

Characteristics of Good Stories

In his book **Storytelling: Imagination and Faith**, William Bausch outlines 13 characteristics of a story. He says that these characteristics are found in varying degrees in all stories. Some stories contain all thirteen of his characteristics. This paper will discuss briefly these characteristics and point out examples of these from the Grade 5 Born of the Spirit program, **May We Be One**.

Sometimes as catechists we are reminded that we should teach the way Jesus taught. One of the techniques that he used was storytelling. He was a master storyteller. Sometimes people would ask Jesus a question and he would respond with a story. For example, when asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with the remarkable story “The Good Samaritan.” Bausch says that this story exhibits all thirteen story characteristics.

Characteristics

1. Stories provoke curiosity and compel repetition

Here is a little story to illustrate this.

In an old Chinese story a wise teacher asks his students, “Identify the most satisfying thing in life. His students immediately gave these answers:

“A happy marriage.”

“Good health.”

“Close friends.”

But the sage said that they all had failed to give the right answer. “The most satisfying thing in life,” he said, “is to see a child confidently walk down the road on his or her own after you have shown the way for them to go.”

What does this story tell us about what it means to be a teacher?

Why is it a story that we would repeat?

BOSS Examples

Year 4 – An Ancient time Capsule p.15

Why does this story provoke curiosity?

Year 5 – Mother’s Day p.9

How does this story compel repetition or telling our similar story?

2. Stories unite us in a holistic way to nature, our common stuff of existence.

Many stories remind us of the very important truth that we are connected to all of creation. If we are to teach children to be good stewards of the earth, we must tell them stories that reveal our connection with the earth. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew Scriptures begin with creation stories.

Once a young man came to a holy man and said, “More than anything in the world I want to find God. Show me how.”

The hermit took him to the shore of a lake and bade him wade in with him. When they went in to the depth of their necks, the holy man placed his hand on the young man’s head and pushed him under the water. He kept him there until he nearly drowned. When they got back to the shore he asked the young man, “What more than anything else did you want when you were under the water?” The young man said, “Air.”

“When you want to find God as much as you desired air, your eyes will be opened to the wonder of God.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Working as a Shepherd p.58

How does this story display human connection with nature?

Yr. 5 – David’s Rock p.16

How did David’s grandfather use the rock to show how he and David were connected?

3. Stories are a bridge to one’s culture, one’s roots.

All peoples have stories which connect them with their past. If we lose our stories we lose our sense of who we are. In the telling of our stories we see that we are connected with all people from the beginning of time, and realize through our interdependence that all people are the beloved of God.

Once a young man, watching an eighty-year-old man carefully plant a peach tree, asked, “Why are you planting that tree. You won’t be around to eat the fruit.” To which the old man replied as he rested on his spade, “All my life I have enjoyed peaches – never from a tree I planted myself. I’m just trying to pay the other fellows who planted trees for me.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Working as a Shepherd p.58

How does this story display human connection with nature?

Yr. 5 – No Translation Needed p.25

How does this story help the boy connect with his culture?

How does it help him connect with Jesus’ story?

4. Stories bind us to all of humankind, to the universal, human family.

When we read stories from different parts of the world it is amazing to see that stories contain similar universal themes. We are connected to all humans through our stories. They speak of a universal connection of all peoples.

The disciple was a Hebrew. “What good work shall I do to be acceptable to God?”

“How should I know?” said the Master. “Your Bible says that Abraham practiced hospitality and your God was with him. Elijah loved to pray and God was with him. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him too.”

“Is there some way I can find my own allotted work?”

“Yes. Search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Come and See p. 42

How does Matthew’s story illustrate that we all desire strongly to be included rather than excluded?

Yr. 5 – The Captain’s Faith p.18

How does this story illustrate that God is with all people and, therefore, that we are all interconnected?

5. Stories help us to remember.

Stories help us to remember events, dates, people, and help us to connect with feelings associated with those times. Because of these memories of what we were like in the past we can learn how to be in the present.

A young minister went to his first church with eager anticipation, but was soon disappointed by the poor attendance at the services and the general apathy of the people. He decided to visit some of the parishioners and they told him the parish was so dead they didn’t care to attend. The church board said these people were somewhat justified.

The pastor announced that since the parish was considered dead, he would hold a funeral. Driven by curiosity, the lapsed parishioners filled the church. A coffin was placed at the front of the church. The pastor eulogized the deceased. He invited everyone to come forward to view the corpse. One by one the people looked into the casket only to see his or her face reflected in the mirror placed into the casket. Many were indignant, but slowly realized that it was his or her own spiritual indifference that was the reason the church was dead.

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Totem Poles p. 48

How do Totem Poles connect people with their past?

How do they help people remember their stories?

Yr. 5 – Jennifer’s missed birthday party p. 52

Do you remember a time when your pain turned into joy?

In the future why will this be a special birthday for Jennifer?

6. Stories use a special language.

Stories use the language of real and imaginary worlds. Most stories begin with “Once upon a time...” These stories resonate with mystery. Stories, whether true or imaginary, or a combination of both, lead us to confront feelings, which we enjoy or avoid experiencing. These stories may have a liberating or cathartic effect. When we read a story like Jennifer’s Missed Birthday Party we work through feelings that we may have not dealt with and need to deal with.

A disciple once complained, “You tell us stories, but you never reveal their meaning to us.”

Said the master, “How would you like it if someone offered you fruit and masticated it before giving it to you.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4. – Sea Bottom Treasures p. 54 and Mother Teresa p. 57

Pearls are created because the oyster tries to alleviate pain. Jesus’ stories, such as The Pearl of Great Price (p. 55), often used language that evoked vivid images in the listener’s imagination. How does the language used in the story of Mother Teresa evoke strong mental pictures?

Yr. 5 – On Stage (The Emmaus Story) p. 54

How does the language of this story stretch the disciples to see Jesus in a new way?

7. Stories restore the original power of the word.

One of the few times that Mary speaks in the scriptures is at the wedding feast of Cana. Mindful of the needs of her relatives she says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” In spite of Jesus’ protest that his time had not come we all know the end result of these words. A mother’s simple request is heeded. Words have power to transform, the power to heal, the power to bring about change.

A man walking through the forest saw a fox that had lost its legs and wondered how it lived. Then he saw a tiger come in with game in its mouth. The tiger had its fill and left the rest of the meat for the fox.

The next day God fed the fox by means of the same tiger. The man began to wonder at God’s greatness and said to himself, “I too shall just rest in a corner with full trust in the Lord and he will provide me with all I need.”

He did this for many days but nothing happened, and he was almost at death’s door when he heard a voice say, “O you who are in the path of error, open your eyes to the truth! Follow the example of the tiger and stop imitating the disabled fox.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – God Is With Us p. 75

How do you react to the words, “God is with us?”

Yr. 5 – Melissa’s Hope p. 66

How do Melissa’s words move the class?

What power do words that describe our feelings have?

8. Stories provide escape.

Escape is not always a bad thing. Quite often when we need to move away from a bad situation a good story will help us move into a space where we will be refreshed and will be able to come back to reality and will be able to face our problem with some new resolve. For example, Cinderella escapes into her imagination and is able to face the drudgery her stepmother imposes on her. Eventually, she is transformed into the beautiful princess she is.

The old man dearly loved his after-dinner pipe. One night his wife smelled something burning and shouted, “For heaven’s sake, Pa! You’ve set your whiskers on fire.”

“I know it,” answered the old man angrily. “Can’t you see that I’m praying for rain.”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Juanita p. 100

How does Juanita try to escape from her fear and loneliness in Canada?

What gives her the courage to face her problems in a new way?

Yr. 5 – Jonah and the Great Fish p. 95

This delightful story tells of Jonah trying to escape God. How does this story reflect our attempts to escape the real world?

How does this story lead us to face our problems anew?

9. Stories evoke in us right-brain imagination, tenderness, and therefore wholeness.

Most people in the Western World function out of left-brain consciousness. Reason is prized above all things for determining behavior and decision-making. Stories help us connect with right-brain activities, with the imagination, with the unconscious. Stories help us to connect with and to integrate the emotions in decision-making. This helps create a balance that leads to wholeness.

A sheep found a hole in the fence and crept through it. He wandered far and lost his way back.

Then he realized that was being followed by a wolf. He ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him, until the shepherd came and rescued him and carried him lovingly back to the fold.

In spite of everyone's urgings to the contrary, the shepherd refused to nail up the hole in the fence.

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – The Prince's Great Question p. 122

How does this story connect imagination and reason?

How does this story illustrate the need to be in touch with our feelings?

Yr. 5 – It's no game p.106 and What choice do we have? p. 107

How do these two stories help to change attitudes by helping us to be in touch with our emotions?

How does imagination help us to recognize injustice?

10. Stories promote healing

Because stories are so connected with the imagination, they bring healing. We have all heard how some people lead others to healing of memories by having a person recall an incident that was painful to them, and which still brings them anguish, or a refusal to forgive the one who caused the pain, and having them imagine Jesus walk with them into the scene.

One person I know who experienced the absent father recalls how healing it was that his father at the time of his death asked forgiveness for not being a better father. He tells the story with tears in his eyes, and each time he tells the story more of the bitterness he had felt toward his father is peeled away.

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Juanita p100

How does this story illustrate healing?

Has Amy appeared in your life? How?

Yr. 5 – I set my bow in the clouds p.127

How is the story of Noah a story of healing?

11. Every story is our story

We have said that stories often answer a question. For instance we might ask, "Is there life after death?" We might then be told a resurrection story such as The Emmaus Story to illustrate that that indeed is a reality. Jesus' resurrection becomes my story as well. Stories of Jesus' healings are stories of my healing. Stories of Peter's doubt, his betrayal of Jesus are my stories. Each story has meaning for me. It helps to uncover my truth, and to be in touch with my inner self.

A father and son were out walking one afternoon when the youngster asked how electricity went through the wires stretched between telephone poles. “I don’t know,” said the father. “I never knew much about electricity.”

A few blocks farther on the boy asked what caused lightning and thunder. “To tell the truth,” said the father, “I never understood that myself.” The boy continued to ask questions throughout their stroll, none of which the father could answer. Finally, as they were nearing their home, the boy said, “Dad, I hope you don’t mind me asking so many questions.”

“Of course not,” replied the father. “How else are you going to learn?”

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Meet Jenny and Joey p. 73

Does this story bring back memories of a similar situation?

With whom do you identify – Jenny or Joey?

Yr. 5 – On the Road to Damascus p. 166

Can you recall a time that God broke into your life?

Recall a time that you had a real a-ha moment. How did you feel?

12. Stories provide a basis for hope and morality

Many stories that we encounter tell us about change that people go through. They speak of the hope with which people face difficult situations. They tell of how people are moved to do the right thing, the life-giving thing. Jesus’ parables to this day move us to do the right thing, e.g. The Good Samaritan.

About eighty years ago a man opened the paper and read, “Dynamite king dies.” Intrigued he read on. By mistake, it was his story, the story of a man who had amassed a great fortune through his invention of dynamite and the creation of weapons of mass destruction. He was horrified to read that he would be remembered as a “merchant of death.” He saw himself in a new light. It was his hour of conversion.

Immediately, he resolved to change his image. From that moment on he devoted his energy and wealth to works of mercy and human betterment. Alfred Noble is now remembered as the founder of the Nobel Prizes.

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Come and See p. 42

How does Matthew’s story illustrate hope?

How does the story motivate you to be inclusive?

Yr. 5 – Welcome to Canada p. 110

Does our family have a similar story?

How does this story reveal that some people did the right thing?

13. Stories are the basis for ministry

When we enter the story of others and become their story or a part of it real ministry can happen. When we go into ministry in order to serve others, disdain is not far away. We argue how these people do not appreciate all of the good we do for them. When we let go of the “serving principle” and enter into their conversations and story, then we will be one with them.

A classic example of this is the story of Damien. When he went to serve the lepers of Molachi he began his homilies with “You lepers...” His ministry went nowhere. One day after spending it in futile evangelizing, when he put his foot into hot water he felt nothing. Now, that he had leprosy he began to say “We lepers...” His ministry took off. He had entered into their conversation and story.

BOSS Examples

Yr. 4 – Man in Motion p. 44

How does the story of Rick Hansen illustrate his desire to be at one with the stories of all the handicapped?

Why does this story illustrate why it is important to enter into the story of the people we feel called to minister to?

Yr. 5. A man of compassion p. 104

How did the new bishop enter into the story of the community?

Why is he successful in his ministry?

It is finished p. 142

How do Jesus’ suffering and death minister to us when we experience suffering, pain, and death?