

## Story Telling, by Sue Steidel

The children, ages six – eight, are sitting cross-legged, still as statues, on our classroom's blue carpet in front of me. They are totally focused on what mischief Anansi, the spider, is up to in this new story. The room explodes with the sound of their laughter when I use Anansi's squeaky voice to say, "What a strange moss covered rock!" They and I, the storyteller, are sharing a magical time. We are inside a story together, visualizing the characters and the setting, anticipating what will happen next, and experiencing the waves of emotion. There is a synergy, a very special bond, between us.

If you are like me, and enjoy reading aloud, you're enchanted by the lyrical sound of our language. You find it easy to give characters voice and to portray the emotion of the story. My connection to storytelling came from my love of reading aloud.

Children have always enjoyed listening to stories I'd read in the various classrooms in which I've taught. Several years ago, I was working in a public school fifth grade classroom with eleven year olds. One day, the students and I found us with twenty minutes to kill before lunch. Instead of reaching for the current book we were enjoying, I said, "I have a story to tell you about a little red squirrel that gave Mr. Steidel and me some problems with this past summer. Would you like to hear it?" When I saw the enthusiastic nods, I began. I really hadn't prepared it. I simply told the story as it happened. When I finished, however, the children actually clapped! And, at their request, I repeated it several times as the year progressed.

As I thought about what fun I'd had telling that first story, I began to realize that I have, in reality, always been a storyteller. It's my style of teaching. I have made a conscious effort to pattern my

teaching approach after the model provided by the teachers and professors from whom I've learned the most. They have been the ones who have made the subjects come alive. Instead of reading from notes, they have spoken with enthusiasm and made eye contact with their audience. They have added humor or human-interest anecdotes to their presentations. They are the storytellers.

I decided that preparing a story for presentation was something I was going to perfect. I began by reading books written about storytelling. One title I found most helpful was *The Story-Teller's Start-Up Book* by Margaret Read MacDonald. I attended storytelling festivals and listened to storytellers on tape. I also had the good fortune to study with professional storyteller, Susan Danoff, from Princeton, N.J.

I have found that the secret to effective storytelling is preparation. It takes considerable time and practice. The thrill of presenting the finished product, however, more than compensates for the effort.

There is a specific routine I follow as I prepare. The first step is to find the material. There is a wealth of excellent children's literature available from which to choose. The folklore section of the public library is another fruitful source.

As a matter of fact, there is so much out there, the task of settling on one can seem daunting. I always find one, however, that seems to call to me, and one I feel I simply must tell.

Next, I find a place, free from distractions, where I can concentrate. I read the story aloud several times. As I do, I listen for those parts of story that make it unique. I will memorize any chants or repeated phrases. I pay close attention to the beginning and end because they will also be memorized. To have a definite start and finish is vital because no matter how much a telling varies from the original, they help to keep the integrity of the story.

I picture the settings. I analyze the characters, how I think they sound and what they look like. Each time I read the story, I am more aware of the general feeling it portrays. After I have read it enough to internalize the sequence, I keep the book open and try to tell the story in my own words. I check back any time I get stuck. I then repair the problem spots by rereading those sections of the text. The only parts I've memorized are the beginning, the end, and any parts that are so specific to the story that they must be told exactly the way they were written. I am now ready to close the book and tell the story without stopping.

This process takes about an hour. And what a feeling of accomplishment I feel when I finish! Now I can't wait to tell the story to my husband, who is my best critic. If he approves, I practice telling it out loud every chance I get. I find those times when I'm alone in the car are my best opportunities. I've long ago stopped caring what fellow commuters think of my wild gestures and odd facial expressions!

I am now ready to tell my new tale to the JR1 children whom I teach. I have found that in order to set myself up for success, I need to prepare the environment. I choose a time in our schedule free from interruption. I position myself in the room where I can see the doorway and away from bright sunlight. The children are reminded that they should sit quietly and not get up unless it is truly a dire emergency. The children and I sing a song, "Tell Me A Story" that I remember from my childhood.

Now it's quiet and we're ready. I begin with a few words of introduction. I either state the title and author or explain the source of the story. Then, I pause long enough to say the first line, which I've memorized, to myself. This is an effective way to prepare both my audience and me for the journey inside a story on which we're about to embark.

During the telling, I remember not to string everything together with "and" or "um". I give characters unique voices. I don't speak too fast, but instead, change the pace of the telling to match the action. I speak with emotion. Sometimes I whisper and other times use a "stage" yell. The entire time I'm telling, I am inside the story, visualizing all aspects of the tale. When I come to the end, which I have also memorized, I slow my words and focus on one face. This lets my audience know that our journey is over.

As a result of the energy I've invested in perfecting my storytelling expertise, I have discovered a new hobby that has become an invaluable teaching tool. And, best of all, I have rediscovered the fun of play. How blessed I feel to have discovered in myself a natural ability that we all have but few realize!

I encourage everyone who enjoys the company of children and loves a great story to give storytelling a try. I want everyone to experience the joy.

I agree with Jimmy Neil Smith, who wrote in *Homespun: Tales from America's Favorite Storytellers*, "Everyone has a story to tell. And while we could spend a lifetime learning the art and technique of storytelling-perfecting our style and performance- for most of us, it is the simple telling of a tale that's important. Something as ordinary as the events of the day, an old joke, or a traditional story we heard as a child. Storytelling comes from the heart, and nothing should keep us from the exhilaration and sheer pleasure of telling a story."