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The Glory of Story

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A well-told story is not just a one-night stand. Rather, it is the start of a deep and meaningful relationship. The best stories have a built-in retention module and stay in the subconscious mind and heart of the listener, returning when needed. Stories teach in layers, offering all to the listener, who plucks from the tale what he or she can grasp at that time. Then they lurk just below the surface in the reader’s mind, waiting for an opportune time to rise to the conscious mind and provide additional layers of information and insight. Stories are a vehicle for subliminal teaching. That is, perhaps, their greatest value. They allow one to teach without causing resentment and without seeming to beat the student over the head with lessons.

So what message should stories convey? Not the lessons taught in Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Rapunzel, and the like. These are stories of passive, submissive women, locked in their misery, waiting to be rescued by a valiant prince. What is the social intention of these stories? Isn’t it to limit women’s vision of their potential, keeping them helpless and in their place: on hold, waiting for the day their prince will come? Don’t promulgate that message. An occasional foray into the never-land they offer is fine and entertaining, but don’t make it a steady diet. Instead, tell tales of empowerment, stories of those who faced adversity fearlessly, fighting with whatever tools came to hand. Tell stories with life-affirming messages that contain such lessons as it isn’t necessary to follow convention; try, try again; share bread with a stranger; take advice; and persevere, even after a rotten childhood.

Tell of Sheherezade, who, through her ingenuity, saved herself and the sultan as well, changing him from a diabolical tyrant into a stable, caring person. How did she accomplish this? Through the power of story, of course! For one-thousand-and-one nights Sheherezade told tales so captivating, so engaging, the sultan couldn’t bear to forgo hearing their end, even though it meant cheating himself of the “pleasure” of putting her to death. Sheherezade told tales that taught this sorrowing, sinful man to laugh; tales that spoke of others who had endured pains as great as his own; and tales that helped him develop understanding and compassion. Sheherezade used persuasion, courage, strength, and grace to transform the sultan and save herself. Now that’s empowerment.

Tell the tale of Robert Munsch’s paper bag princess, a valiant girl who risked all to save the man she loved. This tale teaches that perhaps an occasion will arise in which one must ditch one’s traditional role and sally forth, sword in hand, to vanquish evil and rescue the helpless. The “it’s not my job” mentality will be countered by the message of this story as it floats to the surface of the reader’s mind once again. Readers will be empowered to step up. Okay, so Prince Ronald was a poor choice and, in the meantime, she did the right thing.

Allen Chinen speaks of fairy tales that explain that supernatural magic—fairy godmothers, elves, magic pebbles, and so on—is not needed. People need only to recognize the magic in universal truth, the magic of empowerment, and dealing with the consequences of getting what they ask for. Tell fairytales of a protagonist who learns something, solves his own problem, relies on himself, and often has a positive influence on others. Consider the story of Clever Manka. In this tale, the daughter of a poor, humble shepherd provides her father with the answer to a set of riddles given to decide a property case against a rich farmer. Delighted with Manka’s success, the judge poses other riddles to test her. After hearing her clever solutions, the judge marries Manka, hoping to shape her into the silent, non-participatory role filled by women at that time. But Manka will not be squelched. She quietly,
unobtrusively, and repeatedly uses her quick wit to aid her husband till he finally lauds her cleverness and permits her to, in effect, come out of the closet. This tale of hapless males who rely on a female “savior” flies in the face of most formula fairytales. But what a strong message it conveys—one needn’t be strong to be victorious or old to be wise; even the very least can help a friend in need. Readers need more incarnations of the “Lion and the Mouse.”

Tell stories of reconciliation, of resolving conflict through cleverness and courage. Tell stories of the virtue and rewards of being willing to start again and work hard. The real “glory of story” lies in its application to the life of the listener. Shouldn’t stories help the listener be heroic? Help a reader feel competent to live, even though life may be hard? The tale of Molly Whuppie provides such a model. In effect, it tells the listener that, “this tough moment in life is not all there is. Life exists beyond [one’s] neighborhood, beyond [one’s] circumstance.” It gives the reader the hope needed to persevere. This story and many others lay out life’s patterns: everyone makes mistakes, but everyone can learn; everyone falls, but many manage to get up; everyone suffers, yet everyone can still survive.

The “glory of story” is that it tells readers, “Life is difficult, but now is only part of the story. Life goes on beyond this moment...beyond this place.” Story prompts people to look at their own lives as they could be from that moment on. It gives them permission to manipulate their lives, indeed mandates this. Even more, stories show their audiences how to do just that. Stories tell their readers to “find friends, listen to advice, forgive those who wrong [them], use [their] gifts, paltry though they seem.” The right stories offer visions of life that are full of love and hope. They simmer within their readers, changing them for the better. Isn’t that glorious?