

The Art of the Protection Story: An Introduction

~ Suzanne Down

We, dear friends, who have a love for stories and visual puppet shows, know they can be a healing gift for the children. However, children and their parents have become increasingly overwhelmed and anxious in a very unpredictable world. Deep and rhythmic breathing, the basis for our inner balance and equilibrium, has become endangered. This “shallow breath” epidemic threatens every child’s ability to know the world as a good and safe place.

We can help by telling children stories that intentionally bring back a sense that “all is well in the world.” I have been developing stories for many years that specifically hold children in metaphorical “mother’s arms,” and recently collected some of them in my forthcoming book, *Protection Stories for Young Children*.

This story direction began for me when people started asking me to suggest a healing story after 9/11. They asked again after Katrina; after the great tsunami that devastated Japan; after each instance of the continual violence in this country and after each mass shooting. I increasingly thought, all children need stories that will make them feel safe, that will surround them with story pictures like layered, gently protective sheaths. These stories would give each listening child extra “skins” through which to meet the world of today.

We tell healthy stories all the time, but we can make our intention more conscious. A deeper understanding will guide us in how we hold this kind of story inwardly, how we speak it aloud, and how we reveal it through visual images in puppetry.

For instance, “Mama Bird is making a nest. She carefully weaves in twig and moss, grass and leaf. She is wise in her creation of a home for her baby birds that will withstand wind and rains. The nest is nestled on a sturdy branch up high in a tree, hidden safely by leaves. If she is lucky she has found some thistledown

or sheep’s wool to make the nest soft and warm.”

You see, layer after layer of protective story sheathing is already established, even before the little tale begins. Then Mama Bird sits on the nest, the warmth of her plumped up feathers along with her wings warming the eggs, and later the wee baby birds, like a blanket.

“Mama Bird sings a sweet melody. The warm rays of the golden sunset and a gentle rustling of a breeze through the leaves say, ‘shhhhhh, shhhhhh, time to sleep little ones.’”

This adds further picture layers and offers a soothing quality. Our own observations of the listening children will tell us what is needed. The children’s breathing becomes rhythmical and deep. All is well in the world.

We can create specific protection tales, and we can also rethink some of our favorite or traditional stories to make them more therapeutic. When we see tenderness and vulnerability in the children, or when the hardening of their inner lives arises as the fast pace and intellectuality of the adult world presses in, we can look for stories that incorporate “shelter”: a sturdy and safe home. Old favorites like “The Mitten,” “The Little Clay Pot,” or any number of folk tales tell about animals who, one by one, share a cozy home.

But what of the traditional ending of such stories? A bear comes along and sneezes, sending the cozy, reliable home for all asunder! From the viewpoint of a protection story, we can re-picture the ending image to be something stable and wonderful. Something like this: Rumbly Bumbly the Bear comes along and tries to push his way into the mitten. In the chaos, a Bee ends up on Bear’s nose. Instead of making Bear sneeze, which sends all the animals up in the air and out of their warm shelter, imagine Bee telling Bear, “Follow me, I know where there is a hollow tree full

of honey!” Bear follows Bee to a feast, yum, yum! There is also a hollow log on the ground by the honey tree, covered with soft moss, where Bear curls up for this winter sleep.

You see where I am going. Bee returns to the “mitten” or “clay pot” with his friends. Order is intact in their beloved home, and friend Bear is happy with much more than he had hoped for.

Harmony reigns. All is well in the world.

This is not to say that all your stories will have this intention. But adding protection stories to your repertoire of tales to tell through the year will serve the children well.

In the following story, an old, unwanted pine cone finds new purpose as a shelter for a family of ladybugs. The story pictures soft moss, quiet night, moonlight, and a renewed grandfather pine cone finding happiness. Please enjoy.

The Pine Cone Hotel of Redwood Hill

From *Protection Stories for Young Children*
by Suzanne Down (forthcoming)

Dragonflies zigged and zagged through dappled sunshine right by the edge of the tall, tall redwood forest. “Good early morning, Glory. Halleluiaah.” They zipped to the cluster of pale pink morning glory flowers growing in the grasses.

But all was still and silent in the shade of the redwood trees, where a strong boy was looking for pine cones to sell. When he found a perfect one, he put it in his large basket and looked for more.

*Pine cones for me,
Pine cones for you,
Selling at the market,
You can buy some too.*

He picked one up and was putting it in his basket when he noticed it was dry and knottled with age. He threw it down the hill and said, “You are too old and worn, Grandfather Pine Cone. No one would buy you at the market!”

The lone pine cone rolled and rolled down the hill through pine needles and twigs until it was stopped by a moss-covered log that had been lying there for a hundred years. THUMP! The pine cone landed there upside down!

The sound of the pine cone landing against the log woke up twenty-seven baby ladybugs and their mama who had been sleeping in their soft, cozy, mossy nest on the top of the log. They crawled out to the edge of the log to have a look.

Mama Ladybug saw the old Grandpa Pine Cone, and he was crying.

“I am old and ugly and no one likes me,” he sobbed.

Mama Ladybug looked carefully at Grandpa Pine Cone and saw only deep, strong rooms with a roof over each one. “Why this would make a good safe house for me and all my babies. Moss is nice, but there is no roof to keep us dry. May we move in to your rooms?” she asked Grandpa Pine Cone.

Grandpa Pine Cone stopped crying and looked up. “You would live in my pine cone rooms? I can be useful to you?” he said, surprised and ever so pleased.

“Oh, yes,” said Mama Ladybug. At once, each of the twenty-seven babies and Mama gathered soft bits of moss and flew into Grandpa Pine Cone’s rooms. How very nice it was indeed!

Grandfather Pine Cone stood tall, even if he was upside down! He was proud to be useful by this mossy log. He could feel the sweet tickles of the twenty-seven baby ladybugs getting settled in their new home.

Grandfather Pine Cone sighed a happy sigh as a gentle night fell over the forest. By the time the moonlight shone down through the trees, his new tenants were sleeping safe and sound in his Pine Cone Hotel. He did not even mind that he was upside down. He stood tall and strong and listened to the sweet peace of the baby ladybugs in his care. ♦

Suzanne Down has been studying and practicing storytelling and puppetry for decades. She is the longtime director of Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts, based in Boulder, Colorado, a center for artistic, therapeutic, and early childhood puppetry arts. Gateways thanks Suzanne for sharing her conception of the Protection Story, her own original, creative work. Email her for more information about Protection Stories for Young Children, as well as other resources and events, at suzannedown@gmail.com, and visit junipertreepuppets.com for more information.