

STORIES IN CHILD CARE: A METAPHORICAL APPROACH TO CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Scheherazade transformed the distraught Sultan Schahriar by telling him one thousand and one stories. Her unique style of story telling changed a cruel and murderous ruler into a gentle and just king.

Jesus conveyed complex spiritual messages and ideas through simple yet beautiful stories called parables. These everyday stories contained layer upon layer of unconscious thought and meaning.

Erickson altered his patients' awareness with the help of stories to ease their pain and cure their emotional ills. Each word, sound and movement was precisely executed to make this man's stories irresistible.

Throughout the ages man has used story and folk tale to teach, prepare, heal and entertain his listeners. A story can be used to introduce a new thought or concept, investigate an old idea, empathize with a person's situation, suggest alternate behaviors, create a certain feeling or explain a technique. There are endless possibilities.

Stories, anecdotes, truisms and examples can enhance communications and can often have a lasting effect on the listener. Children enjoy stories for their entertaining, relaxing and often inspirational effect. A message or lesson contained in a story can be less threatening for a child than if the same message is told directly to them. In a story, the child has a choice. He or she can disregard the moral of the story or believe that the meaning is meant for someone else. The child may instead feel the story was written for him or her personally and may be inspired to achieve greatness. The effect of most stories is between these two polarities.

The stories here are a series of metaphors used to augment the treatment of emotionally troubled children and their families. They are published with the intent that child care workers as well as other professionals will use them to assist their work with children. It is also my hope that these humble stories will encourage others to adopt and create their own metaphors to use in their life situations.

May the life from these stories give you as much joy as they have given me writing and telling them.

THE WILD HORSES

In a land not far from here there lived a small band of horses. There were horses of many different sizes, shapes and colors. There were roans, dapples, greys, pintos, appaloosas, mares and stallions. For many years they had heard their fathers and grandfathers tell of a special meadow that existed far across the sandy desert. Slowly, one by one, the members of the small band began to experience a need to visit this special place. And so the band began to prepare itself for this long and difficult journey. Difficult, because as you know, a desert can seem like a very unfriendly place to those not used to the hardships imposed by the lack of water and food. The time eventually came, and the small band of horses set out across the desert.

As they travelled, the thick green prairie grass that grew on the fringes of the desert became thin and brown and more difficult to find. The weather became hotter and the air became dry and dusty. Many of the water holes they passed were dried up and the herd of horses started to feel very hot and tired and hungry. As their thirst deepened and their mouths dried up, their tempers flared. Many quarrels broke out among them. They began to kick and bite and argue with one another. These uncomfortable and unhappy times went on and on. No one in the herd could see a solution as the sounds of fighting and sadness continued. Every one of the small band was feeling frightened and alone.

As I said, these bad times lasted a long time and would probably have caused a lot of hardships for the band had they not met up with a herd of wild horses. These wild horses appeared to be quite happy and comfortable with the desert's hardships. In fact, when the small band first caught sight of them, the wild horses were neighing wildly and jumping over small bushes as if playing some sort of game. As they got closer to these wild horses, they began to feel hopeful inside. "Maybe things will get better," they said to themselves. The small herd, in unison, whinnied a greeting to this wild and somewhat strange herd of animals. The small band and the wild horses approached one another in a friendly air of caution.

After much sniffing and careful looking, touching and neighing, the wild horses invited the small band to travel with them for a way, since they were both travelling in a similar direction. The small band of horses most thankfully accepted the invitation and both groups travelled together as one.

Each morning, as was the custom of the wild horses, the whole herd assembled for food, conversation and play. It was during these times that the prairie horses learned and experienced much. These wild and

sometimes crazy horses were able to find food and water in places where there seemed to be nothing at all. Dried-up water holes and strange-looking cacti were now seen as a source of food and liquid nourishment. These horses could hear the winds and the sand moving which told them of whether storms or calm weather could be expected. They would use their nostrils, tongues, ears and the very fibers of their beings to understand the ways of the desert. They delighted in play and loved to teach their games to others. The small band had many questions for the wild horses and each one was answered very carefully. The small band enjoyed and benefited from every minute spent with these wise and playful creatures.

Time passed by very quickly as it often does when things go well and soon the small band was saying its final farewells to the group of horses they had become very close to. Each horse stroked and sniffed one another and then parted in different directions. But somehow, even as they turned away, it was as if some part of them was still together.

The small band travelled on. The water was still very scarce. The grass was still brownish and sparse, the weather hot and dry. The small band still quarrelled from time to time; but, somehow, something was very different. Was it the way things looked? Was it that everything sounded better? Was it a feeling? No one was absolutely sure but they all could agree on one thing. The time together was much more comfortable and a lot more fun.

Then one day, as if by magic, it happened. All that their fathers had prophesied appeared on the horizon. They heard the sound of water splashing down a sparkling stream, birds twittering, and they saw myriads of yellow-gold butterflies filling the air. They could taste it, smell it and feel it. They had arrived at the glorious meadow they had set out to find. There before them stood the cool, green and peaceful meadow, that special place of their heart's desire.

The small band lived in that meadow for a long, long, time. And at times, they would drift back in their memories to the time they spent crossing the desert. They could even picture their old friends, the wild horses, neighing their special hellos. And they felt good, safe and content.

THE BEAR FAMILY

Once upon a time there was a family of three bears – the mama bear, the papa bear and the baby bear. Do you remember the story of the three bears and Goldilocks? Well at that time the bears were just newly married with one little cub and life seemed very good and trouble-free. As

time went on the baby bear, who was a boy bear, grew up and a little baby girl bear was born into the family. This family of four lived very comfortable and happy lives in their forest home.

However, after a time, some very difficult problems arose. For one thing, food was becoming scarce which meant papa bear had to travel farther and work harder to get enough food for his family. Sometimes papa bear would come home feeling terribly tired and if he was rubbed the wrong way, he would become very upset. Mama bear would often put the blame on herself saying that it was "all her fault" and then would begin to cry. The sight of the tears running down their mama's cheeks made the bear cubs feel very sad and scared although they tried hard to pretend everything was alright. They tried to shut out their feelings and sometimes they would try to trick their parents out of fighting. This way of behavior became a real habit for the bear family and the fighting got worse and worse. One night there was a terrible argument which ended with papa bear yelling, "I hate it here, I'm leaving," and out he walked, slamming the door hard behind him.

Mama bear and the children were very upset and they cried and cried for many days but papa bear did not return. Now the responsibility to feed the family fell on mom's shoulders. Mama bear felt alone, tired and very sad and blamed herself for everything. The children sometimes blamed dad, sometimes mom and sometimes themselves. Most of the time they pretended that it never happened. All the blaming led to more fights among the family and the pretending kept their feelings apart from each other.

This went on for a long time and probably could have gone on forever, if mom had not heard about the Wise Old Owl. The Wise Old Owl, mama was told, had a way of talking to people and listening to people that seemed to help even when things sounded like they would never get better.

Mama bear went to visit the Wise Old Owl and explained the whole situation. She was instructed to come the next day and to bring her two children. On that day and for weeks to come, the bears met in the quiet of the forest with this wise and peaceful old bird. The owl taught them a new way to talk to one another; a way that didn't blame or cause guilty feelings and a way that dealt directly with the problem. The owl taught them new ways to find food and nourishment. He taught them many other things as well; some of them they understood right away while others took them a long time to really understand.

One day the little girl bear asked, "Mr. Owl, do you think papa will come back to live with us now that we have learned a new way?" The Wise Old Owl replied, "There have been many animal families just like

yours and others too that have broken apart. Some of these families have come to me to learn a new way. Sometimes the papa bear came back, learned a new way of behaving and was able to live once again with his family. Other times, a new dad came and joined the family. But, all the animals that have used this new way have grown and lived much happier lives than the animals who continue to blame themselves and others."

The little girl bear sighed, wiped the tear from the corner of her eye and smiled.

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If you would like to purchase Michael Burn's book of stories, write to:

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