

Children's Religious Ed Notes

An E-letter from the Pacific Yearly Meeting Religious Education for Children Committee

#3: Winter, 2007: Storytelling in the Meeting

Children's Programs come and go, but meeting community is durable. With or without a structured curriculum, we share our faith with our children by sharing worship, sharing food and fun, working together on service projects, singing together—and by sharing stories that connect us to the Wellspring. The PYM Committee on Religious Education for Children invited Grass Valley storyteller Karen Davidson Olson to our November retreat, and here is what she told us:

Stories Take Us Deeper

Many years ago in Africa, storytellers traveled from village to village sharing myths, gossip, and lessons with the people. Together, they laughed and cried and shared their bond of humanity.

Then television came to the region. The television started telling the same stories as the tellers. However, the stories on the television were embellished with magnificent special effects and beautiful or handsome narrators. The people turned to the stories on television. First the young adults, attracted to the hip young narrators, switched to television. Then the young children and finally their parents abandoned the traveling tellers for the television, which presented stories quicker and slicker. The storytellers kept telling the tales from village to village although their audiences became smaller and smaller and older and older.

After a year this began to change. More and more people came back to the storytellers to patiently listen as the stories unfolded. In six months the audience was larger than ever. A storyteller asked a teenager, "Why did you come back? The television tells the same stories with fancy effects. Why did you return?" The girl spoke the feelings of all the gathered people when she replied, "The television people know the stories, but the storyteller knows me."

We tell stories to each other because that is how we empathize with one another. Whether it is around the well or the water cooler, people through the ages share themselves when they share their stories. Stories can help people of different generations share with each other. Stories can teach gently, but the learning is lasting.

Dr. Joseph Chilton Pearce, a scientist who studies the activity in the brain, particularly when we learn, said that within the brain there is a river of energy that connects the reptilian brain (sensory) with the mammalian brain (analysis and creativity). This limbic system (sensory) is exercised by the use of our imagination. The more we use it, the more fluid and deeper our connections go. When adults or children create images in their mind as the storyteller tells the story, they are using the limbic system, which makes lasting connections in the brain.

Albert Einstein said, "If you want your children to be brilliant, tell them fairytales. If you want them to be more brilliant, tell them more fairytales."

Stories also connect the head with the heart. Jesus knew this. When he shared sacred truths that he knew would be hard to hear, he used stories. He helped people hear from their hearts. So when the apostles wanted to know about forgiveness, he told the story of the Prodigal Son. The story shows how love can forgive before the son repents.

Trying to reach the Pharisees, Jesus reflected their disconnectedness from God's love in the story of the farmer who left his fields to his servants. When he sent his son to collect the harvest, the servants killed the son. Some stories reach the heart better than others.

Karen's Hints for Telling Stories in First Day School

Storytelling can be scary. It's hard to let go of the book. Here are some suggestions that can help you feel more confident in learning and telling a story.

1. Find a story that excites you or touches your heart.. You have to read many stories to find the right one. Your personal experience stories are usually the most powerful.
2. Learn the story by heart, not by memory. Sometimes you might want to memorize a phrase: "Run, run as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man."
3. If you are learning a story by heart from a book, read it three times and then close the book. If you are doing a story from memory, write it down and read it three times and put it away.
4. Now see the story in your mind's eye. Visualize the characters. What does Goldilocks look like? What does the Bears' home look like? Is it a rock structure or a wooden house? What is Goldilocks feeling as she goes into their house? Go through the story in this manner. Notice you haven't spoken any words yet.
5. Now think about the bare outline of the story. If there are any details (place, names, dates, etc.) that you have forgotten, go back to the original written story. You will probably be shocked by how vivid the story is now.
6. Put the visualizations and the story together. Give voice to the characters. (This is my favorite part. I like to do it in front of the mirror.)
7. Tell the story OUT LOUD to yourself. The words are different inside your head- you need to hear them. (The shower can be a good place for this.)
8. Tell it to someone. Before you go to First Day School the story needs to be told. Anyone will do—your mother, the coffee vender, your dog. Just tell it.
9. Share it with your children. Sometimes I set the stage by lighting a candle or singing a song. The most important aspect is for you, the storyteller, to be excited.
10. This sounds like a lot of work, but when you see your most restless child sitting transfixed in the spell of the story, it will be worth it. But be prepared for the first words to be "tell us another!" It's always good to have 2 stories ready.
11. Trust the power of telling and enjoy.

Karen's Favorite Story Resources:

Religious Education Committee of FGC, Quakers on the Move. Available at www.quakerbooks.org.
White, William R. Stories for Telling. Augsburg Publishing House. 1986.
Ragan, Kathleen. Fearless Girls, Wise Women & Beloved Sisters. W.W. Norton & Co. 2000.
White, William R. Speaking In Stories: Resource for Christian Storytellers. Augsburg Publishing House. 1982.
Komroff, Manuel, trans. The Great Fables of All Nations. Tudor Publishing Company. 1935.
Shah, Idreis. The Magic Monastery. E.P. Dutton & Co.
Uchida. The Magic Listening Cap: Folktales from Japan. Harcourt Brace and World. 1955.
Mayo, Gretchen Will. Earthmaker Tales. Walker Publishing. 1991.

For more story resource ideas, go to www.quakerbooks.org. Look at the adult books as well as the children's books; so many of the stories we need to share and sink deeper into are the same stories for people of all ages.

Looking for resources? Have a concern you'd like to discuss? Have ideas or experiences you'd like to share? Want to subscribe? Email the PYM CRE Committee at quaker-re@yahoogroups.com. Find past editions of this newsletter at www.pacificyearlymeeting.org.