

Six Principles of Effective Storytelling

As I told the missionary story during this year's vacation Bible school, 120 children sat in rapt attention, their eyes fastened on me, hanging onto my every word. Yet in this group were several active, noisy, rowdy children, and a few described as "just plain bratty." I learned to tell stories by listening and observing. When I saw something that worked I learned what to do, and just as often I saw things that didn't work and learned what to avoid. I'm naturally a shy person the kind that shrinks in front of three people at a party, but through practice, observation, and God's help I've learned to tell stories that would hold the interest of even a large group of people.

There are six major principles that work for me and for other good storytellers I've heard, perhaps you'd like to try them.

First, I never try to memorize a story word for word, but I do study it thoroughly so I know the basic plot well. I dislike the canned speeches recited by some sales people. It's easy to spot such a speech by the tone and rapid rate of delivery. A memorized story no matter how perfectly recited can never sound natural. Besides what would the storyteller do if their mind suddenly went blank? If they know the basic plot of the story they won't be totally lost if they forget one part. But if each word is connected to the next one and one link is lost, the whole story is over.

On the other extreme is the storyteller who reads the story once, or twice, and then wonders why she can't keep her students under control while she tries to remember the next part. Worse still is the storyteller who just reads to her students. And usually loses her place in the process. Of course reading a story to a group of children as they all cluster around to see the pictures does have its place in the Christian education. I often read to my children. But with larger, and older groups telling the story often holds attention longer and better.

In studying the story I sometimes feel the need of a simple outline. I may use a 3 x 5in card if the story is very complex, writing only the main ideas. If I make more than one card I number them in bold numbers with contrasting ink. (What if I drop them?) Sometimes a simple 4 or 5 line summary will suffice, I sometimes find it useful to write it on the palm of my hand. With flashcard lessons an outline is usually not necessary because the pictures remind me of what is next.

Secondly, even though I don't memorize the entire story I do memorize two parts, a one line opening, and a one line closing. I give considerable thought to these sometimes departing from the published version. I want something snappy to grab my listeners' attention right away and when I speak one line boldly and enthusiastically the rest of the story seems to follow the same. The ending is just as important I want something to signal the end, without saying it. I also want to bring the story home to my students lives. It's hard to adlib a good ending so I memorize this part.

Third, when I tell a story I always exaggerate emotions. I never exaggerate facts, but emotions are different. My sad characters are sobbing sad, my happy characters are giggly happy, and when my characters are mad they are lip curled, teeth grinding mad. Hamming it up made me self conscious at first but the children loved it, and I soon forgot my so called dignity and began to experience vicariously the feelings of the characters in my stories. Sometimes I get so involved in just practicing a story that I shed tears. I think this emotional heightening has added more child appeal than any other thing I do.

Fourth, I have found that children listen better when I use contrast. I speak slowly when it's appropriate and faster and faster as the plot thickens. Slow speech is appropriate for sad portions, and rapid speech for happier sections. I speak loudly then almost a whisper. The children hear me because they listen closely. My voice exhibits sorrow, and glee, apprehension, and confidence, timidity, and boastfulness, when appropriate to the story.

Fifth, I dramatize the story with action, and facial expression. When happy my characters skip around the room, when bored they slouch. When frightened they may stutter with fright, or their knees may knock. I never simply tell the children "Tommy was excited." I show them Tommy was excited by the volume, tone, and speed of my voice, by jumping up and down, by the look on my face.

Sixth, I make a deliberate effort not to pause even for a moment, and not to change the tone of my voice when I move into the application, or an invitation. (this is much more difficult than it sounds.) I have seen a large group sit engrossed in a story but when I start the application half of them yawn, start talking, or get up to leave. I've been able to cut down on this by moving rapidly into the invitation, and using the same tone, and variations I did in the story.

Everyone has probably heard Christians who have a "talking voice" a "praying voice," or a "preaching voice." By avoiding my "preaching voice" I have been able to avoid triggering the off switch in many of my listeners. Then there are less distractions, and The Holy Spirit can work with tender hearts.

Well, that's it. Those are the six principles I have seen work with other story tellers and with myself. To apply these six principles, I practice. Usually I tell a story to my own children at home before telling it to a group. I can identify my weaknesses and strengths that way. I can also tell how well I know the story, if I get the facts mixed up, or hesitate, I practice again. I can also get a feel for the emotions, and tone that belongs.

There is more to teaching than storytelling but I've seen a spellbinding story excite and deeply affect many people. But remember-- half of the spell is in the storyteller.