

Endorsements

Once in a while if you are very lucky you come across a book that stops you in your tracks. As a spontaneous storyteller for some 30+ years I rarely come across a book of such immediacy and engagement for the complete beginner as much as the professional storyteller. It is a 'how-to' storytelling classic. You can open this book anywhere to become fascinated by its content and the incredibly useful storytelling exercises that populate its pages.

– **Alexander MacKenzie:** storyteller in executive education, OSHR Management Consultant, author of an illustrated Hospice book, *Humbert Bear Likes to Doze: Joy in the Face of Adversity*.

Healing Storytelling portrays adults and children finding healing and creative courage in the midst of even the direst of life stresses. Many teachers, students, community leaders, parents, therapists and other professionals have carried this inspirational book with them, dog-eared and worn, in backpacks and purses, to help them to meet daily challenges.

– **Robert Smyth:** Yellow Moon Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

This storytelling classic is packed full of gentle wisdom and inspiration to help develop the imagination. Its focus on the power of storytelling to nourish and sustain us all through hard times is particularly moving and relevant today.

– **Sue Hollingsworth:** storyteller and co-author of *The Storyteller's Way*.

This is one of the most beautiful books written about the power of storytelling to heal body, mind and earth. It is a precious medicine chest of inspiring, profound activity. We need Healing Storytelling.

– **Laura Simms:** storyteller, author of *Our Secret Territory: The Essence of Storytelling* and *The Robe of Love: Instructions for the Heart*.

Finding the sources to fairy tales, myths and tellings in the form of living images from our inner world is worth gold to budding and seasoned storytellers alike. This is a book to restore our innate intelligence and creativity in wise and delightful ways.

– **Inger Lise Oelrich:** adult educator, storyteller, founder of Nordic Healing Story Alliance and author of *The New Story: Storytelling as a Pathway to Peace*.

This is a handbook for turning straw into gold. I refer to it professionally, and recommend it in every workshop I run training therapists, teachers and parents in storytelling. I turned once again to the wisdom of Nancy Mellon's insights and exercises recently in Singapore, training professionals in prisons, early years settings, mainstream and special schools. During a difficult time, one of her exercises also helped me to bridge a deeply painful personal situation.

– **Louise Coigley:** Speech and Language Pathologist and Therapist, Creator of *Lis'n Tell: Live Inclusive Storytelling*.

Nancy Mellon describes stories as maps to learning and healing. She leads readers into the imaginative and transforming world of traditional story with vast knowledge of their wise symbolic potency. Therapists, teachers, storytellers, and story enquirers everywhere should read this important book, and add it to their library.

– **Mary Smail:** dramatherapist and psychotherapist, SoulWorks, UK.

Sometimes the Wonder Tale of who we are touches in to the everyday happenings of our lives. The exercises in this book show ways to find peace and healing through a conscious engagement with that wise aspect of us which knows and cares for our true story.

– **Paul Matthews:** poet, educator, author of *Sing Me the Creation: Creative Writing Sourcebook* and *Words in Place*.

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HEALING STORYTELLING

The Art of Imagination and
Storymaking for Personal Growth



Nancy Mellon



Hawthorn Press

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Dedication

This book is dedicated with loving gratitude to the late Adam and Gisela Bittleston, to my family, and to the many individuals and families I have met along my journey who have helped me to find my way. I am deeply indebted to many inspiring people who are connected with the international Waldorf School Movement.

Foreword

For thousands of years, story making and storytelling have been integral to our humanity. More than a source of entertainment, stories in every culture have taught moral and history lessons to adults and children alike, and kept complex traditions alive. Through story language we have learnt about the mountains and the forests, the earth and the sea, the stars and the moon, and those who came before us. It is often through storytelling and the art of the imagination that fears have been faced, and hurdles overcome.

Meeting challenges, big and small, by tapping into imaginative narrative is natural and unique to us as a human species. Yet as Nancy Mellon points out in her introduction to this book, our modern imaginations are often broken, warped and fearful.

Especially now in our modern fast-paced age, so obsessively dominated by the internet and other virtual experiences, we need stories to help us to create authentic relationships with ourselves and one another. This book offers a feast of ideas that inspires the reader to slow down and develop healthy imaginations and wholesome real-life story interactions. A manual for personal and group creativity, it is a wonderful healing resource.

Stories can soothe our souls, and touch our hearts. They can change our perspectives, motivate and strengthen us on many levels as they bridge unseen and visible worlds and connect us to all life. Indigenous communities worldwide hold a deep respect for their sacred healing capacity.

Nancy details a rich supply of examples from her healing work with both adults and children. The author insists that every human being is born a storyteller, and that our troubles are fuel for genuine transformations to occur. She shares how imaginative story making has helped multitudes of others, as well as herself, to transform personal challenges.

An anecdote the author shares that speaks deeply to me is a story she wrote one spring morning called *The Flower Hater*. Her mother did not

want flowers in the house because they reminded her of her mother's funeral when she was a child. Nancy, now an avid gardener, was able to lift away a shadow that had been hovering all her life. She states, 'Writing the story was like a healing dream. I was liberated through respecting the truth of my imagination.'

Many more such intimate sharings from Nancy's life and the lives of her students of all ages are woven into the pages of every chapter. All were eager to experiment with the healing power of story making. My own imagination has been deliciously nourished by reading the range of inspirational anecdotes and exercises in this book that can be applied with courageous intention as healing salves to a multitude of ills.

Stories are as important to our soul life as water is to our well-being. They can revive, and rejuvenate; they are vital for healthy growth and development; they find their way into our hearts, and our very being. This book is a shining wellspring for readers to dip into, and continue on their journey, enlivened and refreshed. Whatever your walk of life, it offers invaluable guidance and encouragement for your creativity to thrive, perhaps in ways you have never before imagined.

As a therapeutic storyteller, I know from personal experience with teachers, therapists and parents who have attended my seminars in many different countries, people everywhere are thirsting for healing imagination. Many years ago Nancy helped my first book come into being, and in 2008 she generously penned its foreword. Now life has come full circle and the honour is mine. I am sure you will enjoy this inspirational guidebook to healing imagination, in many ways, and on many levels.

Susan Perrow

Therapeutic storyteller, teacher trainer, parent educator and counsellor

Introduction

This is a book to help restore story wisdom to your daily life. A treasure-trove of imaginative powers lives within us all. These powers often lie stunned and dormant, yet to awaken the pictures that live in our story-imagination is to become more fully and radiantly alive. Although setbacks of all kinds may discourage us, the grand, old process of storytelling puts us in touch with strengths we may have forgotten, with wisdom that has faded or disappeared, and with hopes that have fallen into darkness. It also connects us to joys and pleasures that have been relegated to professional entertainers. Above all, storytelling gives us love and courage for life: in the process of making up a wonderful story, new spirit is born for facing the great adventures of our lives and for giving wise encouragement to others, of any age, along their own path ways. Every storyteller collects and arranges vital inner pictures; behind these live universal ordering principles. I offer this book as a way for you to tap into these life-giving patterns. It is meant to be used as a companion to the story collections that you may know or have yet to discover, some of which are listed at the back of this book.

Reading wonderful stories from the past empowers you to speak and to write your own stories. To make up and tell an original story, however, is quite a different experience than reading or reciting stories already formulated in books or on screens. For several years I have had the privilege of working with parents, prospective parents, teachers, librarians, and people in the healing professions. Together we have brought to life the art of storytelling for our selves, for the children in our lives, and for each other. My purpose, whether exploring old stories or helping to create new ones during storytelling courses and workshops that I have held, has been to enliven speaking, and to awaken the lifegiving and transformative energies that help us through our difficulties. Every detail in a story, its characters, landscape, moods, and the meanderings of plot can be circulated through our own bodies,

feelings, and the structures of our minds. If we experience the reality of each part of the story as an aspect of ourselves, no matter how grand or dilapidated, or fantastical it may be, it will be an enlivening experience. As we bring adult awareness to everything that happens and everyone in our stories, we grow accordingly in our sense of who we are and in our relationships with all kinds of people and happenings.

What is active healthy imagination?³ My experience with adults and children has shown me that our twenty-first century imaginations often are broken, fearful, warped, obsessive; yet given guidance, inspiration, and encouragement, they can become, even quite suddenly, wholesome and radiant. Steadied by wise old elements of the imaginative world, we can surge and play with the rich energies of its themes and images, as dreamers and poets do. Powerful old story themes, language, and imagery moving through our psyches act like good food, causing the body and blood to rise up with joy and eager breathing. The process of storytelling itself, through voice, gesture, and goodwill and through the founts of wisdom it opens, evokes from deep within a healthy state of creative adventure.

This book is intended to meet different kinds of needs. Each of its short, evocative essays and the examples that accompany them are gentle tickles to encourage you – perhaps despite yourself – to go forward in joy and wonder toward a life full of love and the wise use of power. It is first of all intended as a guidebook to those inner gestures, energies, landscapes, and characters that awaken from time to time from the deep springs of imagination. It is a book for anyone at home by the fireside and bedside, in schools, and in therapeutic settings who is seeking a more self-aware, meaningful, and positive relationship to the sometimes overpowering and confusing world of imagination. It will help you to better delineate and experience that world in a personal and positive way.

This book is not arranged to teach specific story plots; many resources already exist that share the grand old stories – summarizing, analyzing, and interpreting them for us from different points of view. The method here is to touch, page by page, upon the pulse points of various grand old tales in order to enliven similar creative pulse-points in the reader. Consequently, more personal integrity may be experienced

during the reading, telling, and creating process. Most of the stories and myths that are mentioned come from European sources, yet their themes are common to many languages and countries, having been filtered through the genius of the time and the folk who lived there.

The ultimate purpose of this book is to foster the creation of fresh, healthy, new stories to help us better meet the challenges of our times. Healthy and helpful stories spontaneously well from us wherever we are, whenever we are willing to let them. To make a wholesome, spirited story that truly meets the moment is a process that enlivens us from deep within, arousing a sense of wonder and joy to strengthen us on our sometimes overwhelming and bewildering journeys.

When I began my career, teaching a variety of subjects at different locations, I thought how happy I would be as a traveling storyteller. Then everything could be wrapped up joyfully into one role. But in those days storytelling did not have the enthusiastic appreciation it formerly had in America. Besides, I was shy and withdrawn. For a number of years instead of storytelling, I stood before classes of children and young adults and, for the most part, shared books and the ways of language with them.

One day I had a great surprise. I was asked to keep a feisty class of children busy for an hour because their teacher was ill. How was I to keep them quiet? I had just enough time to search out something to read to them; since it was Saint Patrick's Day, I chose some tales collected by W. B. Yeats, the Irish poet. I opened my mouth to read and out came an authentic Irish accent that astonished me. I kept on reading; the children were as entranced as I was listening to the story I had selected and to my voice. The words sang through me. My heart had opened wide. At the end of the hour, I closed the book and my Irish voice was gone. That experience served as a great opening for me. I wondered how many cultural roots were living at the base of my tongue, waiting to emerge in story-song.

In the years that followed, as I learned to hear myself, I could listen more and more deeply to the quiescent voices in the children and adults from many lands and cultures who entered my classrooms. I loved helping them to free themselves into poetry and stories and into declamations in debate. Tell us your dream! Tell us your memories!

Describe who you love and the taste of truth!

At long last I discovered Waldorf Education, and this was my true entry into an old cause. To tell a great story well, I learned in my education classes as I prepared to teach in a Waldorf School, is my duty. Not to know the story as part of my mental collection but to feel it, as the liveliest child might, all the way down to my toes. Not to think of imagination as a historical activity but as daily necessity. Soon I would have to make up and to tell stories every day to maintain the high standards of the best of Waldorf School teachers. According to this creative method, I began to strengthen and to regulate my own sporadic imagination in new ways to meet the needs of the children that I was teaching. I began to believe in earnest that storytellers have as profound a purpose as any who are charged to guide and transform human lives. I knew it as an ancient discipline and vocation to which everyone is called.

One day, in the course of my training as a Waldorf teacher in England, I encountered one of several people who have greatly changed my life. Gisela Bittleston was to become my puppetry teacher and the teacher of my soul. I met her for the first time within a glowing little jewel of a theater speaking and singing in high vibrato a Rumanian puppet play, 'The White Wolf'. The beautiful story was about an enchanted white wolf whose gentle lover had to journey to the farthest stars to find the light to transform him into the true prince that he was. This was a story about the total determination of the human spirit for self-transformation. The universal theme at that moment deeply touched my soul.

Thus began my relationship with fairy tales, for as a child, like many of my generation, I had only slight interest and pleasure in fairy tales. Today I often enjoy telling people how un-American I had believed storybook princes and princesses to be. I understand very well the resistance we can have to the kinds of characters and landscapes that are invoked in this book. Yet in many subsequent puppet productions, as my right hand, my left hand, and my voice portrayed characters that my 'democratic' skeptical mental attitudes rejected, I took on new life! As I opened myself to splendid, new possibilities in childhood education, I also had begun, with vistas undreamed of, the reeducation of my own 'inner child'. I found a deeper breathing.

My joy at working with the beauty and truth behind folk and fairy-

tale pictures gradually was opening me up to unfamiliar qualities of mind and heart. My soul was now ranging through archetypal energies, and through many different cultures and moods of soul. As I spoke and sang the tones of a mournful queen, an enchanted prince, a wicked witch, an eager princess, or a powerful shaman, I discovered lost and undeveloped parts of myself. I had become a grateful puppeteer, portraying stories from behind the red curtains of my story theater. I could whimper and cry! I could sing soulfully because the queen longed for a child, or because the beautiful child needed to sing in the story. I could laugh like a horrid witch or wizard, and I could dispel wicked enchantments with one resounding word. I became so enthusiastic that I taught many others to create puppet productions so that they might share this way of feeling into a story and receiving its gifts.

After a time, I discovered that through all the many hours I had spent with stories from around the world – changing the lighting from scene to scene, creating hand puppets and props with many sorts of young and old people, refining the gestures and voices – I had somehow won from these old tales the power to make up new stories. I was no longer a timid soul; I had found immeasurable new breath, understanding, and purpose. I was creating stories for the children I taught, and I was being invited to parties as the storyteller. ‘Marcus needs a story for his fifth birthday because he wants so much to fly that we are afraid he will jump off a cliff.’ ‘Serena wants more than anything to be a prince and seems so bossy and intense. If only she could hear a story about herself.’ ‘Joseph attacks his sister as if she were an armed guard.’ Baffled and inspired again and again into creativity for the children, my old dream was coming true: I was sitting in the midst of families and in classrooms, listening to myself create story medicine.

My way of working with stories today is as a tool for self-transformation. I give prescriptions for self-healing through stories. These days much attention is given to finding and healing our ‘inner child’. Age is not a factor in story therapeutics: ‘Divine Enfant’ and ‘Wise Old Sage’ live within everyone. The spontaneous wisdom woven into the core of every person is the essence of life. It is this wisdom that we tap into in the storytelling process. It is like prayer; it reassures and strengthens us. Of course, we have to go through whatever resistance

we may feel as we return to this core. Is there any pain, sorrow, or nightmare too terrible to be told through a story? Are there fears and bewilderments too deep for a story to hold?

Story makers ultimately accept all earthly feelings and carry them as wise children into the realms of joy. I invite people to reach into my great round basketful of archetypal figures and, with the kind assistance of the puppets, to bring forth the aspirations and dramas of their inner lives. Or, seated around a candle in a circle of care and creativity, to write and to share spontaneously a tale from their own wise imaginations. Or, to sit apart in pairs for a while and tell stories to one another as if their lives depended on it.

Because I myself resisted becoming a storyteller, I appreciate the powers that are stored within you, though perhaps entirely hidden, which can flourish with affirmation and guidance. When it is time for a story, I say to myself and to others: Take a good deep breath, plunge in and keep swimming; the waters will keep us up. Or dance, fly. Or jump into the volcano. In the realm of stories, all will be made well.

Movement and a Sense of Direction

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all the time. – Rumi



STORY MUSIC

As you tell stories, life-powers which may be hidden away within you can recover beat and rhythm. The melodies of many moods can reverberate through your story imagery. You have a sense of coordination that wells up naturally in your muscles and limbs. However constrained and awkward you may feel in your ordinary life, you know deep within you how to move with delightful vitality. Goals and ordering principles will set you off in a story pattern with a great sense of order and purpose as if you are moving within a musical composition. Language will take on beat and tone. Hold off the impulse to spoof, mock, and sentimentalize the wise, old, well-known story forms even a little while, and their rich, healthy vitality will now well up for you from the original source.

You can take pleasure in listening consciously for the inner music of the great old tales, and in forming your own stories with similar thematic flow and counterpoint. Classical fairy tales, like classical symphonies, mark time majestically. The form of 'Little Snow White' in the original Grimm's collection shows us many of the grand elements of story structure. A theme is introduced at the beginning: yearning, birth, and death. When the child is born, the good queen dies. This death resolves the beautiful opening section. The stepmother embodies the counter-theme; her pride turns into envy and murderous jealousy from which the child must be saved. The middle section of the story surrounds the lovely, growing child with the protection of the seven dwarfs, whose nature is full of the strength and hardihood of the mountains in which they live and work. The stepmother's cruelty intrudes into this realm until the harmonies of the seven little workers are almost broken by her power. In the finale, a princely lover arrives to restore her to life, whose potent love shines into the ice of her bondage to the jealous queen, returning her to the human realm with the dwarfs' blessings.

An innocent meets opposition; help comes; then more opposition and more help alternate until the ultimate resolution of love and fulfilment. This basic story rhythm has a deep connection to our human heartbeat,

which moves regularly through three expansions and contractions until one complete circulation has been completed. Whether long or short, a story may be experienced as a symphonic word picture circulating through the chambers of a joyously expanding heart. The tempo of a tale may be discovered and controlled by the teller as a piece of music is discovered and interpreted by a musician. A largo telling may create a mood of melancholic catharsis, *allegro moderato*, a sense of sprightly balance. Fast-paced tripling on the tongue – *vivace*, *molto vivace*, or *furioso* tales or episodes – appeal to the swift mercurial energies of teller and listener alike. Silences between words and episodes can be as eloquent in a story as in a piece of music. Within the bounds of any tale, several themes and rhythms may hold sway, giving tongue, heart, and mind the satisfaction of a contrapuntal journey through the realms of time.

The musical patterns of the human heart are the foundation for the most powerful and beautiful stories that have been created and told on this earth. As you stay in touch with your pulse and heartbeat, the breath with which you formulate your story-music will be charged with warmth and flowing rhythms. These will propel the story forward naturally. In the midst of telling your story from your heart, you will be in touch with profound principles that live in your story language and in all harmonious forms.

Whatever your favorite instrument, tell a well-known fairy tale entirely through spontaneous musical composition. Afterwards you may wish to write the music down.

Music unlocks images and the power of speech. Ask each person in a storytelling group to bring a favorite musical instrument, or, provide a variety of instruments for them to choose from. Each instrument may represent a character in the story, a story landscape, a place, and/or a 'magic spell'. Ask the group to create a spontaneous story completely through the interaction of the musical instruments. Simple instruments may be used, such as castanets, triangle, and drum, that can interact with whistling, strumming, and/or singing. Ask the group to practice their story until they know it musically by heart, then present it to others. The others may wish to guess what the story is about, or

after the musical presentation, someone in the group may want to put the story into words.

To become more aware of your power to regulate the speed and rhythm of your words as a storyteller, tell the same story in a variety of tempos.

Try singing an entire story to yourself, like an uninhibited child in a beautiful garden with only the bees, ants, and trees as your audience. A courageous elderly woman said that she had always explored life with a brace around her neck, which constantly restricted her breathing. In your story, an iron band locked around your story heart or throat may snap.

DESCENDING

As you are creating a story, a sudden or persistent urge to dig down may surprise you. Or, you may feel like falling down, like Alice did, through an already existing tunnel into 'Wonderland'. If you follow this descent, you will come to deeper levels of earth life and of yourself. Downward ardor may lead to exciting, ominous fires and darkness, to caverns in which are hidden gems and jewels of wisdom and power. Guardians of these depths may astonish you with their appearances and behavior. You may meet wild beasts, dragons, and shadow monsters that have lain in wait there with tests, passwords, mirror games, and mysterious hungers, that can be appeased, perhaps, only by magical means.

As you descend into story terrain, you also may discover gnomes and dwarfs, elemental workers in the under-earth. Curdie found them in the mining mountains of Scotland in the story world of George MacDonald. The magnetic brilliance of their jeweled realms constitutes a main theme in the Germanic myths that were dramatized by Richard Wagner in his 'Ring Cycle of the Nibelungenlied'. Dungeons in old castles may chain a noble traveler, such as biblical Daniel, who was held captive in the dark for his ability to accurately interpret dreams. Greek and ancient American Indian lore portray a maiden who goes down into the shadowy realms below the surface of the known earth and there meets the spirits of those who have died and are buried. As an adventurer in the under-earth, the maiden is initiated in the ways

of the realms of the dead. She becomes a queen, and in her royal role becomes a helper and guide to the souls who, when they are prepared, can receive the touch of her radiant wisdom and return to the realms of light and fresh air. George MacDonald created uniquely feminine and benevolent helpers in the underworld, wearing luminous crowns and gowns and shoes. These powerful feminine presences unfailingly find and help children lost down there. A monk may be praying ceaselessly in a deep cavern, although in and around him burn fires of fabulous hues and intensities.

Courage to descend into story terrain may lead in many directions at once. Similarly, our bodies contain many mysterious caverns, openings, and branching circulations of nerves and blood. A story can illuminate the lower depths of our circulatory powers. These connect us with some of the deepest realities in the world outside us and with our own will to live, to be, and to generate new life in and around us. When a character is given cautionary advice and talismen before venturing downward into these realms, wise story characters accept the aid. Brash and careless ones may be eaten by monsters, enchanted, or incarcerated by crones or devils. Then some means of reconnecting with the light and order of the world above must be found.

You have the power to descend into your darkest centers of will and courage and regeneration. As storyteller and story creator, you meet your power to give life and to take it away, to live and to die, to rule and to withdraw. The whole history of death is your inheritance, as are the vast oceans of birth and life upon the earth. As you accept your goings down as well as your risings up again, light will shine into even your darkest places. The pictures that well up from there into your thoughts and feelings will show you depths of human nature. Whatever and whoever arises can be welcomed by your wise inner storyteller.

A puppet story was made up by three girls just on the edge of puberty. I transcribed it as best I could when I realized how wonderful it was. They built the set out of classroom chairs on top of a long table and different pieces of silk which I had dyed into beautiful colors. The assignment was to make up a story about someone who needed to be liberated, and at the end of the story to have cause for a great celebration. Each group of children was given an hour to prepare their story for the

others. One of the girls was resistant and anxious but her attitude and her voice changed magnificently in the course of the story. I assure the reader of this book that I did not coach this story except for the directions, though I had made the space very safe for the children's deep imaginations to work.

At the top of an overturned chair was the queen's pink upper chamber. Directly below this was a dark place filled with black and purple cloths. A silken impression of a stairwell connected them. To one side was a misty green and lavender forest. The girl who was narrating explained all this before they began.

The princess began with a grand gesture. 'This is the palace where my mother presides over everyone.'

'You may explore', says the queen, 'but you must not go to the lower chambers my dear.'

'Thank you mother.' She goes down the long, long, long spiral staircase.

'Oh, who is this moaning in such distress?' I must disobey my mother to help that poor soul. 'May I help you in any way?'

'Help me. Save me.'

'I will do what is in my power. I shall return to the upper chambers to see what I must do.'

'My daughter', the queen chides.

'But mother; it was for this kind, lonely one that I went down.'

'We shall talk about your punishment later. Now you must go to the one who gives advice to all the confused and disobedient princesses. She is true and harmless.'

So the princess went through the depths of a dark forest. The mists lifted as she moved through it. She came to the village of a wise Indian woman.

'I need your guidance', says the princess, and describes her descent into the dark chamber and the spirit she heard calling to her down there. The wise Indian woman agrees to go with her.

'You have made a wise and kind wish, princess. I am happy there are some of your kind left in this world of greedy souls. I must not let this poor spirit suffer any longer. We will attempt to free this spirit.' So

they traveled through the forest safely; the mists parted wherever they went.

'This is the palace where my mother presides over everyone', says the princess again.

'She is always performing more of her queenly duties.' They go to tell the queen what they are going to do.

The queen graciously agrees to let them make the attempt. 'Go now.' Then she hastens about her queenly duties.

'We must go and free the spirit.' The princess and the wise Indian descend the long, long, long spiral staircase to the lower chamber.

'Help me. Help me. Save me', moans the spirit profoundly.

The wise woman questions her and hears her story. 'She had been part of a good people, but others had come and dragged them down until, without a shred of evidence, she was put into the dungeon and kept there with rats running freely until she died. She is one of many who have been judged harshly, which is what can happen to most of us.'

'Help me free the poor wandering spirit with the shadows of harm upon her shoulders', requests the wise woman of the princess. They chant together.

'Go. You have my blessing. The stars are not very humble. Go and do the good of the stars.'

Then, having put several cloths on the end of a classroom pointer, the narrator said:

'This is a star of many colors of warmth and of kindness. Repay us not. Only fly forth to meet the stars. Thank you.'

The spirit went out of the dark chamber into the light and was taken into the star. 'Thank you. Thank you.' The wise woman and the princess ascended the long, long, long spiral staircase and informed the queen of the events below. The wise woman asked if the princess might be allowed to return to her village with her for a special celebration.

'Though we are small, we are very close', said the wise woman of her village. 'We shall hold a dancing celebration with all the colors on our heads and our feet and in our singing breath.'

The queen consented to let her daughter go with the wise woman, and during the celebration dance, she sat quietly in her upper chamber.

A deep contentment came over us all after this story had been told. This group of young adolescents had brought about a mysterious and powerful transmutation. Somehow, it had been a great event.

Create a sense of higher and lower in your mind's eye. Visualize or sense who lives in these polar opposite spaces. What connects below and above? Now send your protagonist into the depths and find the way to build a relationship between the lower and the upper levels of your story.

Imagine a wise guide who can safely lead your main character down into an unknown realm and interpret whatever is found there.

RISING

As you experiment with gestures and motions in story space, a vertical urge may lift you far and wide, on wings or winds or on a magical carpet. The power to rise connects you with light, joy, and vast uncharted territories, which interpenetrate your material form, reflecting into you the mighty movements of the sun, moon, and stars. The many energy centers that propel you through adventures constitute territories through which the figures in your story can ascend. The sexual realm may be expressed through powerful imagery – children born and unborn, romantic impulses, fears and jealousies, the sense of life and of death. An unhappy episode in the magnetic realm of hunger may resemble an episode in Dante's hell. As you take your adventurer into the realm of the heart, you may feel joy and warmth; all at once, the scene may seem transformed with loveliness and pervaded with a peaceful rose and golden light.

When the realm of the throat is reached, the power to speak truth suddenly may awaken. A silent one may find his or her voice and be able to say what no one else has been able to say; perhaps words of encouragement, of insight, of loving acceptance may well forth. Or, voices from even the furthest reaches of your global-self may be heard speaking in many languages. A singer may emerge as a delightful, surprising story-poet and illuminate 'ordinary' things and experiences with caring words. Advancing further up the ladder, you may climb

into your thinking, integrating center, and from there into the utmost realms of spiritual vision and truth where the power to perceive and to discern may awaken into the light of ever-expanding consciousness. Story characters wandering, or compelled to go into these various realms, reflect their truths.

Through storytelling, you can safely experience the delights of going upward with wise guidance and the possible dire consequences of ascending carelessly into unfamiliar spaces. Within you coexist balance and disorder. If a way cannot be found to get down again, the heights can be as ominous as the depths. How can one master this upward urge? The proverbial princess in her tower very much needs to be saved and brought down into a wholesome embrace. The dilemma of the 'Light Princess' in the story by George MacDonald is that she cannot stop levitating. Castle turrets and towers may express a leavening sense of power, pride, and celebration, yet a wizard walled high into his protective tower must find a way down to the world of ordinary mortals. Daedalus's flight shows us the danger of flying too high too fast. The builders of the Tower of Babel strove to touch the heavens by spiraling to heights never before expressed in stone, but created instead many broken and fallen voices.

An American mother of Scandinavian ancestry wrote a powerful story during one of the workshops she attended that began:

Once there lived a bright young princess who loved to sing and dance, but most of all she loved to hear the birds of the forest sing their melodious tunes, for when she heard their singing, she would dream of faraway places. Braids that danced when she danced and dreamed sprang out of her head. She wore ribbons on her braids. She loved to wear flowing skirts so she could see the air move them like the wings of the birds above the trees. Her eyes were sparkling blue, like an ocean glistening in the sun. On her feet she wore the softest, red shoes you could imagine; they protected her feet, but the soft leather felt like velvet next to her skin.

Now it happened that she was sitting out under her favorite weeping willow tree listening to the birds when a particularly beautiful, white bird caught her eye. She was attracted to the bird and very much

wanted to follow it and rose up to do so. The bird flew over meadows and across rocky fields to the edge of a dark forest. She didn't know she had come to the forest, except that all of a sudden she realized that she had lost sight of the beautiful bird, and it had grown dark. The ribbons on her braids had stopped flying. She didn't know what to do because she wanted so much to be with the bird; she started to cry.

The story adventures that followed took her little one into strange territories. Afterwards she spoke about the power of this story in her life:

I now have a way to understand the legacy I have been dealt in a very positive way. I have a way to meet it with a creative mind and not crumple or get into the syndrome of bemoaning my fate. It is truly a release to know that I have the freedom to move from a scary place. I have a way to find deeper meanings and to reconcile happenings. I can look at the symbols: when I understand them, it is such a satisfaction. The girl with the braids is going through a process; it wasn't a process that happened to me overnight. The story shows me that I have the ability to find my way. I'm not afraid to do that. I was afraid, shy. The story took me to a level that had provided encouragement, as if the spiritual side of me was given a boost of confidence. It is like the warm, comforting bed you come into on a cold night. I was spiritually comforted on a very deep level that I hadn't even known was there. The fulfilment was in the act of becoming the story. I felt as if someone was wrapping me in this wonderfully warm comforter. All along I felt totally taken care of.

Another mother, who attended the same workshop, however, had been unable to get herself out of the imaginary tree her protagonist had escaped into during her story. She had to work on his descent for many weeks. When the hero of her story finally figured out how to get out of his enchanted tree in a way that felt 'right' to her, she was overjoyed.

Tell a story in which your main character sees things with unusual clarity, as if from above, and says what he or she sees very plainly. What consequences ensue? Reread 'The Emperor's New Clothes'.

Create a set of characters who are unable to get down to earth until they receive just the right help at the right time.

CIRCLING

Children and adults who are deeply engaged with a story want to hear it again and again. Repetitions build up energy patterns and strengthen already existing ones in us. Healthy patterns connect us with the flowing regularities out of which our whole earth, the solar system, and the worlds beyond are built and maintained. In a story, a circling journey through exactly the same territory enlivens our sense of place and time. Whether large or small, covering a vast distance or concentrated in the boundaries of a little, green knoll, or a magical underground room, the one who circles through it again and again gains familiarity and strength. The sure movement of the sun, moon, and stars through the story skies, as other less orderly events unfold, inspires confidence. The steadiness of the seasons, as they care in turn for seed, root, stem, leaf, blossom, and fruit, brings a deep sense of peace and order when chaotic and terrible events must be faced by vulnerable adventurers. As in 'The Juniper Tree', wherever a true picture of the rolling regularity of things can be brought out in a story, a gentle sense of wonder and security helps sustain us through the perils that must be met.

Plants spiral upward in sure and steady circling rhythms. Invisible human growing patterns also spiral in regular increments. In old fairy tales, you will sometimes encounter a hill that can only be opened by pacing around it carefully and repeating certain words in a certain order again and again. At first the hill may seem deceptively ordinary or dull. But, when the necessary ritual has been accomplished correctly, a door appears and what has been captive can be released from those enchanted bounds.

In the wisdom of fairy-tale imagination, the winding up and unwinding of spells through exact movements and sounds may remind us of the invisible wheels through which we move and speak as we build up our human lives, releasing old ways to new. When they are correctly addressed through attention and effort, the wheeling fields of energy that are buried within us may flower freshly as beauty, goodness, and truth. As you establish in yourself the truth of the human life cycle, from this feeling of circularity, you can create circles of many dimensions. The story of your life is connected with the movement of the earth, sun, moon, and stars.

The clock of life has a round face, through which the days, weeks, months, and years continuously turn. You can immerse your story world gently into encircling realities and build your story patterns firmly out of their complex yet comforting geometry.

Tell a story about an ‘old-fashioned’ clock maker who loves interweaving his round clockwork and designing the faces of his clocks. Fill the story with circles and curves. Include his feeling for the sun as it moves through a whole day, and the moon and stars as they curve through the night sky. Throughout your story, enjoy a deep feeling of reverence and interest in the mighty, yet minute, movements of time.

Create a magic ritual that must be performed by turning around a certain number of times and repeating words in a special rhythm. Expand this ritual into a story that includes it.

Tell a story through which the four seasons circle three times during your protagonist’s adventures.

GOING FORTH AND RETURNING

The homing instinct shapes multitudes of myths and tales, as it can shape your own stories. Neither the destination nor the return may offer perfect security, yet you can let your story line proceed with a definite linear pulse beat – a great expansion that is followed by a sure contraction and return to the starting point. The very best-loved stories in early childhood offer a warm nest of comfort. Odysseus, Theseus, Little Red Ridinghood, and the girls who visit Mother Holle go out on an adventure and return home. Father’s arms welcome Hansel and Gretel home again from their forays in the dark forest. Dear Mili returns to her mother’s loving heart after many years. A gate opens on to a quiet garden; familiar pets bark and whistle. A kingdom awaits its rulers; a village awaits the hero or heroine’s skillful goodness. In such stories, the places and people from which the protagonists venture securely, even impatiently, await their return.

In George MacDonald’s Curdie stories, when the Princess has found Curdie and his attendant beasts and other helpers, she can return health

and order to her father, the King, and to all the realm. When Jason has won a powerful lover and the golden fleece in distant Colchis, he returns across the high seas to rule his own land. An adventurer such as Rip Van Winkle or Odysseus, who returns home after long years to find things very much changed, seeks to rebuild from the ground by his love. All such stories center us in our heartbeat, reminding us with every pulse that we are propelled out of creative spiritual ordering principles and powers into a life span that, at death, will return us home in good order.

As a storyteller, you can be aware that each little pulse of your heart is part of the vast trajectory of your whole life span. Your comings and goings are part of the living heartbeat of the larger universe. You can enjoy the rhythmic journeys of your story characters in this vast living context. Warm steady heartbeats awaken a sense of adventure and confidence in life. As your heart pulse expands, you go forth to unite yourself with the world around you. As you return to systolic relaxation, you experience inwardness and peace.

I was deeply touched when I first met parents who took time to be with their young children every evening. Together they had mastered a very beautiful bedtime ritual, which is often learned by parents whose children attend Waldorf schools. The whole family participated together. These fortunate children took turns entwining themselves in their father's or their mother's lap and arms. Each child was helped by both parents to remember their day. They might start with the evening meal, recall a green fly and white milk on the table at noon, then a funny morning visitor. They reversed the chronological order of the day until the children could remember waking up safely in their own house that morning. This simple ritual of remembering was followed by a prayer to inspire trust in human nature and in the goodness of the world, bringing a sense of order, warmth, and closeness at the end of the day, and strengthening a mutual sense of memory and love.

In Waldorf school kindergartens, all the children's birthdays are celebrated with a version of the following story, which can be adapted at any stage of life to the part of ourselves that remains a child.

Once upon a time there was a little angel and a big angel in heaven, and the little angel loved to look into the clouds. One day she ran to

the big angel and asked:

‘What is that big round hall?’

‘That is the earth’, said the big angel. ‘Can I go down there?’

The next day she was playing in the clouds again, and this time she saw mountains and rivers and valleys, and it was so beautiful that she ran to the big angel again and asked, ‘May I go down to the Earth?’

The big angel said, ‘No, it is not time yet.’

While the little angel was sleeping she had a dream. (Here the teacher describes the mother and father with care.)

The little angel asked, ‘Will you be my mother?’

And the woman said, ‘Yes’. Then the little angel saw a man near her and asked, ‘Will you be my father?’

‘Yes’, said the man. Then the little angel wakes up from the dream and runs to the big angel and tells the dream.

The big angel says, ‘This is the dream that all little angels have who want to go down to earth’.

The little angel asks, ‘Can I go now?’

‘No, you have to wait until the moon makes nine circles around the earth.’ The big angel takes her to a special place. They make nine circles. When that is over, there is a rainbow that goes from heaven to earth, and the little angel gives her wings back to the big angel, and when the little angel wakes up, she is looking right into the eyes of the woman and the man she found in her dream.

A mother, who had to travel long distances by car when her son was three and four years old, developed a story routine that was a great help to both of them. When it was time for his nap or to go to sleep in the evening, she would tell a story about a boy whose life was very similar to that of her son’s. She started each episode in exactly the same way.

There was once a boy named Sandy. He was called Sandy because he had sandy-colored hair. He loved to explore and go on many adventures. He lived in a house across the street and down the lane from the shore of the sea.

In all these adventures, she said she ‘let her imagination go’.

Once an old fisherman invited Sandy on to a boat and told him all

about fishing from his point of view.

Another time Sandy explored a meadow and discovered that when he was quiet he could hear creatures. Even a rabbit spoke to him.

‘It was really interesting what came out of the process of letting go. I always tried to tell a story based on an experience we had just gone through or were going to have. If we were going somewhere to visit, that would become a Sandy story.’

Although her son is eleven years old now, he sometimes requests ‘a Sandy’. Recently when she started out with her Sandy introduction, he fell deeply asleep. After a while, he woke up and said: ‘What happened?’ He mumbled, she said, because at eleven, he was a little reluctant to show how much he wanted to feel the old security and warmth of their storytelling ritual.

A lively child of five was sleepwalking and crying every night after he moved to another part of town with his family. When his distraught mother came to see me, we made up a story for her to tell at bedtime. It was about their old house. In the story the old house sags and creaks when the family moves away, But, as the new family arrives with shouts of happiness and delicious cooking smells rise from the kitchen stove, the house becomes comforted and holds the new family peacefully in its ‘arms’. The story worked like a charm.

Through your own original storytelling, cultivate your sense of safe return. Create a story about someone or something that travels from a beloved home and, coming full circle, finds it unchanged. ‘A long time’ may seem different to a child than to an adult, yet everyone experiences wonder and comfort in returning.

Create a story about someone or something that leaves a beloved home and returns by the same route after a long time to find it almost unrecognizable. You may want to imagine that your main character has lost possession of one or more of the senses, such as the power to see or to hear, yet his or her power of loving recognition may even be enhanced by the handicap.
