

# Introduction

This book is for teachers, learning support assistants, mentors, indeed all those who work with children and young people in schools or elsewhere. It is about the positive influence that telling a story, as opposed to reading, can have on a child's learning, particularly in the domains of social and emotional learning. It is a process of speaking and listening that creates a powerful educational methodology. As education becomes more focused on new technologies and media, an activity that requires nothing more than the 'presence of minds' has a lot to offer.

Storytelling is, at its best, an art form and one in which everyone can develop skills. This universal form of expression is based in the safe relationship between teller and listener. Stories speak of our desires, dreams and anxieties and can inspire our imagination. So, storytelling is a bridge between the inner psychological world and the outer real world. As such it is particularly useful in helping develop social and emotional skills in children and that is the central premise of this book – storytelling can build emotional literacy. This process begins with listening to stories and can be developed as children gain the confidence to tell and create their own stories. In so doing, they have a valuable tool to shape their experience. Before they can begin to write a story, children need to imagine it, and to tell it!

By being able to confidently tell stories with emotional depth and resonance, teachers have a valuable tool to engage children in the learning process. Projects such as T3 (Teachers Telling Tales) in Northern Ireland aim to reintroduce this timeless pedagogic tool back into education settings by giving teachers the chance to learn storytelling skills from professional storytellers. There is a resurgence of interest in the oral tradition of telling stories. This book aims to give adults working with children the confidence and resources to tell stories to children and young people. At this time the engagement of young people in education has never been more important. Storytelling can help with this, in all areas of the curriculum, but perhaps most by building well-being and community.

Telling stories is a skilful occupation but we all have the potential of finding a way of using this method of communication. It is an essentially democratic activity that can involve all. As one person tells a story another wants to respond, they naturally lead to sharing. Storytelling is reciprocal in nature and can contribute to calmer classrooms, confident children and safer schools.

In **Part One** of the book, Steve gives a theoretical basis to using stories and storytelling to develop social and emotional aspects of learning. Chapter 1 gives a broad sweep across how stories help children learn and assist in psychological development. Chapter 2 outlines the principles underlying emotional literacy, a movement that emphasises the value and importance of understanding feelings in ourselves and others and its application in education. Chapter 3 weaves these ideas together and describes how storytelling can be used to enhance emotional literacy in schools.

**Part Two** is a 'How To' section. In Chapter 1 Taffy helps give the confidence and skills necessary to tell a story. Chapter 2 describes some methods to help children tell and create stories.

The final section, **Part Three**, consists of many traditional folk tales and stories that can

be told in school or anywhere working with children. Most of these stories come from Taffy's extensive collection. There is a wide variety of stories appealing across the age range that can be learnt to be told individually or in groups by teachers, parents, mentors or indeed anybody working with children or adults. Traditional stories are used not because they are the only kind of story to develop emotional and social growth but because they are entertaining, engaging, have emotional resonance and are a foundation for building the skills in using stories to promote emotional literacy. When you tell a story you give a gift, the listeners will take from it and use it as they will. This section also includes some appendices for further reading and useful organisations and resources.

# Part Two

## 1 - TAG Tales Are Great - Pass them on.

Why tell stories? In an increasingly speedy and technological world, an art form that was created by and continues to be owned by The People is indeed precious. Traditional stories leave no carbon footprint and have the potential to educate, enlighten and - through entertaining – de-stress the young and the young-at-heart. Storytelling is potentially a complete inter-generational activity. In an age where marketers have sought to create generational barriers through naming target groups - Teenagers, Toddlers or Old Folk – storytelling challenges this process: when sharing a story together, we're all just people. Something that is both simple and quite profound happens in a storytelling time. The essential components are a storyteller, a listener and a good tale. The teller and the listener bring something of their own life experience to the moment. Together they're both making the same journey. A warm relationship grows between the two through that storytelling moment. A good story well told has the potential to draw together a very disparate group of people, as this tale, gifted from my American storytelling friend Dan Keding, shows:

### The Two Warriors

Two warriors faced each other, bloodied and bruised from their battle. Exhausted, they slumped to the ground, deciding to renew their fight the following day. Lying side by side as the light faded, they started to talk to each other. One produced a photograph of his son back home, who would one day become a soldier like his father. The other produced a photo of his daughter back home who would one day be a nurse, to care for wounded soldiers like them. The two enemies continued this way until the sun began to rise. Struggling to their feet, they sheathed their swords, embraced each other, and parted in opposite directions, for truly it is impossible for two people to hate each other when they know each other's story.

I am keen to present the potential of storytelling to enlighten in an unpretentious way. It is not necessary to conclude a tale with the clumsy "and the moral of the story is..."! Listeners, even the very young, have the ability to listen and decide what the story means for them. Even tiny infants, too young to understand a particular tale, can derive experience from the warmth of storytelling by sitting on the lap of or near a parent or peer, whilst everyone enjoys the shared experience.

The fact that an almost exceptional trust is quickly built between teller and listener is best illustrated by the following anecdote. Whilst telling stories to a small group of three

and four year-olds in a north-eastern nursery, I was set back when a small boy stood up and pronounced, "*Oi, Storyteller, last night my dad gave my mum a black eye*". My first instinct was to feel relieved that nursery staff had witnessed this and could register the family had a problem of violence in the home. Secondly I felt it said something of the potency of the story session that it freed this troubled soul to unburden. I also felt a duty to register the unacceptability of violence in the home. So, I gently said, "That wasn't very good, was it?" The other listening children agreed, and pointed out that my story that had been interrupted was good and needed finishing. Both teller and listener quickly settled for the conclusion of the tale and peace and relaxation again filled the space.

The greatest threat to our tradition of storytelling is that we live in an age where most Europeans are time-poor. One Lakeland village, Staveley - which incidentally hosts a biannual storytelling weekend - had developed in an interesting way since the creation of a bypass. The road running through the middle of the village has now quietened to the point where locals and visitors alike can pause at the sides of the road, or even in the road, and just chat. It is this relaxed chat that gives birth to storytelling, for people remember their history as stories. Recently, telephoning Miss Rosa Hicks - the octogenarian widow of American mountain man and storytelling national treasure Ray Hicks - I mentioned that I understood since Ray's death she had started to tell stories. She replied, "*Not really, just talking on...*" and I realised that's all it is. Storytelling is as natural as breathing. Perhaps that's why it is relaxing and entertaining. The relationship between teller and listener is fostered by the subtle way the teller bends within the telling to satisfy the needs of the listener. This advances the ancient art above, for example, the television, which - despite all recent desperate attempts to make it interactive - once switched on, continues whether the person sitting in front of it is laughing, crying, or even dead! A couple more comments on the educational value of this art: there is no doubt that storytelling develops and fosters speaking and listening skills. It is possible to teach Geography by telling tales from distant lands, and equally lead into History; for example, some stories in this book - notably 'Trouble' (page 109) which, although given to me as a Jamaican story, originated in Africa and so almost certainly made that journey from one to the other via a slave. Thus an entertaining tale provides the perfect introduction to study history of the slave trade.

In a busy age it is debatable where the most appropriate venue for practising the art of storytelling might be. The answer has to be quite simply where people have the time to listen. There is currently an active storytelling revival of professional storytellers, many of whom prefer to practise their art in theatres and art centres, all places where the listener has to part with money to witness the art. Whilst I have no quarrel with this, being myself a professional storyteller, I favour the approach that the ideal home for the People's Art is wherever people meet together, i.e. in the community, in the home, workplace, or place of worship. Some of the stories in this book substantiate this approach; Death in a Nut (page 74) is regularly told for people dealing with bereavement - at home, in school or even as part of a funeral. If an art form is important then people will wish it to form part of their domestic rituals, whether they be births, namings, weddings or funerals. For family groupings, whatever the configuration, time spent sharing a tale will naturally lead to the opportunity to discuss other issues that may need confronting, e.g. bullying, stress etc... In sharing family stories and memories, there is a restatement by the participants of who and what they are. If all involved are happy with this, it is a boost to self-esteem, if not it will serve to name problems that can be dealt with, reference The Fearsome Giant (see page 66).

In an age when all generations are simply not taking sufficient exercise, a walk with stories may be the answer. If one of the party can come up with a story or a riddle for animals or objects spotted along the way, e.g. a bird or tree, the experience will be all the more rich and pleasurable. This probably begs the question as to whether everyone and anyone can tell a story. It is probably at this point worth saying that there is a world of difference from the role of a professional storyteller who like all performing artists, has to deliver the right story in the right way no matter how they feel on the day. Many of the finest storytellers do not even think of themselves as being 'storytellers'. To again repeat the words of Miss Rosa Hicks, they're "just talking on". To be inclusive and to enable anyone who wants to achieve some ability in the art for whatever reason, I describe the model of a practical storytelling workshop of about 1 hour, devised by myself and used effectively in schools, libraries, and for parents' and teachers' groups:

## So You Want To Tell Stories?

**The outline for a workshop created by Taffy Thomas, The storyteller**

**Note:** this session is effective with a group of participants numbering between four and forty, but with an even number.

I usually start by convincing all present that they will leave having told a story. At this point some show signs of terror. Gentle questioning usually reveals the fear comes from a lack of trust in their memories and the lack of will to stand up in front of the group. I then reassure them that no-one will stand up in front of the group; they are merely going to choose a partner and swap stories one-to-one. In dealing with the memory fears, I point out that no-one has to remember any words because the nature of storytelling is such that the words can be different every time. I advise that the necessity is to develop a visual memory, a much-used technique in memory training. The participants are advised to visualise their brain divided into two halves. One half contains their vocabulary - as rich a collection of words and phrases as can be mustered (regional and dialect words are encouraged in this collection). The other half of the brain contains the story remembered as a series of pictures. All the storyteller does is to paint the pictures from one side of their brain, with words from the other side. This effectively communicates a picture from the teller to the listener. It is as simple and as complex as that! My favoured story to illustrate these skills and this technique is The Little Cobblestone Maker:

### The Cobblestone Maker

There was a little Cobblestone Maker who was the finest Cobblestone Maker in the world. However, he was unhappy. Whenever he did his very best work, all people did was walk on it. He wanted to be more important, more powerful and stronger. He had some wishes. So one day he was chipping at a cobblestone wishing he was more important when there was a flash of light. He felt something heavy on his head and to his amazement, discovered he was wearing a crown, and a red cloak with white fur around the bottom.

All the folk in the street bowed and knelt down because he had changed into a king, and he thought,

'Great, now I'm important, now I'm powerful, now I'm strong. My wish has been granted. My ambition has been fulfilled.'

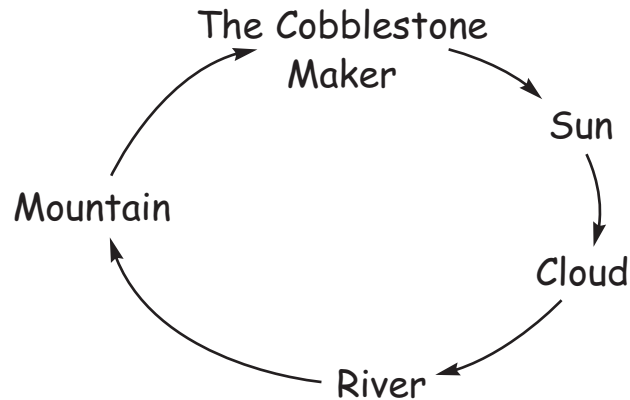
Just then the sun came out and all the people turned their heads to enjoy the sun, so he cursed. The sun is more important than a king so if I want to be the most important I must wish to be the sun. As he made his wish, there was a flash of blue light and he was up in the sky beaming down heat and light on the earth below, and he thought,

'Great, now I'm important, now I'm powerful, now I'm strong. My wish has been granted. My ambition has been fulfilled.'

Half an hour later a cloud passed in front of the sun, blocking out all the heat and the light. He cursed. A cloud is more important than the sun, so if I want to be the most important, I must wish to be a cloud. So he wished to be a thunder cloud, the strongest cloud of all. There was a flash of light and he was a liver-coloured cloud floating across the sky. All the people looked up. Seeing this dark cloud they ran for their umbrellas and raincoats. Just to make sure, he sent down a flash of lightning followed by a crash of thunder, followed by rain in torrents that washed the trees from people's gardens and sent a wild river racing down through the valley - a river in spate. The river crashed into a granite mountain, splitting into two streams, one each side of the mountain. Again he cursed. A mountain is more important than a flooded river, so if I want to be the most important, I must wish to be a granite mountain. As he made his wish, there was a flash of blue light, and he became a granite mountain standing four-square at the head of the valley. There he stayed as the days became weeks, the weeks became months and the months became years. One morning he woke with a tickling, itching on his back. He looked around and there on the back of the mountain chipping away patiently was . . . a little Cobblestone Maker.

So the little Cobblestone Maker realised he was important because we need people to make the roads. The one who cleans the hospitals is just as important as the one who does the operations. And the storyteller is just as important as the policeman, the teacher or the politician - but no more so.

The structure and shape and images of this story are so strong that all who hear it can recall what happens and in what order. The story also has a chorus or, as storytellers call it – a ‘Run’: ‘Great, now I’m important, now I’m powerful, now I’m strong. My wish has been granted. My ambition has been fulfilled.’ This happens every time the story moves forward to its next stage. It serves to give the tale shape, but more importantly allows the teller a moment’s thinking time as they recite the ‘run’.



At this point participants are invited to choose a buddy to work with, either someone they trust or someone they’re never likely to see again! One half of each pair retire to another space, leaving their buddies to hear a story. It is worth advising the listeners they need to be a good listener! I suggest ‘Why Dog Lives With Man’, again because of its shape and strong images:

## Why Dog Lives With Man

Dog used to live on his own but Dog got lonely. He thought he needed a friend. Just then Dog spotted Hare. Dog thought that Hare could be his friend. Dog went over to Hare and said, “You and me could be friends”.

Hare said, “OK, we’ll give it a go”.

In the daytime Dog and Hare went hunting together and at night they lay side by side. But in the middle of the night, Dog woke up and howled...“HOWWWWWWWL”.

Hare said, “Don’t do that. If you do that you’ll wake up Wolf, and Wolf will come and kill us.”

Dog reasoned that if Hare was frightened of Wolf, then Wolf must be the tougher. If this was the case then perhaps Dog should have Wolf as his friend.

Dog went over to Wolf and said, “Hey, you and me could be friends”.

Wolf said, “OK, we’ll give it a go”.

So in the daytime Dog and Wolf went hunting together and at night they lay side by side. But in the middle of the night, Dog woke up and howled . . . “HOWWWWWWWL”.

Wolf said, "Don't do that! If you do that you'll wake up Bear, and Bear will come and kill us."

Dog reasoned that if Wolf was frightened of Bear, then Bear must be the tougher. If this was the case then perhaps Dog should have Bear as his friend. Dog went over to Bear and said, "Hey, you and me could be friends".

Bear said, "OK, we'll give it a go".

So in the daytime Dog and Bear went hunting together and at night they lay side by side. But in the middle of the night, Dog woke up and howled . . . "HOWWWWWWWL".

Bear said, "Don't do that! If you do that you'll wake up Man, and Man will come and kill us. Dog reasoned that if Bear was frightened of Man, then Man must be the tougher. If this was the case then perhaps Dog should have Man as his friend. Dog went over to Man and said, "Hey, you and me could be friends".

Man said, "OK, we'll give it a go".

So in the daytime Dog and Man went hunting together and at night they lay side by side. But in the middle of the night, Dog woke up and howled . . . "HOWWWWWWWL".

Man said, "That's great! If you keep doing that you'll scare away Hare, Wolf, Bear, and burglars, and if you do that you can stay in my house and I'll feed you." And ever since that day Dog and Man have been the best of friends.

Their buddies return to the workshop space and are told the story by their partner. After the listeners have applauded the tellers, the tellers retire to another space, allowing their buddies to hear and absorb their story. I suggest 'Silly Jack':

## Silly Jack

You probably know somebody like Jack. He wasn't all that bright and he wasn't all that fond of work but somehow he got by living on his wits. Now Jack wanted to be a farm worker. In those days, if you wanted a job on a farm, you didn't just go to the job centre, you went to the fair - a hiring fair. You stood in line and the farmer walked along inspecting his possible employees, feeling their muscles. He would then come to an agreement with them, maybe a shilling a week, for you could get a lot for a shilling in those days. They would then shake hands on the bargain.

Jack's mother sent him off to the fair, with the advice that farmers are very secretive about their financial affairs - a fact that is true even today - and that Jack, once he'd come to an agreement with the farmer, should keep it 'under his hat'. Jack stood in line and winced as the farmer squeezed his

biceps, muttering something about 'knots in cotton'. However, Jack seemed fit and lively enough for employment, so the farmer took him on and they shook hands, agreeing a shilling a week. Feeling proud, Jack followed the farmer back to the farm and set to work with a will.

At the end of the first week, the farmer complimented Jack, presenting him with his first shilling. Jack knew he had to take this money home to his mother in gratitude for all the years she had looked after him before he found this, his first job. Thinking of his mother, Jack recalled her advice to keep all finances 'under his hat'. Jack balanced the shilling on his head and pulled his cap on top of it. He was so proud in becoming the provider that as he walked down the lane he leapt in the air, shouting, "WHOOPEE!" The coin slid off his head into a pile of mud and could not be found.

When Jack arrived home, his mother asked for the money. Sadly Jack explained what had happened. His mother looked him in the eye, saying, "You stupid, stupid boy. You should have put it in your pocket". Jack assured his mother he would try and do better the following week.

After a day's rest, when Jack and his mother relaxed together - neither mentioning the missing coin - Jack returned to his work at the farm. At the end of the following week the farmer again complimented Jack, telling him he'd done so well he was going to get not one shilling, but two. However, as the farm had a surplus of milk, the farmer was going to pay him two shillings-worth of milk. The farmer handed Jack the milk in a jug and Jack remembered his mother's advice to bring his wages home in his pocket. He tipped the milk into his pocket, it ran down his trouser-leg and out through the hole in his boot.

When he got home, his mother again asked for his wages and Jack sadly explained what had happened. His mother looked him in the eye, saying, "You stupid, stupid boy. You should have brought it home balanced on your head, like the women do in Africa".

After another day's rest, when neither Jack nor his mother mentioned the milk, Jack returned to the farm. At the end of that week the farmer told him he had again worked so well he would receive two shillings but this week there was a surplus of butter. Now these were the days when butter was slab butter. A large piece was cut off the side and wrapped in greaseproof paper - plastic had not been invented yet. Jack remembered his mother's advice to carry it home on his head. However, it was a hot summer's day. Before long the butter started to melt and Jack felt the grease running through his hair and down his neck.

When he arrived home his mother asked for the wages, and pointing to his greasy hair and collar, Jack explained what had happened. His mother looked him in the eye, saying, "You stupid, stupid boy. You should have wrapped it in leaves and carried it home in your hands".

The mother then complained she was a little lonely while Jack was away all week at the farm. When Jack returned to work, he told the farmer of his worries for his mother's loneliness. The farmer promised to try and help.

At the end of the week the farmer told Jack that his cat had kittens, and Jack could take one of the kittens as his wages to take home as company for his mother. Jack remembered he had to wrap it in leaves and carry it in his hands. The kitten didn't like this much and squealed, digging her sharp claws into Jack's hands. Jack dropped the kitten who shot off into a haystack and was never seen again.

When Jack arrived home he again had to explain this to his mother. His mother looked him in the eye, saying, "You stupid, stupid boy. You should have put a piece of string around its neck and led it home". She then told Jack that when he returned the following weekend it would be her birthday and she hoped he would earn enough for them to have a birthday meal together.

As soon as he arrived at the farm, Jack told the farmer about his mother's forthcoming birthday and the meal.

At the end of the working week the farmer gave him a leg of pork as his wages. Remembering his mother's advice, Jack put a piece of string around the leg of meat and led it down the lane behind him. A few metres down the lane, Jack heard the sound of yapping dogs. They snapped at the meat, so when he arrived home, all that remained was bone on a piece of string. Of course, Jack's mother said, "You stupid, stupid boy. You should have carried it home on your shoulders". Jack again apologised, for after all he was getting good at that, and told his mother he had one more week of his contract to work at the farm, and would try and do better. The following weekend the farmer paid Jack off, telling him he had worked so hard he would pay him something that would help him in the future. His wages would be a donkey, so he could start work as a delivery man, taking equipment from farm to farm and town to town. It was only then that Jack remembered his mother's advice and realised he had to carry the donkey home on his shoulders. He thanked the farmer, bidding him farewell. He ducked his head under the donkey's belly, and wrapped his arms around the donkey's legs. Struggling to stand up, Jack staggered down the lane, bearing the donkey on his shoulders.

On the way home, Jack had to pass the house of a very rich man. The rich man had a daughter who was melancholy - she never ever smiled. Her father said that if anyone could make his daughter smile they could have a million pounds, and the daughter's hand in marriage. It just so happened that as Jack was staggering past the house, the melancholy daughter was looking out of the window. She had often seen a man on a donkey but had never before seen a donkey on a man and she burst out laughing. Delighted, her father rushed to see the cause of the outburst. He summoned Jack into the mansion to give him his reward.

So that day Jack went home to his mother with a million pounds safely in a bag and a beautiful bride-to-be on his arm. His mother had to admit perhaps he wasn't such a stupid, stupid boy after all.

The other half of the group return to hear that story told by their buddies. The listeners of course applaud the tellers. At this point everyone in the group has told a story so the aims of the workshop have been accomplished.

As a professional storyteller I'm aware this is merely the start but, as Lau Tzu once said, "*All journeys begin with one step*". I will take the time for some further advice to novice storytellers, advice that was useful to me as a novice some thirty years ago: firstly, take the story seriously, no matter how absurd the content or how full of inane repetition; if it is good enough to tell it should be treated with respect. On my first trip to perform in London in 1988, storytelling veteran Ben Haggerty greeted me at the station. Aware of my terror, he advised me to merely trust the story. I have subsequently come to learn that it is the story that is the star of any performance, not the storyteller, who is just a channel to pass on the tale. As twelve year-old Sarah Kennedy wrote, after enjoying my workshop at Keswick School,

*A story's like a game of tig that's passed on  
And around. A story is like a gift that's  
Given by sound. A story is like a Mexican wave  
Whirling above the ground. Around and  
Around it goes, by word of mouth it flows  
Hold the gist as it goes by. Pass it on or it will  
Die. A story's a game of tig.*

If you can't feel respect for a particular story then choose another, because if you continue there will be a touch of shamefacedness in your telling that will transfer to the listener, breaking the spell. Take your time; there is a comfortable storytelling pace. This is not a licence to dawdle. If you adopt a business-like leisurely pace, there will always be time for a good tale. If you blunder, thanks to the tyranny of memory, the details are relatively unimportant, just pass right on. If the detail is crucial to the narrative, find a way of putting it in later as skilfully as you can - you can probably deceptively seem in the right order, rather than breaking the spell and the trust that exists between the listener and the teller. I was once asked on live radio the difference between a story and a joke. I replied that, "All good jokes are stories, but not all good stories are jokes". However, many good traditional stories, e.g. Jack tales, use humour to effect. For these there is value in the storyteller learning a little of the skills of timing employed by stand-up comedians. Whilst distancing ourselves from stand-up comedy, there is no harm in exploring the space between stand-up and storytelling. In such stories there is value in flagging up the approaching nonsense with a wry glance at the listener and "You're ahead of me, aren't you?" humour is often more potent building than surprising. In Silly Jack, the entire audience set up each piece of nonsense with the refrain, "You stupid, stupid boy". Everyone then further appreciates the pay-off when Jack gets the reward and proves that he isn't quite so stupid after all. Lastly, the pleasure of the teller will instantly communicate to the listener.

I am the luckiest man in the world: I enjoy telling stories to anyone who enjoys listening, always remembering that if speaking was more important than listening, we'd have two tongues and one ear!

Here's a last story, just for the love of the art: