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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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The “Kaleidoscope of Life”: Story as Vital for Values Education

“Should the schools teach values?” (Lickona, 1991, p. 3). Should schools focus on the character development of students? In recent years, teachers and parents alike have been asking these questions more frequently (Wynne, 1986, p. 28). According to Thomas Lickona, the character education movement is growing more rapidly than any other school reform in America. Surveys and polls reveal that the American people consider character education to be their greatest concern in restructuring school initiatives. In addition, findings from recent research indicate that 75% of those responding believed that building character should be pivotal to public education. However, 65% of those questioned pointed out that they were uncertain about the proper method of teaching values and favorable character traits to students (Edgington, et. al., 1999, p. 36). In response to this dilemma, some educators have offered literature as a medium for values education, and research has shown the appropriateness of this solution.

Although stories are not designed to teach, readers do nevertheless learn something from reading them. Literature provokes thinking and questioning. Yet very importantly, literature does not teach didactically; rather, it imparts understanding (Lukens, 1990, p. 94). This may be one reason why literature-based character education programs experienced such a revival during the 1980’s. At that time, then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett suggested that the humanities curriculum, including literature, be employed for inquiry into character formation (Wynne, 1986, p. 28). This proposal raised an important question for English educators: What role does or can English play in character education?

Bennett (1993) clearly felt that the discipline of English played a vital role in character education. He not only recommended the literary canon as a means to achieving it but also compiled his well-known *Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*. This collection was comprised of virtue-laden poems and prose and a contents page with a list of ten virtues: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith. Bennett touted his compilation as a "how to book for moral literacy" (p. 11). Significantly, although the publishing of his book is several presidential administrations in the past, its clout has continued. In fact, several years ago, PBS sponsored a 30-minute animated television series titled *Adventures from The Book of Virtues*. The series featured storytelling through the heroes of time-honored literature, including European fairy tales, African Folklore, Greek mythology, and others, to present various values to the programs cartoon child stars (*Cigna–backed 'Book of Virtues'*. . ., 2000, p. 1).

Yet Bennett was not the first educator to suggest literature as a domain for moral inquiry. Beginning in the 1960's and reaching into subsequent decades, the idea of using core curriculum, such as English, for the additional purpose of character education came into focus. Indeed, numerous ideological premises for character education and curricular opportunities for instruction in values have emerged through the teaching of literature. These opportunities arose through studying the figurative language, moral dilemmas, and moral decision-making opportunities in texts, as well as instances of moral reasoning and empathy. For instance, such opportunities were created by comparing the psychological stages of moral development as displayed in both fictional characters and students. Similarly, political novels have been used as sources of moral ambiguity, complexity, and ethical dilemmas, about which students have equivocated and by which they have become enlightened. Finally, drama came to be seen as rich

with the moral values of fairness and equality, while literary instruction has developed the ability to cultivate a valuing of truth, obedience, property, and friendship, among other worthy qualities (Socket, 1992, p. 556).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, educators created new curricula and pedagogies to adapt English/language arts to character education. One example was Bruno Bettelhiem’s use of fairy tales for bibliotherapy. Another curricula inspired by psychodynamic psychology was the “back to basics” program, which relied upon story and fairy tale, to address the problem of the media’s influence upon children’s imagination (Sockett, 1992, p. 547).

To further substantiate the premise of literature-based approaches to character education, many researchers have set about to affirm the presence of values in literature for children. One such study was conducted by Edgington, Brabham, and Frost (1999), who determined a strong presence of values in books that received the Scott O’Dell Historical Fiction award (p. 43). Other studies were carried out by Andrews (1994), who researched which values were most commonly found in children’s literature at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; these findings were discussed in *Teaching Kids to Care: Exploring Values through Literature and Inquiry* (p. 185). Other scholars, such as Moynihan (1975), have studied ideologies present in children’s literature that reflect the politics, the social milieu, and the world events of the day (p. 166). Yet these studies are only a few examples of the abundant research that has been done to verify the values content in children’s literature, and literature at large.

Thus, research has shown that children’s literature is rich with values and can therefore be useful for character education. Yet the presence of values alone is not the only reason why literature is such a worthy vehicle for character education. Instead, the nature of story itself,

when paired with the presence of values, renders literature a dynamic source for moral guidance. Story itself holds intrinsic benefits and assets that many scholars have whole-heartedly extolled.

St. John noted the historical justification for and the spiritual benefits of story telling, as applicable to both character and religious education, in *Stories and Story Telling*, published in 1918. Current religious leaders have taken a similar stance as St. John, as noted by Capshaw (1999) in an article about the innate merits of storytelling. By contrast, Mair (2007) has noted the psychological importance of story, detailing the contributions of both Kelly and Bannister and the merits of story-telling psychology. In addition, Kimmel has discussed the philosophical premises in which story can be seen as wonderfully powerful and vital for all humanity. Finally, Berthelot (1996) has reviewed the sociological significance of story, explaining how story telling, as a communicative device, benefits society and humanity in various ways. These and other scholars, representing diverse fields of expertise, agree on the fundamental importance of story to the human race, while they also frequently link this importance to the practice of education.

In the article "Story Telling: Stories and Story Telling, from Moral and Religious Education," St. John (1918) discusses the historical backdrop and spiritual benefits of the story. Everybody loves a good story, St. John notes, adding that "every heart responds to the charm of a well told tale." Importantly, St. John ties story-telling to character education, observing that "there are moral forces among those feelings that are stirred" by a fine tale. To use his own terminology, stories have a "secret influence" that has the power to shape character. In fact, story has been the predominant medium for character education throughout history. St. John notes that the past has seen wonderful teachers whose precise aim was character-building among their

students. These teachers seem to have always understood the value of story-telling and used it as the method of changing the lives of young and old people alike.

St. John (1918) cites numerous examples of wise teachers who utilized story: Jesus Christ, Plutarch, Froebel, the Medieval monks, and others. Significantly, as concerns educators, “the very origin of story telling was in the teaching impulse.” As observed by St. John, the primary importance of story from the earliest ages was educational:

> Events which were fraught with meaning, were kept alive in memory and handed down from one generation to another that they might help to shape the life of youth. In this way men gave the warning of the certain penalty which nature inflicts upon those who break her laws. So they sought to stir the sleeping spirit of hero-worship and aspiration. Aside from purely unconscious imitation the story is almost the only pedagogical means used by primitive men. And as we trace the development of human culture we find that it does not lose its place in the higher stages.

Story is universal, and its importance reaches beyond mere enjoyment. Story is character-molding. The story contains ideals that reflect back upon religious and social life, and in turn, the story has shaped those ideals and has provided power and form to them. The teller of the tale has been highly esteemed in Japan, Arabia, India, and China. The Greeks, Hebrews, and Romans all honored story, used it in education, and even allowed it to substantiate the breadth of their school curriculum. The vitality of and esteem in which the story is held can also be seen through the historical popularity of bards, jongleurs, and the skalds of Europe and the Middle East: “The minstrels of the age of chivalry with their songs of noble deeds were honored for their influence

upon character, and had a recognized place in the educational system of Feudalism" (St. John, 1918).

Later in time, such persons as Dickens offered stories that were clearly reforming. Similarly, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "outweighed in influence thousands of sermons and tens of thousands of pages of antislavery tracts," St. John (1918) notes. In addition, Jesus Christ was a masterful storyteller. St. John points out that "most of us feel that we have gained our clearest and most impressive knowledge of his teachings from those parables or from the simple account of his life which is The Story of the Gospels." St. John concludes that losing love for stories is a sign of lack of wisdom:

> To feel contempt for their use reveals ignorance of the art of education. The conscientious teacher will hardly be content to say, 'I cannot tell a story.' He will make himself a teller of tales. This is his duty and his opportunity, and when he has mastered the simple art it will be his joy as well.

To further explicate the importance of story and to solidify such a claim, St. John (1918) provides numerous quotable quotes from note-worthy persons who provide insight into the value of the tale:

> --Stories are the oldest form of transmitted culture, and the most formative. – Richard G. Moulton.
>
> --The story was the earliest study in the educational curriculum of the race. – Quoted by Nora Archibald.
>
> --Every fairy tale worth reading at all is a remnant of a tradition possessing true historical value; historical at least in so far as it has naturally arisen out of the

mind of a people under special circumstances, and risen not without meaning, nor removed altogether from the sphere of religious truth. – John Ruskin.

--The Pueblo child does not receive commands to do or to refrain from doing without the reason for the command being given in the form of a story, in which the given action is portrayed with the food of evil resulting to the doer. – F. C. Spencer.

--The narrative, which extends from Genesis to Esther, is found, in its literary analysis, to be an alternation between two forms: a framework and connective tissue of history, with the highlights and spiritual essence of the whole given by brilliant stories. – Richard Moulton.

--I would rather be the children’s storyteller than the Queen’s favorite or the King’s counselor. – Kate Douglas Wiggin.

--Let me tell stories and I care not who writes the textbooks. – Stanley Hall.

Finally, St. John (1918) describes what a story actually is. He defines story as “a narrative of true or imaginary events, which form a vitally related whole, so presented as to make its appeal chiefly to the emotions rather than the intellect.” A story must contain four parts: a beginning, a series of events, a climax, and an ending. St. John explains that these elements are all instrumental in the inculcation of values and truths: “Only as the teacher conforms to these natural requirements can he effectively use the story as a means to an end in moral education.” According to St. John, a story is appealing both to one’s feelings and to one’s imagination.

Importantly, the idea of valuing stories, as presented by St. John, is still prevalent today among religious educators. One example of the continuation of the church tradition of valuing stories can be witnessed in a not too distant ecumenical church educator’s event in Chicago. At

the event, attendants discussed the value of storytelling (as well as of technology). As reported by Capshaw (1999), communications director for the United Methodist Board of Discipleship, "throughout the event, speakers and workshop leaders stressed the importance of stories" as vital tools for educators. "'We are a story-formed people,'" observed attendant Elizabeth Caldwell, Educational Ministry Professor at Theological Seminary in Chicago. Thus, the traditional preeminence placed upon stories for moral teaching and learning appears to be persisting among religious educators.

Be mindful, however, that there are psychological as well as spiritual and historical justifications for the use of story. In the article "Kelly, Bannister and a Story Telling Psychology," Mair (2007) discloses the psychological vitality of storytelling. In Mair's own words, "stories are the womb of personhood. Stories make and break us. Stories sustain us in times of trouble and encourage us towards ends we would not otherwise envision. The more we shrink and harden our ways of telling, the more starved and constipated we become." Before beginning his discussion of story-telling psychology, Mair provides several quotations related to the importance of story. He notes Wiggins' observation that an important story is a "presentation and an invitation. It presents a realm of experience, accessible through the imagination, and invites participation in imaginative responses to reality."

Doty, in contrast, speaks of story as "the narrative quality of existence that can be shared and that therefore compensate for all that cannot be shared." He points out Stephen Crites' understanding that:

> The formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative . . . Only narrative form can contain the tensions, the surprises, the disappointments and reversals the achievements of actual experience . . . Fictional stories, just because

> they are not restrained by documentary sources, factual data, may indeed provide greater scope for the exploration of more elusive dimensions of experience.

Finally, Mair (2007) includes the insight of Novak, who terms story a “method,” an articulation of change of experience, and a means of liberation. According to Novak, “story is not narcissism or subjectivity, but its opposite: the making of an independent object.”

In addition to spiritual, historical, and psychological bases for the story, a distinct, philosophical justification can also be found. Kimmel (2001) of Trinity University discusses this philosophical justification for story in his article “Telling Stories.” Kimmel cites Momaday, who claimed that human beings could not exist without “the moral dimension of language.” In fact, Kimmel offers the idea that people as story tellers find their existence in “a creative act of imagination and remembrance” of which story, or “*mythos*” is central. The idea of mythos, then, can delineate between “abstract reason which reduces meaning to the truth value of propositions, and toward a more inclusive depth and diversity of meaning as sense.” As Nietzsche observed, reason or “*logos*” is “narrowly conceived,” while story or *mythos* is “fully imagined.” Nietsche goes further to state that if a culture were to lose myth and the subsequent “natural, healthy, creativity,” it would become “famished among all [its] pasts and must dig fanatically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities.”

According to Kimmel (2001), human beings are more than rational makers, doers, and thinkers. They

> are what they imagine and remember, and the creative act of telling stories gives coherence and continuity to the whole of human experience . . . Narrated world is as essential to the identity and memory of an individual as it is to a constitution of community and to the *ethos* and history of a people.

Thus, Kimmel warns that if the dominant culture loses the "creative and consolidating sense of the mythic, so too our individual lives [will be] lived out in a poverty of both place and time, and in the absence of a culturally integrating or individually redeeming story." Importantly, a story can assume a consolidating mood. As noted by Isek Dinesen, "'all the sorrows can be borne if one can put them into a story, or tell a story about them'" (Kimmel). Kimmel concludes that stories must continue to be told for the sake of culture, truth, and human life:

> Telling stories is a collective enterprise of imagination which preserves a culture; it is itself worth preserving as a resource for the renewal and appropriation of what is valuable . . . In general, story (*mythos*), has a concern for truth on a broad scale of perception and perspective, of world and life, of a person or a people; the telling of a story forms ground and horizon for the truth it carries . . . Human life at its roots is desire, in its fullness an adventure, and in the imagination of its telling constitutes a culture, a people, a history. In acting, remembering, telling, we come together as human beings, we come together into human being.

Even so, the benefits or justifications for story do not end with the spiritual, the historical, the psychological, or even the philosophical. Sociological justifications and benefits exist as well. In The Value of Story Sharing, Berthelot (1996), Communication Specialist, discloses what some of these sociological benefits are. Berthelot begins with a historical backdrop:

> Since the most primitive campfires and throughout history, stories have helped teach, influence, and bind people together. Stories have fostered the understanding — of self, of others, and of life — which is vital to progress. Such understanding is sorely needed today, as we struggle to live and work together and progress toward common goals.

Berthelot points out that on the individual, the organizational, and the societal level, story brings people together. In contrast, withholding or ignoring stories separates people, “keeps us ignorant and isolated,” and so is neither wise nor practical.

According to Bethelot (1996), storytelling constitutes a “powerful human strategy” and has numerous purposes. These include stimulating creative and critical thinking; increasing understanding and awareness; facilitating effective teaching; influencing behavior, attitudes, and cultural change; creating a sense of unity within diversity; integrating individuals who have newly arrived into a group; reinforcing societal ethics and values; and orienting new individuals to organizations or work roles. These purposes, in turn, are important to schools, churches, places of work, and organizations, not to mention to individuals, the community, and society at large.

Berthelot (1996) notes that “story sharing can enhance awareness, human relations, performance, ethics, team spirit, organizational understanding, and loyalty.” Therefore, story sharing is beneficial in numerous ways. These include but are not limited to improving speaking, writing, and listening skills; illustrating points and offering concrete examples; arousing the emotions and “right brain responses”; humanizing strangers and those different from us; encouraging relationships, human connections, and empathy; opening hearts and minds; and fostering an appreciation of both commonalities and differences.

Berthelot (1996) points out that stories are so powerful because the abstract principles they contain stir the listener on both the emotional and visceral level. Story-telling is a non-“hostile and litigious” approach to accomplishing objectives. In short, story reflects the human experience; “reveals underlying value;” and brings “our ancestry, our culture, and the larger history to life.”

Truly, numerous reasons to use story as an educational medium exist. Spiritual, historical, psychological, philosophical, and sociological justifications can be offered as to why story is an appealing and engaging method of education. As observed by one writer, "a child who is told stories by parents or other caring adults is a fortunate person. You are doing nothing less than passing the whole of civilization and a part of yourself along to future generations." Stories are meaningful. When a story is read, something special happens. The child need only be asked *why* the story was wonderful, for the fact that the literature *is* valuable is just a given (*Story Telling Hints*).

Storytelling has been thought of as the "kaleidoscope of life." Human beings "represent and structure their world and convey this to others" through storytelling. All people tell stories. This practice emerges at very early stages of life and constitutes normal communication between child and parent. Even within children's dramatic play, a sense of story recurs. Story is universal, used by children and adults alike to understand the world, life, themselves, and each other. All people use story to organize ideas and knowledge. Thus, storytelling is "fundamental to life." Stories entertain, excite, amuse, explain, and teach. In addition, story can be seen as "a structural abstraction perhaps built into human memory, a way of thinking . . . the soul of a culture and the mystic and metamorphic consciousness of a people." From prehistory, to history, to contemporary times, story becomes that "thread of human awareness," allowing us to know, to understand, and to remember. "Story is a mystery that has the power to reach within each of us, to command emotion, to compel involvement, and to transport us into timelessness" (*Value of Story Telling*).

Therefore, in addition to the presence of the values in the tales, the powerful rationale for story-telling itself makes literature-based approaches to character education sensible. Throughout

history, educators have faced the need to resolve the pedagogical issues of character education. The demand for character education has led to many literature-based approaches for moral guidance. Some educators have pointed out that literature, when carefully selected, can single-handedly serve as character educational material. This supposition has lead to studies to confirm the presence of or kinds of values in literature, especially children’s literature. The research has verified the presence of values in literature. When this verification is paired with an understanding of the numerous merits of story alone, a strong argument is posed for literature-based approaches to character education. Therefore, in the face of this strong argument, one can deduce that the methodological questions of character-education have been resolved. Literature-based approaches to character education can be highly esteemed among all other approaches and readily embraced as needed to accomplish this educational objective.

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