Once There Was And Twice There Was Not: Belief And Effective Storytelling

John Shuve

The relationship between belief and storytelling raises three questions. What sort of belief is it that defends dragons as real? Why does such belief allow storytellers to leave a lasting imprint on the hearts and minds of their listeners? And, most importantly, how can educators integrate belief-based storytelling with other teaching methodologies?

Belief, Truth, and Conviction

I pose a simple question. "Do you believe in dragons?"

The most common answer is "No, I don't believe in dragons."

This is true in one sense. Most of us have serious doubts that dragons have been or ever will be encountered. More formally, because there is no evidence that dragons exist, we do not believe in them.

We believe in zebras because we have seen them, and we believe in quarks because scientists have detected them. If we equate "belief" with "evidence", then it would indeed be unreasonable to believe in dragons. Why, then, would anyone say that they believe in dragons, or that dragons are at least as real as zebras and possibly "more real" than quarks?

It is a matter of recognizing that "belief" has a wider sense than mere acceptance of evidence. In this wider sense, one "believes" what one can "conceive". If I say the word "dragon", and you understand what I mean by that word, then in the wider sense, you

believe in dragons. Why? It is because your conception of dragons is probably as clear as your conception of zebras, and almost certainly clearer than your conception of quarks.

If I ask you to describe a dragon, you are likely to say that it is green, scaly, winged, huge, fire-breathing, and so on. Even though dragons don't exist, most of us seem to know rather a lot about them.

But if I ask you to describe a quark, and you are not scientifically inclined, it is unlikely that you can say much of anything. Even though quarks probably do exist, most of us seem to know very little about them.

Thus, if you close your eyes and are asked to imagine dragons and quarks, you are likely to have a much richer inner experience of the one than the other. This is the kind of belief you need in order to tell a good story: a deep inner experience of something to which your listeners can relate.

This is what Tolkien and Lewis meant by believing in dragons. The world of our imagination is vaster than the mundane world of zebras and quarks. It is full of significance, mystery, contradiction and dragons. I cannot say this better than Tolkien, who, in his 1938 Andrew Lang Lecture On Fairy Stories, wrote:

"Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth,

and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men..." (1964)

The mundane world is but a part of a larger world: the world of things that our minds can conceive. For our minds can conceive of that which does not exist as well as that which does. Indeed, in a peculiar way, dragons are more substantial than many "real" things of the world. After all, our concepts of science and medicine undergo frequent revision, but our concepts of dragons seldom change.

What is Story?

Of the three questions that this article has set out to address, the first now has an answer: what sort of belief is it that defends dragons as real? It is the belief that the world is bigger than what we see around us.

And so, to the second question: how does such belief allow storytellers to leave a lasting imprint on the hearts and minds of their listeners? To answer this, we must understand the meaning of Story itself.

Story is not simply the sum total of all the stories that exist. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) and elsewhere, documented and analyzed the recurrent global patterns found in myths and legends of many cultures, including our own. The work of Campbell and others led to a revolutionary understanding of Story. Story is, quite literally, everything that we experience, in both the inner world and the outer, and everything that we experience is Story.

History provides us wonderful examples. In teaching about Trudeau's role in the repatriation of the Constitution, imagine how powerful it would be to tell some of the events as stories.

What is a Story?

If Story is everywhere, in fact and fiction, in the mundane and the esoteric, what is a story?

Simply put, a story is just the contents of a ladle drawn from the great Cauldron of Story, to use Tolkien's words (1964). A story needs only a few basic elements.

First, it needs a structure: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Beyond that, it does not need to conform to the standard structures of Western literature (i.e., exposition, complication, climax, and denouement). Many cultures have divergent story structures, and ours is not the only one that has power and effectiveness. Look at tales from China or India or Haiti or any other of the world's cultures and decide what structure fits what story.

Second, a story must be true to its own inner logic, and that logic cannot be a target of frivolity. This is a subtle but vitally important point in creating or locating effective stories. The power of a story is in the belief you bring to its telling. If you mock the inner nature of the tale, its power is diminished or lost completely. Stories demand respect, or they will undermine you. This is not to say that humour in stories is forbidden—quite the contrary, some of the most memorable tales you may tell will be humorous—but the humour can never be directed at the inner world of the story itself. If you have a tale about dragons, then the tale is worthless if it contains anything that suggests that dragons aren't real. A common example of this failing can be found in tales that end, "...and she woke up and found it had all been a dream." This tells the listener that they have been cheated. Dreams can form part of a story, but should never be the *deus ex machina* to end a tale when the

author cannot think of a better conclusion.

Apart from these points, which are central to believability and effectiveness, imagination always wins over rigidity. There are many resources available for locating and reworking existing tales, and many on writing your own. Several are mentioned in the list at the end of this article.

Telling Tales

Most of us are familiar with the concept of Story, and certainly of stories, but the concept of telling is widely misunderstood. No matter how worthy and wonderful, a story can be destroyed by a poor telling.

A telling has three parts that form a triangle of relationships: the story, the teller, and the listeners. Each element has its own relationship to the other two.

The story has a life of its own beyond the teller, and is not the teller's possession. It is an entity unto itself that deserves respect. The teller is the channel or conduit for the delivery of the story, but the listeners have their own relationship to it, apart from the teller.

The teller presents the story, and is engaged with every listener. The term "listener" reminds the teller that each person who hears the story is an individual. This makes storytelling very different from acting. An actor is usually on a brightly lit stage and the audience is shrouded in darkness. But a teller always works "in the light", so that he or she can see every listener, and vice versa. The teller's relationship with the listeners relies on direct engagement. This means that telling is not the same as reading aloud. Reading a story out of a book always disrupts the interaction between teller and listener. A true telling never involves notes, 3 x 5 index cards, an open book, or any

other such aid; it is told from the heart.

The listener is simultaneously in a relationship with the teller and with the story. This is why storytelling does not work well on television, or video tape, or film. Without the direct connection of teller and listener, there is no magic. It is your privilege as a teller to participate in a relationship that cannot be forged in any other way—it is the basis of oral tradition. Telling is a great service to our culture. We have only to witness the tragic destruction of the oral traditions of aboriginal peoples around the globe to see that the relationship between teller and listener can be lost by a single generation of silence.

Reaching Out

Storytelling founded in belief and respect for one's listeners is not an arcane practice limited to a select few. Anyone with passion and imagination makes a good teller. This is as true of students as it is of teachers. Stories can help students find their own voice.

Telling is not public speaking. It is a more intimate activity that gives attention to the whole triangle: story, teller, listener. Public speaking focuses almost entirely on the "teller", that is, the speaker, and can be intimidating and often frightening to both young people and adults. Storytelling, on the other hand, can be done in a non-threatening and simple environment, which is much more encouraging than an auditorium full of disinterested spectators. Storytelling is not a performance, it is a beautiful activity where story, teller, and listener are all respected and attended to.

A worthwhile challenge for a storytelling teacher is to become a story-listener as well as a story-teller. Whether as part of the curriculum, or as an extracurricu-

lar activity, student storytelling can be a gateway to empowering students and forging another link in the chain of our vanishing oral tradition.

Putting it all Together

We are now brought to the last of the three central questions of this article. We have seen what sort of belief it is that defends dragons as real, and we have seen how such belief allows storytellers to leave a lasting impression on their listeners. So, how can educators integrate belief-based storytelling with other teaching methodologies?

First, educators in general, and classroom teachers in particular, are in a remarkable position to become effective tellers. Is it such a great leap from instructing a class to telling a tale? The dynamics of good teaching and good telling are much the same: a good teacher, like a good teller, engages each student as a respected individual.

Second, integration of stories with other forms of teaching is a wide open subject, full of possibilities. Here are some of the ways in which stories can be used, regardless of grade level or subject.

- Framing and context-setting – Here, occasional tales are used to bring a subject alive but are not intended to supply curriculum information. Example: Newton, Leibniz, and the Calculus.
- Historical re-enactment and concept-fixing – In this case, occasional tales are used to supply information relevant to the curriculum in a manner likely to lead to long term retention. Example: Trudeau, Chrétien, and Constitutional Repatriation.
- Story as curriculum – A series of tales, sometimes referred to by educator-storytellers as an epic, can replace some or all of the standard curriculum. Example:

M.S. Schiro, in his book *Oral Storytelling & Teaching Mathematics*, presents an innovative method for teaching multi-digit addition in grades 3 or 4 by means of a five day epic tale (see Resources).

- Story as literature – Greek and Roman myths, for example, can be brought vividly to life if recast as stories told either by the teacher or the students.
- Story as reward – Stories that are loosely connected with the curriculum, and used as a positive reward for appropriate behaviour. Example: my experience with the class of Grade 9 mathematics students.
- Gentle replacement for public speaking – With the appropriate use of games and activities to assist students in writing their own tales or revising existing tales, the more intimidating aspects of public speaking can be ameliorated.
- In-school storytelling circles – As an extracurricular activity, it can move in two directions. It can connect students with adults who love storytelling, and it can connect secondary school students with their younger counterparts in middle and primary schools—for example, by the establishment of storytelling circles within the feeder network of a secondary school.

Conclusion

Three central principles should motivate an educator/storyteller: a belief in dragons, a passion to bring others into the world where those dragons live, and an open heart that continually searches for ways to integrate the living art of storytelling with traditional teaching.

The remarkable thing about storytelling is that it takes no props, no money, no expensive resources. It takes only time, love, and desire. Resources are every-

where for those who wish to find them.

To remind us about the nature of Story and Truth, here is a short poem (Kane 1995) that makes a wonderful opening or closing for any story...

*The dreamer awakes,
the shadow goes by;
When I tell you a tale,
the tale is a lie.*

*But ponder it well,
fair maiden, good youth.
The tale is a lie,
what it tells is the truth.*

Bibliography

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- Kane, A. 1995. *The Dreamer Awakes*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.
- Norton, J. 2004. "Review of Beowulf, tr. by Seamus Heaney", *Flak Magazine*. Retrieved May 18, 2004 from http://flakmag.com/books/beowulf.htm_Hlt726814861_Hlt72681486
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- Trudeau, P.E. 1992. "Trudeau on the Constitution". *UNI – Unity, Diversity, Respect*. Retrieved May 18, 2004 from http://www.uni.ca/trudeau_const.html

Resources – A Representative Sampling

Books for novice tellers

- Lipman, D. 1999. *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond The Basics For All Who Tell Stories In Work Or Play*. Little Rock, AR: August House.
- Lottridge, C.B. 2002. *You Can Tell A Story: A Handbook For New Storytellers; With Seven Stories To Tell*. Toronto: The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program.
- Rydel, K., ed. 2003. *A Beginner's Guide To Storytelling*. Jonesborough, TN: National Storytelling Press.

Resources for math and sciences

Fisher, B.M. 1997. "Noble Numbers, Subtle Words: The Art Of Mathematics" in *The Science Of Storytelling*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.

Lipke, B. 1996. "Figures, Facts And Fables: Telling Tales" in *Science And Math*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Schiro, M.S. and D. Lawson 2004. *Oral Storytelling And Teaching Mathematics: Pedagogical And Multicultural Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Storytelling skills for students

Lambert, R., A. Rilstone and J. Wallis. 1996. *Once Upon A Time: The Storytelling Card Game*. 2nd ed. Atlas Games.

Lipman, D. 1995. *Storytelling Games: Creative Activities For Language, Communi-*

cation, And Composition Across The Curriculum. Westport, CT: Oryx Press.

On-line resources

Forest, H. *Story Arts Online*. Retrieved May 18, 2004 from <http://www.storyarts.org/index.html>

Lienhard, J. *Engines Of Our Ingenuity*. Retrieved May 18, 2004 from <http://www.uh.edu/engines/engines.htm>

International Storytelling Center. Retrieved May 18, 2004 from <http://www.storytellingfoundation.com>

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Story Starters from my collection...

- A long time ago in fact so long ago that almost everyone has forgotten lived...
- One day, when I was six years old I...
- There was an old man who lived in a house at the end of my road. One day he...
- My favourite story goes something like this...
- My bike starting going faster and faster and faster and suddenly...

Remember in a good story anything can and often does happen.

Ray Chodzinski,, Storyteller

Ontario Storytelling Organizations and Resources**Storytellers of Canada/
Conteurs du Canada**

www.sc-cc.com

See article in this issue. And links to storytelling organizations and resources.

CANSCAIP

www.office@canscaip.org

This site is the home of Canadian Society of Children's authors, Illustrators, and performers, La societe canadienne des auteurs, illustrators et artistes pour encores

Four winds Library

talewind@web.net

is located at 632 Pape Avenue Toronto, 1-416-462-3950 provides books and resources for storytellers, teachers and others interested in the art of storytelling. The library holds nearly 1,600 books of folktales and reference material from around the globe. Searches are available for a very small fee.

Newmarket Storytree

www.storytree.ca

is a haven for resources on storytellers amateur and professional. The organization is devoted to promote storytelling as an art in New Market and York Region and is committed to introducing storytellers to non storytellers. Contact Bruce Carmody.

The Second Story Workshop

secondstor@golden.net

Located in Baden near Kitchener Waterloo provides a venue for workshops, local storytelling events and resources for schools. Contact 519-634-8973

Brant Tale Tellers

vsisson@sympatico.ca

serves Brantford and Brant County and meets September to June. Contact 519-756-0727 contact Barb Sisson.

Burlington Storytellers can link up

contact Marilyn Helmer
mghelmer@cogeco.ca

Hamilton Storytelling Circle

contact Barry Brosen
brosen@primas.ca

Ottawa Storytellers

www.ottawastorytellers.ca

provides an interesting web site dedicated to sharing information about storytellers associations across the country and around the globe. This is an exciting and important resource.

Storytelling Guilds are located in St. Catharines, Niagara, and Oakville

"if you want smarter kids tell them more stories"

Attributed to Albert Einstien