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Born To Be Storytellers

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Recently, Chicago's own Vivian Gussin Paley was the keynote speaker at the 34th Annual Uberto Price Reading and Language Arts Symposium at Appalachian State University. The topic was "Building Community Through Stories" with Mrs. Paley's presentation kicking off an event that included Orville Hicks, a North Carolina storyteller in the Mountain Folk narrative tradition, and Charlotte Ross, a collector of stories told by her Cherokee ancestors in the north Georgia mountains. There was much to enjoy about this day of storytelling, with the gaps and ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the background and the soft, gentle tones of mountain talk all around. Life is good in the company of storytellers.

Vivian Paley began by reminding us: "In the beginning there was story." Her message to her audience of educators, students, parents, and developing storytellers was to "learn to slow down and allow each scene to play itself out." In her recent book, "In Mrs. Tully's Room: A Childcare Portrait" (2001), Paley shares glorious stories of a talented Chicago teacher, Lillian Tully, who uses storytelling with very young children, the "twos" who attend her childcare center.

Visiting Mrs. Tully's room, Paley heard Alex's story for the first time. It began and ended with the single word, "Mama". "It seems the best reason to tell stories when you are little," Mrs. Tully shared with Vivian Paley, "is to keep Mama in mind." In Mrs. Tully's room, the "Mama" story was written down, acted out, and told over and over, with variations added at each telling of Alex's story.

"Keeping Mama in mind is something I've taken for granted," Vivian Paley observed after her visit with these two-year-old storytellers, "yet suddenly it seems a crucial impetus, a prime factor in making a child this young want to slow down and tell a story," (2001, p. 7).

"It's a mystery, don't you think?" Mrs. Tully in her wisdom noted. "I mean the way these babies take to storytelling it's like they were born doing it."

Mrs. Tully's talent for listening as born-to-be storytellers emerge surely has implications for us as professionals working with families and young children. The 22nd Annual Conference of the Illinois Association for Infant Mental Health (coming up quickly on Friday, October 24) has as its topic "Keeping the Baby in Mind: Building Reflective Capacities in Parents." The brochure for the conference states: "An essential aspect of reflective functioning is the parent's ability to recognize that the infant or

toddler has feelings, thoughts, and intentions of her own. A parent's ability to make sense of her child's mental states, as well as her own, is intrinsic to sensitive parenting." (retrieved from <http://www.ilaimh.org>).

It seems to me that "a parent's ability to make sense of her [or his] child's mental states" can be enriched by paying attention to the "born-to-be-a-storyteller" developmental characteristic that Mrs. Tully and Vivian Paley so beautifully point out to us. From our own research studying the development of intention (Harding, Weissmann, et al, 1997; Harding and Safer, 2003), it is clear that babies from the beginning of life display their developing intentions through observable actions. It also seems clear that we can teach (and be taught) how to pay attention and interpret these intentions. We may not all have Mrs. Tully's talent for listening to "Mama" stories, but it seems that we all can slow down (as Vivian Paley demonstrates), listen, and learn to interpret and encourage the stories that are happening around us.

In the STORIES Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, researchers Debra Jervay-Pendergrass and Carole Brown (2000) developed a training program for early childhood educators and parents based on three assumptions:

- Infants and toddlers are natural storytellers.
- Parents' and caregivers' knowledge and skills are critical to the "telling" of children's first stories.
- When caregivers learn to be more skillful conversational partners, they facilitate the production of young children's prenarratives. (Jervay-Pendergrass & Brown, 2000, p. 1)

"Young children are remarkable storytellers," Jervay-Pendergrass and Brown concluded. "As early as the first year of life, even with limited communication skills, they begin to share their stories with people who are willing to listen and observe. Their daily experiences and interactions with others inspire the stories they tell. When *'something happens'* in their world that they feel a need to report or share, young children communicate this to their conversational partners in their own resourceful and creative way." (p. 1).

Grandpa Art (my husband, Art Safer) and I can attest to these early stories. Our little Sophie has told many stories during her first year that (given the luxury of grandparenthood) we have had plenty of time to listen to and enjoy. Smiling, laughing, looking into our eyes, babbling, frowning, wiggling, reaching have all contributed to what I used to define as "intentional communication" and now as Sophie's stories. Sophie's emerging views of life are there for us to listen to and interpret. And, although an open-ended script, one of our favorite life-long roles as grandparents has become telling and re-telling Sophie's stories with her.

"The supportive role of the adult listener is critical in helping children communicate their stories," Jervay-Pendergrass and Brown teach. "Listeners must be prepared and

ready to lend active support. As conversational partners, our job is to recognize and interpret children's utterances and nonverbal behaviors."

Programs such as the STORIES Project and places like Mrs. Tully's room can teach each of us how to listen to and encourage our earliest storytellers. The stories are there in all the ordinary things babies do – and, for that matter, any of us do. Helping each other listen is one challenge. Telling our own stories is another. According to Orville Hicks, our North Carolina storyteller of Mountain Folk stories, it would have been hard to "shut off" his storytelling, at one or at fifty. And one thing that kept the stories coming for him was being surrounded by a community of storytellers and storylovers (...the quiet stillness of mountain days and nights probably didn't hurt either).

When was it, some of us asked each other as we left the Storytelling conference, that we lost – or began to neglect – our born-to-be-a-storyteller selves? Probably (according to folks like Vivian Paley, Orville Hicks, and Mrs. Tully) it happened when we forgot to slow down, listen, and (this is important) tell our own stories.

In a world of born-to-be-storytellers, there will always be stories. Perhaps the easiest thing to do as we incorporate this awesome phenomenon of human development into our professional and daily lives is to begin by telling our stories. As we all know (at least when the storytellers remind us), one of the best things about stories is that stories always lead to more stories.

"And that's the way it goes with stories," Vivian Paley expressively observes. As we meet together on October 24 to focus on "Keeping the Baby in Mind", let's tell our own stories, listen to each other's, and pass on the reminder to colleagues, students, and families to actively encourage and enjoy our little born-to-be storytellers.

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