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The Inspiration of Story

I have asked to say something today that will *inspire* you... but of course it is very difficult to say something new and inspirational about books and reading to an audience such as you people — who are all passionate and professional readers and book-people. So I have decided to go back to the beginning and see if we can find inspiration in something that is older than books and reading.

I am speaking, of course, of *story*.

In the early 1950s, when I was a young child, there was a song on the radio that began: “Tell me a story, Tell me a story, Tell me a story before I go to bed...” Of course, it was my favourite song, and I sang it all the time in my terrible flat voice. And perhaps to shut me up, my mother would give in and tell me stories about her own childhood, growing up in suburban Sydney and on a north coast dairy farm. In their content, these tales were very ordinary, but to me there was something amazing about the fact that my mother had once been a child, just like me. And this almost incredible fact was able to turn the most trivial story into a legend.

If the content was unremarkable, so was the context. For the telling of these stories, we might be on a train, or walking along the street, or my mother might be cooking or washing up or gardening. While my mother also read me lots of books, reading required a bed or a comfy chair, as well as the book itself. The wonderful thing about spoken story was that it could happen anywhere, any time.

Looking back on what it was that made me into a reader, I believe it was really important that the written stories I first encountered when my mother read me books were enfolded in this larger embrace of the spoken stories that she told me over and over again. While both together developed my love of narrative, the spoken stories just as much as the written stories developed my language skills — my vocabulary, my sense of rhythm, my understanding of grammatical structure, my understanding of story structure. As well, the spoken stories fostered my ability to imagine through the power of words alone — words without pictures.

Just as importantly, these real-life stories gave me a sense of the history of my mother and her family, and this was crucial in developing my sense of my own identity, my cultural heritage and my place in the world. I should perhaps add at this point that I did not have any grandparents, and my father was not a storyteller, so I was totally dependent upon my mother for a sense of where I came from. And I might also say that when I was nine years old, my mother died and I was put into a foster family, so that the knowledge I gained through those early years of listening to her stories would prove to be my lot.

Moving on now from my own story, I want to keep pulling out the strand of what *spoken* story gives us, in addition to the content of the story. So let us, for a moment, listen to a couple of the hundred and more Indigenous voices in the book *Playground*

We'll start with Bronwyn Penrith, who at the time I compiled the book was Chair of the Aboriginal women's centre in Redfern, called Mudgingal. I asked Bronwyn to tell me about first lessons that Aboriginal children are given and, after thinking for a moment, she described how one of the crucial aspects of her culture is passed on through storytelling. Not through the specific content of stories, but through the act of sharing story. Listen...

We are people who come from a culture of sharing, so there's not really a lot about the singular person, about the individual. Traditionally, we've lived for each other, sharing everything, and we still live like that today, with that sense of community.

When I try to think how this is passed on to children, the first thing that springs to my mind is the sleeping arrangements. For as far back as I can remember, I always slept with someone. And those were the occasions when the stories were told. You'd get in close to Mum or Nan to hear the stories. Even though you heard them every night of the week, you still wanted to hear those stories.

And I think today — certainly in *my* home — when my daughters come home, and the kids, we put all the mattresses on the floor and then the women and kids sleep together. Turn the TV off and start yarning. And the kids ask for the stories.¹

Now I turn to Kim Holten, a qualified teacher and Aboriginal Education Advisor. Kim was raised in the Sydney suburb of La Perouse by her grandmother, a Dhanggati

¹ Bronwyn Penrith, from *Playground*, compiled by Nadia Wheatley, Allen & Unwin, 2011, p. 29

woman, who was a wonderful storyteller. Describing her grandmother as 'the great teacher' who inspired her to follow a career in education, Kim explains that the Aboriginal way of learning is to do with 'the way we communicate'.

And it's not just about the speaking but it's about the deep listening — it's being able to listen very closely to what people are saying. That was one of the invaluable lessons that my grandmother taught me, through the way she told her stories.

My auntie Boronia does it, even to this day. If she wants you to listen to her, she'll talk to you on her drawing breath in — it's like a whisper — so you have to get closer to her. And my grandmother would do that too, so it would force you to come close and lean in and listen, to really get the message — to get the meaning behind what she was saying, as that story was being built up and built up and built up and built up and built up! And then getting to the *point*, and the inflexion in the voice going down.

And the repetition of the story-telling, and the changes in the story, really make you grasp the point of sharing that knowledge and learning from what is being said.

You know, before my grandmother died, I was twenty-one, twenty-two, and I would come home from a club and I'd jump into bed with her and say, 'Come on, Ma! Tell me a story about when *you* were young.'²

For me at least, those accounts by Bronwyn and Kim shed new insight into the kinds of things can learned through story. But as I think about the vital and living tradition of spoken storytelling in contemporary Aboriginal culture, I find myself reflecting that this is an area in which Anglo-Australian culture has lost some of its cultural heritage.

To understand when and how this happened, I believe that we need to go back before the personal computer, before the invention of television and film, and indeed before Europeans arrived in Australia. We need to go back to eighteenth-century Britain, to the time before the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions.

While most youngsters of that era were not able to go to school, children who grew up in the old rural way of life were educated in the home as they worked alongside their parents and grandparents, who in turn often sang songs and told yarns to make the working hours fly past. As well as acquiring essential life skills and moral values, these children developed a sense of their own identity and their place in

² Kim Holten, from *Playground*, compiled by Nadia Wheatley, Allen & Unwin, 2011, p. 79

the community through listening to a fund of stories drawn from folklore and from family and local history. This education was passed on in local dialect language.

With the coming of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, village life disintegrated, and at the same time the informal system of family education broke down very quickly. With parents, grandparents and children working long shifts at the mine or the mill, there was barely time for a song, let alone a story. With this loss of story, people lost history, identity, and language. When I say ‘people’, I mean *my* people. My ancestors.

Of course, today we are in a celebratory mood. We are looking for ups, not downs. Inspiration, not desperation. So how can we — as citizens of a First World country in the 21st century — get back our tradition of storytelling? How can we — as parents, grandparents, teachers, librarians and book people — get back our powers as storytellers?

I stress that I am not suggesting that we throw the baby out with bathwater... that we stop promoting literacy and literature. Rather, I am recommending that we enfold books and reading within the warm embrace of oral story. Here are a couple of simple steps:

First, *tell stories...* to your children, grandchildren, and students.

What sort of stories? Well, by all means, tell the old tried and true stories from your cultural tradition. The stories you yourself heard when you were growing up. But above all, share your personal stories: what did you do when you were a little girl or boy? Where did you live? What games did you play? Did you ever get into trouble?

To do this sort of storytelling, you don’t need to be an actor or a writer, or indeed a professional storyteller. Indeed, no actor speaking on a talking book, and no unseen voice on a book app, can give a story the intimacy of a real live human being, up close, talking in her own voice.

To do this sort of storytelling, you just need to be yourself. After all, this is one subject on which you are the world expert.

Secondly, if you are a teacher or a librarian, show your students and their families your respect for storytelling, by treating this as a vital part of the experience of learning literacy and of learning to love literature.

In many Australian school-communities there are families in which the parents or grandparents have difficulty reading the English-language books that their children bring home from school, and as a result these family-members feel that they are not able to support their children as they would like to do, in the development of literacy.

Well, they shouldn't feel disempowered! Encourage your students to ask family members for stories. Encourage parents and grandparents to tell them. And then encourage students to come back into the classroom and share their family stories.

In conclusion, remember that telling stories and listening to stories is about something much bigger than the *content* of any one story.

Remember what Kim Holten said about storytelling teaching 'deep listening'.

Remember what Bronwyn Penrith said about storytelling teaching the value of sharing — the value of community.

Story is about culture. It's about identity. It's about understanding who we are and where we come from. It takes us back, before the book app and before the book, to the time when some early human child said, 'Tell me a story...'

Now, *that* was an inspiration!

