

The Healing Power of Story Language

~ Susan Perrow

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As a respectful way to begin this conference in Spring Valley, I wish to pay tribute to the indigenous people who once lived on this land. It is a traditional practice to do this in my own country, Australia. I also want to honor the stories that have been told here and all across the North American continent for thousands of years. Then to carry this further, I want to acknowledge the cultural stories and folk and fairy tales from all over the world that together we bring with us as a foundation for this wonderful, rich topic of “The Healing Power of Story Language.”

Tonight I will look at story language in a broad way, beginning with some examples. Then I plan to dance with and explore the questions: “What is the imagination?” and “How can we strengthen and nourish our imaginations so we can readily use story language with the children in our care?”

Story or picture language can be as simple as a single word or phrase in a sentence. A trip to the dentist for my son to have a tooth filled proved this. The dentist said to my son, “You need to have a silver star put in your tooth to keep it strong.” The previously reluctant child widely opened his mouth to receive the “silver star” (despite the warning added by the dentist that it would hurt a bit). This was my first introduction to how powerful picture language can be. In the kindergarten at tidy-up time, we do not say to “clean up” but to “take things to their homes.” When teaching children to do up their shoes we may talk about butterfly wings when making the bow. A Chinese parent in one of my online courses encourages her seven-year-old to be a “lightning rod” whenever she is feeling angry (feet together and arms stretched up high). This has brought a new stillness to a usually aggressive and destructive time.

Such picture language can be extended into verse and song with repetition, rhythm, and rhyme. Some

examples: “Here is the boat, the golden boat, that sails o’er the silvery sea . . .” “Slowly, slowly, creeps the snail, all along the garden trail . . .” We can even have language to support the pictures that have no meaning but give a sense of movement or humor: “Hickory, dickory, dock”; “Humpty Dumpty.”

Therapeutic stories are examples of a more formed and complex use of story language. Early in my teaching and writing career I experienced an immediate need for a therapeutic story. One morning a four-and-a-half year-old boy, who was usually very settled in his play, arrived in a whirl. The night before the family’s house had burned half-way down—the family had escaped in time but stood in the garden watching the destruction until the fire engines arrived to put out the fire. The mother explained to the boy that they had insurance to cover the loss; they would be able to rebuild and all would be well again. The mother had thought the child would understand, but he was not consoled—she had been talking to him in a rational adult way. That day, before home time, I came up with a storied explanation. I told a story of a mother rabbit and her bunnies who lived in a burrow in the middle of a grassy field. The bunnies loved to run and play in the long green grass. The mother had to leave her bunnies for a brief while and went away. When she returned, she saw that a fire had burned the grass. She wondered if her bunnies were all right. She found them safe asleep in their burrow. She climbed in with them, and they all slept a long time. When they awoke and looked out, they could already see little green shoots beginning to grow again. They watched and waited until soon the green grassy playground was back to how it was before the fire.

When the child heard the story, he asked if I could please tell it again the next day. Then, when his mother arrived, he ran to her and said, “Mummy, everything is going to be all right!”

Another example concerns a six-year-old boy in a mainstream school who would not write the letters

in class but only wanted to draw pictures. The teacher shamed him, and he was so upset that he broke the pencil. The teacher put him outside the room and called his parents. His mother was attending my therapeutic story seminar that weekend and wrote a story which she then took to the teacher. The story was read to the whole class. The story told of a broken pencil that, when it was mended, had a special song it liked to sing when it was used to write letters (the story included the song). This transformed the child's attitude. When the child came home from school that day, he wrote a beautiful letter "A" and asked if his mother could hear the pencil singing—then he sang the song for her.

Now for a light-hearted example. A three-year-old girl refused to sit at the table when I was invited for an afternoon tea party. The mother was distressed and embarrassed by the child's lack of cooperation. The mother tried reasoning with the child but to no effect, then looked to me for help. I cupped my hand to my ear and said that I had just heard that the table was inviting everyone to a party. I named all the items on the table—cups, plates, flowers, cake, biscuits, fruit, etc. But the table was sure that one friend was missing. By this time the child had stood up from her place of refusal and was patting her chest to show that she was the missing friend. Then she sat at the table to join the party.

Communicating with children in "their" language is an important way to ensure that children can have a full childhood. Of course, I am not meaning "baby talk" here—I am referring to the language of story, the language of song and rhyme, the language of the imagination - this is the natural language of childhood.

Margo Sunderland, the Director of the Centre for Child Mental Health in London, is passionate about story language. She sees this as an important but under-used therapeutic modality. She claims that story is the language of young children and that literal rational language is often sensorially too dry—like "dead little words" to them. Of course, there are certain things that need straightforward language: "Turn off the water quickly—it is too hot"; "hold hands as we cross the road." But there are many times when, by using the language of the imagination, we are doing children a great favor—we are reaching into their world instead of expecting them to stretch up to our adult world!

Another wonderful "imagination" project is happening in Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, led by Dr. Kieran Egan. With funding from the Canadian government, he has established a research school to develop story-centered curricula for children in British Columbian preschools and schools. He understands from his research that the imagination is the most effective way to reach and teach children.

Slowly we are finding our way back to imagination. Dr. Albert Einstein, more than 90 years ago, understood the balance between imagination and rational thought when he famously stated, "Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere."

Waldorf has had this wisdom for almost one hundred years. In *A Modern Art of Education*, Rudolf Steiner describes graphically the imbalance of teaching intellectualized concepts without using imaginative "living pictures"—he gives us the image of someone with a plate of fish in front of him, cutting away the flesh and consuming the bones! (pp. 139-40.)



What is the imagination? Dictionaries give main definitions such as: "the faculty of forming mental images of what is not actually present to the senses; the ability to imagine things that are not real; the ability to think of new things." However, these are quite limiting and "dry." They speak conceptually of something that is not conceptual. If we want to understand a butterfly, we really have to move and dance with it, not capture it in a net.

From different cultural and poetic viewpoints, I want to dance with this question. I have been fortunate to travel widely since my books have been translated into many languages. I have been in Africa and Asia. I have had time to soak in some different cultural understandings and have found a deep reverence in each country and culture for story and the imagination.

During three years working in East Africa, often when I would meet someone new and tell them that I wrote stories, the Kiswahili response would be: *mawazo ni mwanga katika usiku*—imagination is a light in the night. Or *hadithi mwanga usiku*—stories light the night. In Southern Africa, the San people (Bushmen) have no word for imagination. For them "story" is all-encompassing. They have a saying: "A story is like the wind. It comes from a far off place

and you feel it.” They would “story” their children on long treks across the desert and savannah—no literal and rational talk (just another thousand steps – let’s count! or a promise of a treat when we get there!). The Bushmen would carry the walk through the imagination—there would be stories of that rock, this bush, the clouds, the lizard and more! Story is so important to this culture that it has been documented with incarcerated Bushmen that they have wasted away mainly because they have missed their connection to story.

Similarly, in my country, Australia, “story” in indigenous culture embraces everything—connectedness, all life, nature and community. It goes back thousands of years to the Dream Time, which is the aboriginal understanding of the world, its creation and its stories.

In China, when I have posed the question in my seminars, “What is imagination?” the common reply has been that in Chinese culture it is difficult to define but could most fittingly be compared to the TAO, the invisible force behind all things; stillness and movement; the balance of all things; the heart force of nature. “After all, if trees and flowers could talk they would speak in stories,” one participant commented. Another, who had studied ancient Chinese painting, spoke of the empty spaces in each painting. He believed that the blank spaces were left for the imagination.



Crossing now to our English culture, there are many arts from which we can draw to explore this question. But in the time constraints of this talk, I want to come to this specifically through poetry. Poets through the ages have worked to elevate the importance of imagination over logic, and have deeply respected the sacredness of image and metaphor.

Many years ago, in my quest for a poetic understanding of the imagination, I made an exciting discovery. It shone out of an essay on “Matter, Imagination and Spirit” by the English poet and philosopher Owen Barfield. In his writings, Barfield depicts two realities—the spiritual and the physical, the “hidden” and the “everyday.” But he gives motivation to us as adults, for he suggests a bridge between the two, a way of traveling from one to the other. This bridge or connection between matter and the spirit is the “imagination”—beautifully depicted as a rainbow bridge of imaginative activity. This is

the realm of the story, the realm of metaphor, the realm of symbol.

With this in mind, let us now look at the question: Why does story language (story, poetry and song) seem to be such a natural language for children? In light of Barfield’s ideas, the answer seems quite simple. It is because children have only recently crossed the rainbow bridge. For them this imaginative world is so near, is so real.

When one of my sons was asked at the age of six, “Why do you like fairy tales?” his answer was “Because they think about what I think about.” This childlike wisdom has helped build another link in my chain of understanding of the imagination—for a child the imaginative and spirit world could be as real as the physical everyday world, and children seem to have the ability to cross back and forth like butterflies.

The poet William Wordsworth, in his “Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” captures beautifully how close our little children are to the spiritual world—“ . . . trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home. Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” He laments this loss of connection to spirit as we grow older—“at length the man perceives it die away, and fade into the light of common day.”

Imagination is an interesting phenomenon. In human development, we mostly grow stronger physically, socially and mentally, but often weaker in connection to the spirit, weaker in our imagination. Most adults have to work hard to keep their imaginations flowering—they have to tend their imaginative gardens. Children have this naturally but for many of us our connection has faded.

Wordsworth’s poetic lament seems related to this phenomenon. Something splendid fades, something vastly wondrous shrinks. This is the challenge for us as teachers: how do we re-develop, re-nourish, and re-strengthen our imaginations so that we can work with children using the language most familiar to them?



As a long-time student of anthroposophy, I have been particularly interested in Steiner’s thoughts on developing the organs of spiritual perception—Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition, the three “I”s (spelled with a capital “I”). But I can openly confess I have not achieved these lofty stages of development! As Steiner himself has warned us, it is a long, hard, arduous task.

However, while we plod slowly along this path, I think it is important to be aware of and honor what I am going to refer to as the little “i”s – the imagination, inspiration, and intuition belonging to our everyday life, to our everyday humanness. We sometimes get a sensing from somewhere. Sometimes we feel that something greater is working through us. Sometimes we receive gifts, grace from the spiritual world. We sometimes even say, “An inspiration has come to me!”

I am sure that the big “I”s and little “i”s are connected, but from my personal experience this broader awareness has given me creative courage to write my stories.

Here are some personal examples, beginning with some experiences of the little “i” of intuition. One goes back 30 years—before the founding of our Steiner school in Byron Bay. A little voice “told” me to go outside and retrieve a registration package for the starting of the school. I had tossed it into the recycle bin because it looked as though the founding of the school was not going to happen. Getting those papers out of the recycle (minutes before it was emptied) was life-changing for the school’s future, as they gave access to a higher funding category. Today, in my story writing, I have had several “intuitive” gifts that have helped with writing some of my stories for trauma—for example, *The Rose and the Thorn* for the Norwegian tragedy and *The Flowered Kimono* for post-tsunami Japanese families.

We have probably all had personal experiences of being touched by the little “i” of inspiration—watching a sunset, walking in nature, looking at a great work of art, reading a poem. Such experiences have inspired much of my writing. Nature and the arts have been an inspiration in all cultures throughout history. In his autobiography *And There Was Light*, Jacques Lusseyran wrote that when he was imprisoned in Buchenwald during World War 2, poetry was one of the rare things that prevailed over cold and hatred. Poetry tied earth back to heaven; linked the real and the impossible; inspired courage against all odds.

As for the little “i” of imagination, this can penetrate and enrich our daily life and work in so many ways, with children (as per the examples given at the beginning of my talk) but also with adults. Susan Laing is an Australian artist and psychologist who effectively uses imaginative language in her work with her clients. Recently she counseled a woman

who had been grieving for six months over having had to have a C-section. She asked her; “If you were trapped in a room with the door stuck, what would you do?” As the woman answered, “Of course, climb out the window.” She smiled and her grief dissipated.

A doctor friend of mine keeps a collection of figurines on a tray on his desk (people, animals, trees, fairy tale characters). They are a point of lateral reference for his patients to start connecting with their own unique condition in a metaphoric, imaginative way.

Many cultures talk quite freely in pictorial, imaginative language. In Kenya, wise sayings are written into kikoyos (sarongs). One of my favorites, that was often helpful at a school meeting when the agenda seemed off track, was “It’s no good polishing the floor if the roof is leaking.”

I encourage you to share and write down your own experiences of the three little “i”s. You may be surprised to find, like I have, that they shine their sparks of light into our everyday life more often than we may have realized.

However, even though these little “i” gifts sometimes light up our lives, how can we nourish and strengthen them? Particularly with our “imagination,” how can we find ways to let it shine brighter and more often?

I would like to finish with seven tips that may help:

Read. Read many children’s stories. Immerse yourself in the images of folk and fairy tales.

Listen. Let Mother Nature speak to you. Nature has so much to share. Walk in a forest, on a beach, in the park. Sit in a garden or on a balcony amongst the potted plants.

Observe. Ideas for metaphors for stories can come from the most unusual places, such as a dust pan and brush as a metaphor for cooperation. It is surprising what we can pick up through observation. Observation can also help to inform our stories: How does a wombat carry her baby? How does a snake shed its skin?

Walk. Poets and philosophers have attested to how walking can loosen our thinking. Bruce Chapman was a traveler from the last century. He walked across Australia and up South America. He believed that if you walk enough you do not need religion. There is much potential in walking.

Play with story motives. Use story cards (see attached chart) and randomly pick two and use these

to craft a story. Almost every story has a beginning (introduces the problem), a middle (wrangles with the problem) and an end (problem resolved). The random approach can help your imagination to flutter and fly.

Give it time. Sometimes we need to sleep and dream and sleep some more.

Give it a go (an Aussie saying). When you have created a story or game or song or rhyme, use it with the children. Strive for it to be as polished as possible, but accept that nothing is ever perfect. Be encouraged by the lyric from Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem”: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Working with these pointers can help us with writing therapeutic stories. However, this genre of writing is not about recipes, it is not like a cooking class. In my books you will find a framework that has helped me—working with “metaphor,” “journey,” and “resolution.” But most of the effort has to come from you—playing, exploring, trying and re-trying, using your three little “i”s, slowly plodding along the path of the lofty “I”s!

There are so many circumstances and situations today with children that can be helped with a uniquely crafted story using a particular imaginative journey and specifically chosen metaphors. I believe it is our task as teachers today to take up this challenge, and even if our writings may only be a “stammer” compared to the beauty and depth of a fairy tale, I encourage you to “stammer” away.

Editor’s Note: You can use the following collection of words (“motives” or “prompts”) to help you create stories in a variety of ways. You might meditate upon the collection while considering a particular issue you wish to address, choosing a few elements that seem to provide meaningful metaphors upon which to build. Or you might choose three disparate elements and meditate upon how they connect into a meaningful tale. Or, as you are working on a story, you might refer to the collection of words for inspiration when you get “stuck.” The elements are all iconic, familiar fairy tale motifs—you should also add words of your own. ♦

MOTIVES FOR STORY WRITING

(a small selection for random story making exercises—add more squares for your own ideas)

TREE	BELL	DOOR	PRINCE	HORSE	TEAPOT	ROPE	FLOWER
SPADE	FEATHER	CAT	MOON	POT	BEE	CAVE	CHAIR
BEAR	PATH	KEY	WAND	STICK	GRAND-FATHER	NECKLACE	GRAND-MOTHER
STONE	GOLD	HUT	FARMER	HAT	RING	GLOVES	DOLPHIN
CRYSTAL	BAMBOO	SHOE	BOY	SILVER	SHELL	PEARL	MIRROR
GIRL	TREE	BUTTERFLY	TURTLE	RABBIT	DRUM	STAR	CASTLE
COAT	PRINCESS	BIRD	RIVER	FROG	ELEPHANT	KING	MOUNTAIN
FISH	TABLE	FOX	BOAT	LION	DANCER	QUEEN	CLOCK
BEACH	GARDEN	FIREFLY	ANT	NEST	KANGAROO	SUN	WALL

Susan Perrow is a writer and consultant who works with teachers, parents, and therapists, and runs seminars on therapeutic story-writing and storytelling worldwide. Her travels take her from China to Africa, Europe to America, and across her own sun-drenched land of Australia. Her publications include *Therapeutic Storytelling* (Hawthorn Press 2012) and *Healing Stories for Challenging Behaviour* (Hawthorn Press 2008).

Resources:

- IERG: the Imagination in Education and Research Group, www.ierg.ca
- Susan Laing, *Conscious Creative Courageous Living with Children*, www.creativelivingwithchildren.com
- Jacques Lusseyran, *And There Was Light* (Sandpoint, ID: Morning Light Press, 2000)
- Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education* (Great Barrington: Steiner Books, 2004)
- Margot Sunderland, *Using Storytelling as a Therapeutic Tool with Children* (Abington, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2001)

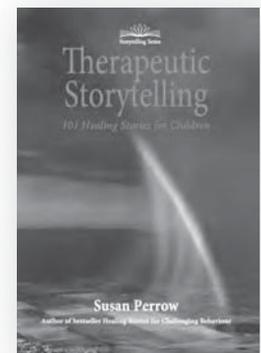
Healing Stories for Challenging Behaviour

Discover the power of healing stories with Susan Perrow. Explore how stories can help to shift out-of-balance behaviour, find the right story for your situation, and learn how to create your own stories, or adapt others to suit. Includes 80 stories, and detailed explorations of therapeutic storytelling as a method.



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