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CARETAKERS OF WARMTH AND WONDER:

Creative Storytelling in Schools Today

Just a few deeply felt words from a teacher will bring children into harmony with one other and with the natural world. When our fourth grade teacher told us tenderly about the bird's nest she had discovered on her way to school, I felt love and wonder in her whole being. After she spoke very simply to us while holding the little nest in her hands, each spelling word that she asked us to write felt to me a delicate and amazing thing, and my pencil and paper came alive with woodlands and birds. Many years later this memory continues to glow reverently within me. I am reminded of Maya Angelou's frequently quoted words: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" (LaNae, 2012). Today as families struggle to maintain heartfelt connections, expressions of genuine warmth and kindness become even more essential at school.

How can the 21st century storyteller bring more awareness and conscious choice into the fields of electronic communication? As virtual advertising and media networks burst into households and school communities to change so radically the culture of our daily lives, I often wonder, with Sherry Turkle (2015) and many others, how a diet of mechanized images and voices especially is affecting children. As we listen with storyteller's ears and all our faculties intact to our global human cliffhanger may we all become more aware amidst "the Internet of things" of the vast trove of immaterial wisdom that lives ever-present, free from electronic influences. Surely it is possible to slow down the virtual words that are rushing at our minds and finger-tips in today's

classrooms, and to feel deeply the tremendous vitality that lives within and beyond the world's great stories.

A lovely young woman and her handsome sweetheart, instead of looking at each other, are reaching for their iPhones. "Why?" I ask. "I don't know," they replied looking for a moment quite puzzled and lost. What exactly is happening to their sense of connection, to their I- am-aliveness, as they thumb their way through their *newsfeeds*? Or to parents as their bewildered, astonished babies finger and stare into the i-Pads built into their baby-carriers and toilet training potties? What neurological stressors are changing their brains? What is this "internet of things" that catches them into its ever more peculiarly and wildly brilliant worldwide web? Is this i-web aware of itself as it encroaches on centuries of teaching and parental love? Are new commitments to warmly informed closeness growing as a result?

I grew up in the United States with a variety of ethnic influences. New sensations and thoughts occurred to me through whatever language and culture I experienced--Celtic, French, Portuguese, Yiddish, Russian, Chinese. I imitated the voices I heard around me, as we all do, especially during vulnerable growth spurts. When I was fifteen years old, a sensitive time in my development, I won a little magenta radio by selling magazines. Unlike today's teenagers with their insistent cell phones and other electronic devices, I seldom listened to the radio; the television was in our parents' bedroom. But early one Saturday in spring as I was rearranging my room, I turned on the radio and was transformed as I listened for a few moments to a play by George Bernard Shaw, the great Irish playwright. My whole being expanded in this unexpected dawn shower of well-spoken English. As the impassioned voices streamed through me, it was not the content so much as the richly expressive dose of word music that deeply touched a wellspring in my soul. From then on I found myself often listening within and around me in a new way into the poetry of emotion and landscape. I spoke and wrote with new verve and phraseology. My boyfriend kept telephoning to say: "I

just want to hear your new voice.” As teachers, we can call on a new voice to expand warmth and wonder into our classrooms through the words of richly textured storytelling.

Teachers in Touch with the Wonder of Words

Beyond the clicking of electronic devices, how can we become more fully present caretakers of warmth and wonder, especially in the classroom? Many years of research have taught me that both children and teenagers long to listen to words that are spoken with integrity. They remember best the adults who share heartfelt personal stories because growing bodies and souls respond comfortably to fully embodied adults who are genuinely in touch with themselves and the words they speak. Young people intuitively sense the power of words to influence their wellbeing. Words can nourish them, and encourage good digestion. Running through blood and muscle, they can heal and awaken curiosity and joy, and powerfully sparkle and dance both teachers and students to life. Yet words can also erupt even many years later as nerve-based diseases and skin disorders. They can constrict stomach enzymes and produce heart trouble.

Whether spoken or written with care and consciousness, everyone benefits from narratives that are alive with well-formed sentences so that the grammar resonates in our bones, and the rhythmic music moves throughout our body and soul, warming and lifting our spirits to experience the immeasurable truth of which we are made.

Creative Ways to Read Aloud

Even if no one speaks great literature aloud at home, just a few moments of well-spoken story in classrooms can bring about astonishing benefits. Aside from the opening of hearts and souls, it can help children to discover their own resonant and responsive voices. Throughout the grades a reading-aloud club, or a

storytelling club that meets regularly can transform speaking and feeling and thinking with astonishing results. When I was teaching young children in the grades, at reading time the whole class imagined ourselves to be an inter-generational family reading together. We would sit in a big circle and I would pretend to be a grandmother with tired eyes. I would say, “Who is going to read to us today? Who wants to be the father and mother? Who is the oldest reading child in our family today? Who wants to pretend to be too young to read?” The children would light a candle, sometimes sit on each other’s laps, and take turns reading a whole story to one another. The more advanced children would help the others to sound out words. Sometimes they would ask “Grandmother” to explain a word for them. This helped us all to enjoy with warmth and affection the different reading abilities in the group and to minimize competitive anxiety. The playfully intimate and cooperative atmosphere increased confidence. Sometimes I encouraged the children to make something with their hands as they listened and waited for a turn to read. Knitting or modeling clay or wax without an assigned goal for these warming activities would increase their heartfelt attention and listening.

Recently I was reassured to discover two teenagers reading aloud to one other, finding their narrative voices in an art room. They were taking turns sharing a rich flow of words day by day in the afternoons as he slowly sanded a small harp for her, and she wove a beautiful strap for his guitar. Meeting in their free time during the afternoon to read a powerful novel and to create beautiful things for one other had become a profound ritual for them. Neither cell phones nor iPads were evident. Some of my happiest experiences in classrooms have combined storytelling and handwork, the teacher or an older child telling or reading a new installment of an eloquently alive story as the children create something wonderful with their hands for family or friends.

Well-spoken words, like music, encourage a resonant felt sense of wisdom and healing vitality. These days as more and more abbreviated styles of communication challenge the eloquence and

integrity of well-formed phrases and narratives, reading aloud can restore and awaken our humanity and even quietly bring about profound healing. I often remember a kindergarten teacher from South Africa that I was privileged to meet several years ago who had been so violently beaten by her husband that she had entirely lost her ability to speak. This beautiful woman had subsisted silently in a hospital for two years, sometimes helping out. At last a visiting physician gave her a volume of poems and plays by William Shakespeare, a dictionary, and a prescription to read every day. She knew very little English at the time, yet obediently began to read as best she could, and to look up the meaning and pronunciation of the words. Eventually in this strange new beautiful language, as she grew fascinated and sounded out the sonorous speeches from within an unaccustomed part of her soul and mind, her voice returned! She is a stellar example of how imaginative, creative, and artistic experiences can heal. Today she is protected from her former husband, as she takes hundreds of children into her caring protection. Now she sings and speaks in her native language, nurturing their sense of story and language, and also enjoys conversation in English with a Shakespearean flavor.

Report Cards as Healing Stories

After two decades of teaching often troubled students, I became fully convinced of the urgent need for courageous artistic expression at the heart of educational practices. Committed to developing my artistic abilities and to more fully meet transforming growing young people I trained to become a Waldorf teacher, since Waldorf Education is committed to arts integration at all levels (“Waldorf Education, n.d.). Eventually when I was teaching seven and eight-year-olds in the Waldorf School in Lexington, Massachusetts, by the end of our school year I wanted the adorable children in my class to be able to read their report cards aloud to their parents at home to start their summer

vacations. Inspired by Brien Masters (2008), a brilliantly artistic and creative British Waldorf teacher, I resolved that each of their report cards that went home would be alive and beautiful. It was a daunting yet delightful challenge to follow Masters' lead to contemplate children as color compositions. What were their predominant colors? I smoothed wet watercolor paper onto a board let myself choose two or three colors from a full spectrum of paint tubes. During early mornings on the weekends, I strove to sense each child with my whole heart as I brushed these colors onto the watery mirror of the paper. I would devote my imagination and aesthetic awareness to serve the true wellbeing of the child. From the interaction of the flowing watercolors, an image eventually and sometimes very quickly would spring up. As an image or two came more clearly into my view, I would begin to weave a little story. Back and forth I would move between drawing out the images in a painting and scribbling down an imaginative episode to mirror the child in the metaphorical language of story — perhaps about a kind warrior, or a princess in a storm, or a resourceful sailor. Qualities that I sensed developing in each child, their strengths and their challenges, became more clearly focused within me as these surprising stories emerged. Often they would seem to write themselves, as if the very souls of the children I was teaching at the time were close by to inspire this creative process, even though we may have been miles away from one another.

In addition to a palette of watercolors and pastels, I also discovered the pleasure of having an array of colored pencils to choose from as I wrote metaphorical stories and poems to mirror the children as usefully and wonderfully as possible to themselves. I used a pencil sharpener less as I discovered the meditative attention it takes to carefully pare a pencil to a smooth balanced point with a penknife. Concentrating, slowing my breathing, each subtle cut required a leisurely attitude from me that helped me to connect myself more deeply with each child. I began to collect the colorful pencil shavings of earthy hues, of airy pastels, of gorgeous fiery reds and oranges, and watery greens and blues. The loosened

bits of color stimulated my courage illuminating a title, or highlighting special words in a poem or story, and for blending and shading drawings. I was often amazed to discover myself gaining artistic skill and aesthetic awareness as I went along, with the goal of making the mundane beautiful. Although attention to the carving of pencil points has been going out of style as electric pencil sharpeners and other electrifying whin-digs whirr and click us into speedier viewpoints, there is nothing quite like forgetting those electronic mechanicals for a while to peacefully sharpen a few colored pencils while contemplating the accomplishments and supporting the creative potential of growing young people. On the reverse side of each painting, I copied out each little story with colored pencils, and then intuitively added finishing touches to the paintings. Eventually I rolled each one up as a scroll until they became a big basketful of “report cards” to present ceremoniously for the children to take home and share. Sometimes years later I heard how the children cherished these “report cards” from their earlier years, and kept them proudly on their walls or bedroom doors for months or years. For their parents I would write a different kind of report, intentionally describing a child’s progress in complete sentences instead of with numerical evaluations. Although all this took extra time and effort, painting, drawing and writing about each child felt worthwhile. The story of our whole year together felt more aesthetically complete.

As a classroom teacher, because my rational mind often was baffled by how to meet youngsters most helpfully, such artistic contemplative processes very often saved the day. Of all the ways I have grown as a K-12 and adult educator, they have proved to be the most helpful, allowing me to engage at the same time in intuitive artistic and more objective inquiry. Moments that are aesthetically alive also enable the children to receive what the teaching offered quite differently from when approached intellectually with facts, comparisons and judgments. Even when my creative efforts on their behalf did not particularly please me,

again and again I noticed with relief and fascination that they always seemed to positively impact the children.

Creating with Energies of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire

During all my years of teaching children and adults in the classroom, I often wrote and practiced poems and stories that expressed these very dynamic four elements, and found refreshment and courage from attuning to their elemental powers. I gratefully discovered that if I spoke a story that dramatized heat in imaginative pictures, a fiery episode could quickly reach and calm a fiery child: *“When Perronik had mounted the foal that knew the way to the Grail Castle, he had to pass through trees of flame and a lake full of dragons.”* Airy energies could lift us into magnificent heights and, bring us down to earth again through lightness of word music and imagination. Little poems would often evolve into whole stories.

*Wildflower sprite~
To seek the light
She wings too high
And turns pure white.*

*Her good friends frown:
“O haul her down.
Fasten her into
A flowery gown.
Tighten her shoes
Of leathery brown!”*

*Give her a crown
Of shining stones
And wise old bones.
To weigh her down.*

Soon parents wanted to connect more artistically with their children through enhanced listening and storytelling. To encourage this creative healing art at home too, I began to offer adult educational classes in color awareness, storytelling and story making. The vibrant momentum of earth, air, water and fire moved us adults into artistic expression attuned to the children's needs. These imaginative encounters with the four elements inspired within us courage and confidence for even very troubling situations. Picturing family problems in connection with archetypal story patterns often awakened astonishing new insights and hopefulness. Boundlessly dynamic healing dreaming occurred when supported by story making (Mellon, 1992, 2000, 2008). A warm current carried sailors past dangerous islands to safe and welcoming shores; stone statues in a spellbound castle were released to wiser life. The children learned to respond to the power of the elements too in their own story-making activities when I gave them such imaginative exercises as: Let your hero and heroine receive precious gifts from the water, the earth, the air and the fire, and return triumphantly to share these gifts throughout their realm. (Mellon, 1992, 2000, 2008).

Stirring Word Music: Rhythm and Tempo

Tempo and musical timbre and mood of word music wakes up the storyteller within. Even crowded bus rides and walks to school became opportunities to listen for just the word recipes for healing magic to happen in the classroom. Recently a tenth grade class listened like children as I told aloud one of the greatest of the fairy tales found in the collection of the Brothers' Grimm. As they took in the spell of tale entitled "The Queen Bee,"(Household Stories, p.262) it awoke their listening verve and their natural storytelling abilities. Afterwards they imagined for themselves an immobilized enchanted land where, through the power of respect and love, all come to life again. As the students wrote their own original stories

following the story structure of “The Queen Bee” and told them aloud to each other, the classroom came alive with wonderment and the natural moral wisdom that is the birthright of adolescents. Discussions followed about helping the natural world to thrive that were rich with heartfelt inquiry and wise metaphorical intelligence

I especially learned from Elizabeth Cook (1976), author of *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: The Language and Temper of Fabulous Storytelling* and Heinz Muller’s (2000) *Healing Forces in the Word and Its Rhythms*, how to match the flow of my words to the energy patterns that I sensed in classrooms and in individual young people. I loved to bring into our daily classroom activities staccato airy bibbity-bobbity-boo’s, fiery commanding verbs, flowing phlegmatic rhymes, and contemplative thoughtful phrases. Energetically and viscerally attuned breath and word music enhanced the imaginative landscapes and characters that turned up during well-planned and more spontaneous story times, and often served the learning needs of individual children. Even a story character’s spitting, or panting, I discovered could surprise an asthmatic or dozy child into a healthier, more relaxed breathing pattern and attention. For guidance, I read and re-read chapters on temperament and storytelling in Gudrun Davy and Bons Voors’ insightful collection of essays: *Lifeways: Working with Family Questions..*

I kept a notebook with me wherever I went to jot down phrases, images, and whole poems and tales that seemed relevant to what was going on for us in and around our classroom. A quickly cantering story poem about a wild horse would give a willful child pause for thought.

*...Your ears swivel to listen.
Your muzzle is soft as moss.
Your eyes have stars in their darkness.
How shall I be your boss?*

Or reciting rhythmic humor to start our morning would stir up livelier listening and singing :

Sail me. I'm not a barnacle.

I'm not a conch.

I'm the song boat your own voice can launch.

Time for Dream Sharing in School

Children's dreams need to be nurtured and protected especially today amidst humanity's shifting and rebalancing response to electronic networking,. Dream visions authentic to their own souls' purpose appear to be one more endangered species. Yet I foresee joyous powerful wisdom springing as our human story unfolds, and as electronics provide transformational mulch and fodder for more fully awakened inner life and personal relationships of every sort.

Chelsea Adams, a teacher at Wild Roots Preschool in California, recently was telling a story to her three-year-old daughter about Grandmother Spider who dances and sings as she weaves beautiful stories. Her daughter ran to her mother as she was waking up one morning. "Mama," she said. "I had a funny dream last night." "Oh?" inquired her mother, "and what did you dream?" "I dreamt there was a big spider in the middle of a web singing and dancing. Your cell phone fell onto the spider's web, and the spider danced on it, until it fell into the potty." "My daughter laughed and laughed," said Chelsea. Like this mother, I want to know how spider wisdom stimulated such joyous freedom in this child? A regular time for dream sharing at school is an invitation for joyous inner freedom of expression and closeness to evolve in the classroom. A child in one of my classes, the son of two Jungian psychotherapists, loved to recount his dreams to me and to his classmates. Thanks to him, we all decided together as a

class to make time for any one of us who wanted to share a dream to stand in front of the class during morning snack time. As we developed our little classroom dream sharing ritual, there were a few rules: during dream sharing time everyone had to listen respectfully, and the dream sharer could only say three um's and had to stand up straight and speak in whole sentences. I assured them that if they needed their teacher to be with them, they could invite me into their dreams. This ritual produced much delightful new confidence and respectful sharing. Sometimes the dreams held important significance for a child or for all of us.

Creative and Healing Transformation of Technological Plot-lines

In addition to dream sharing, I encourage children to invent new stories by transforming popular computer plot lines. My shocked enthusiasm for such projects began one morning in a computer store a few years ago as I watched a beautiful young mother gazing around as if transported spell-bound to another world, while meanwhile in her arms her baby held in both his little hands an i-pad upon which he was vigorously suckling. During several more stunned moments I observed a boy of about five years old standing nearby, with a very dark cloud of rage visible over his head. His sister who was seated nearby quickly returned to the game she was playing after explaining to me that the game he was playing was about some furious mechanical birds —“his favorite.” As an experienced teacher and psychotherapist, I saw that the boy was suffering a destructive, abusive adult techno-war game that he was unable to win. The mother, occupied with her own computer concerns, seemed oblivious to both of her children. Soon after I returned home my creative self that loves to nurture children began to write a story:

Once there was a little bird that dwelt in a robot hanger

with other birds that had been enchanted and turned into drones. But this amazing little bird heard wondrous music playing somewhere in a different place. It felt a longing to make music too instead of being endlessly lined up with others on an attack mission. As it wondered how to break free, the shadow bird did not yet know that it was missing its soft feathers and loving heart.

So began the bird's adventures, and mine too. I soon began to offer imaginative storytelling and story-making workshops to collaborate with parents, teachers and whoever else is seeking release from excessive, addictive computer use. A number of exercises began to occur to me to help others to identify their own concerns about excessive and inappropriate use of computers, similar to those I had evolved over many years of working with storytelling as a healing art in classrooms and family life. I thought of a child who had recently complained to his mother: "The computer has gotten into my soul!" Are the souls of all children searching today for ways to ground and restore themselves, like the young people do with such profound joy in Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic, *The Secret Garden*? What if attendees were invited to work in small groups to make up a story about children who together find a way to bring themselves and their parents out of the spell of their computers for different kinds of adventures together out in the natural world?

Stephen Spitalny (2015), an experienced Kindergarten teacher, includes a simple straightforward story his group made up in his newest book, *What's the Story?* Through storytelling, Spitalny encourages children to envision techno-spells they encounter as a part of a much larger human story. Like Turkle, he sees "the enchantment of technology" as "an obstacle to connection," and asserts: "Real connection is a human need. Perhaps nature can help break the spell and we can use those silver boxes as tools rather than be under their spell 24/7" (p. 27-9).

Can imaginative stories help children to discover well-grounded refreshing new balance and clarity around electronic devices? My own story continued to write itself:

The little mechanical shadow bird decided to dive deeper into the game it was in until it came to the very edge of the computer. Many targets were destroyed while this shadow bird watched a moment and then dove out, and landed in a shadowy heap on the floor at the feet of a young violinist. At first she did not notice, nor did her long-eared pet rabbit. The shadow bird lifted up and down in the sounds she was making came to rest in a long musical pause...

As I join my voice with gathering voices of those who are informed to protect and inspire young people, I recently was moved to offer a workshop entitled: *The Digital Dilemma and the Storyteller*. I sought to address the following questions: *How can the storytelling within you create bridges from chilly, virtual reality into warm, living imagination? What plot lines can enliven our relationship with ourselves and each other as we experience the communication revolution? How can you rediscover your imagination and voice as wholesome balance for keyboarding and screens?"* This workshop was unusually well- attended by a room full of concerned fathers who were there because of their love for their vulnerable little children. During the workshop we played with various plot lines, such as *The Secret Garden*, and *The Emperor's Nightingale*, even the most reluctant of these concerned fathers collaborated willingly to create stories to bring themselves and their children in and out of the spells of their various household devices. Amidst the fascination and joy of these fathers at the vistas that opened for them during this process, a mother wept; reluctantly she told us of her hopeless frustration with their family life because of the addictive use of technology.

As I listen with wonder into the skirmishes and battles in the vast new mythic EMF fields of techno-creativity, Hippocrates' voice resounds with majestic authority in every classroom: "*Primum non nocere*. First do no harm." I am learning how to welcome Hippocrates into the unique darkness that is being cast by the tech-revolution and to work with all senses and faculties awake to bring its shadows to greater light, at home and at school. I listen for the voice of Hippocrates saying: "Wherever the art of Medicine is loved, there is also a love of Humanity." With the process of cultivating storytelling in the classroom, electronic inventions become handy tools to be used with care and respectfully put away again, with ample time for observing the lives of genuine birds in their natural habitats, and for responding to their songs with music of our own.

Join the Fully Embodied World Storytelling Renaissance

These days as more and more chaotic virtual communications complicate our human story, the dignity and organization of well-formed narratives in world literature call to us as never before. Different from watching a film or surfing the Internet, well-structured words and stories nourish healthy awareness, especially when spoken aloud in the here and now.

The National Storytelling Network provides extensive support for teachers who want to bring about multicultural storytelling in their classrooms and school communities ("Connection People," n.d.). Young people often pick up the timbre and meaning of life freely through the stories of unfamiliar cultures to expand their souls and vocabulary of life. The storyteller within us all learns to speak warmly in the here and now with faculties intact, including ingenuity, rich imagination, and courageous kindness of heart. I hope every teacher and child therapist is participating in the fully embodied world storytelling renaissance. All children are invited to participate on their own two feet; it is theirs to discover. As

computers both make and break our collaborative communal awareness, tasking us all with a quest that presents many obstacles, distractions, and paths leading to robot hangars and candy-covered cottages, may we remember the heart-felt healing power of imagination and well-spoken words. Teachers, administrators and children together are invited to bring about every day a genuinely mindful, well-grounded and humanely evolving global story

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