

Chiseled in Stone: Using Stories for Lessons that Last with Children

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Educators are constantly doing research and studies on the best ways to present lessons to children, at all stages of their development that will have lasting, beneficial effects, make a life-long impression, and simply put, stick with them. Monies are spent, reports are published, elaborate programs are implemented, etc. Most overlook one of the oldest, most honored and sure-fire ways to teach any principle or concept to every soul: Story.

From the beginning of civilization stories were used not only to entertain, but to pass on community values, culture, wisdom, and knowledge. Story brings relevance and practicality to the information being shared. Several studies have been done on the effect of storytelling to learning information and developing values over the years. While preparing this article, I discovered a particularly insightful article about the psychology of the storytelling process that I found very descriptive and applicable to my personal experiences as a storyteller.

In his article [“Storytelling as a pedagogical tool in higher education”](#) (“Education” April 1998)* Craig Eilert Abrahamson cited the work of noted hypnotherapists Milton H. Erickson and Ernest Rossi and their studies of storytelling’s effects on listeners. They proposed five stages of thought processes or “conversational hypnosis” characterized by storytelling that lead to a simple hypnotic-like state. These five stages are: fixation of attention, depotentiating habitual frameworks and belief systems, unconscious search, unconscious process, and hypnotic response (Erickson & E. Rossi, 1976).

Fixation of attention is what happens when the storyteller appears before the audience and then through the power of his or her performance skills grabs their attention or engages the minds and hearts of those listening. The listener is focusing on the immediate experience of the story. **Depotentiating habitual frameworks and belief systems** means that the listener is re-examining what he or she usually accepts as normal or “real”. Most people call this “suspending reality”; or opening the mind to the suggestion that fantasy might be a form of reality. An **Unconscious search** occurs when a listener compares the incoming information of a story with what he or she already knows and understands. This is a very subtle, almost subliminal, process. **Unconscious process** is the storyteller’s insertion of information, ideas, and values as a natural part of the story that can be likened to a hypnotic suggestion. The listener absorbs the teller’s feelings or opinions about the information and then quietly decides if he or she agrees with the teller. The **Hypnotic response** describes the effect that the storytelling experience has had on the listener. Without really understanding what has happened, a listener comes away feeling sympathy for the teller and enthused about the messages that were carried by the stories. The listener

retains large portions of information given and feelings shared, because he or she was involved with the experience on many levels of consciousness.

These stages are so descriptive of what happens during my performances! I have two very different acts that I offer. The one is my storytelling/ventriloquism act of Randel McGee and Groark (the dragon) and the other is my portrayal of Hans Christian Andersen, the world famous fairytale author.

Groark is a large green dragon puppet with what appears to be my right arm holding him around his stomach, but this is an illusion. In actuality my right hand enters Groark through a cleverly hidden sleeve and extends into his head to make him move and talk. My ventriloquism is another illusion, with two voices seeming to come from two different characters. Groark himself is a riveting “fixation of attention”. The more life-like he acts the more the audience, children in particular, have to suspend what they believe to be true: that there are no talking dragons (or are there?). The humor of the show is so constant that soon they are listening intently so as to not miss a punch-line or witty comeback. After an initial time for the audience to be drawn into Groark’s “reality”, I start teaching Groark important character traits and values that are soon being absorbed by the enraptured audience. They leave the show singing the songs to themselves, reciting their favorite lines to each other, and feeling generally happy for having been at the show.

The effect my shows have on children have always amazed me. Teachers tell me that children discuss the show often and Groark-ish expressions are heard for weeks afterwards. This really was impressed upon me when I returned to a school about a year after my first appearance there. A boy of about 9 or 10 years old saw me loading my equipment into the auditorium. He recognized me as Groark’s “friend” and proceeded to tell me his favorite parts from the show the year before. He quoted several minutes of different segments of my show verbatim... after a whole year’s absence! How is that for making a lasting impression!

My H. C. Andersen shows have a completely different energy to them, but apply the same five stages of conversational hypnosis. I appear before the audience in full costume, dressed as a gentleman from the 1860’s. I then greet them in Danish. These two actions fix their attention and let them know that this is going to be a different experience than they are used to. I perform the stories as if they were unfolding around me. My involvement in the story draws the audience into the story as well. I can often see on the children’s faces that they are reacting to the sights and smells and consequences I am suggesting. By inviting them to repeat recurring phrases and asking them what they think will happen next they become invested in the process. There is a part of the program when I start snipping on a piece of paper with long scissors. The audience becomes almost mesmerized by the movement of the paper and scissors as I continue to tell a story. When I unfold to cut paper to reveal an elaborate design that illustrates the story I just told, the audience always lets out a gasp as they are jolted back to the reality of the small marvel they have just witnessed. They leave the show with the

morals of the stories deeply engraved upon their souls. Again I hear from teachers that phrases from the show are heard for weeks after I have performed. Pictures that students often send me show that they were able to visualize certain aspects of the story very clearly.

I want to share a very personal anecdote about the power of story to make lasting impressions. At the funeral of a friend, the deceased's children each came forward to share a valuable lesson they had learned from their father. Afterwards I asked my grown children what they could say they learned from me. They all responded with very positive examples. My daughter had made a list of traits that she felt she had learned from me. One of those traits was strength. I asked her how I had taught her strength. She answered that I used to tell her stories at night before she went to bed in which she and her brothers were superheroes that saved their friends from dire situations. She told me that those stories lead her to feel that she really was strong enough to face problems and do great things. This is the power of the story!

Storytelling is a powerful way to teach any concept or principle to any soul, because a well-told story touches the intellect, tickles the humor, and embraces the heart. Storytelling chisels in the stone of the soul a lasting message.