

ONCE UPON A TIME PRODUCTIONS presents:

Why Storytelling in the Schools is Vital to Our Children's Education

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We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy . . . But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed . . . We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates . . . Child-nature protests against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment. (Rabindranath Tagore, *The Poet's School*)

INTRODUCTION

The news is in and everyone's talking about it. The nation's educational system is broken. Many schools are ineffective. The drop out rate is way too high. And Johnny still can't read. Actually, Johnny can read, but slowly, painfully, grudgingly, with minimal ability to comprehend. Experiments in education around the country have provided answers. In the educational systems that fail, there is no passion. No passion for children or learning or language. No passion for ideas and no knowledge of our special place in history. No awareness of the fullness of life to be found through stories and literature. The solution? Some suggest lengthening the school year, clipping summer break, cutting recess, canning gym, and canceling the arts. In short, disposing of any activity that richly engages Johnny's mind, body, emotion and spirit.

And, to what end? To pile on more of the same: more quizzes, more tests, more rods, measurements, ordeals, and hurdles for indifferent Johnny to jump.

And, more Ritalin... to ensure bored Johnny pays close attention to what bores him.

ONCE UPON A TIME PRODUCTIONS believes that any worthwhile national education system should build it's curriculum around stimulating and advancing creativity, freedom, joy, and human potential in all its manifestations.

ONCE UPON A TIME PRODUCTIONS believes that when a child is inspired to learn then any child will seek to learn. We've found the magic to inspire that yearning; the magic that drives children to want to read on their own. We entertain them. We affect their emotions. We make them feel and we make them see and we show them where to find more of it.

Addicted to feeling. Addicted to reading...

THE PROBLEM

Educational philosophies have for decades been a pendulum, swinging wildly between "the cognitive approach" [all head], and "the whole child approach" [head, heart, and body] ("A Call to Action on the Education of Young Children", 2005).

Today, educational philosophy in the United States favors the cognitive approach (See "No Child Left Behind" and other standardization projects around the nation). This cognitive approach prizes the "logical-mathematical" (Gardner, 1983) learning style (methodical, linear thinking). A perfect learning style to accommodate a system that seeks to standardize more and more of the curriculum. But, because of this, even children in pre-Kindergarden are being allowed less time for imaginative play; even kindergartners are being pushed to achieve academically, to undergo "drill and kill" activities.

Not only does this early education with its narrow academic focus rob young children of their childhoods ("Play is the work of childhood."-- Jean Piaget), but an educational system that on a whole esteems the logical-mathematical, or cognitive learning style; an education system that figuratively chops off the child's head, plops it on his desk, then kicks the child's body out of the classroom leaves a majority of learners behind.

Howard Gardner, Psychologist and Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard University, is famous for his research in the multiple intelligences of human beings. In his book, *Frames of Mind* (1983), Gardner identifies many different intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner believes that significant changes need to be made to the current educational system, most notably the development of curriculum options that would focus on the various strengths of individual students.

Gardner's vision is wise. We need to bring variety to our children's education. We need to speak to and serve the Whole Child: mind, body, and spirit.

Why?

Lost in the lust to appeal only to children able at learning above the neck are activities that foster integrity, morality, sociability, character, and compassion; the learning that takes place when kids are allowed to do hands on work and engage in dramatic play.

Numerous educators have even dubbed U.S. schools "academic boot camps" ("Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

And what kind of kids graduate from these “academic boot camps”? Kids with deep problems.

College teachers around the nation report on their lackluster, uncreative, nihilistic students. One teacher we spoke to offered the following testimonial:

My students are empty and apathetic. I offer exercises in creative thinking, and they have nothing to contribute. When they write stories for class, they summarize movies they've seen. They offer nothing thought out, nothing impassioned, nothing of themselves. Just pabulum. They move through life in a stupor, diddling their technology incessantly. They cannot think a thought for themselves. They don't even know what to do with free time. They're constantly harping on being 'bored.' Many find living irrelevant. One student of mine just the other day told me he has no reason to live. Nothing moves him. He's dead inside. I asked what he thought the matter was. He said life was meaningless, rule bound and dreary. One student came to me yesterday, bragging about how she had just got done bullying some peer. "Why did you bully the girl?" I asked. "Because, it was something worth doing," she said. "Define worth doing," I said. Worth doing to this student meant any activity that made her feel alive. Any activity? She didn't know the difference between eating an apple and slitting a throat. It scared me. (Personal Communication, January 15, 2010)

Why do human beings hurt others? A thousand reasons: poor upbringing, poor critical thinking skills... and perhaps poorly thought-out school curriculums which starve the many hungry parts of the child.

Children forced to sit in compulsory institutions for hours every day, allowed no gym, no recess, no arts; kids forced to apply themselves to standardized lessons and tests, starved of time with body and creative self are alike to any persons who have been held captive for long periods of time. According to Clarissa Pinkola Estes, writer of the bestselling book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992),

Overkill through . . . excessive behaviors, is acted out by [human beings] who are famished for a life that has meaning and makes sense for them. When a [human being] has gone without [his/her] creative needs for long periods of time, [he/she] begins a rampage of . . . alcohol, drugs, anger, oppression of others, promiscuity, junk food, to name a few areas of common excess. When [human beings] do this, they are compensating for the loss of regular cycles of self-expression, soul-expression, soul-satiation. (p. 264)

What can we as a community do to bring life back to our children?

THE SOLUTION (in general terms)

Arts in Education

In a Washington Post article (Strauss, 2009), University of Virginia cognitive scientist, Daniel Willingham, lists numerous reasons why bringing the arts to the schools is imperative.

First, he says, many kids feel broken by the system because of its emphasis on math and science. He says the arts offer such students another chance to feel successful, and to feel that they belong.

Second, school leaves kids feeling like they have no voice in the world, and that their studies have no meaning. Engagement in the arts brings meaning and purpose to the lives of students.

Third, the arts offer kids an opportunity to work together; and thus to come to an understanding and appreciation of one another. Imperative in these times of school shootings.

Fourth, the arts offer physical health advantages. See dance. See drama. Imperative in these times of cutting gym and recess.

It's true. Time spent building, making, weaving, storytelling, painting, speaking and/or dancing develops the imagination, develops self confidence, develops a love for life and beauty, and often develops an enthusiasm that translates into other subject areas. Involvement in the arts keeps dropouts from dropping out. The arts train up the entire human being, engaging mind, body, emotion, and spirit.

The arts achieve so many human purposes; the most important being that the arts dignify the human being by speaking to and calling forth the multi-faceted self. Not only this, but the arts bring people together, connect human to human in depthful activities relevant to their lives; rare in this time of constant connection; where everyone is talking, yet saying so little of value.

Arts in Education is not a luxury, but a Necessity

According to author Daniel Pink, in an interview with Opra Winfrey covering his book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (2005), right-brain thinkers ("creative, artistic, and empathetic") are "wired for 21st-century success." And left brain thinkers ("logical, linear, and by-the-numbers") are already being left behind.

Pink suggests that our country is entering the “Conceptual Age”, during which right-brained skills such as design and storytelling will become far more crucial than traditionally left-brained skills, such as accounting and computer programming. Why? Because left-brain skills can be outsourced, while “transformative abilities” such as storytelling, empathy, and creativity cannot: “What matters more now is the ability to put facts into context and deliver them with emotional impact” (Winfrey, 2006).

Delivering a message with impact? How might schools teach that? By bringing the soul and body enriching arts into the schools.

Pink further explains that “one of the trademarks of the Conceptual Age is the outsourcing of traditional white-collar jobs such as law, accounting, and engineering to less-expensive overseas workers, particularly in Asia. But . . . you can't outsource creativity” (Winfrey, 2006).

Creativity? How might schools teach that? By bringing the soul and body enriching arts into the schools.

Ken Robinson, author, speaker and international advisor on education in the arts, in his speech “School Kills Creativity” for the T.E.D. (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in 2006, makes a convincing case for creating an education system that nurtures (rather than undermines) creativity:

I believe our only hope for the future is to adopt a new conception of human ecology, one in which we start to reconstitute our conception of the richness of human capacity. Our education system has mined our minds in the way that we strip-mine the earth: for a particular commodity. And for the future, it won't serve us. We have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we're educating our children.

The bottom line? With the contemporary education system and its shift to prescriptive curricula, standards-based instruction and standardized tests, imagination is being squeezed out.

To persist in training up our children to follow a path of such narrow focus is shortsighted and dangerous.

We must change.

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. (Abraham Lincoln, December 1862)

THE SOLUTION (in particular terms)

The value of Storytelling in the schools

Karen Armstrong, author of numerous works on [comparative religion](#) reports the following:

In most premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them Mythos and Logos. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complimentary. Each had its own sphere of competence . . . Logos (“reason”) was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world . . . People have always needed Logos to make an efficient weapon, organize their societies, or plan an expedition . . . Logos was essential to the survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life’s struggles. For that people turned to Mythos, or “myth. (The Case for God, 2009)

What Karen Armstrong calls myth, ONCE UPON A TIME PRODUCTIONS calls Stories.

People in premodern times needed stories, and people in modern times need stories still. More urgently, children in modern times need stories more than ever.

What is Storytelling

Since the beginning of time, people have always told stories to each other to pass on family history, values, and beliefs. They told stories to teach facts and concepts, to entertain, to bridge differences, to teach wisdom and to form bonds of trust. Storytelling was used in the past to express the human qualities of hope, love, awe and fear . . . Storytelling once had an important place in the world, in communities. Storytellers were once the transmitters of information, but...

With the advent of written language, storytelling began to decline in value. Television and other forms of visual media, radio, internet, ipod, and audio media, storytelling took a larger and greater hit. These technologies negate the need to concentrate on and understand precise language in order to derive meaning from a story. The viewer can rely on images, sound, and other media to grasp the story message. Thus, the viewer, story listener, is less challenged to develop vocabulary and language skills. (Baker and Greene, 1977)

School is a perfect setting for storytelling, a strategy that is often overlooked. Storytelling can be used to entertain, to explain, to arouse curiosity, to reassure, to inspire. A storyteller can make not only the past but classroom curriculum come to life. For example, a lesson on the inventor of the printing press will be more meaningful if

students first listen to a story about the life of Johannes Gutenberg, his successes, his failures, his persistence.

The value of storytelling can be witnessed simply by watching kids play during recess. Once outside and left to manage time themselves, kids once dead come suddenly to life. They tell stories to one another as they dance or run or walk or move from game to game. They dictate story directions: "You be the mom! I'll be the dad!" They talk, they debate. Through story and story games they make sense of their world and their experience, and most importantly, they create.

"Storytelling is, by its nature, personal, interpretive, and uniquely human. Storytelling passes on the essence of who we are. Stories are a prime vehicle for assessing and interpreting events, experiences, and concepts from minor moments of daily life to the grand nature of the human condition. It is an intrinsic and basic form of human communication" (National Storytelling Association, 1997).

Storytelling offers benefits that can last a lifetime

"I once heard . . . that life is like chess and that stories are like books of famous chess games that serious players study so that they will be prepared if they ever find themselves in similar straits." (Kendall Haven, Story consultant and nationally recognized expert on the structure of stories)

Listening to storytelling sharpens imagination.

Imagination helps us to solve problems, to get beyond 'right' and 'wrong' answers. Imagination helps us think outside the box. Dr. Kieran Egan, Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, and the founder and director of the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG), describes imagination as ". . . a particular kind of flexibility, energy, and vividness that comes from the ability to think of the possible and not just the actual. . . To be imaginative, then, is not to have a particular function highly developed, but it is to have heightened capacity in all mental functions. . . It makes all mental life more meaningful; it makes life more abundant" (As cited in Hamilton & Weiss, 2005, p. 9)

Storytelling is an art that nourishes the imagination by giving joy and instruction through word pictures (Cone and Hall, 1976).

Children listening to stories are actively involved as their minds must see and hear and feel the images and make sense of the story.

Storytelling as it sharpens the skills of imagination can even translate into bettering math skills. The Winnipeg Sun (2004), in an article online titled “Imaginative Children Better in Math”, reports that,

“Math and storytelling may seem like very different abilities, but a new study by [University of Waterloo scientist Daniela O’Neill](#) suggests that preschool children’s early storytelling abilities are predictive of their mathematical ability two years later . . . O’Neill looked at several aspects of children’s storytelling ability. Two years later, the children were brought back to the laboratory and were given a number of tests of academic achievement that included a test of mathematical achievement. What O’Neill found was that those children who scored highly on the mathematics test had also scored highly on certain measures of their storytelling ability two years earlier.”

This study suggests that building strong storytelling skills early in preschool years may be helpful in preparing children for learning mathematics when they enter school. “There can be little doubt that storytelling stimulates the imagination. For pure storytelling, where no props are used, if the telling is to be successful, the members of the audience must generate mental images as the teller speaks. The audience actually co-creates the tale with the teller” (Vygotsky, 1962, pp 98-99).

People able at imagination are known for their more flexible approach to life. When faced with challenges, imaginative people are more easily able to come up with alternative possibilities or solutions; better able to assign meaning to experiences; better able to find order in chaos. Building imagination helps kids live better; and storytelling builds imaginative kids.

Listening to storytelling develops an appreciation for language.

Numerous educators and institutions advocate for the use of storytelling in the classroom. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) notes how language development is assisted through the use of storytelling:

Listeners encounter both familiar and new language patterns through story. They learn new words or new contexts for already familiar words. Those who regularly hear stories, subconsciously acquire familiarity with narrative patterns and begin to predict upcoming events. Both beginning and experienced readers call on their understanding of patterns as they tackle unfamiliar texts. Then they re-create those patterns in both oral and written compositions. Learners who regularly tell stories become aware of how an audience affects a telling, and they carry that awareness into their writing. (NCTE, Teaching Storytelling)

One can see the value of storytelling when watching children as they sit delighted, eyes bulging, listening to a teller. The once fidgety children now sit mesmerized in their seats: mesmerized not by video games, text messaging or machines, but by words, human

energy, and movement; mesmerized by the storyteller's emotional expression; mesmerized by their own imaginations as their minds paint the pictures the storyteller is dramatizing.

Storytelling is a perfect strategy for improving communication skills-- listening, writing, and speaking. With the . . . storyteller, children must focus on the story, the action, and the dialogue to capture the meaning. They are better able to draw inferences when they listen rather than read. As this skill is developed through strategies such as storytelling, students become better equipped to draw inferences when reading independently." (Rothlein, L., & Meinbach, A., 1996, p.217)

Listening to storytelling creates lifelong readers.

By listening to stories told in school, kids learn to associate language with pleasure, to associate words with ideas, to associate physicality with meaning, and to associate ideas with connection to the human heart. Storytelling is a whole body dramatic experience which calls upon the listener to engage on many levels.

And yet, many children today have never experienced a live storytelling event. Sure, they have been bombarded with entertainment, and educational events on the internet, on television, on the ten thousand technologies that exist, but rarely have they experienced the heart palpitating experience of listening to and watching a storyteller close up.

And when they sit with heart pumping wildly, having just witnessed a live performance, the storyteller finally asks, "Where can we find more emotions like this? In books!"

How better to teach a lifelong love of literature to the young than to bring literature to life right before their eyes!

Listening to storytelling develops empathy.

The question that faces humanity in the 21st Century is the following: "Will the . . . technologies that our accelerating future anticipates enable us to increase our empathy with others or will their use decrease our ability to understand 'the other' that exists outside our own selves, families, communities and cultures?" (Journal of Evolution & Technology).

Our technological lives must be combined with activities that inspire empathy. Activities like storytelling.

Standardized tests can train up children to build the bomb. But, only stories can shape children into individuals capable of weighing whether and on whom to use that bomb.

Stories act as a humanizing force. If children are expected to become moral, caring members of society, they must develop a strong sense of empathy. As children listen to . . . stories, they identify with characters who struggle to overcome difficulty, and in the process they work through numerous problem-solving and decision-making exercises. By living vicariously through the experiences of others, students gain a sense of empathy and connection. (Hamilton & Weiss, p. 21-22).

CONCLUSION:

In summary, storytelling is vital to the life and richest functioning of all human beings. Storytelling enhances imagination, develops an appreciation of language, creates lifelong readers, and nurtures empathy. Storytelling motivates listeners to seek out stories, read on their own, tell on their own, and take charge of their education. Storytelling, in short, can instill a love of words and thus reading and create within learners a desire to develop good literacy habits that will serve them for life.

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