
The Power of Real Stories in the Age of Screens

— Nancy Mellon

Once upon a time, stories were told by human voice, one person to another—parent to child; friend to friend; child to child; storyteller to the village, family, or wider community.

Today, accustomed to screened and virtual versions of stories, most adults are surprised to learn that most of the wonder and joy that children experience as they listen to tales comes from having an adult fully and warmly present to narrate them.

Children listen alive to stories with hands and feet and growing bones. Well-structured, flowing narrative spoken by a warmly present adult nurtures children from head to toe and deep within. Whether from a sacred tradition such as the Koran or Jataka or from traditional folk or fairy tales, warmly spoken tales nurture children's cellular well-being. As well-balanced stories sound through them, stories can encourage good digestion. Running through blood and muscle, they can heal and awaken curiosity and joy and powerfully sparkle and dance both adults and children to life. They move us naturally into play activities.

Thankfully, many parents and teachers, seeing how children become passive and mesmerized by screens, commit to regulating their children's use of devices and TV time. Yet, like the hungry "wolf" at the door, too often parents use their own devices in front of children and ignore the very rules that they have set. Vigorous research, such as Cris Rowan's in *Virtual Child* and Mari Swingle's in *i-Minds*, thoroughly detail the hazards of turning children and families over to screens. Years later, if not immediately, the effects of flickering images may erupt as nerve dysfunction or breathing and character disorders. At the very least, framed viewing isolates children and puts a chill on their immersion into the real world of human warmth, struggle, joy, and play.

Everyone responsible for the wellbeing of young children these days is reckoning with the effects of these potent devices. This very moment, vast numbers of children are glued to a small tablet watching Disney's newest alterations of *Beauty and the Beast* or *Frozen*, which was adapted from Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. Amidst the thickets of

hyper-screened entertainments and instant access to huge menus of old and new versions of tales, which stories best help to build character and resilience today? How can we intentionally bring stories to counter the hypnotizing power of technology?

In "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids," seven vulnerable little kid goats are left alone at home by their mother. "Do not open the door to strangers while I am away," the mother warns as she locks the door behind her. Then the wolf comes to the door, cunningly disguised as their dear parent. The confused little goats open the door and all but one are consumed by the wolf. Although we may protect real wolves in their natural habitats, does not that famished story-Wolf reside in all of us? Folk tales like "The Three Little Pigs" and "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids" speak symbolic wisdom to both adults and children about unlimited openness to the lures of the material world.

As children sense the wisdom of "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids," they enjoy acting it out. To prime play, parents and teachers can narrate the story several times, find a blanket, a watery blue silk ready to cover the villain, and a matronly sewing basket with imaginary scissors, strong needle and thread. Before the start of play-acting, I often encourage the children to prepare the grand finale to this tale by carrying some previously collected hefty stones to place in a circle that represents the well.

Depending on the children's ages, play-acting roles may be fluid or assigned. Children may want an adult to safely be the mother and wolf. The kids in the cottage "baaaa" their good-byes to their mother as she goes off to market, basket in hand. When the wolf's knock-knock-knocking is heard at the door, caution is sensed but eventually goes unheeded. The instant the door is opened, the story-Wolf enters to wrap the troupe one by one into the wolf-belly blanket.

When Mother Goat returns home, she senses what has happened like so many parents who know instinctively how to respond in emergencies. She discovers her one surviving kid and tenderly frees him from his hiding place. Then she motions to him to bring her sewing basket. Taking the imaginary

scissors, she ceremoniously snips open the beastly belly blanket to release all her other beloved children. In the playful hush, children then load stones instead of kids into the wolf-blanket. Mother Goat, with equal ceremony, pretends to sew up the belly. Then she quickly changes roles to become the Wolf, heavily awkward, waking up with a terrible belly-aching thirst. The children push and carry the blanket of stones to the well and ceremoniously cover the villain with the watery cloth. Now circling round and round the stones they sing from their hearts: *The wolf is dead, the wolf is dead.*

How different are the faces of children aglow with joy as they embody stories in this way, compared to the faces of children who, drawn into a story, are hunched over screened devices? Does making a physically robust drama out of conquering the Wolf nourish imagination and intellect? Yes. Vivian Gussin Paley, a prolific early childhood educator, encourages story dramatics every day in the classroom. After only a few weeks in her realm, every child plays freely. She often makes daily tasks, such as clean-up time, into stories. To children replaying Hurricane Katrina, she gave the image of “putting on [our] big rubber boots” such as helpers from the National Guard might have worn as they worked with us to make our world clean again. Like Nell Smyth, author of *The Breathing Circle* and *Drama at Heart*, Vivian inspires communities of actors in her classrooms, strengthening the wise imaginings that even the most protected children need to develop in order to meet today’s storm of technology.

During an interview entitled “Storytelling in Young Children’s Development,” Vivian Paley spoke of a fundamental plot line. “Let’s go back to ‘peekaboo,’ the beginning of story . . . [I]t’s the infant who begins the story. Where is that nice smiling person? Gone. Will she come back? I’m afraid. Ah, here she is, back again.” This is the beginning of the child as narrator. Story scenarios give a safe way to imagine “What if’s.” What if the mother and baby peek at one another? What if there’s a big wind and it looks like a hurricane? What if the bad guy comes? And so on. What if the children put away their phones?

In the interview, Paley continues: “Every new class of little children . . . are here to play and to find out where they belong in a group and how that group creates a community.” Relating the play of children

imagining themselves sisters, she says, “If you look at everything that’s going on in kindergartens and in some preschools . . . you can bring children from all levels of society and background, rich and poor and middle, hearing English at home [or not], and you put them into an environment where there are playful scenes that they all imagine, dictate, and act out, you are hard put to say which child is in special education, which is in a regular classroom, and which young child is in a gifted classroom. . . . All the children, even the children without spoken words, for one neurological or experiential reason or another, imagine the story acted out . . . and can be helped to put it on with their own classmates. It is the leveling and uplifting activity and we can’t do without it.”

The life of every child is filled with an immense array of moral dilemmas. The world’s great fairy tales portray dangerous realities and entities to be met and diligently, creatively transformed. Maria Tatar’s *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* helps us to understand the transformative power of story. Snakes, frogs and toads crawling from the mouth of a wicked girl may be puzzling to a child who wants to love and protect frogs and snakes, yet be a useful picture of anger. Recently I met a woman who grew up in an abusive household and whose favorite plaything as a child was a long soft snake with amber buttons for eyes; night and day it was her protector. Wise stories, such as Perrault’s “Toads and Diamonds,” expand symbolic vocabulary while embodying inner dramas of growing moral awareness.

What if your most trustworthy, beloved adult loses connection with you through being compulsively bonded to a mobile phone? Fairy tales give us classic pictures of children who are abandoned, orphaned, neglected, and even abused. While we are upset by these pictures as heartless and cruel to our modern sensibilities, obsession with phones and screens is creating a modern community of neglected, disconnected children.

Those of us who cherish children’s connectedness to life in all its sensorial richness are sounding the alarm about the agenda of commercialism’s slithering snake that brings phones into our homes and the wolf’s rapacious greed for material consumption. We insist that family and school provide generously protected time and space that is completely free of technology yet includes its reality. Well-guided, engaged story drama helps everyone to do their jobs:

children to grow into well-balanced, imaginative adults; caring adults to more fully recognize the real needs of growing children; and stories to work their eternal magic. ♦

Nancy Mellon *is a writer and psychotherapist who specializes in family and generational issues, somatic healing, and recovery from trauma, applying a broad variety of healing modalities. She teaches widely in the United States and abroad, following the path of storytelling deep into physiological processes, and pioneering new awareness of the relationship between language, imagination and well-being. Her publications include Storytelling with Children (Hawthorn Press 2001).*

Resources:

- Vivian Paley, “Storytelling in Young Children’s Development” in *LEARNing Landscapes Journal* Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013)
 - Cris Rowan, *Virtual Child: The terrifying truth about what technology is doing to children* (Cris Rowan 2010)
 - Nell Smyth
The Breathing Circle: Learning through the Movement of the Natural Breath (UK: Hawthorn Press 2006)
Drama at the Heart: Teaching Drama in Steiner-Waldorf Schools (UK: Floris Books 2016)
 - Mari K. Swingle, *i-Minds: How Cell Phones, Computers, Gaming, and Social Media are Changing our Brains, our Behavior, and the Evolution of our Species* (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2016)
 - Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (Princeton University Press 2003)
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