

Teach your children well: tell them stories . . .

Mary Alice and I find storytelling to be the most immediate, consistently powerful focusing activity we do with children. Where I used to think of storytelling as a survival technique, a last-ditch management tool, now I realize that it can be one of the most important and precious gifts we can give to our students.

Some of you might be saying: “But I have never told a story. I am not a storyteller.” Hogwash. You are telling stories all the time. You tell your colleagues about a wonderful or challenging event in a music class. You tell your loved ones about an unforgettable event that happened at a wedding or a funeral or a Thanksgiving gathering. You tell your own children about when you were a child. You are the expert teller of these, your stories.

So your first stories for your students might be about your life: about when you were growing up, or about a real event that happened to you recently. The children will love these stories: they open a window to the children of who you are.

Now keep your storytelling style more or less the same as telling these personal stories and switch to folktales. You know quite a few already, and very few if any children in your class will have heard these stories simply told before. Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs, Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Mitten, Little Red Riding Hood, you add to the list. Being a music teacher gives you the advantage of practicing the same story with various classes, but remember, in traditional storytelling, children love hearing stories again and again. At first you tell the story, then the children help tell you the story, then you and the children act out the story.

Children want stories, children need stories. Children’s synapses are constructed in such a way that storytelling, especially the telling of traditional folktales, puts them into a deeply receptive state, a mild trance really. The universally recognized archetypal characters in folk and fairy tales (kings, queens, giants, witches, ogres, princes, princesses, talking animals, bullies, unselfish younger siblings) help children figure out the moral fabric of life. It gives them a place to put the mysteriously unpredictable mood swings of the powerful adults around them, and it helps them deal with their own fears and joys.

As it is very likely that children are hearing folktales rarely if ever outside of the classroom, I, Peter Amidon, do hereby authorize all you teachers to tell stories to your students.