THE LOVELY, DARK, AND DEEP WOODS OF NARRATIVE FICTION: MAKING ROOM FOR THE RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL IMAGINATION OF CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper explores the important role of narrative fiction in the holistic and educational development of children. It is structured around four themes: the ethical component of narrativity as a grounding lens for this inquiry; the child's encounter with the redemptive space of narrative and metaphorical dimensions; the spiritual depth and potential of the young; and, an overall reverence of approach to the child as 'implicit author,' and to the power of the religious imagination.

Metaphorical and Ethical Dimensions of Narrative

> Whose woods these are I think I know
> His house is in the village though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> (Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening")

Who better to root us in metaphorical space than the poet Frost? This paper will bow to Frost's poetic lure and *stop by the woods on a snowy evening – the lovely, dark and deep woods* of 'narrative fiction and the imagination of children.' It will explore how the deep woods of narrative fiction can bring children to a place of wholeness, healing, and transformation, to a place of hope.

Some years ago, when asked about the interrelation between content and form in her fiction, Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence shared these insights:

> I am concerned mainly, I think, with finding a form which will enable a novel to reveal itself, a form through which the characters can breathe. When I try to think of form by itself, I have to put it into visual terms – I see it not like a house or a cathedral or any enclosing edifice, but rather as a forest, through which one can see outward, in which the shapes of trees

> do not prevent air and sun, and in which the trees themselves are growing structures, something alive" (Kuester, 1994, 20).

This metaphorical dimension of narrative fiction as a 'living space,' and its ability to nurture the lives and imagination of children, is of chief consideration in this exploration. For philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the space of narrative is a space for new possibilities, for self-understanding – an ethical space. In his hermeneutics of text, Ricoeur (1991) explains how literary texts generate meaning and open up the space for self-understanding:

> Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations that literature carries out on the real (86).

Ricoeur states that "there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts" (15). In further describing the world of the text, he writes: "For what must be interpreted in a text is a proposed world that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own most possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text" (86).

The need for this metaphorical awareness among practitioners is the chief inspiration for an action research project that I am currently designing. The primary focus of this participatory project is the role of children's stories in fostering the ethical imagination of children. The participants comprise adults who engage with children in family, school and community settings.

In the data collected during the first cycle of planning, it is significant to note that almost all participants relied on the vehicle of story to describe how narrative fiction functions in their daily work with children. As a sampling of this initial data, three participant stories are documented next.

Metaphorical Dimensions – Redemptive Encounters

Story 1

A teacher participant shared a recent story of what happened when she read the text *Small Beauties* (Woodruff, 2006) to her class of seven-year-olds. This story is situated during the time of the Irish Immigration. Darcy Heart O'Hara is the only daughter in a large Irish family, herself a treasure. Darcy sees beauty in the small objects she collects and stores in the hem of her skirt. It is these small beauties that keep this family connected to the old homeland as they forge their new home in America. As the teacher read how Darcy Heart O'Hara brought to life the memories that her family held so dear, a child in the class raised her hand. "I'm just like Darcy," she said. "I notice everything." The teacher asked, "How do you do that?" "With my heart," the child replied.

Kurtz and Ketcham (1992) state that "of all the devices available to us, stories are the surest way of touching the human spirit, [inviting] a kind of vision that gives shape and form even to the invisible, making the images move, clothing the metaphors, throwing color into the shadows." In their words, "Stories are the vehicle that moves metaphor and image into experience" (17).

Illuminating the narrative hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, Simms (2003) emphasizes that there is a *point* to reading or hearing a narrative that reaches out beyond the narrative itself (85). For Ricoeur (1984), this is "refiguration," or "the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" (71).

Story 2

A second teacher also shared a recent story of what happened when she read the text *The Dot* (Reynolds, 2003) to a group of young students in a country setting. The story is about how each of us has the ability to make our mark in the world, and that sometimes it only takes the recognition and affirmation of someone else to help us realize it. The teacher watched one young boy who had just made a birdfeeder that he was going to hang on a tree. She saw him shine when a few boys who lived in the town came over to gaze at his feeder and to tell him what a good job he had done. "Between the story and the affirmation, something happened," the teacher said. "Something he had designed and created was valued. He felt special."

In his inquiry into reading relationships as transformational space, Dennis Sumara (1993) suggests that the kind of reading from which deep relationships between readers and texts emerge occurs at knots, "at places in one's life where new understanding is required" (303).

In his work *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne Booth (1988) suggests that all stories can be viewed "as companions, as friends – or . . . as gifts from would-be friends" (175). In exploring stories as friendship offerings, Booth emphasizes the *claim* of story "to offer us some moments together that will add to our lives" (174-176).

Story 3

A third participant remembered a story from earlier years that left a lasting mark. The teacher's name is Margaret. This is an account of her story:

Margaret was testing a new resource and about to try a new activity with her class. At home, she had mixed up a batch of dough, rolled it until it was about .5 cm thick, and cut it into 19 pendant shapes with her cookie cutters. Before baking the pendants in the oven, she made a small hole in each pendant so that a ribbon could be passed through.

In class, Margaret gathered the children around her. “I brought something special for each one of you today,” she said, as she handed a pendant and ribbon to each child. “We will use these pendants to help get to know each other better,” she explained. “In a little while, each of the pendants will carry a story – your story.” Then she invited each of the children to choose a marker and print the first important design on one side of the pendant: the initial of the child’s name. To decorate the other side of the pendant, she asked each child to find a quiet spot and prepare a secret code. Margaret explained what the code might include: “secret numbers such as your birth month or the number of persons in your family; letters such as family names, the name of a special friend or the name of a favorite hobby; colors such as your eye color or the color of your bedroom, and special designs such as your fingerprint, favourite food, flower or season.”

The children worked hard all morning preparing their pendants, designing their secret codes and painting them on. When they were done decorating, they pulled ribbons through tiny holes in the hard dough and hung their pendants around their necks. Now the time had come to share the story of their pendants!

Margaret gathered the children in a small, cozy circle on the classroom floor. Everything soon grew still, except for the glow of the huge candle that flickered fast shadows against the classroom wall.

She had prepared a skein of yarn for the storytellers to roll into a storyball. She had carefully pulled one end of the yarn out of the skein slightly. Now Margaret handed the skein to the first storyteller, who began to share the secret of her code. As she told her story to the class, she rolled the yarn into a ball. The storyball grew bigger and bigger as one child, then another, took a turn. Soon Matthew found himself holding the storyball. From the stillness in the room, he could tell that the class was anxiously awaiting his story. (Matthew was a shy, quiet child. He had cerebral palsy. His right arm was paralyzed, and he had a severe limp in his left leg. He did not get involved much in school activities. So the children did not expect Matthew to share much from his pendant.)

Holding the ball of yarn steady in his left hand, Matthew stared out at the little circle of people. Somehow he knew that the story he would share today would be the story of a lifetime. Gently he laid the ball in his lap and steadied it with his right, paralyzed arm. Matthew reached for the pendant that hung ’round his neck.

“I have put an M on my code,” he said. “M stands for Matthew, Mary and Mother. This past summer I was able to be with my mom for two whole months, and it was the happiest time of my life. M is special to me.”

The number 10 was visible as Matthew slowly turned over his pendant. “Ten years ago when I was born, I nearly died,” Matthew continued. “Nobody expected me to live. The doctors told my mom that I would not live past three weeks. So 10 stands for the ten years of my life.”

Everyone was feeling Matthew's story. In her letter, Margaret said that a hush 'to last a lifetime' came over the room that day.

"I have something else to say," Matthew blurted, as he let go of the pendant and searched for the storyball. "For a long time I have felt left out and alone."

There was a long, silent pause before Matthew spoke again, and his dark eyes welled up with tears.

"Today as I roll my story into the ball, I don't feel left out anymore. For the first time I feel that I belong. I belong here. And it's the best feeling in the world!"

"All through the year, the children's approach to Matthew, and their caring for him, never wavered," Margaret said. "And the storyball held a special place in the room."

"This encounter made me revisit my whole life," she wrote. "It made me take hold of my purpose as a teacher."

In his 1971 essay "The Model of a Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,"[1] Paul Ricoeur writes: "Social time, . . . is not only something that flees; it is also the place of durable effects, of persisting patterns. An action leaves a 'trace,' it makes its 'mark' when it contributes to the emergence of such patterns, which become the *documents* of human action" (153).

In an address in 1997, Parker Palmer tells us that what will transform education is not another theory or another book or another formula, but rather "a transformed way of being in the world" (1).

> One of the greatest sins in education is reductionism, the destruction of that precious otherness by cramming everything into categories that we find comfortable, ignoring data, ignoring writers, ignoring voices, ignoring information, ignoring simple facts that don't fit into our shoebox, because we don't have a respect for otherness. We have a fear of otherness that comes from having flattened the terrain and desacralized it. A people who know the sacred know otherness, and we don't know that anymore (7).

Palmer insists that "there is a distance, a coldness, a lack of community in a secularized academy" because we miss "the connective tissue of the sacred to hold this apparent fragmentation and chaos together" (9). In his view, we must go deep, to recover "the hidden wholeness" that Thomas Merton points us toward, to recover our sense of the sacred, "our sense of community with each other and with all of creation" – what the poet Rilke called the great things of the world and the grace of great things (9).

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[1] This essay was first published in *Social Research* 38 (1971): 529-62. The essay appears in James M. Edie's (1991) edited work *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* which is the source for this reference.

Spiritual Dimensions and a Reverence of Approach

In their recent work *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*, Adams, Hyde, and Woolley (2008) offer a guide for reflection upon practice to parents and professionals who engage with children in their daily lives (10). The authors encourage adults "to become more aware of the 'geography' of children's spirituality [and] to engage more fully with children's worlds – how children experience their inner worlds, and how the inner and outer worlds interact to shape the spiritual dimension of their lives (9).

While much has been done in recent years to attend to the child's voice on the political agenda, including in 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Adams, Hyde, and Woolley emphasize that "the increasing prominence of the child's voice has not necessarily spread to spirituality" (40). To nourish spirituality is to allow children to question, "without feeling the need to provide stock answers." It is to allow natural fascination, and to know that children have a natural sensitivity that allows them to hear their inner wisdom, sometimes beyond the insights held by adults. Relying on the work of Hay and Nye (2006), they suggest that "the task of nourishing spirituality is one of releasing, not constricting, children's understanding and imagination" (46). They challenge the "brisk structures that define so much of our work with children" because such structures limit and undermine opportunities for children "to find their voice, explore creative ideas or dream dreams" (44).

In underscoring the need to empower children to speak about their own experiences, situations and aspirations, these authors raise several critical questions throughout the first major part of their text, some of which include the following:

> If one cannot marvel at the intricacies of the natural world, how can one learn to find one's voice to express concerns about the destruction of the planet, care for its resources, appreciate its beauty or its complexities?
>
> How do we develop participatory methods to engage children so that issues have a *livingness* and a reality to them?
>
> How do we create the space for the unexpected question that leads to new learning?
>
> How are those involved in work with children and young people prepared and equipped to face the levels of imagination, openness and creativity which they will encounter on a regular basis?
>
> [W]hat sort of experiences can help children and young people to have a sense of belonging, of being a part of society and of feeling united with others, resulting in increased trust, gentleness and empathy? (45, 47, 53)

In an essay entitled "The Religious Educator as Story-Teller: Suggestions from Paul Ricoeur's Work," Heinz Streib (1998) proposes that religious education should follow a hermeneutics of fiction, what he describes as "education in perception, in seeing, and in hearing, a school of fictionality and imaginative variation, and a school of

responsiveness, remembering, and solidarity" (314). Underscoring the importance of the role of fictionality in religious education, Heinz writes:

> Fictionality means to realize the "difference," to realize the "it-could-be-otherwise" in order to play imaginatively with new worlds. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricoeur, learning to see oneself as another (Heinz 1998, 314).

Alongside Streib's insights, this paper proposes that we seriously consider the vehicle of narrative fiction to help open up "the religious quality of imagination, the deep and profound dimensions lying beneath its surface" (Harris, 1987, 19):

> If the function of language is to give form to our experience of the world, then the use of religious language to speak of imagination can help us understand the mysterious, numinous, and the mystical elements residing at the heart of the world, including the world of teaching (19).

This is why we need to *stop by the woods on a snowy evening*.

> The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.
>
> (Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening")

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