

This was written after a presentation - which involved storytelling, discussion and working with rhythm sticks - at the MERYC conference in Cambridge June 2017

Story Music Steve Grocott

*"Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me
in my childhood than in any truth that is taught in life."* Friedrich Schiller

Once upon a time...

there was an old woman who went out to her apple tree with her basket over her arm to pick the apples from her apple tree. She picked all the apples except one that was very high up. Instead of being able to grasp hold of it she knocked it to the ground where it rolled into a hole. She looked around to see who could help her and saw a bird. "Bird, Bird, go down the hole and get my apple for me" she called but the bird said "Tweet tweet tweet," which means no I won't and the old woman said "You are a very naughty bird."

She called to a cat to chase the bird and then a dog to chase the cat and a whole series of animals people and things to help her until it was, "Cow drink the water so the water will put out the fire, so the fire will burn the rope, so the rope will tie up the beekeeper, so the beekeeper will tell the bee to sting the dog, so the dog will chase the cat, so the cat will chase the bird and the bird will go down the hole to get my apple for me"

Everyone says no until finally the old woman asks the same bird to peck the cow, this time he agrees setting up a circle of frantic activity. The bird starts to peck the cow who starts to drink the water and the water starts to put out the fire, so the fire starts to burn the rope which starts to tie up the beekeeper who tells the bee to sting the dog so the dog starts to chase the cat and the cat chases the bird who is pecking the cow and round it goes...

While this is going on the wind comes and blows the apple out of the hole and into the basket.

The old woman makes apple pie for everyone and they all live happily ever after.

The simple twist to a familiar story pattern really gives the tale greater bite and relevance. Some stories are richer in resonances and connections to how the world works than others.

This is a retelling of a Middle eastern tale from *The Farmers Wife* by Idries Shah who also wrote *World Tales - The Extraordinary Coincidence of Stories Told in All Times, in All Places*. In this seminal book he shows how same story patterns come up again and again in different cultures and in different eras. One explanation for this is that they express in metaphorical form the basic elements of human psychology. They have a great deal to tell us about who we are and deserve sustained and careful attention. Telling and retelling, acting out, adding elements and changing details and contexts all serve to help us extract the nourishment from the tales.

Children don't just listen to stories, they inhabit them. They effortlessly become the characters and transform any thing they have in their hand into a story object. They ask for stories to be repeated, act them out, interrogate the details and make connections with their daily lives.

Storytelling creates a space free from the constraints of everyday logic and reasoning where we can improvise, look at things differently, try out different combinations and ask "what if?" It also provides a place for experiencing the feelings of others and examining parts of our selves that get ignored in the day-to-day way of things. Of course these are not always parts we are keen to see but luckily stories also give us numerous effective ways of dealing with ghouls, witches and numskulls.

Traditional stories provide a wealth of objects, characters, themes and, importantly, relationships to occupy that space. When we retell and inhabit the tales new resonances and connections occur to us connecting storyland with our everyday world. The inevitable repetition that happens when working with children and stories provides an ideal opportunity for this to happen if we let it.

The Elephant in the Dark

That magical phrase "Once upon a time..." is all we need to be transported to Storyworld but there are other ways. The next story, chosen for its relevance to, among a million other things, the world of scientific research, was introduced in the presentation by mini theatre - a mechanical baby elephant made his way across the carpet landscape accompanied by live music.

You can see a version of this at https://youtu.be/H9pG4Zag_8o

The little elephant was clearly an orphan which may account for the fact that when caught and attached to a travelling circus he was always afraid of the light and had to be kept in a dark tent. The circus travelled far from the land of his capture to places where elephants were completely unknown and when it arrived in a certain town rumours spread that a strange, wondrous and possibly dangerous creature had arrived. Seven people all experts in their own field were sent to investigate. The first to enter the tent got hold of the elephant's trunk and emerged to report that an elephant is a kind of hose. The second expert declared that this was nonsense. Having grasped the ear she pronounced an elephant to be a type of rug. So it went on: one got hold of the tail and imagined a rope; another refused to let go of the pillar theory having taken a firm hold of a leg. In the end seven experts stood outside the tent arguing over the true nature of the elephant and they are arguing still. Factions have been formed and even wars fought. Wiser heads in countries where elephants are commonplace have been heard to wonder if any of those experts had a sense of smell.

Ways to deal with a Monster - Problem Solving

"Humour is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritations and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place." Mark Twain

Feather in My Pocket - a story song

Introduction

I had to set out on a journey to find my friend. Unfortunately the road was dangerous and it was likely I would meet frightening characters on the way. I had no, sword, gun, or stick to protect myself but only a feather in my pocket.

When I set out this morning - To find my friend and play

A feather in my pocket - To help me on my way

I met a tiger - Coming down the street

It was not a tiger - That I hoped to meet

Sooooooo I...

Tickled his tum - tickled his toes

Stuck my feather up his nose

Tickled his chin - Made him spin

Then I ran away - I'm on my way - I'm on my way.

When I set out this morning - To find my friend and play

I met a (insert your idea - cue discussion of things which scare us)

It was not a ... - That I hoped to meet etc ...

The last verse ends with :

I met my friend coming down the street

*It **was** my friend that I hoped to meet*

Aaaaaand she

Tickled my tum - tickled my toes

Stuck her feather up my nose

Tickled my chin, made me GRIN

And then we ran away – we're on our way – hip hip hooray – we're off to play

Hear the song at

http://www.dronesmusic.net/files/drones/SteveGrocott/Feather_in_My_Pocket_sample.mp3

It was partly inspired by the Australian story of Tiddalik, the frog who drinks all the water in the land and has to be made to laugh so he will disgorge it.

Problem Solving and Creativity

Many of the ways of defeating malevolent creatures like ogres, giants and witches that occur in traditional stories are metaphors for creative problem solving. Just a few examples are...

- sing or play him to sleep – The Magic Flute
- slowly slowly – break the problem into smaller pieces and solve it by increments which is how the fox catches the The Gingerbread Man
- channel the river – Hercules
- become "Nobody" – Odysseus dealing with the Cyclops
- import a solution from another area – Dick Wittington's Cat
- turn the problem upside down – The Archer and the Target - he shoots the arrow first and draws the target round it
- challenge the baddie to show you how – the djinn goes back into the bottle in the Arabian Nights. This involves both the psychological notion of influencing someone by getting them to show off and the practical idea that if we know how a problem came about it might help us solve it.

Using rhythm sticks to tell a story

We used the rhythm sticks: which are light claves, good for small hands, to play

Lazy Day – a warm up song where the stick becomes anything you can think of apart from a stick. This was included to invoke a spirit of creative improvisation.

The Billy Goats Gruff - the sticks are used as both props like the goats' horns and rhythm beaters to sing and tell the familiar story. You can hear a recording of children doing this accompanied by a slide show of them involved in all kinds of story play at :

Being in the Story <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5U1aZw-jJ4>

The range of activities shown in the slide show further illuminates the improvisation theme that was explored in various ways at the conference. Often children are doing different things in response to a song or story. At other times they can clearly be seen inhabiting the characters. Stories, like songs, provide perfect frameworks for repetition with variation. This allows for a deeper connection with the patterns in the story to emerge. In this story, for example, the initial focus is usually on the fun of boffing the troll off the bridge but with time the trickery element clicks in. One group who I work with have taken to chanting "Don't mention the horns" as the middle sized billy goat is convincing the troll that the big brother will make a big dinner for him. A shared group version has been created.

From a child's perspective we might think of the troll as a metaphor for things that are difficult to do while very young that become easy, as we get older so the three goats are part of the same person at different stages of development.

As an adult I sometimes also think of the troll as a being like one of those urgent unsolvable problems that occur to us in the middle of the night that are so easily sorted out in the morning when our big billy goat is up and ready for anything. These, of course, are just a couple of the myriad of possible associations.

The Bogeyman - a story rhyme that lends itself easily to rhythm work.

Mummy in the kitchen doing a bit of fixing
In comes the Bogeyman to chase the Mammy out - BOO !
Oh says Mummy that's not fair - Oh says the Bogeyman I DON'T CARE X3

Daddy is doing a bit of mixing etc..

Uncle is doing a bit of stitching etc..

Baby in the kitchen doing a bit of screeching
In comes the Bogeyman but baby says - BOO !
Oh says the Bogeyman that's not fair - Oh says the Baby I DON'T CARE X3
And the Bogey Man runs away !

You can see how the action of the story and the rhythm of the rhyme organise children's playing on a gathering drum as they do this for the first time at...

The Bogey Man on a Gathering Drum <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW8pXr0UC10>

The way that repetition with variation deepens our understanding of stories is analogous to the way that musical jamming enables us to really get inside a song or tune. In my experience this can develop over a long period of time. The fruit of this process is clear when we hear someone performing who has really "got" it.

The power of the story form

All our perceptions come to us in narrative form. Putting things we want to say in story form is the most effective of communicating them. Ideas couched in story form bypass resistance and stay in the memory. Evidence for these assertions and many other aspects of research into the effect of storytelling can be found conveniently in one place in *Story Proof - The Science Behind The Startling Power Of Story* by Kendal Haven.

Of course, because of this power, we have to be vigilant about the stories that are being told to us that we may have unconsciously absorbed into our world view. One obvious and much discussed element of this is the issue of stereotyping. Being "traditional" these tales are inevitably framed in the context of social, political contexts that are no longer accepted so while the concepts and relationships may still be relevant the contexts might not. When it comes to working with children it is usually possible to make adjustments such as "rescuer" for "handsome prince" to deal with this. When it comes to finding the nourishment in tales for ourselves, seeing story characters as metaphors for parts of the self or for patterns that exist in the world can help us look past stereotypes and power relationships that might otherwise make us throw the baby out with the bath water.

We don't need to be over cautious however; children do know the difference between everyday life and the imaginary world at the same time as seeming to be completely immersed when they inhabit the world of imagination. A two and a half year old told me yesterday, "That wont happen in real life," as we discussed a story. The same is true of children's relationship with imaginary friends (See Alison Gopnik – *The Philosophical Baby*).

The Story of the Two Frogs

This is a Japanese story. There were once two frogs. One called Booba lived in Boobatown and the other, Kiki, lived in Kikitown. The towns were very different. One was full of rounded shapes and the forms of nature while the other was more spiky with many things made of metal. In between the towns was a huge mountain and very few had dared to climb it so the inhabitants of the two towns were ignorant of the complementary delights offered by the other place.

Our two protagonists were relatively adventurous frogs and had both heard a rumour that there were interesting things to be learned on the other side of the mountain. They both set off on a journey of discovery at the same time and, after enduring many hardships, met on the summit and fell into conversation. They were both delighted to find that their new acquaintance was from the very place they had set out to reach and quizzed each other about what they would find there. As the wise man said, however, "What should they know of Kikitown, who only Kikitown know" and lacking the wide experience necessary for comparison the two new friends found it difficult to communicate much about their home towns that the other could understand.

Next they fell to talking about the hardships and privations of the journey and wondered if the journey all the way down to their destination and back was going to be worth it. They decided to try and see the towns they were trying to reach by propping each other up with their front legs to get a more elevated point of view. Alas, we all know that frogs have their eyes on top of their heads so from their propped up positions both frogs were actually looking back at the town they had recently left.

Believing there to be no difference between the two towns they said farewell and went back down the mountain to their own homes and never ventured out again.

The frogs hopped and my story has stopped !

Let's just leave this one hanging in the air. Storytellers often caution against over interpreting or intellectualizing their tales and advise that given time resonances will reveal themselves.

"I have given you an apple," they say, "Do you want me to eat it for you as well ?"

References

Shah I (2005) *The Farmers Wife*. USA : Hoopoe Books

Shah I (1979) *World Tales - The Extraordinary Coincidence of Stories Told in All Times, in All Places*. UK : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

Haven K (2007) *Story Proof - The Science Behind The Startling Power Of Story*. USA : Libraries Unlimited

Gopnik A (2009) *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love & the Meaning of Life*. USA Bodley Head

Feather in My Pocket from *Story Songs CD-ROM* Pie Corbett and Steve Grocott

steve.grocott@btinternet.com

www.dronesmusic.net

I hope this is useful but I'm sure it is a lot less fun than the storytelling session was. SG