

# Some Basic Principles for Storytellers:

## **Introducing the Story**

... Your introduction is crucial. *"You will win or lose in the first three minutes depending on how you begin."* Ethel Barrett. You have to create your "audience" out of a group of children each with his own thoughts and focus of attention before you can tell your story to them. There should be the promise of exciting things to come, their curiosity aroused, uniting them in anticipation. Don't give everything away in the introduction. Always keep up a certain level of mystery, anticipation and surprise through out the story. Don't forget to deliver it by the end however. I often try something dramatic or mysterious to gain attention.

### **Some cautions are needed here:**

- The introduction must not overpower or obscure the story.
- Once you have gotten their attention (any storyteller with experience knows when he or she has that), then don't linger with the introduction - proceed into the substance of the story.
- The best storytellers keep their props, plots and costumes simple and provoke their children's imaginations to the maximum. In fact, the masters of the art need no props at all. They can create everything with their words.
- We as adults tend to underestimate children's ability to accept imagination or fantasy as such, and sometimes make too much effort trying to justify our "scenario" or explain its details. Actually the children delight in trying to figure out the implausible aspects of the story afterwards. That's fine - you have their attention and they are thinking about what you are saying.
- Sometimes, once the story has actually started the costumes and gimmicks become irrelevant and "invisible".

## **Delivery....**

Important qualities in a Storyteller are:

*Salesmanship,*  
*Sincerity* (Don't try to fake excitement, happiness, sadness. Be earnest!),  
*Wholeheartedness,*  
*Enthusiasm* (This does not mean artificial or noisy excitement),  
*Animation* (in your gestures, voice, facial expressions)  
and most importantly *Being yourself.*

Finer points of presentation include:

*Emphasis,*  
*Repetition,*  
*Transition,*  
*Pause*  
and *Proportion.*

Keep in mind the principles of effective public speech, even in telling a child's story. I recommend *Storytelling: It's Easy*, by Ethel Barrett for further explanation on these.

**Some attention keepers...** Many factors affect the attention of your listeners. A storyteller needs to be sensitive to his audience and may need to regain their attention before continuing.

- The running "joke" or pratfall. This finds the children paying careful attention waiting for the expected laugh.
- The "throw away sentence" or digression. Like the "rural storyteller", you "digress" with an offhand remark that perks interest.
- The gimmick. Costumes or object lessons can include a number of these.
- Involvement or participation. Use volunteer(s) from the audience in your story. Or have the audience participate in hand motions or making sound effects.
- A distinct change in your pace, voice, or mood.
- An unusual or unexpected twist in the narration. Use different voices describing dialog between different characters.

*"Never state a fact if you can bring that fact to life!  
Make them real. Make them come to life!  
Plunge into your story with glee, and don't leave out the fun."*

## **Concluding...**

We want our message to come through clear and well defined. Our objective is to communicate the Bible truth in a personal way with a clear application. However you do the story, make sure that they get the point! Don't take for granted they got it. Make it as real as the story. Do not to give it in *"a let down voice and dreary summation. Leap into it, with the same intensity as the story .... pick one point and drive it home quickly, as if it were the most exciting news in the world."*

- Apply it personally with a up-to-date, where-you-are-at twist.
- Keep it simple and direct!
- Once you have made it-stop! Don't ramble on. If you are using a costumed character, exit quickly without the drama and flourish with which you came. Leave their thoughts lingering over the point that has been made.
- Don't feel you have to explain everything and tie together all loose ends. Let them go away thinking about what has been said.

## **Finally...**

The more you practice- the more skilled you will become. Don't be afraid to try different methods. Be creative and as you do, learn from your experiences. Expect to flop, the best of us do. Don't be overly self- conscious. Don't be afraid to be a clown or a fool for Christ's and the children's sakes.

Humility, love and prayer are important elements of storytelling along with creativity and innovation. Children get more than the story from you - they need to catch your personal excitement about the message. They need to see you have been touched by it as well. Prepare your heart as you prepare your story.

## Characteristics of a good story:

1. A single theme, clearly defined
2. A well developed plot
3. Style: vivid word pictures, pleasing sounds and rhythm
4. Characterization
5. Faithful to source
6. Dramatic appeal
7. Appropriateness to listeners

-Baker and Greene, *Storytelling: Art and Technique*, pp. 28

Be sure there is drama in the story as well. There should be a situation (a conflict or predicament) building to a climax and resolution in the tale. The conflict can be introduced immediately or foreshadowed to increase the suspense and intrigue. Try to have the audience worry along with your characters and care about what happens next. The story has to seem real to you.

*"As the suspense of your story builds, be sure to have some comic relief periodically. Approach the climax through ever increasing tension interrupted with periods of relaxation."*

*"Become so thoroughly familiar with it, it is a part of you....  
Don't just tell it, live it!"*

Children respond to sight and sound more than logic and plot. Look over good children's books, or anthologies of stories. Notice how the stories paint word pictures and use the sound and rhythm and repetition of words. In developing and learning a story concentrate on its visual and audio aspects: either assemble it into a series of visual pictures like a filmstrip, or consciously absorb the rhythm and arrangement of the sounds of the words. Repetition and Exaggeration has always been basic elements of story telling.

Even when telling an old a familiar story from the Bible, you must use imagination and all the storyteller's skills to make it come alive. Use your imagination to make the story come alive as you prepare. Give them personalities...live the story with them...know and feel their emotions...breathe the breathe of life into them, until they become so real to you that you feel like they are people you know. If you are convinced - your listeners will be too.

**Personal preparation...** The storyteller must really study the lesson well.

You have to *"Know a great deal in order to teach a little bit."*

The key in storytelling is to be gripped by the message personally. When the story has come alive to you—if your relationship with God has been touched by it—that will communicate that the point you are making is important. For this reason it is important that you allow ample time to prepare the story.

## **Developing an appropriate story: Imagination and resources:**

Use imagination to create your stories. *"Imagination is to paint a picture in the mind, to invent ideas by seeing, because to imagine a thing is to image it."* Feed that imagination. *"It is reasonable then that the more you see and hear and read and experience and remember, the more the materials you will have on hand with which to feed your imagination. The more you practice the easier it will become."*

Bible truths can be made into stories in quite imaginative ways, ways that will cause them to ponder, to apply, to understand their Bible lessons from different perspectives.

Good inspiration for story ideas include the stories of George MacDonald, the Narnia tales of C. S. Lewis, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's progress*, and *The Holy war*. These men were masters at making Bible teachings come alive. The children's section of your local library is another place for ideas and inspiration in preparing stories.

## **Making the point...**

Our stories must be kept simple and to the point. We are teaching children, with short attention spans, communicating in a story context that can and must add "clutter" to the message, aiming for no longer than 10-15 minutes! The point should be summarized in one simple sentence. As I have told my son "A good preacher tells you what he is going to say, says it, then tells you what he said - and that is the sermon."

We retain only a tiny portion of that we hear, a little bit more what we read, and most of all that which we memorize. The lesson is actually a combination of the story, the class lesson in their books, and their memory work. I suspect we would be rather humbled at how little they actually "catch" of the messages we aim at them.

Bible lessons have depth and strong biblical content to aid you in your preparation, usually more than you will need for the actual story. But you must boil them down as you study the lesson till your focus is clear and precise. Develop sub-concepts only with strong reasons and make sure they remain subservient to the main message. Much as we wish children would catch the whole story, we must be realistic.

If you feel the prepared material covers too much, or misses the point then please adapt it. It's your lesson. Do however be sure that you look at what the children will be doing in their class workbooks when you are making your preparation. If the story departs too far from the lesson, they may become lost in the workbooks.

## **Pre-teaching...**

Sometimes your audience needs to be prepared for the story by giving to them "listening tasks" (listening for certain information, or elements of the story). Perhaps you want them to listen for and respond to a particular word or phrase. Sometimes unfamiliar elements: objects, places, customs, etc. need to be illustrated or explained ahead of the story before puzzled looks or misunderstanding results. Pre-teaching can use a variety of visuals and activities, and can help bring the point into sharper focus.

## **Adapting to our audience...**

I have observed that our audiences have lost some of the ability to follow a narrated story and see things in their minds. I suspect this is because of TV and other "instant, no-room-for-true-imagination media" and a general dearth of reading and being read to. Storytelling has become more difficult. Our children's attention spans are shorter and more demanding, more sophisticated, yet less able to independently imagine or visualize abstract truths. They seem to need more visual stimulation.

## **Hints on your audience:**

- They can't concentrate from a distance- take the story as close to them as you can.
- They can't concentrate for long periods- keep it brief and simple- especially for younger children. The secret is in your preparation- the last step of preparing is trimming all unnecessary or distracting details- paring down to the heart of the story.
- Children learn with their senses. They love to feel, smell, touch and listen and see vivid pictures. Describe the characters and settings vividly, help them sympathize with the character's feelings.
- They are fanciful and imaginative. They love pretending! There are no bounds to their imagination, once it is tapped.
- In a mixed audience, try to aim your story at the younger ones!