

## **Nurturing the Nurturers: Story as Food for the Soul**

In this life there are three journeys to embark upon in the company of another. Each of these journeys is a privilege, undertaken with a willing heart, an open mind and an outstretched hand.

The first, is to assist the passage and welcome the arrival of a new being into the world; the miraculous journey of birth. The last is to bid farewell to a departing soul; the final journey of death. While these two journeys may be completed in a day, the one in between can engage us for a lifetime. It is the journey of the nurturer; the one who nourishes, rears, fosters, trains and educates those in their care.

Nurturing is not only integral to the lives of parents, teachers and carers, but the foundation upon which all other learning and development processes are built. The responsibility for fostering creative, intelligent and sensitive human beings is enormous and demanding. Nurturers deserve resources, recognition and rewards befitting their role.

Teachers, carers and parents do not receive the monetary and status entitlements that are their due. They are over worked, underpaid and under resourced. Naturally, this impacts on the children in their care. To what degree, is largely determined by the nurturers themselves, who are called upon to give extra time, commitment and specialized attention.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945) a German theologian suggested that the morality of a society could be measured by what it does for its children. Anthropologist, Margaret Mead made a similar comment in relation to how a society treats its old people. Children and elders play a particular role in all societies: the children are the embodiment of that society's future and the old people the custodians of the culture. Between these two groups are the nurturers, who, in addition to their nurturing role, are often the bridge between young and old.

Although a society as a whole may not value the true worth of its youngest or oldest members, certain individuals within it have pushed the boundaries and challenged prescribed notions of nurturance, to create innovative programmes, inspirational projects and enlightened nurturing practices. It is these people who also need nurturing so that they can be stimulated and sustained in their ongoing work.

How do we nurture the nurturer? There are basic requirements that all workers need: a safe, supportive environment, appropriate training and supervision, quality resources and constructive feedback. Although these things are structurally important and often considered by management as the foundation for a stable working environment, they do not nourish the soul.

Time and again people have managed to work in appalling physical conditions, because they derive their sustenance from a spiritual or artistic source. What is perceived as inner strength, expressed as faith and experienced as satisfaction, is simply the result of feeding the soul.

Stories are food for the soul; they can be processed and packaged into easily digestible containers, grown wild from ancient and organic seeds or given

as a gift by the Earth. Like food, they too have varying degrees of 'nutritional value' and must be monitored in the same way junk food is. Children deserve the best food and the best stories to nurture their bodies and souls.

Stories are recipes; they can be told in the old way and handed down from one generation to the next, or made up as you go along. Stories are meals; they can be prepared with love and attention and become the family favourite, or created with the best ingredients and all the trappings to become a rarified treat. Stories can be sampled by the discerning, relished by the gourmet and devoured by the hungry. Human beings need food to stay alive, but we need stories to thrive.

'Failure to thrive' was a description given to war orphans, who, although given the basic tenements of food, shelter and warmth to stay alive, did not grow, develop or express any interest in living, as they were starved of human touch and affection. These children were alienated from each other, their culture and their immediate environment. When we say that humans do not live on bread alone, we are acknowledging the importance of nurturing spiritual, emotional and cultural connections. We are saying that human beings need love.

Storytelling is an act of love. For it to take place there must be three things; a wise teller, a willing listener and a worthy story. If the listener hears the story with an open heart, and the teller tells it in such a way, the heart is warmed, the soul is nourished and all are nurtured.

Ben Okri describes the joy in storytelling as being twofold. There is 'the joy of the telling, which is to say of the artistic discovery. And the joy of the listening, which is to say of the imaginative identification. Both joys are magical and important. The first involves exploration and suffering and love. The second involves silence and openness and thought. The first is the joy of giving. The second is the joy of receiving...Of the two joys, the first teaches us humility, while the second deepens our humanity.'

There are an infinite number of stories for the storyteller to choose from. They live in the printed word and the artist's brush, the grey beard's memories and the seer's dreams. There is a story for every purpose; to entertain and explain, to educate and enlighten. Myths, legends fables, fairytales and folktales fly to us from every culture around the world. They bring with them the wisdom and wit of the old to be retold anew.

The fact that fairytales and folktales are still being told today, speaks to the power of these stories to reflect upon the human condition. Although they were orally transmitted long before they were written down, the pervasiveness of the printing press ensured that the written versions became the authorized ones. The prejudices and preferences of collectors are reflected in their written works, to the extent that children became regarded as the targeted audience. This has continued to the present day.

Before the nineteenth century, fairytales were largely told by adults to adults, and contained material that would not be deemed suitable for children's ears. However the essential magic in fairytales could not be vanquished by Victorian mores, and although many tales were sanitized they were not desecrated. The bones of the stories were kept in tact, even if some of the

endings were changed. Not surprisingly folklorists discovered similar stories in many different cultures. Joseph Jacobs an English folklorist who collected and published English Folktales and Celtic Folktales in the late nineteenth century once described a printed Cinderella story as,

‘an English version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original.’

In the same way that fairytales and folktales continue to be rediscovered, rewritten and retold, myths too have survived for centuries ‘because they have lessons and inspirations for our own lives.’ E D Hirsch. Even the rationalist Aristotle, said ‘The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.’

Whereas most nurturers acknowledge the importance of telling stories to children, they need a framework to understand the power of storytelling. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, ‘The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them.’

Storytelling is as much a nurturing experience for the teller as for the listener. Many stories, fables in particular, have a lesson to teach. However, if that is the sole purpose of storytelling, then the heart is not being opened to the experience of joy. Choosing a meaningful story and trusting its power enables the listener to discover the truth that resides in the story.

‘The purpose of the storyteller is to relate the truth in a manner that is simple: to integrate without reduction; for it is rarely possible to declare the truth as it is, because the universe presents itself as a mystery. We have to find parables; we have to find stories to unriddle the world’ Alan Garner.

Choosing appropriate stories to tell is essential to the making of a successful storytelling experience. Three guideposts to follow on the path are; to listen with your heart, trust the story and speak the truth.

Knowing that a story is right for you to tell, means allowing it to resonate in your heart. If it does not, then you will create excuses and be plagued by doubts about the telling. Either the story is not right, or the time is not right to tell it, so seek out another story. If it is right, then learning it will be a simple matter of seeing it in your mind’s eye, telling the bones of it to a friend and or writing a précis of it. When you have established the right setting for it to be received, and your listeners are ready, in your own words, tell it. Your feedback will be immediate and spontaneous.

You will feel if joy has been released, the spirit lifted and the mind enlightened. And you will know if these things have taken place in your listeners too. Starhawk said, that the test of a true myth is, that each time you return to it, new insights and interpretations arise.

Never be afraid to tell the same story more than once...at different storytelling sessions. Not only do children have their favourite tales, they like to participate in the telling of them. They identify with the characters, act out or join in the dialogue and often want to retell it. They too are building on their experience of the story, and its infinite possibilities.

Sharing your own experience of story with children and colleagues, opens the door to understanding the power of storytelling to heal the heart, inspire the

imagination and illuminate the intellect. And here I reiterate that this applies to both teller and listener.

When storytelling to children I expend a lot of energy in my performance. A day storytelling may leave me physically exhausted, however I replenish my soul with story in three ways. The first is to be open to the spontaneous participation of my listeners during the storytelling session. By this I know that they are connecting to the story(ies), which affirms my purpose in telling them. Afterwards I talk about my storytelling experience to a friend or mentor in storytelling. We share our insights, delights and desire that story may be enough to change the world. Finally I seek solace in the stories themselves. My own ability to be nurtured by them is dependent on my receptivity to their revelations. Stories are layered like onions and require us to go to a deeper level of meaning only when we are ready to comprehend it.

With this in mind, there are stories that I return to again and again, to savor and savour. These stories have survived for millennia because they speak to our humanity. We are compelled to tell them, because as Ben Okri says, 'we are part human, part stories.'

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### **Bibliography of Quotes**

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