

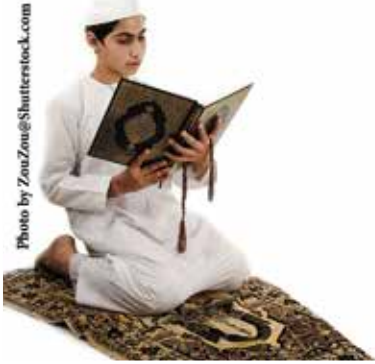
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# THE BIBLICAL STORYTELLER

A Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int'l. Publication



Telling Stories of Peace  
in a World in Love with War



# Teaching Kids About Christianity and Other Faiths

## The History of “Faith Seeker Kids”

The First of a 3-Part Series  
by Vicki Garlock, PhD

It was one of those hot, steamy summer days. I sat in my office feeling utterly overwhelmed. I had just completed my first year as Nurture Coordinator and Curriculum Developer at Jubilee! Community Church, and I was reviewing the year in my mind. While no one had complained, the program still felt horribly incomplete. The Sunday school teachers had adequately implemented the lesson plans I designed, but everything I knew about cognitive development and pedagogical technique indicated that using a lectionary with kids had been less than ideal. On top of that, I wasn't convinced that we were really preparing these kids for our 21st-century world. I was starting to feel that accepting this job was a big mistake.

For eleven years, I was a full-time psychology professor at Warren Wilson College, a small liberal arts institution just outside of Asheville, NC. I spent eight years earning my Ph.D. with dual specialties in neuroscience and cognitive development. I was offered the position at my first-choice school. Over time, I became a respected teacher, department chair, student adviser, and committee member—until I left it all behind to take a job at a church. It was a progressive Christian church, but it was a church nonetheless. My

academic colleagues thought I was insane, and my parents were struggling to support my seemingly irrational behavior. Frankly, I couldn't blame them.

The Jubilee! job wasn't just new for me. It was new for Jubilee!, too. Folks had become disenchanted with the kids' program because it didn't seem cohesive or grounded in any philosophy/theology. They had tried using liberal Christian curricula for Sunday school, but those still felt too traditional for them. They had tried programs grounded in human values, but those

no one quite knew where that was. That, after all, was now my job.

In many ways, I had the right combination of training and skills. My graduate training in cognitive development had given me insight into how kids think. My years of teaching forced me to create meaningful lesson plans. I had spent my entire childhood in parochial schools—a Lutheran grade school followed by a Catholic high school. Because my family also attended church every Sunday, I essentially had religion lessons six days a week from age 5-15. Even a complete idiot would know the Bible stories under those conditions. And that's how I convinced them to hire me.

During my first year, I developed a curriculum based on the lectionary used by our founding minister. It seemed like an easy decision. The kids would be reading the same Bible passages as their parents, and family members would be able to share their individual perspectives. We used a non-dogmatic approach and encouraged the kids to think for them-

selves about what the passages meant to them. Every few weeks, we would take a Sunday “off” from the Bible and learn about another faith tradition or practice. We usually focused on a holiday—the Buddha's birthday, the pagan wheel of the year, Sukkot, etc. Now that we had completed our first



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ignored the Bible stories entirely. The Unitarian Universalist approach often focused on Bible stories one year and “other religions” the next year, and Jubilee! was uncomfortable with that level of separation. Many of the parents were convinced that a happy intersection existed somewhere, but

year, the summer seemed a good time to reflect on where we stood. I wasn't thrilled.

To begin with, the teachers didn't like the lectionary approach to Sunday School. As they pointed out, everything seemed so random. The story of Moses receiving God's commandments was followed by Jesus' transfiguration, then the fall of Adam and Eve, Jesus' temptation in the desert, and Abram and Sarai departing from Haran. We followed it all up with a Sunday on Diwali!

The teachers wanted the kids to read stories—the Joseph story from beginning to end, the Exodus story from baby-in-a-basket to the parting of the Red Sea, and the stories of Jesus' life and teachings in some sort of reasonable order. It made total sense—both developmentally and pedagogically. Such a system would provide continuity and a natural way to review from week to week. It also meshed with the latest neuroscience research on brain processing. The same brain areas used to process the sights, sounds, and actions of real-life events are activated when we hear stories.<sup>1</sup> Why not take advantage of that? The teachers also wanted the faith holidays from other traditions to connect in a more meaningful way. Everyone loved the idea of systematically incorporating other religious practices, but it seemed to be increasing the already haphazard nature of what we were doing.

As the mother of two children, I had additional concerns. I want my kids to have the tools they need to find their religious and spiritual home in our complex world. I want my kids to understand the ways in which all religions address core human conditions and emotions. I want my kids to appreciate the different ways others have tried to articulate and connect with the Divine. I want my kids to combat fear, intolerance, and extremism on a daily basis simply by the way

they live their lives. I want my children to have peace.

So I got to work, starting with our themes. We needed themes that would align with the cognitive abilities of our four different age groups (Pre-school-Kindergarten through Middle-Schoolers). We needed themes that would allow us to focus on biblical narratives. And we needed themes that would transcend religious divisions. We started with: Peace, Compassion, Dreamers, Blessings and Gratitude, Creation, Awe and Wonder, and In the Desert.

The next step: integrate the multi-faith piece. It had to be more than a feel-good add-on, but it also had to be age-appropriate. We're offering a Sunday school program, after all, not a Masters in Theology. I clearly needed to learn more about child-rearing in other faith traditions. How do Muslim or Buddhist children learn about their faith practices? If humans truly are hard-wired for storytelling, what stories do Hindus or Bahai's tell their children? Was any of this stuff translated into English? Discovering the answers to those questions would take several months, but the process was—and still is—enlightening, stimulating, heartening, and at times, truly revelatory. I look forward to sharing the story of Faith Seeker Kids with you!

<sup>1</sup>PhysOrg.com, "Readers Build Vivid Mental Simulations of Narrative Situations, Brain Scans Suggest," January 6, 2009, <<http://www.physorg.com/print152210728html>>



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