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Dedication

This book is lovingly dedicated to Hugh
(Brother Blue) and Ruth Hill,
close friends of the Eternal Storyteller,
and to aspiring storytellers everywhere.

Foreword

by Thomas Moore

Five years ago I began telling stories to my two children in the half-hour before they went to sleep. I didn't do this on principle or theory. It just happened. Many of the stories have become quite long with episodes complete in themselves told over months and even years. They often begin with a formula and contain common structural elements. The same characters appear, and new faces show themselves. For example, the series about King Francis and Queen Maeve frequently begins with King Francis waking early in the morning and going to the balcony just off his bedroom to look over his kingdom. Everything is usually still and beautiful except one little anomaly that usually appears faintly on the horizon.

Every night I ask my children which story they'd like to hear. They say 'King Francis' or 'Ananda Coomeraswamy' or 'Blue Foot.' Sometimes they tell me what they want to have in the story, but I usually tell them that I can't force the characters or the story to do what I want. I listen to the story being offered to us as much as they do.

I've learned a great deal over the years from this storytelling. I've discovered the beauty of repetition and formula, the power of a character to become a person in our field of relationships, and the arc a good story covers whether it is long or short. First I almost always take a moment of silence to let the evening's story be born and show itself in the sketchiest form. I've learned to trust that a story will take form and complete itself if I'm open to inspiration.

The few friends who know about this storytelling tell me how good it is for the children, but I do not think of it in those terms. It's pure pleasure, and it's something the children and I have discovered that we can do with each other. Many an evening I'm grateful that even when the story doesn't pass muster in my judgment, they are happy and appreciative. When a story is done, I hear them stir from their

deep attention and shift into a different world to prepare for sleep. The sounds of that moment are the sweetest music in my life. Very rarely do the children fall asleep while the story is being told, although when they do I am happy for that.

I know firsthand how precious and pleasurable family storytelling can be. I want to underscore the point that this tradition in our family simply sprang into being. I didn't initiate it out of any philosophy of education or upbringing. I do happen to have many ideas and theories about stories, but somehow they have been involved only unconsciously.

And so I'm delighted with this new book by Nancy Mellon on storytelling for parents. She, too, has many ideas but she presents them without any annoying theory. She can appreciate many variations in the practice and the mode of stores told. She helps articulate what is possible by letting us know what in fact is done in families. At the same time she helps us see how family stories can have classic themes and forms. She understands the importance of voice and articulation, but she doesn't offer rules.

I think her book will give parents guidance and courage to trust their imaginations and to explore certain simple structural motifs common to great stories and the simple ones that arrive on a parent's lips on an ordinary evening. The last thing we parents need is a rule book for storytelling. What we can use is some gentle encouragement to adopt the persona of storyteller. I appreciate Nancy Mellon's way of giving us good ideas without making us feel that we are now bound to certain expectations of what is right and proper. Once the pleasure and personal inventiveness leave the process, we've lost the heart and soul of this kind of storytelling.

The parent who is a storyteller enters a tradition that looks simple but is actually complex and serious. Family storytelling is more than kid's stuff. Its pleasures are fully adult for the storyteller. All of this Nancy Mellon describes with a good storyteller's sensitivity. She also mentions the obstacles that parents run into as they try to tell stories. Sometimes, I admit, I'm afraid that my stories won't seem good enough, but that's the writer and academic in me raising voices of unnecessary caution.

At the deepest level of experience, our lives are made up of story

fragments and images in search of a coherent narrative. We find meaning in those stories. The deeper we go into them, the deeper the place from which we live. It follows, I would say, that storytelling is the primary task of the parent. Making stories honest, attractive and appropriate for children is an inviting task. Reading stories has its extraordinary pleasures and value, but 'making up' stories – letting them come to you – is the best kind of storytelling I know.

When I do step back and think about my practice of family storytelling, one hope I have for my children is that they are discovering how to be in this life with imagination. The kingdom of King Francis and Queen Maeve and the curiosity shop of Ananda Coomeraswamy are real. They're imaginary, but to me the imaginary is in many ways more vital than so-called 'reality' – life deprived of imagination. Let Nancy Mellon teach you to be a storyteller and a discoverer, for you and your children, of worlds that truly make a difference.

Introduction

It is a blessing to have a wise and dedicated storyteller in the family, and it is never too early or too late to become one.

For countless generations storytelling has provided vision and consolation, inspiration and instruction; yet our present times demand new approaches and dedication to this ancient art. This book can help you discover why and how to become a family storyteller, and to transform any reluctance you have, so that storytelling may thrive in your life with your children.

Although children often show us our shortcomings, as we devote ourselves to them they can inspire us to deeds we never thought possible. They learn from us to tap into the hidden riches of their memories and imaginations as we grow with them, in order to fulfill their needs.

Many parents and other adults are surprised at first that young children want them to make up stories out of themselves. Yet it does not take long to realize how meeting their need for stories creates a sense of warmth, family and community. This book has been written to stimulate your direct experience of the wise and benevolent creative forces which, however dormant they may be, live within every one of us. Computer stories, television, and even printed books are chilly substitutes for closeness with fully present adults who are spinning whole tales out of their own hearts and souls. Warmly creative adults inspire the same qualities in the children around them.

Amidst the ingenious cacophony of electronic inventions, the wise old art of storytelling is re-awakening with conscious intention. Many parents and grandparents feel a growing need to transform themselves into warm-hearted, fully present storytellers. As they tell their first stories to their children or grandchildren, or gather into story circles in villages, towns and cities to practice their favorite tales, they soon sense that everyone is a storyteller with an endless supply of personal and universal themes. Stories can draw from past, present and future

cultures; through them we can discover ourselves in each other: the world-wide human family. As storytellers we can commune with our ancestors and rediscover our spiritual origins; we can tune to the wisdom of the natural world, and to the star-filled heavens. We can speak to the future through imagination—the language of evolution.

Parents and children both need to hear stories told aloud. One of my greatest joys over many years has been to develop the art of storytelling with families. Since I first discovered its creative power as a teacher of young children, I have met a great many people from diverse backgrounds and cultures who wanted to have more confidence in themselves as storytellers. In this book you will meet some of these adventuresome people, who began storytelling when their children were young or not yet born, with the puzzlement most of us experience when we begin unfamiliar activities. Yet lasting and abundant benefits have flowed back to them. I hope their creativity and courage will move you to become a more confident storyteller: for the children in your life, for your own sake, and for your larger community.

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Weaving a Storyteller's Mantle

All things are connected...
Geoffrey Chaucer

For love of stories, God made humanity.
Elie Wiesel

What is a Storyteller?

Babies, like storytellers, look into the world with wonder and surprise. They sense old and knowing ways of speech gathering about them. Between timelessness and time, they begin to draw words and images from a vast weave of sound and meaning. As children discover with delight this vibrant mantle of speech, memory and imagination that enfolds every human being, they insist we help draw it around them, sensing that only within it can they fully grow into their own humanity.

Becoming a storyteller in your family is an opportunity to develop

a more conscious and sensitive relationship with the quality of your words and your tone of voice. With the same commitment you bring to providing wholesome meals, you can serve stories rich in words, images and spiritual content. As you let the genius and vitality of language flow through your voice, it will surely return to you through the children. Courageous beginners, they form their organs of speech through diligent practice, sometimes taking extraordinary risks to express themselves. Their spirit and desire to communicate can be your greatest inspiration: like a child, you can rediscover the wonderment of words.

Reading a book to a young child is a very different experience from telling a story. Parents often have their first liberation as storytellers from reading a satisfying story so often that it takes flight. Sensing a child's need to hear a story coming directly from them, it can be a great experience to break free of written words and speak a tale from memory.

Imagine a storyteller

There are many ways to become established in the oral tradition, whether or not there has been a storytelling tradition in your family. I often ask mothers and fathers to imagine a storyteller who will help them to communicate with their children. A young mother of four children pictured the storyteller as 'a stern American Indian, standing strong and upright. In her left hand she carries a beautifully carved staff that has been passed to her through generations. With a conch shell in her right hand she calls her people together when she has important stories to tell.' The mother recognized this storyteller to be a hidden part of herself that urgently wanted to help her speak with wisdom and authority to her children.

Another young mother discovered that she could invoke a wise old aspect of herself by beginning each of her stories with the same Slavic melody and the words:

> *Far away across the ocean, over the sunlit fields of golden hay, over villages with red-tiled roofs, far far beyond the mountains in the black forest, there lives an old woman. Her hair is pure white. There is a garland on her head. She sits in her old wooden chair and this is the story she tells...*

This method has helped her on countless occasions. Of the old storyteller

within, she says 'I trust her. She gives me strength when I am tired, or feeling impatient with the children. Always humming in her clearing, I picture her wrinkled face, her wisps of silvery hair, her old skirt. I see her seated, with grasses at her feet, surrounded by birds. It is as if the children and I journey to her in a swift balloon. By the time we arrive in her realm I feel more put together. We travel over fields of France, and over the tiled roofs of my Belgian ancestors, until we arrive in a clearing somewhere in eastern Europe. As I start to hum her melody, the children take a breath. It is as if all the generations of our family listen with us.'

A father of a three- and five-year-old discovered that stories from books were not enough for them. One stressful day, his imagination produced a stern schoolmarm. With creative desperation he made up the first of many tales about her. Mrs. Crabapple read moralistic stories in a stern nasal voice. She insisted there was only one right way to do things. Over several months she was at the center of spontaneous tales he told, causing outbursts of silliness and much new perspective. She became so much a real part of the household that, one day, when parents and children were at odds with one another, all of them wanting their own way, the father shouted: 'We are acting just like Mrs. Crabapple!' He sent her out of the room and they all felt amazingly better.

The same family gradually invited several other imaginary storytellers into their house. 'The children have their favorite ones, who are not necessarily the same as mine,' said the mother. 'They especially ask for the storyteller who lives in a white tent and wears polka-dotted socks. She is easy for me to imagine too and gives me lots of energetic stories. When it is time for a story the children often say: "Please call on the Lady with the Polka Dots".' Intentionally changing her energy to match the children's, this inventive mother will say: 'Here, this is the story she told.' Sometimes the story is one they already know and love, to which the fun-loving story lady in the tent may add her unexpectedly colorful flourishes.

Another favorite storytelling companion of this rural family is Mr. Gleek, who brings fix-it stories from a big city. When the children want to hear about his activities, they call him on their imaginary telephone: 1-2-3-4-5 is his number. 'He has such a different personality

from anyone in the family, with his cigars and heavy accent. He tells stories about his sister who chews gum, and about repairing leaky pipes and old doors,' explained the mother. Both parents tell stories about him, often finding themselves as surprised and amused by his behavior as their children are.

Many parents complain: 'I can't weave a complete story out of myself ! I can't trust my imagination! I can't tell a real story without a book in front of me!' Yet children thrive on wholeness and freshness. The essential ingredients for storytelling are the same that children need for their healthy development. We may feel surprised to find ourselves enlivened and cared for as much as they are as we create and tell stories with them.

It can be a profound experience to imagine a very experienced storyteller, from another culture and time, who is linked with the first storytellers and can sing and speak in tune with the universe. Find or create a shawl or blanket for this ancient, capable storytelling part of yourself. Create a space for storytelling with a coverlet or two draped over a few chairs or a tabletop, or pinned to a corner wall. Light a little candle or lantern with the children and enjoy the womb-like interior hush, out of which great stories are born.

Creating Silence

Although children love to make a great commotion, they also long for quietness. As the decibels produced in billions of houses rise, everyone needs more silence. The hullabaloo of daily events is a constant challenge to an ear that listens: we miss the quietness of trees and of most living things. Yet allowing this quietness to reign in our lives today requires ingenuity. Silence unites all the faculties of the child. It embraces thinking, feeling and willing; allows expectations to flourish; minds to open; stomachs to relax. Silence is the kindest, and the most powerful starting point for stories. Creating silence is different from waiting for children to be quiet. It is an active, radiant power. In the atmosphere of silence our hearts center into gentle rhythms, our senses open, the very pores of our skin relax.

To create silence is to strengthen a child's patient, active attention, which is the foundation for all learning. There are many ways to ease into its power. A grandmother knitted a shawl for herself from every color of the rainbow. She wanted to bring others into the peaceful radiance she experienced as, enfolded softly in the shawl, she shared stories with her grandchildren. Over many months she knitted storytelling shawls of rainbow colors and gave them to her family and friends as gifts, wrapping them around her favorite storybooks.

A middle-aged mother, exhausted every day by her two small, active sons, was also grateful to experience the gifts of silence through her own storytelling. In the busy, ambitious American suburb where they lived, she decided one day to buy an old spinning wheel. Soon afterwards she and her husband took the brave step of fencing off part of their garden and buying a quiet sheep. Over many weeks the family learned together to care for the sheep and her lambs and to card wool. As the boys' mother practiced spinning, especially at bed-time, the gentle whirr of the wheel lent an atmosphere of peaceful focus. Her fingers grew increasingly adept at spinning long strands. One evening, as the boys watched the fibers moving through her fingers, she began to 'yarn' for them a story about two lively shepherd boys. To her amazement, they loved this story and eagerly awaited a new installment. The next evening she picked up the same thread. The children helped her, through their devoted interest and satisfaction in this on-going yarn, and subsequently her husband

also, to develop lively confidence in themselves as storytellers.

The quiet rhythms of our breathing immediately reach children, and the child within all of us. As we settle down to tell a child a story and prepare to say the opening words, each complete breath is heaven to children. It stimulates their own harmonious breathing. Then they can relax and give us their undivided attention from head to toes. A person who is wholly there for them inspires their confidence that the story will make them feel good and whole. Children need the quiet, creative warmth and closeness of adults. Anything less weakens their attention and leaves a hunger for relationship. The essential expectation of every child to be nourished by parental breathing and speech never dies. The inner call for a warm, breathing story told just for us persists until the very end of all of our lives. No quantity of books, television, tape recordings or computerized stories can fully satisfy our deepest needs for connection.

One rainy evening a mother took her children to hear a well-known storyteller. A large, rowdy crowd of children and their harried parents had filled the room to capacity. Overwhelmed by the different ages and moods of the children, the storyteller forgot to bring silence to the room before he began. The more tricks of the trade he tried, the more conflict and confusion filled the room. 'I could better have stayed home and trusted myself to have a good evening with my children,' said Katrina. 'I forgot how much I enjoy being their storyteller, how satisfying it is for them and for me.' Eventually she wrote a book about her determination to enjoy peaceful and creative time at home with her two boys.

Another mother, who was beginning to tell stories to her children, often found herself preoccupied at their bedtime. Reluctantly she agreed to let her children watch television, although she knew they would be filled with images from programs and advertisements. Other members of her storytelling circle commiserated when she told them that her children fell asleep later than usual and that they had wakened several times during the night with restless dreams. She resolved to keep their story time sacrosanct, no matter how important were her other concerns, as she knew it did her good too.

When I was sharing stories every day with children as a kindergarten teacher, I would first sit quietly in a rocking chair, listening for a few

moments to my breathing. The children were soon listening too. The rhythm of my breathing and quiet rocking focused their attention more than my words. This was a great discovery for me. No matter how rambunctious they had been, they would calm down. Together our breath and pulse would deepen. As we created a balanced, peaceful enclosure, like the knitting grandmother and the spinning mother, my self-doubts and anxieties would disappear. The warmth weaving between us often allowed the words of my stories to come with surprising inspiration.

In a busy and happy kindergarten that I visit, a large soft chair sits invitingly at one end of the room. Peeking out from under its skirt is a pair of old-fashioned pointed boots, with golden laces. A large shawl is draped over its shoulders. Tucked in around its cushions are numerous small dolls, colored cloths and stones, and a hand-knit ball. When a child is in need of quiet time, has been injured, or is in need of more nurturing than the teachers can offer at the moment, the words 'Go sit in the Mother's lap' are spoken gently. This the children do willingly, curling up, leaning into the depths of the chair for succor and a quiet space alone. According to the regular ritual of the classroom, when it is time for the children to hear the story of the day, their teacher seats herself ceremoniously in this quite archetypal chair. She takes time to make herself comfortable in 'the Mother's lap' before she begins. The little dolls, stones, cloths and other items tucked into the chair sometimes come into her story. As the children develop their imagination of a wise, comforting, and accomplished 'story mother', they learn gradually to draw from her seat consoling and strengthening quietness through the stories she tells.

Many opportunities can be found to bring about more silence in the life of your family. Some parents find it helpful to place an old-fashioned clock in or near a child's room. When I was small, the big clock that stood in our stairwell with its steady beats spoke to me, though I did not as yet understand its purpose. My brothers and I loved to listen to the round disc of the pendulum pulse and bong every quarter hour. Careful listening to different kinds of sounds prepares for lively listening at story time: an evening breeze, the sound of a kitten's footsteps, your own breathing and your child's, your shifting movements, the soft rhythmic pulse of inner circulations.

A young father, a raconteur who is rarely at a loss for words, discovered the power of silence while creating a story about Indians. At first, quiet breathing and listening was strangely disquieting for him, yet recently he shared with me a story he made up at a summer evening's fire. The main character, a mysterious Indian woman, was neither deaf nor dumb, but she chose not to speak. It was as if sounds passed through her and went to a place of beautiful expectancy. Sometimes when she came to an evening campground not even the fire made a noise. In the silence around her, the people she visited in different encampments were filled with wonderful questions; when the children awoke after her visits they remembered beautiful songs from their dreams. As their father made up various stories about these Indian villages, the children often asked: 'Is the Quiet Woman coming?' Along with their father, they loved to hear about her power.

In a similar mood, during their vacation on a lake, a family decided to pursue the sounds of silence. At first they could only keep quiet and listen for a few moments. They encouraged one another to listen to the spaces between their words. Finally they were able to live in quiet awareness for almost a whole day, hearing surprising music in the natural world around them. As silence for them increased they became more peaceful as a family, their gestures more eloquent. When their three-day experiment ended, one of the children wanted to continue it for the entire vacation.

What rewards come to you and your children as you take time to listen for rich, diversely breathing silences in your everyday experiences? Everything that is breathes. To nurture inner quietness in a story you create you might include the leafy song of a tree, the sigh of a boulder as the sun shines on its back, the sweet exhalation of a rose. Or a story about a country child who goes forth to listen for the breathing of everything it sees – a woodcutter, a cow, a bee.

Storytelling Awakens Listening

The power to be silent awakens dormant forces of listening and understanding. A mother made a doll especially to help her tell stories to her young children. When her small daughters were getting up from their naps, she would wake the doll very tenderly in her arms and ask:

'Would Mimi like to hear a story?' Like the children, the doll would eagerly nod her head, sometimes interrupt, or hide and cover her ears in the folds of the mother's garments. The doll helped both the children and their mother to experience different listening moods: when the doll begged for another story, the children would say: 'I wish she would learn that she can't hear stories all the time!' Mimi especially liked to whisper a question shyly in the mother's ear. 'What do you think Mimi wants to know?' the mother asked her daughters. After a while the children became adept at speaking for the doll. At the end of a story the mother created a routine: Mimi would sigh with contentment and thank the story, the storyteller and also the children for listening with her. When story and prayers were done at bedtime, a yawning Mimi, who had been listening along with the children, would go dreamily into her cradle at the children's bedside.

Different children – different stories

In both children and adults the power of listening can waken and develop to extend into those ancient storytelling parts of us that are ever attuned to moods, languages and people. Because children listen to life inside and around them in so many different ways, I like to look at their ears before I tell a story. Old shells formed in cosmic seas, each pair of ears is unique. Their individual shape and color invite words tuned in different ways. Over my years of practice with storytelling, I have learned that listeners with fiery-colored little ears especially require lively action in stories. Burning with curiosity as to what comes next, they balk when a story moves slowly. Delicately curving, graceful ears, in contrast, seek to take in light-hearted words. Perhaps not hearing every word, they receive stories easily, enjoying lilting details. Plumper ears, hungry for whatever is full and round, seem slowly to eat the dreamscape of a story. They like repetition and words that meander slowly. Cool and sensitive melancholic ears, with unique inwardness, listen thoughtfully for distress and suffering in a story, attuning to mournful tone and themes.

Children naturally draw forth from their elders different kinds of stories to meet their different moods and energy of listening. Because of differences of temperament and personality, some children prefer telling and listening to highly imaginative tales; others gravitate to

practical down-to earth stories. Still others prefer stories that especially excite feelings and portray emotional truth. I recently met a sensitive grandmother who loved to read and tell fairy tales. She was bewildered by her young grandson's taste in stories. Although her own children had listened contentedly to all sorts of fairy tales when they were young, at seven years old her grandson claimed that stories about princes and strawberries in the snow were silly. He wanted straightforward stories about animals and people doing good work. He hated rabbits that had been given human characteristics and would become wildly upset if a donkey talked. Now, as a teenager, he is a practical repair-man, who happily spends long hours tinkering with cars.

I loved reading stories to my brothers and myself when I was a child. One day, when I was eight years old, an Afro-American girl, who was slightly older than I, visited our neighborhood. We children gathered around her awestruck as, arms akimbo, she sang and told a wildly imaginative story. This wondrous event gave me the idea that I too might look out into mysterious realms, sing loudly and tell stories. So one evening soon afterwards, as my six-year-old brother and I settled down before sleep, I asked if he would like to hear a story. I hoped he might like a wildly imaginative one. Instead he wanted a story about a little red truck. Although I did not like playing with trucks, I dearly loved my little brother and my imagination pictured a good truck. My brother wanted the truck to visit very real places. He wanted a story to help him grow. Today he is a very accomplished builder, with many trucks helping him in his work.

A five-year-old, evidently with a different set of goals for her future, insisted on being part of a circle of adults who were studying fairy tales in a candle-lit room. We were taking turns telling original stories based on well-loved plots: Briar Rose, Snow White, Iron John and others. Her mother cradled her on her lap past her usual bedtime in the candle-lit room with us, believing she would soon be asleep. During one of these evening gatherings, the child sat up suddenly in her mother's lap, announcing she too had a story to tell. With her relaxed, yet absorbed attention she had been observing how we allowed stories to move through us freely. That evening she held us spell-bound with the exquisite language and archetypal plot line of her story. As it ended,

she sighed happily, curled closer to her mother and fell deeply asleep. We sat stunned and speechless at the depth to which this tender child had joined her listening with ours. She had demonstrated for us how to tell a story without being distracted by fears, self-doubts or competitive ambitions. The story itself had brought with it for her, and for us all, sublime satisfaction. Because the group had grown increasing humble in the presence of great fairytales, fortunately, no one's compliment burdened her as she finished her own reflection of them, such as 'What a clever little storyteller you are becoming,' or 'You're a better storyteller than I am.'

It is natural for children and even babies to respond to a positive story atmosphere. I have often seen wild birds, family pets, squirrels, and seals come as close as they can to a good story. It can be a pleasure to listen to yourself speaking a story, as a child would, wide open. The listening child in all adults needs to be nourished by language, image and gesture; a well-nourished child becomes a more complete adult. Listening with deep attention is an essential theme of many of the greatest fairy tales. *The Queen Bee*, a venerable old story included in the Brothers Grimm collection, shows that noble love between man and woman is only possible when there is deep, respectful listening. The hero of the story is able to disenchant a castle and awaken true love because he has heeded the voices of bees, ants, and ducks. *The Donkey* portrays a child who is determined, against great odds, to sing and play a musical instrument – in the end, because of his music, he realizes true love. The imagination at work in such stories nurtures our listening spirit, leading us toward more complete realizations of who we are and can become.

Were you one of the lucky children who were read to in your early childhood? What book or story told from memory made a strong positive or negative impression on you in your early childhood? The highly individual way you listened depended on your personality and temperament. How is your personality and temperament different from your child's? How the same? What types of stories might your child resonate with, now and in future years?

When children's listening becomes calmly universal, the story has reached a very deep part of their inner life. Was there a story that moved

you very deeply as a young child? Tell that story to your own child or grandchild. As your children tell stories, your listening helps them find words to match their imaginations. To avoid situations where they might receive flattering compliments to cause them unnecessary self-consciousness, a graceful tact is to focus on the stories themselves: their words, images, characters, and your eagerness to know what happens next.

Rhythmic Story Weaving

Rhythm is a necessity of childhood. Regular meals create a peaceful atmosphere for children to receive nourishment, to digest, and to steady their appetites; regular story times create a loving atmosphere in which to grow; regular sleep and rising times help young bodies to flourish. Physical, emotional and mental growth all develop in similarly complex patterns. Once we have attained physical maturity, we easily can forget how prolonged and complicated is the process of creating a well-balanced 'house' in which to live.

Everyone benefits from rhythmic routines: adults need a warmly rhythmic environment for sharing the events of the day and discoveries of the heart almost as much as little children do, especially in our present world. No one ever outgrows the need for satisfying verbal nourishment. The search for it can turn into a lifetime struggle for expression and for emotional security. When not satisfied at home by the primary guardians of our childhood, the need can turn into a lifetime of puzzled foraging.

Even if steady warmth and safety for storytelling was not created for you in your own childhood, nevertheless you can create it with your children. A three-year-old girl was wearing out books, and her mother, by her incessant demand for stories – in the car, during meals, even on the toilet. After her mother joined a storytelling circle, she realized that she herself was erratic in many areas of her life, eating all day long, rarely sitting down. Believing that her child's babble was more charming, important, and deserving of attention than her own, her conversations with adults became increasingly unsatisfying. She complained about this with the circle of parents who were cultivating the art of storytelling for their children. Astonished to realize that she had been unconsciously

imitating her child's chaotic energy and speech, she resolved to bring more adult self-respect to all the words she spoke, both for her own sake and for her child's. She began to temper the stories she told, telling each often and well. She soon discovered how soothing and enjoyable it was for them both when she gave up the book and trusted the words to memory: seeing her mother's whole face in front of her calmed the child. They learned little nursery rhymes and rhythmic tales, repeating them regularly before meals and at bedtime every day. Soon they were developing some of them into songs and humorous games, or drawing and painting a delightful stream of pictures, and were never bored. Her child's words began to grow less chaotic and rambling. She and her daughter could look into one another's eyes with joy and delight, and join their hands and voices.

A bewildered man, a very successful entrepreneur who fathered a daughter late in life, recently told me that he had consulted a doctor because, at three years old, his child wanted everything repeated over and over again. He was incredulous – and relieved – to learn that this is normal for young children everywhere.

Instinctive knowledge of the rhythmic patterns that sustain children has broken down in recent years, and as a result many adults today rely increasingly on electronic assistance – videos, tape recorders, computerized stories – which can repeat indefinitely. Yet children in the sway of even the most excellent television programming as their primary source of rhythm, do not satisfy many of their most fundamental needs.

When a child discovers that you are reliably and thoroughly present as a storyteller, the nervous, dissatisfied need for more and more stories calms down. A long day with children can sometimes leave us stressed and tired, yet as storytellers we can find rhythmic patterns that give a reassuring sense of measure and coherence. Children of all ages build their inner life as they connect with stories' orderly structure and content. The very youngest children prefer stories that are thoroughly rhythmic in word-sounds and structure. A diet of these reliably rhythmic stories helps them build a foundation for healthy, self-regulating adult life.

Until recent times, great stories were sung in metric verse. Today there are many story collections from which to learn the pleasures of singing, clapping, and word-romping for both children and adults. Rhythmic

phrases and little story chants stimulate, strengthen and open heart and soul, like sacred mantra. Before I had encountered chanting in Western and Eastern traditions, I spoke and sang nursery rhymes regularly with a group of four-to six-year-old children. Our joy and delight increased with each repetition. As we slowed down our words and gestures, our concentration and voices deepened. Gradually speeding up, the words whirled brighter until, with the last sound and syllable, they would flower like fireworks in the air around us. In this simple, sublime atmosphere many problems of the children, as well as my own, disappeared. The pleasure of sharing rhyming stories with children is a reminder that great cultures have developed spirit and maintained their languages and many of their traditional stories through the communal art of chanting.

Like rhythmic lines, rhyming words also support our need for rhythmic order and satisfy our ears' need for expectation and closure. Words that sound almost the same, chiming and echoing through a nursery rhyme or story, encourage listening and language development. Many old nursery rhymes are little tales. *Going to London* on Mommy's or Daddy's knee is the beginning of high adventure. *This Little Piggy Goes to Market* begins the discovery that characters, like toes, are connected within the same plot. Well-spoken rhythmic stories vitalize childen: rhymes and rhythms encourage the tremendous cumulative task of building their own bodies. Recurring rhythm sways their circulatory systems towards greater life. Rhyme may encourage bones, sinews and connective tissue to grow. Rolling and pulsing word repetition gives a sense of orderly progression – the sense of being safely embedded in a whole, nurturing context.

Finding regular times

Many families find pleasure in creating a regular story time every evening before bed, and at other special times. Even when children can read very well to themselves this island of sharing creates a steady heart-beat for the whole family. A father who wanted to create a Sunday morning story time complained that his three children, ranging in age from three to seven, would not come when he summoned them or sit still enough to hear what he wanted to say. Yet when he became thoroughly convinced of the importance of this time for them all, a new

authority came into his voice and presence. He was deeply moved when his children began to look forward to the stories he wanted to share with them, and to the flowing strength of his voice.

Telling it again – and again!

Because all young children need stories regularly repeated, storytelling with them can develop saintly patience in the teller. Sometimes it can take weeks, even months until that mysterious moment when a child is satisfied and ready to move on to a new story. A mother once told me that through storytelling with her son she had developed tenacity beyond her wildest expectations. She told *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* to her son for the first time when he was four years old. Sometimes he requested it every day, then would let it go for a time. It became a ritual for them. This wise mother said that ultimately she surrendered to his need, believing that the story was helping him to prepare for events in his adult life. Twelve years later, after countless repetitions, when he was sixteen years old, he had still not entirely lost his need to hear her bring the goats safely over the troll's bridge.

A busy young mother felt humbly grateful for her own mother's patient storytelling with her four-year-old daughter. Said the grandmother: 'I am getting to the truth of the stories again and again. They can be repeated 5,000 times, like an orchard full of apples.' The ring of wisdom and authority in her voice feeds her grandchild. Every child's soul needs to build strength, stability and security. Like milk, parental storytelling is a necessity. Your presence and voice and sureness of speech help children to discover theirs. Every rhyme and tale repeated with attention to each word warms the child's loving response to language.

Just as digestion and assimilation improve with a steady meal schedule, so do stories when they are part of the day's rhythm. If you make a storytelling schedule for your family for evenings and special times, such as holidays and birthdays, children will look forward to these regular story times which help them build a sense of security and confidence. You are telling for their future selves as well as their present.

Animals, humans, and plants share rhythms together. Our primary pulses move in a steady beat. Poems and stories which hold and express this rhythmic music are the natural food of growing children.

Birds in the air –

Stones on the land –

Fishes in the water –

I'm in God's hand...

Or

One misty, moisty morning

when cloudy was the weather

I chanced to meet an old man

clothed all in leather.

Fundamental rhythms also pulse through the folk music of many lands. As little children hear outside them what they are subtly experiencing in their own bodies, they feel secure and happy. Many fairy tales express a three-four rhythm. Joyous, healthy breathing rises naturally out of such well-balanced stories. In *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, three meet a fourth character. In *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, the troll is the fourth. In *The Three Little Pigs*, the villain sizzling in the fire comprises the fourth beat, stimulating a new round of the story. In *Vasilissa the Beautiful*, a well-known Russian fairy tale, certain words are repeated many times as Vasilissa and her mother commune through a magical doll. When children call for such stories and rhymes again and again, they are experiencing the vital music of their own pulses. They drink in the words and rhythm we manage to co-ordinate, and emulate us as best they can. As we patiently retell exactly the same stories for them they experience us as magically trustworthy adults.

Young children especially require whole stories: during a story everything else can wait. Undivided story time helps them build integrity in all areas of their lives. Who would give a child a puzzle with missing

pieces or a broken ball? A circle encompasses all directions and gives a sense of enclosure and safety: together you can blow an imaginary bubble and sit together in its roundness.

Voices: Spinning Gold

Where does speech originate? The holy origins of speech, although largely forgotten in the daily hullabaloo, can be found when we slow down enough to give peaceful attention to the sounds we make, and to the space and breath around our words. Your parental voice can provide a haven, especially at story time. Listening well to your own voice helps children to listen to themselves and others: your listening builds theirs. Gradually they will be able to realize the effect of words upon themselves and others. Recently, I listened gratefully to a harried mother who consciously expressed love in her voice. I was glad for her that she had discovered how to bring this warmth into what she said, like a sheltering embrace, even when she was irritated with her child. As we take increasing responsibility toward the quality and quantity of our words, a child will reflect a positive caring attitude back to us.

It is an interesting experience simply to listen to one's own voice. Speech is a combination of breath, thoughts and feelings; it arises from a subtle and complex coordination of bones, muscles and circulation. Tones conveying warmth and happiness nourish a sense of confidence. Critical tones darken the atmosphere. We can gradually come to see the weather we create with our voices. Children are at the mercy of the way we speak – our impulsive little words and the feeling tones that surround them. These root deeply and from them our words return to us again, for better or for worse. How we speak to impressionable children is likely to affect them for the rest of their lives. The feeling atmosphere of our words can shrivel or bless them. With even a little effort, we can will ourselves to shed self-criticism, worry, distractions and ambition. Steady attention and commitment is required to speak with truth, good humor, and loving kindness. Whether parents or teachers, we can intentionally invite warmth to fill and organize us from top to toe, and seek a spiritual outlook, so that love and respect can flow from our words.

Storytelling provides opportunities to ease into the vibrant music of words. People often ask me if they need to modify their normal way

of speaking in order to tell stories to children and I reply that children are our guides: the bodies of infants surely invite gentle melodies to enfold them. Soft melodic lines very gradually transform; as little bodies gain weight and substance, they invite more solidity of words and syntax that sway between music and speech. What lives within our voices is evidently what matters most to them; if a heart be merry, kind and honest, even a raucous, rusty burr can charm and nourish them. I have seen very small children listen spellbound to a succession of story songs offered gently and musically to them by parent-storytellers in very different languages: Slovenian, Japanese, German, Nigerian Igbo and English.

Independent of logical meaning, in the playful rediscovery of our voices during story time, we can recover speech patterns long forgotten, perhaps being moved to tears as we ourselves are revived by them. Words and phrases from surprising lands and other times may come to nourish us. As your mouth searches the shape of sounds you speak in the presence of children, you may learn new words and feel their resonance in different parts of your body: in bones, belly and blood. When you speak with your whole self, even your feet participate. The burst and swirl of sounds emerging from mouth or throat cause the tongue to stretch and shape itself in so many fascinating ways.

Children need clearly pronounced words that begin, continue and round off with a sense of deliciousness in the mouth and freshness in the air – like a peach. They long to love and heartily enjoy the banquet of language. It is all too easy to correct, ignore or imitate children's attempts at words. A story that contains the words and phrases they want to speak gives them a gentle opportunity to listen and learn from your own speech. Rather than correcting them immediately when they mispronounce or misuse a word, at story time you can include what you hear them trying to articulate.

The instrument of the voice

A mother with a thin, nasal voice complained that she had difficulty gathering her children to hear her read stories. She said she could not hold their interest, no matter what she was saying, and feared she would never be able to change her voice. A group of parents who had gathered

to practice the art of storytelling made up a whimsical story for her. It began: *Once there was a flower that wanted to roar...* Their story deeply touched her imagination, and helped her to speak more powerfully. She was surprised to discover that, when she gave herself permission to breathe deeply and play with words and expression, her children started to play with their own voices. Soon, to her great relief and surprise, as they all played more freely, her children gathered eagerly to hear her tales.

Another mother, who was bi-lingual, discovered she could move gracefully between two languages as she told her stories. This enhanced the learning of her young children. She made up and practiced several stories which united both languages. Soon she found that she could tell episodes in either language, the children attending happily to the subtle changes in her voice and words.

When they are old enough to enjoy taking roles and changing their voices, children are happy that we can do this too. They also listen for our clear, reliable, everyday voice. As they experiment and grow in expression, your uniquely loving voice is their most important stimulus for learning to integrate themselves and to counter the discordant voices they are bound to hear in the world around them. The clarity, warmth and sincerity of the stories you tell, help them develop these qualities in themselves. You also can regulate the volume of your speaking. Your voice is a subtle instrument which attunes your child to both inner and outer realities. A loud voice is not necessarily more powerful or effective. A gentle whisper can sometimes fill a large room and hold the attention of a crowd.

Clearly formed words, phrases and sentences in poems and stories expand and enrich all of our senses. They help us listen for crops growing, winds singing, the hearts of trees. The bridge to things and people, to the truth of feelings and emotions and to all inner life, speech awakens children for spiritual life. Together with all human beings, you and your child are on an endless path of discovery of the relationship between reality and the structure and sounding of words.

Stories that portray the power of words increase respect for the human voice. Examples are *Sweet Porridge* from the Grimms' collection; the English tale *Tom Tit Tot*; the Russian fairytale *Vasilissa the Beautiful*.

In how many ways can one say: 'Once there flowed a peaceful river'? As you repeat the words, change your thoughts and notice how this

affects your voice, body, and feelings. For example, behind the words you might carry a skeptical attitude or a scientific, political or poetic one. Say a phrase while standing, sitting and lying in different postures to notice how your body affects the quality of your voice.

Afterwards

At the end of a good story, a bout of clapping can be jarring and prematurely break its spell I often like to show my genuine feelings through quiet gestures. I sometimes give a big sigh of contentment and place my hands over my heart in pleasure and gratitude to show children how to open their arms wide to embrace the whole story.

Having made a special effort to prepare and to tell a story, storytellers typically feel both elation and depression. One new storyteller observed: 'Especially after an important story, I like to be still. I feel warmth in my heart. I've connected to the children through the story; I feel an opportunity for us to be held in this openness for a while before returning to the usual physical world...' A grandmother described how she lets herself feel a little tired after a session of storytelling. 'The time after a story is a rest before a new breath. Like the quiet before a new day, it can bring a sense of holiness and wholeness. Like the children at bedtime, I curl into a little cocoon. Or maybe I read a really good book, or do some heavy housework to bring myself thoroughly back into my body.'

To honor such soul-sensitive times, a large candle can be used for a whole year of storytelling. After the story has finished, to slowly come out of its spell you can carefully blow out the flame, or use a candle snuffer ceremoniously, watching the curling smoke rise. Then carefully take off your story shawl or hat, get up and move on with cheerful deliberation to another activity – washing dishes or polishing shoes. You are a role model, teaching your child how to move in and out of different states of awareness with conscious intention. From you your child learns to bridge wisely and gracefully between different worlds.

Stories often come from beyond the person who has been speaking them. Says a puppeteer friend: 'A good story is golden light flowing through a little sky in the back of my mind. It doesn't stop with the children. I feel the sharing of the story gives its Source great joy, just as it does to myself and the children. A berry catches it; a bird eats the berry.'

When children question a story, they are not necessarily asking for explanations and interpretations. Instead of answering directly, it is often preferable to simply echo the whole or a portion of a story. You can ask them respectfully to find the answer to their own question. Interpretive logic is a mental ability that blooms best in later years. Adult reflection on meaning can detract from the more fundamental nourishment of word and image. A story left intact is likely to have a healthy life of its own in dreams, emerge in play and become part of the household for a short or a long time. Yet even a quite simple, harmless story, whether it has been read or told, can be disturbing to a child or their parent. 'I'm sorry this story frightened you,' or 'Tell me what you didn't like in the story' can increase the discomfort. If a story you have read or told upsets you or your child, you can erase it decisively with: 'When you are a little older this story will be just right,' or 'Well, that story is certainly not for me!' Children will usually identify happily with you. When my mother disapproved of a story she would say with an imperious gesture, 'Phewy on that!'

A father recently told me that, although he usually only read stories he already knew to his seven-year-old, he was appalled to find that every character at the end of a lavishly illustrated tale, both good and bad, had met a terrible end. 'I felt helpless,' he said. A member of the storytelling circle suggested he might have said: 'Let's send that story to God for improvement.'

Yet a difficult story may be the very one that a child needs; growth can be uncomfortable. Adult distaste for stories can sometimes cramp a child's freedom. When in doubt about whether or not a story was good for your child, you can safeguard even a terrifying tale, and also shield your child's right to freedom of imagination, giving them a sense of solidarity with other children, by saying: 'This is a very old fairy tale from long ago, that has been heard by many children through the ages and is still heard today.'

Your own openness also helps to nudge difficult stories toward corresponding aspects of children's inner lives. As you tell such a story with steadfast kindness in your heart, your presence supports children's ability to absorb the deeper messages of the story, and stimulates their wide and heartfelt reading later on.