

Telling the Great Stories (Transcript)

Only six stories can be called Great Stories. Each one connects and opens the doors to one area of human knowledge, or subjects. Subjects are simply the way humans have organized knowledge to make sense of it, but we can't lose sight of the fact that all that knowledge is inherently inter-related. These stories give the child a vision of the whole and provide a compass for the learning journey. Any knowledge they gain from now on can be organized in the context of the whole or bigger picture.

You will notice that the Great Stories imply a concept of a creative energy. This is not because they're religious in nature, but because developmentally, the child is looking for a sense of purpose, meaning, and connection. As he grows in mental maturity, we will give him more scientific facts and he will be able to come to his own accurate conclusions.

The Story of the Origin of the Universe (aka, The Story of God Who Has No Hands) opens up the study of geography. It sets the stage so we can explore the family our Earth belongs to, what Earth is made of, the different forces that affect it, the Earth's relationship with the Sun, and the work of wind and water.

The Story of Life opens the study of biology and invites us to explore how plants and animals live and function, the work they do for themselves and others, their classification and their relationship to the Earth and humans.

The Story of the Coming of Human Beings opens the study of human history and invites us to explore how human society functions, the human gifts and how they're used for good, and how humans use ideas and work to build a world beyond nature.

The Story of Written Language (aka, The Story of the Ox and the House) opens the study of language arts, while the Story of Math (aka, the Story of Numbers) opens the study of arithmetic, geometry, and algebra. These two stories explore disciplines that are representative of the power of human thought and creativity to solve problems.

In the Upper Elementary years we also tell the story of The Great River, which is an exploration of biology, as well as a perspective of human economic geography and human history.

We, as adults, are tour guides in the land of knowledge. The stories are a map of this land of knowledge. Together with the child, you'll embark on what my trainer Baiba Grazzini called "a great voyage of exploration."

So, what's the UNDERLYING GOAL of the Great Stories? It's to share the goodness of nature and human beings. We want the child to be proud and excited to belong to humanity; to understand and feel the creative potential of the human race. It's important to leave the destructive aspects of humanity for later, when the children have developed more maturity. You can start introducing some of these elements in the Upper Elementary years, but not before.

The Great Stories can be hard to tell because they were written by someone else, and it can be challenging to own someone else's thoughts. But there are many reasons you may want to tell a story written by someone else: To get a child excited about a new topic, to answer a child's question, to share family/cultural values, as a cultural celebration, to help a child process emotions, and more.

You may not have noticed before but all stories have a shape and a series of elements: Orientation in space/time, characters, problem, solution, conclusion. To tell another person's story successfully, you need to envision the shape of your story and follow a structured approach.

First, read the selected story silently once, then again out loud. Then, create an outline (short notes) of the story, starting by focusing on the connection to a larger whole (a prior story you told). Use an engaging starting phrase - you can find many options on folktale.net/openers.html. Give the child an orientation in space/time, and describe the characters, including unsung heroes and roles of humans. Remember that it's the ordinary people who give us a compass for living our life. You can also give anthropomorphic qualities to non-human characters, so the children have an easier time connecting with them. Consider the plot, or sequence of events: what happens first, and next, and then. Describe the problem: What challenge are the characters facing? What problem needs to be solved? Then, explore the solution: highlight human ingenuity, the character's contributions to improving the world, or how nature strives for balance. And finally, focus on the conclusion, which is the realization with which we want the child to walk away. This can be the interconnection between Earth and Space, between life and Nature, between animals and humans, or between humans across history and cultures. It can also be what we owe to different kinds of people across space and time.

As you're reading and taking notes, notice the qualities that give the story staying power in a child's mind: Essential phrases, repetition, and rhyme. Identify the corresponding props: charts, timeline, demonstrations and where they are used within the plot. If you're a visual learner, you can create a visual guide for the plot, in the form of a mind map, storyboarding, or stepping stones. You can also put a sticky note behind each chart with a few words that remind you of its meaning. Just make sure you don't lose the connection with your audience because you're too busy reading your notes!

Now practice with your outline and props using the "three mirrors" approach: Mirror #1 is when you tell the story aloud in front of an actual mirror, to experiment with expressions and gestures. Mirror #2 is when you record yourself and listen back, noticing your tone, rhythm, and pauses. And finally, mirror #3 is when you practice in front of a trusted friend, ideally twice, and request feedback. The first time, ask them to tell you what was alive for them (or what moved them) in your story. The second time, they can tell you what's not yet flowing. Now you're ready!

On the day you're going to tell the story, prepare the charts and demonstrations ahead of time. Determine a time to tell the story when you won't have distractions, and when your children are rested, exercised, and not hungry. Tell them that you're going to share a story that's as special as Christmas (or a special holiday your family observes) because it only comes once a year. Set the ground rules: The children's job is to listen and use their imaginations to envision what you're going to say. You're not going to be taking questions during the story, so they can keep them in their minds and ask them when the story is done. Then start. Ignore interruptions or attention-seeking behaviors. Immerse yourself in the story and they will too.

When you're done, don't ask for interpretations and don't interpret for the children (Remember: you're sowing seeds, not pulling them up to see if they're growing). Stay silent and wait to see what the children do. They may ask questions or want to look at the experiments or charts. They may want to go off and play. Don't worry if the children didn't understand everything; remember our job is to leave in peace to ponder.

Instead, take time to compliment yourself: notice what you did well, speak to yourself like you would to a friend. Be objective: Write down what you'll do differently next time you tell a story. Later, ask the children what part they liked: this helps with recall and will give you valuable feedback.

Here are some tips for using charts and timelines: Keep all charts facing away from the children except the one you're currently talking about. If you're using a timeline, unroll it as you tell the story. DO NOT explain or teach what's on the charts. Remember, they're meant to be impressionistic, in other words, they're aids to the child's imagination, not teaching tools. If you tell them everything, you don't leave space for their imaginations or curiosity. After the story, leave the charts or timeline out for a couple of days. As you start presenting the curriculum, remember to revisit sections of the story, as a sort of "zooming in" on the whole.

Give yourself at least a week to prepare each story, then tell it, and leave at least a week before the next one. There's no rush, you can still be doing work from all subject areas while you're getting ready to tell the stories. Now, go prepare to tell some Great Stories!