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Building a Child's Spiritual Center: A Storytelling Approach

By Bill Gordh

There is not one story that provides the foundation for a rich spiritual life in a child; there are many that can offer guidance, inspiration, and understanding to a young listener. Still, we can do more than just find and read good stories to children; we can make the stories theirs so that each tale speaks to the whole child, all the way down to their core.

How can we do this? One solution that I have been exploring and developing over the past two decades involves storytelling and children acting out stories. The way of the storyteller with young children is one of attentiveness—the story held between teller and listener allows it to shift to make the experience a richer one—for the listener/participant and the storyteller as well. Let's consider.

Little Monkeys

There is a story from Brazil about some little monkeys that play all day every day along the Rio Negro. At night they climb into the trees and it begins to rain. The monkeys are cold and they decide to build a house "tomorrow."

The next day is sunny and warm. The monkeys climb down and play. When one reminds the others of the plan to build a house, they point to the blue sky and declare, "It's beautiful! We can play today and build the house tomorrow!" This repeats and repeats. They never build a house. The story can be told with gestures accompanying the repeated phrases so that the children can help tell the tale and they understand the message.

Let's take it another step. After you have told the story, invite the children to act it out. There are mama, papa, and little monkeys in the tale and all the children get to be the monkey they like



and monkey around. When the sun goes down in the story, the monkeys go to spots you have designated as their trees and they shiver. They continue acting the story as you retell it. Then, if your experience is like the one I have had many, many times, you will notice that the children are not very happy with the story—they liked it when it was first told, but now that they are the monkeys, they are not pleased with where the tale goes. They want to build a house! Why not let them!? You can say, “Well, in the story, the monkeys never build a house, but would you like to change the ending?” Their faces will light up; they will call out “Yes!” and get to work “building.” When the sun goes down on this new ending to the story, the monkeys all go to sleep in their house—very happily.

What if you had just changed the ending yourself? Then the children do not experience or come to understand that they can change stories—the ones you tell as well as the ones they live.

*“Well, in the story, the monkeys never build a house.
But would you like to change the ending?”*

The Mirror, The Medicine, and the Carpet

There is a tale from Nigeria in which a chief sends his three children (boys traditionally, but often changed in storytelling) out to find a special gift. The one who finds the most remarkable gift will become new chief. They walk for three days and come to a crossroads and each sets out on a different road. The youngest finds a mirror in which the owner can see anyone they want. The second finds a flying carpet. The third discovers magic medicine that can cure anything. They meet back at the crossroads. In the mirror they see that their father is dying. They fly home on the carpet and use the medicine to cure him. Now the father must choose which child will be the new chief. Which one does he choose?

This provocative story is a dilemma tale that ends with a question that is worthy of discussion by a wide range of ages. Look within the story for yourself

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before telling it. You are already pleased that it leaves the story open to the listener, but there is something else. Traditionally the brothers compete for why they should be chosen—what if you change this? What if, when the father announces that the son who healed him will be the new chief, he doesn't hear any argument from the son with the carpet; rather, the oldest son says, "Thank you, Father, but my brother brought us here on the flying carpet just in time." The second child with the carpet points out that the magic mirror of the youngest brother contributed as well.

Now, have the children/students act out the story as it is first being told with a chief, three children (more than one student can play each of the three children) and others playing the merchants and the magic gifts. When the story is acted out and the chief announces that the child with the medicine will be the new chief, the student playing that character is likely to cheer for "winning." When he hears that his own character in the story actually points out the value of the other brother's contribution (the brother with the carpet), he may recognize the need to share the "win." This is repeated with the second child, with the carpet, pointing out the value of the mirror. Often at the end, the children insist that the three should share the chief's job. The intellect and the heart are brought together through the experience of the story.

There are folktales from all over the world that will enchant the children you work with. Find stories you love. Then with each, discover its center. Tell the tale from your heart, with your eyes and ears focused on the children. They will guide you in telling their story. I suspect you will gain as much from this experience as they will. ●

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