



# “Tell me a story”

A passionate storyteller reflects on the crucial importance of hearing stories and their place in the Bible

Reading is a fascinating and amazingly complex skill. The more you consider it, the more impressive it is that any of us can see marks, lines and symbols and then to somehow decode and decipher them in our wonderful brains and create in our imaginations meanings and messages, to see in our mind's eye the lines and symbols turned into something meaningful.

For example, when you see the symbols T E A, they become

something with meaning. In your mind's eye, you may see a mug full of comfort, thoughts of early morning with the kettle on, a drink and a chat with friends and family, or warm hands on a cold day.

But the same lines arranged differently, – / - | | \ = - do not evoke the same images. We may try to decipher them, but they are just lines without any meaning.

I remember being a non-reader. At the age of six or seven, I recall all print looking like this and the

feelings of being confused by lines and shapes that I could not interpret, but others could.

### The importance of literacy

The importance of literacy has been well documented. The National Literacy Trust is an excellent source of information with many studies on the positive impact of literacy.

There are many benefits to reading. Not only is there a positive link between literacy and life chances, but there is also a link

between literacy and life expectancy.

Children who enjoy reading and writing are happier with their lives. Children who engage with reading are three times more likely to have good mental wellbeing than children who don't.

Low levels of literacy contribute to health inequalities, drive poverty, and narrow the opportunities of young people. Poor literacy is prevalent among young offenders and the prison population. 48% of offenders in custody have a reading age at or below the expected level of an 11-year-old.

Children born into communities with the most serious literacy challenges have some of the lowest life expectancies in England.

It is evident that reading has a very positive impact, but what if you are not a reader?

### Hearing stories

Is there any value in just hearing and not reading? Since hardly any of our early years children can read, they rely on us to be their readers; we read to them and tell them stories.

I love to observe our children as they interact with a story and as they share their responses with the storyteller and with each other: to

- see their involvement expressed through their body language and the expressions on their faces
- hear their gasps of surprise
- listen to their giggles and laughter
- hear their shouts of enthusiasm and excitement
- watch their eyes and mouths open wide in wonder or anticipation
- see them shrinking in fear or reaching out to hold hands with a friend for comfort
- see them clapping hands in praise
- watch their faces light up with smiles of pleasure and delight

I hope that you have had the opportunity to observe the same.

The National Literacy Trust supports the importance of hearing stories. They have some interesting information on the value of audiobooks. Their research suggests that:

- audiobooks can support children's emotional intelligence and well-being and improve children's comprehension.
- listening to a book or story helps develop the skills needed to process information, unhindered by the challenges presented by decoding and word recognition. Different parts of the brain work harder when listening compared with reading.
- hearing a story helps children to recognise and to understand the emotional essence in a narrative. The auditory presence of a human voice stimulates a higher emotional engagement than just reading.

Many cultures had and still have a tradition of oral storytelling; for example, the Norse myths and legends, Aesop's Fables, the Greek myths, the Aboriginal Dreamtime stories. These stories often helped provide their cultures with an explanation for the world around them, inspired them with heroic

adventures and helped to build a world view and a moral code that fitted their culture.

Oral storytelling is an ancient tradition. It is vital because it involves not just listening but also taking part in the story. The listeners are not passive recipients; they are intrinsically and actively involved. It builds on the intimate interactions between the storyteller and the audience.

Recently, I had the pleasure of listening to a friend, demonstrating what she did at her church toddler group. (Most of the listeners were people who had never had the opportunity to experience stories for under-fives.)

"I'll tell you this story. They really love this one. It's the one they always choose." She clearly loved it too! Her face lit up as she began the story of Jesus calming the storm, which all of her adult audience knew well. What was happening to this grown-up audience? They remained enthralled, joining in with actions and repetition. It was full of excitement and dramatic anticipation. (How could that be when we all knew the story so



## Story

well that none of the narrative was unexpected?). It was great fun, and we all laughed together. The opportunity helped to deepen a sense of community between us because, together, we experienced a shared excitement, anticipation, fun and laughter, with the satisfaction and delight of a happy ending. The sound of her voice enhanced the story. With her Liverpudlian accent and her intonation, she filled the tale with excitement, wonder and fun, so that the words seemed to dance with a rhythm more like a melody or a song instead of a straightforward narrative.

Perhaps that is the essence of storytelling: the words are spoken with rhythm and repetition and even a chorus so that telling a story can become more like singing than reading a piece of literature. Like music, it produces a deeper emotional response in us.

We are all aware of the power of songs and rhymes in helping to build, develop and reinforce our children's language skills.

Our English as an Additional Language (EAL) children and children with speech, language

and communication difficulties can join in with rhymes and songs long before they can have a conversation.

Storytelling can help to build community, supporting the development of social communication and emotional skills. If you watch your children as they listen to a story, you will see that the best story times become a social occasion, a shared experience, a time of learning and growing together. Studies suggest that oral storytelling benefits an individual's social and emotional abilities and cognitive growth, as well as language skills. Socially and emotionally, oral storytelling is much more interpersonal than reading.

A threefold connection and interaction is happening that helps to build relationships and develop a sense of community. The audience engages with the narrative and reacts to the story, and the storyteller responds to the audience, adapting and expanding and moulding the story. Also, there is a communication between the individuals in the audience; there is a sharing of

experiences and emotions.

It is a fascinating dynamic, and I never tire of observing and participating in it. It is exciting to see relationships building, understanding deepening, emotions shared and expressed, and the emergence and awareness of empathy.

### Building a community, being together, a shared experience

For those children who struggle to make relationships and build connections with others, oral storytelling is of great benefit. They can join with their peers and share the same excitement and anticipation, wondering what will happen (Will the little billy goat get across the bridge without disturbing the troll?), share the same sense of fear or dread (Will the big bad troll eat the little billy goat?), they can laugh together and share the joy, experiencing the same satisfaction and delight at a happy ending.

For those children who struggle to recognise or express emotions, having the opportunity to experience them in this safe shared environment can be of great benefit. The adults and children around them demonstrate appropriate expressions of the emotion, and they can observe, learn, imitate and share the experience.

Children with ASD often struggle most with social communication and pretend play. I have found that using stories as a basis for play can be of huge benefit.

Communication involves two components: language skills and social communication skills. Together, these are the key to successful play, learning and relationships. Storytelling can nurture them by supporting the development of listening and attention (the base of the language skills pyramid) and also by providing the vocabulary and the narrative to enable play and role play.



Several of the ASD children that I have had the privilege of working with have taken their first steps into social and pretend play through storytelling and it was a real pleasure and delight to see them interacting successfully with others without the support of an adult.

One child, while playing outside, initiated a chasing and running game by declaring “Run, run as fast as you can... can’t catch me!” Of course, he was the Gingerbread Man.

Another child, after the storytelling of the Good Shepherd, came to the rescue of his peer’s lost sheep (who was bleating and crying out for help). “You safe,” he said, picking up the sheep and cuddling it.

And another child was able to join in play with his peers when a child handed him a toy billy goat and told him, “You can be the little one.” He knew what to do and said, “Trip, trap... don’t eat me!”

### Parables

Jesus knew the importance of storytelling. He knew how stories need to be pondered and considered, to turn them over again and again and allow them to change our perspective and our intentions. He knew the importance of hearing: the deep impact it has on our minds and our hearts as we imagine new and different possibilities.

The meaning of a story is understood more deeply as it is retold and heard again.

As Jesus told stories, they recreated clear visual images. Everybody at the time would have been familiar with vineyards, mustard seeds and fig trees, and farmers scattering seeds. Jesus used their potential to show the Kingdom of Heaven here with us. We need to tell and retell the stories to understand them.

They evoke powerful images of

- seeds sown and scattered



- homes built on a rock with secure foundations
- tiny seeds that become huge trees providing shelter and homes for the birds
- a sheep that is lost and a shepherd searching and then rejoicing over the lost being brought home
- a son who abandons his family and of father waiting, longing and hoping for his return

The parables elicit an emotional response from us as we think and ponder, and gradually develop a deeper understanding.

### Rahab

The Bible tells us that **faith comes from hearing**. (Romans 10:17) One of my favourite characters in the Bible is Rahab who demonstrates this. Rahab was a complete outsider; her people knew nothing about our God. She was one of those people who some use and abuse, while most overlook, pass her by, or choose not to befriend her. And yet Rahab declared, “**Your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath**” (Joshua 2:11).

How did she know this? She must have heard stories about an unknown God and the way He rescued His people from slavery, stories of how a nation of slaves was set free by a God who rescued them and protected them.

As she had listened, her faith grew and the stories evoked in her an emotional and a spiritual response. Her eyes and heart were opened, and she requested: “Take me with you.”

We want children to hear the stories of Jesus, to hear of our amazing God, and to say like Rahab, “**He is the God of heaven above and earth below**,” and “Take me with you.”

- Words have power to change
- Use words wisely
- Jesus is the living word
- When God spoke, the whole of creation came into being.



Elaine Douglas