



Open the
door to the
imagination
with stories

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Therapeutic Storytelling: supporting the capacity of children through the realms of imagination

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Susan Perrow has an extensive background (22 years) in early childhood work (teaching 3 to 8 year olds), teacher training, storytelling and course facilitating. Over the last eight years she has worked in early childhood teacher training in Australia, Kenya and South Africa, and from August 2003 she will be teaching in Nairobi, Kenya, for 2 years.

In 2000 she wrote and tutored a 150 hour unit on Storytelling for Southern Cross University (Lismore, NSW, Australia) - the first of its kind at an Australian University. In 2001 she completed her Masters Research on Storytelling in a cross-cultural situation (post-apartheid South Africa), and is now working towards a PHD on 'Writing Therapeutic Stories for Children'.

For the last two years Susan has been the full time coordinator of a CARE Parent Support Program based at Byron Shire Council (NSW) and funded by the Australian Government's "Early Intervention Parenting Project". She has also published several collections of children's stories: "Gift's from the Sea", 1996; "Garden of Light" (Therapeutic Stories), 2002.

Introduction

In this workshop, using the medium of storytelling, ideas and techniques for writing healing ("medicinal") stories for children will be shared. Drawing from 22 years experience as a teacher/parent/storyteller, my aim is to enthuse the participants to support the capacity of children through the medium they love and respond to the most - the imagination.

Working as the full time co-ordinator of an Early Intervention Parenting and Behaviour Management Program (a pilot project funded by the Australian Government) I have been seeking ways to help teachers and parents work imaginatively with children. Through developing courses on Imaginative Discipline, I have been encouraging teachers and parents to work with the power of story and the imagination as an effective way of meeting and 'healing' some of the challenging behaviours of our modern times.

Within the workshop some example stories will be shared from this work. The group will be involved in a deconstruction process of the examples, and then the participants will be encouraged and supported to create their own stories. The session promises to be a practical imaginative experience.

Historical Background (in brief)

The universe began as a story we are part human, part stories (1).

The importance of stories and storytelling has been understood and worked with since the beginning of recorded history. The great spiritual and religious teachers of the world have used 'story' as a way of passing on their spiritual truth. When asked why he spoke to the people in parables, Jesus answered that this was the way for the mysteries of heaven to be known (Matt: 13:10-35). Zen and Sufi stories today are well loved and used for their wise and succinct messages.

Anthropologists have long observed the importance and popularity of stories in every culture. Joseph Campbell, through his extensive study of world mythology, states that our cultural myths

work upon us, whether consciously or unconsciously, as energy-releasing, life-motivating and directing agents ... whenever men have looked for something solid on which to found their lives, they have chosen not the facts in which the world abounds, but the myths of an immemorial imagination (2).

The 'Healing' Power of Stories

More recently there has been a revival in the healing and inspirational power of stories and storytelling for our modern age. C.P. Estes, in her book *Women who run with the Wolves* (3), recognizes and works with the healing power of storytelling, describing stories as 'medicine'.

Stories have a quality that can touch our 'souls', touch our hearts – they can reach us, move us, *heal* us, on many levels. As well as hearing traditional fairytales, myths and folktales (important 'heart and soul' food for all children), it has been my experience that our children today can benefit greatly from hearing therapeutic stories newly created for our modern time and place. This workshop includes examples of such stories written for specific challenging behaviours in young children - from helping to calm an over-active/aggressive child; to helping groups of children develop environmental awareness; to encouraging a ten year old boy with responsible use of tools; to helping to heal the pain and fear caused by sexual abuse. In every example the 'power of story' made a significant difference, a significant healing.

There are several important factors in the creating of our own stories. There is the creative process or "energy" that is passed on to the children, as well as the healing power of the story content itself. It can also be an empowering experience for the creator, the writer. This workshop aims to encourage you to explore this art of 'storying', a healing art for both teller and listener!

Imagination and Learning

Storytelling as a pedagogical technique works with the more expressive, imaginative 'way of knowing' or form of intelligence. Until recently this 'other' way or form has lacked epistemological support as a valid 'intelligence'. But the last thirty years has seen a cognitive revolution of such major proportions that modern learning theories now incorporate anything from two to eight intelligences or 'ways of knowing' - refer to Buck, Bruner, Blakeslee, Hillman, Gardner and Steiner (4).

It is beyond the scope of this workshop to examine any of these learning theories in detail. However, central to a rationale for the importance of storytelling as a *healing* medium, is the acknowledgement of a more holistic view of the realm of human cognition, and, in particular, imagination as a way of learning and knowing.

Einstein believed so strongly in the education of the imagination that he recommended children be told fairy-tales, and more fairy-tales!

Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination circles the world (5).

The Story Form as a Pedagogical Model – The Revival of ‘Old’ Wisdom

In his book *Teaching as Storytelling*, Kieren Egan, a Canadian Educator (and Director of the newly formed IERG), claims that imagination is the most powerful tool for learning that children bring with them to school. However, to date there has been very little research focused on it because, according to Egan, it is so difficult to grasp, difficult to research. He states that the dominant learning theories that have profoundly influenced modern educators have almost entirely ignored the use of children's imagination as a teaching and learning tool. Egan then presents a new planning model for teaching and learning based on principles that use and stimulate children's imagination, using the story form as a central teaching tool. According to Egan, “the story reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience” (6). His aim with his story-centred curriculum is to reconstruct curricula and teaching methods in light of a richer image of the child as an imaginative, as well as a logico-mathematical thinker (7).

Steiner (Waldorf) Education, one of the largest independent school movements in the world today, also acknowledges the importance of the child's imagination in learning and uses a story-based curriculum for most, if not all, subjects. Steiner described imagination as “a new beginning, a germ or seed drawing upon the future” (in comparison to cognition, an “end product”) and urged teachers to bring to the child as many imaginations as possible to help with continuous, holistic growth and development (8).

It seems important to acknowledge here that both the above models, although ‘new’ to the modern western world, are drawing on the wise and ancient art of storytelling. With a growing knowledge of the rich history of storytelling throughout cultures worldwide, it is now understood that the above models are not new discoveries but, hopefully, timely revivals!

Supporting the Capacity of Children through the Realms of Imagination

In many traditional cultures, supporting the capacity of children through the realms of imagination has been understood and shared as a community responsibility. Adults (teachers, parents and grandparents) have naturally used stories and imaginative strategies in their role as mentors and guides for the children in their community.

In the role as the full time co-ordinator of a Parent Support Program for the Shire of Byron, Far North Coast, NSW (a two year pilot project auspiced by the Byron Shire Council and funded by the Australian Government), I have been seeking ways to revive, enthuse and empower this responsibility. Storytelling courses have been offered as a springboard for teachers and parents to work in an imaginative way in their relationship with young children.

There was a young doctor who attended one of these storytelling courses, and in the introductory session, when it was his turn to say why he had enrolled, he told the group that for six years he had been at University studying medicine and his mind felt like a ‘dried up prune’. He was hoping that storytelling would help his mind become a ‘juicy plum’ again. This same doctor now has a reputation for being wonderful with children. He keeps a story-bag in his surgery and to help relax his little patients he pulls out a story prop and tells a story about it – all the while preparing the child for their check-up or injection!

This workshop is based on the premise that human beings start their life as ‘juicy plums’. Young children come into the world with rich and vibrant imaginations. Unfortunately, as a result of a predominantly intellectual education system in their earlier years, most children grow into adults whose imaginations are like ‘dried-up prunes’. From personal experience with the teachers and parents who have attended my courses, they are thirsting for imaginative experiences, they are thirsting to become ‘juicy plums’ again.

It has been my working experience that most existing training packages for teachers and parents cover “fostering children’s imagination” and emphasize that the participants must understand the importance of imagination for all aspects of the child’s development. BUT, they do not cover the development and use of the adult’s imagination in working with, managing, and guiding young children.

Helping to fill this gap has been the focus of my work over the last eight years. The attached table and charts (see Appendix A & B) capture some of the results of encouraging adults to work imaginatively with children.

A Model for Writing Therapeutic Stories – Work in Progress

This practical section of the workshop is difficult to capture on paper as it is usually a lively imaginative experience for the group involved. Using a whiteboard, a chart and an interactive group process, I plan to share my ‘work in progress’ of a construction/deconstruction model for writing therapeutic stories. After sharing several story examples with the group, three main aspects of story construction are examined (refer to Table 1 for deconstruction examples and Appendix A & B for story sources and summaries). The model is outlined below:

- ❖ Metaphor(s) and/or Props
- ❖ Journey
- ❖ Resolution

In summary, it has been my experience that when writing a therapeutic story you need to carefully select therapeutic metaphors to meet the need. These are not intended to moralise or induce guilt, but to reflect what is happening and, through the story ‘journey’ provide an acceptable means of dealing with it and/or a future resolution. Firstly, it is usually necessary to work out the **resolution** before anything else – if this is not clear, then it is difficult to know what to work towards. Examples of stories with difficult resolutions will be shared in the workshop – eg. a story for a child whose sibling or parent has died; a story for a child with separated parents; a story for sexual abuse.

Metaphor(s) and/or props are often best found from the child or situation (eg. using the child’s favourite animal or toy; taking clues from the natural environment) – however there is no rule for this – stories don’t fit comfortably with ‘rules’!

Finally, the **journey** is as important an ingredient as the resolution, as it is the ‘journey’ that helps to build the story tension – for a 3 - 4 year old the ‘journey’ can be as simple as using repetition of the same experience, song or rhyme throughout the story; for an older child the ‘journey’ usually needs to be more complex, involving several turnings or tasks on the road or quest.

Discussion Points (if time allows):

- Therapeutic stories must be age-appropriate - discuss the inappropriate example of creating a story for a 2 year old ‘bed wetter’; or a stealing story for a 3 yr old (when most 3 year olds don’t even understand the concept of stealing). Don’t expect a story to help jump developmental stages for children!

- When constructing a story it usually helps to isolate a specific example to help come up with ideas. Instead of trying to write a general story ‘dealing with aggression’ try to work with eg. ‘pushing children off chairs at lunch time’; Instead of ‘dealing with silliness’ try to work with eg. ‘tramping on the flower garden’ – the specific situation may then help feed ideas into the story.
- Imaginative solutions can help children come to their own conclusions (eg. for the child who was sexually abused – see ‘Born to be King’ story – Appendix B.5) - but a journey of some kind is needed for this! There seems to be a definite need for ‘indirectness’ in stories - ~~don't~~ lecture or instruct directly - e.g. a story about a rabbit that hurt his friend and so his mother gives him a talking to and he stops hurting his friend (this is a lecture not a story!). Your story needs to allow your listeners to come to their own conclusions, to have their own journey with it, or else needs to make something so enticing that the children will want to imitate it and engage with it through their imaginations.
- Warn that the effect of stories can’t always be predicted - give example of the Koala Bear story (Appendix B.6) written for a child with ‘separation anxiety’ – instead of the story helping the child the story helped clarify for the mother that she wasn’t yet ready to send her child to preschool!
- Stories can't always heal but can hopefully help (eg. for the orphan child – see ‘A Doll for Sylvia’, Appendix B.4)
- Discuss the use of props to extend and enrich a story – eg. A crown for the child in ‘Born to be King’; a doll for Sylvia; a miniature woven ‘magic carpet’ for Dion’s bedtime story (Appendix A.1)
- Discuss multi-cultural sensitivity
- Final tip: READ MANY STORIES TO HELP DEVELOP YOUR OWN IMAGINATION! (to help turn from ‘dried up prunes’ to ‘juicy plums’)

Table 1: DECONSTRUCTING THERAPEUTIC STORIES

(For source and summary of the below mentioned stories see Appendix A & B)

STORY - GENERAL	METAPHOR(S) / PROPS	JOURNEY	RESOLUTION
Tembe’s Shoes (B.3)	little red shoes, friends together, repetition and rhyme	the daily journey of a pair of shoes on a child’s feet	shoes put together at rest time
Grandmother and the Donkey – an environmental story (B.7)	nature’s child, grandmother, donkey	moving from the country to the town	children helping to clean up the litter in the town and plant gardens
STORY – SPECIFIC	METAPHOR(S) PROPS	JOURNEY	RESOLUTION
Baby Bear Koala (B.6)	hungry baby, mother, juicy leaves, higher branches	mother and baby in tree, mother falls asleep, hungry baby climbs by himself to reach juicy leaves	baby becomes brave enough to climb by himself
Little Red Pony (B.2)	wild pony, grooming brush, farmer	pony slowly learns to stop kicking wildly all the time and enjoys keeping still to be touched/groomed	pony experiences the joy in stillness and the farmer’s caring touch
Pocket Knife story	‘singing’ pocket knife, castle, silver moonlight	repetition of ‘cutting’, dream, carving a castle	boy experiences the joy of creating something wonderful
‘Born to be King’ Story (B.5)	prince, broken bones, grandma’s mirror, sunlight, garden, dark bedroom	Accident and slow healing process Light to dark to light	prince needed to walk out into the sunlight by himself
Cloud Boy story (B.1)	boy who lived in the clouds	‘Cloudboy’ makes his way down to live in the world	Child bonds with and cares for new doll
Carolina’s Towel Story (A.2)	Grandfather towel and little towel	Learning how to be a towel; learning the towel song	A new towel is happy because it has had a chance to be a ‘towel’

Conclusion

Stories are as important to our soul life as water is to our physical well-being – they can rejuvenate; they are vital for healthy growth and development; they find their way right into our hearts, into our being, just as water can find a way in through a crack in the wall when nothing else can! Many stories together make a ‘well’ for travellers of life to dip into and continue on their journey enlivened and refreshed.

From time immemorial storytelling has been used as a powerful educational and *healing* tool. Today there is an exciting trend to re-awaken this age-old art form. Fortunately there now exists a small but growing group of educational thinkers, researchers, teachers and practitioners giving due acknowledgment to the expressive, imaginative ways of thinking and knowing, and helping to revive the art of storytelling (9).

From experience in workshops (both in Australia and Africa) it seems that the ‘storyteller’ in all of us is crying out to be re-woken. This revival of storytelling is a community responsibility. The aim through presenting this workshop is to help encourage this awakening and this responsibility.

A long-term vision is to once again have teachers and parents working with the power of story and the imagination in their role as mentors and guides for the children in their community, supporting the capacity of children through the medium they love and respond to the most - the imagination.

It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are. They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world (10).

List of References

- (1) **Okri, B.** (1996, p.22). *Birds of Heaven*. London: Phoenix
- (2) **Campbell, J.** (1987, pp 4 -5). *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. New York: Arkana.
- (3) **Estes, C. P.** (1992). *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. London: Rider.
- (4) **Blakeslee, T.** (1980). *The Right Brain*. London: Macmillan; **Bruner, J.** (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; **Buck, R.** (1984). *The Communication of Emotion*. New York: Guilford.; **Gardner, H.** (1996). Probing more deeply into the theory of Multiple Intelligences. *NASSP Bulletin*, 80(583)(Nov), 1-7.); **Hillman, J.** (1975). *Revisioning Psychology* Harper, N.Y.; **Hillman, J.** (1979). A Note on Story. *Parabola*, Vol 4, No 4 (November), p 43-45; **Steiner, R.** (1981). *Study of Man*. London: R.S.Press.
- (5) **Viereck, G. S.** (1929). What Life Means to Einstein. *The Saturday Evening Post*, Oct 26th, pp. 6.
- (6) **Egan, K.** (1988, p.2). *Teaching as Storytelling*. London: Routledge.
- (7) Related Websites: <http://www.educ.sfu.ca/people/faculty/kegan/> ; <http://www.ierng.net>
- (8) **Steiner, R.** (1981, p.5). *Study of Man*. London: R.S.Press
- (9) Refer to the ‘Imagination in Education Research Group’: www.ierng.net
- (10) **Okri, B.** (1996). *Birds of Heaven*. London: Phoenix

a) Appendix A – Story examples from course participants working ‘imaginatively’ with children

Sample of ‘Healing’ Stories written by Parents and Teachers – 2001 to 2003 (collected and documented by Susan Perrow, CARE Parent Support Program Coordinator)			
Situation / Behaviour	Age of Child	Story outline	Effect
1. Not wanting to go to sleep at night / not wanting to sleep in own bed in own room	Dion - 5 yrs (boy)	Star falls from sky, star found by boy, boy gathers coloured items from nature to weave a rainbow carpet, boy uses ‘magic’ carpet to fly star back up to sky, carpet then lives with boy under his pillow and takes boy to dream land every night to have adventures	Dion’s mother wove a miniature ‘magic carpet’ as a prop to help strengthen the story – after hearing the story Dion found the prop under his pillow the next morning. Several months later his parents reported that he now sleeps with the ‘magic carpet’ next to his bed, in his own room.
2. Unusually strong aversion to being dried after bath time!	Sundi – 3.5 yrs (girl)	Story about a group of towels all living in the linen cupboard together - the new towel is taught a ‘drying’ song by the ‘grandfather’ towel, to help it know ‘what a towel needs to do’: <i>Humpty diddily impty I, Wrap her up and start to dry, First the face and then the hair, Have to pat dry everywhere; Under the arms, front and behind, Is there anywhere else to find? Yes - the legs, the feet, the toes; And last of all, her little nose!</i> When the new towel is chosen for the bathroom, it knows just what to do! It sings to the child and the child stands and listens and gets dry.	The mother shared the story (and towel song) by doing a simple puppet show – her daughter loved it so much that she wanted to have a bath straight away so she could be dried by a towel that sang the towel song – 6 months later the mother and father reported that they were still singing to the child while she happily stood to get dried after bath time.
3. Disrespect for craft materials – wanting to cut up everything in sight	Jessica - 4.5 years (girl)	Story/poem about a ball of wool brought to life - care aspects covered (through fun and rhyme) – the poem especially stressed how much the ball didn’t like to be cut into tiny bits! (Mother tucked the poem into the wool bag and pretended that it belonged there)	Jessica so charmed by the fact that the ball of wool had a personality that she took her dolls out of their cradles and started to tuck the balls of wool from the craft basket into bed, care for them and carry them round like ‘babies’! There was no more random cutting of wool.
4. Disinterest in craft work – only wanted to watch TV	5 years (girl)	The God’s Eye – story about an Indian child who wanted to make a protector / good luck charm for her home – a riddle was given in the story for a way to collect materials and construct it.	Child wanted to make one too – straight away! Then wanted to explore making more things with wool and sticks. TV watching decreased.
5. Suffering from nightmares and afraid to go into any room in the house without a parent	Bella - 5 years (girl)	Story about a ‘star girl’ who came into a child’s bedroom at night through the window and became a special friend	Mother made a ‘star doll’ as a prop for the story and a star necklace to hang on a hook in the kitchen – her daughter started to wear this and with it hanging around her neck could start to go to the toilet on her own and also into other parts of the house
6. Child not happy if mother is working – always wants her to play with her	Ella – 4 yrs (girl)	Song and story about a day in the life of a bunny family (Ella’s favourite animals were bunnies) and what happened if Mother Bunny played all day and didn’t get her jobs done – no carrot soup cooked for dinner, no clean warm pyjamas to sleep in that night, etc	Ella loved the story and asked for it repeatedly – her main comment was ‘Why would the mother want to play anyway?’ The mother also observed how her child was deeply contented that she had written a story especially for her! Also the mother reported that she was left alone more often to work while her child played alone.
7. Traumatized by memory of a mud-flood when in old house - even though now recently moved to town child would not go near mud or water	Lewis – 4 yrs (boy)	Mother and father made up story about a family who lived in a ‘bamboo cottage’ that always seemed to get full of muddy water when it rained – finally the family packed up and moved to another town and lived in a house with drains and strong walls and a fence and were now protected from water coming into their home	Parents told many versions of this story to Lewis on many nights before bed – Lewis loved the story and asked for it over and over again – Lewis now seems to be over his fear of mud/water and happily plays outside by himself and also enjoys playing in the mud.

b) *Appendix B – Story examples from the presenter’s work with children*

Sample of ‘Healing’ Stories written by Susan Perrow – 1985 to 2003

(Note: some of the stories below can be found in ‘Garden of Light’ - A Collection of Therapeutic Stories for Children - available online through www.immortalbooks.com.au)

Situation / Behaviour	Age of Child	Story outline	Effect
1. Boy wanting an aggressive ‘Masters of the Universe’ Warrior Doll for birthday; mother not wanting son to have such a toy – mother wanting son to have a less aggressive/ less commercial doll to play and sleep with.	5 years	Cloudboy – a simple story about a child who lived in the clouds and who wanted to come down to the world and have a friend to live with and play with – he travels around the world looking for a friend who would look after him	This story helped to successfully wrestle my youngest son out of the clutches of the commercialised ‘Masters of the Universe’ warrior dolls. I used the power of story to fight the modern commercial ‘monster’ that encroaches relentlessly into our homes and private lives. After telling the story several times, ‘Cloudboy’ was placed in a hanging cloth cloud by Jamie’s bed for him to find the next morning. This doll then became my son’s closest companion (the desire for the Warrior Doll completely disappeared) and was part of our family life for many years – he even features in the family photo album!
2. Boy unable to keep feet still when around other children at preschool – would wildly kick and hurt others	Mitch - 4 years (boy)	Little Red Pony – refer to book (Garden of Light)	The boy’s teacher used this story as a puppet show and also it was dramatised during music time. The boy loved the story and loved to have a turn to be the pony. This gave the staff the chance to touch him and cuddle him as they pretended to brush him down. This was the start of a new and positive relationship for the boy and the staff.
3. African kindergarten children (60 in a group) throwing shoes in a messy pile by the door at rest time - this took one teacher an hour to sort out so the shoes would be ready for home time	2 - 6 year olds	Tembe’s Shoes – a story about a little boy called Tembe who had a pair of shoes that were such close friends that they always liked to stay together, even at rest-time	The teacher and children loved the story (the story had much repetition and rhyme) and the teacher continued telling it to the children and to new children who joined the group. From that time on the shoes on the verandah were placed together by the children in beautiful order, and the shoe-sorting teacher was able to take a much needed break!
4. Orphan child – recently lost whole family	Sylvia - 5 years (girl)	A Doll for Sylvia – refer to book (Garden of Light) – note that the story was followed up by Sylvia finding a special doll, with silver and gold threads in her dress (like the story doll) waiting in her bed the next morning.	Sylvia was orphaned at the age of 5 after her whole family was killed in a raid on her village – she has now been adopted by the SOS Children’s Village in Nairobi where she will live until the age of 18. Sylvia’s story was told to her by her class teacher, who later reported on her play and behaviour in the Kindergarten – ‘Sylvia is now very active, she socialises well with other children and her play is very imaginative’. Her house ‘mother’ noticed a great change in her play and general interaction with others after this story. (Note that this story was only attempting to ‘humbly’ help, not heal, this horrific situation)
5. Sexually abused at 3 years – still carrying the fear of the pain in peeing due to a STD that took a year or more to heal – would not go to the toilet without mother’s help.	Boy - 6 years – living in Kenya	Born to be King – refer to book (Garden of Light)	Copy of email received from the boy’s mother outlining the success of the story: “My son is thrilled by his story more so because he’s a prince! (The mother had woven her son a crown from golden threads and commented that he wanted to wear it all the time). He has been listening to the story at bedtime. He now empties his bowels without my assistance. All I hear from time to time is water flushing down the toilet. I am so excited to observe him overcome his phobia.”
6. Separation anxiety – child not happy to be left by mother at pre-school	Boy - 3.5 years	Baby Bear Koala – refer to book (Garden of Light)	This story helped the mother to realise that <u>she</u> wasn’t ready to separate – her child was withdrawn from pre-school and happily returned a year later.
7. Lack of litter / environmental awareness – school children throwing scraps and paper onto ground instead of using the bins.	4 – 7 years	Grandmother and the Donkey – refer to book (Garden of Light)	This story was written in 1997 for a puppet show for African children, and toured through many kindergartens in the Cape Town Townships. It had such an effect that as we were packing our puppet show into the car after each performance the children would be running up to us with handfuls of scraps and paper that they had gathered from their school playground (we started to take bags to hold all the rubbish!).

