

Living Planet, Living Imagination

How one storyteller creates a sense of connection to the landscape through the stories she tells in the classroom.

by Jana Dean



Reprinted from The Best of CLEARING

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Through environmental education, I seek to engender respect for the beings of the earth and their home, the planet. Through storytelling, I seek to engender respect for stories and their home, the imagination. Like earth life, stories live. They live in the minds and hearts of those who receive them. Using only the human voice, the storyteller requires each listener to create for themselves an imaginative picture of the events that transpire in the story. Once I have guided listeners to create that picture, I take up the responsibility of leaving that picture intact by resisting the impulse to tie the story to just one interpretation or meaning. Sometimes children will ask me, "What did so and so look like?" Usually, I turn the question back to them: "You tell me what she looked like." More often than not, they have at least a partially developed image in their minds. I may guide them to fill in that image, but never will I rob them of their own creative power.

Just as we must work harder than ever to sustain the places we inhabit, we must work harder than ever to sustain the imagination. Both the planet and the imagination are subject to a deadening onslaught of technology that erodes our creative power. So rarely have we the opportunity to envision whole pictures. Media technology makes our images for us. The stories we receive on television and in the theater leave little or nothing

to the imagination. Even the physical landscape we inhabit is dissected, cut into little pieces connected by tenuous threads if at all. More than ever, we need the creative vision to see how all life is connected. Without it, we will not be able to guide ourselves down the path to a sustainable future.

Choosing Stories, Finding Connections

For ten classroom visits, I rearranged a series of stories to build a complete picture of the place we call home. The stories encompassed soil, water, plants, animals and humans. To create a landscape that lived in the imagination and at the same time found reflection in our local surroundings. I told folktales that came from the oral traditions of various cultures and stories that arose from my research. With the folktales, I relied on generations of people having told tales to teach about a world inhabited by many different creatures. The stories that I developed spoke specifically to the spirit of life at Puget Sound and thereby heightened interest in specific features of our south Sound neighborhoods.

While I built the program around water and water quality, I emphasized human connections to the landscape in order to foster respect for the water that flows through it. I let the children discover for themselves the thread of water that ran through the program. About four weeks into the program I saw a face light up in recognition. Brian exclaimed: "Hey! All the stories you told have water in them." That discovery led to a spontaneous discussion of how water connects us to everything.

A few basic principles guided the program I shared with the children. They are as follows:

- The human imagination is sacred. To allow the children's imaginations to live as fully as possible,

I let the stories speak for themselves. While a story may have illustrated a concept of value, I let the story convey it through pictures rather than didactic statements.

- Listening is crucial. I approached listening to the children almost as a meditation. I sought to provide, through my own presence in the classroom, a model of giving selfless attention.
- All human experience is valuable and worthy of sharing. I asked the children to share from their own lives in order to broaden our collective experience of living near Puget Sound. I sought to draw connections between their life stories and the stories I shared.

With these three tenets to follow, I arranged the stories to flow, roughly, from more universal themes to the more geographically and time specific.

Moving Personal Experience Into Story Space

I opened the program by sharing a myth that incorporates the elements that form our world: earth, air, fire and water. While many stories incorporate these dimensions, I chose a tale called *Turtle and the Divers*. The story comes from the Wyandot people whose ancestral land is in the Great Lakes Region of North America. The myth is one of many Northeast Woodland tales in which Turtle holds the earth on his back for Sky Woman, who has fallen into the water world. Once Sky Woman stands on dry land, she gives birth to twin sons who proceed, in an epic battle, to make ready an earth home for human people. One brother endeavors to create beauty and ease on Earth, while the other follows in his footsteps creating nothing but hardship. Because of the many deeds of the brothers in creating the world as we know it, the story had space in it to weave in experiences the children had shared with me.

Before telling the tale, I asked the children to share with me an outdoor adventure they had. The experiences they shared revealed the depth and diversity of human experience. I heard about

seeing a deer give birth, a battle between a pair of knees and the barnacles on the beach, a fall from a bicycle into a patch of blackberries. One child confided that the trees in her backyard spoke to her when she was very quiet. Another recounted a long and rambling tale of listening to all the animals at Northwest Trek [link]. As I gathered the children's experiences, I quickly noted them on the blackboard, always checking with them to make sure I had understood. After all had had a chance to share, I studied what they had told me and tried to hold as much of it as possible in my memory. Then, as I painted word pictures on the story landscape, I included barnacles, deer, blackberry thorns and trees that could talk.

Telling a story in this way challenged me to treat with utmost care both the story as it had developed in Wyandot oral tradition, and the experiences of the children. The effect was to bond all of us together in the shared experience of a story that we all were a part of.

Laying a Foundation for Listening to the Landscape and to Each Other

Throughout the program, I carried a rock in my pocket. The rock held the power of storytelling. I introduced the rock by telling the children how I had believed at one time that the job of the storyteller was to talk, but that I had recently learned otherwise - I must listen - if I don't listen, I won't hear the story and if I don't hear the story then I can't tell the story. Hence, I explained, large parts of my visits would be taken up with passing around the rock and listening to others' experiences in the neighborhood.

While this process began with incorporating children's experiences into the first story I told, it continued with Magpie. In the tale Magpie thinks that he must own the river in order to live near it, and he thinks the best way to do that is to make more noise than the river itself. He makes so much noise that even those who want to listen to the river can't hear it. Through facing a near disaster, Magpie finally learns to listen.

I created a listening experiences for the children by coming into the classroom with index cards on which I had written down phrases from the adventures they had shared with me the week before. I split them into groups of six to ten, and challenged them to recite the phrase from one end of the line to the other without distorting it, much like the game “Telephone.” I emphasized that listening meant not only remaining quiet, but giving full attention to the person speaking.

We continued practicing giving full attention to each other by pairing up to tell one another stories. We then shared not our own story, but our partner’s story in the large group.

I then gave them the assignment of finding a place near their home and spending five minutes giving full listening attention to things they heard.

In some classrooms we continued sharing what we heard in our quiet places and playing the Telephone game for weeks. Throughout the program, the children asked me to bring out the rock during each session. I didn’t always pass it around, but they wanted to know that I had it in my pocket before I began telling a story.

Features of the Landscape

The most accessible inhabitants of a place are the plants, and, in the Pacific Northwest, our trees lend us a sense of history and of place. To introduce the trees, I enlisted the help of a character named Crayfish. Thanks to the work of Joseph Bruchac, Crayfish lives not only in the stream down the hill, but also in the Oneida tale *Why Crayfish has his Eyes on a Stalk*. In the story, flood waters carry Crayfish far from the river bed, stranding him on high ground. But that isn’t the worst of it. He falls asleep in the sun and his eyes dry up. Lucky for Crayfish, he can talk, and he knows his trees. Because he knows how far from the water each one grows, he finds his way home by asking each to identify itself. When he finally arrives at his stream and jumps into the water, he gets very excited about regaining his eyesight. Because of his excitement, he tries so hard to see that his eyes pop right out of his head and

thereafter wave around on stalks.

In some classrooms, I told this story for three weeks in a row as we became more and more acquainted with the vegetation of our place. So that we could meet our trees, I brought boughs of eight native trees into the classroom and laid them out on pieces of paper to distinguish them from one another. I had made tree cards with a sketch of the limb and leaf of the tree and text to describe it. I pulled illustrations from *Native Trees of the Northwest: A Pocket Guide* by Art Bernstein. I called on individual students to come up and meet the trees by reading the card aloud and then choosing the bough that matched. When we had met the tree, I emphasized native trees’ importance in the landscape by asking who had one of these trees in their yard. In our rural and suburban neighborhoods, each of these eight trees had a strong presence.

May the Cycle Remain Unbroken

This theme ran through several visits and stories. Initially, I introduced it through an exploration of the water cycle. I told a folktale that conveyed the importance of life-sustaining water in the form of rain. In the Vietnamese story *The Toad is Heaven’s Uncle*, Toad perceives that his pond is drying up. He knows that unless he does something about it, all the beings on the earth will die. Toad journeys to the King of Heaven himself to plead for the beings of the earth. Thanks to Toad’s cunning and persistence, he gains an audience with the King of Heaven and rain comes. I followed the story with a discussion of rain and its origin and then led the children in a guided imagination of the lifecycle of a rain drop. I then had them draw their journey as a raindrop. Throughout, I emphasized that water gets used again and again and again and again. In putting together this exercise, I closely followed a lesson outlined in the curriculum *Voices of Puget Sound* by Theresa May.

I continued to build on the notion of connection and cycles by looking at salmon as both a part of Northwest identity and as offering a critical opportunity to work to keep the cycle of life intact. I told the story *The Boy, the Salmon and the Bear*. In

this tale, a boy loves the salmon so much that he wants to become one. He does become a salmon, and through his understanding of the fish, he ushers the last salmon of a stream to the death it deserves. Because the salmon dies a good death, the circle remains unbroken. Ultimately, the boy returns to his human form, but he retains his memory of that fish, and he never loses the salmon feeling in his heart.

Once I had told the story, I drew a circle on the board, and explained that the circle represented a year. Then I marked the winter and summer solstices and the fall and spring equinoxes. We discussed the cyclical changes that we experience during the course of the year. We talked about daylight bedtimes in the summer and early darkness in the winter, baseball season, plant changes through the year and much more. Then I drew spokes on the wheel to mark each of the twelve months. I asked the children to think about their birthday and something they look forward to each year at that time, and then make a not of it on the wheel in the slice that corresponded to their birth month. After we had built a composite of yearly experiences, I superimposed the lifecycle of the salmon to show that just as the early cycle continues from year to year, so does the life cycle of the fish.

Building a Web of Heroism for our Place

The Story of Leschi provides a context for identifying ways that we ourselves could become heroes or heroines for a place. Leschi led the Nisqually people in their fight for a piece of the Nisqually River in the 1850s. The war led to the establishment of the present-day Nisqually Reservation and to Leschi's death by hanging. Leschi died in service to his people and the river. As a leader, he stands as an example of moral integrity and willingness to fight for his home.

After telling the story, I asked the children to remember the heroes and heroines from all the stories I had told. Once we had identified a heroine, we established what qualities had made her a heroine. Together, we came up with at least a dozen heroic characters.

Then we gathered in a circle and passed around the rock for each to share some aspect of our place that we cared about. Then I asked them to think about how they could act heroically for what they had identified. As each of us recounted a heroic deed we could perform for our place, I connected the speakers back and forth across the circle with a string until we had created a web.

All the while, I stressed that this web of heroism for our home place would be able to sustain the earth. When the web appeared strong enough, I directed each to gently tighten the portion they held. Then, letting my inflated earth ball represent the living planet, we carefully balanced it on our web of heroism. If at first it fell, I explained that in order to succeed, we would all have to work together with focused attention. When finally we sustained the ball, we held the earth through our careful, sustained connection to one another.

Jana Dean is currently teaching math and science in the Olympia School District in Washington. This article is from The Best of Clearing, Volume V. It was originally published in 1993.