

THE TEACHER AS STORYTELLER

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Introduction

"Do you know the way to Santa Fe?" I am, of course, corrupting the line from a popular song. Santa Fe is a fascinating small city that has deep historical roots. Santa Fe was colonized by Spain, and it has retained its Spanish flavor, which can be seen vividly in the downtown plaza. Treasures and trash—everything is for sale. And if you are lucky, you might even find a storyteller doll.

Once, when I was visiting Santa Fe, I purchased a storyteller doll. The doll was made of clay, cast in the figure of a grandmother, surrounded by a score of little children. Her mouth was open, indicating she was telling stories. Cultural stories represent the way in which humans connect one generation (older) with the next (younger). Stories provide us with a sense of who we are. They place the stamp of identity on how we view ourselves in relationship to the world. "The People" is a word commonly used by simple societies to refer to themselves. The Ancient Hebrews were great storytellers. Their stories proved so popular that Christians and Muslims adopted them as their own. How did the world come to be? Genius offers an interesting answer: God created it in six days. Religious fundamentalists still cling tenaciously to the story as immutable truth.

I was once asked, "What was the best piece of luck you have had in life?" I was able to answer the question without a moment's hesitation: "I was born into a family with a loving mother." Not only was my mother very loving, she was also a great storyteller. Every night, when my brother and I were ready for bed, our mother read us fairy tales. Fantasy stimulated our imaginations. Our thoughts were filled with dreams of ghoulish giants, beautiful princesses, and heroic deeds. Is it any wonder that I would later write a book about metaphors?

Stories and Teaching

Stories are the principal tools of teaching. They offer a way of viewing abstract ideas in concrete terms. Former students of mine have often remarked, "We can't remember the theories you presented in class, but we all know your stories by heart." Stories have a way of sticking to our ribs. They are useful metaphors for explaining complex problems. One of the stories I remember vividly from my childhood is Rumpelstilzkin. He was a funny little man who possessed the magical talent for spinning straw into gold. J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, has demonstrated a similar talent. Teachers like Marva Collins are able to work miracles in the

classroom, transforming ghetto children into young scholars.

Have you ever opened "Pandora's Box?" It is not only a colorful story but a powerful metaphor. How many times have we all rushed in where angels feared to tread. George W. Bush set out to bring freedom and democracy to Iraq. Now no one knows how to put the lid back on Pandora's Box. Many novice teachers resign after the first year of teaching when they discovered they are not prepared to deal with the real children who live inside Pandora's Box. Joseph Campbell was one of the brightest minds of the Twentieth Century. His book, *The Power of Myth*, is an insightful treatment of how myths underlie the ideas we accept into our lives. According to Campbell, we are all Ulysses—returning home from an adventure quest. We begin life in a nurturing environment. The world is no bigger than home and hearth. When we arrive at adulthood, however, we venture out into the world to seek our fortunes. These adventure quests can take many different forms. Some are military conquests; others result in more scholarly pursuits. All of them result in personal growth. The individual becomes more mature in his or her judgments. The final stage of the adventure quest is when the mature individual returns home to share what he or she has learned with others.

Campbell's insight can be seen in the children's storybook, *Pinocchio*. Pinocchio desired to become a real boy. In order to pursue his dream, he sets out on an adventure quest, which led him to Pleasure Island. There he succeeded in making an ass of himself. He is only transformed into a real boy when he sacrifices himself for others. Here we encounter a universal theme: The old self must die before the new self can be born. I have always found the story of Pinocchio to be rich in symbolic meaning. When I was a child, I was a little wooden-head. (Some of my former colleagues still hold that opinion.) I wanted to become a real boy. What I needed was a model. Fortunately, there was a real boy who lived in my neighborhood, Bryce. He possessed all the qualities of a real boy—resourcefulness, guts, fleet of foot, and good fighting skills. I idealized him. My dad always said, "If Bryce were going to hell, you would be right there with him." Bryce once crawled through a hole under the old school building. I dreaded the dark, but I was not going to be left behind. We crawled through the air duct system of the school, eventually coming out on top of a pile of coal in the basement of the building. My dad was right—I would indeed have followed Bryce to hell!

Functions of Storytelling

Storytelling performs a number of significant roles or functions. One function is that of modeling. Healthy humans and animals always model up. We admire and try to copy the behavior of those who are ahead of us in their development. Male children require contact with adult men, real or imagined. This point is illustrated by the problems exhibited by adolescent male elephants in Africa. The male elephants of the herd had been killed by poachers. The young elephants had been raised without any adult models. The keepers of the preserve noticed that someone or something was killing off the rhinos. They discovered that the young male elephants were guilty of the crime. They were killing rhinos merely for sport. When they introduced adult male elephants back into the herd, the problem was quickly corrected. Young males possessed great power and strength, but they were lacking in discipline. If this is true of elephants, it is equally true of humans who display delinquent behavior. Dewey once observed that the child who is left to follow his or her own whims is more a prisoner of purposeless emotions than the child who is under the control of a mature adult.

Another function of storytelling is that it allows us to personalize our experiences. Stories help to illustrate who we are at the core of our being. They illustrate the qualities we most cherish about ourselves. When I was six years old, my mother was pregnant with my brother. My parents drove me to a small neighboring town to stay with my aunt. My favorite toy, a red tricycle, went with me. My aunt had a son, Bud, who was six years older than I. Bud was a bully who teased me incessantly. Finally, I had had enough! I climbed on my red tricycle and headed for home. I would still be peddling if my aunt and uncle hadn't picked me up in their truck. Determination and persistence have always been two of my distinguishing characteristics. Ann Marrow Lindberg once remarked that the qualities that had made her husband great—allowing him to fly across the Atlantic—were the qualities that later gave him trouble in life. The same has been true for my life. Determination and persistence, when carried to an extreme, cease to act as virtues and become vices.

Storytelling and Identity

Who am I? Stories perform the role of offering us an answer to that question. When I was growing up, older people would often ask: "Whose kid are you?" Teachers would see me coming to school and say: "Look—here comes that Ivie boy." They had me pegged dead to rights. And I didn't disappoint them! I have always had a talent for kicking things into the air. Look at the titles of some of my publications: "Multicultural Education:

Boon or Boondoggle?" "Are Black Studies Relevant?" And "Learning Styles: All Smoke and Mirrors?" My cultural hero for years was Peter Abelard, though I hoped they would not hamstring me along with my philosophy. I have enjoyed playing the role of an iconoclast. The joy of teaching, I have often maintained, was to be found in tromping around the edges.

Imagination is one of the key virtues coming from storytelling. Quintilian once remarked he would sooner have students who showed imagination over those with good memories. Imagination fosters creativity in literature, science, and the arts. The Bible is not all moral allegory. There are passages that convey profound insights. The twenty-third psalm, for example, tells us that: "The Lord is my Sheppard, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul." Paul in 1 Corinthians says: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Metaphor allows us to capture poetic truths.

Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelly wrote *Frankenstein* when she was only nineteen. It is a ghost story with few equals. In 1815 a volcano exploded in Tambora, Java. As the ash from the volcano spread around the world, there was a cooling effect on the climate. The year of 1816 was recorded as the year without a summer. Shelly, Mary, and Lord Byron went to Geneva for a bit of hiking. The weather, however, was so cold they decided to stay inside and to see who could write the scariest ghost story. Mary won the contest, hands down. She later went on to become a pioneer spokesperson for the feminist movement.

Scientific discoveries are, by in large, the product of creative imagination. The lives of two of the greatest scientists, Newton and Einstein, illustrate this point. When he was born, Newton was so small you could have held him in the palm of your hand. No one thought he would live let alone become a person of intellectual stature. When he went to school, Newton was smaller than all the other children. One day, when he was being physically abused by a schoolyard bully, he fought back and gave the bully a good thrashing. Newton's bulldog like tenacity not only proved useful in fighting but also in his scientific inquiries. Newton had a talent for focusing on a problem and "worrying" it until he had arrived at a solution. He would lock himself in his room

for weeks on end, hardly bothering to eat or sleep. Once he had formulated an answer to a problem, he was absolutely confident in his conclusions. He hated criticism by others who he regarded as his intellectual inferiors. Newton is best known for his Theory of Gravity and The Calculus. His theories stimulated the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century.

Einstein was no less a germinal thinker. He picked up the problems of physics where Newton had left off. Einstein was not considered to be a brilliant student when he was in school. Einstein's father once asked his son's teacher what he thought his son might be successful at in life. The teacher replied that it did not matter which profession he might choose. He was likely to fail at any of them. Einstein barely passed his university examinations. Though he desired a university teaching position, none was forthcoming. He had to settle for a clerical position at a patent office. While he was there, he worked on his Special Theory of Relativity, which revolutionized the world of physics. Newton had regarded space, time, and matter as separate realities. Einstein changed Newton's basic presuppositions. Time for Einstein was relative, changing with the velocity of an object through space. The only constant in the universe was the speed of light. Einstein had a feel for the universe. He once remarked, "to these elementary laws there leads no logical path, but only intuition." With his General Theory of Relativity, Einstein demonstrated that gravity was a result of the curvature of space created by heavy bodies, suns and planets. At the end of his life, Einstein was working on a Unified Field Theory (or a Theory of Everything). Today's physicists are still trying to unravel the same Gordian knot.

Storytelling and the Human Condition

Stories reveal universal themes in human character. For example, what do Macbeth, Benedict Arnold, and Richard Nixon all share in common? They were all filled with blind ambition, and they all experienced similar tragic fates. Macbeth listened to witches, accepting their lies as truths about his fortune. Benedict Arnold, whose name is synonymous with the word traitor, was one of Washington's best generals. However, he wanted to be on the winning side so he cast his lot with the British. Richard Nixon wanted his presidency to be recorded as one of the greatest in the history of the United States. In order that he would have a complete record of everything that went on in the Oval Office, he had secret tapes made of all the conversations. President Nixon did not really trust anyone. He saw himself as surrounded by enemies, and

he set out to destroy them. The whole Watergate episode reveals the truth of an old saying: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Nixon's machinations, in the end, proved his undoing.

A good story should always have a punch line. World War II produced two classic victories. Hitler committed suicide in his bunker as the Russians ransacked Berlin. The United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. Victory belonged to the Allies! Do you ever watch boxing? The fight for the heavy weight championship between Marciano and Walcott resulted in a classic knockout punch when Marciano caught Walcott with a right cross. Walcott went down like a sack of potatoes. The Spanish have a flare for the poetry of life. The bull fight, when there is a clean kill, is like a moment of truth, a catharsis. Everyone in the crowd is carried away by the emotions of the moment. The crucifixion of Jesus was another story of death in the afternoon. The Romans and the Jewish leaders thought they were finished with another rabble-rouser. They did not count on Jesus' resurrection, a triumph over death.

Story as Empowerment

Have you ever thought about changing your life? Perhaps what you need is to reframe your life story—the story you tell yourself and others. By repeating the same old story, day after day, we become stuck in a rut. Open your eyes, entertain a fresh possibility. My aunt Viola had a favorite story line: "No one ever had life as tough as I have." Her story went downhill from there. I once met a woman whose self-concept consisted of repeating the same confining metaphor: "I am just a little mouse and I hide in my little house." Talk about windmills of the mind! Another woman told me: "I am the girl whose sister was killed." When I asked her how long ago that had happened, she replied: "Oh, thirty years ago, when I was in high school." She had been clinging to the victim story for the past thirty years. The problem with casting yourself into the role of a victim is that it is very limiting. You have no potency of your own; you have to passively accept what life hands you. Nothing can change your life more than ending one career and starting a new one, finding a new mate, getting a dog, moving to a different city. All that is required is that we tell ourselves a different story.

Two things can bring a story to life quicker than anything else, children and animals. Once, when I was visiting the Dallas Zoo, I encountered a little boy who was standing next to the lion's cage, crying. I knelt down beside him to see if he was lost. Between sobs he told me a sad story. His name was Andy, and he had come to the zoo with his girlfriend, Valery (who was

standing close by), and her father. Before he had left home, his parents had given him five dollars and placed it in his wallet. They had gotten as far as the lion's cage when some older boys had come running by, snatched his wallet, and ran away. Valery's father had chased after the boys. I decided I had better stay with the children until Valery's father returned. After a short time the father came walking down the trail, empty handed. Andy really began to cry. Here was a five-year-old, mugged at the Dallas Zoo. I felt bad for Andy so I pulled out my wallet and offered him twenty dollars, saying: "You can buy a new wallet and put some money in it." Andy refused to take the money. I looked at Valery's father. He shook his head, not knowing either. The last time I saw Andy he was walking away with Valery and her father, still crying. Why wouldn't Andy take the money—let me fix up the mess? Andy had experienced one of life's rude awakenings—being ripped off by others. He had lost something near and dear to him, his innocents and his wallet. The body has its own primitive wisdom. Something inside of Andy was saying: "You need to grieve your losses. If you accept the money from the nice stranger, you will have

missed the real message of this experience."

Story as Parable

Finally, stories may reveal novel and surprising

truths. Do you remember the old eastern-western, Cong Fu? I watched every episode religiously. When Cong Fu was a still a novice at the monastery, he sought out the Master. He found him meditating at the frog pond. "Master," Cong Fu asked quietly, "why are you meditating so intently?" The Master raised his eyes and replied: "I was reflecting on the meaning of life, Grasshopper." "And what is the meaning of life?" Cong Fu asked. The Master lowered his eyes and remained silent for several minutes. "Life is an eternal struggle between two wolves, the white wolf and the gray wolf. The white wolf symbolizes the creative powers of the universe. The gray wolf represents the destructive forces that would undo it. The struggle between the two wolves is not confined to the world around us. It is also taking place inside of every person. The spiritual side of humanity is in constant conflict with its animal desires. Which one should we listen to: logic and light or greed and darkness? Every evening at dusk the two wolves circle one another at a clearing in the woods and begin their ritual dance, tearing at one another's flesh." Cong Fu pondered the Master's words for a long time. Eventually he asked: "But in the end, which wolf will be victorious?" The Master raised his eyes, giving Cong Fu a steely look: "Whichever one you feed, Grasshopper, whichever one you feed."