Bringing Storytelling, Poetry, Creative Writing and Drama to Groups of Children and Teens Facing Loss - A Workshop with Merna Ann Hecht

“Any sorrow can be born if it can be made into a story, or if a story can be told about it.” ~Isak Dinesen

“Stories are thick with meanings. You can fall in love with a story for what you think it says, but you can’t know for certain where it will lead your listeners. People take what they need from the stories they hear. The tale is often wiser than the teller.”
~Susan Fletcher from Shadow Spinner

1. A Discussion of Story, Imagination and Poetry and Their Place in Creating Safe Space and Comfort

Poet and author, George Ella Lyon, reminds us that stories allow us to leave the burden of our singularity and hold ourselves in a suspended space where we temporarily live inside of the life-world of a story rather than with our own struggles. The narrative thread of the plot pulls us along on someone else’s journey; it tugs us, at least temporarily, out of our own sorrows and worries. This time-honored art form provides a pathway for children who are grieving to tap into their capacities for imagination and play. This is as important in bereavement work with children as are finding ways to help them identify, cope with, and accept their feelings related to the death of a family member.

When we grieve we experience a fundamental shift in our internal time clocks. The “normalcy” of time as we know it before the death of a family member is altered. We will loop back into memories of times when our loved one was not ill; or of the experiences we had with them before the death occurred. We may begin to anticipate a future when we might feel better, when we get through the hardest part. We might have glimmers of how life will go on without our loved one, and then of a sudden we may move back into a state of profound grief or the view from hindsight and the “if onlys” that the loss of a loved one can visit upon us. Our grieving takes us on a journey of living with a new timeline of “before” and “after.” Stories can provide children an important permission to move across the boundaries of time. Past, present and future weaves together through the structure of stories and allow us to experience the cyclical flow of time. That beginning, middle and end, and past, present and future intermingle in narrative structure, just as they do in our own personal journeys and life cycle can be an important source of comfort for children.

Also, one of the fascinating ways in which storytelling provides a sense of security and comfort for children has to do with the paradox between how children fasten themselves to the suspense of not knowing how a story might end and a more subliminal awareness of safety and security because they know that the teller is holding the ending for them.
Objectives:
- To experience a sense of imaginative embodiment in the safety of a group setting connected to the themes of a story;
- To gain a sense of security and reinforce the belief that solace, care-taking and nurturing are available when needs are great;
- To discover and celebrate resilience in the face of loss;
- To honor the connections we have to our loved ones who have died.

2. Two Stories and Related Activities:


In the story of Morning Star, a bold young maiden laughingly tells a friend that that she would like to marry one of the bright stars above them, and she points to a particularly shiny star that has captivated her attention. The next morning a "star man" appears and tells her that he is Morning Star, the star she has wished to marry. He is a strong, handsome young man, with an eagle plume in his hair who tells the young woman that if she comes with him to his sky realm she will become his bride, but only if she agrees never to return to her people and her village. She consents and the star man places an eagle plume in her hair swooping her up with him toward the sky. Upon arrival in the sky realm Morning Star introduces his earthly bride to his mother the Moon and his father the Sun. Moon welcomes Morning Star's new wife and gives her the solemn warning that she must never dig up a certain large turnip root, which is sacred.

In great joy the woman lives with her Star husband and they have a child, a beautiful little boy. However, the woman succumbs to curiosity and digs up the sacred root. She and the child are banished and must return to the earth. An enraged Sun warns the Star Wife that if the child touches the earth during their first fourteen days back on earth, he will be returned to the land of the stars and she will lose him forever.

One day, when the Star Wife has gone to fetch cooking water, thinking her beloved child is carefully tended to, he crawls down to play upon the ground. Then, like a leaf caught in the wind, he rises up out of the smoke hole and disappears into the sky. Morning Star's wife is utterly bereft. She cannot sleep, but instead lies night after night beneath the stars grieving her losses and searching for a sign of her little boy. Finally, one night she locates a new star gleaming in the sky where the empty turnip hole had been. Realizing this new star is her lost child, Morning Star's wife finds a deep comfort and knows that when she is lonely she can always find her son; that he will look down on her always from his place above.

"Morning Star Takes a Wife," invites listeners, young and old, to feel a companionship with Morning Star Wife as she grieves the loss of both her husband and her child. We also experience Morning Star's sorrow as he watches his wife and his little boy climb down spider's web back to the earth, knowing he may never see them again. The story has many layers of symbolic meaning.

While there is no one truth about the afterlife, or where our loved ones go when they die, the story of "Morning Star Takes a Wife" answers to our collective need to stay connected with our loved ones. It does so with a great immediacy and simplicity by taking
us into the realm of the cosmos. There is no clear path. We walk with the young woman into unknown territory. That the presence of the new star comforts the grieving mother and soothes her sorrow can provide comfort to children and adults in remaining connected to the bonds with those we have lost.

Two Poems to Accompany this Story:

Looking for Him
by Patty Turner

Once in awhile when I lean my head back to stare at the sky,
I am looking for him.
Today I'm looking, today when it's all gray.
The softest gray I've ever seen, this sky
opening after a rain and getting ready to close again
for another.
A light behind this sky
Shimmies, gold above gray.
I try to see his soul up there floating around like
a thin blanket of human just under the clouds.
Or glimpse the wing of an angel,
a boy-angel playing in the gold-gray light
up above the clouds.
I try hard to see.
And then gray turns solid, light disintegrates.
I try to keep it inside my body, the light.
When I can,
he lays his hand on my shoulder.
Then I put my hand on his and say to no one,
"Daddy, oh Daddy."

from I FEEL A LITTLE JUMPY AROUND YOU: PAIRED POEMS by MEN & WOMEN, (1999), Naomi Shihab Nye and Paul Janeczko, editors, p. 47

Heritage
by Maria Mazziotti Gillan

I'm like those Russian peasant dolls
made of lacquered wood where the larger dolls open
to reveal smaller dolls, until finally
the smallest doll of all stands, unseamed and solid.

When you open me up: my mother, her mother,
my daughter, my son's daughter. It could go on forever,
the way I carry them inside me.
Only their voices emerge, and when
I speak to my daughter,
I hear their words tangled in my own.

Ma, when you died, I though I'd lost you forever;
grief washes over me
when I pass your barren garden and remember
the tomatoes that grew so wildly while you
watched from the bedroom where you were dying;
or when I walk into your basement kitchen
and see that it is grimy with neglect;
or when I see Dad sitting in the big recliner,
his legs covered by a blanket you crocheted
and a picture of you propped up
on the table next to him,
but only when I open myself
you are still there inside me and I am safe,
even though I cannot drive to your house
or sit down while you pour me an espresso.
This is the way it is with me—
you are nested inside me,
your voice a whisper that grows clearer
with each day.


The story of “The Palm Tree” has four strong elements that I can identify as being helpful for any child who is grieving.

The first element has to do with a community’s response to a death in the family and with survival itself. After the death of Ojo’s father, Yobachi Baba, the villagers bring food. But with the passing of time, the villagers resume their routines and no more food is offered to Ojo or to the pet monkey and tortoise. This turn in the story allows children to identify with the loneliness that can occur when a family member dies. At first relatives, friends and community members may surround them, bringing food and what comfort they can. But, as many have recognized, after a while the casseroles, baked goods and dinners stop coming and the family is left to confront what may be a great sense of emptiness and a huge change in the basic structure of the family from what it was before the death.

In the story of “The Palm Tree,” Ojo’s basic survival is at risk, he doesn’t know how to procure food, since he has not had to do so while his father was alive. Ojo doesn’t even know where food comes from; it arrived as a gift because of his father’s status as a renowned healer. Ojo has never even been to a marketplace. He knows nothing about the local markets that spring up on certain days of the week in dusty clearings and village gathering places. When Ojo comes across a market day, and the purveyors have set out an array of their sumptuous crops and offerings, he has no money with which to buy food for himself or his beloved pets. After a death in the family, especially the death of a parent, some children will feel that their basic survival is under threat. Such children might ponder questions like, “Who will take care of me?” “What if I die?” “What will become of me?” Although children may not verbalize these questions and fears, they are a part of the child’s inner story. In the slantwise way of stories this tale gives assurance that nourishment will be provided and the young boy will survive his loss. The story of Ojo and many other tales from cultures far and wide, correspond with the “real life” predicament of a grieving child’s fears, questions and anxieties.
The second element has to do with the importance of finding inner resources and tapping into them, even when we are experiencing feelings of anguish and/or helplessness. When Ojo shows his compassion for and worry about his pets who he loves and wishes to care for and protect, children might be able to tap into their own capacity for extending kindness toward others. This can allow them to feel less threatened about their own survival and experience increased confidence in their ability to care for themselves and extend care to others. Also, the story honors the connection children feel with animals, both with the companionship animals can provide and the care-taking that goes with having a beloved pet in a child’s life.

Third, at the very moment in this story when Ojo remembers and then tries out his father's magic, the story turns toward a positive outcome. The “magic” is enlivening and delights children with the possibilities of new ways of thinking and new patterns of being. After all, trees don’t walk, but in this tale they can and they do. Ojo and his animals survive and find nourishment in direct relationship to Ojo’s calling upon what he learned from his father.

Finally, Ojo’s connection to his father is on-going. He takes up his father’s place in the community and becomes a great healer himself. The end of the story suggests that Ojo’s connection to his father, Yobachi Baba remains ever present throughout Ojo’s life. In stories, the past, present and future co-exist and children reap the benefit of knowing that no matter how bleak the circumstances, there is hope and there are enduring connections to those who have died.

Opening Activities Connected to the Themes of the Story:

Visualization Exercise
Before I begin the story I ask the children in a group to close their eyes and imagine themselves sitting with their backs comfortably against their favorite tree OR to imagine that they have climbed the tree and that they are safely perched in its branches. I expand the guided imagery by adding in a series of questions. What season of the year is it? What colors do they notice? What sounds are they listening to? Where is their tree located? What’s in their backpack if you have one—a book, an apple, other favorite foods or drinks? How do they feel? What is the weather like? What time of day is it? Then I give the suggestion, “let yourself become very friendly with your tree and let it welcome you in friendship.”

Creative Dramatics Exercise
Next, I stand up with the children and ask them to reach up with their arms, then their hands and next their finger-tips until they “became” the tree they have imagined. As I talk, I too “became” a tree. I ask each child to “see” his or her tree in all of its detail—the shape of the trunk, the outstretched branches, the twigs, and the leaves. “Imagine”, I say, “that the sky is blue, imagine that a soft wind blows through your leaves.” Next, I ask them to close their eyes while imagining that their tree is growing roots, deep and then deeper still, down into the earth. Once we are rooted firmly into the earth, I change the wind tempo and the weather, asking each “tree” to move with different wind patterns from gentle to fierce and to withstand the weather as it changes from a soft summer’s day to
hail and snow. I invite them to respond to many moods of wind with out loud whooshes and sighs or the sounds of pummeling hail and thunder. All the while I guide them to concentrate on keeping their strong and deep roots fixed to the earth.

Finally, to everyone’s surprise, laughter and delight I ask them to imagine that they had been magically uprooted and that in their tree-forms they can walk in slow, silent motion through the forest. The “trees” glide around the room until they are asked to “freeze” again and root in to the earth. Then each child takes a deep breath, finds his or her place in the circle and the story of “The Palm Tree” begins.

Two Poems to Accompany this Story:

**MY FATHER**
by Yehuda Amichai, translated by Warren Bargad and Stanley F. Chyet

The memory of my father is wrapped in white paper like slices of bread of a day’s work.

Like a magician who pulls rabbits and towers from his hat, he pulled from his small body—love.

The rivers of his hands poured into his good deeds.

from *VOICES: Poetry and Art from Around the World*, selected by Barbara Brenner.

**I Remember My Father’s Hands**
by Lisa Suhair Majaj

because they were large, and square, fingers chunky, black hair like wire

because they fingered worry beads over and over (that muted clicking, that constant motion, that secular prayer)

because they ripped bread with a quiet purpose, dipped fresh green oil like a birthright

because after his mother’s funeral they raised a teacup, set it down untouched, uncontrollably trembling

because when they trimmed hedges, pruned roses, their tenderness caught my breath with jealousy

because once when I was a child they cupped my face, dry and warm, flesh full and calloused, for a long moment

because over his wife’s still form they faltered great mute helpless beasts

because when his own lungs filled and sank they reached out for the first time pleading
because when I look at my hands
his own speak back

from, *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*, selected by Naomi Shihab Nye, p.21

(This poem is provides a powerful example of how the economy of language found in poetry can give us the sense of an entire story of love and loss. Simply asking that people tell their stories through a poem by using the repeated line “because” can be deeply emotional. Thinking about what group members want to use for their own poem is useful, i.e. “I remember my brother’s eyes,” “I remember my sister’s smile,” or as the poet uses, the memory of a loved one’s hands.)

3. A Brief Overview of Using Stories and Poetry with High School Age Refugees all of Whom Have Experienced Trauma and Loss

**MY FATHER’S KITCHEN**
by Malaak Abdallah, from Somalia and Yemen, lost her father two years ago

Memories of my father’s cooking fill my head
when my father cooks it smells Yemeni
the fish Masala mixed with pepper
remind me of my father’s kitchen.
Memories of his rice mixed with saffron
are like the morning sunrise.
The memories of splashes of oil
are like an ocean of honey,
the memories of sizzling fish
are like the sound of the warm wind.

I picture my father’s hands
shining with the color of orange saffron,
I picture the steaming fish *id-les*:like heaven,
I picture the deep brown of the tamarind juice

I can feel the love of my father’s hands,
I feel his hard work,
the tenderness of his country Yemen
in my father’s kitchen.

**My Mother’s Kitchen**
Kang Pu, from Burma, his mother died in childbirth when he was twelve (now he’s sixteen)

When my mom cooked it smelled of sweet wintertime cherries,
of a solitary forest with rain falling
and it smelled like the murmur of a lonely bird, singing,
I picture the spherical smoke rising from her kitchen
it was like the sound of sleep at night,
it was like arriving home safe and sound
the sounds of her kitchen were peaceful
i still long for the laughter of those family meals
we all waited for that table, my mom’s table
how she prepared every family meal
this is what I still long for
so often I remember my mother
nothing can take her memory away from me
it is truly difficult that I have departed
from my motherland
and from my mother’s kitchen.

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