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ONCE UPON A TIME...

The grey text below is that which appears in *Hullabaloo!*

Head of our Department of Undergraduate Initial Teacher Training, Kathleen Taylor, tells us about the storytelling project that her students get involved in each year...

Students on our BA Primary Education always begin the course with a storytelling project. The project is run in conjunction with a number of local schools and involves each student pairing up with a child. The student draws on the relationship that they build with child to write a story which is personal to the child and which is then told on a special storytelling day at BG.

The students share the experience with the child and in doing so get to know the kind of things the child might like in their story. Often the child may want their siblings and friends in the story, or favourite TV characters; indeed the names of the characters in the stories often reveal the personal traits that the children see in people they know. The project culminates in a storytelling day on campus when classrooms are transformed into storytelling spaces and the children get to hear the stories that have been written for them.

My involvement in the (long established) project, began fourteen years ago, which in project's history is not so long! I knew then, as I know now, that story is a fundamental vehicle through which we learn, especially for children. My mantra was that of Barbara Hardy who, in Margaret Meek's collected essays in *The Cool Web*, wrote "narrative, like lyric and dance is a primary act of mind transferred to art from life". The same quotation was used to illustrate the underpinning principle of teaching and learning in the first year of our course when we wrote the first validation document in 1994.

My part in the project is to model storytelling and like everything in teaching the more you know the more there is to know, so I'll admit now to being a novice storyteller. I still feel nervous when I start to tell a story, it always *feels* like stepping into the dark, so I can empathise with the fear that students feel when embarking on the project. To allay those fears both for myself and the students I begin by recognising the stories we already hold in our minds, especially those we know from childhood."

I was fortunate as a child because my mother told me stories. *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, were stories I can remember asking for again and again. I remember too, the yearly outing to the pantomime at Sheffield's Lyceum Theatre where I would see the regular comic whose name I remember vividly in lights, 'Ken Platt', performing the stories my mother told me and I knew so well, along with others such as *Puss in Boots* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Aladdin*.

Through reading I encountered more stories. I still have my first story book: a collection of Hans Christian Anderson stories and a treasured Brothers Grimm story, *King of the Golden River*. Enchantment followed enchantment, wonderful teachers reading aloud to me Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* in my first year at Junior School. Then in Junior 2 Kenneth Graeme's *Wind in the Willows* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. John Meade Falkner's *Moonfleet* was almost unbearable as my teacher Mr. Whitehouse raced to finish every chapter before the bell for dinner. Two memorable events occurred at Junior School: being taken to Sheffield's Library Theatre to see Anderson's *The Imperial Nightingale*, and to the Sheffield City Hall to see Barbirolli conduct *Peter and the Wolf*, I wish I could remember the narrator!

More than this, when I was a child a whole new vehicle for telling stories arrived in the form of television. I can't begin to convey the excitement I felt on a daily basis rushing home from school to see programmes such as *Ivanhoe*, *Sir Lancelot*, *Robin Hood*, *William Tell*, *Long John Silver* and *The Buccaneers* (other than to say I ached and longed for the next episode). When Ian Serrailier's *The Silver Sword* was serialised I ran to

the library to get the book and remember reading it in one go because I couldn't wait for the remaining episodes on TV. Through play I acted out the stories so that they were not only familiar, but part of my psyche. Indeed reading Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* at age 12, the opening pages of which are set in the very Wharncliffe Woods where I played, convinced and confirmed my commitment to rout, revelry and ransacking. All in a good cause of course, and not to be confused with Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills* which was yet to be written!

The above is but a snippet of my early encounters with stories, the significance of which is in the remembering and the making of what is implicit in the mind *explicit* for the purposes of teaching. In other words we all have stories which we can draw upon to become storytellers, whether we have heard them, read them, seen them or played them. Further layers of personal stories and family stories make up the 'walking stories' that we are, where each, I believe, contributes to our picture in the world and the picture we have of the world.

In my storytelling session I draw upon my repertoire of stories, finally drawing on *Gawain and the Green Knight*, a story I remember being told to me by my tutor at University, and one that made a lasting impression. The story can be viewed as a romance, a quest, a gruesome game, indeed, many things, but for me it is a story of a flawed man in his personal quest to be honourable. Michael Morpurgo, who has written a beautiful version of the story, when being interviewed on Desert Island Discs a few years ago, told of his Company Sergeant in the army telling the story to young recruits, of which he was one, and that the story resonated with his feelings at the time. He did not explain his feelings but I wondered if, like mine, and like those of the Sergeant, the feelings were to do with trying to do one's best in spite of known flaws, and of course, unknown flaws yet to come. Flaws and mistakes are a teacher's bread and butter, so it seems right to introduce the story early on in a teacher's career in preparation of recognising the flaws within one's self and dealing with them compassionately and fairly in others. Apart from my interpretation is the fact that it is a fabulous story, and one that follows true story conventions that are so easily remembered, hence it is known today mainly because it has been handed down through our oral tradition.

Recently a colleague recommended I read *Mr Pip* by Lloyd Jones knowing my love of Dickens and especially *Great Expectations*, whose central character Pip forms the title of Lloyds' best selling book. The reason I draw upon *Mr Pip* to conclude this short article is not for its content, which is not so dissimilar to *Gawain*, such as the horror, the quest, the noble characters etc., but rather to draw attention to the character, Mr Watts, a teacher and storyteller who, in a village that is all but destroyed (but whose children long to be taught) draws upon his memory and knowledge of a story he knows, that of *Great Expectations*. I conclude that the stories are there within us just waiting to be told.

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