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A STORY FESTIVAL

by Donna King

It is late April, lunchtime. I am standing on the big wheeled-toy deck at the back of our playground, facing a curve of children and families crowded together on low stools and benches. This space, usually rumbling and rattling with tricycle traffic, caped

heroes, and bouncing basketballs, is wrapped in an expectant hush. I take a deep breath, look from one face to the next and the next, and gather my “announcing voice.”

“Welcome to the Children First Story Festival!”

As a community, we break into a well-practiced song—the version of “Here We Are Together” sung at the beginning of every morning meeting and community gathering, singing the name of each person in turn—a simple, playful, and rowdy ritual that makes this space “our” space, and this moment “our” moment.

And then I gather myself again. I am not by nature a performer. As an introvert with no particular talent in arts or athletics or politics, I did not grow up

accustomed to stages and speeches. But I know—as Priya Parker teaches in her book “The Art of Gathering”—that I have a responsibility to leverage my power as host of this gathering. It is my duty to articulate and amplify our intention for being here today. I have prepared for this moment, and the words I intend to share are captured on the paper I am holding tightly in my hands:

Today we are here to enjoy some Children First stories and to celebrate Children First storytellers. I expect there will be lots of reasons to smile and maybe to laugh, too. I think we are going to have a lot of fun.

But while we are having fun, I do not want us to forget for one minute how important and powerful these stories really are. We are not here because our



In 1990, Donna King, informed by her graduate school study of child care quality, worked with a group of teachers and parents to found Children First, a small, nonprofit early education program in Durham, North

Carolina—and she has been teaching, directing, and, most of all, learning there ever since. King’s book, “Pursuing Bad Guys,” is part of the ROW series, and chronicles the year that Children First teachers worked with pedagogista Pam Oken-Wright to join the children’s research on bad guys. She has three children—Cara, now 31; Anna Grace, now 28; and Josh, now 26—all graduates of Children First.

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 Quest for Clarity, Courage and Community*



kids are cute and amusing—although they are beautiful and delightful. We are here because these pretend stories have important things to say about real life matters.

I go on to name some of those important things, connected with the particular stories we will see acted today, and then I conclude:

So enjoy! AND pay careful attention with your minds and hearts. Let the powerful storytellers we are here to celebrate work their magic.

And then I call the first of our storytellers, along with the actors he has selected as his cast. Photo 1 is Campbell, 4 years old, in the middle of the stage—quiet and composed, smiling just a little, facing the audience. He will play the “little boy” in this story. His moms—thoroughly rehearsed and ready to embody two “mean bears”—take their places in the back corner we are calling “bad guy land.” Campbell’s friends sit on the literal and figurative edges of their seats, knowing they will also be called into the story soon.

I say, “Quiet on the set.” The audience settles in.

From my spot at the back of the stage, I begin to read Campbell’s words aloud, narrating loudly and with expression, “Once upon a time, there was a little boy that was going in the forest. And then he got lost.”

Campbell wanders around, looking confused, and speaks his dialogue: “I think I’m lost!”

I pick up the narration: “And then a mean bear came. And then another mean bear came.”

Campbell’s moms emerge from bad guy land, growling and menacing, stomping their way toward Campbell.

Photo 1



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I narrate: “The little boy yells, ‘Help!’”

Campbell shouts: “Help!”

I continue: “Then all the people come to help the little boy that was lost and help the bears go away.”

Campbell’s classmates—aka “all the people”—leap from their seats and run to join forces with their friend. Together, they turn to bravely face the bears.

I narrate: “They chase the bears and yell ‘Shoo! Shoo! Shoo!’”

A flurry of running and a chorus of raucous shooing ensues. The

mom-bears demonstrate their dismay and intimidation by starting to back away.

After allowing the cacophony to continue for a moment, I read again: “And then the bears walk away, saying, ‘Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.’”

Campbell’s moms slump in total defeat and retreat to bad guy land, mumbling “blah, blah, blah” in the same sulky and sassy tone Campbell used when he first told this story a few months ago. The understated hilarity of the “blah, blah, blah” is a pitch-perfect balance to the seriousness of the relief our hero experienced when his desperate call for

help was heard and answered by “all the people.”

And now the gleeful triumphant conclusion, as I read: “The kids all say, ‘Yay! They’re gone!’”

The kids leap up and down and repeat their lines together: “Yay, they’re gone!” before I read the final words – “The End.”

The actors take their bow, and the audience applauds with genuine delight and appreciation. I feel—and I think they do as well—that this collective rendering has done full justice to the narrative genius of Campbell’s little story.

Now everyone sits down and takes a breath as we reset the stage for the next story – which will be entirely different and equally perfect.

At Children First, storytelling and acting—inspired by the work of Vivian Paley—has been central to our teaching since our founding 32 years ago. Our families have always been connected to the children’s stories in important ways. Children dictate their stories and we write them by hand in story journals that stay at school, but we always type them up afterward. Typing the stories makes them more legible to me and therefore easier to use when we act them at meetings; it makes them easier to discuss in our teacher research meetings; and it also makes it possible to share them in children’s portfolios and in the weekly emails titled “This Week’s Stories” that I send to all families. We know that revisiting their own stories, and even acting them with their families, is one of many children’s favorite ways of “reading” their portfolios at home. And we often have lively conversations with families about the stories over email and face-to-face.

So, in 2017, when I heard Chicago Commons director, Karen Haigh,

speak about a story-acting event their Reggio-inspired program had created to invite families into the storytelling process at their school, I was immediately inspired and excited. I could see that a “Story Festival” would be a wonderful way to culminate a year of storytelling and acting—a way for kids to demonstrate in front of their caring “public” the capacities they had been working on in the privacy of the small classroom community all year. And I loved the idea that kids would “cast” their stories with actors from the whole of the whole school community, a community we had spent the year helping them come to know.

In the six years since our first Story Festival, we have come to understand that the reach and power of this relatively simple celebration may be even greater than we had imagined. Here is my sense of what, consciously and unconsciously, children might be taking away from this experience of having their stories acted and witnessed in the circle of community.

I matter. My ideas, my feelings, and my creative work matter. And my contribution to staging the work of my friends, and witnessing and applauding the work of my friends matters, too.

I am seen and heard. Witnessed as a creative writer; witnessed as an actor—whether shy and conservative in my expression, or bold and open; and witnessed as an emotional being, whose storylines and choices about characters reflect my big questions and ambitions and worries, about who I am and who I am trying to become.

I belong. My voice, my body, my work, my SELF absolutely has a place sitting in this circle, and standing at the center of this circle.

I can make people laugh—WITH me, not AT me. I can make people gasp,

and cheer, and breathe a deep sigh of relief. I have the power to share and generate real emotion.

Just as I belong and matter and am seen and heard, my friends belong and matter and are seen and heard. I am an important part of the community which holds each and every one of them. I contribute to the community, as well as receive from the community.

And finally, as children working with teachers to grapple with social justice themes including identity, fairness, and freedom, I believe they take away the idea that:

I am brave. I can, as Campbell’s sister Macy once put it, “Be nervous AND want to act.” And I can create a story that demonstrates my deep connection to the ideal of heroism—a force in both the world of pretend and of real, a force inside my friends and family, and inside myself, that leads us all to be Upstanders. To help, to solve problems, to risk, to speak up, to share, to stand tall in the face of scary events, to save our beloveds from danger, to use our power to both stop badness and rehabilitate badness.

I am writing this article as a new school year opens, and I am just coming to know this year’s community of storytellers. Week after week, as fall turns into winter, and I file each child’s new stories in our big story binder, I will look forward to the magical springtime hour when one of those stories, for each child, will become their Story Festival moment—a moment when we will all see them more fully, and when they will see themselves reflected back with acceptance and love. And I feel grateful to be in a profession that allows us to create and share that kind of magic in such a simple and yet profound way.

Story Festival Medicine

Stories are powerful. The stories we are told and the stories we tell act on us in potent ways. Since ancient times, human culture has revered stories as mind medicine and soul nourishment. Angus Fletcher, a modern-day “story scientist,” who studies story through the dual lens of literacy criticism and neuroscience, tells us that stories are technologies for psychological healing.

I think we all know this from our own experience with stories. We have all been haunted by fairy tales, uplifted by novels, captivated by our latest binge watch. We have all internalized cautionary tales; emulated inspiring characters; wept over the loss of a fictional soul-mate; and recovered our lost equilibrium by losing ourselves in tales of good triumphing over evil. And the stories we hear most often—creation myths, family lore, cultural fables—are the ones that impact us most.

So, when I work with kids to choose one story from the big collection of stories they have told over a year, it is not a casual conversation. This is not a conversation about an everyday sort of choice, like inviting kids to choose which blocks will work best for their building, or which song to sing at meeting, or what name to give the paint color they have just mixed. Those are low-stakes questions I ask with curiosity, but without attachment. The question is which story to bring to the Story Festival—a high-stakes question!

When I present kids with their choices for the Story Festival, I have carefully considered every story they have told, and narrowed the options to just two or three. It is like I am a nutritionist and the stories are food. I know the kids are going to be consuming these particular dishes over and over and over again for two full weeks, so I need to craft a menu of the healthiest, most calorie-rich and highly nourishing dishes available. I already know the options taste good to the storytellers, since they were the ones who wrote the recipes; but I also need to feel good about

the children stuffing themselves with these foods day after day during Story Festival season.

This care is needed, because the Story Festival is more than a one-day celebration of 12 stories. It is a deep process of coming to know each of the stories, inside and outside, up and down. These stories will be acted- and acted and acted again—as we rehearse them at meeting; as we teach them to the parents and siblings that will act them at the Story Festival; and ultimately, as we perform them in the heightened moments of the festival itself. We will think about staging and sets; we will grow dialogue as we revisit the stories again and again; we will build sets and craft props from useful junk; we will make costumes and consider color schemes. For a while, we will live inside these stories together.

This means we have an incredible opportunity to tailor this high-dosage nutrition to the growth edges and tender wishes and deepest ambitions of each child individually, and to those of the group as a whole.

Consider Ellis, who has grown slowly but surely from loner to friend. He chooses a story in which his hero’s determined tinkering gains him entry into a locked hideout where there is room for him and for a friend.

Then there’s Elliot, who is working on slowing down and on repairing mistakes he makes when he goes too fast. He chooses a story that begins when he impulsively gobbles up his whole birthday cake before his party. He asks his Mom to bake another, and she kindly agrees. This time, he keeps his promise to take just ONE BITE, and that there is plenty of cake to share with all his friends.

And then there’s Zinnia, an easy-going younger sister who spends her school days being coddled, encouraged and sometimes bossed by her older cousin. In her story, she is the super-competent big girl who uses her strong voice and the power of the written word to protect herself and her baby doll from a mean and hungry dog. And who does Zinnia choose to play the role of baby doll? Her older sister Dahlia, of course!

There are stories like these behind and inside every story acted at the Story Festival. When we choose our story medicine with care, the stories we celebrate point the children—individually and collectively—in the direction of strength, courage, care, community, and safety. And that matters. Because, as Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in her masterpiece “Braiding Sweetgrass,” “Imagination is one of our most powerful tools. What we can imagine, we become.”

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