

Storytelling at the Crossroads

by Nina Jaffe

“**W**E DO NOT MEAN, we do not really mean, that everything you are about to hear is the truth. A story, a story. Let it come, let it go.” These are the words of a traditional West African “story beginning” formula. All over the world and in every language, these formulas exist to help the storyteller and the listener enter the world of imagination, beauty, fear, and wonder that is carried on in the spoken word. In the Bahamas the storyteller says, “It wasn’t my time, it wasn’t your time, it was old folks’ time,” and in Armenia they say, “Once there was and was not...”

Today we live in a world suffused with electronic media, where conversations of all kinds occur in the faceless, glistening realm of cyberspace. We go to the cinema and in the darkness of the theater and half-light cast by the projector, our brains are filled with every sight and sensation the director has devised for the movie-going public. “Ah,” we say, as we sit back and the credits start to roll, “this is living. Now I’m going to see a story, now I’m going to feel something. Where will this film take me?” And yet no matter how beautiful or moving, revolting or revelatory a film may be, we leave that theater with something lost, too. For we also have a part of our minds that itself wants to imagine, that itself wants to create the pictures, hear the words, “see the story.” And that need can be filled, in my experience, in one way and one way only, and that is by listening to another human being tell a story.

Once an anthropologist was investigating the culture of a remote village in Central America. Every night the people would gather around and listen to the village storyteller in the town plaza. One day, electricity was brought to the village, and soon afterward, the first television set arrived.

The villagers spent every night glued to the set which had been placed in one of the largest dwellings. However, the anthropologist noted that little by little, one by one, the people began to drift back to the house of the storyteller. When the anthropologist asked them why this happened, one of the villagers said to him, “The television set knows many stories, but only our storyteller knows us!” (told by storyteller and puppeteer Ron Sopyla).

I teach storytelling to teachers at Bank Street College of Education. Every time I begin the course I wonder to myself, “What am I about to teach here?” How does someone “teach storytelling,” something so real and natural, and yet so ephemeral? Often in the first class, as people share their names, places of work and reason for wanting to take the class, I hear behind their statements both fear and desire. The fear—“What will I reveal about myself if I tell a story, even to five year olds?” And desire—the desire to find in themselves a form of communication they know is basic and essential to themselves and their work. Herbert Kohl once wrote: “In every good teacher, there is the voice of the ancient storyteller.”

We begin talking about storytelling but then start sharing—a memory here, an incident there. I teach them a game called “Apple Tree.” (Lipman). The rules of the game are simple: everyone sits in a circle and claps out a rhythm to the rhyme: “I climbed up the apple tree, all the apples fell on me. Apple pudding, apple pie, is it the truth or is it a lie?” Then the chosen storyteller tells a tale, based on their own life experience. They can tell it as they remember it, or change it as they like. Sometimes I will begin and tell them a story like this: “I grew up on East 97th Street. When I was little, I used to jump rope in Central Park. Every day, I would practice and practice. One day I jumped 10 times, 20 times, 30 times, until finally I flew over the park and landed on the West Side and went to see my cousins.” Everyone laughs, holding thumbs down (it’s a lie) and a new teller is chosen. The circle of strangers comes closer to each other. Everyone has a story to tell, and the play with language that is essential to storytelling begins.

Through a demanding learning and remembering process, whether text-based or through oral transmission, the story is shaped in the imagination and soul of the teller. It begins to take up a certain residence in her body, her mind and her voice. But only in that time when the story is heard and received by the listener does it take on its true life. David Gonzales, a storyteller and friend, calls storytelling “human currency”—for the teller, whether “a beginner” or “a professional” has invested himself in the words and their meaning. The storyteller says to his listeners, “I have learned this for you!”

Every culture has its way of talking about stories, their origins and impact. Among the Iroquois, one myth tells of an orphan, an outcast of the tribe who was the first to bring stories to his people, told to him by a stone in the forest (Bruchac). In a Korean tale, a young boy is so greedy for stories, he captures each one he hears and hoards them in a leather bag. Finally the bag becomes full. He ties it up and forgets all about it. On his wedding day, his old manservant is surprised to hear voices coming from inside a leather bag hanging by the oven. He hears each voice whisper its plan to take revenge on the young man for hiding them away and forgetting about them: “On his way to the wedding, I’ll turn into a flowing stream and poison him!” “On his way to the wedding, I’ll turn into a hundred string snakes and sting the young man and his bride to death!!” The old manservant foils their plot, but that is why, ever since then “...if you hear a story, you shouldn’t keep it hidden away where it can become mean and spiteful. Instead, stories should be passed along, from one person to another, so that as many people as possible can enjoy them.” (Kim)

Karl Kroeber says, “Stories are like plant species that move readily but unobtrusively over surprising obstacles, including vast spans of time and space, quietly adapting to foreign environments, and then changing those environments...Storytelling is humanity’s primary tool for changing reality.”

We are here, poised at the edge of a new century. Its beauties and its dangers are all around us. They call to us, and we must choose carefully how we will answer. But at this fork in the road, we must ask ourselves, can we truly live fully, with joyful purpose and meaning, without finding a place in our lives for the

sharing of our stories: the ones that have long been with us, and the ones that are this day being born—not only on the written page, not only in the cool and consoling hum of the computer and TV and video—but also in that place where intimate community can be created—when we speak the language of story, to each other.

References

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Nina Jaffe teaches courses throughout the year at Bank Street College in storytelling and folklore in education.

TE539: Folklore in the Classroom (1 credit)

An introduction to the study and materials of folklore as a discipline that can deeply enrich life in the classroom and school community. Storytelling techniques, songs, folk games and visual materials from a diverse range of cultural traditions (and for different age groups) will be presented. Class discussions will focus on the relationship of folklore to issues of linguistic and cultural diversity, child development and multicultural curriculum. Resources in print and media; as well as local and national folklore organizations will be included for student's future research. This course is also relevant to special educators, museum educators and students in the bilingual program. (July)

TE528: Storytelling for Children (1 credit)

The purpose of this five session course is to enable students to develop their skills and resources in the art of storytelling for and with children. The course will provide opportunities to study as well as practice repertoire and techniques from world folklore for a variety of age groups and professional settings. Story learning, ways of encouraging group participation, and analysis of folktale structure are included. Readings, bibliographies and resource packets will be provided. (Fall)

For information regarding course dates and registration call: (212) 875-4407.

Nina Jaffe is on the graduate faculty of Bank Street College of Education and is the co-founder of the Center for Folk Arts in Education. She initiated "Teacher as Teller," the Center's series of meetings of teachers interested in sharing and telling stories in their classrooms. A professional storyteller who performs and speaks nationally, she is the author of several critically acclaimed books of folk - lore for children, including The Uninvited Guest and other Jewish Holiday Tales and Patakin: World Tales of Drums and Drummers. This article was excerpted from an article published in Forkroads: A Journal of Ethnic American Literature, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 73-76.