

A LITTLE YOUNGER THAN FIRE:  
Personal Storytelling, Drama, and Learning

by


Jennifer L. Nyman  
B.A., Bennington College 1996

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of


MASTER OF ARTS in theatre


in Drama/Theatre in Education

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

  
Prof. Juliana Saxton, Supervisor (Department of Theatre)

  
Dr. Jennifer Wise, Departmental Member (Department of Theatre)

  
Dr. Daniel Bub, Outside Member (Department of Psychology)

  
Ms. Carole Tarlington, External Examiner

©JENNIFER L. NYMAN, 1999  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. Thesis may not be reproduced in whole or part, by  
photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

Supervisor: Prof. Juliana Saxton

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a story about story; a story which explores the relationship between personal storytelling and drama as instruments of learning. In providing a thorough, comprehensive analysis of this relationship, this researcher has sought to address the following questions:

- 1) What is personal storytelling, and how is it different from other forms of narrative?
- 2) What role does personal storytelling play in one's cognitive and emotional development?
- 3) How might the utilization of personal storytelling within the curriculum effect school learning?
- 4) How might personal storytelling be utilized to enhance learning in drama education?

The answers to these question will be addressed within this thesis as I provide a detailed account of the current research which surrounds these issues and of the outcomes of my human subjects research project. The project, conducted during the Summer of 1998, serves to illuminate the reciprocal educative relationship maintained by personal storytelling and drama, how the two may work in tandem as effective pedagogic tools, both within school learning and drama education.

Examiners:



Prof. Juliana Saxton, Supervisor (Department of Theatre)



Dr. Jennifer Wise, Departmental Member (Department of Theatre)



Dr. Daniel Bub, Outside Member (Department of Psychology)



Ms. Carole Tarlington, External Examiner

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER	
I. The Seed of the Story.....	5
II. The Nature of Story and Narrative.....	17
A Story of Mine, Part One.....	19
Defining Story and Narrative.....	20
III. Understanding Our Selves and Our World Through Story.....	32
A Story of Mine, Part Two.....	32
Stories to Understand Our Selves.....	33
Stories to Understand Our World.....	37
A Story of Mine, Part Three.....	46
The Issue of Truth.....	48
Contextualizing the Other's Story.....	53

IV. School and the Story.....	58
The Need For Talk: A Drama and Language Perspective.....	59
School Learning Through Personal Story.....	78
School Learning Through Personal Story and Drama.....	91
V. Personal Storytelling and Drama.....	99
The Negotiation of Meaning.....	107
The Translation of Meaning.....	127
Performance.....	
EPILOGUE.....	136
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	139
APPENDIX.....	148

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express her appreciation for and gratitude to:  
My sister, Sarah Nyman, and my brother, James Nyman, for their insight, integrity, and humor. My father, Dr. Allan W. Nyman, for a lifetime of loving guidance, support, and wonderful car-ride conversations. Many thanks to my supervisor, Professor Juliana Saxton for her time and generous teachings. Thank you to Narnie. Special thanks to Travis Julia, my best friend, and my favorite storyteller.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother,  
Maryann Gray Nyman,  
the finest educator I know.

**Stories are a little younger than fire.**

**Betty Jane Wylie**

## PROLOGUE

**Children ten years old wake up and find themselves to have been here all along...they wake like sleepwalkers, in full stride; they wake like people brought back from cardiac arrest or from drowning: in media res, surrounded by familiar people and objects, equipped with a hundred skills. They know the neighborhood, they can read and write English, they are old hands at the commonplace, and yet they feel themselves to have just stepped off the boat, just converged with their bodies, just flown down from a trance, to lodge in an eerily familiar life already well underway.**

**Annie Dillard**

My sharpest memories are of stories and drama.

As I grew up, my favorite stories were those I made up myself, and as it happens, those that stand out most clearly in my mind are the ones I would devise and dramatize during summer vacations. Those “acted-out” stories of mine have remained alive for years, whole and unclouded within my memory, as if the soggy heat of those humid Maine summers had melted and fastened them, like wax drippings, permanently into my mind.

I remember them best because they took place outside of my usual routine, the school year. Summertime broke that routine; each day began with the onslaught of possibility and a thousand questions--Where will Mom and I go today? How will I entertain myself? What stories will I invent? The power was mine to make each day more original and exiting than the last. As the research of Hudson and Shapiro (1991) has shown,

experiences that are different, unique, “set apart” from the usual, are more likely to be remembered.

I see myself at age eight, clear as any image on a TV set with good reception, parting the long, leafy tresses of our backyard willow tree and stepping into the lush green space within--a ballroom, where an elegant party is progressing at full swing. I lower my eyes modestly, aware of the hundreds of pairs of admiring eyes on me as I enter, resplendent in my lovely gown. I engage in lively banter with charming friends as we dance, or sip wine haughtily while seated on a silk upholstered divan. In those days, any protruding tree root made comfortable furniture, and my quilted pink bathrobe tied around my waist was all I needed to feel beautiful.

The image shifts to a different story I loved to play--it is a year earlier, I am seven, crouched in the corner behind a wing-back chair. I am a runaway, a fugitive from the law, with only a few poor possessions to call my own and nothing to eat but crackers. Every sound I hear could be the police coming to drag me away, or perhaps the hideous guards from whose prison I have just escaped. I am miserable, an outcast, scorned and rejected by society. I begin to feel sorry for myself and my eyes well up with stinging tears. Oh, the divine glory of imagined suffering!

The picture fades, my memories scroll back to even earlier times. I am six, five, four--it is within the images of these early years I find, sparkling and glossy, my most treasured story-memories of all. They are the memories of stories I created with my parents as we played.

Mom comes into view; she is kneeling, trowel in hand, wearing denim pants and rubber-fingered gloves streaked with dirt. I have settled cross-legged onto a soft spot of grass beside her. “Can you tell me about about the candy?” I ask. It is a tradition of my Mother’s and mine for her to describe a world made of candy to me as she works in the garden.

“In a world made of candy,” she begins, the familiar words filling me with an instant, satisfying thrill, “the telephone poles are Tootsie Rolls, and the telephone wires are red licorice.”

My line comes next. “And what about the trees?”

“The trunks of the trees are chocolate eclairs, and the tops are made of cotton candy.”

“And what if you get thirsty?”

“The rivers are made of orange soda.”

The story is our ritual; we adhere to the established pattern with an accuracy I demand and relish.

Dad and I have a ritual too: the Story of the Flying Car. “Does the car want to fly today?” I ask as we drive along. Sometimes it does.

“Hold on tight!” Dad tells me as the road becomes a runway, the car speeds up and so does my heartbeat. I feel the bump of the tires’ final contact with the street and we are up, above the trees, looking down on the roofs and telephone wires.

“Why don’t you look down and tell me what you see?” Dad asks, without turning his head. He is keeping his eyes on the sky ahead of us.

This was my life. Each day was an ongoing string of stories that I would dance in and out of with confidence, delight, and ease. I had a

story for every occasion, a score of imagined worlds at my fingertips. My love of story-making was insatiable, my dramatic whims irrepressible. An older cousin asked me once, as I sat on a stump, “fishing” (dangling a string in a bucket of water and leaves) if I ever planned on “living in reality.” I didn’t know what he meant by that, nor did I care. My world of stories *was* my reality; it was all I was interested in. What use to me was the banality of ‘real life’ when I could exist in the divine realms of my imagination?

The year I turned ten was the year that all of this changed. As Annie Dillard might say, it was the year that I “woke up.” I awoke to a different sort of story that year-- to my own, true one. I still played, I still imagined (I have in fact, never stopped doing those things) and yet, a distinct awareness of reality had settled on me that would remain a presence in my life forever. I began to realize that I was more than a spectator to the bright, huge, incredible world that I lived in; I was an actual participant whose actions had effects and consequences on that world. It was an awareness of that fact that I was not only a person to whom things merely occurred, but a person who made things happen herself. This awareness allowed me to recognize that real stories, not just the imagined ones, were also valuable. This was the year I realized that I was the teller of my own life story.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE SEED OF THE STORY

**To tell a story is to create community.**

**Nancy King**

*Thursday, July 9, 1998*  
*8:45 a.m.*

It is the fourth day of my human subjects research project. It is not quite nine o'clock, but the morning is already decidedly humid. I am busily arranging the room in preparation for the arrival of my students and the day's activities which I have stayed up past two o'clock agonizing over the night before. My heart is racing with a combination of excitement and, guiltily, dread. "Today will be different," I tell myself, "It will be better." To put it mildly, things have not been not been going well.

My students arrive... they are quiet and groggy, eyes still slanted from sleep. "GOOD MOOORNING!!" I sing out with a cheeriness I hope won't reveal my new, strange, fear of them. The students greet me with nervous smiles, then duck their faces to avoid my eye. They take seats on the floor, place careful distances between them, fiddle with their hands or stare eerily into space. They do not talk. Their silence unnerves me... I can't bear it. "SO, HOW WAS THE STREET DANCE THE OTHER NIGHT?" I bellow, desperately, stupidly. "WAS IT FUN?"

"I guess so," one of them answers, his eyes riveted to the floor.

The stony reply is more than I can stand. "EXCUSE ME A MINUTE," I say, and escape to another room, away from their silence and nervous glances. My eyes sting with frustrated tears. I am not used to feeling this way, especially not with these students. I have known most of them all their lives. I have directed them in dozens of plays, run through their sprinklers, taken them out for ice cream, laughed at their jokes, taught them songs lyrics and tongue twisters, listened expectantly to tales of their elementary school escapades. *I know these kids!* It has been nearly two years since we last worked together--now they are in junior high and high school, yet is it possible that they have changed so much?

Perhaps it is the nature of the work we are doing that has caused the change; certainly, this is an entirely different experience of theatre, and of "theatre with Jen" than they are used to. I had explained to them at Christmas time what the summer's work would entail: instead of me writing a script for them to perform as I had always done previously, we would work together as a group towards the creation of a play that would come from their own stories. I had asked them if they would be interested in it. "Yes!" they had said with resolution. "We don't want you to do a play that we're not in!" Their loyalty and enthusiasm had warmed my heart, but now I have begun to think "Did they *really* want to do this? Were they really interested in trying something completely new?" And then a new thought crosses my mind: perhaps I am not capable of working in this "new" way either.

The Strawflower Children's Theatre Workshop is the name of the theatre program I began in the Summer of 1991. I was seventeen years

old. It was a thrilling and risky time of my life; I was passionate about theatre, passionate about teaching, utterly lacking in any practical experience, yet brimming with ideas of how I could perform what was in my hometown in Maine, an unheard of feat--creating a play with children as the only performers.

When I began directing the workshops, my primary goal was to ensure the children's ownership of the plays. I wanted them to feel control over, and ease within, the imaginative worlds they would create. I was tired of seeing children's theatre productions in which adults took all of the main parts and the children "filled in" as trees, animals, and other nameless, speechless roles. In my workshops, the children's tasks would not be so peripheral. I was confident that the plays I directed would belong solely to them.

For six summers, I maintained this goal. I was successful in my attempts to create a positive, non-competitive atmosphere where strong ensemble work, creative innovation, and good fun were always prioritized. Our company was inundated with tremendous support and enthusiasm from the community, whose large and consistent attendance gave my students thrilling experiences of playing to houses with standing room only. As most of the students returned to participate each year, and the lengthening waiting lists allowed me to conduct multiple sessions, I felt proud and content with the work I was doing.

Yet in spite my general feeling of success, there seemed to be something missing in my work--something crucial to the plans and ideals I had set forth initially. Although I had made countless, agonizing attempts to adjust my scripts and methodology, I never felt that I had given the

children the experience I wanted them to have. Why didn't the plays ever seem to be *theirs*? Despite my painstaking efforts to write interesting, challenging, and enjoyable roles for each of them, my words remained...well, *mine*. I could never write a play for children that could, to my satisfaction, allow them to create a life on stage which fully belonged to them.

After much time spent mulling this over, continually re-structuring the program within my mind in attempts to address these concerns, the thought of one of the students' favorite pastimes kept appearing in my thoughts. Although I didn't realize it at the time, my recognition of this pastime and the greater insights it held would change the course of my life's work forever. It would set off an ever-widening spiral of questioning, research, thought, and practice. It would deepen significantly my understanding of theatre, of people, and of what I have come to regard as the most essential component of drama education: personal storytelling.

Throughout our years of working together, I had noticed that the children in my workshops seemed to be happiest, most energized and comfortable not on the stage during rehearsal, but while sitting together on a concrete stoop during our lunchtimes. This was time they devoted to their "special performances"--when they all took turns providing entertainment. Within these lunchtime sharing sessions I saw children who only minutes before had struggled to overcome extreme shyness during rehearsal, perform extemporaneously before the group with robust style, wit, and confidence. They told jokes. They sang songs. They did hilarious imitations of family members and people we all knew.

Most frequently, the children told stories about their lives. Their stories were complex, painful, joyous, vivid, infused with emotion, humor, and wisdom. As they told and listened to these stories, I saw the children come alive. I saw them benefit from the reciprocal roles of teller and listener as they smiled and laughed and earnestly nodded at their shared experiences and newest revelations. I saw them utilize their faces, bodies, voices, and memories with tremendous skill, all the while making powerful personal and social connections. Why couldn't I, as a playwright and educator, provide these children with dramatic material which allowed them to transfer their natural energy, charisma, and strong dramatic abilities to their lives within the play?

The answer to that question was so simple I could not see it. It was not *I* who should be providing the dramatic material-- the children already had their own. It was *their own stories* from which their dramas could most effectively and meaningfully emerge.

And so began my process of structuring the human subjects research project I would conduct during the Summer of 1998. After spending a year researching personal storytelling as a learning medium, and gathering first-hand experience in the process of playbuilding, I drafted an outline of my pedagogic strategy. My goals for the project were as follows:

1. To create, with a small group of students (aged 14-16) a storytelling-conducive environment through a context of dramatic exercises that is personally safe and emotionally responsible.

2. To explore common themes or elements of the students' stories which they feel contain dramatic potential or warrant further investigation or contemplation.
3. To find a means of translating the common elements of their stories into a dramatic form that will hold meaning both for the students and their audience.

This was my plan. "Easy!" I thought. As I knew my students to be eager and responsive storytellers who thrived in the pursuit of dramatic challenges, I considered my plans for the project to be engaging, exciting, and entirely feasible. I imagined how thrilled my students would be to experience, for the first time, a genuine sense of ownership in their work, and group autonomy over their dramatic process and production.

What I could never have expected was how completely "un-easy" this process would actually be, particularly during its beginning stages. Instead of rejoicing at the news of their dramatic liberation as I had expected they would, my students hated the idea that we would be building the play collectively.

"It won't be any good if we write it!" they told me, their voices whiny and fearful. "Why can't YOU just write it, Jen? Like you always do..."

"It will take too long."

"It will be too hard."

"We won't be able to make any decisions."

"I'm an actor, not a playwright."

Their lack of enthusiasm disappointed me-- I hadn't expected them to be so unimpressed with my ideas. "Give it a chance!" I begged. "I know you can do it, and it will be wonderful!" My words of encouragement fell on deaf ears. When their complaints turned to the silent treatment, their participation in the exercises stubborn and reluctant, I became hurt and perplexed. Why wasn't this working? I had done all the research, experienced a similar process myself, made all the necessary preparations....MY IDEAS WERE SUPPOSED TO WORK!

I now know why my ideas were not working. In retrospect, I realize that I presented them (more accurately, *thrust at* them) far too much, far too soon. I took away everything about the dramatic process that they were comfortable and familiar with and replaced it with something completely foreign, untraditional, and potentially scary. Of course they felt that this new dramatic format wouldn't work, because it was completely different from the one they had always known to be successful!

Although I had been careful to structure my storytelling exercises in a safe and responsible manner, taking great care to assure that no private stories or ones containing painful emotional resonances would be shared, I expected my students to jump right in to storytelling from the onset, without giving them time to establish any sort of "comfort zone" or social safety net. Furthermore, I had expected them to immediately recognize the beauty and value of their stories right away, to see the dramatic potential in the experiences of their lives. "Plays are supposed to be exciting," one boy told me on the morning of our second day. "Our stories are boring."

I wince at the memory of those words and all the things I did wrong during our first few days of working together. My expectations were hopelessly unrealistic, unbearably rigid-- I had expected my students to abandon their familiar methods of creating drama, to share their stories without reservation, and on top of all of that, to be extremely happy about it! I now see that in my eagerness and haste, I had concocted no less than a recipe for disaster. The first few days of the project were strained, nerve-wracking, and frustratingly unproductive.

Fortunately, things did not stay this way. On the morning of the fourth day of the project, a shift occurred. It was a shift that changed everything, that opened things up, and that allowed us to move on. This shift paved the way for the beautiful, substantial, rich, exciting work that was to come. Although it would feel good to be able to say that I was responsible for this great change, the truth is that I had nothing to do with it. It began with the students, when I gave them time.

As always, I too, am a learner.

*Thursday, July 9, 1998*

*9:16 a.m.*

I have been out of the room for nearly twelve minutes. I feel guilty to have left my students for so long, but I have needed this time to collect myself, to prepare myself for the inevitable struggle that this day holds. As I approach the doorway of our theatre space, I expect to see my students where I have left them: icily separated and silent as stones. Instead, what I see and hear surprises and stuns me into stillness.

They are talking.

I pause in the doorway before entering the room and listen to their voices alternate between straightforward delivery and hushed tones of dramatic effect, occasionally punctuated by shrill bursts of laughter. I move among the circles, catching pieces of their conversations...

Charlotte's got such balls...she talks to anyone. We were sitting in front of Subway, right, and this guy walks by, and she goes, 'Hey! If I re-wrote the alphabet, I'd put U and I together!' Get it, like, U and I, YOU and I, get it?

She used to come around and rub our backs every time we took a test...it really used to gross me out 'cause she's so weird and she smells like...I don't know what but it's bad. So, one day last year I just couldn't stand it anymore, and I told her, 'Mrs. Corwin, I really don't like it when you do that!'

Oh my God.... the dressing rooms before a skating competition...it's SO tense. The air is just filled with hairspray...and you can hardly move because everyone's Mom is in there putting make-up on them...my Mom and I get up at five-thirty just to do my ringlets...

My Mother's brother is insane and no one's ever met him. He used to be a dentist but now he's a rodeo clown. And before that I think he was a drug dealer...

My students do not notice me. I seat myself in a corner, away from their circles, as they continue their conversations. I jot a few notes, breathe deeply, wonder briefly if I should be trying to suppress my smile. It has been a long, awkward three days, and this is the first moment that has felt "right." My students are letting their guards down. They are

communicating. They are engaging in a practice that is most natural to them, in their own way, on their own terms. They are storytelling.

Storytelling is an elemental activity. As Daniel Stern suggests,

once the child has reached the stage at which narratives of her own experience are possible, such narratives become obligatory, and the mental system involved in the construction and reconstruction of narratives functions like other motivational subsystems such as hunger, sex, or curiosity. (1989, 316)

There is resounding agreement among researchers that storytelling is an inherent, compulsory function which is common to everyone.

Educational researchers have described human beings as “storytelling organisms” who lead “storied lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

James Moffett (1968 A) acknowledges narrative as the main communicative tool of early childhood by observing that “whereas adults differentiate their thoughts into specialized kinds of discourse such as narrative, generalization, and theory, children must for a long time make narrative do for all” (p.63).

Similarly, Moffett describes another inherent human function, drama. He refers to drama as “primitive,” and recognizes that dramatic play is a part of a child’s activity long before his school years (1968 A). Both functions, storytelling and drama, are organic tools by which we learn. As learning mediums, the two are inextricably bound.

Just as drama provides what Gavin Bolton calls a “change of understanding” (1993, p.40), so does storytelling. Stories are the fabric which binds our memories together and provides meaning to our current

experiences. Hearing a story broadens our knowledge of the world, and the actual telling of a story gives us added perspective on the experience we are relating, thus broadening our knowledge of ourselves. As drama enables us to learn by actively experiencing, experimenting, and doing, our stories provide the internal decoder which allows us to make sense of it all. Gordon Wells writes that “[stories] explain and give coherence to the otherwise inexplicable” (1986, p.194).

The purpose of this thesis and the practical research work which has surrounded it is to investigate, utilize, strengthen, and celebrate a student’s most inherent and natural learning strengths: personal storytelling and drama. In describing the relationship of these two phenomena, it is essential to explore personal storytelling and its function as an intrinsic learning medium. This exploration, which includes several methodological examples, will provide strong evidence for personal storytelling’s place in the school curriculum.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I will give a detailed account of my human subjects research project of 1998. This account will illustrate how personal storytelling and drama work in tandem as effective learning tools. It will explore the reciprocal relationship of these functions, and describe, through examples of students’ responses and my own critical analysis of the process, how personal storytelling and drama, when utilized together, serve to engender and enhance learning.

This thesis is about stories. Therefore, I have found it only apt and fitting to utilize various types stories as a means of explaining, clarifying,

and elucidating the issues and ideas explored within this work. I will tell many stories throughout this thesis-- stories of my students, stories of my teachers, stories of my friends and colleagues, and stories of my own. These stories have been instrumental in furthering my own understanding of personal storytelling and drama. I include them here as a means of furthering the understanding of others.

CHAPTER TWO  
THE NATURE OF STORY AND NARRATIVE

**Every person possesses not only a waiting room full of memories where old favorites are recalled but also a lost and found where recollections from the past appear without being recognized. Other less accessible memories are hidden in mental suitcases to which we have replaced the keys; elsewhere suitcases are discovered empty that we thought were full. Piled in with the rest are convenient imitation fantasies constructed out of dreams that were never paid for with experience. Every baggage room of memories is open day and night, for no living traveler rides free of the burden of old luggage.**

**Bruce M. Ross**

**Then you really are going to do that? ‘Evoke your childhood memories’... How these words embarrass you, you don’t like them. But you have to admit they are the only appropriate words. You want to ‘evoke your memories’... there’s no getting away from it, that’s what it is.**

**Nathalie Sarraute**

Memory is the heart and lifeblood of all narrative and story. Without memories to fuel, spark, or inspire us, there would be little to storytell about. Invariably, a writer of fiction will draw upon her own store of memories as she creates new life on the page: children’s author Beatrix Potter once said that the inspiration for her stories came from “a peculiarly precocious and tenacious memory” (cited in Meek, Warlow, & Barton, 1977, p.74). Potter’s reliance on memory for the creation of her

storied worlds is evident: after learning a bit about her, one may recognize the summers she spent in the hills and woods of Scotland among the pages of *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggywinkle*, and catch glimpses of the toys she played with as a child in *A Tale of Two Bad Mice*.

A similar phenomenon can be witnessed in the work of novelist John Irving. Irving, a student of Exeter and champion of the wrestling team during his high school career, litters his works with references to New England preparatory schools, and it seems as if at least one character in each of his novels (usually the hero of the story) is an accomplished wrestler.

We are not surprised when we recognize our favorite writers weaving personal memories into fictional tales--in fact, we almost expect it. After all, isn't each of us (excluding those with neurological or psychological impairments) inundated by memories which constantly and irrepressibly affect our lives? It may be that our anticipation of the influence of an author's personal experiences within her written works is indicative of our innate understanding of one of human kind's great commonalties: the need to tell our own stories.

Each one of us is a storyteller. As this chapter seeks to reveal, we all have many reasons (both explicit and implicit) for telling stories about ourselves. The explanation of why people tell stories, and how people use stories to learn, is as intricate and complex as stories themselves can be. Educator Kieran Egan (1986) believes that the best way to teach, describe, or explain something, is to do so through a story (1986). Therefore, with a nod to Mr. Egan, I will begin...

A Story Of Mine  
Part One

Sometime in May of 1986, I spent a Sunday morning playing a game of catch with my younger brother and sister, who were then aged six and four. Looking back to that unusually warm spring day in my twelfth year, I recall the three of us, still dressed in various forms of our night clothes, our hair tousled from sleep, bounding out of the house, un-hibernating ourselves from the long Maine winter we had spent indoors. My Father was working in the yard that morning, my Mother was on the back porch, clearing away the debris that winter's storms had left.

It seems odd to me that we had chosen to play so close to the house that day-- our fifty acres of fields and oak groves were generally our preferred stomping grounds, but on that day we tossed our ball among the fruit trees in a narrow side yard that looked in on our dining room.

My little sister was first to see the deer. It happened very quickly, but I can still remember her raising a tiny finger to point at the dining room window, the deer's wild-eyed glare a brief, blurry image behind the thick storm window and metal screen. We three stood motionless for the sparest of seconds, and then darted back, completely in shock, as the bewildered deer exploded through our dining room window in a quick flash of hooves and glossy flanks. In silence, we watched it leave our house and bound away, catapult itself over a short length of fence and run swiftly through the field, finally to disappear among the oaks...

## Defining Story and Narrative

What is a **story**?<sup>1</sup> Is it a carefully prepared and practiced tale, handed down through generations, capturing the essence of a culture? Is it the nightly ramblings of family members as they share their day around the dinner table? Is it the mostly invented discourse of young friends on the playground? Is it a brief and sputtered account of a deer jumping through a window? If story is a definable term (and I believe that it is), then in order to unearth that definition, one must first look comparatively at other forms of **narrative**.

It would be nearly impossible to list every existing form of narrative. The vast range of genres and media on which human beings rely to communicate meaning is as diverse and expansive as humankind itself. Roland Barthes has composed a partial list which gives perspective on the scope of narrative's breadth and variety:

Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings...stained glass windows, movies, local news, conversation...like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (1975, p. 237)

Narrative, in its innumerable forms, inundates nearly every aspect of our lives. Consider for a moment how narratives pervade, in both overt and subtle ways, a range of situations experienced within a single day: song lyrics on the radio, a caption beneath a newspaper photograph,

---

<sup>1</sup>A glossary of all terms appearing in bold print may be found in the appendix.

graffiti on the subway station wall, nightly scribbles in a private journal. A thousand books could be written on any of these narrative agents and the countless ways they effect our thoughts, experiences, and emotions.

So what about story? Where does it fit into this conglomeration of narrative modes? The focus of this thesis is **personal storytelling**: the act of telling a story about oneself. A personal story can be communicated in any number of ways: through writing, painting, or song. But in this case, personal storytelling refers to the oral transmission of story, the communication of story through the spoken word.

In order to give a more elaborate definition of personal storytelling, I must first provide a definition for story. This in itself is not an easy task, due mainly to the fact that terms used to describe the phenomena of telling one's story are frequently used interchangeably by researchers of narrative-related fields. In fact, much of the research in drama, education, and psychology does not make any distinction among terms such as story, narrative, storying, and storytelling.

In the research that *does* make a distinction, however, the opinions tend to be largely conflicted. Some theorists use the term "narrative" to refer to a primary conveyor of meaning, delivered carefully and intentionally by the teller to suit a particular need or purpose (Bal, 1985). Other researchers claim narrative to be a term which refers to only a component of the story form (Prince, 1982). Still others claim the opposite, that it is story which is the component of narrative (Chatman, 1978).

However arduous the task may be, a distinction can be made between story and narrative, and, for the purposes of this thesis, this distinction is

important to understand. The works of Alyssa McCabe and Carole Peterson (1991) and Susan Engel (1995) describe the distinguishing features of these often closely-aligned terms, and the following comparative discussion is based on the work of these researchers.

A story is a description of events occurring in the past, present or future. Since all events unfold over time, stories include time as a point of reference for the events they describe. Engel claims that most stories have a feeling of sequence--first one thing happens, and then the other (1995). The events described within a story are always related in some way, either by sequence (I woke up this morning, my Mom made me toast, I dropped a piece and got jam on my shirt) or because several things happen that, when described together, reveal a common theme: it was raining, I felt sad, I broke my favorite bowl, my dog ran away; this was a miserable day (Engel, 1995).

A random set of events cannot be a story. For example, "A man tosses and turns unable to sleep. A mirror breaks. A telephone rings," is not a story because it establishes no causal or temporal relationships among its events (Bordwell & Thompson, 1979).

Here is a story told by a student to her fourth grade teacher:

My Mom and Dad are going to take us to Florida! We're going to drive the whole way! It'll be a long trip, so we have lots of snacks and games in the car. When we get there, we won't care that it took so long, 'cause we'll be just so excited about getting to Florida!

This qualifies as a story because it relates a series events which will occur within a framework of time (the family will go to Florida, it will be

a long trip, they will be excited when they arrive). There is a large event (the trip) and within its context there are specific events (they will drive, they will have snacks and play games). When these events are described together, a common theme emerges--the student's excitement about her vacation.

Like stories, narratives also include references to time (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Engel defines narrative specifically as "an account of experiences that are temporally sequenced and convey some meaning" (1995, p.19). The following narrative, "We were at the ballpark this afternoon and Jimmy had two hot dogs," utilizes a framework of time and describes briefly an event, yet it is easily distinguishable from a story by taking one factor into account: its intention to convey meaning beyond the propositional content. As the following examples reveal, although stories and narratives share similar characteristics, they differ significantly where the transmission of meaning is concerned.

Guy Widdershoven has written that, "Life has an implicit meaning, which is made explicit in stories" (1993, p.5). Stories revolve around **meaning**. Whether focusing on the crux of an impassioned argument, an explanation of a mysterious occurrence, the fantasy of an imagined tale, or even the re-telling of a movie plot, every story is told with the desire to express or impart meaning of some kind. Take for example, this story told by a twenty-five year old person:

I saw a production of *Twelfth Night* the last time I was in London. It was great production, really well acted...hilarious, really funny, everyone was laughing all around me. But for some reason, I just wasn't enjoying it. No matter how hard I tried not to be, I was just

miserable the whole way through...couldn't wait for it to be over. When I got home I was angry. I was so pissed off...it didn't make any sense. It was like I was crazy or something. And then I started thinking about why I felt that way, and you know what? It's because I was jealous. It was because I haven't auditioned in over a year and I wanted to be up on the stage, doing that show. (personal correspondence, 1997)

This man's story is an expressive account of a personally significant event in his life. The meaning within this particular story (the man's inability to enjoy the play and subsequent anger was caused by his own longing to perform) is made explicit by the narrator's telling of his experience. Not knowing this individual or the particular details of his life does not impair the reader's grasp of his story's meaning. The meaning's attainability may be attributed, in part, to the narrator's construction of the story in a form which is readily comprehensible to its audience. The story form allows us to access the intended meaning. This is not true of all stories, however.

Each event expressed through story has been seen through someone's eyes, and part of a story's meaning is conveyed by the teller's perspective or point of view. In order to fully comprehend a story's meaning, the listener must be aware of its source, and recognize the personal nature of the teller's perspective. This awareness is particularly crucial when listening to the stories of children. According to Engel, "in children's stories particularly, where sequence and plot are not always clearly developed, the key to understanding, appreciating, and responding to the story often lies in understanding the meaning, the perspective of the

narrator” (1995, p.18). A four year old tells his story about a recent trip to a farm:

When we were at the pumpkin farm, all the kids were screaming and yelling cause of all of the pumpkins! I have lots of candy and a smaller candy and a tambourine made with beans. And a dinosaur with a fat body and a little head. I said I wanted the biggest one [pumpkin], but my Dad said I had to pick one up that I could pick up and that one I will bring home. So I try a pumpkin and go, “Ahhhgggggg!” Too heavy. And I try another one and go “Ahhhhggggooooee!” Too heavy again. But then I see the biggest pumpkin, and I go “Ahhhhhhgggg!” And I picked it up and I have it and I drew my best Beanie Baby on it. I drew my Beanie Baby named Tobasco. (personal transcription, 1997)

This story does not maintain a definite structure of time or plot, yet there is much meaning to be gathered from this child’s account of his experience. By describing the events leading up to the event, as well as the event itself (lifting a pumpkin which he perceives to be the largest), the narrator recounts a story of personal triumph. He describes the difficult pursuit of his goal with a reiteration of Dad’s words and through expressive sound-making. He concludes his story by describing a meaningful, symbolic act of possession-- drawing the beloved Beanie Baby. Although not as explicitly or distinctly expressed as the meaning in an adult’s story might be, this story communicates meaning in a unique and vivid way. The comprehension and appreciation of this meaning requires the listener to be aware of its origin, to recognize the perspective of the young child.

Narratives also convey meaning, yet that is not their primary function as is the case with stories. Narratives are automatic, instinctive modes of discourse that are utilized so frequently and naturally within our daily encounters that we scarcely realize that we are doing so. They are powerful enablers of information exchange, allowing us to access thoughts, feelings, and event knowledge through a familiar and comprehensive form. Engel has written that narratives “can be embedded in a conversation or interaction and need not be experienced as a story by the speakers” (1995, p.19). Notice the frequency of narratives within this conversation between a mother and child:

Mother: Where are you going with the Band-Aid box?

Child: Jerry got a scrape yesterday and the scab got ripped off.

Mother: I thought I asked you not to play so rough. Someone gets hurt when you play rough. What are you doing?

Child: Same as yesterday...being pirates. Mean pirates.

Mother: Well, tell Jerry to come inside so I can look at it...tell him his mom's coming in a minute to get him. He's going to his sister's recital tonight and he's got to get ready.

This conversation is infused with narrative-- the mother and child impart information to one another by describing events within a sequence of time: Jerry's scab from yesterday has come off, Jerry usually gets hurt when they play, they have been playing what they played the day before, Jerry will go to his sister's recital. The communication is cohesive and lively, yet there is no story told here; in this particular instance there does not seem to be a need for one. Neither teller nor listener requires a story to provide further explanation or a more complete understanding of the

topics they have discussed. The narrative mode is utilized to suit the needs of the tellers and listeners.

One of the most identifiable characteristics of a story is its *intention to be a story*. A story requires forethought and a certain degree of planning, and has been pre-constructed within the mind before it is told. This thought process is known as **storying** (Wells, 1986). Storying occurs before a story is verbalized-- a means of trying out possible story forms that will best suit a storyteller's intentions. Storying can be thought of as a storyteller's rough draft, or internal testing period.

I had friend while I was growing up who was a fantastic, hilarious storyteller, and when I first learned about storying, it was she I immediately thought of. Heather and I lived in different towns, and she would often call me up to say that she had a really good story to tell me. "So why don't you just tell it to me right now?" I'd say, curious and ready to listen.

"Because I haven't decided how I'm going to tell it yet," she'd reply. "If I don't get it right, it won't be as good!"

The storying process is, in essence, a decision-making process, the means by which the storyteller selects the words, phrases, tone, contextualization, and aesthetic form her story will follow. Although most storying doesn't take as long as Heather's did (storying can take mere seconds as a story is prepared within the mind) even at age nine, my seasoned storytelling friend understood that a good story requires thought, that semantic and stylistic choices play a hand in a story's effectiveness.

Narratives do not require the same thought and planning that stories do. Narratives are spontaneous, they pop up intermittently within everyday dialogues, and can be used as quick, effective, and familiar means of gaining and supplying information:

Did you go to the store today? There was a great sale on peanut butter. I got five jars!

I know what you mean...the last time I played with Joey he bossed me around in the sandbox.

The accounts given in these examples are indeed story-like; the events occur within a common framework of time, and convey some meaning. Yet these narratives are not stories, because they have not been told with the intention to *be* stories. Stories convey information within a definitively composed structure of beginning, middle, and end; they are outcomes of a process of organized thought. Narratives supply information, that is their primary function, but they are not products of storying, and they do not require the story-structure of beginning, middle, and end.

Although they may not be as deliberate or explicit as those expressed through story, narratives contain complex meanings that often require closer investigation and sometimes a bit of external structuring to expose. As Engel has explained,

a child may be able to express complex meanings and sequences in his play with a friend and yet not be ready to construct a story on his own, at the request of an adult. A child may convey deep, personal feelings about himself in a conversation with a parent about a past experience and yet not be able deliberately to create a story about

those feelings to share with others. Similarly, the adult listener must sometimes weave together the narrative that seems to be buried in the flow of a child's play and conversation, much as Freud, in the guise of an archaeologist of the mind, took static buried memories and symbols and wove them together.... (1995, p.20)

Just as parents “weave together” the meaning of their children's narratives, the students participating in my research project (which focused on playbuilding from personal stories) gleaned many story ideas for the creation of dramatic scenes from their lively conversations peppered with narratives. The students became adept at recognizing their narratives as pieces to a larger puzzle, and often noticed the re-occurring themes or issues in their casual, narrative-laden conversation which had not surfaced within their stories. By identifying the “common threads of meaning” within a conversationally-produced group of narratives, the students often recognized dramatic potential.

During a break one day, the students discussed various elementary school incidents they remembered. As they talked, one student noticed that many of them had mentioned significant events they had experienced while riding the school bus. This interested them, and they decided later that day to improvise a scene which revolved around school bus riding. Their improvisation incorporated many ideas culled from the narratives they had shared earlier, and evolved, through rehearsal, into a rich composite of childhood memories and images. The improvisation was eventually worked into a complete scene, and became part of the students' final production.

Personal narratives can also serve as starting places or springboards from which stories emerge. Thomas Leitch suggests that “although narrative discourses do present agents, events, and relations, those agents and events are not a story, merely the material for a potential story” (1986, p.16).

Narratives hold terrific potential for storytelling. Many times during the research project, my students would be engaged in conversation when a bit of someone’s ongoing narrative would spark or inspire a story from either themselves or another person. The following excerpt from one of their conversations demonstrates how narratives can engender stories:

ELOISE: I saw you downtown yesterday.

RAMONA: You did? Where was I?

ELOISE: You were in the car with your Mom. I waved at you and I was like “Ramona!” but you didn’t see me.

CHARLOTTE: We saw Will and his brother downtown.

WILL: Yeah...you freaked him out really bad!

ELOISE: We did? We were just joking around.

CHARLOTTE: We were like, “Hey, do you know Elvis?”

WILL: Pete usually doesn’t get jokes that well.

RAMONA: What grade is he in?

WILL: Seventh.

CHARLIE: Hey, remember what Pete did when we were in elementary school? Ok, you guys, listen...

This series of somewhat disconnected narratives led to a discussion about Will’s brother Pete. Subsequently, the narratives provoked a story about Pete from Charlie. In this way, stories and narratives can work concurrently to produce meaning: narrative made Charlie’s recollection of the story possible, and “paved the way” for the story’s delivery.

We may now recognize story and narrative as similar, yet distinctly separate forms of discourse. Both forms perform essential functions throughout our lives as we experience the world, gain knowledge, and communicate. The narrative form allows us to communicate freely and expressively, while the story form involves communication and expression on a level that requires more thought, planning, and personal significance.

Before concluding this exploration of the fundamental “nuts and bolts” of story and narrative, I must return to the essential point of the discussion: stories are concerned with meaning. I began this chapter with a piece of a story about a deer jumping through a window. One might ask oneself at this point: what was my purpose in doing so? Why have I selected that story to tell? What meanings is it intended to hold for the teller and her audience?

A story is often a potent accumulation of thought and feeling, the outgrowth of careful contemplation. Because storytelling is an act which conveys meaning, a story is a powerful tool for understanding. As Alida Gersie and Nancy King have suggested, “stories and tales are the product, the end and therefore, paradoxically, the beginning of our journey toward understanding” (1990, p.31). Although it may not yet be clear, I am telling my story for a reason. For now, one may consider it to be the beginning of a journey.

CHAPTER THREE  
UNDERSTANDING OUR SELVES AND OUR WORLD THROUGH  
STORY

**Nations need stories, just as people do, to provide themselves with a sense of continuity, or identity. But a story does even more than that. Without stories as organizing frameworks, we are swamped by the volume of our own experience, adrift in a sea of facts... A story gives us direction by providing a kind of theory about how the world works-- and how it needs to work if we are to survive.**

**Neil Postman**

A Story of Mine  
Part Two

My Father, hearing the window smash, thought we had broken it with our ball. He came running, his face tense with a mixture of irritation and concern. We assaulted him with a stream of confused explanation.

“A deer jumped through the window, Dad!”

“It was in the house!”

“It came from inside, and it jumped through the window, and it ran away! It really did!”

“THERE WAS A DEER IN THE HOUSE, DADDY!”

An examination of the broken windowpane, spotted with blood and tufts of tawny fur, confirmed our bizarre story. My Father shook his head in disbelief--he too was stunned. My brother and sister and I began spurting speculation as to WHY and HOW the deer had made himself a guest in our dining room. My brother, a gregarious six year old, was already developing complex theories.

“He musta been really, really hungry! ’Cause winter just ended and there’s no food! He musta smelled our food, and so he came inside to eat it! Deers get really hungry and they just can’t eat bark all the time...”

While my brother rambled on excitedly, my sister (the four year old) seemed to be pondering the situation with a combination of awe and glee. “That deer was big,” she told my Father. “It came right through the window and got glass all over the place! It went back to its home, I think.” Suddenly, from inside the house, my Mother was calling for us to come inside...

### Stories to Understand Our Selves

One’s immediate response to the notion that stories provide meaning might be to associate this idea with the familiar stories we know are told “with a message.” Folktales, legends, fables, and fairy tales are stories which impart some kind of moral or message through a world of fiction and metaphor. These kinds of stories play important roles in our development and learning; researchers such as Bruno Bettelheim (1976) have shown that fairy tales provide children with material with which to consider fundamental and emotional concerns.

The folktale or fairytale is well-suited for the transmission of meaning yet it is not, by any means, the only, or even most common story-form that engenders understanding. The personal story, told in countless contexts, situations, and for innumerable reasons, is the strongest, most intuitive meaning-making structure that we human beings possess. The range of understanding personal stories provide is boundless and far-reaching; people use stories to understand themselves, their families, their cultures, and essentially every aspect of the world around them. We gather and accumulate stories as we learn and grow, and our stockpile of stories becomes, in essence, the skeleton on which the body of our lives is strengthened and supported.

We depend on stories. Our self-perception is, to a great extent, a composite of the stories we know and tell, and we use stories to make sense of the inexplicable situations that life throws up. Robert Atkinson's (1995) research indicates that storytelling provides four essential functions in human understanding: the psychological function (concerned with understanding of self), the social function (understanding of others), the mystical function (understanding of sacred or spiritual aspect of life), and the cosmological function (understanding of the world we inhabit.) These specific functions have not been listed to imply that the stories we tell engender meanings that may be pigeon-holed into a definite slot or category, but rather that a single story may engender many different kinds of meanings, on many different levels. Stories allow us to put multi-layered, multi-faceted events into perspective, and through the act of storytelling, we may gain insight into many overlapping concepts,

issues, and ideas. As Harvey has described it, “story is a tool for making us whole” (1995, p.3).

Who am I? This is a question we begin asking very early in our lives. Bettelheim writes that “as soon as a child begins to move about and explore, he begins to ponder the problem of his own identity” (1976, p.47). Just as young children struggle to understand the things going on around them, they are equally concerned with understanding themselves, and it is storytelling which provides much of this understanding. Neil Postman writes with profundity of the importance of story to self-knowledge:

Children everywhere ask, as soon as they have command of the language, “Where did I come from?” and shortly after, “What will happen when I die?” They require a story to give meaning to their existences. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die. (1989, p.122)

Stories provide the means by which we define ourselves. To a large extent, our individual grasp of self-perception, our holistic view of our identity, is based on stories: those we tell and hear about ourselves, and the stories of those around us whose existence has contributed to who we are-- the stories of our families, our communities, and our cultures.

Developmental researchers often use the term “storied lives” (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) to describe the story-like way in which our lives are structured. Certainly, each of us lives a life that is in itself an ongoing story, and our own understanding of who we are is not unlike

our perception of the main character in a play or movie--we are given insight into the nature of a character and his environment as his multiple stories unfold within the context of the play, just as we gain insight through the stories of our own lives. We are, in essence, each the hero of our own life-story. Our story-hero will grow and develop, will make mistakes, do wrong things, have experiences both remembered and forgotten, change so much within a lifetime that one would scarcely recognize her, and yet her stories will remain the reservoir from which we construct our identity. As Howard (1991) suggests, "a life becomes meaningful when one sees himself or herself as an actor within the context of a story" (p.196).

Since our stock of stories is constantly evolving (added to, shaped, altered, warped by the inaccuracies which may develop through multiple tellings in varying situations) so is our self-perception. Each story we tell contributes to what Engel (1995) refers to as a "self-portrait" which can be continually consulted as a reference point of self understanding, yet is constantly and irrepressibly changing. Cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser (1988) has written that people construct what he calls an **extended self** that is made up of stories of ourselves in the past or future. He suggests it is the extended self by which we understand our selves and life experiences. According to Neisser, people tell stories as a confirmation to themselves and others of who they are. The extended self is easily altered; with each personal story we tell, our extended self can be shaped, defined, recast. Daniel Albright (1994) provides a vivid description of the extended self and its function as a self-perceptive tool:

One might say that each of us carries around a videotape of our identity, or a kind of time-doll, painted with our own features, continually taking shape from infancy onward, continually becoming inflected by significant experiences, until it triumphantly culminates in our present form...Our lives would be intolerable without some predicate, some ballast of identity, to provide a context for the wisps of thought and action that constitute our instantaneous selves. (p.21)

When we engage in personal storytelling, we are not only sending clues of our identity to others, we are also constructing and clarifying that identity for ourselves. Personal storytelling contributes to the construction of the extended self.

### Stories to Understand Our World

Stories are marvelous teachers. From the moment we learn how, we begin creating stories that are immediately put to work for us, helping us to make sense of the world. Storytelling is often used as a “figuring out” process, an exploration of the personal and social, and universal worlds we inhabit. As the next example will illustrate, stories do not always require a listener other than the teller herself for learning to take place. Learning occurs not only through the stories we tell others, but through the stories we tell ourselves as we talk out loud.

A case study by Katherine Nelson (1989) examined the storytelling of a little girl named Emily. Each night, from age twenty-one months to three years, Emily was tape recorded as she talked herself to sleep. The study yielded a wealth of information about the way children make sense of the world. As Emily’s “crib monologues” demonstrate, this sense-making process occurs largely through storytelling.

Whether Emily is talking about the past:

Mommy had a help, my sleep, Mommy came, and Mommy get, get up, time go home. When my slep [sic] and, Mormor came. Then Mommy coming, then get up, time go ho-o-me...Yesterday did that.

or discussing the future:

Tomorrow, when we wake up from bed, first me and Daddy and Mommy, you eat breakfast...eat breakfast like we *usually* do, and then we're going to p-l-a-y-, and then as soon as Daddy comes, Carl's going to come over...

or speculating about what *might* happen:

We are gonna...at the ocean. Ocean is a little far away. Baw, baw, baw...far away...the hot dogs will be in a fridge, and the fridge would be in the water over by a shore...

or reiterating parental rules and explanations:

I can't go down the basement with jamas on. I sleep with jamas. Okay sleep with jamas. In the night time only put big girl pants on. (Nelson, 1989)

Emily reconstructs her world by story, and by doing so, is able to sort out the meaning of her experiences. Her own stories become sort of a nocturnal tutor, categorizing and solidifying the information she has accumulated during the day. By storytelling, she is also able to experiment with language as a means of learning about story and narrative forms and how she may use them to convey meaning to others.

Nelson gave her transcripts from the Emily tapes to a group of noted developmental researchers so they could be analyzed from many different perspectives. One researcher, Carol Feldman (1989), makes the case that

Emily's principal purpose is to make sense of past, present, and future, reported and experienced, actual and hypothetical, real and fictional. That is, Emily is driven by a need to explain or to interpret those putative facts which she feels to be unclear. ( p.98)

Feldman believes that Emily's stories allow her to solve cognitive goals by linguistic means, and that "often, she arrives at her time alone in bed with an unsolved puzzle in her hand and goes to work on it in **monologue.**" (Ibid) This storytelling approach to problem-solving is not only utilized by young children. Throughout their lives, people frequently use stories to find answers or solve problems. Daniel Dennett (1992) has explained how

sometimes talking and listening to yourself can have wonderful effects, not otherwise attainable...the way to get yourself to figure out a problem is to tickle your ear with it, to get to that part of your brain which is best stimulated by *hearing* a question to work on the problem. Then sometimes you will find yourself with the answer you seek on the tip of your tongue. (p.148)

Storytelling often involves speculation, or a "trying out" of information to see if it makes sense. In my family, this has always been a common practice. When the deer jumped through our window, my brother's first response to the situation was to find a probable explanation through narrative. He used his imagination, as well as his pre-existing knowledge of the habits of deer, to try and solve the puzzle of what had happened. My younger sister also employed this process, making assumptions as to where the deer had gone and adding them to her story about what had occurred. Wells has described storytelling as "one of the most fundamental means whereby human beings gain control over the world

around them” (1986, p.197). As was the case when my brother and sister were faced with a bewildering situation, storytelling and narrative allow us to translate confusing events into a form that makes sense for *us*.

Jerome Bruner has addressed our tendency to seek understanding through story in his discussion of a “folk psychology” (referring to people’s common understanding of “how things are” or “how things usually are”) According to Bruner, “the function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (1990, p.49); we create stories to understand strange events which strike a discord within our folk psychologies. Bruner offers the following example of this phenomenon:

If somebody comes into the post office, unfurls the stars and stripes, and commences to wave it, your folk-psychological interlocutor will tell you, in response to your puzzled question, that today is probably some national holiday that he himself had forgotten, that the local American Legion post may be having a fund-raiser, or even simply that the man with the flag is some kind of nationalistic nut whose imagination has been touched by something in this morning’s tabloid. (Ibid)

Bruner’s example illustrates how people may create stories in their pursuit of reasonable explanations. Thus, we use stories to “fill in the gaps” with plausible information. As was the case within this hypothetical situation, stories created to fill this need are most likely a part of, or related to, stories one already possesses. Certainly, a person could not make storied assumptions involving national holidays or the American Legion without some existing understanding of these things.

Old and new stories are connected in this way; the **pre-existing stories** go to work for us, fueling and supporting our creation new stories and understandings. Smith (1990) encapsulates this idea with his description of stories as the “mortar that holds our thoughts together, the grist of all our explanations, rationales, and values” (p.144).

Storytelling is a social event. Whether it occurs among schoolmates on the playground, around the water cooler at work, privately between two friends, or to oneself as both teller and audience, telling and listening to stories are experiences which expand our social horizons and interpersonal understandings. Stories are essential to the process of establishing connections among people; they are natural and intrinsic means of initiating, strengthening, and defining relationships.

Children are avid storytellers, and regularly use story as a social tool. Vivian Paley (1995) acknowledges storytelling as a vital school activity, essential to the building of an accessible and engaging classroom culture:

Nowhere [are stories] more important than in a classroom for, each year, most children enter a new class as strangers in an unknown land. If we watch and listen, we will see the natural way strangers quickly become participating members of a society: they begin by telling one another stories, building a culture within which to establish the parallel roles of player and student. (1995, p.95)

The act of storytelling extends and enhances our understanding of self in relation to others. Atkinson (1995) suggests that “the stories we tell about our own lives sometimes help us to see how our life fits together with everything else” (p.60). Through storytelling, we may affirm and

validate our own experience in relation to those around us, and clarify our place in the social order of things. Bruner has written that “it is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture” (1986, p.123).

The social aspects of storytelling also provide invaluable opportunities to further our emotional understandings, and to fulfill our emotional needs. Through story, we bridge separations from loved ones, filling them in on experiences we have had in their absence, sharing with them our ideas, insights, fears, grievances, and dreams. While creating new relationships, it is often through the sharing of stories that we come to know and understand one another. McCabe (1991) poses the question, “Might our knowledge of the personal narratives of someone be a measure of our intimacy with that person?”

As we support and assure the development of close bonds of friendship and family through storytelling, we may also use our stories as a way of purging or releasing ourselves of certain burdens (Atkinson 1995). In his writings concerning the grieving process, John Harvey (1996) deems storytelling an organic and essential response to traumatic experience. According to Harvey, in order for sufferers of loss or trauma to heal emotionally, they must become both private and social storytellers. He presents the notion of a griever’s private story-making as an imagined social event--that the story is social both in its imagined mental construction as well as its interactive form. A grieving person must first be able to structure internally the events into a story with a beginning,

middle, and end (the storying process), he must imagine and prepare for the telling of his story and how it will be received, and finally, he engages in the actual act of confiding their story to others. Harvey emphasizes the reciprocal, communicative nature of storytelling, and suggests that “when major loss occurs, both persons in a confiding situation may comfort one another and tell stories of loss...[which] makes the experience a powerfully social event that has implications for both the listener and the teller” (p.10).

As we vocalize our personal stories, we are simultaneously gaining insight and furthering our own understanding of significant personal events. The act of storytelling distances us from the event we are describing, serving to externalize what is often potent emotional material. Ross refers to storytelling as a recollection of the teller of the “nuances that give [the event] color and emotion for him” (1972, p.67). Externalizing past events enables us to assess them with greater clarity and develop a better understanding of what has occurred. Stories often provide a “cooling function” which separates us from the emotional heat of the moment, allowing us to acquire a sense of comfort and mastery over personal events (Engel, 1995). By putting a story into words, one may still experience the same pain as before, but the act of storytelling places events into an “organizing framework” (Postman, 1989) that can be considered with greater clarity. Telling a story often allows one to understand it better.

The world of storytelling provides countless, varied opportunities for self-understanding to be developed and enhanced. One such opportunity lies in the stories we share and tell with other people-- developmental

researchers refer to these as **co-constructed stories** (Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, & Potts, 1992).

Many developmental theorists agree that self-understanding is relational, that it develops through an understanding of other people. This makes sense when we consider that among the very first stories a child tells are the ones shared with parents. Even when children are only in the initial stages of language acquisition, it is usual and natural for parents to instigate joint story-making. Parents often narrate everything they do or have done, encouraging the child to participate in the discourse. (Mother: Today we're going to the park! Remember what happened the last time we went to the park? We saw Jamie and you played in the sand together! And then do you remember what happened?)

As children grow older and their linguistic skills develop, they learn to discuss, analyze, speculate and elaborate on shared personal experiences. The interpersonal exchange involved in **joint storytelling** provides all participants with greater understanding of themselves and a heightened sense of belonging to their culture. Wells has suggested that

stories do not only offer a personal interpretation of experience...Because they occur in the context of social interaction and are produced in conversation, they, like all other conversational meanings, are jointly constructed and require collaboration and negotiation for their achievement. In this way, members of a culture create a shared interpretation of experience, each confirming, modifying, and elaborating on the story of the other. (1986, p.195)

A study conducted by five developmental psychologists at the University of Chicago in 1992 focused on how young children portray

themselves in relation to others by examining “naturally-occurring stories of personal experience told jointly with family members.” Their research indicates that self-understanding is greatly supported when children tell and re-tell stories with their families, and that both a child’s interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge is enhanced (Miller et al.).

The significance of co-constructed stories in families, groups, and communities has been evident throughout my experiences in drama education. For years, I have observed my young summer theatre students reveling in the joy and sense of belonging engendered by their co-constructed stories:

Remember last summer when we marched through the Junior High with our masks on?

Remember when Carrie was little and she used to spill her drink in the hall everyday?

Remember when we sold every seat for *Charlotte’s Web* and we had to put chairs in the aisles?

Year after year, my students have delighted in the telling and re-telling of these **shared stories**, and when new members join the group, they are initiated through the “old” students’ barrage of stories from previous summers. I believe it is more than just the humor and nostalgia of the stories that tempts my students to tell them each year-- they tell these stories to name and shape the meanings of their common experiences, to communicate and negotiate interpretations of shared events, and to celebrate their special bond and unity.

Susan Stewart (cited in Ross, 1991) has recognized the deep significance of personal stories to children. She refers to stories as “personal souvenirs” and claims that “children have many fewer personal souvenirs so this adds to their eagerness to purchase commercial souvenirs as a sign of their own life histories” (p.185). Stories, like souvenirs, are symbols of the past events which have shaped our lives. We treasure them, we share them, and we learn from them.

### A Story of Mine Part III

My Mother had heard the crash, and had been the first to see what had happened inside. We followed her in through the back porch door and she led us to the shattered mess of the dining room window. The antique planter that had stood under the window sill was now lying broken on the floor, its potted ferns spilling out dirt and white beads of fertilizer. Dark spots of blood speckled the sill, the wall, and the radiator. “I heard the phone ring just before I heard the crash,” my Mother told us, breathlessly. “It must have been scared by the sound and jumped through!”

We were perplexed. It was obvious how the deer had gotten *out*, but how had it gotten *in*? As we stood there, completely puzzled, my Father noticed a few more specks of the dark blood leading into the next room. We followed them-- into the hall and up the stairs, past the bedrooms, through the bathroom and down another staircase, the specks of blood providing an eerie trail. We were five sleuths, our minds scarcely able to contain the strangeness of what we were looking for.

Finally, the trail ended. We stood in amazement at what we saw. In a corner of our living room, beside the piano where my lesson book sat spattered with a spray of blood, another window was broken. Just like the one in the dining room, this window had both a storm glass and a screen, but dissimilarly, it was flanked by a giant hedge at least six feet high. The deer had jumped this monstrous hedge with enough momentum to break through three layers of glass and screens, had run through almost every room in our house, and had left by breaking another sturdy window!

My Father called the game warden, to see if he might be able to track down and help the possibly injured deer. My brother and sister hopped around like rabbits, giddy from the bizarreness of the whole thing. My Mother began cleaning up the broken glass.

Why did that deer jump over a hedge and into our house and then jump out again? Who knows? Maybe she saw her reflection in the living room window and charged what she thought was a rival deer. Maybe she saw green grass through another window on the inside and got confused. Perhaps she just wanted to see what the inside of our house looked like. Her “reasoning” remains a mystery.

I went outside and stared out into the forest where the deer had fled, scared and bleeding. Lots of animals lived in those woods--moose, coyotes, and Dad had even seen a black bear eating berries by the garden shed. I glanced back at our house. I could hear Mom on the phone with my Grandmother. “Well, you’ll never believe who came to visit us today!” Her voice was full of laughter.

I wasn't sure how to feel. The house I had for so long trusted to keep my family safe could no longer be considered impenetrable. A wild animal had come inside right under our noses! She hadn't asked permission; we hadn't been prepared. The thought both thrilled and terrified me. I was given a sense, for the first time, of the vulnerable and precarious nature of our world.

### The Issue of Truth

Two prominent American authors, each in their respective published memoirs (*The Liar's Club* and *This Boy's Life*) have touched on the issue of truth within storytelling:

Of all the men in the Liar's Club, Daddy told the best stories. When he started one, the guys invariably fell quiet, studying their laps or their cards or the inner rims of their beer mugs like men in prayer. No matter how many tangents he took or how far the tale flew from its starting point before he reeled it back, he had this gift; he knew how to be believed. (Mary Karr, 1995, p.15)

I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my Mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I've allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it a truthful story. (Tobias Wolff, 1989, p.v)

Karr's book chronicles her Father's exploits as a champion teller of tall tales; Wolff's book makes a sincere attempt to convey the truth, at the same time acknowledging that his "truth" may be different than the

“truth” believed by others. The works of both authors reflect important components of storytelling -- that in stories, the truth may be stretched deliberately as a matter of artistic license or expression, and in other cases, truth is a matter of interpretation.

Just as each of us is a natural and accomplished storyteller, so are we, to a certain extent, natural and accomplished truth-stretchers. This is no reason to become alarmed or mortified! Researchers such as McCabe & Capron (1991), Peterson (1991), and Engel (1995), all suggest that our tendency to invent, distort and fictionalize within our personal stories is a natural and essential function of our development of self-perception. Engel writes that “invention is as central as recall in the construction of stories, and of the self, regardless of whether the story uses specific recollections” (p.12).

McCabe (1991) has cited storytelling as a “vital human activity,” and claims that through storytelling, “we present ourselves as heroes, victims, wise guys, nice guys. Through narrative, we find ourselves in the process of presenting ourselves and our experiences.” (p.124) The self-representation we create through story has a powerful effect on the way we view and feel about ourselves. It is most likely that each one of us, at one time or another, has consciously or unconsciously slanted or colored a personal story with details that may not have been entirely true, in order to present ourself in a certain light. This tendency is often easily observable in the stories of children who, being at the very beginning stages of their self-perception development, are eager to experiment with fiction and identity. Stories that children tell about themselves do not always describe who they actually are and what they actually have done,

but are often invented tales of who they would like to be and what they would like to do. By inventing stories, children give themselves the chance to “try out” new experiences and speculate about how those experiences might feel.

While teaching at a pre-school in Seattle, I had the enjoyable opportunity to work with a five-year old student named Anna. Anna is a bright, precocious little girl who loves to tell stories and often asked me to write them down for her. Here is one of her stories:

I have a new baby [sister]. She is so nice and oh! She is very smart. Her name is Alice. I love Alice. I love her very, very much. I taught Alice to say Anna. And I taught her to crawl. And I taught her to go BO BO BO! And I taught her to say, “Mommy, can I have some more spaghetti-os?” I keep her fingers away from the plugs. We go to the park. We go to the Woodland Park Zoo. We go to Mercer Island and the beach. I wore my new bathing suit. It was red with white sprinkles. Alice has a bathing suit but it is blue with white sprinkles. And silver sprinkles. I love Alice. The End. (personal transcription, 1997)

When Anna told me this story about her new baby sister, Alice was only a few weeks old, and far too young to be capable of doing or saying any of the things Anna describes. It is easy to tell how excited she is about Alice, and through her mostly invented story, we see what kind of relationship Anna would like to have with her.

Anna’s story places herself in the role of caretaker, teacher, and companion. Since Alice is her first and only sibling, Anna is inventing this story in order to “try out” the experience of being someone’s sister. Stories like this one allow children to gain insight into plans and choices

they might make in the future. By telling a story in which she casts herself in positive and influential roles, Anna creates a self-portrait of the sister she would like to be.

In the stories of adults, invention and distortion can serve essential purposes, sometimes functioning as the storyteller's means of emotional wellness or in some cases, their survival. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1992) has written about a woman in her late sixties who narrated her Auschwitz experience to interviewers from the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. While relating her memories of the Auschwitz uprising, this woman became very animated and intense. She described passionately the triumphant shouts and screams of the uprising, the jubilant battle cries, as well as the climax of her story, the explosion of four chimneys.

Historians who viewed the woman's testimony claimed that her story was inaccurate, that only one chimney had exploded, and not all four. "Don't you see," one historian exclaimed, "that the woman's eyewitness account of the uprising...is hopelessly misleading...? She had no idea what was going on" (Laub, 1992, p.61). The historians could not understand why the woman ascribed such importance to an event which historically made no difference; the uprising had not been the glorious battle that the woman described, but a desperate and tragic failure.

Despite the inaccuracy of the woman's testimony, Laub was able to hear her story differently. He recognized that the woman was testifying "not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination" (Laub, 1992, p.62). In other words, this woman had altered details of her story within her memory as a way of

preserving hope, of experiencing something positive amidst the horror of her life in the concentration camp. This woman's story had permanently been distorted in her mind, *because she had needed it be distorted in order to survive*. As Laub himself explains,

She saw four chimneys blowing up in Auschwitz: she saw, in other words, the unimaginable taking place right in front of her own eyes. And she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eyewitnessed--this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz. The historians' testifying to the fact that only one chimney was blown up in Auschwitz...does not break the frame. This woman's testimony, on the other hand, is breaking the frame of the concentration camp by and through her very testimony: she is breaking out of Auschwitz even by her very talking. She had come, indeed, to testify, not to the empirical number of chimneys, but to resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death... (p.62)

Just as memories and stories may be unconsciously altered within our minds, so may they be consciously altered, often as a way of protecting, preserving, or improving our emotional well-being. Robert Atkinson (1995) writes of an adult woman who had extreme difficulty in telling personal stories of her childhood. Atkinson asked the woman to think creatively about her stories, and to "use her imagination in coming up with something she could feel good about" (p.5).

The following week, the woman returned with a story she had written down on paper. The story described her life with an alcoholic and often absent father, constant battling between her parents, and a household tormented by a perpetual feeling of despair. Her story ended with these words:

My father committed suicide August 3, 1979, my Mother died of a brain tumor November 17, 1979. I was born November 18, 1979.

Creating a new mental image of her life helped this woman overcome her inability to tell her own story. By “re-inventing” the beginning of her life through symbolization, she was able to transform both her story and her self-perception. This woman was not lying to or tricking herself into believing something impossible had occurred; she was constructing a metaphor to re-illustrate and clarify a portion of her life that was painful and confusing. The invention in this woman’s story is merely a wording of her own symbolic truth. As Atkinson comments:

In her writing was her resolution. She used her imagination in a very positive way to create a new and symbolic story that expressed a truth about her life. She utilized a resourcefulness in bringing order to some confusing experiences in her life story. Her use of imagination actually brought into her personal story the great and universal theme of rebirth, possible only when she recognized and accepted the equally powerful image and role of tragedy in her story. (p.8)

### Contextualizing the Other’s Story

The issue of truth within stories is terrifically complex-- every story has both an author an audience, and both parties maintain their own truth for the stories they tell and hear. I have been telling a story about my experience of seeing a deer jump through the dining room window of my family’s house. From that story, there is much information given about me, both factual and emotional. This information has provided you with a multitude of clues about my life and personality. Without even realizing

it, you have probably begun to construct in your mind a fuzzy composite of the kind of person I might be, what my family is like, and how I “fit in” to the world you know. This composite is based largely on what you have learned through other stories, both your own and those you have heard from others. You are able to contextualize *me* from what *you* know and understand. As James Britton has written, “I look at the world in light of what I have learned from past experience of the world” (1970, p.15). Is your composite of who I am *true*? According to Patrick Lewis, that question is moot. Lewis suggests that “the truth in a story is that which informs the listener/reader. The truth in a story is what the listener/reader takes away from the telling.” (1995, p.5) Lewis goes on to suggest that “just as there are a myriad of stories, at times, there can be a myriad of meanings dependent upon who is reading or hearing the story or doing the telling.” (p.13) Any reader of a story gathers her own “truth” from it based on her own experiences, interpretations, and own, personal truths.

Determining whether or not my story is entirely “true” would be an exercise in futility. Certainly, you could call up my parents, or the local newspaper which covered the story, to see if my facts match theirs, yet you would still not be able to designate my story as being either “true” or “false.” The reason for this is that there is no one “truth” for my story; outside of the factual, indisputable information in the story (a deer jumped through two windows in my house in 1986) there are in fact multiple truths. Each member of my family has experienced the story in his/her own way, and maintains his/her own version of it. Furthermore, because my family considers it to be a highly amusing and interesting

story, it has been re-told again and again until it has been undoubtedly warped and altered in its re-tellings.

As we grow and develop, we use stories to suit our changing social and emotional needs. Stories are versatile; they can be altered with each telling, reflecting the changing context of the storyteller's life. Every time that I have told the deer story, surrounding circumstances have required me to present it in a slightly different manner, appropriate to the particular situation. The first time I told it was to the newspaper reporter who visited our house that day after hearing about it on his police scanner. The second time I told it was to my friends at school (who after seeing my picture in the paper awarded me briefly with celebrity status.) Another telling of the story which stands out in my mind is the time I told it at a party during my first year of college. All of these storytelling contexts required a completely different "frame" for the telling. The first was a purely informational frame, a listing of the events as best as I could remember them. The second entailed an extension (and most likely, an embellishment) of facts my listeners already knew. The third telling was an attempt to construct a bit of myself and my personal world for an audience that did not yet know me, an invitation to learn more about me by learning about my past.

Our stories grow and change along with us; they reflect the constant maturation of our mutable inner landscapes. Engel suggests that "a story collects meaning as it is retold, and the retellings add depth to the emotional, cognitive, and dramatic action of the original story" (1995). Not only do I possess the story about the deer, but three separate and unique stories about the different occasions on which it was told. Each

story plays a role in the development of who I am, and each shapes my memory of the actual occurrence.

The issue of truth within stories is entirely subjective, interpretative-- each of us has a personal "truth" that we maintain and believe in, whether or not that truth matches everyone else's. Ultimately, it is our own truth, our own story, that matters to us.

Human beings are ceaseless storymakers who utilize their wealth of stories to serve their ever-changing social, emotional, and cognitive needs. Each day of our lives is spent learning from, adding to, re-evaluating, and re-constructing our stories; we use our stories of the past as a means of contemplating the present and predicting the future. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have written,

a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future and, therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories. A person is at once engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories. (p.4)

Few human functions so powerfully engage us as the act of storytelling: a painful story can feel like our worst enemy, and pleasant or meaningful ones become cherished friends we love to revisit. Our stories are constant and inescapable teachers who guide us through complex emotional battles and perplexing cognitive puzzles. They allow us to develop into social, communicative beings who create and strengthen relationships through the sharing of our pasts, and they are tireless sources of entertainment. Personal stories are the backbone of our existence-- they provide the structure and support for everything we do,

think, and feel. Without them, we would be vastly limited in our ability to communicate meaning, gain understanding, or share emotion. Stories are who we are--*we are the stories we tell.*

## CHAPTER FOUR SCHOOL AND THE STORY

**Drama and speech are central to a language curriculum, not peripheral. They are basic and essential, not specialties.**

**James Moffett**

I once had a teacher who let us talk.

Sr. Teresa was a bustling, sharp-witted Ursuline nun who ran her third grade classroom with a penchant for good manners, good grooming, and a hearty appetite for jokes and stories. We were a talkative class that year, and Sr. Teresa loved to listen. "Tell me what you think," she'd say, and we'd be off and running, hands waving to take our turn at the wheel of some impassioned debate. She was different from other teachers we had had because, unlike many others, Sr. Teresa wanted us to talk in class. She was as passionate about listening to us and seeing to it that we all had a chance to speak our minds as she was in making sure we had mastered writing in cursive. And Sr. Teresa always threw her two cents in, too--she was one of us, she communicated. It was exciting! She was our friend.

I now know that there was more than just pleasure and personal satisfaction gleaned from those long-winded group discussions in Sr. Teresa's class. Unbeknownst to us at the time, our teacher was giving us a valuable gift. She was allowing us to become better, more proficient and confident speakers.

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, personal storytelling is an innate learning tool, used irrepressibly throughout our lives as learners. Therefore, it makes sense that we make use of this intrinsic learning medium within the classroom as well. Spoken language is the root and foundation of personal storytelling-- it is a skill which, like any other, is cultivated, honed, and improved with time and practice. In order to gain confidence as a storyteller, and to benefit from the learning engendered by storytelling within the classroom, students must gain facility with the spoken word itself. Thus, before delving into the educative particulars of personal storytelling, it is important to first consider the issues surrounding learning and *speaking*. Drama gives students the invaluable opportunity of speaking in the classroom. The first part of this chapter will outline both the need for talk, and drama's unique and effective ability to fill this need.

### The Need For Talk: A Drama and Language Perspective

Experience as both a student and educator has taught me that when it comes to "talking in class", teachers who share Sr. Teresa's philosophy are rare. Many teachers simply do not incorporate talk, other than their own, into regular classroom practice. Perhaps this occurs in conjunction with a common misconception I have noticed among educators (myself included at times!) The misconception lies in the notion that teaching a child on the primary level is, in effect, "starting from scratch." It seems as if some teachers liken themselves to pourers of concrete: they view their students as vast, empty holes which they must fill with the first

solidifying coat of information, thus creating a foundation for the next layer of learning to come.

I remember one of my junior high school teachers, Mrs. Corwin, who had taught first grade earlier in her career. She spoke fondly of those days, recalling the excitement she felt teaching her students to read for the first time. “The best thing about teaching that age group,” she said, “is that they come to you knowing practically nothing, and its your job to fill in those gaps.”

Mrs. Corwin was not intentionally underestimating her students by thinking this way, nor did her belief make her a bad teacher. But her comment about first grade students “knowing practically nothing” is an example of what I believe is a lamentably prevalent oversight among educators. The learning achievements of a child during her pre-academic years are numerous. By the time she is three years old, a child has developed considerable motor skills, the ability to socialize with family and peers, and perhaps most impressive of all, she has acquired a spoken language.

From the time of his first vocalized sound, his language power increases at an astronomical rate until, when he enters school, he brings with him such a wealth of learning about language that he will never again be able to learn as much in a like period of time. (Possien, 1969, p.7)

It is a basic instinct of children to use language to learn. In learning through talk, as in learning to talk, children are active constructors of their own knowledge (Wells, 1986). Children learn through talk when they partake in joint activities with friends and family members such as

cooking, yard work, shopping, or game playing. They make personal connections to the world around them by asking and answering questions. They experiment with language in the realms of fantasy and imaginative play. Language is also the primary enabler of what Gordon Wells has referred to as “incidental learning”: a child shows interest in something, a parent or teacher responds to this interest by offering verbal information to fill in more of the picture.

Wells places special emphasis on the importance of “home-style” learning patterns being continued at school. He has remarked that home learning is regular and inevitable, yet sporadic and unstructured. According to Wells, this sporadic learning is both a strength and a limitation. Its strength lies in fact that the child’s purpose in the activities that promote language use sustains the child’s motivation to understand, and the activities’ contexts provide support for concepts grasped and connections to be made. Wells considers the limitation of this learning to be its unsystematic nature: while some areas of experience are illuminated often and from a variety of perspectives, others are rarely, if ever, encountered. Wells claims it is the job of the school to

broaden the range of children’s experiences and to help them develop the sustained and deliberate attention to a topic or activity that makes the systematic learning possible. Above all, they need to be helped to become more aware of what they already know and still need to know, so they can gradually take over more and more responsibility for their own learning. (1986, p. 67)

When educators recognize their students’ significant pre-elementary language development as a key to other areas of growth, they may find

that they have tapped into an enormous resource of learning opportunity. The task then remains to locate a vehicle through which that resource can be most effectively accessed. Fortunately, one such vehicle exists, one as familiar and inseparable to a child as her language. The vehicle is drama.

The innate human functions of communicating and drama go hand in hand, one servicing the other, enabling children to cultivate social and communicative skills, and academic skills such as reading, writing, and thinking. Very early on in our lives, human beings use drama and language interchangeably. We hear voices making sounds, we mimic them, we begin to attach meaning to them, we use them as our own. An infant watches her parents carefully and moves her tiny mouth, duplicating what she sees and hears. A five year old hears his parents laugh at an older sibling's joke, and attempts to reproduce her tone and cadence, hoping for a similar response from Mom and Dad. Language is learned by imitation. And like any individual employed in the dramatic profession, whose imitative skills must be constantly honed and perfected, children require rehearsal.

To develop their language powers, the simple fact is that children must talk a lot. They must use language and use it an enormous amount. (Moffett, 1968 A, p.45)

The need to talk as a means of increased language understanding and communicative abilities does not stop once a student has entered his school years, yet here's an example of when teachers become "concrete pourers." Ignoring the fact that the child's language learning process is well underway, that she has been accumulating words, phrases, and vast

amounts of learning about language just by *speaking* it, the assuming teacher often assigns the student the inactive role of listener. For years and years, countless hours of a child's language learning in school is spent only listening and reading about it. John Stewig has written that

while it is true that most children do get some experiences in oral language in primary grades (e.g. show-and-tell period), it is rather limited. Regular dramatic experiences are almost never a part of the on-going language arts program. (1973, p.4)

Vivian Paley addresses a similar concern as she comments on how

children enter school accomplished storytellers, veteran fantasy players, only to discover quite abruptly that this great passion of theirs is not a part of the curriculum. Their talents for imagery and illusion are sent outdoors to play where no teacher can make use of the stories they tell--or even hear them...The natural connection between storytelling and learning is not observed in school mainly because we seldom see the classroom as a real and full life, a continuing drama, a world into itself. (1995, p.95)

Educators commonly make the mistake of failing to utilize their students' inherent learning strengths. Storytelling and drama, two great and organic abilities in most people, could be well used in the classroom to advance language skills. Yet students are often taught the tools of language use, such as vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation, through rote memorization or other methods which do not involve vocal practice of any kind. (Stewig, 1973) I am not attempting to minimize the importance of assuring a child's competency in these areas; I am aware that students must learn to write, and they must learn to read. It does seem, however,

that within most curricula, the mastery of grammar and other language “tools” is over-emphasized. Even when they have already been taught and reiterated at each grade level, lists of rules for parts of speech and verb tenses are often presented to students again and again. As Stewig’s (1973) work has indicated, very little attention is paid to a student’s development as a speaker, a communicator, a talker.

Michael Marland (1973) has written extensively about the inherent link between oracy and literacy, and claims that educators have for too long “concentrated remorselessly on the archaic and alien... culture of print. We have not prepared people for the aural world of spoken communication, so vital in an economy of service industries and personal communication (p.15).” He reports that many of the movements in secondary education “require more reading, or if not more quantitatively, the reading is more important (p.17).” Marland joins Moffett (1967 A, 1967 B), Wells (1986), Booth (1987), and Wagner (1998) in the belief that knowledge of phonics, grammar, and other non-verbal components of language study are not enough to secure a student’s command of reading and writing, and that the strengthening of oral language skills is essential to literacy. Marland argues that reading and speaking share a reciprocal educative relationship, and that

the ability to read depends on and grows out of language ability. Indeed, reading of a passage that is too far beyond the reader’s verbal experience is virtually impossible. As reading is *not* simply a matter of decoding word-by-word in left-to-right sequence, but of a continuous speculation and checking, if a reader has to spend too long on an individual word, he loses the overall sense. Similarly, the guessing

ahead is eased if the reader is familiar with many of the word collocations. (p.19)

I remember being taught the meanings and uses of punctuation marks every year from first through sixth grade. I can still see the pre-fabricated animated versions of exclamation mark, period, and comma marching across the top of each classroom's chalkboard, long after we had outgrown a need for their presence. It was almost as if the punctuation marks were some sort of old family tradition that even the teacher had realized had long outlasted its necessity, yet kept it alive for mere nostalgia! Yet through all of those years I dutifully re-learned the punctuation marks, I never once used them in an oral context, or practiced them through speech intonation. Talking out loud was not a part of learning. Drama was not utilized in any capacity.

I can hear the cries of educators now reminding me, "But we've got so much INFORMATION to teach them! There's no time for fooling around with a lot of talk when you've got a whole textbook to get through!" Certainly, there is great pressure on teachers to produce students adept in all facets of the language arts. Children must emerge from the classrooms as capable readers and writers, able to pass state assessment tests with high scores that reflect well on the school district. State and provincial mandated curricula, though not exactly written in stone, are lengthy and thorough enough that a teacher often has little room to add information of her own. Teachers who have been in the profession for a long time are familiar with these curricula and have devised specific teaching methods to ensure that all required material is adequately

covered. Asking a teacher to deviate from these methods could be likened to asking a champion chess player to relinquish her secret game-winning strategy.

Educators might alleviate much of the pressures placed upon them by adopting a new classroom strategy, one that makes use of the knowledge their students already possess. As James Moffett (1968 A) has commented,

learning to read and write will depend in large measure on the growth of oral speech. Like dramatic play, conversing is something the child does before he comes to school, a fact that implies two things. First, it is something that the school can build on from the outset, a familiar medium to extend and use as a substratum for reading, writing, and thinking. Second, since children learn to talk out of school, their talk within school should provide additional learning not easily acquired anywhere else. (1968, p.45)

Drama is not some sort of “cure-all” for the struggling, frustrated teacher, yet when effectively and resourcefully applied, it can be the key to the engagement of student’s interest in their own learning, and subsequently, to their stronger grasp of language.

The following provides an example of how drama can be utilized in the teaching of what is often a particularly vexing subject for young students: vocabulary development. This term does not refer solely to the student’s ability to correctly define words, but to her comprehension of those words within a variety of contexts, thus giving them a more vivid and personal meaning. Stewig identifies drama’s contribution to word comprehension with his suggestion that “in using drama to further vocabulary growth the

[teacher] is not after specific words to be memorized, but rather a captivating exposure to enough words to sensitize children to their ‘lure and lore’” (1973 p.29).

Words are precious vessels of meaning, emotion, energy, history, and utility. Words are like the dragons of medieval fairy tales; they are there to be conquered, to be captured and dragged off to the caves of our minds where we tame them and make them our own. Children could be taught to view their own acquisition of words as a challenge, an exciting conquest that will make them stronger, more confident communicators. My students have often complained to me of spending long hours in school memorizing long, disembodied lists from the end of each textbook chapter. There is no wonder why kids dread doing this-- they dread it because it is boring and purposeless. It infuses in them no curiosity, no real reason to investigate.

A teacher who utilizes drama to enhance vocabulary growth has, to continue the fairy tale metaphor, discovered the keys to the kingdom. In drama, information is not thrust on children in an incomprehensible chunk (such as the case with vocabulary lists) it is presented in such a way that the teacher shares it with her students, exposes them to it in a manner that is meaningful to them, as well as provoking their own thoughts and feelings to further advance their learning experience. In *Push Back the Desks* by Albert Cullum (1967), the author describes his work with kindergarten students:

From my meager linen closet I sacrificed a good white sheet to make a dramatic entrance into the kindergarten...

“I am a friendly apparition,” I slowly stated.

“What’s that?” asked five-year-old Tony.

I proceeded to whirl about in a flashing dervish manner and explained to them that for Halloween I was going to be a very friendly apparition...Finally Annette guessed that I was dressed as a ghost. They then took turns wearing the large sheet and...flew through the kindergarten air as friendly apparitions. It was simple for them to accept apparition as a good kindergarten word. (p.29)

Cullum continued to use drama to enhance and expand his students’ vocabulary development throughout the school year. By providing his young students with strong visual images, opportunities to move about, to speak and to “play” the words they were learning, thereby attaching meaning to them, he was able to significantly increase their spoken vocabularies. This technique bore impressive results: when Cullum tested the children at the end of the school year to measure their retention of approximately sixty large words he had taught them, over ninety percent of the class scored 100% without any review.

The acquisition of vocabulary is a vital component of language learning, yet research suggests it is by no means the most important piece of the puzzle when it comes to actually understanding the meaning of language we use and hear. Paralanguage (the pitch, stress, and juncture of speech) and kinesics (expressive actions such as smiles, winks, shrug, and nods) are expressive overlays we use to convey the intention of our words (Stewig 1967). A study conducted by Ferris and Mehrabian (1967) demonstrates that in the total impact of a verbal message, only 7% is made by basic verbal symbols (words), while 38% is conveyed by vocal overlays of paralanguage. An astounding 55% of the message is determined by kinesics.

If children are to become adept communicators, it is imperative that they become fluent interpreters of all expressive facets of spoken language. Enlarging the word count of their vocabularies will not ensure their success as communicators if they are not also made aware of the mutability of language through expression. Paralanguage and kinesics, although not usually directly addressed in the curriculum, could be utilized to enhance other areas of learning such as reading comprehension and general communicative skills.

These are not subjects that can be learned passively--these integral elements of language must be fully experienced, practiced, and 'acted out' to be comprehended. Students must gain facility in the manipulation of their own voices and bodies if they are to become competent, practiced communicators and storytellers. Here drama lends itself as the ideal learning medium.

Paralanguage and kinesics can be demonstrated simultaneously in dramatic role play. Through character **improvisation** (creating spontaneous, dramatic dialogue) students become more conscious of the physical constraints and gestures we employ that contribute so heavily to the actual meaning of our words. This is not information which can be gleaned from filling out pages in a workbook, it can only be discovered by the active process of doing it, watching it, and hearing it be done.

John Stewig has written extensively of drama's facility in improving student's command of paralanguage and its communicative effects. One activity he suggests involves exploring a sentence in isolation. The following example demonstrates how, by taking a line from a classroom

improvisation and altering the stress on the words, students may notice changes in the sentence's meaning and implication:

1. My, that's a *pretty* green dress you have on today. (Interpretation: You wore an ugly green one yesterday.)
2. My, *that's* a pretty green dress you have on today. (Interpretation: I like that one, but the one on the rack leaves me cold.)
3. My *that's* a *pretty green* dress you have on today. (Interpretation: If it were any more green, I don't think I could stand it!)
4. My, that's a pretty green *dress* you have on today. (Interpretation: But you're wearing an ugly fuschia hat.)
5. My, that's a pretty green dress *you have* on today. (Interpretation: The girl beside you is wearing a hideous turquoise dress.)
6. My *that's* a pretty green dress you have on *today*. (Interpretation: So, at last, you've worn a pretty dress.) (p.33)

Drama is an extremely effective means of raising children's awareness of the communicative elements they use regularly to convey meaning. In a drama class a colleague of mine taught recently to twelve and thirteen-year-olds, the students were experimenting with characterizations of people in various types of conflict. Their depictions of conflict took on many forms, including a disagreement among friends, a student disputing a teacher's grade, and an argument following an automobile accident. The students had developed these scenes from improvisation, worked on them steadily, but remained dissatisfied with them for reasons they could at first not quite identify. My colleague suspected that they were unhappy

with the conflict scenes because they sensed that they did not “ring true.” One reason for this was that although all three situations showed very different types of conflict, all three were shown in a very similar way-- a screaming match. Yelling and screaming seemed to be the stock image the students drew upon when they imagined conflict. It was difficult for them to access or experiment with any other modes of expressing anger, frustration, or stress. My colleague felt that a study of kinesic expression would be beneficial, and experimented with a means of bringing it to their attention.

It seemed strange to the students at first when their drama teacher brought in a videotape of President Bill Clinton and Senator Bob Dole’s debate from the 1996 Presidential campaign and played it with the sound turned off. As they viewed the silent video, she asked them to watch each candidate carefully, and to respond to what they saw. Despite the lack of words to engage their grasp of the dialogues’ meaning, the students were surprised to discover how much of the debates they could actually understand. One of the twelve year olds remarked that the candidates “moved more than I thought they would.” The students took notice of slight gestures such as eye movements, shrugs, leaning forward or back, twitches of the lips and shifts of the chin that they felt told volumes about the nature of the conversation, the intention of candidate’s responses, and of each man’s own personality.

Watching the tape in silence, and paying close attention to the actions and gestures of the two speakers allowed the students to become much more aware of the gamut of physical choices available to them as communicators. Their gained insights into the malleable nature of speech

and gesture allowed them to return to their improvised scenes with a new sense of possibility. As the students experimented with diverse means and styles of communicating, they discovered that they could show conflict in more than one way, and that they, as expressive, feeling individuals, were capable of accessing the range of both subtle and overt communicative overlays.

Familiarizing students with paralinguistic and kinesic expression is time well spent: when children have an understanding of all components of their complex and articulate vocabulary, they will be able to apply that knowledge to their own speech and movement, realizing that through this control, they are capable of creating the communicative effects they desire (Stewig, p.32). Students deserve to have this specific knowledge of the way people speak; they deserve to have power over the way *they* speak.

Allowing students to talk, whether through classroom de-briefing, partner dialogues, or dramatic activities such as improvisation and **roleplay**, gives them invaluable practice in speaking, and the opportunity to 'try out' language in new and expansive ways. Drama introduces a verbal landscape where innumerable forms of discourse may be tested and explored.

Drama may be the most appropriate means of providing the types of speaking/listening situations that curriculum guides now demand from teachers. It can facilitate a wide variety of language uses in contexts that require full participation within an affective/cognitive frame, promoting types of talk important in encouraging deep-level thought processes such as expatiation, negotiation, clarification, explanation, persuasion, and prediction. (Booth, 1987, p.4)

The ability to communicate effectively, to use language with confidence and clarity can be gained only through practice. Drama is a powerful medium for language learning simply because it gives students the opportunity to speak; in fact, it demands it. This element is crucial when considering the research findings of developmental psychologists such as Jerome Bruner (1990), who maintains that “language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use. Being ‘exposed’ to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of ‘doing’” (p. 70).

The results of a drama and language research project conducted in Tasmanian classrooms between 1980 and 1983 indicate that the periods of verbal reflection following dramatic activities allowed children to “grapple with language to express their evolving thoughts, opinions, and feelings” (Schaffner, 1984, p.9). The personal engagement achieved through discussion promoted both emotional and intellectual growth in the students involved. Schaffner also reports that drama and discussion gave students opportunities to use language for particular purposes such as reporting, elaborating, predicting, speculating, and reasoning. Drama educator David Booth (1987) has made similar claims, and writes that in drama,

children begin to think aloud, to grapple with language they need to express their evolving ideas, to clarify and change their opinions. They begin to explain the motives and behavior evidenced during the drama, finding reasons and implications for assumptions and decisions they had made. (p.19)

Clarity of thought and articulate use of language are skills educators encourage students to possess as writers, but seldom allow them to develop as verbal communicators. This disparity compels one to pose the following question: how can a teacher expect her students to write a language they do not feel comfortable speaking?

Classroom drama, including periods of reflection, provides the unique opportunity for children to engage in dialogues with adults and peers simultaneously. It creates a forum for language concepts to be grasped in a personal, immediate way. Winnifred Ward (1957) recognizes children's attraction to drama in their need "both for the poise which comes from being articulate, and the power it gives them among their fellows" (p.8). Indeed, the ability to speak effectively and persuasively is a skill which, if never acquired, can affect an individual's ability to function in society. The adult world is a complex array of social and professional interaction. The way we speak influences (and often determines) the way we are perceived by others. Taking this into account, it seems only logical and humane to prepare students for the linguistic struggle that lies ahead of them. Haseman and O'Toole have addressed this concern, suggesting that

when students have power and control over the language they use, and can recognize how others are using and abusing language, they have one of the most crucial tools towards controlling their own lives and decisions. The ability to manage and not be managed by language is, we believe, one way to overcome the inequities of society. (1990, p.vi)

By experimenting with the linguistic demands placed upon people in various social roles and situations, children will benefit from a broadened understanding that different people speak in different ways, to suit varying circumstances. In improvisation and roleplay, a student may observe how verbal patterns change when communicating as, or with, an employer, teacher, friend or any other “character” their dramatic world produces. This experience of “acting out” can help children experiment with the appropriateness of innumerable social registers, and can help them to build up a more flexible approach to communication (McGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1977).

My experience in drama education has provided me with valuable opportunities to witness the confidence and joy awarded to students as they gain control over their language. I will never forget a four-year-old member of a dramatic play class I once taught whose reluctance to speak excluded her from many social activities and friendships. “Katrina doesn’t talk very much,” her teacher told me when I joined the school’s staff mid-year, “She usually plays by herself.”

Observing Katrina as she played alone, I noticed that she actually *did* talk; as soon as she perceived herself to be out of earshot, she would enter upon a running banter with a score of friends I later learned she called her “maginary babies.” In the presence of teachers and her peers, however, Katrina was generally tight-lipped as a clam. During group activities her face remained frozen in an awkward, unhappy-looking frown.

“Good morning, Katrina!” I’d say as she passed me on her way into the classroom.

“Katrina doesn’t talk,” her classmates would remind me.

Several drama sessions passed without Katrina’s contribution to our games or discussions. She always sat on the periphery of the circle which served as our playing space, yet I noticed that she watched the other children’s dramas with strict and focused attention--she would lean forward, crane her neck to better view the speaker, and occasionally move her lips. Two of her classmates once enacted their story of Mrs. Claus rescuing a baby polar bear, turning the circle into a frightening ocean of mighty currents and giant blocks of ice. Katrina nodded vigorously in agreement when Mrs. Claus thought to use her apron as a lasso, and she clapped her hands as the polar bear was finally pulled from the frigid waters. Within these brief yet expressive gestures, I saw the real Katrina, the Katrina who cooed and laughed and conspired with her “maginary babies” on the playground, the Katrina who knew and understood the world of drama and who, I suspected, longed to take part and break her silence.

My frequent words of encouragement elicited only a string of politely whispered “no thankyou’s”, and yet several times over the next few weeks, Katrina visibly teetered on the edge of participation. Once, I saw her nose twitch ferociously during a scene about Peter Rabbit, and when Mr. McGregor entered the garden, her body shifted to a crouched position, as if poised on the verge on escape.

About one month after our drama sessions had begun, Katrina ventured into the circle for the first time. When a soft-spoken girl named Lacey asked for a volunteer “to be a *mother* with three *babies*,” the mere mention of these two words seemed to prompt an immediate surge of

confidence in Katrina. A mother! With babies! This was a role she was familiar with-- she had practiced it countless times, knew the lines to be said, the appropriate gestures to be made. There was no doubt about it: *She could play this part!* In a wonderful moment of courage, Katrina raised her hand.

“I’ll be the Mommy,” she said.

Katrina’s first, hesitant attempts to join in were met with the incredulous surprise of her classmates. They seemed almost in shock to discover that the Katrina who “does not talk” did indeed possess a voice. Subsequent drama sessions saw Katrina’s return to the circle many times, usually in the context of some maternal role, but occasionally she experimented with other characters. One day, Katrina’s portrayal of a growling tiger cub made the class laugh. “Funny tiger!” a boy remarked between giggles. Upon hearing that, the tiger’s grin was one of triumph.

Katrina began talking more in other contexts too; she brought a set of plastic ponies to school and earnestly described their value, another day she told the story of her dog’s death. Bit by bit, Katrina’s reluctance to join in daily activities slowly dissipated; we teachers joyously witnessed her evolution from sideline spectator to hesitant, yet decidedly active participant. The more Katrina spoke, the more confident she seemed to be.

Things changed for her in the social spectrum: as time went on, Katrina’s new found ‘voice’ seemed less unusual, her presence among peers less awkward and strange. It eventually seemed that everyone had forgotten that Katrina had once been the girl who never spoke and who

played alone. Katrina, I later discovered, had not forgotten. Toward the end of the school year, the children were engaged in a lesson about opposites: fast and slow, hot and cold, happy and sad. When her teacher asked the class for an example of things that are loud and quiet, Katrina raised her hand. "I used to be quiet," she said. "Now I'm loud."

A child's ability to communicate contributes largely to the measure of success and happiness she will experience throughout her life. I am reminded of Katrina's story by the words of Wilma Possien, who has written that:

through the process of communication, [a child] comes to regard himself as a worthy member of his family and community, or as an inadequate, unwanted individual, and by the same process, the world becomes a friendly accepting environment or a forbidding, hostile prison. (1969, p.7)

The evidence of children's need for talk is strong. Recognizing that it is a child's natural, inherent tendency to learn by doing is the first step towards assuring her success as a student, a communicator, and a human being who possesses a positive sense of self.

### School Learning Through Personal Story

I have discussed the learning benefits of speaking, and will now shift my attention to a more specific verbal activity: personal storytelling. As the previous chapter has illustrated, personal storytelling is a rich and intrinsic enabler of meaning-making. But when taking school curricula

into consideration, is there a place for this learning medium? While we may recognize a child's need to speak in school, is personal storytelling a suitable means of filling that need? Do school situations provide "appropriate" contexts for **self-stories** to be accessed and utilized? Do the learning outcomes of personal storytelling substantiate its integration into an already jam-packed curriculum? What, if anything, do personal stories teach, and how is this achieved? These are questions the following portion of this chapter seeks to reveal.

Nancy King, a drama and movement educator, has written about one of her student's experiences with personal story in a literature class:

A student in the course "Giving Form to Expression" was asked to explore a myth and to uncover the meaning the myth had for her. She chose an Eastern European tale, "The Fern Girl," about an old woman who plants a fern that transforms into a beautiful girl. The old woman rescues the girl and assists the young woman to marry the man of her choice. The student wrote at great length about the loneliness of the old woman, the misery of the girl forced to marry a man she cannot trust, and the man who chose to hunt rather than accompany his bride to their new home. While discussing the paper with the student, I asked her how she knew the old woman was lonely, the girl miserable, the man uncaring. She said, "It's in the story." I returned the story to her and asked her to find passages to support her conclusions. After several minutes she looked up and said, astonished, "I can't find them. But I'm sure I saw them when I read the story. How is this possible?"

We talked about how the story resonated within her, the images evoked by the story, the issues uncovered by the narrative. She admitted she was very lonely, that her first year of college had been very difficult, and that she was unable to meet all of her academic responsibilities. We looked at the information provided by the story and the material she imposed on it as a way of understanding what her issues were and how her life experiences colored her reading of the

text. Not only was she able to write a new paper that differentiated her experiences from the characters in the story, she also understood why she was receiving poor grades in the literature class she was taking. She learned strategies to improve her critical analysis without losing sight of what the text meant to her. (1993, pp. 8-9)

Personal stories permeate new learning experiences. Knowledge we have accumulated through thought, feeling, and experience (both past and current) colors and influences our understanding and assimilation of new information. As King's student's example illustrates, this process can often occur without us even realizing that it has.

A practiced educator whose teaching methodologies emphasize and prioritize the learner's consultation of self-stories, King recognized her student's imposition of personal meanings on her interpretation of the text, and by making her aware of this, King was able to mold the situation to her student's advantage. Their discussion of what had occurred allowed the student's learning to be enhanced and augmented through two processes: the verbal recounting of her experiences to King (personal storytelling), and the discussion of these experiences in relation to the text. The combination of these processes demonstrates a learning strategy which has become the crux of a burgeoning trend in educative methodologies: the utilization of personal knowledge in the acquisition of new information and meanings.

The incorporation of personal story and the encouraged employment of self-knowledge as a viable learning instrument into everyday classroom practices makes use of a student's most inherent, natural, and readily

available learning tactic. Knowledge is assimilated effectively and meaningfully when it makes sense within the context of what a learner already knows. Betty Rosen (1988) describes this event in her explanation of a person's process of understanding a story. Her suggestion is that "stories do not offer single meanings. They form interlocking sets of meanings, and listening to a story is a search for these meanings through the meanings we already possess" (p.170).

Every bit of information that we learn, every fragment of meaning that we may unearth, can be in some way related to the experience of living beings. David Smith (1991) suggests that as human beings "we are surrounded by the expressions of life in texts, artifacts, gestures, voices, and so forth and we understand them to the degree to which we can show how they emerge from 'lived experience.'" (p.191) Researchers use the term '*familiarity*' in describing an essential component of pedagogical stratagem. Mayher (1990) prescribes a "familiar context" for effective learning processes; Jonothan Neelands (1984) echoes this notion with his claim that

it makes sense for us, as teachers, to raise the status in our classrooms of the vernacular experience and ways of knowing that children bring with them into schools. By so doing, we are legitimizing the child's own efforts to make sense of new information by working on it with familiar tools and by fitting it into her pattern of previous and familiar experience. (p.4)

Learning is an interpretive activity which relies heavily on one's foundation of available, personal knowledge. This feature of learning first became apparent to me during the lecture portions of a Drama in

Education course taught by Professor Juliana Saxton at the University of Victoria. During each lecture, as a new subject was introduced such as the significance of games, or functions of the brain, a dozen hands would invariably shoot up. Some of these hands belonged to students with a question concerning the material, but most wished to speak for a different reason-- they had a story to tell.

When Professor Saxton's students told stories, sparked by a personal connection to the content of her lecture, they used the story of their own experience as a bridge to the new information; they were able to assimilate it because they had found their internal connection to it. The desire to verbalize their stories seemed an attempt to further their understanding of the new information, to solidify their command of it. The communicative atmosphere within the lectures, fostered by the professor's responsive and welcoming attitude towards personal story, made for an educative environment that was prolific and engaging.

The memorization and regurgitation of facts is a common learning practice for many students, yet becomes ultimately useless beyond fulfilling the need for immediate recollection on a quiz or exam. This kind of learning has an almost disposable quality; as John Mayher (1990) has expressed,

when school knowledge remains disembedded and unconnected to the learner's experience, and worse, when neither teacher nor student recognizes or tries to deal with the gap between the label and experience, the only 'learning' that is possible is what I have sometimes called verbal short-circuiting, in which the concept comes in

the ear or the eye and goes out the pen but never gets sufficiently acted upon in the brain to find a permanent home. (p.79)

True learning requires a thorough comprehension of a subject's meaning. When meaning remains uninvestigated, the student's grasp of a subject is shallow, ineffectual, and temporary. Recalling my own high school learning experiences, I am inundated with memories of information presented to me in disembodied lists--lists I was required to memorize with little attention paid to their context or conceptual meaning. Names, dates, state capitals and French verb tenses were learned in large chunks which, if remembered at all, were reduced within my mind to trivial, inconsequential tidbits of fact. I consider this "lack of meaning-making" gap in my educational career to be most tragic! I would much prefer to have retained more of what I so painstakingly memorized, to be able to converse confidently on subjects such as of American History or Victorian Literature, but unfortunately, I cannot. With so little meaning attached to these subjects as I "learned" them, they have for the most part escaped me.

An analogy can be made between the superficial practice of "learning through lists" and McEwan and Egan's description of what is not a story. Their claim is that

an extensive list is not a story. What distinguishes the story is that it takes shape, in however attenuated a form, as a rhythm that ultimately springs from patterns implicit in human life and action. A list merely supplies the parts; a story reflects a structural symmetry between its contents and human life. (1995, p.vii)

Just as the story form connects with human life and action, so does the effective learning methodology. The work of many current educational researchers demonstrates that effective classroom methods which set forth a more holistic, meaning-oriented approach to learning include the interpretation of a subject's significance in relation to personal meaning. (Paley, 1981; Wells, 1986; Felman & Laub, 1992; Mayher, 1993; McEwan & Egan, 1995) Here, personal storytelling comes into play; we may now recognize its potency and capability for learning not only in the larger realms of personal and social discovery, but as a powerful curriculum tool.

In creating a responsive, personal-knowledge based learning environment, a teacher's recognition, acceptance, and encouragement of her students' natural tendency to tell stories about themselves is required. It is an unfortunate tendency among educators to regard personal storytelling as frivolous, a distraction from the pursuit of "real" learning (Wells, 1986). The result of this attitude? A classroom in which the teacher talks and the students listen; a result which, as the earlier portion of this chapter has demonstrated, inhibits students' development as learners and communicators. If she is to avoid this, the educator must adopt a different attitude towards personal stories; she must end her assumption that the imaginative, personal, and emotional response to experience is of less value than the pragmatic and analytic. Wells addresses this issue with his claim that

the education of the whole person, which is the declared aim of probably every school system, can only be achieved if there are opportunities to explore feelings and values in specific or imagined

situations as well as lessons devoted to the consideration of general principles...knowledge has moral and aesthetic dimensions as well as practical and conceptual ones, and a fully mature response is the one that achieves a balance between them. (1986 pp. 203-204)

In further support of this idea, Kieran Egan has written that

we make sense of the world and experience “affectively” no less than “cognitively”...to present knowledge cut off from human emotions and intentions is to reduce its affective meaning. This affective meaning also seems especially important in providing *access* to knowledge and engaging us in knowledge. (1966 pp. 29-30)

Perhaps one of the most insightful and comprehensive studies of the relationship between story and learning, Gordon Wells’ work, *The Meaning Makers* (1986), describes his fifteen-year study of a group of children living in England. His work serves to illuminate the vital, indispensable role of story in language acquisition and literacy as well as other areas of the curriculum. Wells’ study follows the children from the primary stages of language development in which they are first learning to talk, to their learning experiences through elementary school in reading, writing, and speaking. He suggests it is the use of story (both told and listened to) within the home and classroom which engenders, enhances, and extends the children’s acquisition of language throughout their lives.

What this study clearly demonstrates is that it is growing up in a literate family environment, in which reading and writing are naturally occurring, daily activities, that gives children a particular advantage when they start their formal education. And of all the activities that were characteristic of such homes, it was the sharing of stories that we found to be most important. (p.194)

Wells' study indicates that in classrooms which devote time to the sharing of stories in relation to studied subjects, students learn from each other and discover the value of their own knowledge by having it validated by their peers. Certainly, the process of *listening* to each others' stories can be as educative and personally illuminating as the telling of our own. The exchange of stories within the context of learning a subject is fraught with opportunities to appreciate, comprehend, criticize, and empathize with the thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of those around us (Wason-Ellam 1991) and to further enhance our understanding of the subject by allowing us to see how it is comprehended by other views. Wells' study revealed a common eagerness and substantive interest among students in using self-stories to learn. He suggests that

when pupils are given the freedom and the responsibility to work in this way, there is ample evidence that it is indeed their natural impulse to tell and write stories as a means of achieving understanding and of making connections between what they are learning and what they already know. (p. 207)

Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon (1995) has written of her experiences in utilizing students' personal stories as a remarkably effective means of understanding school subjects. She has found her students to be amenable storytellers who experience significant academic, social, and emotional gains by making connections between personal and curricular information.

As part of a class' study of the revenge theme in *Romeo and Juliet*, Haroutunian-Gordon asked her students to write about a time when they took revenge on someone or thought of doing so. In group discussions

that followed the writing exercise, students were asked to respond with stories of their own experiences of feeling angry or hurt.

The students...seem to bring extraordinary resources to the discussion situation: they have intense personal relationships to draw upon, their daily experiences are powerful and so potentially instructive, and they are willing to share these experiences. Furthermore, some seem able to use personal experience to illuminate the meaning of a text...some also seem to use the text to illuminate the meaning of personal experience. (1995, p.104)

The reciprocal effects experienced by Haroutunian-Gordan's students demonstrate the cooperative relationship of self-stories and school learning; *the understanding of one broadens the understanding of the other*. In this way, the presence of personal stories in the classroom provides students with an additional advantage: the advancement of self-perception development. When school becomes a place where students are given opportunities to make personal discoveries as well as academic ones, the learning environment is especially productive and rich. One student's writing, submitted in response to the *Romeo and Juliet* exercises, is a powerful reflection of his broadened understanding of self:

I have been hurt a hundred times by people. Sometimes it makes me feel good, but most of the time it hurts and I refuse to stand for someone taking a cheap shot at me. Sometimes I am forced to do what I don't want to get revenge. It is hard to keep cool...I have decided not to be hurt anymore. For in my lifetime I have been hurt too many times. I am going to try to make it better. (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1995, p.104)

Lessons which utilize personal storytelling place the “power” to understand in the student’s hands; the stored knowledge they have accumulated throughout their lives as feeling, thinking, human beings is acknowledged and esteemed, and they learn to recognize themselves as facile, articulate meaning-makers. This lesson by Nancy King, given to a class of first year college students after their reading of Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, elucidates the effectiveness and flexibility of personal story as a learning instrument. The session included creating images in finger paint, which, as the author expressed, “the students were not used to working with...but expressed their willingness to try” (1993, p.41). The comments in parenthesis interspersed throughout the lesson plan are King’s:

Text: *Siddhartha*

Time: 50 minutes.

Focus: Images of self.

Paint: On left side of paper, image of “self.”

Write: Words to describe a self.

Paint: On the right side of paper, image of “myself.”

Write: Words to describe myself.

Share: Images and words.

*(I intended this to take about fifteen minutes, but it generated a long discussion about the nature of self and the search for self in the students’ lives and in the text’s characters. The talking revealed bewilderment, fear, and concern about their selves and the development of self.)*

Paint: Image of Siddhartha’s notion of self at a particular point in the novel that interests/intrigues/irritates/excites you.

**Select:** A passage that illuminates your notion of Siddhartha's self.

**Share:** Images and passages.

*(Because time was passing quickly, I asked for only two people to share, who had picked different points in the novel. Their choices evoked a lot of talk, and I used their interest to lead in the next task.)*

**Create:** A brief (less than one minute) monologue to describe Siddhartha's understanding of self at your chosen point in the novel.

**Share:** Monologues.

*(I decided to ask for three volunteers who had each picked a different point in the novel.)*

**Discuss:** How or if Siddhartha's understanding of self changed as he lived.

*(I decided not to do this because the ideas emerged as the students did their monologues.)*

**Consider:** Govinda (Siddhartha's friend since childhood) asks Siddhartha, "Give me something to help me on my way, Siddhartha. My path is often hard and dark." As Siddhartha, what would you give him? As yourself, what would you give him? If there are differences, what might account for them?

*(Instead of talking I asked them to paint a gift from Siddhartha on the left side and from themselves on the right side. I asked the group to hold up their images so we could see them. We processed them as part of the reflection. The gifts ranged from a lifetime pass to McDonald's-so he'd never be hungry!- to a portable CD player with all of Beethoven's symphonies...I suggested we think about the meanings of our gifts in relationship to our notions of the relationship between Govinda and Siddhartha and to share these during the next three classes.*

**Reflection:** On session and ideas evoked by the processes we used to explore the notions of self presented in the novel. (King, 1993, pp. 42-44)

The creation of visual imagery, introspective thought, speaking, listening, storytelling...these are the components of this challenging and productive lesson. Personal storytelling (the verbal recounting of story) is employed here, as well as other narrative structures (painting, writing, and thinking.) The learning achieved here is explicit, rich, multi-faceted; King invites her students to explore unabashedly their personal knowledge and experiences in relation to the text, and by doing so, they achieve a position of understanding that is relevant and expansive.

As similarly witnessed in Haroutunian-Gordan's *Romeo and Juliet* exercise, students' consultation of self-stories engenders learning in both academic and personal realms. King's exercise requires the students to think within three frames: the specifics of Siddhartha (painting and writing about Siddhartha's notion of self), the universal frame (painting and writing about images of self), and the personal frame (painting and writing about images of "myself".) The exploration of self in relation to the text is not a accidental by-product of this lesson, but a pre-meditated goal of the educator. King writes that she wanted students to think specifically about

what we each mean by 'self' and how our notions inform, describe, or affect our understanding of Siddhartha's development based on his life experience. I also wanted them to consider their ideas about their own selves and how this understanding might affect their life choices. (1993, p.44)

These students have not only gained tremendous insight into the Siddhartha's world as circumscribed by Hesse, they have been given the opportunity to think comparatively of their own worlds and

understandings. Additionally, the non-traditional, multi-media learning techniques employed here provide a distinctive learning experience that the students will undoubtedly remember. Indeed, this lesson has its own “story”-- it is a unique story of learning that belongs to each student and may become part of their own personal story repertoire.

### School Learning Through Personal Story and Drama

Learning that involves personal storytelling possesses an inherently dramatic resonance. This makes sense, taking into consideration that personal storytelling is, by nature, a dramatic event. Stories, like dramas, are about the human condition--they describe emotions, actions, situations and circumstances experienced by people, and they require an audience who has agreed to listen. Personal storytelling and drama share another similarity as well--they are both remarkable, invaluable tools of learning.

Learning through drama is about the discovery of meanings. In drama, students explore themes, concepts, issues, and emotions within imaginary landscapes; they are working within a framework of “just pretend” and yet experiencing events within what Gavin Bolton has referred to as “a medium of concrete action” (1984, p. 142). Herein lies drama’s powerful duality: its ability to place the learner at the heart of the action, yet simultaneously and objectively distanced from it. Bolton describes this duality in his comment that

dramatic activity does not supersede direct experience nor is it a second-best to direct experience. Its potency lies in ‘metaxis’, a heightened state of consciousness that holds two worlds in the mind at the same time. (1984, p.142)

Personal storytelling can (albeit somewhat differently) also achieve this kind of cognitive and emotional separation. As detailed in chapter three, the act of telling one's story allows us to distance ourselves from it. The story is real, it remains our own, yet as we externalize it through the process of reconstructing it in verbal form, we may examine and contemplate our story in a more objectified state. The "cooling function" (Engel, 1995) of storytelling allows us to remain both participant and spectator to the story's events: we are participant because it is *our* story, and we are spectator because we are *hearing* our story being told. We learn from our stories in this way.

Personal storytelling and drama share another similarity in that they depend on one another in the successful delivery of their respective forms. A successfully told story is one that does more than hold its audience's attention, it *captivates* it, relying largely on dramatic elements. An effective storyteller, like an effective stage performer, can "feel out" an audience, and knows whether or not to speed up or slow down, to add gestures or movements, to adjust the pitch or timbre of her voice. One who understands drama and possesses a firm command of dramatic elements is more likely to tell an effective story.

Concurrently, drama depends upon personal stories as the very fuel and essence of its being--what would a drama be without a personal story to ignite it, set it off and running? How would an improvised scene continue, or even begin, without the players drawing upon their own store of memories, experiences, and stories to inspire their action? How could a playwright conjure a new, imagined world without some pre-existing,

personally gathered knowledge of her own? Personal stories are the fabric from which patches are cut and the dramatic quilt is stitched together.

Personal storytelling and drama work educatively in tandem; their combined applications produce vast learning benefits which spring from the learner's most natural and inherent means of processing and understanding new information and experiences. Drama educator Cecily O'Neill has written about the experience of a ninth grade class studying *When the Legends Die*, a novel about a young native's loss of identity when forced to attend a frontier school. During one of the class sessions, the teacher initiated a dramatic world as she went into role as the

principal of the frontier school, and welcomed the students as potential teachers to the school. Throughout the roleplay, students reacted strongly to the issues raised by the discussion with the principal. In a de-briefing session following the roleplay, students' comments indicated that their passionate response to the situation stemmed from the personal connection they had made to the subject matter. O'Neill writes that

the students questioned the principal and began almost immediately to challenge her view of the need to civilize and convert the Native Americans. In reflecting on this encounter, they connected the condescension and prejudice shown by the principal with attitudes they had experienced in their own school lives. (1995, p.5)

The correlation of internal and external information made by these students exemplifies a valuable, oft-occurring feature of dramatic work. The students are exposed to new information, they contemplate and

negotiate powerful human issues within an entirely new context, and yet remain connected to their own knowledge and feelings. They have been as David Booth has described it, “inside language, using it to make meaning both private and public in the ‘here and now’ dynamic” (1980). They have “lived” inside a historic event, they have exercised their own understandings and sensibilities, and expanded their knowledge both cognitively and emotionally. They have achieved what Larry Swartz (1986) maintains is an essential component of drama education: that in drama, “students need to interact with the story and their own ideas in order to bring about meaning, and to translate the experience of the story into the context of their own lives” (p.41).

Personal stories provide more than consultation points for ongoing dramatic exploration; they may also be utilized at the core of the drama, the starting place from which the drama is initiated. Drama educators may frequently begin a dramatic activity by asking the participants to recall a personal story. The encouraged utilization of personal story within drama acknowledges a component of education deemed particularly essential by leading researchers of this field: ownership. (Saxton, Verriour, 1988)

While describing the goals of their work in drama education, John Hughes and Di Johnson include their aim to ensure students’ “collective ownership of individual cultures and experiences” (1998, p.22). Hughes and Johnson give evidence of this goal as they describe their work with students at the International Drama in Education Research Institute, held at the University of Victoria in 1997. The master class they taught at IDERI was designed “to encourage adults to reflect upon childhood

memories as a way into improvisation and enactment” (p.26). Hughes provides a detailed account of their experience:

The students were lead through a guided visualization in order for them to experience an intra-subjective monologue which recalled a happy time in childhood and a song that was associated with that time... I asked the students to form small groups and discuss their memories and the songs they had recalled. Di and I watched with delight as the small groups of students talked intensely; heads leaning in, concentrating faces nodding, listening and sharing experiences... Each group then chose one song to work on and present. I asked them to construct a frozen moment to illustrate the song itself, then blend slowly into a visual depiction of the memory associated with that song.... (1998, p.27)

Recognition of what is familiar to us within dramatic work is a powerfully satisfying sensation. Students expressed great excitement as the sharing of the “visual depictions” sparked their own memories and associations with the childhood songs:

There were spontaneous outbursts from the audience, indicating the pleasure of recognition as the links were made between aesthetic and cognitive realization ; that is, the visual stimulus of the tableau revealing the linguistic base from which it has sprung. (Hughes & Johnson, 1998, p.27)

Hughes’ exercise designates the students’ thoughts, feelings, and memories as sources of dramatic stimuli. This designation ensures the participant’s sense of ownership: the dramatic work which emerges is comprised entirely of sounds, images, and themes which belong to them and their individual memories of childhood. The process serves to both recognize and validate the individual’s experiences as the childhood

songs are shared and explored dramatically. It is a process which may provide the participant with new insight into the nature of drama itself--the understanding that drama is not some inaccessible or "lofty" phenomena, but is concerned with the exploration, contemplation, and celebration of the elements of life which hold meaning for us as individuals.

I will conclude this discussion of personal story and drama by telling a story--it is the story of an event which takes place each year in a drama in education course taught at the University of Victoria. Referred to as the "Christmas Share," it is an annual event which celebrates, in an exuberant and meaningful manner, the joy and import of personal stories and drama. It is an event which provides strong evidence of the vast personal and communal meaning-making engendered by the combined application of these two learning mediums.

As part of their end-of-the-semester final work, students in the class respond, in writing, to a list of questions. The questions concern the students' own holiday memories, experiences, and traditions such as special foods, songs, family customs, favorite sayings, and specific events. They are open-ended questions, designed to cover a wide range of topics, feelings, and ideas.

Once the questionnaires (usually at least fifty of them) have been returned to her, the instructor sets upon the task of transcribing the mass of information before her into a lengthy, free-form, choral-speak-type poem. The finished product, a composite of story, memory, and image,

becomes the script from which the students produce the term's final performance.

Working in groups that are each assigned a section of the piece, the students may present their part in any way they choose--I have seen some groups impose a story-like plot on their section, others sing it, while still others perform it in a 1950s style beatnik rhythm. Portions of the Christmas share are hilariously funny; others take on a more serious note as the meaning of the holiday season is contemplated.

What is most striking about this process, however, is that in the end, when the groups have all rehearsed and designated their order, when it is time for them to unite and to present the piece in its entirety, each member of the class may recognize the individual, personal contribution he/she has made to the creation of the piece. They are awarded not only with the knowledge that they are an integral part of the *drama*, but that their own *story* has also found its way into the text, and has become an essential component of a meaningful whole.

As both spectators and participants in the drama they have created, the students learn through story in a satisfying, celebratory way: they learn from the memories and ideas of others, they learn how their own experiences compare and contrast to those of their classmates, and they may recognize drama as the common, creative force which binds it all together in a universally meaningful form. "This is your gift to one another," the instructor says as the performance commences.

Indeed, to learners of all ages and abilities, personal stories and drama *are* gifts. They are gifts because they acknowledge and support our most

instinctive and compulsory means of learning. They allow us to assimilate knowledge the way we know best, the way that comes most naturally to us. Learning through personal story and drama is a process which serves to validate and fortify our understandings, both old and new. As educators, we must make room for these powerful learning media in our classrooms; we must prioritize them as integral components of our pedagogic strategy. If we are to succeed in our mission as teachers, we must concede to the following notion: our students need respect for and acknowledgment of their innate learning strengths if they are to become strong people.

CHAPTER FIVE  
PERSONAL STORYTELLING AND DRAMA

**Theatre has no categories, it is about life. This is the only starting point, and there is nothing else truly fundamental. Theatre is life.**

**Peter Brook**

*Monday, July 13, 1998*  
*11:15 a.m.*

It is the sixth day of my research project, and there is a nearly-tangible buzz of excitement in the air. Five of my nine students are rushing madly about, moving and re-moving a chair, whispering breathlessly to each other and giggling. The other four students and I sit calmly on the floor in front of them, waiting. “You have ten seconds!” I remind them. Their pace quickens. Two of them switch places so rapidly their heads nearly collide. “Whoops!” Gil says, grinning. The chair is moved for the final time, and their improvisation begins.

Eloise is alone on stage. She fiddles with something in her hand that is invisible, then mimes pulling on it in three directions. She places it on the floor in front of her, then fastens something to the top. It is a tripod and camera.

“OKAY, I’M READY FOR THE NEXT ONE,” she calls out as she adjusts her camera, advances the film. Sara appears, looking a bit nervous. “Hi there, sweetie!” Eloise hollers in a patronizing,

overly-friendly sounding tone. “Don’t you look cute! Just sit right down...there you go.” Eloise plops Sara on the chair, begins busily arranging her arms and hands, and then assaults her hair with a plastic comb, jerking Sara’s head back and forth like a rag doll’s. “Ya got a little sticky-outey part over here that I gotta fix,” Eloise explains. “Ya wanna look pretty for your school picture, right? AM I RIGHT?”

Eloise then scoots behind her camera, assumes a photographer’s pose with one hand raised high, indicating where Sara should be looking. “There you go sweetie, just cup your chin right in your hand...that’s right! Now just tilt your head a little to the left...there you go! Now smile, sweetie!” Sara manages a tiny, almost unnoticeable smirk.

“I said smile, sweetie, SMILE!! SMILE!!” Eloise bellows. In compliance, Sara gives a ferociously large, unnatural grin. “That’s it, sweetie, perfect!” Eloise begins snapping pictures as Sara’s cartoonish smile remains plastered on her face. “Very nice, sweetie,” Eloise coos, “I betcha got lotsa boyfriends...”

As the improvisation continues, and others are subjected to this over-zealous “school photographer,” the four students in the audience are beside themselves with laughter. They are delighted to have recognized such a familiar scene, executed so wittily. “That was perfect!” one of them crows as the improv finishes, “That’s *exactly* what school pictures are like!”

Later that day, another improvisation takes place, one which involves the entire group of nine. They are seated in a circle, one of them has taken on the role of the school guidance counselor. The rest are in role as

a group of friends called into the counselor's office to be reprimanded for making fun of a fellow student.

"Bud is a retard!" Charlotte snaps viciously, "We make fun of him because he asks for it."

"He's so slow and stupid," Henry chimes in.

"He's dirty and he dresses like a wino," says Charlie.

"He doesn't even know what Abercrombie and Fitch is," Eloise snarls.

"Those aren't reasons for tormenting someone," the guidance counselor interjects.

"Yeah, but it's his choice to look and act the way he does," Charlotte explains. "If he doesn't want to be teased, he shouldn't do those things."

Ramona has not spoken for a while, and appears uncomfortable.

"Maybe we should be nicer to him, you guys," she says quietly. No one agrees with her. Instead, she is inundated with a stream of reasons why Bud does not deserve to be treated nicely.

The guidance counselor scolds them and insists that they change their hurtful behavior. The students agree that they will make an effort, but the sly looks they exchange as they leave the office imply false promises.

"Yeah, right," one student is heard muttering on his way out.

In a discussion following the improvisation, the students (out of role) speak about what has just transpired. Their feelings regarding the work they have done are very mixed. Some feel that the characters they created were far too mean and cruel to be realistic, others feel that their depictions have rung true. "I remember seeing kids being picked on like that every day in elementary school," Ramona says.

“There are still kids in junior high that get treated like that,” remarks Charlie.

“There was a lot going on in this scene,” I say. “It might be interesting to see how the students react now that they’ve been reprimanded. I’m also curious about the person they’ve been picking on: Bud. May we continue with this, after our break?” The students nod in agreement. I notice that they are quieter than they have been all day. This improvisation seems to have set them thinking.

In her journal that night, Eloise wrote about the guidance counselor improvisation:

It reminded me of a girl who was in my last years ski group...she is so ditzy. Her name is Sam, short for Samantha. The experience I had with her was when I was skiing with one of the student coaches named Dylan during our lunch break. We had just gotten done morning training and we were planning to go for a run or two ...I was so happy to be doing that because like everyone else that I train with, I have a crush on Dylan...we were skiing down a trail when Sam (who gets really annoying) was suddenly following us, yelling for us to stop and wait for her. But we didn’t want to ski with her so we ducked into the woods quickly, but she followed us. I looked back and saw her hit a tree and fall. I felt bad because she didn’t come to afternoon training.

The two improvisations I have just described were derived from my students’ personal stories. Although significantly different in their purpose, meaning, and delivery, both the “photo shoot” and the guidance counselor scenes were grounded in a basic commonality: they were reflections of the common experiences and understandings of the students’ lives. These two scenes, and many others constructed in a

similar fashion, became the foundation of the dramatic piece we would build as a collective, a play which the students ultimately decided would focus on the greatest commonality they felt existed between them--the world of school.

Both of these scenes, when presented in their initial improvisational form, elicited significant responses from the participants-- they rejoiced in the hilarity and familiarity of the comical school photography scene, and felt both dissatisfied and moved by the guidance counselor scene. Both scenes triggered thoughtful and emotive responses in their group discussions and journal writings. Both scenes evolved, through further investigation and contemplation, into powerful components of our final production.

As I have earlier mentioned, students' ownership over their own dramatic work is a condition sought after by many of us who work within the fields of drama and theatre in education. In my case, it was the issue of ownership which led me to pursue this study of personal storytelling and drama, to discover a means through which my students could create drama which truly belonged to them. As you will recall from chapter one of this thesis, my recognition of the students' joy and inherent skill in storytelling gave me the idea for my research project: for the students to build a play from their own stories. In achieving this, my students and I embarked upon a process known as playbuilding.

Playbuilding is a collaborative method of creating drama. It is a method which, through creative and analytic practices such as role-play, improvisation, brainstorming, and visual image making, participants work

together in the devising and performing of a theatre piece. Errol Bray (1991) has described playbuilding and some of its fundamental components:

The term playbuilding is used to describe the creative process of assembling a dramatic performance or presentation from the building blocks of drama and theatre, through improvisation, discussion, and rehearsal. The process involves rehearsing a play as it is created, thus developing a strong presentation that comes to belong to the group in a very personal and committed way. (p.1)

The playbuilding process initially appealed to me because its described outcomes so closely resembled those I desired, particularly concerning the issue of ownership:

Actors involved in a playbuilt play take ownership in a special way. Since the final play reflects the view and voices of all group members, there is enormous individual and collective satisfaction and a sense of having created an artistic piece. The playbuilt play reinforces the idea that we are all creative beings, that everyone has ideas, and that collectively, we are strong. (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995, p.8)

Having participated myself in a playbuilding process as a member of a devising and performance team, I felt strongly that this method would provide an effective and enjoyable format from which my students could create drama from their own stories. My own experience in playbuilding had been one of the most thrilling and satisfying dramatic experiences I had ever encountered--one that had taught me to recognize what I now consider to be the most crucial and educative aspects of effective group work: thinking, suggesting, listening, negotiating, and experimenting.

The playbuilding process works only when each member of the group contributes her voice to the collective whole--it demands everyone's commitment and response in order to progress towards its respective goal. Its deeply collaborative structure engenders strong ensemble work, where each member of the cast is essential, where each depends on the others through every step of the cooperative journey.

Playbuilt plays are powerful. Each member of the group contributes in some way to the development of the presentation; the final performance reflects the creativity and energy of all its members. Different people bring different perspectives and skills to the process--all of this input can be assimilated into the structure of the play. (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995, p. 8)

I wanted the students involved in my research project to have this playbuilding experience, one that made use of their individual skills and strengths, one that celebrated their unique stories and ideas. This was a process I trusted to enrich my student's lives.

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the types of learning engendered through personal storytelling, and much of that discussion has focused on uses of stories as transmitters of meaning. Chapter three addresses the compulsory learning functions of storytelling; how stories are used to gain understanding of meanings in the broad spectrums of self, community, and world. Chapter four's discussion of school learning through storytelling focuses on the investigation of meaning for pedagogic aims.

In this final chapter, I present the results of my human subjects research project: playbuilding from personal stories. This synchronous process of personal storytelling and drama focused on the pursuit of meaning through two forms of study:

1. The negotiation of meaning
2. The translation of meaning

These two components of the group's work will be detailed in the following part of this chapter as I describe the aims and outcomes of the research project. The first, the negotiation of meaning, involves the exploration of personal stories within a group context, the contemplation and examination of the meaningful themes and elements of the students' stories with a dramatic purpose in mind. The second form, the translation of meaning, describes the actual process of building a dramatic piece from the stories themselves, how we came to our final scripted production through a utilization of the personal stories as a prolific starting ground.

Both forms of examining and investigating meaning required my students to think and work in the simultaneous modes of personal storytellers, playwrights, and performers. As this chapter demonstrates, it was a process which served, first and foremost, to celebrate the power and beauty of their individual and collective stories and understandings. They will also provide examples of how drama and personal storytelling are ideal educative partners, and show that in the case of my research project, the involvement of one was crucial to the successful execution of the other.

The process of working concurrently within the expressive frames of storyteller and dramatist is a powerful experience. As the writings of my

students reveal, it was a process which expanded the entire group's perspective on the possibility and expressive capability of theatre, and raised the status of their stories in their own minds as invaluable vessels of personal and universal meaning. For myself, I continue to learn and grow as I reflect on the experience. The story I am about to tell, although one of my newest, is one I cherish.

### The Negotiation of Meaning

I have described the rocky beginnings of my research project, and given the example of one student's comment when he learned we would be building a play from personal stories:

“Plays are supposed to be exciting. Our stories are boring.”

Although I didn't realize it at the time, this comment reflects a prevalent attitude among many learners-- a distrust in the value of their own stories and experiences. This attitude became apparent to me after a storytelling exercise I had presented them with on our third day. Working in small groups, the students had shared stories which they had been asked to think about the night before. They had been asked to choose a story to tell which they considered particularly meaningful, or that they felt was representative of their lives and their own person. This story could be sad, humorous, or seemingly ordinary; what mattered was that this story held significance for *them*.

After everyone in both groups had had the chance to tell their story, I unrolled a long length of plain white paper, supplied them with markers, and asked them to fill the paper with their own responses to the stories

they had heard. I encouraged them to write freely, to include any words, phrases, or images that came into their minds.

When I had planned this activity the night before, I had envisioned the students producing a veritable masterpiece of magic-markered expression! I had pictured them scrawling furiously, their hands scarcely able to move fast enough to keep up with their story-fueled, delighted minds. This however, did not occur. While some students did see the value in this exercise, many did not. Their journal writings revealed that they found their creation of the idea and image mural to be dull and uninspiring, and that they could not understand why I would “waste time on such pointless stories.” The giant page remained mostly blank. The students saw their own stories as tiresome. Kieran Egan (1986) speaks to this attitude as he comments that

children take their everyday lives too much for granted...Fish probably do not find water very interesting, until they are pulled out of it. (1986, p.43)

The first challenge of my project lay in bringing the students to apprehend their stories in a new way; to recognize and appreciate the great educative and dramatic potential within them. Before any meanings could be negotiated, my students had to see that there were meanings *present*. As Egan continues,

children tend to take their community routines as ‘natural’, so we must find a way of showing those routines as vividly dramatic, and not simply as prosaic as everyday experience. Underlying the prosaic routines that form the visible surface of our communities there are vital

needs being met, desperate fears being allayed, incredible hopes being made possible...it is this dramatic and real-level underlying the routines of community life that must be exposed. This is what is important; this is the real story on human communities. (p. 43)

How could I get my students to see the exquisite wonder which lay in the stories they took for granted? A variation of an exercise I had participated in during a drama in education course proved helpful in bringing this about. The exercise, which I called "Photo Album" was presented as follows:

1. Students must think of a short story of personal experience that they would not mind sharing with the group. (Since the students had seemed in the mood to talk about humorous subjects that morning, I suggested that they tell a funny story.)
2. In two small groups, the students take turns sharing their stories.
3. As a means of visually presenting their stories, or of "getting them on their feet" the students must each use the other people in their group to build a tableau, or "frozen picture" which depicts one image from the story, one that they feel captures the spirit or essence of the story they have told. It is the teller's responsibility to assemble the tableau to his/her satisfaction, and to think of a line, or "caption" that will summarize or explain what the tableau is about. Each member of the group directs a tableau of his/her story, so that each group has four or five tableaux to present.
3. The groups then practice their tableaux, with spoken captions, so that the order and positions are smooth, as if the audience is flipping through a photo album of stories from the students' lives.

As spectator to this process, I was extremely impressed and pleased with what I saw taking place. The students' tableaux were striking,

powerful visual images that were amazingly varied in their emotional and physical depictions. As the two groups presented their albums to each other, a wonderful sense of dramatic possibility filled the room. The students experimented boldly with physical form and gesture, making good use of their faces and bodies to express the meanings, through both literal and abstract means, that each story held.

Where the mere sharing of their stories had failed in bringing about recognition of their own stories' value, the inclusion of drama in their storytelling allowed this realization to occur. When Will (age 14) wrote in his journal that night in response to the photo album exercise, he had this to say:

It was like when we made our stories into pictures you could see how they might be good as a play...it was like every story was its own play, kind of. And when you saw the pictures you were like, 'I wonder what happened next?' If we didn't make those pictures, I don't think we would have thought those stories were very important.

Ramona (age 14) also expressed her feelings about the exercise:

It was neat how everyone got to see each other's stories acted out...we got to think about what each photo meant.

These two journal excerpts demonstrate the change in attitude the students underwent following the photo album exercise. The process of dramatizing the stories through physical, creative expression served not only to increase the students' awareness of the inherent dramatic potential of their stories, but was their first step in their collective negotiation of meaning.

As we continued to work simultaneously within the frames of personal storytelling and drama, at one point I asked the students what, if any, common themes or subjects they saw emerging from the stories they shared.

“School,” they replied. Indeed, much of their storytelling had revolved around school, and the dramatic work which ensued had almost entirely surrounded school experiences. Realizing this, the students seemed displeased. They saw where this discussion was headed--that the common elements of their storytelling would most likely become the focus of their play.

“I’m not sure I want to make a play about school,” Ned said hesitantly. Others agreed. Gil volunteered his idea of creating a play which focused on Las Vegas lounge singers. “We could wear leisure suits!” he announced. I asked the group why they disliked the idea of building a play around school. The general consensus seemed to be that a play about school held the strong potential to be mundane, didactic, “like an after-school special.”

“But the stories you have told about school haven’t been like an after-school special,” I reminded them. “Your stories have been interesting.” I explained to the students that their stories had been about much more than simply *school*, that each story had one, or several meanings which concerned many things. School may have been the setting for their experiences and stories, but that did not mean they had to create a play about school. The idea was to look carefully at the *meanings* in their stories, as they would be the source from which the play would be created.

I mentioned the improvised scene they had created the day before, the one about the school photographer. I asked them to think of what the scene had been about. The students responded to this with a series of commentaries on plot-oriented details of the scene:

“A school photographer comes and bosses everybody around.”

“She fixes everybody’s hair.”

“She tells a boy he’ll never find a girlfriend if he doesn’t smile.”

“What were the feelings of the kids in that scene as they had their pictures taken?” I asked them. Their responses to this question came a bit more slowly.

“Annoyed.”

“Angry.”

“Embarrassed.”

“Like they want to laugh but can’t.”

Once again, I brought out the long roll of white paper and markers. “You’re on the right track,” I tell them. “Now I’d like you to think of all of the scenes and tableaux that have been come up in the past few days. Write about the feelings of the characters in those scenes, and write about the people or situations which have caused those feelings.”

This time, the students seemed to write with a much greater sense of confidence and ease. They laughed a bit as they wrote, sometimes paused to think, then began to write again. It took about ten minutes for them to fill the page. Their responses were widely varied, covering an enormous range of ideas and emotions. They had written broad, general words such as “hurt”, “anger” “pride” and “fun”, as well as more specific words and phrases including “adults don’t listen” and “friends since kindergarten.”

The group took several minutes to stand and move about the mural, carefully reading what everyone had written. Many of them recognized specific character feeling-descriptions, some of which they did not agree with. Others found new ideas they had not yet considered. “There’s so much here!” Sara said.

There *was* a lot there. The gigantic, full page of thoughts, questions, phrases, and feelings culled from the student’s stories and dramas was a testament to the diversity and enormity of the meanings their work had contained. It allowed them to begin the process of analyzing and discussing which elements of the stories and their meanings held interest for them, both personally and dramatically. This process, essential not only to the eventual building of the play but to their own understandings as individual learners, was a lively and engaging leap into our group’s negotiation of meaning.

As people come together to explore an issue or idea, they find themselves drawn into a process that allows for all views of the world. This process represents a voyage of discovery in which everyone can learn and benefit. (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995, p.7)

The mural sparked lengthy discussions about meaning as the students attempted to pinpoint, in a single phrase, what each story/scene was about. Deciding upon the meanings and themes in their stories that they found to be particularly interesting or important was the essential first step in coming to an agreement on their choice of a play topic. This, however, did not prove to be easy. Friendship, coming of age, parent-child relations, parties, cliques, pressure, and many other

meaningful themes held equal interest for the students. As soon as they would decide on a story, or a commonly-linked set of stories from which to derive the meaning of the play, they would remember another they liked just as well and couldn't bear to leave out.

While the students agonized over their decision, I was elated. They had, I realized, finally come to understand, even *appreciate*, the abundant meaning and worth their stories contained. They had embraced them, not only for their personal value, but for their rich dramatic potential.

Finally, a suggestion was made which proved to be the answer to the students' dilemma. "If we set our play in school, where all kinds of things are happening all the time, to a whole bunch of different people, we can put all of these ideas into the play," Eloise said. A vote was taken, and Eloise's idea was agreed upon. School, which had nearly been abandoned in favor of Las Vegas leisure suits, now emerged as the topic of choice. The next day, we began the next phase of our process.

### The Translation of Meaning

In *Teaching Drama: A Mind of Many Wonders* (1987), Norah Morgan and Juliana Saxton describe a **process drama** taught by Gavin Bolton, in which the students' shared personal stories become the source from which their drama emerges. Bolton begins the exercise by explaining to his students that "we use truth in drama, the truth of our own experience. I am going to ask you to explore this personally. It will be about an actual event from within your own experience" (p.8).

The students are then asked to exchange stories with a partner that involve a major accident which has happened to them. This exchange is

kept private between the two partners. Some students volunteer to share their stories with the entire group. From these volunteered stories, a particularly moving one becomes the focus. Bolton ensures a supportive environment for the student, asking the others to move their chairs closer before questioning the storyteller about the accident.

The shared story is now a springboard from which Bolton and his students may create dramatic life. Bolton instigates a role-play between the parents of Jerry, the name given to the story's accident victim, and a doctor. A vocal collage is created of things people who know Jerry might say about him. Another role-play depicts events which could have taken place before Jerry's accident.

The students do not "act out" the story that was told; to do so would be antithetical to the purpose of the exercise, not to mention exploitive and disrespectful of the original teller. Instead, Bolton's dramatic activities allow the students to explore the story from many different perspectives.

As we grow to adulthood (at least in Western culture) we become increasingly adept at seeing the same set of events from *multiple* perspectives or stances and at entertaining the results as, so to speak, alternative possible worlds. (Bruner, 1986, p.109)

In order to fully investigate these "alternative possible worlds" which the story has sparked, the students must draw upon their own personal knowledge of accidents, injuries, hospitals, family relationships, suffering, hope, and choice-making; they must consult their own stories in order to contribute to the creation of this new one. The original elements and meanings are still present, but they have been shaped, translated, distorted

into a new form which may provide meaning for a larger audience.

Dorothy Heathcote describes the element of distortion and its essential nature in drama with her suggestion that

you cannot have art that does not in some way distort. It distorts productively. Therefore, you do not see the whole, you only see a part through this distorted view, this particularization. As soon as you get distortion, you have the struggle for form so that the ideas are encapsulated in a style, a fashion. You begin to understand what lies behind this particularization. (cited in Johnson & O'Neill, 1984, p.114)

The “productive distortion” of personal stories, or, as I referred to it during the project, the *translation* of stories into a new dramatic form, was the basis of our group’s playbuilding process. Just as Bolton and his students built upon the meaningful elements of the story by translating it into a new one they all shared, so did my students work with a similar goal.

From the onset, I had assured the students that the purpose of our work would not be to “act out” their stories (an activity which I felt would be intrusive and potentially emotionally damaging, or at least uncomfortable for those involved) but rather to work closely with the group to explore how the meaningful elements of individuals’ stories could be examined, negotiated, and translated into a dramatic form that each member of the cast, as well as the audience, could understand and learn from. The process would not involve the literal transcription and performance of stories, but would focus on recognizing the universal themes and dramatic elements of each story and using those “common threads” to create new

dramatic life. In this way, the students would benefit not only from the strong sense of familiarity and ownership of the themes and ideas within their play, but would learn how to use drama as an effective translating tool.

The idea was for the students to study and think about the meanings their stories held for them and to use drama as a way of transforming, expanding, and abstracting their stories into a new framework, a new story; to re-invent the original story while retaining its meaning. Jeanette Winterson (1995) has described this function and quality of art and drama:

Invention is the shaping spirit that re-forms fragments into new wholes, so that even what has been familiar can seem fresh...The artist is a translator; one who has learned how to pass into her own language the languages gathered from stones, from birds, from dreams, from the body, from the material world, from the invisible world, from sex, from death, from love. (p.146)

Through drama, students may learn to identify the universality of the stories people tell, the common elements which allow them to relate to and understand the stories of others. They may learn that the strength of a story can be its meaningful representation of the human condition. In drama, they must discover a means of conveying the messages which exist within their hearts and minds. As Betty Jane Wagner (1998) has written,

How is drama a way of knowing? It challenges children, within a social context, to work symbolically. It demands that they draw on their personal experiences and from external resources in order to

construct meaning out of events... Drama enables them to transform the meaning of events into a personal and profound understanding. (p.71)

As soon as the students had chosen a school setting as the backdrop for their dramatic explorations, they began experimenting with the characters, situations, and stories that would inhabit their created world. I observed that some students chose to play characters which closely resembled themselves, while others dabbled daringly in roles completely opposite to their own personality. Throughout our long days of rehearsal, the students continued to experiment in their roles, each eventually deciding on the character they would ultimately portray. I found it interesting that each of the nine characters they developed in some way resembled a person which had originated in their personal stories.

I have mentioned earlier in this thesis the students' scene which centered on the riding of a school bus (chapter two, p. ???). I will describe it here, in greater detail, because it provides a good example of the process of translation we implemented throughout our dramatic work. The school bus scene, like so many other scenes we eventually included in the production, originated in the students' acknowledgment of a common theme emerging in their stories. School busses seemed to elicit many strong images and stories from the students, many of which were associated with feelings of isolation or memories of bullying.

When the suggestion was made that a school bus scene would be an effective addition to our developing script, the students discussed carefully the stories about busses that had been told. From this

discussion, they gleaned several common themes they felt might work dramatically:

1. Bullies
2. Cliques
3. Loneliness

Using these themes as a rough guide, the students began a series of improvisations. Because they had chosen to create high school-aged roles, the school bus scene required the actors to take their characters back in time to their years in elementary school. They made this transition smoothly, fueled by the stories they had shared and their collective understanding of the scenes' intentions.

It was during these improvisations that the character "Bud" (from the guidance counselor scene) re-emerged, this time in a physical form as Will assumed his role. Although it was never actually discussed, I had the distinct feeling that the tormented character of Bud represented a composite of the many types of victims that had appeared in their stories. The quintessential outcast, Bud had become the metaphoric symbolization for many of their memories of hurt, loneliness, rejection, and fear. Although they themselves had been the ones to mistreat this character within the improvisations, their discussions revealed that the students maintained the mutual belief that their cruelty had been unfair, that Bud was in fact the disadvantaged underdog, trying desperately to stay afloat despite his unfortunate circumstances.

Since his appearance and personality had been mocked and mercilessly dissected in the earlier scene, Bud fell easily into the bullies' target on the schoolbus. It was an exciting moment--the linking of the two scenes, the

building of the story. Bud now had a past, and the other students in the scene could decide how their character would react, supplied with this new information.

After many re-adjustments through improvised work, the final scripted school bus scene read as follows:

### ON THE SCHOOL BUS

*(All are transported back to elementary school. They begin slowly singing, 'Miss Susie Had a Steamboat' as they build the schoolbus and take their seats. Ned becomes the bus driver. Bud does not sing, and takes a lonely seat by the window, in view of the audience.)*

MR. NELSON/NED: Mornin' kids!

SARA: Good morning, Mr. Nelson.

ELOISE: Bud's germs, no returns!

SARA: Hey, I said black magic!

GIL: I saved a seat for you, Henry!

RAMONA: Oh, no, I forgot my lunch.

CHARLIE: You can share mine, Ramona.

RAMONA: What do you have?

CHARLIE: Sprouts.

RAMONA: Thanks anyway.

HENRY: Hey Bud, what's up?

BUD/WILL: Nothin' much.

SARA: Ewwww, Henry, don't talk to him!

ELIOSE: He's weird.

GIL: He's in the lowest group for phonics!

HENRY: (*uncomfortably*) Uh...see you around.

BUD/WILL: Yeah, see ya...

MR. NELSON/NED: Let's take a seat back there, this train's gotta  
leave on schedule!

SARA: Oh, Mr. Nelson, you're so funny!

ELOISE: Bud's got cooties!

HENRY: My Mom says there's no such thing as cooties.

GIL: (*pointing to Bud's head*) No, I see one! (*he screams*)  
(*all laugh*)

RAMONA: Let's play a game!

GIL: (*chanting*) Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?

RAMONA: Who me?

GIL: Yes, you.

RAMONA: Couldn't be!

GIL: Then who?

RAMONA: Eloise!

ALL: Eloise stole the cookie from the cookie jar!

*(They continue the sing-songey game as they dismantle the bus and carry it off. Bud is left alone on stage.)*

Many students commented on how uncannily realistic the schoolbus scene had felt to perform, despite the fact that its story, and those of the other scene as well, had been entirely invented by the group. "We know what its like to be eight years old and on the bus," Eloise wrote. "And that's [the scene] what it feels like." The students had been innovative in

their imaginative depiction of the school bus scene, yet the scene retained a strong sense of familiarity because it had been born out of their own stories. Their translation of its meanings had been complete, yet for the students, the meanings remained connected to their origins.

By the final days of our third week, the students and I had decided on, and loosely scripted, five scenes rooted in information from their personal stories:

### Scene One

An expressive, non-verbal movement montage depicting early-morning, high school hallway life, accompanied by loud rap music. In this scene, the characters and basic storyline are introduced (Sara and Eloise are best friends, Gil is the joker who gets everyone's goat, Charlie is odd and hypochondriacal, Bud and Henry break out into a fight, etc...)

### Scene Two

The characters are introduced, many through their own signature music and monologues. We learn the various school "groups" and how the individual characters feel about each other.

### Scene Three

School bus scene--a short scene which reveals Bud's long-term position as the school outcast.

### Scene Four

Takes place in a classroom. The students are assigned an essay they must write which describes their family life. At first, each student's writing takes on an unrealistic "my life is better than your life" quality, as the students seem to compete to have the perfect family relationship. When Ned, the new student, admits the honest (and hilarious) shortcomings of his family life, the others follow suit, each describing how things really are, both positive and negative.

### Scene Five

"The gossip mill"--this scene demonstrates how easily rumors can spread as stories about the "new kid" circulate around the school.

These scenes, the group decided, would constitute the play's first act. But what should happen next? Would there be a resolution? What, if anything, was there to resolve? The students considered their first act to be a realistic sample, a paradigm of school life as they knew it--did this sample have an end? The students became tense, almost agitated, when they could not come up with an idea of how to end their play. "Maybe you've said all you need to say," I suggested in response to their anxiety. "Maybe the play is already finished."

But the students rejected this notion entirely. They were determined to discover their play's "true ending." It was Gil, the originator of the leisure suit idea, who suggested the ending which, initially, everyone approved. Gil's idea was to show, after a brief intermission, what would happen to each of the characters when they grew up, by writing a scene

about their twentieth year high school reunion. At first, everyone loved the idea.

“Charlotte can come back as a nun!” Charlie suggested, as the group exploded in giggles.

“And Sara can be a pregnant dairy farmer’s wife from Wisconsin!”

“And Charlie can be a famous movie director who wears a beret and all kinds of gold jewelry!”

“What about Bud?”

“Bud can have a really nice family and be the principal of the school. And he will have forgiven everyone for being so mean to him.”

“And you can be in it too, Jen! You can have a cameo role!”

As their ideas, excitement, and laughter flew around the room and the students prepared their latest round of improvised scenes, I tried to disguise my disappointment. Their first act was beautiful--its beauty came from its reality, its roots in the student’s own basic understandings as young people growing up in Maine. They had skillfully blended these understandings into an innovative dramatic form, alternately abstract and literal in its portrayal of their translated stories. Their planned second act was clever in its sitcom-like, easy-answer appeal, yet did not sound as though it matched the careful, thoughtful work they had already done. I thought these things, and remained silent, hoping they would make the discovery for themselves.

It took only one afternoon of rehearsing for them to change their minds. They were unusually quiet as they went through their blocking, as if the jokes they had only moments before found so hilarious, now seemed flat and stale.

When they arrived the next morning, they had unanimously decided to abandon the new Act Two. Their journal writings revealed that their feelings had echoed my own:

I liked the first draft of Act Two...but then I thought about it and became less convinced of its truth. I saw the first act as a whole: a peek into the lives of nine students. Condensed, but very honest. I read the first Act Two: funny, conclusive, but it just couldn't match the candid familiarity of Act One. What do I know about being a nun?  
(Charlotte, age 14)

Changing Act Two was the best thing we could have ever done for the play. I mean, it really took the play off a borderline cheezy level and put it on a real, heartfelt, personal, and outstanding level. And Act Two really changed the play so much in so many good ways. Who cares that we only had less than a week? We could do it and we did.  
(Gil, age 15)

For their revised Act Two, the group decided to show what their characters were like out of school. In accomplishing this, the students chose to have Ned's character, the new student, invite everyone to a party at his house. The group of nine would convene in Ned's basement, and as they danced and joked, played practical jokes and Truth or Dare, more of the character's personalities, emotions, and stories would be revealed. Here is an excerpt from their revised act:

NED: What about you Sara? What's your secret?

ELOISE: I know Sara's secret!

SARA: Shut up, Eloise!

ELOISE: It's nothing to be ashamed of, Sara.

SARA: I said shut up!

ELOISE: It's really not such a big deal...One of Sara's legs is longer than the other, and she has to wear a lift in her shoe!

*(Silence)*

RAMONA: That was really mean, Eloise.

SARA: What happened to you? We were so close when we were little, but now you're so cold and competitive. All you care about is being popular!

ELOISE: I'm sorry.

SARA: It's like we're not even friends anymore.

HENRY: Yeah Eloise, you've totally changed.

BUD: Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you.

HENRY: What are you talking about?

BUD: We used to be friends.

HENRY: I was never your friend.

BUD: Yes you were. Kindergarten and first grade. We used to play together all the time.

*(Pause)*

HENRY: I guess I remember that. You had that cabin behind your house.

BUD: It's still there.

HENRY: It is?

BUD: Yeah.

CHARLOTTE: I had a cabin when I was little. I used to sit in it and watch our lawnmower man. He was the first person I ever fell in love with.

CHARLIE: I fell in love with one of the lunch ladies in second grade. She always gave me extra pudding.

Once again, the students' stories had come through, inundating their new second act with a sense of radiant truth and powerful meaning. There were no Wisconsin milkmaids or gold-spangled movie directors in this scene, only the familiar, engaging, and profound characters that had been so carefully crafted and honed from their own experiences.

Before we knew it, it was time to perform.

### Performance

There was an overwhelming sense of thrill and commotion as we prepared for the first of our two performances. There was also apprehension.

“What if the audience doesn't understand what we mean? What if they just think we're weird?” Ramona mused as we completed our dress rehearsal. Although I did not share in their worries (I knew the piece worked, both fundamentally and artistically) I could understand the students' concern. Their play was thoroughly different, in its style, focus, and presentation, than any other they, or their families, had ever experienced. The students had experimented boldly in the play's design and structure; they had taken risks where traditional theatrical “rules” were concerned. It was non-traditional in its use of space and dramatic conventions--none of the actors ever left the stage, and not all of the scenes were chronological. The play's title, *Milk\_Crates*, had been named after the eighteen plastic crates that the students moved between,

and during scenes to create the landscape of each dramatic situation. There was no set. The cast had broken their dramatic precedent in new, innovative, and evocative ways.

Having worked from their own stories and built the entire piece themselves, the students felt at risk in another way, too. They believed in their play, believed in its spirit, its honesty. It was a product of their own beliefs, jokes, aspirations, fears, longings, and loves. They were deeply connected to it, and they wanted their audience to understand it. A rejection of their play, they feared, might feel like a rejection of themselves.

The cast's invited audiences were, in fact, very responsive to *Milk Crates*, as well as to the individual performers. I was thrilled when, after both performances, audience members lingered to speak with the students, awarding them praise, congratulations, and sharing with them their impressions of the play. Many of them, school friends of the cast members, felt particularly moved by the performance.

"It was the best play I've ever seen," a fifteen year old friend had said, with tears in her eyes. "It's funny, and it's sad, and it's perfect because it tells the truth."

Storyteller Patricia Hruby-Powell (1995) has suggested that

as tellers of personal stories, it's our job to take those stories, to form them, to compose them so that there is a underlying universal theme. We must make the personal story a human story. (p.30)

If the storyteller has achieved this, Hruby Powell maintains that the audience will be profoundly affected, that the story

will spark memories, causing listeners to go on personal journeys as they listen, perhaps riding a wave of the teller's wit or strength of heart. The story will illuminate a bit of the listener's life, as well as that of the teller's. (Ibid)

A comment made by Sara's Grandmother seemed to prove Hruby-Powell's hypothesis, and that the cast had indeed been successful in transforming their personal stories into a new, human story. She told the cast that their play had reminded her of her own youth.

"As I watched you, I remembered how it felt to be fifteen," she said. "I remember feeling everything so strongly. Your play made me realize that things haven't changed all that much. The important things stay the same."

Many audience members had noticed, particularly, the strength of the student's performances, the ease in which they had inhabited their created world. Charlotte's mother wrote to me of her feeling that the play "had come at exactly the right time for [Charlotte]," and that

it was such an enriching experience for her--collaborating in the play, drawing from her own experiences... After seeing her not enjoy drama at school this year, it was wonderful to see her throw herself into a production again, feeling confident instead of anxious and speaking lines that made sense to her--and that had humor. (personal correspondence, 1998)

I had requested that the students write in their journals about what sort of audience they felt would be most appropriate, or would learn the most,

from our play. Most of them felt strongly that a junior high or high school audience would benefit most from viewing the production, that the themes and meanings within it were specific to them and their experiences, and that an adult audience might not “get it” as well. One student, however, disagreed:

The best audience for this play is people. Any age. If they can think, then they should understand. Sure, a younger audience may ‘get it’ more, but HEY, my grandparents got it. And they are not as naive as we think. (Gil, age 15)

Every member of the cast expressed in their journals that the experience of performing a piece which they had created, one that was so deeply and personally understood by them individually, had been an immensely satisfying and thrilling endeavor. Many of them stated specifically that the inclusion of storytelling within the playbuilding process had served to provide not only strong social connections and understandings, but given them an unique and meaningful performance experience:

Our group was so close, and I think that’s because we had learned so much about each other and worked so hard together on our play. Using our stories to make our play was a great idea. I never had so much fun on stage, because we all knew our parts and each other so well. We felt the power of our friendship and of our wonderful script. (Sara, age 15)

The play created by these students was not one which required them to take on the role of something they had no understanding of, nor did it force them to guess randomly at how a twenty-eight year old person should act or speak. Rather, it was one that made use of their own intrinsic strengths, beliefs, knowledge, and characters. This was an aspect of the work for which the students frequently expressed their appreciation; they relished their opportunity to feel wholly secure, comfortable, and familiar with the world they had conceived on stage:

I look at these characters that we made and I say, ‘Wow, I know a girl *just like her*, and stuff like that. Ya know...it seemed like we all had a little bit of our characters in us... (Henry, age 16)

If there was one thing that helped this play the most I would have to say was our own personal stories and experiences... I think since the play took place during our time period, we didn’t have to act but it came more natural to us... I learned a great deal from the whole experience about playwrighting and acting. And that was stuff that will have helped me for as long as I am an actor. (Charlie, age 14)

Just as the dramatic process had allowed the students recognize the meaningful, thought-provoking, and extraordinary aspects of their stories, so did the inclusion of personal storytelling enhance significantly their experience within the drama, as performers. That Charlie felt as though he “didn’t have to act”, because it “came more natural” to him is testimonial to the uniquely effective and comprehensive nature of this work. Eloise (age 14) expressed similar views:

Our stories and experiences have been useful in creating this play in many ways...we all know what it's like to be in school, we know how the bus was when we were eight, and we know how parties are. I think that made the acting a lot easier because we knew how everything goes. When we wrote down ideas for the play it was stuff we had experienced and things we knew about personally. (Eloise, age 14)

A carpenter must know her tools well and how they are used if she is to create new and beautiful things with them. A musician is most likely to evoke his most beautiful sounds from an instrument with which he is well familiar. A cook knows her own kitchen best, and it is there where she feels free to explore new flavors, try new dishes, concoct fantastic meals. This was the way in which my students created a play from their own stories, in a manner that was most familiar to them, utilizing meanings which they understood.

The personal relevance and familiarity they found within their play did not stunt their dramatic growth, rather it provided them a sense of ease and mastery in their new creations; it allowed them to be bold, to take chances, to experiment and expand, all the while remaining within a context they completely grasped, a dramatic world they owned. Ursula LeGuin (1993) writes that

the only way to the truly collective, to the image that is alive and meaningful in all of us, seems to be through the truly personal. Not the impersonality of pure reason; not the impersonality of 'the masses', but the irreducibly personal--the self. To reach the others, artists go into the self...The farther they go into the self, the closer they come to the other. (p.74)

Did my students “reach the others?” Yes, I believe they did, and not because they produced a mere image of their lives that the audience could immediately recognize. Through drama, my storytelling-students became imaginative thinkers--they built an invented world that resonated with meaning, a make-believe universe which had the power and insight to deeply affect its audience. Although their work was rooted originally in the reality of their lives, the play they created was not an assemblage of snapshots. The students were more than mere photographers, reproducing the images which surrounded them-- these students were a cast of visionaries.

The fiction, the poem, is not a version of the facts, it is an entirely different way of seeing. (Winterson, 1995, p.28)

And what did this group of young storytellers/performers/playwrights *learn*? Like the meanings within each of their stories, the learning outcomes of their experiences are negotiable--for each of them, the understandings they took away from this process were as original and individual as the students themselves. They had discovered that the experience of learning by combining personal story and drama proved to double-edged: drama was essential in extracting the meaning of their stories, while their stories made personal and relevant the meaning of the drama.

When the performances had ended and the research project was complete, I spent time reflecting on the events which had occurred over the the past four weeks. I recalled our initial sessions, how nervous we had been, how uncomfortable with each other and with our new way of

working, and I compared these initial days of awkwardness to our final days of performance, in which the cast had worked as a true ensemble. They had lived confidently within a dramatic world of their own creation, and developed a strong sense of unity as a group. I marveled at how far we had come.

As the leader of this playbuilding process, I had experienced a complete departure from the kind of children's theatre work I had done previously, and as a result of that departure, had succeeded in achieving my goals. I had at last discovered a means of creating theatre with children which allowed them to have ownership over their dramatic work; which allowed them to speak words which had both individual and collective meaning. The process had allowed them to make countless personal, social, and universal connections as they had contemplated, speculated, analyzed, and re-imagined the stories which had found their way into our discussions. They saw how they, their stories, and their dramatic work had had a tremendous effect on their audience. They saw that they had achieved this effect by presenting something which belonged to them, something which had been a part of them all along. They had come to know the power of their stories, and therein, the power of themselves. As Charlotte wrote in the final pages of her journal,

We told our own stories, and learned about each other. I now see all of this in our script. I see the general experiences of all individuals in our play. And I now understand how our cast affected our play through our communications during the process. I know we all grew a lot as actors, and developed a strong bond among us. I think we were brought together while learning the stories of each other. Bringing these experiences into our acting drew us closer still. Making our own

characters from our own, shared stories made them contrasting, yet compatible. I loved working with our whole team!

## EPILOGUE

**When we're little kids maybe we need stories to help us go to sleep. But sooner or later we need stories to help us wake up. Hey! Wake up! Nap's over! We wake up, each of us, dreaming ourselves into existence--we *become* the poem, we *become* the song, each of us *is* the story. Happiness depends on how well we tell it.**

**Utah Phillips**

Recently, on a returning flight from a vacation I had not particularly wanted leave, I attempted to console myself in a newly purchased book and a row of three seats I shared with no one. "Ahhhhh, what a luxury," I thought, imagining how I would spread out for a nap once they turned out the cabin lights.

Just as the plane was about to leave, a final passenger made his way down the aisle. Of course, he sat right next to me.

"Mind if I sit with you?" he asked.

"Not at all," I answered half-heartedly. At least I had the window.

We were seated just over the wing, and as the plane made its way into the air, the wheels, or whatever they were, moved back into place with a funny whirring noise and a vibration that we could feel.

"Man, I hate flying!" my seat-partner said. "I'd have driven if I could have, but I've been down in Texas visiting a friend in the hospital and I just couldn't take the extra time off work, you know what I mean?"

"Oh great," I thought grouchy. "First this guy steals my empty seat, and now he's going to talk my ear off." I took my book out of the seat pocket and prepared myself to become deeply engrossed in it, very

quickly. But before I could do so, my eyes glanced over and were caught by something my seat-partner was looking at. They were baby pictures.

“My wife just had our third child,” he said, sensing my eyes. “She’s two months old and I can’t wait to get back to her.”

I couldn’t help asking what the baby’s name was.

“Annie,” the man said.

Before I knew it, the man was telling me everything--he told me the story of he and his wife, how they had met, what they did for a living, the places they had traveled together before their children were born. He told me about his three daughters, aged 8, 6, and 2 months, proudly adding that while most men “would have wanted at least one boy,” he had been happy with girls.

He described where he and his family lived--in Montana, just outside of Glacier National Park. He told me about all the wild animals he and his family saw--deer, elk, wolves, even a grizzly bear. He told me about how he let his kids miss a day of school every so often, “if it’s a beautiful day outside and we all just feel like spending a day in the woods.” He told me about how it felt to sit in their house, which was on the side of a mountain, and watch the snow fall outside. “I told my wife the other day, ‘I don’t care if we’re ever rich...I don’t need money. All I need to have fun are the simple things and living in this beautiful place with my family.’”

My book thoroughly abandoned, I sat enthralled by this man’s stories. He was so detailed, so passionate in the way he told them, that I could see everything, every part of his life that he had told me about, clearly and distinctly within my mind’s eye. Although I had never been there, his

stories had transported me: I could *see* the peaks and valleys of Glacier National Park, the faces of his three little girls.

After a while, the flight attendant came with our beverages and the man stopped talking. But I didn't stop thinking about the stories I had heard--they reminded me of things that I couldn't help thinking about. I thought about the first time I had seen "the great, wild, West," when my Father had brought us to Yellowstone, and we had watched Old Faithful explode in a tremendous gasp of water and steam. I thought about driving cross-country with my boyfriend, watching the landscape change and change again, mile after mile--the diversity and mutability of our country. I remembered how it had felt, hiking in the Tetons, to look into the eyes of a moose.

I thought about family, I thought about work and school, I thought about travel, I thought about my own goals, plans, dreams, and priorities. The man's stories had triggered a thousand stories of my own in me, raised questions, reminded me of thoughts and ideas I had once considered and then forgotten about. His stories had made me think, and they had made me feel. As Utah Phillips might say, they had woken me up.

The man finished his drink and turned to me. "So," he said, stretching his legs as best he could in the cramped airplane seat, "What's your story?"

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Defining Narrative and Story

Bal, M. (1985). Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Barthes, R. (1975). An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. New Literary History, IV. 237

Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (1979). Film art. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Chatman, S. (1978). Story and discourse. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Hudson, J. & Shapiro, L. (1991). From knowing to telling: The development of children's scripts, stories, and personal narratives. In A. McCabe & C. Peterson (Eds.), Developing narrative structure (pp. 107-123). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Leitch, T. (1986). What stories are: Narrative theory and interpretation. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

McCabe, A. & Peterson, C. (1991). Linking children's connective use and narrative macrostructure. In A. McCabe & C. Peterson (Eds.), Developing narrative structure (pp. 15-32) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Prince, G. (1982). Narratology: The form and functioning of narrative. Berlin: Mouton Publishers.

### Psychological Perspectives

Albright, D. (1984). Literary and psychological models of the self. In U. Neisser & R. Fivush (Eds.) The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative (pp. 19-40) Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Atkinson, R. (1995). The gift of stories: Practical and spiritual applications of autobiography, life stories, and personal mythmaking. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Bettelheim, B. (1976). The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales. New York: Random House.

Bruner, J. (1986). Actual minds, possible worlds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1990). Acts of meaning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Capron, E., McCabe, A., & Peterson, C. (1991). The voice of experience: The recall of early childhood and adolescent memories by young adults. In A. McCabe & C. Peterson (Eds.), Developing narrative structure (pp. 208-233). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Clandinin, D. & Connelly, F. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. Educational Researcher, 19, V, (2-14).

Dennett, D. (1992). The self as a center of narrative gravity. In P. Cole, D. Johnson, & F. Kessel (Eds.), Self and consciousness: multiple perspectives (pp. 133-145). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Engel, S. (1995). The stories children tell. New York: W.H. Freeman.

Feldman, C. (1989). Monologue as problem-solving narrative. In K. Nelson (Ed.), Narratives from the crib (pp. 98-122). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Felman, S. & Laub, D. (1992). Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, J. (1996). Embracing their memory: Loss and the social psychology of storytelling. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Howard, G.S. (1989). Cultural tales: A narrative approach to thinking, cross-cultural psychology, and psychotherapy. American Psychologist, 46, (187-197).

Lewis, P. (1995). The stories we tell: The search for meaning through stories. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Miller, P., Mintz, J., Hoogstra, L., Fong, H., Potts, R. (1992). The narrated self: Young children's construction of self in relation to others in conversational stories of personal experience. Merrill Palmer Quarterly, 38 (1), (45-67).

McCabe, A. (1991). Structure as a way of understanding. In A. McCabe & C. Peterson (Eds.), Developing narrative structure (pp. i-xi). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Neisser, U. (1988). Five kinds of self-knowledge. Philosophical Psychology, 1, (35-59).

Neisser, U. (1994). Self-narratives: True and false. In Neisser, U. & Fivush, R. (Eds.) The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative (pp.1-18). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Nelson, K. (Ed.) (1989). Narratives from the crib. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ochberg, R. & Rosenwald, G. (Eds.) (1992). Storied lives. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ross, B. (1991). Remembering the personal past. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Smith, F. (1990). To think. New York: Teachers' College, Columbia University Press.

Stern, D. (1989). Crib monologues from a psychoanalytic perspective. In K. Nelson (Ed.), Narratives from the crib (pp. 309-320). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Widdershoven, G. (1993) Hermeneutic perspectives on the relationship between narrative and life history. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), The narrative study of lives Vol.1 (pp. 1-20). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

### Educational Perspectives

Britton, J. (1970). Language and learning. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Cullum, A. (1967). Push back the desks. New York: Citation Press.

Egan, K. (1986). Teaching as storytelling: an alternative approach to teaching and curriculum in the elementary school. London, Canada: Althouse Press.

Ferris, S. & Mehrabian, A. (1967). Inference of attitudes from non-verbal communication in two channels. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 31, 248-252.

Gersie, A. & King, N. (1990). Storymaking in education and therapy. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Hardy, B. (1977). Narrative as a primary act of mind. In M. Meek, A. Warlow, & G. Barton (Eds.), The cool web: The pattern of children's reading (pp. 12-33). London: Bodley Head.

Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (1995). The role of narrative in interpretive discussion. In K. Egan & H. McEwan (Eds.) Narrative in teaching, learning and research (pp. 100-115). New York: Teachers' College, Columbia University Press.

Haseman, B. & O'Toole, J. (1990). Communicate live! Australia: Heinemann Educational.

King, N. (1993). Storymaking and drama. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

LeGuin, U. (1993). The language of the night. New York: Harper Collins.

Mayher, S. (1990). Uncommon sense: Theoretical practice in language education. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

McEwan, H. & Egan, K. (Eds.) (1995). Narrative in teaching, learning, and research. New York: Teachers College Press.

McGregor, L., Robinson, K., & Tate, M. (1977). Learning through drama. London: Heinemann.

Moffett, J. (1968 A). A student centered language arts curriculum grades k-13. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Moffett, J. (1968 B). Teaching the universe of discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Paley, V. (1981). Wally's stories. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Paley, V. (1995). Looking for magpie: Another voice in the classroom. In K. Egan & H. McEwan (Eds.) Narrative in teaching, learning and research (pp. 91-99). New York: Teachers' College, Columbia University Press.

Possien, W. (1969). They all need to talk. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Postman, N. (1989). Learning by story. The Atlantic, 264, (6) (119-124).

Postman, N. (1992). Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology. New York: Knopf.

Potter, B. (1977). The author as exemplifying the actual transformed by the imagination and memory. In M. Meek, A. Warlow, & G. Barton (Eds.) The cool web: The pattern of children's reading (pp.188-191). London: Bodley Head.

Rosen, B. (1988). And none of it was nonsense: The power of storytelling in schools. Ontario: Scholastic-TAB Publications.

Schaffner, M. (1984). Language development through drama. Drama and Language Research Project 1980-1983. Hobart, Tasmania.

Smith, D. (1991). Hermeneutic inquiry: The hermeneutic imagination and the pedagogic text. In E. Short (Ed.), Forms of curriculum inquiry (pp. 187-209). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Stewig, J. (1973). Spontaneous drama: A language art. Columbus, OH: Bell & Howell.

Ward, W. (1957). Playmaking with children. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Wassen-Ellam, L. (1991). Start with a story: Literature and learning in your classroom. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.

Wells, G. (1986). The meaning makers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Drama and Theatre

Bolton, G. (1984). Drama as education: an argument for placing drama at the centre of the curriculum. England: Longman Group.

Bolton, G. (1996). Drama in education and TIE: A comparison. In T. Jackson (Ed.), Learning through theatre: New perspectives on theatre in education (pp. 39-50). New York: Routledge.

Booth, D. (1980). Drama in the formative years. Ministry of education for ontario.

Booth, D. (1987). Drama words: The role of drama in language growth. Toronto: Language Study Centre-Drama.

Bray, E. (1994). Playbuilding: A guide for group creation of plays with young people. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Brook, P. (1995). The open door. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Hruby-Powell, P. (1995). Why should we tell personal experience stories? Why should we listen to them? Storytelling magazine, 5, (30-31).

Hughes, J. & Johnson, D. (1998). Drama from intra-subjective monologues and narratives of self. In J. Saxton & C. Miller (Eds.) Drama and theatre in education: The research of practice, the practice of research (pp. 21-29). Victoria, BC: IDEA Publications.

Johnson, L. & O'Neill, C. (Eds.) (1984). Dorothy Heathcote: Collected writings on education and drama. London: Hutchinson & Company.

Morgan, N. & Saxton, J. (1987). Teaching Drama: A mind of many wonders. London : Stanley Thornes.

Neelands, J. (1984). Making sense of drama: A guide to classroom practice. London: Heinemann.

O'Neill, C. (1995). Drama worlds: A framework for process drama. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Saxton, J. & Miller, C. (Eds.) (1998). Drama and theatre in education: The research of practice, the practice of research. Victoria, BC: IDEA Publications.

Saxton, J. & Verriour, P. (1988). A sense of ownership. National association for drama in education, 12 (2), (9-12).

Swartz, L. (1986). Drama talk: Another type of conferencing. Drama Contact, 1(10), (44).

Tarlington, C. & Michaels, W. (1995). Building plays: Simple playbuilding techniques at work. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.

Wagner, B.J. (1998). Drama as a way of knowing. In J. Saxton & C. Miller (Eds.) Drama and theatre in education: The research of practice, the practice of research (pp. 57-72). Victoria, BC: IDEA Publications.

Winterson, J. (1995). Art objects. London: Random House.

### Other Sources

Dillard, A. (1987). An American childhood. New York: Harper & Row.

Filstead, W. (Ed.) (1970). Qualitative methodology. Chicago: Markham.

Karr, M. (1995). The liar's club: A memoir. New York: Penguin Books.

Phillips, U. (1996). The past didn't go anywhere [from CD booklet]. Buffalo, NY: Righteous Babe Records.

Ross, R. (1972). Storyteller. Columbus, OH: Bell & Howell.

Sarraute, N. (1983). Childhood. New York: George Braziller.

Simpson, J. & Weiner, E. (Eds.). (1989). The Oxford English dictionary (2nd ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wolff, T. (1989). This boy's life: A memoir. New York: Harper & Row.

Wylie, B. (1995). Reading between the lines: The diaries of women. Toronto: Key Porter Books.

APPENDIX  
GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOUND WITHIN THIS THESIS

**Co-constructed Story:**

A story resulting from a shared experience which is constructed, told, and repeated by two or more people (Miller, Mintz, Hoogstra, Fung, Potts, 1992).

**Extended Self:**

The self-image that is constructed within the mind and is contributed to by the stories we tell and hear about ourselves (Neisser, 1988).

**Improvisation:**

A dramatic activity in which stories, characters, and scenes are created spontaneously, without prior rehearsal.

**Joint Storytelling:**

Storytelling which involves two or more people giving a co-constructed account of a shared experience (Miller et al.).

**Meaning:**

Intention, purpose, signification, sense, import; a sense, interpretation (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). According to Neil Postman (1992), meaning refers "to something more than the result of putting together symbols, the denotations of which are shared by at least two people...meaning also includes those things we call feelings, experiences, and sensations that do not have to be, and sometimes cannot be, put into symbols. They 'mean' nonetheless." (112-113)

**Monologue:**

A long speech or story which is delivered by one person.

**Narrative:**

A verbal account of experiences which occur within a common framework of time (Engel, 1995). Narratives are instinctive communicative tools, and serve as an accessible means of relaying information.

**Personal Storytelling:**

The act of telling a story about oneself.

**Pre-existing Stories:**

Stories of personally experienced and non-personally experienced events which belong to our story repertoire. We often refer to our pre-existing stories as a way of understanding current experiences.

**Process Drama:**

A dramatic activity in which players establish an imagined world as they discover, articulate, and sustain fictional roles and situations (O'Neill, 1995).

**Role-play:**

A dramatic activity in which players assume assigned or unassigned roles and improvise within an imagined world. Drama educators use role-play with students as an effective, "hands-on" means of exploring and experiencing different themes, issues, and ideas.

**Self-Stories:**

The stories we tell about ourselves and our personal experiences.

**Shared Stories:**

Stories resulting from shared experiences and are told by two or more people.

**Story:**

A verbal account of experiences which occur within a common framework of time, and the product of storying. A story's purpose is to convey meaning (Engel, 1995).

**Storying:**

The process of constructing a story within the mind; the thinking and planning process which occurs before a story is told, when the teller makes decisions and choices about what meaning(s) her story will convey, and in what form she will deliver them (Wells, 1986).

## VITA

Surname: Nyman

Given Names: Jennifer Lynn

Place of Birth: LaGrange Illinois

Date of Birth: January 11, 1974

### Educational Institutions Attended:

Bennington College

1992-1996

### Degrees Awarded:

B.A.

Bennington College

1996

## PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENSE

I hereby grant the right to lend my thesis to users of the University of Victoria Library, and to make single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the Library of any other university, or similar institution, on its behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or a member of the University designated by me. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis:

A LITTLE YOUNGER THAN FIRE:  
Personal Storytelling, Drama, and Learning

Author Jennifer L. Nyman

Jennifer L. Nyman

