A Parent's Essential Skill: Storytelling
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PARENTING

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With stories, you can teach your children, in their developing years, the art and craft of life

My father was never trained as a professional storyteller; he is a retired engineer. And yet, some of my fondest childhood memories and valuable learning experiences can be traced to the innumerable stories my father narrated to me as a child and teenager. It did not matter what day of the week or what time of night it was. Besides the daily morning routine, where he would tell a story while getting ready for work, whenever there was a moral to be conveyed, a painful lesson to be learned, after my mother's questioning and reprimanding was over, my father would amazingly narrate a story whose characters, by some strange quirk of fate, also happened to be encountering questions, frustrations and dilemmas similar to mine.

Often, by the end of the story, even as a child, I'd gain a new perspective regarding my feelings and emotions, and come out with a deeper understanding of the next step of action. Modern psychologists might very well state that listening to parables, legends and fables allowed me to come to terms with my own "case history " with feelings of renewed spontaneity, creative problem-solving and wonder.

"Children learn best when they are unaware of the fact that they are being taught, " explains my master, Shri Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari (affectionately known as Chariji), the president of Shri Ram Chandra Mission and spiritual guide for Sahaj Marg meditation practitioners. "That is why play, perhaps, is so intimately intertwined with the teaching process. Children learn practically all they are ever going to learn within the first six or seven years of their lives."

It is, therefore, no wonder that storytelling has been employed as a powerful tool throughout the centuries--by parents, grandparents, teachers, educators, saints and seers. In fact, storytelling has been part and parcel of mankind since the beginning of time--from the days of petrography utilized by prehistoric cave-dwellers to CD-ROMs created by computer scientists for kids growing up in the modern era.

"When did we first get exposed to the presence of a higher power in our life?" we might occasionally wonder. Walking down the obscure road of foggy, distant memories, we may eventually recognize that, in all likelihood, our first exposure to God, to religion and to spirituality started from a tale narrated by a parent or grandparent at bedtime. For instance, the Hindu psyche has imbibed its knowledge and insights from the deep treasure chest of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. Native Americans draw inspiration from their vast storehouse of oral folklore. Buddhist teachers reveal the timeless wisdom hidden in Zen stories and Jataka tales. Islam depends on its wealthy inheritance of stories from Sufi scholars and saints. Judaism draws its richness from Hasidic examples as well as Biblical histories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job and others. In Christianity, the New Testament describes how Jesus taught the masses in parables, and reserved the esoteric teaching for his disciples when they were away from the crowds.

Augusta Baker and Ellin Greene, authors of Storytelling: Art and Technique, speak about the need for this craft in simple, everyday language. "Storytelling brings to the listeners heightened awareness, " they say, "a sense of wonder, of mystery, of reverence for life."

Joseph Campbell, the world-renowned scholar of mythology, states pithily, "The folktale is the primer of the picture-language of the soul." In Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life, Thomas Moore writes: "Storytelling is an excellent way of caring for the soul. It helps us see the themes that circle in our lives, the deep themes that tell the myths we live."

In Stories to Nourish the Hearts of Our Children, contemporary storyteller Laura Simms shares from her professional and personal experience: "Listening to a story is a dynamic process that delights children while allowing them to imagine themselves in a variety of situations. Stories are non-didactic teaching tools. A story heard is not an explanation, but an experience that is enduring and enriching. Each child personally integrates the story, embodying the characters and experiencing the events."

"Stories contain seeds of healing, " she adds, "and telling them encourages growth and rejuvenation. Storytelling is an ancient method that has always served to bring people together and to stimulate creative imagination, wisdom and compassion."

Unfortunately, the fabric of today's society is woven together by nuclear families consisting of over-exhausted fathers and mothers, and its tapestry is strewn with the complexities of modern technology and gadgets. Consequently, it is not surprising that stressful parents have little time and no energy to spare, and are unable to live in the present and enjoy the laughter from the oral tradition. Even the little ones do not have the freedom to indulge in the make-believe world of dressing up, play acting and fantasy games. In order to get a head start and be one step ahead in tomorrow's rat race, more and more youngsters are being sent to preschools and kindergarten at a ridiculously young age--victims of "the hurried childhood syndrome." Additionally, due to the indiscriminate exposure to cable television, videos, DVDs and computer games, the youth in developed as well as developing world nations are facing a major crisis of values.

"Modern life has deprived the younger generation of access to the fairy tales of yester years, " laments Shri Rajagopalachari in Down Memory Lane. "They were entrancing beyond belief. But their greatest value lay not in their charm, but in their ability to give children, during their formative years, a permanent foundation of value systems which they absorbed without being aware of the fact that they were learning the most profound values of life. And since such values were implanted deep into the child's inner core of the developing human being, those values remained, to be called upon later in life in the form of hidden reserves of strength and fortitude, when the now-grown-up adult faced temptations or trying situations in actual life."

One can safely conclude that the loss of morals and ethics is a clear reflection of the diminishing importance given to folktales, myths and legends in our fast-food culture and life in the high-speed lane. One way or another, we have to learn to simplify our lives and attend to our inner growth and nurture the spiritual development of our children.

Drawing attention to the timeless wisdom inherited from the collective human experience in myths and symbols, and stressing the importance of reading myths, Joseph Campbell explains how "they teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols." He suggests that we ought to "read other

people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts--but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive."

When I was a child, little did I realize the importance of storytelling in my life! Neither did I know that reading and telling stories would eventually become an integral part of my parenting philosophy and style. My eleven-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter have been exposed to myths, fables, legends, folktales and spiritual stories from birth. The very first piece of music my son heard a few hours after coming into this world was the heartfelt devotional rendition of the Ramcharitmanas by the late Indian singer Mukesh--thanks to the audiotapes I had deliberately packed in the maternity bag for my hospital stay. Ever since, it has become a daily ritual in our house to share stories from mythology and scriptures at bedtime.

During the last decade, I have observed my children responding to storytellers and readers with varied reactions--ranging from interest and rapt attention to passiveness and plain disinterest--at school, in the libraries and in the comfort of our home. Watching their love for stories, I am nostalgically reminded of my father's gift for storytelling and the role that mythology and folktales played in my self-development. As Joseph Campbell claims, these stories became the launching pad for my spiritual journey, as the writers and narrators had a clear, unmistakable goal in sight: to evoke inspiration and deeper thinking in the young listener's heart and mind.

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Storytelling: A Dozen Practical Tips

In light of the wise words of scholars and spiritual teachers in my story above, I hope parents will find it worthwhile to reflect on the significance of the art and craft of storytelling for the benefit of the younger generation. I hope parents will try to

claim the torch of storytelling by following a few of the tips listed below. At one time or another, I have used them myself and it has been an enjoyable experience for me and my children.

1) Read the story for yourself before you read it to the child. Absorb it, digest it and try to capture not just its moral, but also its essence.

2) Know the story well so that if you are interrupted, you can jump back into it comfortably.

3) Identify yourself mentally with the child. Listen to the story with a child's ears and see how you might make it more appealing. Feel free to adapt and revise depending on the age of your child.

4) Don't use a monotonous voice. Polish up your tone and style with some drama.

5) Allow yourself to get into the heart of the characters to make the tale come alive. It is important for the child to identify with the emotions and feelings of the characters.

6) Be natural. Allow the story to flow through you. For smaller children, facial expressions and hand movements used in a spontaneous, creative way evoke an enthusiastic response. Simple gestures, like a sparkle in the eyes, happy smile, anger or sadness in the voice, can successfully recreate the story's original atmosphere.

7) You are not giving a performance for a critical adult audience. Don't be stiff-necked and self-conscious, worried about appearing silly. Your prime objective should be to narrate in a pleasurable manner.

8) Some story books come with commentaries. Do not read the commentaries to young children as they might sound like a lecture. Mention the moral in fleeting reference. Wait for them to ask questions and when they do, guide them in their thinking.

9) Allow time and space for a dialogue with your children to instill the higher values of life. Reflection doesn't have to take place immediately after completing the reading; it can be done during the ordinary moments of your family life, during garden work, an evening walk or even at dinner time.

10) Sincerity is important in stories that deal with ethics and spirituality. The slightest hint of adult scepticism, and children will see through it immediately. Remember the power of thought: Your demeanor will radiate whatever you feel--whether it be faith or cynicism.

11) Learn to live in the moment. Consider why we love reading the stories narrated by spiritual masters like Buddha and Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa with such enchantment. It is due to their simplicity, faith and surrender to the Divine.

12) Shri Ram Chandra of Shahjahanpur, affectionately known as Babuji, the founder president of Shri Ram Chandra Mission, once said: "Spirituality is a science of wonder " and "Doubt is a poison for the will." So let us remember to read these spiritual adventures with a feeling of wonder, narrate them with wonder, and somewhere along the way, we would have taught our children the art and craft of living a well-integrated, balanced, happy life.