

## STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a unique art that has been going on for thousands and thousands of years and still is popular. People have told stories in small groups like families, picnics, and clubs. They also have storytelling Olympics and other big events. Storytelling has even become a valued profession.

The first National Storytelling Festival was in October in the year 1973. It took place in Jonesborough, Tennessee. It was small, but something happened that October weekend that has changed forever our culture and the traditional art form of storytelling. The **National Storytelling Festival** was created by Jimmy Neil Smith. His inspiration was a well-told story that he had heard over a car radio. This first festival sparked a rebirth of storytelling that is, even today, continuing to sweep the world. Storytelling organizations, festivals, and educational events thrive now around the globe. The autumn festival, held under colorful circus tents scattered throughout Jonesborough, now attracts over 10,000 visitors.

There are many opinions of what the definition of storytelling is. Longtime teacher/storyteller, Muriel Horowitz mentions: "My experience as a teacher is that this art form really appeals to people of all ages...the listeners actually become part of the story in a way...Writing is especially improved when children have a chance to hear and engage in storytelling." Furthermore, well-known storytellers, the Double Deckers comment: "Stories are Magic. The storyteller takes you away from where you are, what you are doing, and what is bothering you. They take you on a journey, and bring you home safely. Storytelling is a joint activity of both the storyteller and the listener. Unless the listener helps by 'seeing' the images, there is no story. Everyone remembers the story, very few remember a lecture."

Judy Farrow-Busack is a professional storyteller who lives in West Bend, Wisconsin. You can tell how much she loves what she does. She mentions, "Storytelling is where I live. I learn about myself and the world with the stories I hear and tell".

Also, Louisiana born storyteller, now living in Naples, Florida, Cheryl Floyd remarks: "Storytelling is a link between the storyteller and the listener. Whether it is the story that connects us with our heritage or links us to another culture, story can be the bridge that unites. Through story, we can find a common ground, a place of laughter, tears or peace and comfort."

Storytelling can be done alone or with props and other extras. Author & Storyteller Kendall Haven believes: “Props are pluses and minuses. You have to add them up.” Kendall mentions that there are more minuses than pluses. “Some of the minuses are: 1. Gathering props is time-consuming. 2. Listeners don’t always need props because they have their imagination. 3. It seems as if listeners’ props are always ‘wrong’. I think that props are relatively bad ideas.” (69) Props can add to your story, keep your audience interested and make you feel more at ease. On the other hand, some believe that props can also remind you of the order of the story (Dubrovian 123). They can also be good visual aids. For example, if the story is about a boa constrictor named Cricor who forms letters and numbers it might be helpful to have a 6 ft. stuffed snake to demonstrate.

Storyteller and web designer, Margie Sejbl, agrees with Albert Einstein. “Imagination is more important than intelligence”. She feels that it takes more imaginative skills to listen to stories that don’t have songs, dances, costumes, or props. However, she believes that due to the effect of television, children have become used to more animated characters.

Some storytellers especially like using props when working with children. Tale spinner and librarian Karen Wendt states, “I get a lot of positive responses from audiences when I invite children up to help with a story by using props or puppets”.

Storyteller and grandmother extraordinaire, Karen Zethmayr tells me: “Props can make or break a story...relating to a ‘thing’ you have in hand can help your own nervousness and be a bridge for the audience...they can help kids understand concepts they have had no experience with...also, they can help bridge the gap between different peoples.” She thinks props are essential. On the other hand, well-respected storyteller, Sandi Sylver, feels just the opposite: “Personally, props aren’t important...there are many tellers who use props effectively. I think it’s up to each teller’s personal style.”

Another area of storytelling technique is vocal dynamics. One storytelling professional is Rob McCabe who states: “My voice usually changes from character to character to narrator (who is a different voice all together). One of my friends says she can easily decipher when I’m a different character by hearing my voice shift.” In addition, Reid Miller gives his point of view. “The voice is for speaking, sharing feelings, and making sounds that help the audience understand the story...The voice needs to be relaxed and natural. Drinking lots of water is a good idea too.”

Another teller, Gwyn Calvetti, reflects on her own vocal characterizations. She says that her voices tend to come out of her personal experiences that might relate to the story. Still, she would love the opportunity to spend time with a voice coach.

A picture is worth a thousand words. So it can be with our facial expression and body language. Famous author, Annette Simmons writes: “Your posture communicates an emotional state (92). You can increase or decrease the intimacy of your story by choosing how closely you stand, how much you lean forward, and how relaxed or formal your body seems (94).” Well-known author and storyteller, Kevin Cordi, discussed with me this: “A story comes alive when a face is alive...Every face tells a story.” Author Kendall Haven says in his book: “Gestures add a lot of energy into the story. They also make the teller look more confident. Gestures mean movement by hand, body, and face intended to provide information for the audience. Gestures communicate efficiently & effectively (67).”

There are many genres of storytelling. Folktales usually involve animals that sometimes act like people. Most of them live in a marvelous place that may include magical things. A lot of these stories want to teach a lesson to the listeners. Sometimes they have the desire to explain something artistically and imaginatively (Scholastic online ¶1). A lot of folktales are told over and over again, being passed on from parents to their children and from these children to the next generation, and so on.

Folktales as we know them nowadays are from all around the globe. Every single culture you could imagine has its own folktale. “Even though they come from all over the world they usually emphasize some value such as honesty that is common to all cultures.” (Searingtown ¶3)

There are many elements of folktales. Frequently, the youngest and/or smallest sibling succeeds after the older people in the family continue to fail and many wishes are granted. A lot of times, you see magical objects as props, animals have the ability to talk, and the stories include monsters and trickery. Many times, you notice that the number three is significant, they may use many objects and often a poor person becomes rich (Kennedy Center ¶2).

Care should be taken when telling folktales that imply negative stereotypes of minority groups and where there is too much violence. Folktales that mention women in a sexist way might be retold from the woman’s point of view. Nonracist descriptions of the characters are also a good idea. Solutions to a problem can be deciphered without violence (Norfolk 16-17).

Pourquoi tales are another type of storytelling. The word Pourquoi is French for “why”. Long before people had the scientific explanations for natural phenomena around them, they used to rely on stories. Stories helped them understand better the world around them. (Education Place ¶2)

Storytellers Weiss and Hamilton mention, “Many Pourquoi tales certainly must have been made up because a child asked a question like, ‘Why is the sea salty?’ People throughout the world have always enjoyed whimsical answers. Even after we learn the scientific answer to such a question, the stories still appeal to us because they speak to a different side of our brain.” (10)

Some examples of African Pourquoi stories are “Why the Zebra Has Stripes”, “Why the Flamingo Stands on One Leg”, and “Why the Leopard Has Spots”. Native American examples might explain the origin of thunder, lightning and rainbows. The late, Verna Aardema specialized in these types of stories. The famous “Just So: stories by Rudyard Kipling are also examples of famous Pourquoi tales. (OPB NTTI ¶?)

Fables come from the spoken tradition of storytelling found in folklore in all parts of the world. After many years fables were finally written down. Fables are a special genre of stories that usually teaches a lesson. It usually has animal characters that represent human qualities. These stories are told again and again. In the process of retelling them, they change into different versions (Kennedy Center ¶ 5-9). Well-known author Annette Simmons states, “The myths and fables that have lasted for thousands of years have lasted because people connect with them at a personal level”. (117)

Aesop’s Fables are light and fun, which make them particularly appealing to children. Even though they were originally written in verse in the second century A.D., what most of us read today are different prose versions. (Penguin Readers ¶ 2) Aesop was a Black storyteller who lived in Ancient Greece. Some people say that he was brought from Africa as a slave. Due to being a ‘minority’, he was not able to express himself openly. Respected storyteller Heather Forest explains that Aesop, “powerfully commented upon human nature and the society around him through his metaphorical fables and stories. Aesop’s storytelling earned him his freedom and he rose to great renown and respect in his time”. (Holt and Mooney 168)

In conclusion, storytelling is still a unique art after all these years. There are many interesting genres of stories used throughout history. There is no right or wrong way to tell stories. The techniques and styles are endless. Storytelling is fun for all ages and I hope it continues to be valued for the rest of eternity.

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