



Folktakes—The Mirror of Humanity

Curriculum Unit 93.02.02
by Synia Carroll-McQuillan

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

As we peer into the mirror of our world and our humanity, we seek answers to ageless questions. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? Why me? Why now? Religion, art, schools of scientific and philosophical thought all reflect our endless search for meaning; our need to understand and make sense of our existence. Yet, this quest must extend further than our present reality. It must delve into our past; our collective memory and understanding.

In order to understand and make sense of who we are, it is essential to know who and what we have been. As humans this has always been our quest. Oftentimes, when my four year old daughter bombards me with questions after question: “ Where did I come from? . . . What did I do when I was a baby? . . . I talked like that when I was first born, right?”, I have to marvel at what seems to be evolution in motion. A child is driven to know their place in the world. Understanding the past gives them important clues about the present, as well as keys to the future.

Through story we find a means of dealing with the endless stream of questions and ponderings that have always been a part of our human nature. Folktales interest me primarily, because these stories are among the oldest accounts shared in the oral tradition.

Folktales encompass a unique body of stories from all people in all places, told throughout the existence of humankind. For me, there is something very exciting and powerful about this idea. When we explore folk stories, we explore ourselves and our many facets as human beings. We see the reflection of humankind: its strength, flaws, fears, and hopes. The settings and characters may change but the heart and soul feelings are always there. They are timeless; they are ageless.

The very existence and longevity of the countless number of tales told and recorded today attests to the power of this very special means of expression. This unit is based on the premise that in folk stories, we encounter a mirror in which we can see who we are and what we have been. It is a mirror charged with echoes of the past and hints of the future.

What is a folktale? There are many definitions. I have selected key elements from those I like best:

A folktale is a story which has been handed down through word of mouth, and thus belongs to a particular culture rather than an individual . . . Because folktales are created by the people they give us many insights into the cultures from which they spring. The themes in folktales are universal and timeless .

(Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss, *Children Tell Stories* , (New York: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.), 1990, p. 39)

Basically, there are three kinds of folk stories: the oral, the transcribed, and the literary or art tale. No one kind of story is better than the other . . . Folktales from the oral tradition carry with them the thumbprint of history. Each place, each culture, each teller leaves a mark . . . tales that are set down and then transported through time on the pages of a book have a slightly different character from those orally transmitted . . . Often events glossed over or forgotten by the oral tellers are tidied up, made cleaner, elaborated upon, fixed to serve a specific purpose . . . Yet we must remind ourselves that most transcribers are not violating the tales. Rather, they are well within the tradition of tale telling, which is a tradition of constant and continuing recreation .

(Jane Yolen, ed., *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* , (New York: Pantheon Books), 1986, pp. 4-5)

Folklore cannot survive in a set form. Folklore continually changes, varying and developing, because it is shaped by the memories, creative talents, and immediate needs of human beings in particular situations. This process, the process of oral variation, is the life blood of folklore. When it is halted by printing or recording, folklore enters a state of suspended animation. It comes alive again only when it flows back into oral circulation

(Tristram P. Coffin and Hennig Cohen, ed., *Folklore in America* , (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., Inc.), 1970, p. xiv)

When telling a story each individual brings to it their unique and personal essence. They are like a vessel, giving shape to the tale. It is the teller who creates, the frame of the mirror within the story.

Folktales, by their very nature, are fluid and change as they are passed from generation to generation .

(Judith Rovenger, "The Better to Hear You With: Making Sense of Folktales," *School Library journal* , March 1993)

We should keep in mind this 'changing' nature of folk stories, particularly since most of the versions with which we are familiar are those we've read in books. We are a literate society for the most part. It has only been in the recent past that a re-recognition and resurgence of the value of oral tradition has emerged in various corners of our society. In his article, " In Quest of the Folktale" storyteller and folklorist, Doug Lipman notes:

. . . Folklorists have published at least 40 authentic versions of "Snow White" in English. The bad news: of the 40, only one has been used as the basis for a children's book .

(Doug Lipman, "In Quest of the Folktale," *Yarnspinner* , vol. 14, no. 4, June 1990)

It is obvious that the versions of many of the tales that we encounter are determined by someone other than ourselves. This is especially significant since most of the folktales that we encounter today are in a written form. Publishers and promoters, apparently for their own reasons have selected not only the versions of tales to which the general population will have easy access, but also the stories themselves. Only a select few have

been promoted as 'suitable' literary material for youngsters as well as the public in general. Many others have fallen by the wayside, lying dormant in shelved collections of folklore.

In spite of this, there are excellent resources where one can find numerous versions of folk stories told around the world. In addition, there are indexes that list and describe motifs and themes that appear throughout the body of folktales. That is the good news (See APPENDIX C for details.)

The attraction to the oral tale is strong. These stories, by their very nature present for all an important acknowledgment of the fundamental concerns of our collective human consciousness and psyche. These concerns show up through symbols and archetypes. Carl Jung speaks of 'cultural' symbols:

. . . The cultural symbols . . . are those that have been used to express "eternal truths". and that are still used in many religions. They have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilized societies. Such cultural symbols nevertheless retain much of their original numinosity or "spell". One is aware that they can evoke a deep emotional response in some individuals . . . They are important constituents of our mental make-up and vital forces in the building up of human society . . .

(Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* , (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday), 1964, p. 93)

The psychic energy inherent to such symbols can be driven underground when we, for various reasons, find certain aspects of it undesirable to integrate into our personal consciousness and actions. This energy, however, does not dissipate or go away. It continues to exist within our psyche in an inhibited and repressed state. The result of this alienation forms what Jung refers to as "an ever-present and potentially destructive 'shadow' to our conscious mind. Even tendencies that might in some circumstances be able to exert a beneficial influence are transformed into demons . . ."

(*Jung* , p. 93)

Children become aware of this 'shadow' nature very early in life. As they learn what behavior pattern is acceptable and what is not they modify their actions accordingly. With this also comes judgment; some actions, feelings, thoughts are good while others are bad. Clearly, in order to win the approval of parents and other 'grown-ups' one must display what is seen as acceptable, good behavior. Children desperately want and need the love and approval of their parents and guardians. They will do whatever they deem necessary to get it. For most youngsters, this involves an incredible denial of feelings and urges, both in the conscious and sub-conscious mind. It is an alienation of the self, that part which is seen as socially unacceptable in their particular environment.

The fear and pain are not permitted to be experienced, expressed and thus discharged; they are frozen into his body, barricaded behind walls of muscular and physical tension, and a pattern of reaction is inaugurated that will tend to recur again and again when he is threatened by a feeling he does not wish to experience .

(Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams, ed., *Meeting the Shadow* , (New York: Putnam Publishing Co., 1990), *Taking Back the Disowned Self* , by Nathaniel Branden, p. 282)

Children, like us all, need a place that is safe for them to express and work through these feelings. Unfortunately, many adults in our society find it difficult to accept or support this need in themselves; let

alone in children. Bettelheim makes an excellent point:

There is a widespread disinclination to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our own natures—the propensity of all men to act aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety.

Instead, we want children to believe that all men are inherently good. But every child knows that he is not always good, and that even when he is, he would often prefer not to be. This contradicts what he is told by his parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes.

(Bruno Bettelheim, “Reflections: The Uses of Enchantment,” *The New Yorker* December 8, 1975)

Throughout the ages we have turned to the arts-music, visual arts and creative language, oral and written, as a means of acknowledging, confronting and integrating the full circle of our existence. The positive and the negative. Story is language with all its powerful imagery and symbolism. Children deserve and need the opportunity to explore and expand upon their fantasies, their understanding of the world through folk stories.

“Tales have an unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination suggesting to him images with which he can structure his daydreams . . . when unconscious material is to some degree permitted to come to awareness and to be worked through in imagination, its propensity to cause harm-to him or others-is much reduced; indeed, some of its forces can be made to serve positive purposes.”

(Bettelheim)

Bettelheim speaks of ‘safe’ stories; those that primarily emphasize the positive, the happy, the triumph of good over bad. Most folktales are not ‘safe’. Within their realm, children encounter many of their deepest concerns as well as their highest hopes. They find that evil can be just as powerful as good. Loneliness, abandonment, death of loved ones, disempowerment all exist alongside of courage, true love, magic, transformation and the possibility of living ‘happily ever after’. Folk stories fulfill children’s very real need to acknowledge and recognize themselves and their world for better and for worse. Through these stories children may vicariously experience and discover ways of coping with the good and bad in themselves and in the world around them in ways that are constructive and empowering.

Folktales are not only teaching and learning tools, they are also entertaining. People of all ages love stories! Every student I’ve ever worked with has been ‘hooked’ by a story at some point. Stories carve a path through layers of “I’m so cool” , “This is boring”, “I got other things to think about”, and go straight to the heart. And the heart, being touched, responds. Children don’t forget a good story. It stays with them, oftentimes for years and years . . .

Imagine a history or geography lesson being taught and learned through story! I am certain that skillfully done, the resulting response from students would be dramatically different. For this reason I encourage teachers to apply any of the ideas in this unit to other areas within the curriculum. Incorporating folktales and stories is a means of creatively improving the learning process, making it more meaningful for all involved.

Schools should be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know. The child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past. This is why children forget all but a small part of what they learn in school. It is of no use or interest to them; they do not want, or expect, or even intend to remember it. The only difference between bad and good students in this respect is that the bad students forget right away, while the

good students are careful to wait until after the exam .

(John Holt, *Why Children Fail* (New York: Dell Publishing), 1964, p.289)

STRATEGIES

FOLKTALES-THE MIRROR OF HUMANITY is a six week unit, designed to be covered in thirty hour-long sessions. Because of the scheduling in the school where I teach, I will use this unit for the duration of the academic year with my sixth grade drama/theatre students. This unit is directed towards a middle school population; however, with some adjustments it could be made suitable for older or younger children. Many folktales are intergenerational and listeners of all ages take what they want and need from them.

The spirit with which you approach this unit will, to a large extent, determine its success. I look at it as a journey or voyage on which both teacher and student are about to embark. It is important to prepare oneself in order to get the full value and enjoyment out of the experience. During the introduction of this unit, time should be spent establishing the following goals and objectives.

1. The development of a community within the classroom

We, as teachers, must do all that we can to make our classroom environment child and learner friendly. Doing this sometimes requires that we shift our thinking and emphases to some extent. We may have to consider ideas from our students' point of view more often. Like educators and authors Bob Barton and David Booth, I have developed the activities in this unit to show:

- *how children's own personal stories can add to the fabric of the classroom, thus helping each individual to recognize the value of his/her life experiences, and building in the class a sense of each person's story worth;
- *how informal explorations by individuals and small groups can be carried out within the context of the larger community;
- *how peer talk can be maximized, rather than funneling all talk through the teacher;
- *how children can be encouraged to listen to each other, respond to each other, and build up their responses as a group;
- *how the role of the teacher can change from that of "all-knowing sage" to "participant in the exploration".

(Bob Barton and David Booth, *Stories in the Classroom* , (Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers Limited), 1990, p. 8)

Consider the mirror discussed earlier in the introductory discussion. In a more conventional mode, a teacher might 'suggest' to students the ideas and images that they should consider relevant. They would expect the students to accept their opinion and judgments as correct. Within such a scenario the mirror becomes 'teacher' centered. My aim is to acknowledge with the students that through folktales we encounter a mirror where we can see who we are, who we have been, who we hope to become. Peering into this mirror is a unique experience for each of us. Our expectations, fears, beliefs and culture, color what we see and how we see it. In our classroom, this alone will guarantee some interesting and lively discussion.

The following are games and activities that have been helpful to me in my efforts to create an atmosphere of community and trust within my classroom:

- A. PASS THE HANDSHAKE
- B. PART OF A WHOLE
- C. NAME GAMES, NERVOUS NELLIE, NAMES PLUS TWO
- D. ATOM
- E. LEAN AND LEAVE
- F. MIRROR GAMES

NOTE: Detailed descriptions of these activities, as well as those mentioned throughout this unit can be found in APPENDIX A.

2. Understanding the nature of the Oral Tradition

The desire and need to understand our world through story comes naturally to all of us. Throughout the ages humankind has found folktales to be a meaningful way to express and explain themselves creatively.

You may find these exercises helpful as you explore these ideas:

- G. OPERATOR
- H. SCAR-RY STORIES
- I. STORYBOARD
- J. LUNCHBAG STORIES or TALES FROM THE WILD SIDE

3. Appreciating the power of words

This goes hand in hand with the power of story. Thinking back to my childhood, I can remember some painful moments when I found myself to be the object of some thoughtless or teasing comment made by a 'not so nice' peer. Being a 'sensitive' child, I would oftentimes cry in these situations, retorting in a trembling voice,

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me”. This means of coping seemed to please the grown-ups in my life and it surely helped me avoid some fist fights. Still, despite all the bravado that I was occasionally able to muster, many of those words stung. And badly. Some I am still able to recall. Fortunately words used in a positive manner retain their power as well. Yet, so often it is the harsh words, those that leave us injured and in pain, that we most vividly remember. Such is the power of words. They evoke images and symbols that we, as humans, have always responded to in profound ways; spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and physically.

The following activities will help young people become more aware of the significance that words have in the shaping of our perceptions and feelings and will also stress the potential and power in the skillful and accurate use of words.

K. POETRY PLAY

L. GROUP STATUES

M. CREATIVE VISUALIZATION

N. SPONTANEOUS RESPONSE

4. Understanding the role of the teller and the listener

There must be a mutual respect between teller and listener if ‘story’ is to take place. This, of course, demands that a person be able to express themselves well and that they are skilled at listening. But let’s face it. For many of our students the principal ‘teller’ has been the television. It speaks the words. It provides the images. Viewers sit along the sidelines, passive participants (for the most part) in the entire experience. Producers, aware of this profitable phenomenon, have done all that they can to ‘hook’ their audience. They are well aware of the stimulating effects the fast-paced images and vibrant colors have on us all, children in particular. It is no surprise that the image of a teacher standing before a class pales in comparison. This is the unfortunate reality we all face. How can we as teachers, hope to compete? How do we show our students the spontaneity, the excitement, the unique sense of immediacy that we feel when we communicate person to person? We’ve come to take ourselves for granted, thinking that machines and advanced technology can replace our heart and soul nature. Yet, even in the midst of this, more and more people are acknowledging that we must maintain a balance if we hope to retain our human essence. Folktales, storytellers, the oral tradition, all provide an essential bridge between who we have been, and who we are becoming. This is the nature of our challenge. Sharing folktales is a way of meeting our students on common ground. The more we tell folktales in our classrooms the more skilled the young people will become as listeners and image makers. As the saying goes, “Practice makes perfect”! For this reason I strongly encourage you to tell stories frequently during the introduction to this unit. At this point, sharing a short story that you feel comfortable and familiar with is a fine place to start. Consider giving an account of something from your personal experience, for example, how you got a particular scar, taking the drivers license exam, your first pet, a trip abroad, etc. Perhaps you might tell a joke or funny anecdote. Below are suggestions of short stories that may interest you, as well as communication exercises for your students.

O. STORIES:

1. Bye-Bye!
2. The Talking Skull

- 3. The Great Cantini
- P. CIRCLE STORY:
 - 1. Word At A Time
 - 2. Phrase At A Time
- Q. GIBBERISH
- R. PASS THE PHRASE
- S. PASS THE GESTURE

5. Developing a flexible attitude towards the lesson plan

The lesson plan is not sacred. It only gives us a place to begin, a frame of reference. The real lesson depends, to a large extent on the interests and needs of the students. They will tell you what they need and want from a story. Their questions, comments, or silences tell us where the lesson needs to go. The activities in this unit work best if they are used to complement and enhance discussion and ideas the tales inspire in our students. After the telling of a folktale, I envision a classroom buzzing with activity, very much like the scenario that Barton and Booth describe.

Safeguards lie in seeking the many modes of responding as a repertoire of choices, and in letting the children select and direct their own learning as much as possible. We may begin with an idea—set out art supplies, divide the class into discussion groups, organize an interview—but the children will make the meaning, and we as teachers will have to be sensitive to their wants and needs. Because we story together, the group of young people will have to cooperate in carrying out activities. Not all children will be working on identical projects. Some may be in groups, others may be partners, and others may work on their own for the moment.

(Bob Barton and David Booth, pp. 112-113)

UNIT SCHEDULE

The following schedule will span 30 sessions occurring within a six week period or, as in my case, over the duration of a full academic year. These time periods are approximations: each group should follow it at a pace that is comfortable as the unit is primarily process oriented.

Week 1 (September): Preparing the class for the Unit

- Discuss some major differences and similarities between humans and animals. (physical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional and behavioral)
- Why did humans start to tell each other stories? Why do we still tell stories and how do we do it?
- What is a folktale?

Week 2 and 3 (Oct, Nov, Dec) Presenting Folktales and Activities

- Occasionally using audio and visual tapes of storytellers may be helpful
- How does this story make you feel ? In one word.
- What colors do you see in this story or in this character?
- What in this story stands out for you the most?

Week 4 (Jan, Feb, Mar)Researching and Collecting Folktales

- Students will be responsible for collecting at least three family or personal stories that they feel could be the “stuff” of folktales.

Week 5 (Mar, Apr)Telling Folktales!

- Students will focus on effective presentation skills. Working in pairs and small groups is most effective.

Week 6 (May, June)Sharing Events

There are a variety of options for organizing special occasions where students can share what they’ve learned and accomplished in class. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1) Small groups would visit the classrooms of younger children and tell or dramatize a selection of stories.
- 2) A series of presentations would be arranged within the community, for example, hospitals, convalescent homes, hospice, libraries, etc. where interested students would tell and dramatize folktales.

3) Story Slam! During class or on an evening occasion participating students would be selected by lottery to tell a folktale. Those who are comfortable with the idea could compete to see who is most able to engage the audience in their presentation of a tale.

THE STORIES

Folktales referred to in this unit have a variety of cultural backgrounds. The following section will briefly describe the function of folk stories within their respective cultures, suggest specific stories to explore and also provide ideas for preparatory and follow-up activities.

As for formulating a lesson plan, I suggest that you take the following approach. First, when planning to introduce folktales from a particular region, spend at least one session introducing cultural, social, geographical aspects of the area. Try to use a multi-media approach, including recordings, film, photographs, artifacts, magazines, speakers, musicians, dancers, food, etc. Use whatever resources you can get your hands on; however, do avoid those that are culturally or ethnically biased and stereotyping-unless you plan to use them to show your students how such prejudices and misinterpretations can color our judgment and understanding.

Second, allow time for at least one of the suggested preparatory activities. Third, devote the next two sessions to the telling (or reading if necessary), of one or more folkstories and selected follow-up activities. You may use your own ideas that you'd like to try, and that's fine. The activities that I've included are those that have worked well for me.

This is the essential make-up of your lesson plan, however, as stated before, be open to changes that may occur as a result of your students response and input.

NOTE; See appendix B for brief descriptions of the following African, American, and Haitian stories as well as written and recorded sources.

STORIES FROM THE AFRICAN TRADITION

Africa is a land of contrasts. Ancient customs and artifacts, contemporary values and perspectives, bustling urban centers, remote villages, the untamed and formidable bush all coexist, some in close courtship, others in opposition and conflict.

Still, in the midst of these and many other contrasts and distinctions, the heart-beat of Africa makes itself felt and heard through her people's most intimate and creative means of expression, the arts.

The African oral tradition embodies this 'pulse' in an especially inclusive and expressive way. Stories in Africa weave music, audience participation chants and choruses, even dance, into their fabric. Storytelling in Africa

is an integral part of the culture. It is a common and effective means of teaching, preserving values and historical events, entertaining and is also an essential aspect of most ceremonial rituals.

To those outside of the African communities some of these folktales may seem harsh or cruel. Natural and supernatural phenomena often display harmful and destructive potential. It is not necessarily the villain who is punished or dies: more often it is someone who is self centered, disobedient, or foolish or one who fails to follow accepted moral codes.

Survival concerns are prevalent in African tales. The village is often pitted against the bush. The village represents family, security, social/cultural norms and expectations. The bush on the other hand, symbolizes the 'other', that which is unfamiliar, threatening, unpredictable, inhabited by ghosts and phantoms. Yet, one must venture out into the bush in order to survive-to hunt for instance or to achieve recognition. It is in the bush that much preparation for rites of passage takes place.

Trickster characters are also popular in African folktales. Anansi the spider is one of the most well-known characters. Africans transported to the Caribbean and Americas brought their Anansi stories with them. As a character Anansi straddles the fence between insect, animal and human figure. Anansi moves easily between the human and animal world. He is as heroic in his ability to overcome what sometimes seems to be insurmountable obstacles or societal pressures as he is gluttonous and foolish. Most of all he is familiar. Everyone knows Anansi!

ANANSI AND OSUN THE ELEPHANT (Anansi Goes Hunting)

PREP ACTIVITIES

1) In order for students to have a clearer understanding of the cultural context from which Anansi stories come, it would be helpful to explore some cultural and geographic aspects of West Africa-Ghana, in particular.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Compare and contrast rural and urban life-styles
- Foods commonly eaten throughout the region
- Wildlife that inhabits the region
- Ceremonial and music customs
- West African graphics, art and design
- Folktales and other oral literature

Resources that may be helpful are included in the bibliography

FOLLOW-UP

1) Gossip Scene:

Objective—to get students talking about the story from different viewpoints, to tell a story about a story.

In small groups students are to “talk “about the events of the story from the viewpoint of characters living in that community: ie. Osun’s cousin is talking with his friends, jackal and hyena about the trick—Anansi played on his uncle’s family . . . “Did you hear what happened to my uncle Osun? Anansi really got him this time . . . “ As this ‘gossip’ session progresses the friends will respond with their own comments and ideas. Some groups may wish to share their scene with the larger group.

2) New Endings:

Review story by retelling or reading to students, stopping at a strategic moment during the story’s climax or resolution. Students then create their own ending for the story.

3) The Encounter:

Anansi and Osun encounter each other sometime later. What might they have to say? (Students may act this out in pairs)

ANANSI AND THE HAT SHAKING DANCE

PREP ACTIVITIES

Same as for previous story

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1) illustrations:

- Student’s favorite part
- Before and after pictures of Anansi (with and without hair)

2) Anansi feast and display:

- After working with several Anansi stories have students construct a variety of ‘artifacts’ that

represent and highlight events in the stories, for example, the pot used for beans, spider web design, clay figurines of characters, and the hat that Anansi wore, etc.

-Students, parents and teachers could cook up a feast featuring traditional West African dishes. During the occasion students could present their artifacts to the group explaining or demonstrating their significance.

A BAD HABIT

PREP ACTIVITIES

1) Discussion:

- What is a habit?
- What habits, good or bad have you seen in yourself or other people?
- Does your pet have any habits? What about other animals?
- Instinct vs. habit. What's the difference?

FOLLOW-UP

1) Bring the story to life!

-In pairs have students reenact the story as it is. Some pairs may want to share their version with the larger group.

-In pairs students again role-play the story, however this time they will create their own version by making the following changes:

- setting
- character
- annoying habits

-characters' stories

(these exercises should end with the catchy phrase “a bad habit is hard to break!”)

HAITIAN FOLKTALES

Unlike many industrialized, modernized and commodity based countries, Haiti is still challenged by prevalent illiteracy and poverty. Outside attention typically focuses only on the problems that accompany these conditions. A look at Haiti's folklore will highlight the more realistic and inclusive understanding of the Haitian people and their culture.

Haiti, in contrast to most contemporary countries, still enjoys a thriving and vibrant collective folklore. It is most often through the oral tradition that people in Haiti learn about their creative culture and history.

Historically, countries and communities that have taken the bold step into the industrialized world have stopped midstream and realized that much of their folklore has dissipated or even disappeared. With this realization came the study and collecting of folklore.

Many Haitian folktales draw heavily on influences from Europe (France, Spain), Africa, (via slaves) as well as the Carib Indians who originally populated the island.

The year 1804 brought independence to Haiti but even now poverty is rampant. Education, food, even basic necessities are difficult to come by. The stories we find in Haiti often reflect the harshness of this reality. Themes such as shame, jealousy, betrayal, the supernatural, childlike innocence, and the ability of the clever underdog to triumph, offer ready comment on one's ability to thrive in the face of hardship.

There are many kinds of stories in Haiti. Some of the best loved are tall tales, trickster tales and accounts of contests between good and evil. Characters such as “Papa God” and the well known team, “Uncle Bouki” and “Ti Malice” are among the most popular in Haitian folktales. Bouki, is boastful, greedy and foolish, whereas Ti Malice is quick, conniving prankster.

People in Haiti tell stories through music, dance and words. Frequent gatherings where both young and old compete to tell their stories is commonplace. It is a lively and engaging occasion, where the audience participates enthusiastically. A teller wishing to be heard will often shout “Cric”. Those interested in hearing will respond “Crac”. Of course the more reputable tellers get a greater response!

Folktales in Haiti are entertaining, educational and grounding. They promote unity among the people and their communities. Perhaps most importantly, folktales are thriving in such a way as to provide a model and inspiration for us, as we acknowledge the significance and the power of story.

CAT'S BAPTISM

PREP ACTIVITIES

1) Discussion:

-What is a baptism? Explore this question with the class. Some students may have stories of their own baptism that they might want to share.

-Baptisms could generally be described as a ceremony where a newborn or newcomer is welcomed into the community. Are there similar ceremonies in other religions or cultures? How could such a welcoming rite be part of a school or class policy when new students are admitted?

-With your class listen to the taped version of "The Cat's Baptism" on the 'Tales From The First World' audio cassette. Have Students:

A) imagine that they are the cats in the story on the way to church. Let them create a Banda dance parade!

B) draw pictures that reflect the feeling of the music

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1) Fancy Cat Pictures!

-Cats are as unique as people it seems. Ask your students to draw a self-portrait of the kind of cat they would be.

2) Pet Talk:

-In pairs have students share pet or animal stories. For example, "The funniest thing my cat ever did was . . . I was never afraid of snakes until . . ."

3) Say your name as if:

- Have students say their names as if they were a chicken, dog cow or snake, etc.

THE NAME

PREP ACTIVITIES

1) Discussion:

- Discuss the significance of names.
- What names do they like and why?
- What is the purpose of getting a name? What do names do for us?

Students might consider why they choose certain names for a pet. How does a particular name influence the way we view that animal?

- Ask students to share one of their nicknames with the class. (If they dare!)

FOLLOW-UP

1) “In the storm, coffin on your back” is a strange name indeed. Ask your students:

- What colors does this name suggest? Have students draw only these colors on small pieces of paper to be used to create a class mosaic.

2) Name Symbols:

I like using paper plates for these exercises. Feathers, glue, yarn, glitter, sequence, and sand can add a wonderful dimension to these creations.

- First, have students consider their own names. What do they want their name to say to other people and to themselves? What colors are in their names? What would they like their name to mean? Students will then draw a colorful symbol of their name on the plate along with the meaning that they would like the name to have.

Note: This is one of my favorite activities. I feel that it is an empowering act to symbolize and give your own meaning to your name. These creations are invariably strong and beautiful.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKTALES

African American folktales arose out of the slaves' impenetrable will to survive the plantation and post slavery experience. These stories served then, as they do now, to inspire and rejuvenate an awareness of inner sources of faith, hope and strength. Africans did not come to the New World empty-handed. They brought their religious beliefs, music, and cultural nuances. They brought a prolific storytelling tradition.

Some of the motifs, themes and story lines of African American tale have undeniable connection to both Africa and Europe. The manner in which tales in the New World colored and dressed these motifs gave them a unique quality that is truly a reflection of how the Black captive and their descendants chose to deal with their life experiences. This storytelling tradition is a direct outgrowth and cultural response to a condition peculiar to the New World.

Animal tales have always been very popular throughout Africa. The slaves readily adapted them to fit their circumstances. Despite the effort the slave owners put into ridding the African captive of tribal languages and customs, they seemed to accept what appeared to be simplistic animal stories so frequently told in slave quarters. They deemed them a pleasant and harmless pastime, as well as a means of entertaining their children.

These stories, which were essentially trickster stories, provided the Africans with a means of psychological and spiritual survival. They were often used to convey a double message; that for the naive, oppressive slave owner and that for the enslaved, disenfranchised Black. Within the context of these stories Africans could comment on their condition in a way that slave owners would neither understand nor find acceptable.

Tale tellers of this tradition have treated trickster like family, almost always referring to him as Brer, Bruh, Bro and Buh. These are simplified ways of saying brother. In North America rabbit is perhaps the most celebrated trickster character. Small, puny and overlooked, rabbit uses his wit to get what he wants. He is a practical joker, a glutton, a braggart and a lady's man (very much like Anansi). Through the antics of Brer Rabbit we encounter situations that are recognizable, amusing, and ultimately instructive. Often times the tales give us models of how not to act! They support the notion that justice can sometimes prevail.

Other examples of how the captive Africans adapted the trickster motif to their plantation experience is seen through characters such as High John de Conqueror, John (Jack) the slave and the boy, Jim, in the Talkin' Cooter. We see that a slave's wit could bring success in avoiding a whipping or obtaining freedom. Triumphs such as these were very significant in the life of the enslaved African.

Although there are various trickster tales in the folklore of Africa and Europe, their use in the United States is more representative of the African version, where trickster constantly stirs things up, creating one predicament after another, just for the joy of it. He is truly a happy mischief maker! In European culture, characters employ tricks to improve themselves or a situation. They are usually working towards a peaceful resolution where all live "happily ever after".

It was the harsh, hopeless reality of the institution of slavery that moved Blacks to give birth to stories where

the downtrodden were empowered by their wit and daring time and time again. These stories have historically given African Americans reason to laugh, to have hope, to believe that they, too, like trickster Brer Rabbit and others, could survive, thrive, and smile while doing it!

HE LION

PREP ACTIVITIES

1 Explore the forest habitat:

-animals, environment, living concerns and behavior

2) To Dream or Not To Dream:

-The African captive felt very strongly about being free one day. For many it was the motivating force. Ask your students what is important to them. What dreams or hopes keep them going? What do they look forward to?

APPENDIX A

The following are descriptions of the exercises and activities referred to throughout the unit.

A. *PASS THE HANDSHAKE:*

Participants sit in a circle. You (as the leader) will offer your hand to the person sitting beside you saying 'This is a handshake'. They then shake your hand and ask you, "A what?" You Reply, "A handshake!"—Oh! they exclaim, and turn to the next person, offering their hand and saying, "This is a handshake". "A what?", that person asks them. The person beside you turns to you again, asking, "A what?" And you reply, "A handshake!" They then turn to the person beside them repeating, "A handshake!" "Oh!" the other person exclaims. They then turn to the next person and have the same exchange. You will shortly hear "A what? A what? A what?" being passed along the as the handshake travels around the circle.

B. *PART OF A WHOLE:*

Discuss the idea of group activities with your class. Have them suggest tasks and projects that people can do together. Some ideas could include; a kitchen of a restaurant, a doctor's office, a courtroom, a sports event or an exercise class. At this point, have one student enter the playing area (ie. the front of the class) and begin

acting out their part in an activity of their choice. One by one, as the other students silently figure out the scenario, they enter the playing area and become a part of the activity until, ideally, the entire group is involved. I generally conduct this exercise non-verbally. I encourage students to focus on making their task 'real'. Its always interesting to find out if the group's interpretation of the activity is what the initial person had in mind!

C. NAME GAMES:

1) NERVOUS NELLIE:

Each person in the circle says their own name with an alliterative adjective and gesture/movement to go with it, such as Rowdy Raymond or Dancing Donna. Everyone in the circle repeats the name and gesture. Each person repeats all those which have gone before and adds his/her own to the list. Everyone in the circle repeats the last name and gesture given and then repeats the others given before that.

2) NAME PLUS TWO:

Students sit in a circle and as a group, choose two things to say about themselves. (ie. favorite color, snack or activity, birthplace, etc.) One student will say their name as well as the two bits of information previously agreed upon. The person beside them offers their own name and 'information and then repeats the name, etc. given by the previous person. This pattern continues with each person first offering their name and the two things and then repeating what has been said by previous students. They always start with the person beside them and work their way back to the beginning. I have used this challenging game successfully with groups numbering twenty-five or less. It does require a lot of patience and it's success depends on the group.

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

1) A day in the life"

-He Lion was scaring all animals. Have students imagine that they are various forest animals trying to cope with He Lion's antics. In small groups have students act out things their chosen animals might try to do, even though they are frightened of the lion, such as eating, gathering food, sleeping, playing, etc..

2) A Different Point of View:

-Students tell parts of the story from the Man's point of view and from He Lion's view point. It might make an interesting topic for a debate.

THE TALKING COOTER

PREP ACTIVITIES

1) The forced separation of family members was one of the most painful aspects of slavery. The following activities should help students become more sensitive to this issue as well as empowered, since they will determine the outcome to the following improvised situations.

-Students should work in pairs as they dramatize, pantomime, or create written dialogue for the following situations.

A) A slave owner has announced that he plans to sell your brother or sister. In an effort to change your 'master's' mind you request to speak with him. The following conversation ensues . . . (Have students create their own dialogue.)

B) It's harvest time on the plantation. Lots of work to be done. Master Jenkins needs all the working hands he can get. But you've received word that your mother is very sick, possibly dying. You haven't seen her since you were sold away from that plantation nine months ago. You want to see her. You ask your owner for a pass to visit. How would the conversation go?

Suggestions:

2) Explore stories where slaves did escape. Discuss the experiences they had to endure, the various qualities that enabled them to attain freedom, and those who helped them. Ask students what they think freedom meant to the slaves. Ask them what freedom means to different people in our world today.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1) The Letter:

-Students write letters from Jim to the slave owner after he has settled in a new place. What can Jim say now that he couldn't say before?

D. ATOM:

Group mills about the space quietly until the leader calls 'Atom!' followed by a number (ex. Atom six) Participants then quickly group themselves according to the number called. Leftover students may sit and watch or they may take turns calling out Atom! I have also seen this game played with students bunching themselves shoulder to shoulder at the call of "Atom!"

E. LEAN AND LEAVE:

Having students freeze into statues is always an effective and enjoyable means of getting them to focus. Ask one student to freeze into any comfortable pose in the playing area. You may want to spend some time helping your students to focus. I usually count . one, two, three, freeze! "Have another student find a way to look as if they're leaning against the frozen person. "Lean with your body, not your weight". When both participants are frozen, have the first one leave. The remaining student must maintain the exact same pose. (For this reason I urge students to be centered and balanced when they go into their freezes.) Again have another student 'lean' against that per-son who will then leave. All members of the group should get a chance to participate.

F. MIRROR GAMES:

These can be excellent activities for encouraging concentration within your group. There are many variations to this theme so be creative! Here are some suggestions:

- Have the group stand, each person an arm's length apart. You, as the leader will stand facing the group and ask the students to imagine that you are their reflection in a mirror. They are to mirror your movements. All movements should be done very slowly and gradually in order for them to be mirrored. It will be obvious when the leader is moving too fast. It's fun to have several volunteers lead the group in this activity.
- In pairs (one person being A and the other B) students stand or sit facing each other. A will lead and B will follow. When you call out "Change!", They will reverse roles. This can also be done with the group standing in a circle, A's and B's should stand on opposite sides so that they will mirror each other across the circle.
- One last suggestion involves pairs demonstrating for the group. Among themselves the pair decides who will lead and who will follow. After they have 'mirrored' each other, students in the class can suggest who they thought was the leader.

G. OPERATOR:

This familiar game highlights the evolving nature of the oral tradition. Sitting in a circle or semi-circle, one student begins by whispering a sentence or phrase into the ear of the person beside them. That person then passes the message on in the same way until it has gone all the way around the circle. The last person who receives the ,message' says it aloud. How much has the original message changed?

H. SCAR-(RY) STORIES!:

Ask the group to think of one scar they have, preferably in a location that is not too personal. Have everyone

divide into pairs, where they will exchange their 'scar-ry' stories. The next step is to have volunteers tell their partner's story. It's amazing how vividly detailed these stories can be! It might be interesting to have students write their stories down and have their partner make an illustration.

I. STORYBOARD:

Materials: A collection of interesting objects. Objects may be random or thematic. Also useful is a felt board or any flat surface. I prefer darker colors because they allow the objects to stand out. After the group sits in a circle, place the felt 'story-board' in the center. One by one objects are placed on the board. (This always generates a lot of 'interest') The story begins with one person choosing and picking up an object. They will then begin telling a story somehow incorporating the chosen object. I recommend the group leader initiating the story the first few times). Each person adds to the story using the object of their choice. All tellers must return their object to the board once they have finished their segment of the story. Objects may be used more than once.

J. LUNCH BAG STORY or TALES FROM THE WILD SIDE:

Label three bags or envelopes, character, setting and problem. Inside each bag put strips of paper or small cards that contain the appropriate suggestions. For characters you could include such ideas as a rooster, ant, scientist or princess. (I suggest using animals, insects and other clear character types. Avoid names and proper nouns). Settings might include; inside an ice cube, under a bed, in a tree or on a magic carpet, or any number of interesting places. Problems could range from 'lost' to 'love-sick.' Have each student reach into the three bags or envelopes, selecting one strip from each so that they have a suggestion for a character, a setting, and a problem. (ie. a love-sick flea under a pillow) This will give them the makings of TALES FROM THE WILD SIDE. Students can then create and illustrate stories individually or in pairs. They can act out skits showing the before, during and after. It's also fun to have them guess each other's characters and situations.

K POETRY PLAY:

Words are intriguing and fun! One way of communicating this to students is by introducing them to poetry and prose that uses words and sound creatively and expressively. Two such poems are Lewis Carroll's, "Jabberwocky" and "Humpty Dumpty's Recitation".

I would also recommend works by Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, Shel Silverstein, and Maya Angelou.

After the class is familiar with a particular poem, assign each student specific words to move and freeze on. Then have the entire group freeze either in their seats or standing together in play area. As you slowly and deliberately read or recite the poem aloud, students quickly move and change frozen postures only when their assigned word is spoken. This can be developed into a performance piece!

L. GROUPS STATUES:

Divide students into small groups of four or five. Leader uses tambourine or other percussive instruments to signal when group is to freeze. It's fun and challenging to call out a variety of objects, themes, and feelings, for example; ice cream cone, conflict, candle, floating. Your options are endless!

M. CREATIVE VISUALIZATION:

It is important that young people be given ample opportunity to flex their image-making muscles. Having your

students draw pictures or verbally describe what they 'see' after you have told or read a story to them is one effective way to give their imagery skills a work-out. I also recommend the book, *Put Your Mother on the Ceiling* by Richard De Mille (New York: Penguin Group, 1976). This book contains a host of graded visualization games and may be a good starting point for this idea.

N. SPONTANEOUS RESPONSE

In his book, *Impro*, actor Keith Johnstone speaks of how it becomes more and more difficult for students to respond spontaneously as they grow older. They no longer trust their instincts and are constantly searching for the right answer. Many students have learned that giving the teacher the response that they are looking for is the key to success in the school environment. In this activity students sit in a circle (though this is not essential). I explain the idea of spontaneity and tell them that when I say a word they are to say the very first thing that comes to their mind. There is no right or wrong answer. The only problematic response is one where they are trying to be funny, clever, logical, or correct! I urge them not to block themselves throughout the exercise as I continue calling out words and asking students to respond at random.

O. STORIES:

Stories in this section can be found in appendix B.

P. CIRCLE STORY:

1) WORD AT A TIME:

While sitting in a circle a student will begin a story saying only one word. The person sitting beside them will continue the story saying the next word. The goal is for the group to tell a short story with each person saying only one word. At the end of a sentence that student should add "Period" after saying their word. Such a story might begin, 'Once—there—was—a—lame—monkey—who—wanted—to—fly". Remind the group to listen to each other in order to have their story make sense.

2) PHRASE AT A TIME:

This activity is done the same way, except that each student contributes one sentence instead of only one word.

Q. GIBBERISH:

Gibberish is a theatre game that stresses communication. The idea is for a person to get an idea across using nonsense syllables instead of any standard language. Students invariably notice that body language, gestures and movement as well as vocal tone, inflection, and rate are very important when trying to communicate in gibberish. Here are some examples of gibberish;

-Ekko sa ludem mishu. (pure nonsense syllables)

-Abba ibba abba ibba. (repeating syllables)

Have students work in pairs conversing in gibberish. When you call out, "change", they will immediately

switch to English. Continue this exercise, alternating between English and gibberish. Again, it may be fun for students to demonstrate this activity in pairs. What changes occur when they switch from gibberish to English?

R. PASS THE PHRASE

This exercise encourages the exploration of vocal inflections, tones, and moods. If possible, have the group seat themselves in a circle. You will then suggest a phrase to pass around the circle such as, “Look at the room”. Each person should try to say the phrase in their own unique way. Encourage students to imagine themselves as characters in different situations. How do they feel? What are they trying to say? Do this exercise several times, using different phrases.

S. PASS THE GESTURE:

Similar to PASS THE PHRASE. You will suggest a phrase that communicates a very specific feeling and intention such as, “Keep your mouth shut!” Students will try to communicate the phrase nonverbally, using only gestures. Try several phrases in this way.

APPENDIX B

Below are brief descriptions of the stories mentioned in this unit. You can also locate printed versions in the following folktale collections.

Bye Bye, Diane Wolkstein, *THE MAGIC ORANGE TREE AND OTHER HAITIAN FOLKTALES*, Shocker Books, 1980

Turtle wants to go to New York City with the pigeons—but he has no wings! Finally, after endless pestering on turtle’s part, the pigeons begrudgingly agree to carry him along on a stick. On the big day turtle takes hold of the stick with his mouth while two pigeons hold it on either end. Off they go! But see what happens when an excited turtle opens his mouth at the wrong time!

The Talking Skull, Roger D. Abrahams, *AFRICAN FOLKTALES, Traditional Stories of the Black World*, Pantheon Books, 1983

An African hunter encounters a human skull in the bush. When it speaks to him he rushes back to his village, telling every one of what he has seen. The king requests that the hunter show him the skull and the hunter enthusiastically obliges. This time however the skull will not speak and the hunter learns a hard lesson .

The Great Cantini, original source unknown, following written version adapted by Synia Carroll-McQuillan, 1993

After the Great Cantini accomplishes the amazing feat of crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope, a young boy urges him to do it again. ‘Please? Do it again! Do it for me, huh? Please? I know you can!’ Does the boy believe in the Great Cantini enough to let him carry him back across the falls? Only the listener knows for sure!

The setting is a small, rural town in upstate New York, near Niagara Falls. Life was mundane, even for the kids.

There were the usual chores to do, homework to finish, trees to climb . . . Fortunately every summer the circus would come to town. That was the next best thing to Christmas! This event gave every boy and girl a reason to behave, and every parent a little extra: power of persuasion. The summer of 1965 was special. That year there was to be a new, spectacular event; the Great Cantini, world famous tight-rope walker, would cross Niagara Falls. Being no ordinary tight-rope walker, this great acrobat had no use for a silly balancing pole. He would cross the falls carrying a barrel—a very large barrel filled with bricks! Yes! This was to be the event of the year! It was bound to beat the corny fourth of July parade and stingy fireworks display.

Finally, the big day arrived. Trees sparkled under clear and sunny skies. It was a perfect day to witness a death-defying dare-devil attempt to do what had never been done before. Everyone came to the event. Folks from neighboring towns turned out in force. Nearby, in full view of the excited throngs, sat a faded, yellow trailer. When the door of the trailer slowly opened and the Great Cantini himself descended the two steps to the ground, the people stared in awe at his magnificence.

Slowly, and with great dignity, he made his way to the small platform where the rope began. Several men were busily putting bricks inside a large, wooden barrel. As they hammered on the lid, the Great Cantini watched, poised and dignified. Then, gritting his teeth and scowling, he lifted the barrel up with his great arms and positioned his feet on the rope. Everyone held their breath as the Great Cantini began his perilous journey. Step by step the man made his way along the tight-rope. He walked slowly, looking neither to the right or left. Nearing the middle of the waterfall, the crowd gasp collectively when his body seemed to waver in a sudden gust of wind. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the Great Cantini reached the other side and stepped safely and composed, onto solid ground. A wild cheer erupted from the crowd! As it died down another voice, small and shrill, could be heard. It was that of a young boy, pushing his way through the crowd. "That was great! That was great, Cantini! Can you do it again, huh? Could you do it again for me, Please? I know you could!" The small boy was jumping up and down, shouting, right in front of the Great Cantini, who stood looking down at him with a patient smile upon his face. "Do you really think I could? ' The child shouted up at him," Yeah! I know you could! Do it again! Please? Huh? " The Great Cantini motioned and several men rushed over to pry the lid off the barrel. Then he very deliberately picked the barrel up and tilted it to the side until all the bricks tumbled out. Giving the boy a stern look, the Great Cantini repeated, " Now, you really believe I could do it again? " Amid leaps and shrieks the child assured him. " I know you could Great Cantini. C'mon, do it again for me, PLEASE!?! " The large man nodded his head solemnly. " Well, If you really do believe I can . . .", he paused and glanced down at the barrel within his arms, and leaning slightly towards the child he said, " Hop in ".

Anansi and Osun the Elephant, Harold Courlander and Albert Prempeh, THE HAT SHAKING DANCE AND OTHER ASHANTI TALES FROM GHANA, Hartcourt, 1957

Clever Anansi finds a way to feed his family during a famine—even if it means tricking a friend to do it. Still, the spider takes only what he needs and uses his wit to avoid a physical confrontation with his outraged friend . . . after all, all's well that ends well Or is it?

Anansi and the Hat Shaking Dance, Harold Courlander and Albert Prempeh, THE HAT SHAKING DANCE AND OTHER ASHANTI TALES FROM GHANA, Hartcourt, 1957

Anansi must always do more than anyone else. In this story he takes it upon himself to show the greatest sadness at his mother-in-law's funeral by refusing to eat any food. His plan goes well until a very hungry and embarrassed Anansi is caught with beans in his hat!

How To Break a Bad Habit, Margaret Read MacDonald, TWENTY TELLABLE TALES, H. W. Wilson Co., 1986

Everybody has habits—and most of them are bad. Rabbit and monkey are no exception. This humorous tale show us that ‘a bad habit is bard to break’ . . . but its worth a try !

The Cat’s Baptism, Diane Wolkstein, THE MAGIC ORANGE TREE, Shocken Books, 1980

What begins as a regal and solemn baptismal ceremony ends in a chaotic cat fight! And its all because the godfather is tone-deaf.

The Name, Diane Wolkstein, THE MAGIC ORANGE TREE, Shocken Books, 1980

This poignant and mysterious tale shows the power of good over evil. It will undoubtedly raise eyebrows and stimulate discussion. After sharing this story you may well ask, ‘What’s in a name?’

He Lion!, Virginia Hamilton, THE PEOPLE COULD FLY, Alfred A. Knopf Publishing Co., 1985

Big, bad, “Me and Myself “ He Lion is scaring all the animals. What can they do? With the help of Bruh Bear and snappy Bruh rabbit. He Lion discovers, much to his surprise, that the ‘real’ king of the forest is someone other than himself!

Jim and the Talkin’ Cooter, Virginia Hamilton, THE PEOPLE COULD FLY, Alfred A. Knopf Publishing Co., 1985

Jim, a slave boy dreaming of freedom, enjoys a stroke of luck when he befriends a talking, singing and playing cooter mud turtle who indirectly helps Jim to realize his dream. This story is a kind of African American counter-part to the African tale, the Talking Skull.

You can find the following stories on the audio cassette, TALES FROM THE FIRST WORLD, featuring storyteller, Synia Carroll-McQuillan and Percussionist, Jeff McQuillan. The tape is available on the American Melody label, 1991 and can be ordered directly from the label or from Synia by contacting her at 95 Anthony Street, Westville, CT 06510, or phoning 389-6636.

*Anansi and Osun, the Elephant

*The Cat’s Baptism *The Talkin’ Cooter

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