkola Estes. I remember reading it on the subway going back and forth to various different arts classes that I was doing, and just having all kinds of little moments of illumination.

Yet this book was written for woman about women. It didn't have anything to do with men at all.

What did you relate to in the story?

Well, again, as I was reading the Estes version, I was struggling a little bit to understand where I fit in. I did not relate to the father immediately, that is to say, the maiden's father. I did not at all relate to the maiden. I zeroed in on the king, because my focus at the time was that I had been that king in my working world. I had been a workaholic since the age of about 17 years old.

Where had you been you working?

I was working mostly in the restaurant business in some form or another—either as an employee in a restaurant, as a manager of a restaurant, eventually as an owner of a restaurant... I had been a district manager of various different franchises where I basically was a cop of franchises and would slap people on their hands and tell them what they were doing wrong. I'd fill out long, complicated reports and sometimes repossess businesses and make peoples' lives utterly miserable. I was good at that, and became the director of operations for three such franchise organizations. In other words I was the guy who now decided which ones were going to "get the ax". And I could become as merciless as needed. It surprised me how cold I was able to become. I was trained to be a working, productive, machine. And because I was good at it, and because I looked the part and sounded the part, and was young, and had a fairly good grasp on things... I was often seen as a guy to fast track into an executive position. That's what people wanted. So I was that guy.

I remember you striding into the workshop that first day looking like The Corporate Man and I thought, 'oh how am I going to get this guy interested in fairy tales!'



Well, I could be that guy. It's not entirely without purpose, and so I don't deny that this is an aspect of my personality, but it was completely dominant and almost the only aspect of personality other than my married personality. I was not ever that way with my wife at home, but I certainly was that way with my work.

And so I first began to identify with the king, because that was where he was. He couldn't resist a challenge. He had a marriage, albeit with a handless maiden, but still the marriage was good, he had a beautiful plot of land and presumably he could have lived happily ever after right then and there, but no, the war

was calling and that was his duty. So he went off and fought the war. And that would have been something I would have done. Whatever challenge any employer ever offered me, it didn't matter how difficult, I was the first one to put my hand up. Because that's what I thought I was supposed to do.

So you would go riding off on campaigns...

Oh, absolutely. Some would end well and some would not. But at the same time I had a conscience that was niggling at me. When I quit the last job I had, unexpectedly in November 2003, I found myself confined in a one bedroom condo with no email, no phone calls, no job applications, nothing being acknowledged for months, for months, nothing! There was nowhere to turn. And I felt a little like the king who was lost in the forest, thinking that he was going to be able, after he won yet another war, to recover the next challenge which was to find his wife and child, and feeling lost, utterly lost. And I completely related to that—*absolutely* related to the way that guy was.

I'm not sure exactly where in that seven year journey I was when I first encountered the story, but I was in that forest.

So that's where you were in your life when you came into the story. You were in the forest, seeking your wife. That's very interesting. What did that mean to you?

Well, I didn't know at the time—I truly didn't know at the time. I had just come away from a therapist who was convinced that my issue was that I had difficulty dealing with authoritative male figures. Because I had had my encounters with them in my corporate life.

Ostensibly, that was the reason I was unemployed at the time. So when I found myself in the inn, looking for my "wife", the "maiden", I found that to be an awkward step. What did she have to offer me, really?

What did these women in the inn have to offer me? What did all you women in the Storytelling Journey course have to offer me? Yet there was a common theme as I went through this artistic exploration—I was surrounded by women. And I was loving it—not their attention so much, although I obviously like attention like everybody else—but I was loving the feeling I was getting, the types of conversations we were having, the nurturing and all those things. But intellectually, I wasn't understanding this at all. Not at first.

A couple of weeks further into the Storytelling Journey the penny finally dropped and I realized that what had happened to the Handless Maiden earlier in the story, was something that had happened to me.

When I finally made that connection—that the loss of innocence by an aggressive act was something that I shared in with that character—a whole bunch of other things began to open up. I had answers to questions I had not been able to answer until that time. And I understood that I had a reason to reconcile with the maiden, to understand the maiden, and to reconnect with the maiden.

And who was the maiden?

Well, for me, she symbolized my youth and my innocence. When I was in my late teens, I wanted nothing but to be involved in the arts. And in my case, the arts were radio. And radio remains to this day what my true art is.

And at that time, I found myself almost obsessed with the whole notion of radio, and needing to become a radio personality. That was the only destiny I could ever foresee for myself on a professional level—on any level, frankly. I wasn't even contemplating such things as marriage or family, or anything else. I became enamored with various different voices on the air. Radio personalities were heroes to me. Every artist has heroes... for some it's rock stars, and for some it's authors, and for some it's painters, but for me, it was these wonderful voices that spoke to me, literally, in the middle of the night, especially overnight. They were voices that were warm, and seemingly sane, and clever, funny, smart. I was raised in a family of people who barely spoke any English, and spoke it badly. They spoke to me in German, in very hard German, and there was no love evident, and no guidance and no plan of any future, just discipline and awkwardness—really the two words that come to mind when I think of my childhood. These radio voices offered me hope. A future. All those things.

I was blessed because by the time I was in grade 10 or grade 9 I was already being told that I had a voice for radio and that just kept reinforcing that radio was what I should be doing.

I kept in touch with a number of these radio personalities by telephone. The only luxury I really had was a black dial phone in my bedroom. I would skip the early classes at school so that I could stay up all night and listen to the programs and get involved in requesting songs and speaking with other people on the hotline. One of these people, a fellow named E. was perhaps the best at this. I was always calling into him and getting involved in his discussions. I heard my voice on radio many times and recorded it feverishly with my little cassette deck whenever it came on. Anyhow. E. one night invited me to the studio, he wanted to meet me. And what do you think, I was thrilled to bits. Went up to the studio and I was over the moon. Couldn't believe it. I was allowed to press the buttons, to fire the turntable and press the carts to fire the commercials, and I came *this* close to whispering in the microphone. It was amazing. Absolutely amazing. This happened for, I don't know, three or four nights over a period of about a month's time in May of 1976. I could not believe my luck. I was that close, *that* close in my mind, the mind of a young boy, to realizing my dream.

Then E started to talk about inviting me over to his place to have some breakfast and to meet his girlfriend, and sure enough, one day, he did so. It was June 24, 1976. The reason I remember is that it is St. Jean de Baptiste Day in Quebec, and that's a holiday. So I certainly had nothing going on. He took me out to his house which was a beautiful house located in Hudson in Quebec, and he drove me out there in a Porsche and showed me the house, and two Rottweiler dogs that were in a cage, rather evil looking rottweilers. The house was secluded, the middle of nowhere, just a beautiful house, waterbed, rock gear everywhere because he was also a musician, at least that's what he said he was. Then he produced some hash and we smoked our brains out. We both fell asleep because it was eight or nine o'clock in the morning, woke up, had some breakfast... And then he started to seduce me. I didn't really know what to think of that. What I mean by that is he just started to get physically affectionate...but it was all very gradual, very gradual. He kept saying, "My girlfriend's coming home soon, and she's really gonna like you, she's really gonna like you."

At which point I just remember feeling confused, really confused, wondering where can I go, shall I run? Shall I wait for the girlfriend? Where shall I run to? I felt that there was something going on, but I wasn't really sure, to be honest. I really wasn't sure what he was doing. But I was thinking, I don't know where this is really going. And then, finally, he proceeded to the next levels of this seduction and at this point I thought, what should I do? Should I just sit here quietly and let him do whatever he wants to do and not

get hurt? I wasn't a brutally strong guy and neither was he, but I felt paralyzed. So I just decided, no, I'm not going to do anything. I won't resist. I'll just let him do what he needs to do and then make a decision as to whether or not I want to pursue this relationship afterwards. So I did. Later on, he drove me to a bus station, and to be honest I don't remember if that was the last time I saw him, or if I continued speaking with him or not after that.

What you're speaking about is such a disorienting experience. You basically said, "Well whatever happens, happens, and afterwards I'll deal with it."

Yes, and you know what I think is so amazing about rape, or sexual abuse, or whatever term you want to apply to it, is how subtle the effects are. They are incredibly subtle. There was very little physical pain involved in all this. It wasn't comfortable. He did bugger me. That wasn't pleasant. But it wasn't horrible. He wasn't a seven-foot eight basketball player, thank God.

But the psychological impact was pretty immediate.

Did it affect your decision to continue in radio?

Well, that was the first casualty. In those days a radio star was a bigger deal than it is today. My parents in particular, who were raised in the 30s and the 40s, viewed a radio personality as almost bigger than a movie star. To them the notion of their own humble immigrant born son being one of these people was ridiculous. So there was no support there, and there was very little support among other peers. And I wasn't a good student at school, so to have the confidence to pursue this on a strictly business or an artistic level was shaky to begin with. And then I think when this happened, I kind of started to look around at all these other radio characters and think, 'Well they're just a bunch of fags, aren't they? Why would I want to be one of them?'

I bottled it up and called it a day, I suppose. I mean there were times years later, and I'm talking three, four, five, six, seven, ten years later, that it would come back. It would always come back to say, you know you should try radio anyway. But I would always try it in a half hearted way. I took the odd course, would call the odd talk show, just to hear my voice again and that kind of thing. But it was pretty much a buried thing.

It's astounding to me that the radio dream went completely under and you went into another occupation altogether, the food industry. Then years later you encountered this fairy tale that seemed to depict the trauma in very graphic terms. The maiden's hands were severed and she was driven into the wilderness.

Yes, and very quickly. Despite her claims to her father about not deserving a life of opulence, she finds herself with a king on a fabulous farm. It didn't take long for her to go from one kind of comfort scenario which was her home, to the next one which was the farm. I did the same thing. I went from a relatively comfortable home and went directly into the life of the "man-made man", the man who works hard, the workaholic. That was my farm. My safety was there.

That's an interesting term, the "man-made man." What do you mean by that?

Well, I don't believe that men in our society, even now, in early 21st century society, are the animals that they're trained to be. I believe that we have that side to us, but I just don't believe that we are by nature, dominated, or to be dominated, by such ruthlessness. And such a calculating, hard, mathematical, logical, black and white, right and wrong, way of seeing life.



Abuse would seem to be a good initiation into ruthlessness...

It certainly is. When you think of most initiation rites, no matter what type of initiation rites, and no matter what age... and these are things that have been long accepted by men amongst men. You know, if you're trying out for a hockey team at the age of 8, you'll probably find a piece of shit stuck in your helmet one day from somebody that brought in a dog turd and stuck it in your helmet. You put the helmet on and everybody laughs, right? These are rites of passage, initiation, har har, chummy-chummy, now you're part of the team, welcome, you know. And then the next day you find yourself picking up the piece of shit for the next guy. And it's that kind of cycle, and that kind of thinking, that this is brotherhood, that I find disturbing. It leads to creating this "man-made man," this machine.



As I go on in life, it's incredible how narrow the rule book is for that "man-made man". It's a narrow little rule book. Really, it wouldn't be as thick as the New Testament. It's just a tiny little "play-by-play" thing and you can say, well, if you put this line in here, you can expect the answer to be x and then put this line here and y. Especially if any type of macho challenge is being offered up. The way we tell jokes, the way we enter a boardroom and tell two or three dirty jokes so the boys can relax and then afterwards, you get down to the brass tacks and hammer out the details of the next contract, and so on and so

forth. You call the straight and shoot between the eyes and everybody's on their edge, and then by the end of the meeting, somebody closes with another dirty joke. We all leave and laugh and go out for martinis and tell more jokes. It's all a very narrow playbook, and it can be applied whether you're working on a construction site or a boardroom or in a restaurant or anywhere else. That's what I call the "man-made man," the man who is constructed to be an effective, net contributor to the society. Whether he's a soldier, businessman, father, consumer, that he's a net contributor to the financial machine. A functionary.

What is the loss there?

What is he ignoring? What is he not acknowledging? Where has the rest of him gone? So that's where I think *The Handless Maiden* tells that story so beautifully. When I came to understand what the maiden's role was in that story, then I as the king, having assumed that particular perspective, realized that what I really needed to do, instead of dealing with men in positions of authority, I needed to embrace the woman, that maiden, and welcome her back into my life.

So how did the story—I know this is probably a complex question, but...what was the transformation for you? How did you experience the regeneration of the maiden's hands?

Well, through the Storytelling Journey in particular, and then, frankly, Michelle, through our correspondence that went on well beyond that, I just continued to embrace the artist. Through the exploration of the story and the fictitious twists I took with the king's journey and so on, I really began connecting to the writer in me. The artist started to make a comeback. I didn't know I could write. I really didn't know I could write.

I still rejected the notion of going back into radio. Despite everything. Despite the fact that I understood intellectually what this was about, now. I'd made this connection, but I hadn't healed it yet, certainly not on a professional level. I did start to tinker with the CIUT radio in December 2004 which was after the

Storytelling Journey was over, but that was once a week, and it was awkward, and not particularly satisfying. I just didn't see that as my future, really. I didn't have faith in it yet. I didn't have faith that this was where to go.

I had also just simultaneously finished a class to become a corporate trainer and that is what I thought I would do. And at the time I thought to myself, well this is a great marriage of the two. I would be able to tap into the resources within myself that were now awakening, the writing and the presentation skills and all those things, and at the same time not jeopardize my income and my future. I wanted to find a way, a very logical way of blending the skills that I had developed in the man-made man world and the artist. So that was to some extent where I was going with that.

The transformation happened through the writing. That was a wonderful, absolutely wonderful experience.

When did radio become a real possibility? Because now you're obviously in radio, so...

I started to do more and more as a volunteer with the radio station. I started recording live music shows, and establishing a connection with their community, which of course is very artistic, and put together a program which they aired every Tuesday night, called It's Alive. As a radio personality, I was still very stiff. But I loved the people I was meeting. I was surprised by the depth of art and talent that existed in this community, and was encouraged by it. Not a lot of income was being made and yet there was example after example after example of people who were remaining faithful to their art, despite everything.

But I didn't accept that as my future for quite awhile. For a year or so I did this corporate training thing which was an absolute joke—I didn't ever truly buy into it, and I felt unengaged—I wasn't part of the boardroom meetings, I didn't tell the jokes, I didn't want to break any balls, I just went about the minimum amount of work. I had never done that with any work—but I found it cold and useless and callous, and very unsatisfying. But the money was good, and we needed the money. Finally, by February of 2006, I made a decision to leave the corporate world, and put everything I had into radio. Those artists, those musicians, they inspired me. It wasn't like I had a big dinner discussion with eight of them and they said, "Frank, what are you doin'?" It was subtle. When I started getting better with the program, they would be very gracious in their thanks, and they would say, "You're excellent at what you're doing, why aren't you doing more of this?"

The other reason, again, Michelle, is you. The memory I have is driving back from Ottawa, through Oshawa with my blackberry, with one hand on the steering wheel of my truck and the other hand typing out a text message to you with my one thumb that was free while I was driving 140 kilometres an hour. A job had opened up at the radio station that was the assistant of the program director. It was a secretarial job and they had never ever ever hired anyone but a young pretty girl in that role. I asked you if I should apply with that text message, and you responded by a message of your own through your email with the word YES in capitals repeated about fifty times YESYESYESYESYES.

I thought, how am I going to be able to justify this poor income? And then I started thinking of all those artists out there. That job didn't materialize, but a few months later I thought, I don't care, I'm going to do whatever I have to do. I quit the job and Helen and I sold the real estate that we had at the time to liquidate our financial assets, and put that liquidity into a bank account and said, well this will buy us about two years of insurance that if I absolutely cannot make radio work we can still feed ourselves. I made that decision February 06 and by March and April I was already earning money at the radio station in other capacities. Today I'm earning an average amount of money.

So the lesson there is a complete devotion to one's art is the only way to test and to measure whether or not this is something that one can do. To half-test the water, put the foot in it, that kind of thing, was never going to add up to Jack squat. I just had to do what I had to do. And now I can't conceive of another way of making a living.

But it was a slow, it was a slow reconnection, because a long destruction, or suppression, wasn't going to be healed overnight. We live in a world where we think, okay, I've made the conscious connection, now everything should just go tickety boo. But it doesn't work that way.

Now you're in a position where you've not only recovered your own artist but you're also supporting a lot of other artists at the same time. You're in a role where you're helping to teach

others people in radio. So you've got that position of authority that was the position that abused you when you were young. So it's really quite a cycle that you've gone through.

It is and it's one I take with great care. I don't deal with people quite as young as I was when I was molested but I do deal with young people. The average age being 21, I guess. People who work with me on the radio show often look at me as a father figure. And there are those who are vulnerable—I'm not talking about sexual abuse here, I'm talking about just abusing their goodwill because they're volunteers, and it's tempting as the producer to take as much as they're willing to offer and milk it. I'm very careful about not doing that. I want to make damn sure that if they do want to offer something, they know what they're getting themselves into. And even once they find themselves into it, making sure they're not overstepping their abilities and heading for a negative experience as opposed to a rewarding one. I take that very seriously. As far as the musical artists that we support, the least I can do is to offer them some sort of a humble platform. For many of them it's their first time getting the air time, ever.

There are many artists out there, there are many writers, there are many musicians, there are many people wanting to do what I'm doing for a living, too. And very few opportunities to do them. I have a lot of respect for the profession that I'm in and for people who have established the standards that we adhere to.

I love it, I love being where I'm at. And I understand that even though I'm new to it, relatively new, I'm not perceived that way, and I don't feel that way. It's always been in me.

It seems almost essential to have made the journey that you've been on, Andy, in the sense that the Devil is still there and you have to deal with him in the world..

Yes, it's interesting you mention my good friend the Devil. Because he's such a part of the story—a character in the story that I fell in love with. Because I found that, as horrific as it all sounds, chopping hands and molesting and all these other things we're talking about — the Devil to me represented the force of change and randomness. We live in a world that is never the same from one day to the next and the Devil to me represents that character who is the dark side of God...

he's the Mr. Hyde of God's Dr. Jekyll. I found it important to acknowledge him, and to acknowledge his value. To dismiss the Devil and just revere God is an imbalanced way of looking at nature. The Devil is just part of the same animal, the same force. And maybe you don't love him and cherish him, maybe you do have a bit of a moment of "fuck you, Devil" but at the same time to not acknowledge him is to me part of what would help one bury a certain part of one's own self.

I found the Devil in this story to be wonderful comic relief as I went through the process, as I told the story. He was a critical character—I could not imagine the story being told without his role in it. And I just loved this character.

It's interesting how the devilish characters often have the most potential for humor and fun, once you get into them.

Yes. And also, as I mentioned earlier, he had rules. Which I found ironic, you know. Three times and that's it, you're shit out of luck there, Devil. Sorry! Then all he can do is sulk. I kept asking myself in that writing process, what did the Devil really want from the Handless Maiden, anyway? What was his motivation? Then I concluded—the Devil can never ever EVER have her innocence. He lives for that



purpose, just for a taste innocence. In one of my writings I wrote about the devil encountering the king during his seven year journey. And the first words out of the devil's mouth are, "So tell me, king, what does innocence taste like? How does it feel to have those silver hands digging into your back?"

I feel for him. I feel a certain amount of pity. He gets a lot of glory but he sure as heck doesn't have what he wants or needs. He can't have it. It's just not his role, sorry. On the other hand, he's got all the man-made glory, all that stuff—it's all there for the Devil's taking.

I felt for all the characters. I thought about the handless maiden's father. Any rape victim will have some kind of a guilt complex. You know, how did I get myself into this situation where I found myself in this house in Hudson on June 24th 1976. What kind of a dumb silly boy was I to accept this invitation, and how blind and naïve. Why didn't I run? Why didn't I fight? All those questions. What was the lure? What did I think I had to gain from my relationship with this evil man? There was a risk that I took for some reason or another. And I think the father, having made the deal with the devil to sell his apple tree for all the riches in the world, was very much the part of my conscience that was saying, if I play my cards right, I'm a step away from being in radio. And I have to take some responsibility for that. To me that's what the father represents—he's a little naïve and a little quick to jump at the first dangling of temptation.

It's really quite extraordinary that all this started with you picking a card that depicted a maiden without hands.

It was almost miraculous that I picked that thing up, that I was there, that this particular story ended up being what it was. No matter what happens, if this whole radio experience dries up tomorrow and I never find another job in that field again, and I have to go back to working in some other capacity, heaven forbid ... but if that should happen, nobody could take this experience away now. The experience has happened. And I can say that four years later, or whatever it's been... three and a half now, I could not imagine another way that I could have healed. There are other ways, obviously, people have these experiences through religious epiphanies or through work with a brilliant therapist, or whatever ways people find themselves coming out and making themselves whole again... but the whole experience has opened me up to the concept of spirituality. I had none when I first met you. None, zero. I didn't believe in anything beyond what I could see, feel, touch and hear. But I have evidence that this is effective. Truly, truly effective. And for me I can't see that anything else could have been. No religion would have done it for me, I wouldn't have approached religion with any degree of faith. And I was getting to be that way with therapists.

What a privilege to witness where you've gone with your story, Andy. Thank you.

Andy: Thank you.