

The Golden Thread

*Storytelling in
Teaching and Learning*

by
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❖ PREFACE ❖

For over twenty-five years I have been telling stories, using stories to teach emergent literacy and writing, and helping teachers become storytellers in their own classrooms. This book has grown out of my belief that storytelling is not an entertaining diversion, a filler, a treat on a cloudy day, or a reward for good behavior. Nor is it a craft that belongs solely to the professional storyteller who visits classrooms on special occasions. Storytelling is a method of teaching, a way to gain trust, to communicate effectively, to inspire imaginative thinking, and to provide a foundation for the thinking that is basic to literacy.

The Golden Thread lays a foundation for understanding what is really happening in children's learning when we teach through stories. In a book about storytelling it is important to be reminded of the magic of the tale. For that reason I have begun each section with a story that serves as a metaphor for the discussions that follow. The essays at the heart of the book reflect upon the unique capacity of storytelling to teach, what we're teaching when we tell stories, and why it seems to work.

I begin by considering the role of teacher as storyteller. Teachers are unusually well equipped to tell stories because of their already finely honed communication skills. Once they have stories in their repertoire, using those stories can profoundly affect social interaction – the relationship of teacher to student and the building of class community.

Stories not only address social and behavioral issues in

the classroom as I discuss in Part II; they also help children to think. Stories links feelings and thoughts, and the place of intersection is the imagination. Part III, “Storytelling and Imagination,” shows us how stories can perform a great service to the child’s developing imagination because they hone the skills of visualizing, envisioning, and play that help us to become thinkers and actors in the world.

Some teachers and storytellers believe that our work has the greatest impact on children’s literacy. I have saved my discussion on literacy for Part IV because I believe that the behavioral issues and the development of imaginative thinking are prerequisites to literacy. In schools where children struggle with literacy, often for cultural reasons, storytelling can have a profound influence on learning to read and write.

Finally I talk about the spirit of the teacher. Storytelling can feed our spirits and remind us why we became teachers in the first place. It can place us among the vast chain of teachers since ancient times who have compelled their students to learn through the sheer power of the story to captivate, inspire, and transform the imagination.

✧ INTRODUCTION ✧

My Personal Journey As a Storyteller and Teacher

I have loved stories ever since I can remember. As the youngest in a family of readers, I was the very last to learn to read. One of my earliest memories is my first day of first grade, the year my mother had told me I would learn to read. I came home from school that day deeply disappointed because I had not learned this magical skill and announced, “If I don’t learn to read tomorrow, I’m quitting school.”

It was not many days before I became an avid reader, and books have been my constant companions ever since. As I recall it now, my longing for stories was an insatiable hunger. I spent as much time as I possibly could reading books. I didn’t just read them; it felt as if I ate and drank them. I devoured them.

My mother took my sister and me to the library once a week, and we were allowed four books each. For years I kept careful records of what I read, often making up codes for how I felt about them. Although I had favorites, I was usually in love with whatever conjured my imagination at the time.

But it was never enough for me just to read a book; I always had to tell someone the story of what I had read. For the experience to be complete, I needed to pass on the gift.

When I was in the eighth grade in 1966, the town of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania set up a tutoring program as part of the Office of Economic Opportunity, a group of social programs for the poor. I don’t know why the program was

willing to accept a thirteen year old as a volunteer tutor, but they agreed to try me out, and I stayed on through high school.

My first student, Robert, was a small white boy in the fifth grade. The first day I sat down with him at a card table in the dark basement of the YMCA, he looked me in the eye, put his fist on the table, and said, "I just want you to know right now, I'm a slow learner."

You might imagine that this was quite a stunning remark to hear in my very first moment as a teacher. Though I cannot remember exactly how I responded, I know that I attempted to dismiss his sense of failure and focus him on the task at hand.

The first thing that I did was to try to determine what Robert knew. I had some children's books with me, but he couldn't read a word. I discovered that though he could recognize some of the letters of the alphabet by name, he didn't know that letters were symbols and that words signified meaning. In fact, he thought that reading was magic: some people could do it and some people couldn't. He was just one of those that the magic hadn't touched.

I taught Robert the sounds of the letters quickly and easily, and he began to see how to form them into the magic of words. His family moved away from Wilkes-Barre about six months later. For years I regretted that I couldn't take him further, though I always hoped that at least he knew that he had the capacity to learn, and that reading was a code that he could break.

I learned from teaching Robert that if a child carries within him the belief that he cannot learn, and if no one believes in his ability, it is doubtful that he will learn.

My second student was more difficult than Robert. Trina was an African-American child in a largely white community. I would often board the bus and take a half hour bus ride to the Y, only to discover that Trina hadn't shown up that day.

Trina was in the third grade. Like Robert, she could not read; in addition, she *would* not read. I recall our first session. We were sitting on the side bleachers in the empty YMCA gym when Trina said, "I don't need to read."

My mind began to work quickly to think of all the reasons why reading would help her. I began with the most practical I could think of. "What if you want to look up someone's phone number in a phone book?"

"I'll ask someone," she said.

"When you're older, what if you want to drive somewhere and you can't read the street signs?"

"I'll take someone with me."

Looking up at the red exit signs on either side of the gym, I said, "How would you know how to get out of a building if you can't read that sign over there?"

"I'll just go out the door," she said.

I cannot recall how many other reasons I came up with, but Trina had an easy rebuttal for every one of them.

I gave up on that strategy. Instead, I began to bring picture books to our sessions and read to her. Eventually she dropped her resistance and learned to read. Many years later I found out that she had gone to college.

These early experiences taught me, first of all, that I was absolutely hooked on teaching. They also taught me that the obstacles to learning often have little to do with learning itself. Those moments of breaking through made even the

futile bus rides worthwhile.

If I had been wildly successful as a teenage tutor, I was a dismal failure as a middle school English and social studies teacher. In 1979 I took a job in a very small New Jersey community where I was responsible for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade social studies, English, drama and a few other subjects. I also threw in Chinese as a bonus, and with the greatest enthusiasm only a young teacher can have, I embarked on a job that required ten preparations a day.

It wasn't the preps that destroyed me, though. It was the kids. About half my class had parents who were going through divorces; a boy named Greg had a father in jail and liked to throw things; Tommy still peed in his pants; and a pair of obstreperous twins would not even follow the principal when he asked them to leave the classroom with him. There was so much anger in the class that it was like walking through pea soup. To top it off, the students had idolized the male teacher who had just left and were determined to despise anyone who took his place. That was me.

A more seasoned teacher could have probably sorted it out, but I was a novice and not up to the task. There was, in fact, only one time during the day when the children would sit and listen, and that was when I read to them. I read them the whole of *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, and even though they were white children who had not undergone the deprivation of Wright, they deeply identified with his embattled childhood. The only punishment that had any sway with these children was my steadfast refusal to read *Black Boy* if they misbehaved. These were the only peaceful moments in that classroom, the only moments of community.

I put every ounce of energy I had into the job, all my

waking moments, seven days a week trying to make it work. One of my colleagues, still an educator these many years later, told me she cried every day after school during the year when she had taught the same children. Another friend, a retired career teacher who was then eighty years old, counseled me by saying, “You need to quit that job or you will never teach again.” I left the job at Christmas.

But something else had happened to me that fall which was not unlike Alice falling through the rabbit hole. Another world had opened up for me just as the world of teaching seemed to be closing over me. I heard my first storyteller. One evening Diane Wolkstein told stories at the Princeton Public Library, not from a book, but from her heart, inviting us into a magical space where the story resided. I experienced an almost seamless transition from the every day world to the world of story. During the entire time she told her tale, I lived within it while all sense of ordinary time and space receded. Yet when the story was over, the vividness of the tale remained with me and resides in me still after twenty-five years. I had fallen, head first, into the world of storytelling. Although I did leave my middle school job, I have never left the teaching profession. Since that time I have been an itinerant teacher, and the wares that I carry are the many stories I keep in my invisible bag.

While I was working as a storyteller for the New Jersey State Council on the Arts in the 1980's, I happened to be placed in two long-term residencies in Trenton schools. These were schools with large minority populations in poor urban areas where children generally struggle with literacy and where the high school dropout rate is very high. Two particular incidents made an indelible impression on me.

At one school I had a group of fifteen fourth and fifth grade students who were selected to learn to be storytellers, and among them were a number of boys who could barely read and were considered discipline problems. They lit up for storytelling and put their hearts and souls into it. One was a tall fourth grader named Ronnie. Because Ronnie's reading skills were very weak, I taped the story he selected, and he read along with the text as he listened to the story on my walkman. Some weeks later during a tutorial session with Ronnie, I asked him, "Do you like to tell stories?" He replied, "Yes, but I *really* like to read." I was quite surprised by this and wanted to hear him read. We got out a folktale from the school library that he hadn't read before, and he began to read with fluency and understanding. Something magical had happened in that few weeks. Ronnie, who had been reading only words, suddenly realized that words strung together to make sense. Through storytelling he was able to reconstruct meaning from text just as he was able to create meaning in the oral telling of his own tale.

In another class, a seventh grade, I had a student named Felicia who sat in the back with her head down. I thought this child would never look up or lift her pencil. One day I told the African-American story *The People Could Fly*, and we talked about the emotional truth in this folktale, which captures the misery and cruelty of slavery and the indestructible desire for freedom. During the story, Felicia looked up. When the students wrote personal stories that mirrored the painful emotions in this story, Felicia picked up her pencil for the first time. She wrote, "I felt like pain. I was weak. I was tired. My heart was burning in flames of pain. Teardrops rolled down my cheek. They rolled into my mouth. I tried to hold

my tears back. But I couldn't. They would just burn my eyes. The place was cold. The words that came out of my aunt's mouth were words of hurtness. My mother tried to hold her tears back. But I knew she wanted to cry. Her eyes looked like madness." When the children were required to write evaluations at the end of the year, Felicia wrote, "I liked the stories and sometimes I even liked myself."

Although most students I had visited in the past had welcomed me, the enthusiasm and appreciation that these children showed was far beyond anything I had ever experienced in a classroom. It confirmed my feeling that storytelling was a key in education, particularly in schools where children were failing miserably in the area of literacy. Because of Ronnie, Felicia, and many other wonderful students in Trenton, I decided that the storytelling I was doing through the State Arts Council was not enough. I looked into how to begin a nonprofit corporation, and in 1996 I founded Storytelling Arts, Inc., because I felt it was imperative that storytellers reach more low-income school children and speak to them through stories as I had spoken to Ronnie and Felicia. In founding the nonprofit, I also felt that if we could place storytelling in the hands of more teachers, we might transform the education of these children.

Since 1997 Storytelling Arts has given me the opportunity to work with twelve of my colleagues, bringing storytelling programs to New Jersey schools. All of our projects are long-term, since we are interested, not in the entertainment value of storytelling, but in its profound ability to teach.

I have also trained many teachers in the art of storytelling at our annual summer institutes at Princeton University and at numerous teacher workshops. This work

has convinced me that teachers can easily and naturally learn to tell stories and to incorporate them into their work. The teachers I have worked with over the years have used storytelling extensively in their classrooms—teaching children to tell, teaching writing, and even teaching math.

The foundations that have funded our work have required that we collect data and assess the impact of storytelling on children's learning. This has prompted us to ask some challenging questions about what we do. Although it is obvious to anyone who observes a storytelling session that children are deeply engaged, it is important that we ask what they are learning and why it matters.

In our long-term projects, teachers have helped us to assess the impact of storytelling on their students, and I have included some of their comments. In thousands of observation forms that teachers have filled out over the past six years, we see several recurring themes. Teachers all over New Jersey at every grade level have told us they are surprised to see that their shy children speak during storytelling sessions; the children who are usually distracted, distracting, and inattentive seem to be able to focus when they listen to stories; and children who speak a language other than English are willing to engage and participate. The teachers are also surprised that their students remember the stories in detail, even after a very long period of time has elapsed. Some have reported that their reluctant writers are eager to write after they hear a story, and others have said that their students are more eager to read, especially if it's a story like the one they heard from the storyteller.

I am writing this book because when a teaching method has that much impact, particularly on the children

who are most difficult to reach, every teacher needs to know about it. I also believe that storytelling is a teaching method available to any teacher who takes the time to learn and understand it.

Since I was thirteen years old, my work as a teacher has been a constant process of revelation, unfolding, and transformation. My students Robert, Trina, Ronnie, Felicia, and many others have inspired me along the way to focus on the most elusive aspects of teaching and learning: the desire to open oneself to the process of learning, to believe in one's own potential, to engage the heart and the mind together. Looking back, I realize that even before I had been introduced to storytelling, reading to Trina and to my difficult middle school students was the most effective way of reaching them that I knew. Storytelling, when I discovered it, became an even more powerful way to do so.

For me, storytelling is not only an art form but a handmaiden to teaching. That is something the ancients knew when they enveloped their values and beliefs, their hopes and fears, in the garment of story. It is something the religions of the world have always known as they transmitted metaphors of the life of the spirit through narrative. But it is something that our institutions of learning have forgotten. Indeed, storytelling is a language that children understand from an early age. It is the language of teaching. In the following pages I hope to be able to share how and why storytelling can change the intellectual and emotional life of a child.

