Sweeten Up Life's Lessons with Folktales

Nancy Alder
Ah, the age-old problem: how to engage a child’s interest and make school and life lessons palatable, understandable, and memorable. The solution is as close as your library. Whether teaching in a formal classroom setting, working to enhance school lessons at home, or illustrating moral values, try flavoring the facts with some fun. Folktales are chock-full of adventure and humor. And, for all their winning ways, they are a useful teaching tool.

Teaching about a particular land and its people? A trip to the library or bookstore will lead you to folktales from all over the world and every region of the United States. Woven through these stories is a wealth of information about the culture and physical attributes of the places from which the tales originate. You can enhance the message of the stories by incorporating other sources of information about the country. Listen to music from the land of origin: a steel band for Caribbean tales, bagpipes for Scottish stories, or African kalimba. Get out the globe and find the country the folktale comes from. Talk about the region’s climate, natural resources, and indigenous wildlife. Have the kids listen to the story or read it, keeping their minds open to hints of the culture and physical surroundings. What a palatable way to ingest the facts! Folktales can spice up lessons about geography, science, mythology, history, religion, ethics—virtually all aspects of the curriculum.

Wiley and the Hairy Man, for example, originates in the bayou country of Louisiana. The setting for the story is a swamp—typical terrain for Louisiana. A colorful telling of the tale will evoke the feeling of a swamp. Your listener will envision the giant bay trees dripping with moss and the stands of bamboo that Wiley tries to chop down. He will turn up his nose at the heady smell of moldering vegetation and picture patches of quicksand waiting to catch the unwary. Wiley, the hero of the piece, poles a raft across the bayou as swamp folk surely did, and still do. Both Wiley’s Mama and Wiley’s nemesis, the Hairy Man, know magic. The belief in supernatural powers and the ability to manipulate nature is common in bayou culture. In his encounter with the Hairy Man, Wiley challenges him to use his conjuring powers to “turn himself into sumpin he ain’t.” The Hairy Man obliges, magically becoming an alligator and a possum in turn, animals indigenous to the bayou area.

Through reading and listening to folktales, kids learn about the flora and fauna of the place, geographical facts, and aspects of culture without realizing they are doing anything other than having a good time. Subliminal learning!

What Wiley and the Hairy Man can do to teach about a part of Louisiana’s culture, other folktales can do for their points of origin.

The Anansi stories from West Africa teach about morality, underscore the consequences of bucking societal mores, and foster social cohesion. The stories are filled with clues about life in Ghana and Nigeria. The tales take place in the jungle and in villages, and are filled with indigenous animals as characters. The notion of tribes and tribal authority runs through the stories.

Native American tales deal with values and concerns of the cultures from which they spring. Pueblo storytellers weave tales of trickery and valor that revolve around matters still of vital interest to members of this desert society. Some tales deal with the loss and acquisition of water: rivers, rain, well sites. Other tales deal with respect for authority, matters of honor, and the human connection and kinship with the natural world.

Where do you find these all-purpose treasures? Picture books, story collections, and audio tapes of folktales abound. A browse through the 398s in your favorite library (GR 74-76 in the
Library of Congress classification system) will take you around the world through folktales. You can read a number of tales from a given culture to gain an understanding of that particular place or culture, or you can look for similarities and differences in a number of cultures by examining their folktales which address a particular topic. You will find the creation myth, for example, explained in almost every culture through folktale. Numerous versions of cautionary tales dealing with conceit, laziness, greed, and all other undesirable character traits will also be discovered.

At a time when the differences between cultures, religions, and peoples serve to divide and alienate us, how nice it is to know that we can learn to recognize the commonality of humankind through a good read. What’s good for us needn’t be a bitter pill after all. Learning can be fun!

While you are sure to find your own favorites among folktale collections, I’d like to share with you some favorites of my own.


- *Wisdom Tales from Around the World*. Heather Forest. August House, 1996. 0874834783. $27.95


Nancy Alder is a professional storyteller and educator. Her books and tapes, including *Tellin’ Tales at School: a handbook for teaching storytelling in workshops and in the classroom* and *Terrific Tales for Telling* are available at the BYU bookstore and Deseret Book, and from the author by email at nalder@att.net or phone at (801)224-6861.

Excellent versions of “Wiley and the Hairy Man” can be found on audio tapes in *Favorite Stories* by Diane Ferlatte, Olde West Recording, 1991, and in *Why the Possum’s Tail is Bare and other classic southern stories* by Jimmy Neil Smith, Avon Books, 1993.