

Play

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HELP WITH TELLING STORIES

THE GOOD SHEPHERD CALLED US

“Yea, tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me...”

I think it should be noted that on the Sunday after September 11, 2001, I called all of our classes together and used the Parable of the Good Shepherd as a way to have conversation about the tragedy of the World Trade Center. I think it should be noted because, as I talked to trainers around the country later that week, it seems we all had done much the same thing. The Good Shepherd had called to us. And many of us had turned to Psalm 23 to read it to our children, a source of comfort in our lives, as it was in our parents and grandparents' lives and in the lives of all the grandparents before them. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...”

—Kim McPherson

THE STORIES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

by Jennifer Acland

The children gather eagerly. They have not heard these stories before.

I teach religious education in a non-denominational Christian school for girls in Melbourne, Australia. The school has Christianity woven into its foundation, but many of the families in the school would have only a very occasional church connection with it. Some parents have been married in the local churches, and they may well be buried from those churches when the time is right, but worship is not part of their life routine.

I wanted to know if religious education inspired by Godly Play would work in an Australian Primary school. I was appointed as the Junior School Chaplain after I ran an in-service training to introduce the teachers to Godly Play. The teachers welcomed the change in approach and me.

The children sit, silent and mesmerized by the movement, the material, the voice: the story. We journey together through the desert, we seek God's face and we long for the Temple. Later we listen to Jesus' words and wonder what his life and death might mean for us.

Listening to the silence as I told the stories, hearing their remarkable responses and seeing their beautiful artwork all made me think of ways to invite them deeper, through the stories, to the place where they might encounter God. I wanted to tell them more stories, more stories of individual people doing the very thing I was inviting them to do. I told them about Balaam and Gideon and Saul, the first King. I wanted to tell more stories of women who listened to God. So I wrote about Ruth and Naomi and Hannah. Later I told about the woman at the well and about Martha who worked and Mary who sat. I told them about the woman and her oil. They continued to wonder and to do their work.

I do not use many of the stories from the Liturgical Cycle as the children I teach do not go to church. Instead I stay close to the scripture stories as we have them. Staying true to the inspiration and practice of Godly Play I have written new stories. I am a member of the Australian Network of Biblical Storytellers. They encourage people to learn scripture passages for recitation in church rather than always hearing it read. I have found their method meshes beautifully with the reflective silence of Godly Play. Children who have not heard the stories come fresh to them. It is a delight to tell the stories and to watch them being received like bread from heaven.

I speak the words of scripture straight from the book, or so it seems to the listeners. I learn the passage from their *Good News Bibles* and I speak those words to them.

They have not heard words exactly like these before. And yet they echo with a distant familiarity.

“Do you know the whole Bible, Miss?”

I smile at their wonder. They find the story for themselves in the book and they hear the echo again. And again, I pray... The stories speak for themselves.

THE SLOW PACE OF GODLY PLAY

by Kathleen Capcara

When I travel to other Godly Play classrooms to lead workshops, I often hear teachers worry about the need to “slow down.” Helping children learn the skill of being still to allow more openness to the presence of God is certainly a part of Godly Play. But I believe some of the urgency about telling stories slowly may come from a feeling of the need to emulate the style of Godly Play’s founder, Jerome Berryman.

The Reverend Doctor Berryman is a gifted storyteller. His soft voice, slow delivery and gentle manner in presenting lessons have held us spellbound for years. But I believe that in modeling the Godly Play method for us, it was never his intention for every Godly Play storyteller to become exactly like him. All of us who present Godly Play

lessons will need to find our own style and authentic voice. I also believe that it is often appropriate to modify your storytelling style to suit the ages of the children and specific situations in your classroom. A slightly faster pace may work better with older children and in some situations.

Some of the slower pace of Godly Play stories is necessitated by the use of manipulative story telling materials. It is difficult to tell a story quickly and move materials that illustrate the story at the same time. And learners find it challenging to simultaneously watch what you do with the materials while they listen to what you say as you present the lesson. The ability to process both verbal and visual information at the same time improves with age in many learners, but not all.

The children in your classrooms who are extroverts will be quick to let you know when they feel the pace of your storytelling is too slow. But try to remember that there will also be introverts in your class who may not verbalize their appreciation of the slower pace.

I live on the East coast, where a premium is placed on accomplishing things quickly. I believe that some of this comes from a desire to do as many good things as possible in the limited time we have on earth. As one of these well-intentioned people, I need to remind myself that when the prophet Elijah was waiting for God to come to him, Elijah was sitting still in a cave. And God was not in the earthquake, wind or fire that passed by Elijah. God came in a sound of sheer silence. It takes a slower pace to be fully present to a sound of sheer silence. I use a prayer by Michael Leunig to remind myself and my restless fourth and fifth graders to find the peace and serenity that are already in our hearts: “God help us to live slowly...to move simply...to look softly...to allow emptiness...to let the heart create for us.”

GETTING READY TO TELL STORIES

by Becki Stewart

Practicing

- Your goal is to make the story your own.
- Choose a lesson you love or are familiar with.
- Begin by reading through the script.
- Use the lesson materials or substitutes so you learn the story with your body.
- Practice with cue cards. Highlight key words. As you practice without notes, use the cards when you forget.
- Audio tape yourself and listen to the story over and over.
- Practice in front of a mirror and watch the movements.
- Practice telling the story to a safe audience.

Developing Your Style

- Be patient with yourself, it takes time.
- You have your own unique style.
- The story belongs to all people and the children need to know that.
- Just do it.

Making “Mistakes”

- It happens.
- Just keep going.
- Make a choice—leave it or correct it when you can.
- Use your mistakes: learn from them.

STORIES FROM THE HEART: WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO LEARN GODLY PLAY STORIES BY HEART

by Rosemary Beales

Sometime teachers are afraid they cannot memorize the stories, and that they need to rely on written prompts such as note cards to help them present the story to children. Here are the reasons that it's important to make the effort to work “without a net.”

First, “learning stories by heart” is a more accurate description of what we do than the word “memorizing.” I hope it will transform the process from a task that must be accomplished to a joy that may be embraced.

When a story sinks into your heart, it also comes from your heart in the telling. Children know the difference!

Learning the stories by heart:

- allows the story to take root in you so that it becomes your own and nourishes your own spirit
- removes the distraction of having to look in two different places—the text and the materials—as you present the story (Focusing your visual attention on the materials actually helps you remember the language.)
- gives the children only one place to look, at the story materials (This focuses their attention as well as yours.)
- shows children that you love the story so much that you know it by heart
- enables you, eventually, to become fluent enough that you can work with any child who chooses any story material at response time

The language of the Godly Play texts is carefully chosen, and it is important to be attentive to the language. But it is even more important to be relaxed and enter into the story you are presenting. Telling the story from your heart, to the children's hearts, is more important than getting it right.

THE LANGUAGE OF GODLY PLAY

by Becki Stewart

Jerome Berryman identifies four kinds of language in a Godly Play classroom.

The Language of Sacred Stories:

- described by Jerome Berryman as narratives in which God is the main character
- tells about the encounters of the people of God with the mystery of the presence of God
- helps us find our own story within the Master Story (the Bible)
- tells about finding our identity as children of God

The wondering questions for the Sacred Stories include:

- I wonder what part of the story you like best?
- I wonder what part of the story is most important?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you or where are you in the story?
- I wonder what part of the story we could leave out and still have all the story we need?

The Language of Parables:

- pushes language to the limit
- illustrates that the Kingdom of God is not something that can be expressed easily using ordinary language
- encourages us to make sense of life in existential terms (meaning, death, aloneness, freedom)
- stands on its own (You can't throw a parable away just because you have discovered one correct interpretation.)
- includes the "I Am" statements of Jesus
- speaks in the authentic voice of Jesus

The wondering questions for the Parables include:

- I wonder what this could really be?
- I wonder where this could really be?
- I wonder who the person could really be?
- I wonder if the birds have names? If they are happy? If they know how to build

their nests? I wonder what the person was doing while the seed was growing? I wonder if the person was happy to see the birds nest in the tree? If the person could take the shrub that grew as big as if it were a tree and put it back inside the tiny seed?

- I wonder how he felt now that he had the great pearl? I wonder why the seller would give up the great pearl? If the seller was happy with all his things? I wonder what could be so precious that a person would exchange everything for it? I wonder if the seller had a name? I wonder if you have ever come close to the great pearl?

The Language of Liturgy:

- means “the work of the people”
- shows how we as a community of Christians worship God
- demonstrates the parts of a particular Christian act, such as baptism
- shows how time and space are ordered for a community of Christians (i.e. How the Church Tells Time)
- shows the meaning of the act of worship through symbols and symbolic actions (i.e. The Mystery of Easter)

The wondering questions for the Liturgical lessons include:

- I wonder if you have seen something like this in church?
- I wonder what happens when you see the colors?
- I wonder what part of Lent you like the best?
- I wonder if you have come close to a table like this?

The Language of Silence:

- helps children become aware of the elusive presence of God
- enables children to be ready to hear the small, still voice
- supports the creative process and an ability to contemplate the lesson
- gives us the opportunity to experience silence and become comfortable with it

The wondering questions about silence may include:

- I wonder where the silence is?
- I wonder where the silence comes from?
- I wonder how the silence makes you feel?
- I wonder how the silence speaks to you?

The language of Godly Play gives children a way to confront the existential questions common to all people. The questions we all struggle with are about the meaning of life, death, freedom and aloneness.

The goal of Godly Play is helping children to learn to use religious language to know God and find direction in their lives while they are still young.

—Jerome Berryman

WHAT IS AN OBJECT BOX?

by Kathleen Capcara

Some Native American and African storytellers used a storytelling bag. Objects pulled from the bag would remind the storyteller of an important story. The listeners would feel a certain amount of suspense as they wondered what object would come out of the bag next and what story might be connected with the object.

Jerome Berryman suggests object boxes to hold symbols from some of the important stories of our tradition. Many of the Bible stories we use in the liturgy just tell one incident in the life of a character such as Abraham. An object box story can provide an in-depth look at the life of a character—a timeline of what happened to Abraham, for example. Object boxes can also tell the stories of saints, church leaders and spiritual leaders such as Ghandi or Martin Luther King Jr. Or the boxes can hold stories about church customs such as “What is a Bishop?” or “Traditions of Christmas.”

Object boxes are especially appropriate for older children, ages 6-12. The small objects appeal to children in that age range and pose no danger to them.

Object boxes are designed for children to work with. As they examine and lay out the objects in the box, they learn how to tell the story that the objects represent. The objects need to be durable enough to withstand use by many small and large hands.

When telling a story using an object box, lay out the items in a line using a carpet square as a background. Place the items in order from your right to your left. As the children see the items, they will appear from left to right—the way we learn to read in English.

It is not a good idea to pass the items from the object box around the circle as you tell the story. It is too distracting for the children. Instead, remind them that they can work with the box later.

A control should be included with each object box—a length of poster board that contains a simple black drawing of each object and the order in which it appears when telling the story. This provides a means for the children to check their own work without help from an adult.

Often, after hearing object box stories, children are inspired to research and make their own object box. It can be a marvelous way to preserve the stories of our faith and life together for the next generation.

MAKING AN OBJECT BOX

by Kathleen Capcara

First, research the story. If it is a Bible story, read it in several translations and consult some commentaries. Discuss the story with your minister or spiritual director, Bible study group and/or Godly Play teachers' group. If it is a story about a saint or a person, read some biographies of the person. If it is a story about the Church's traditions, go to a church library, or ask your minister where you might find resources on the topic.

Second, write the story. Think about the important themes and shifts in action in the story. Write an outline of what you would like to say in the story, then write out the story. Let it sit for a day or two before you come back to it. Rewrite as necessary.

Third, decide what objects you will include in your story. Choose materials that help tell the story without being so interesting as to detract from it. When possible, use the highest quality materials you can afford to increase visual appeal for the children. Give preference to natural materials and durable materials that children can touch repeatedly. You can use small boxes within the object box itself to keep items organized and to add appeal.

Fourth, locate the objects. Some sources are craft stores, doll furniture stores, party goods (for trinkets and flags), discount department stores, Christmas ornament departments, toy stores, inexpensive import stores or catalogs and religious book stores. If you are unable to find or make what you need, consider using a photograph or drawing from a magazine, or from a church supply or publishing catalogue. You may need to give up on certain objects. You can still tell that part of the story without an object.

Fifth, test your story. You may be able to test the story on family members or friends, either adults or children. When you test your story in the classroom, listen to what children say. Watch their art responses. Keep the story in your room and observe the children. Do they come back to the story on their own?

Finally, offer your story to other teachers to test. Ask the teachers to report to you the reaction of the children to the story. Discuss any changes they would make and why.