

How to Nurture Storytelling
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Because there is a natural storytelling urge and ability in all human beings, even just a little nurturing of this impulse can bring about astonishing and delightful results. Children who are encouraged by listening to the stories told by their elders will often create exquisite and profound ones, even at a very early age. Parents who did not experience storytelling in their own families as they were growing up can discover, hidden within themselves, wonderful abilities which have been waiting, perhaps for many years, to come forth. Children, especially during their waking and going-to-sleep times, can inspire our best stories. The springs of imagination well up through them freely. Sitting close to children and looking deeply into their eyes, one often can find just the right beginnings and endings for the stories they need to hear.

A scientist has told or read a story to his son almost every night for years. His son is now twelve, very sensitive, yet full of confidence in many activities. The father spoke about the importance of storytelling in their family. "As long as I keep going, a story unfolds," he said.

"It is quite a remarkable thing to watch it happening before my very eyes. I find there is always something in my stories about myself, a memory thread, perhaps with a little twist. Usually I also throw in a little magic, and I try to put in humor. My stories are not necessarily wild flights of imagination. When our son was young, I just told stories about real things that had happened to him during the day, but cast in story form. I changed his name to Joey. Strange how just the same thing that happened to him would happen to Joey in a similar way! No great messages. Getting up. Activities with our family. Meals. Just reaffirming his own experiences. I learned that in his eyes, my stories were never failures.

Every evening we were making a connection with one another. He was with me. In this way, I discovered that a bond could grow between a parent and a child. One of my greatest objections to TV is that it robs parents of this kind of creative time with their children. We want our son to trust his own judgments and to act upon them. So far, the stories are my way of getting that across to him.

The imaginative happening for the child becomes a powerful tool later on in life. I see this in my own work. People should not belittle the power of imagination and intuition to guide activities. The world would grind to a halt if we had to wait for science to give us all the answers about how to live."

The wife of this remarkable man has always shown deep and lively interest in his stories, yet does not interfere with the relationship that is possible between father and son because of the story telling they share, a time of rest and refreshment for them both. Sometimes they collaborate to thread some aspect of the story through the day.

Whether telling stories with your children or with strangers, one of the most useful guiding principles is to style its language and imagery to the prevailing mood of whoever may be listening. A fiery person will not be impressed with a languid plot. Similarly, an excitable group that lives on high energy will not be calmed down easily until some elements of their own mood have caught their attention; a fire breathing monster, a wild storm, a commanding, demanding potentate. Whoever loves light, laughter, and playful antics will not be drawn to profoundly tragic episodes. A contented listener will probably prefer a slow-moving, well ordered story. A sad listener probably will prefer to have at least one character who is struggling with burdensome realities.

As a story teller, you can turn even very ordinary events, people, and things into many-layered, many-faceted symbolic pictures. A group of parents who wanted to create a school for their children out of their own ideals met to explore story telling. One evening we worked with the story of “Briar Rose” for several hours. First we read the story aloud slowly, passing the book from hand to hand around the circle. After some exploration of the image of the thorn-rose wall that protected the Princess in her deep sleep, I asked them to write. I said, “Imagine that you yourself are a thorn wall. Go into the thornbush of teenage agony. Begin with an ‘I am’ statement, such as I am a ‘thorny rose.’”

One unusually practical mother surprised herself greatly when she wrote:

I am an imposing thorny patch.
I cannot get through to anyone,
nor can anyone get through to me.
It’s hard to give love without a sting.
It’s hard to accept love without a smart.
How can I get to the loving beauty that I know exists?
What can change the riveting pincushion I’ve become?
Insensitive to others. Insensitive to myself.
When will I awaken and feel the welcome softness?

Everyone read aloud quietly. We worked with crayons for awhile. Then I said, “Write a piece that begins, ‘I am arose.’” At the end of this piece, the same mother found herself writing, “My petals and essence, in the golden cask, last till the end of time.” Something had burst wide open within her. She had found herself in a new way.

Several years later, she and I remembered this story session. The school had been successfully founded and had been named after a species of wild rose found in their area. She said that she had been deeply stirred by the image of the rose wall that was protecting such lovely but vulnerable beauty in the castle in the story of Thornrose. Suddenly the book of living imagery had seemed to awaken within her. She found that she was able to see and to make connections where before she had been totally asleep. As a homeopathic practitioner, this reflected deeply in her ability to commune with her patients and their many problems. I had encouraged her to paint and to draw to illustrate the stories she told to help the children and their parents graphically experience the remedies she gave them. It gave her pleasure to be creative in this way for the sake of her patients. She did not feel herself to be particularly artistic. Actually, like so many who do not know it, she was astoundingly gifted. As these gifts unfolded she became more and more confident of her ability to understand and to express the language of symbols. Later she said to me:

“I felt that long, long ago I was involved with symbols. I am rediscovering what messages live behind them. When we were naming our school, I could speak very clearly and confidently about what the rose could mean to us. Through storytelling imagery, now it is as if I can step outside everything, and then I can step back in again. What is a rose truly? Why seven birds? Why three tasks? Simpleton opens the door and disenchant the whole castle. The great truths behind these are everlasting.”

Symbols awaken when you feel them as a living part of yourself. They are discovered through a portal of the mind that takes you deep into formative processes. Your body naturally wants to express health; your soul also seeks to express itself in a healthy way. Healing forces are constantly working to restore balance. Whenever you activate your personal connection with great story images, life forces are generated from deep within you.

“I am a parched land.”

“I am Hansel in the witch’s cage.”

“I am a wheel spinning straw into gold.”

“I am Cinderella at the dark hearth.”

“I am a donkey that wants to make heavenly music.”

Marvelous seeds and springs lie beneath the “parched land.” The moment you identify with Hansel, you know your sister will be able to liberate you. You feel within yourself the wheel that whirls in an emergency and creates a miracle. Your own pure soul, like Cinderella’s, bends in the ashes. The donkey within you will not give up until it succeeds in expressing the beauty it feels.

The imaginative world, though an unstable region, is a profoundly real one. In it is constant motion and transformation; it is like children who are playing. Gradually you can orient yourself and interpret what is happening there. You can delight in the discovery of new boundaries around the powerful, and disappear again from the dream depths of our imagination, and interweave them with your ordinary consciousness.

Making a regular time with your family to explore these powers of story imagination can put your storytelling on a firm footing. It also helps to join with others outside your family who have the same or similar needs and intentions to explore great story lore. Once you have read a story aloud within a story group, its grand design will already be working on you.

Almost all great, old, fairy tales can be told within a relatively short span of time. This is reassuring when you want to make up stories of your own. A story which fills fifteen minutes with well-chosen words and a truly satisfactory composition of characters and events can give joy for a whole lifetime. The test that a story image is truly working is that your heart will feel light and a flame of joy will shine up within it. It may spring to mind and give special significance and momentum to what might otherwise have been dissatisfying or even, meaningless moments.

Whatever efforts you make to retell a great story, by following the inner picture of the story with your mind’s eye and perhaps, casting the story in fresh language rather than in the time-honored language of the original, will bring out your creativity. Learning to tell at least one great story verbatim, with one’s whole heart alert to its inner meaning, gives courage for the telling of future tales; whether old ones or new ones, you will invent to meet a special occasion.

Since stories are made up of a series of pictures and sometimes these pictures are very great ones and exist on several levels at once, rather than analyzing, it is often most helpful to use colored crayons, paints, or pencils to illustrate an image or scene in the story that is puzzling or fascinating in some other way. Artistic expertise is not necessary for such efforts to be beneficial. Stories awaken a sense of movement and color and design that helps the conscious mind to contact the essence of a scene or character. Attempts to draw or to paint the layers of meaning from one moment in a story can awaken ability and inspiration for other modes of creativity. A spontaneous song or poem may well forth, or a little psychodrama. A group can return the following week, or at some other regularly scheduled time, to share the results of such inner explorations.

Your imagination loves to be given specific tasks. It thrives when it can go to work to bring about changes through a flow of images. Some themes that you can take up with others, or on your own, are listed.

Story Transformations

From	To
passivity	hope
slothliness	diligence
loneliness	oneness
stubbornness	kindness
impatience	forbearance
illness	healthiness
handicap	gift
poverty	wealth
	contentment
awkwardness	graciousness
rage	love
vanity/pride	understanding
hyperactivity	calmness
powerlessness	potency
confusion	clarity
addiction	spiritual
	illumination
lying	courage for the truth
violence	gentleness
obsession	openness
bitterness	tastefulness
emptiness	fullness
fear	courage
stone	music
animal/beast	human being
scepter or rod	visionary eye
superficiality	depth
death	new life

Stimulated by a transformative goal, whether you are alone or with a storytelling group, you may evoke one or more aspects of the story worlds that have been set out in this book. When you are exploring a “bog” mood, for example, you might wish to express this mood more thoroughly, and to find ways out of it through the use of imagination that stays true to the individuals participating in the group. Similarly, the sense of gratitude might be explored through story images or theme-wishing. As a group leader, you might present the theme in story terms and guide the offerings of others in the group. As a group, you can help one another accept the beautiful and powerful images that live within you.

When you experience yourself as a creator, even for a moment, you touch the creativity through which all things come into being, are sustained, and pass on into other dimensions. Stories that are deeply satisfying express healthy circulation; they breathe delightfully and deeply. A plot that is based on our pulse beat - a regular flow of fours - unfolds in a regular pattern. The central character or characters set out on a journey. First one obstacle is overcome, then a second, and finally a third - releasing the central

figures to a radiant sense of union with the source of well-being. On this basic format, there are an infinite number of variations. By taking an open, experimental approach to story composition as you work with various themes, characters, landscapes, and moods, this healthy blueprint, which has served eons of storytellers and story-creators, also can serve you.

If you double the basic four-beat, then seven tests or obstacles and, perhaps, seven rewards will come to your hero or heroine. In this grand design, your characters may move through the seven tones of a major or minor scale, through the colors of the rainbow spectrum, through the days of the week, or even through the seven “chakras” of our human bodies until they reach a sense of unity and peace. Another time-honored story sequence is based on three sets of four. Stories based upon the power of twelve can take your protagonists on a journey through the zodiac. In the days leading to a birthday celebration, for example, representatives of all the other signs of the zodiac can be met with the birth-chart symbolic animal acting as guard and guide. Or, the twelve months might be encountered as story figures, each offering its strength and wisdom.

Uniting story imagination with the power of one, two, three, resolving in four, a story ground becomes firmly formed out of the complex numerical wisdom that courses continuously through you. Every effort you make to circulate these pulse-beat rhythms in your stories affirms some of the most fundamental laws of our nature, which though they may baffle your mind, nevertheless form the foundation of all lives. Whatever your purpose is for making a story, if you summon patterns that have been stored within your form from the story imagination of past eons and work with these carefully, your story will contain transformative energies. Your sense of who you are and how you meet others and the world, which is evolving, for better or for worse, through every sort of human creativity, will hearten and deepen.

*Reprinted from **Storytelling and the Art of Imagination** with permission from the author. Nancy Mellon, a former Waldorf teacher, is a psychotherapist who has been trained in healing through the arts. She offers many workshops and courses during the year. Some upcoming ones include “Storytelling as a Healing Art and a Path of Self-Development” from July 21-21, 1997 at the Bay School in Blue Hill, Maine. She will be holding a nine weekend course September 1997 -June 1998 in the Boston area and is offering a residential training in southern New Hampshire from April 19 - May 31, 1998. For more information call Nancy at (603) 654-2982.*

This summer there will be puppetry courses at Emerson College and in British Columbia. The course at Emerson will run from August 11-22 and will be led by Roswitha Spence and others. For information, write to The Summer Courses Secretary, Emerson College, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5JX, England. Suzanne Down, gifted marionetteer in British Columbia, will also be offering a summer course from July 7 to 11 in Nelson, B.C. For information, contact her at RR# Site 30 C6, Nelson, BC V1L 5P6, Canada. Suzanne also sells kits for finger puppet plays and for storytelling aprons.