Black and White Fire: The Interplay of Stories, Imagination, and Children's Spirituality

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This paper explores the potential for using narrative to foster children's spiritual growth. It discusses the nature, origin, and appeal of story, and presents theoretical perspectives which form a rationale for using non-sectarian children's, adolescent, and young adult literature for spiritual development. Such books avoid church-and-state controversies while providing a fresh approach to educators where religious and spiritual education are mandated. An annotated bibliography of a repesentative sample of such books is included in an Appendix.

Keywords: *Children's Spirituality; Narrative; Children's Literature; Reader response to literature*

Introduction

Rae and I were team-teaching the fourth grade Sunday School class at our church, alternating Sundays to lead the lesson. That particular group of children had already earned a reputation for having a high energy level. The curriculum, ordered from the denomination's publishing house, contained many Bible stories, with suggestions for possible extension activities. Following the stories with hands-on participatory activities proved to be the one way to maintain some degree of engagement among the children.

I soon noted that on her Sundays to lead the class, Rae tended to give the stories and the

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accompanying activities short shrift and to turn the lesson into an opportunity to talk about Christian duties and virtues. One Sunday she skipped the story altogether and gave an extensive teaching on the many charitable activities that our church is involved in: a prison ministry, caring for the poor and homeless, helping build houses for people in need, etc. She wrote the names of the ministries on the chalkboard and began to describe each one, pointing why we as Christians should be involved in such efforts. The little boys in the class were attentive at first, then began to squirm. Rae's teaching became more animated as she strove to maintain their attention. Soon elbowings and nudgings were followed by chairs tipping over and accompanying laughter. Finally, in exasperation, she turned on them. "Don't you like Sunday School?" she angrily demanded. "Why do you come if you always misbehave? Is there *anything* you like about Sunday School?"

There was a long pause. The children, silent, stared at their desk tops. Finally one of the little boys said, "We like the stories."

What accounts for the appeal of story for children--or for adults, for that matter? What have great spiritual teachers down through the ages known about the power of story? In this paper I shall discuss the nature, origin, appeal, and power of narrative from various theoretical perspectives. Together these perspectives provide a strong rationale for the use of narrative in fostering children's spiritual development. These theories also suggest certain parameters or guidelines in that use.

In the United States, Canada, and Australia, teachers in public schools are hesitant to use overtly religious texts in their classrooms because of laws regarding separation of church and state. There are, however, non-sectarian works that are, or can be, sites of the sacred: children's literature that can be used to foster students' spiritual growth without violating such laws. At the

same time, teachers who are mandated to teach for students' spiritual development may find that "secular" or non-sectarian texts provide a fresh approach. A representative listing of such books for children, adolescents, and young adults is included in Appendix A.

Why Story?

According to Jerome Bruner (1986), narrative is one of two primary modes of human thought, two "distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality": the paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode (p. 11). The mode of thought that has been privileged in the modern age is the paradigmatic mode, a mode which describes and explains phenomena according to categories which are related to one another to form a system. This mode of thought, which Bruner also calls the logico-scientific mode, deals in general causes and is concerned with verifiable empirical truth. The narrative mode, in contrast, seeks not to establish formal and empirical truths but rather verisimilitude, life-likeness. Bruner says that "narrative is built upon concern for the human condition," in contrast to the "heartlessness" of logical thought (p. 14). In the modern age the narrative mode of thought has generally been discredited or marginalized as a legitimate way of knowing. Sue's list of various church activities with a common purpose was an example of thinking in the paradigmatic mode.

M.M. Bakhtin (1981) has also provided a useful way of understanding the kind of discourse Sue was engaged in; it would be described as "authoritative" discourse, a type of discourse that strives to determine behavior, or "ideological interrelations with the world" (p. 342). Authoritative discourse is characterized by distance from oneself, a lack of dialogic possibilities, a lack of play, of "spontaneously creative stylizing variants"; discourse that is static with its own single calcified meaning (pp. 342-3). A second type of discourse is one which Bakhtin describes

as having interior persuasiveness. This type of discourse does not necessarily appeal to any

external authority but is flexible, with malleable borders. It is contextualized and can be related

to one's own life. This type of discourse offers further creative interaction; it is open,

unfinished, capable of further representation. Harold Rosen (1986) describes narrative

discourse as having this interior persuasiveness; this is the type of discourse the children in our

Sunday School class seemed to prefer.

One cannot draw a one-to-one parallel between Bakhtin's and Bruner's categories;

Bakhtin does not identify internally persuasive discourse with narrative discourse only, and

he includes many types of discourse beyond the logico-scientific mode in his understanding

of authoritative discourse. He does, however, assert that the role of authoritative discourse

in fictional writing is "insignificant" and the artistic rendering of authoritative discourse

is "impossible" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 344).

The Origin of Story

Is narrative, then, indeed *a priori* wired into the human brain, as Bruner suggests? Was it

always so, or did human beings, at some point in our history, develop this mode of thought?   If

so, how did it begin? And why?   We can more easily trace developments in scientific theory

and more easily pinpoint the invention of such media as radio, television, and home computers

than we can trace the origin of story.

To explain the beginning of the oral narrative, the great storyteller Ruth Sawyer (1962)

would take us back to prehistoric days, to a time when our ancestors lived in caves or trees, when

their urgent everyday concern was the need to hunt for food in order to survive. Gradually, over

time, they began to live together in tribes, to organize their labor, and thus to have time for

leisure. There must have been a moment when one of them sat back, lifted her head, and looked

about. A few questions must have come to mind: What is this place I live in? How did it come to be? What is that light that travels across the sky? Why does it go away, leaving me in darkness? Why does it always return? Is there some power that makes it do that? What would such a power be like? Is it friendly or hostile? And this world, is *it* friendly, or hostile? What is my place in it?

Then, perhaps casting an eye on its offspring as well as on other members of the tribe, to wonder, What about these others? How am I to relate to them?

And, ultimately noting the cycles of days and years, of birth and death, asking, What does my life mean? And, finally, Who am I?

The first human response to such questions was not to develop measuring rods and telescopes, compasses and gyroscopes, to organize and understand these phenomena; it was to develop stories, stories that explain how the world began, how humans came to live on the earth, what forces were at work in the creation. These are the stories we know as myth; all early cultures, as far as we know, seem to have developed them.

Soon other stories developed. Stories were told about members of the tribe who had performed extraordinary feats; as these stories were repeated, their deeds took on larger-than-life dimensions; the stories that we speak of as legends and sagas were born. Some of the stories were set to verse and sung, and the ballad came into being. With more leisure, stories began to be developed for amusement alone: the stories we know now as folktales and fairy tales.

The storytellers--later known as troubadours, bards, minstrels, ollahms, or seanachies--were the early teachers; it was they who passed along the lore, the wisdom, the values of their societies. Their stories gave the people a sense of who they were, an awareness of communal and personal identity, an understanding of commonly held values, a sense of how one related to

others and to the natural world.

The Hebrew Bible provides an example of a culture that grew out of such an oral tradition. The Bible reveals a tradition rich in storytelling but one that was also undergirded by authoritative discourse, in the many laws that prescribed how the Hebrew people were to relate to God, to others, and to the creation. Here it is instructive to ponder the interplay between Bakhtin's two types of discourse. Clearly the laws and regulations found in the Torah have had great authority for the Hebrew people. But suppose the Bible contained authoritative discourse alone. Would people relate to it in the same way--or would they find it so distant, so rigid, so calcified that they would turn it into a mere cultural artifact? What part has story played in the ongoing life and power of the Bible? Has it not, in large degree, rested in the inner persuasiveness of its stories? Do we choose not to kill simply because the law says, "Do not kill?" or because when we hear stories about killing we understand, this is what it means to kill; this is what the consequences of killing are?[2]

An old Jewish commentary speaks of the Bible stories as

having been composed in black and white fire. The black fire is seen in the form of the

printed or handwritten words on the page or scroll; the white fire is found in the spaces

between and around the back. The black fire is fixed for all time; the white fire is forever   kindled by

Personal engagement, imaginative leaps of understanding take place in the white fire "for which

the black fire, the letters, are the boundaries" (p. 24).

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[2]   I am grateful to Professor Roy Heller for this insight.

[3]   Peter Pitzele cites this portion of Midrash as a basis for his approach in using dramatization to invite people into the life and heart of Bible stories. The concept of black and white fire can be found in the Hebrew *Book of Legends* (New York, Schocken Publishers, 1992, p. 82), which traces it to two earlier sources, *The Palestinian* (or *Jerusalem*) *Talmud,* Shekalim 6:1 and *Yalkut Shimoni*, Berakhah, paragraph 951.

Literary Theorists

German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1978) provides a similar perspective in his description of the act of reading literary texts. Iser points out that a writer leaves gaps, or blanks, in the text, when information is not made explicit. The reader fills in those gaps, is drawn into the text by supplying what is meant by what is not said.

According to Iser, the reader's central and essential communication with a literary text arises from the asymmetry in the reader-text relationship occasioned by the gaps. The reader fills the gaps by continual projections or inferences. The text continues to guide, to confirm, or correct the reader's inferences, as the reader continually casts forward toward a future horizon of possibilities, while retaining the "past horizon that is already filled" (p. 111). Thus, in reading a work of literature, the reader is "composing" the story in his or her own mind; "the story is in effect being *rewritten* by the reader, rewritten so as to allow play for the reader's imagination" (cited in Bruner, p. 35).

Hans R. Jauss (1982) describes how the disparity between the reader's "horizon of expectation" and an encounter with a new text can bring about a "change of horizons...through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (p. 23).

Like Iser and Jauss, the American literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978) takes us beyond the view that a literary work has one meaning at which a reader ideally arrives. According to Rosenblatt, the meaning of a literary work does not reside on the printed page but comes into being in the transaction that occurs between the reader and the text. The literary experience is a synthesis of what the reader already knows or feels or desires with what the text offers. Readers are active in selecting and organizing elements of the text according to their own already

acquired habits, assumptions, and expectations for reading. What the reader brings to the text--one's life experiences, one's present preoccupations or inner needs, the purpose for reading, even the setting in which the reading event occurs--affect the meaning the reader will make of the text. For Rosenblatt, the literary work evoked by the reader is unique to that time, place, and reader.

Both Rosenblatt and Iser grant the text a stronger role in the reader-text transaction than do more subjective reader response theorists such as David Bleich (1978) and Stanley Fish (1980). For Rosenblatt, the text both guides the reader's response and constrains it. While Rosenblatt's theory allows for multiple interpretations of a literary work, not every reading is a "valid" one. A valid reading will not contradict the written text nor will it infer something for which there is no verbal evidence. For Iser, the interaction between reader and text fails if the blanks are filled solely and unimpededly by the reader's projections. A process of continual correction of the projections occurs, guided by the text. It is from this process that the reader develops a frame of reference for the situation as a whole, but because the imbalance between reader and text is undefined, a variety of communications is possible.

Implications for Teaching

Such theorists as Rosenblatt, Iser, and Jauss raise questions about the most effective approaches in teaching through narrative. Particularly do they call us to question the impulse to explain to children what particular stories "mean," or to insist that the meaning we have derived from the story should be theirs as well. My own experience in studying children's responses to literature has shown me that children's interpretations of stories are very likely to be quite different from those of adults. Children's developmental levels affect their response, as do their

own unique life experiences, inner needs, preoccupations, and attitudes (Trousdale, 1987, 1989, 1994, 2002).

And yet we find in both secular and religious realms an expectation that children are to derive a particular, pre-ordained "correct" meaning from a given narrative. In the secular realm such an expectation drives requiring children to identify the "main idea" of a given story or to choose, among multiple pre-ordained and thus limited choices, the one "correct" answer about the meaning of a brief narrative passage. In the religious realm it is revealed in the use of stories as a vehicle for preaching explicit moral lessons or inculcating particular religious virtues. By imposing a pre-ordained interpretation of a story on children, adults deny the dialogic possibilities which stories offer, thereby extinguishing their white fire.

Such impulses may derive not only from the notion that a literary text has one correct meaning, but also from the idea that the child's mind is a blank slate, upon which adult educators are to inscribe knowledge. In religious education this has manifested in an assumption that it is the educator's job to "teach" spirituality to children, to impose a certain kind of spirituality (often a particular religious perspective) upon them. Such an approach, consciously or unconsciously, derives from a denial of children's inherent spiritual capacity and acuity. Increasingly research is showing that children seem to possess an innate spiritual capacity (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2002; Hay with Nye, 1998). The implications of this research would be that the religious educator's task is one of affirming and drawing forth from children their own spiritual impulses and insights, to assist them in articulating and exploring them.

Understanding Spirituality

Before proceeding further, it would be helpful to come to an understanding of the

term "spirituality." Many definitions have been proposed, yet there seems to be no universal

consensus on what spirituality is. For some, the term relates primarily--or solely--to a search for

God. Others expand the term to encompass both a devotional or God-directed focus--the internal

aspect of spirituality--and an external aspect that relates to how one relates to the world

(Kitschoff, 1994). Others see spirituality in naturalistic, secular terms, not necessarily related to

religious impulses or experiences (examples in Coles, 1990; in Hart, 2003; Watson, 2000).

Rebecca Nye's (1998) research with children leads her to an understanding of children's

spirituality as "relational consciousness," manifested in two patterns, "[A]n unusual level of

consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other passages of conversation spoken by the child"

and "[C]onversation expressed in a context of how the child *related* to things, other people,

him/herself, and God" (p. 113). Such an understanding is consonant with those first questions

I imagine our early ancestors to have asked. If we were to encapsulate them into three, they

might be: Who am I? Is there a power beyond what I see, and, if so, what is it like? And, What

is my relationship to others and to the creation to be? I propose that these essentially relational

questions are not limited to children; they were likely prompted when our ancestors' spiritual

nature came into conscious awareness;[4] they are the questions many of us still ask today.

These are the questions that religious seek to answer. Some persons have found a religious

tradition in which they comfortably find answers to these questions; others, not resonating with

any religion, seek the answers elsewhere. This is as true of children as of adults, as Coles' (1990)

Hart's (2003), and Pridmore and Pridmore's (2003) work reveals.

Towards a Pedagogy

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[4]   Similarly, Hay cites Alister Hardy's claim that religious or spiritual experience is
biologically natural to all human beings, having evolved through the process of natural selection.

Reader response theories have been valuable in their acknowledgment of the reader's role in evoking the meaning of a literary work. Mark Pike (2000) points out that a pedagogy informed by reader response theory encourages students to bring "the whole person," including one's spiritual faculties, to bear upon a literary encounter. In a study of adolescents' responses to poetry, Pike found that, with the influence of reader response theory, the students did engage on spiritual and moral levels with the poems, deriving "experiences of moral and spiritual significance" from them. In addition, they "had their own views challenged and gained new direction" (p. 189). Likewise, in a study of young children's responses to the picture book *Old Turtle* (Wood, 1992), I found that the seven- and eight-year-old children were able to fill in the gaps in the text in ways that were quite mature and astute, and that their perceptions of God were expanded through the reading of the text (Trousdale, 2002).

While both Rosenblatt and Iser balance the reader's response with the influence of the text, there is a sense that personal, subjective response becomes the criterion for and shaper of meaning, of truth. And yet, as Parker Palmer (1983) points out, there is as much danger in subjectivism as in the objectivism that has dominated Western educational practice in recent centuries. Objectivism, Palmer notes, literally means "to put against, to oppose." It assumes a distinction between the knower and the object to be known, placing us in adversarial relationship with the world, with one another, and, ultimately, with ourselves. It seeks "objective facts, objective theories, objective reality," claiming that knowledge that is not "objective" is not knowledge at all, but merely passion or prejudice. Thus mythology, stories, poems, religion and other forms of conviction or devotion are discounted as valid ways of knowing (p. 23).

Palmer cites the work of philosophers in many fields who have exposed the claims of objectivity, who have come to understand the inseparability of the observer and the observed, the

knower and the known.   Subjectivism has been seen as an antidote to objectivism, and yet,

Palmer says, "[i]f my private perceptions are the measure of truth, if my truth cannot be

challenged or enlarged by the perceptions of another, I have merely found one more way to

objectify and hold the other at arm's length, to avoid again the challenge of personal

transformation.... If private truth (no matter how full and rich) is the measure of all things, I can

never be drawn into encounter with realities outside myself--especially those that might chastize

and correct me" (p. 55).

   The answer, for Palmer, is community, is relationship. Indeed, Palmer says, truth is

relationship. Even in individual personal encounters with literature, it is relationship that is the

key to "moments of deep knowing." He speaks of the experience of reading a great novel

and "suddenly becoming aware that it is reading us as well.... The writer has created a living

world with words, a vital communion that cannot be taken merely as an object of study but one

that draws out our meanings even as we draw its meaning out" (p. 59).

   Well wrought characters in fiction "come off the page to converse with the reader; they seem

to know us and our secrets at least as well as we know them; they reveal us to ourselves in ways

not possible through simple self-analysis.... We discover the autonomy of such characters when

they tell us things about ourselves we would rather not hear!" (pp. 59-60).

   In a later study, Pike (2003) points to the need for social interaction to supplement and

enhance the individual reader's encounters with literary text. Students need such interactions

among themselves to achieve a fuller response, Pike notes; and their perspective is further

broadened by a teacher who brings to the discussion greater "knowledge of the social and

cultural context of a work and a greater understanding of its style and form" (p 78). Through

such discussion, "the reading of literature becomes a collaborative venture in the remaking of

meaning through personal and shared responses to a text" (Webb, cited in Pike, p. 70).

Young people, however, do not come into the world knowing how to discuss literature in fruitful and mutually-enhancing ways. And the teacher, who perhaps has known only the role of lecturer and arbitrator of meaning, may find it difficult to listen and respond to students in ways that both honor individual response and also lead students into a deeper or fuller appreciation of a given text. I have discovered two useful models of developing such interactions with children, Godly Play, developed by Jerome Berryman (1991) and Literature Circles, developed by Jerome Harste, Kathy Short, and Carolyn Burke (1988) and further articulated by Harvey Daniels (1994).

In Godly Play, Berryman seeks to draw young children into Bible stories through an oral telling of the story accompanied by the use of tangible, manipulable objects representing figures in the stories. After telling the story, Berryman begins a series of "wonderings," asking such questions as, "I wonder what part of the story is the most important part" or "I wonder which is your favorite part of the story" or "I wonder where you are in the story. What part of the story is about you?" (Berryman, 2002). The storyteller listens to each child's response, affirming it by perhaps repeating its essence, and waits for other responses. Such an approach invites children to enter the story imaginatively, honors children's personal spiritual insights while considering others' responses. It allows them to play with the malleable borders of the story and to relate the story to their own lives. The children are later encouraged to extend their imaginative interplay with the stories through other artistic expression.

In the United States many teachers are finding Literature Circles to be a means of encouraging thoughtful discussion of stories. In Literature Circles, small groups of children gather to discuss a book (or portion of a book) that they have chosen to read in common. The

teacher's role is one of facilitator, turning over more and more responsibility for guiding the discussion to the students.

In Daniels' model for Literature Circles, the children play a rotating assortment of tasks. One child is the Discussion Director, developing questions for discussion. The Creative Connector draws connections between this reading and other readings or experiences. The Artful Artist illustrates a favorite part of the story. The Literary Luminary selects particularly powerful or expressive passages, while the Word Wizard looks for interesting or new words. The atmosphere is informal and playful but focused. Such discussions require listening to one another and responding to what one hears or sees, thus experiencing the bonds of community. In addition such approaches subtly teach children how to discuss books in a thoughtful and mature way and expand children's interpretive powers beyond their own individual response.

Stories invite children to enter a world not their own, vicariously to identify with the story's characters and their situations, thus stimulating the emotions, the imagination, cognitive powers, and moral reasoning. Such books may resonate with children's own spiritual experiences or encourage them to think beyond their experiences.

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (1999) describes a narrative approach as "relational teaching." Sharing stories, she points out, "ground[s] people in their heritage and give[s] expression to their present situation"; it "binds people together even across ideological divides." Narrative teaching, she says, "gives meaning to abstract concepts, presenting them within contexts in which...people can view the parts in relation to the whole", thereby gaining a greater perspective on the individual parts (p. 131). Such teaching allows the important spiritual questions to be raised, to be articulated, to be discussed, and to be seen in light of other, perhaps larger or over-arching perspectives. If children's spirituality may indeed be described as

relational consciousness, relational teaching seems a natural fit.

Appendix A.

Baylor, Byrd and Peter Parnall. (1978) *The Other Way to Listen*. (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons). A child learns that one may actually hear the hills singing, the rocks murmuring,   windflower seeds burst open, if one takes the time to listen.

Berenstain, Stan and Jan. (1999) *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Question.* (New York, Random House). In this animal fantasy for young children, the young bears ask the "big questions," questions that are not easy to answer. They learn that the questions themselves come from God.

Bruchac, Joseph. (1996) *Between Earth and Sky: Legends of Native American Sacred Places*.   Thomas Lo

Cherry, Lynne. (1990) *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest*. (San Diego,   CA, Harco

Demi. (1990) *The Empty Pot.* (New York, Henry Holt). A Chinese Emperor, looking for a worthy successor, establishes a contest. The real test is not success in the endeavor but honesty.

LeMieux, Michele. (1999) *Stormy Night*. (Niagara Falls, New York, Kids Can Press Ltd.). A   child's nigh

LeTourd, Bijou. (1990) *The Deep Blue Sea*. (New York, Orchard Books). A creation story for   very young

Lucado, Max. (1997) *You Are Special*. Sergio Martinez, Illus. (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books). Punchinello is belittled by the other wooden creatures until he learns that if he visits the woodcarver, Eli, in his workshop every day, Eli's love will restore Punchinello's   self-esteem

Ness, Evaline. (1966) *Sam, Bangs and Moonshine*. (New York, Henry Holt & Co.). Samantha   compensate

Shriver, Maria. (1999) *What's Heaven?* (New York, St. Martin's Press). A grandmother's death prompts a little girl to ask her mother questions about Heaven; the mother's answers   are comfort

The Story of Jumping Mouse: A Native American Legend. (1993) Retold and illustrated by John Steptoe. (New York, Scholastic). Jumping Mouse has a dream to see the far-off land; on his journey he learns the value of friendship, of self-sacrifice, and of hope.

Wood, Douglas. (1992) *Old Turtle*. Cheng-Khee Chee, Illus. (Duluth, MN, Pfeifer-Hamilton   Publishers)

Novels

Fleischman, Paul. (1997) *Seedfolks*. Judy Pederson, Illus. (New York, HarperTrophy). A group   of alienate

Hesse, Karen. (1995) *A Time of Angels*. (New York, Hyperion). A young Jewish girl in the   early 20th c

Lowry, Lois. (1993) *The Giver*. (New York, Bantam Doubleday Dell). Jonas, who lives in a
    society that represses emotion, imagination, spirituality, sexuality, and choice, is selected to
be the Receiver of Memories (and experiences) denied the other inhabitants. He   ultimately
is faced with a radical, life-changing decision.

Paulsen, Gary. (1988) *The Island.* (New York, Orchard). Teen-aged Wil discovers an island
on a lake near his home; there he finds connection to other living things through writing,
    meditating, drawing, dancing with the birds and swimming with the fish.

Soto, Gary (2003) *The Afterlife.* (New York, Harcourt, Inc.). Seventeen-year-old Chuy,   murdered i

Tolan, Stephanie S. (1996) *Welcome to the Ark.* (New York, Morrow Junior Books). Four
    children who possess prodigious intellectual and spiritual powers are sent to a research   and
rehabilitation center where they are chosen for a special experimental program. The   book
raises important spiritual and ethical questions, including how one is to deal with   violence.

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Feminist Teacher, Storytelling Magazine and *Children's Literature in Education;* and numerous

chapters in books on children's literature and children's spirituality.