

# Humans as Storytellers

## Implications for Interfaith Education



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# How Do People of Faith Teach Children?

## Sacred Texts

- Qur'an
- Tao Te Ching
- Buddhist Canon
- Vedas/Upanishads
- Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

## Story



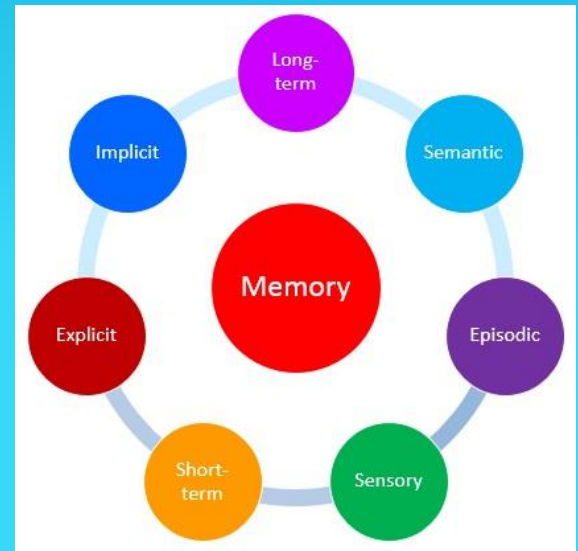
# Memory Power

**Version 1:** A regular story with the theme of the story (“There was once an old farmer who owned some very stubborn animals”) in the first sentence.

**Version 2:** Same story, with the thematic sentence (“There was once an old farmer who owned some very stubborn animals”) placed at the end.

**Version 3:** Same story, but no thematic sentence

**Version 4:** Sentences in random order.



# Brain Power

**Watching and reading activate similar perception centers of the brain**

**Doing and reading activate similar motor centers of the brain**

**Story-induced activation of the brain's sensory and motor areas is similar to real-life activation**

**Both real-life and story-related goal changes activate the pre-frontal cortex**



# People Power

## All About Trouble

### *Writing Fiction* by Janet Burroway

“Conflict is the fundamental element of fiction...In life, conflict often carries a negative connotation, yet in fiction....conflict is fundamental because in literature only trouble is interesting....This is not so in life.”

### *Storytelling Animal* by Jonathan Gottschall

“Stories the world over are almost always about people (or personified animals) with problems. The people want something badly – to survive, to win the girl or boy, to find a lost child. But big obstacles lurk between the protagonists and what they want.”

# All About Trouble

## Kids' (Age 3-5) Make-Believe Stories

“This is a story about a jungle. Once upon a time there was a jungle. There were lots of animals, but they weren't very nice. A little girl came into the story. She was scared. Then a crocodile came in. The end.”

“The boxing world. In the middle of the morning, everybody gets up, puts on boxing gloves and fights. One of the guys gets socked in the face and he starts bleeding. A duck comes along and says, ‘Give up.’”

# All About Trouble

## *Ambiguity of Play* by B. Sutton-Smith

“The typical actions in orally told stories by young children include being lost, being stolen, being bitten, dying, being stepped on, being angry, calling the police, running away or falling down. In their stories, they portray a world of great flux, anarchy, and disaster.”



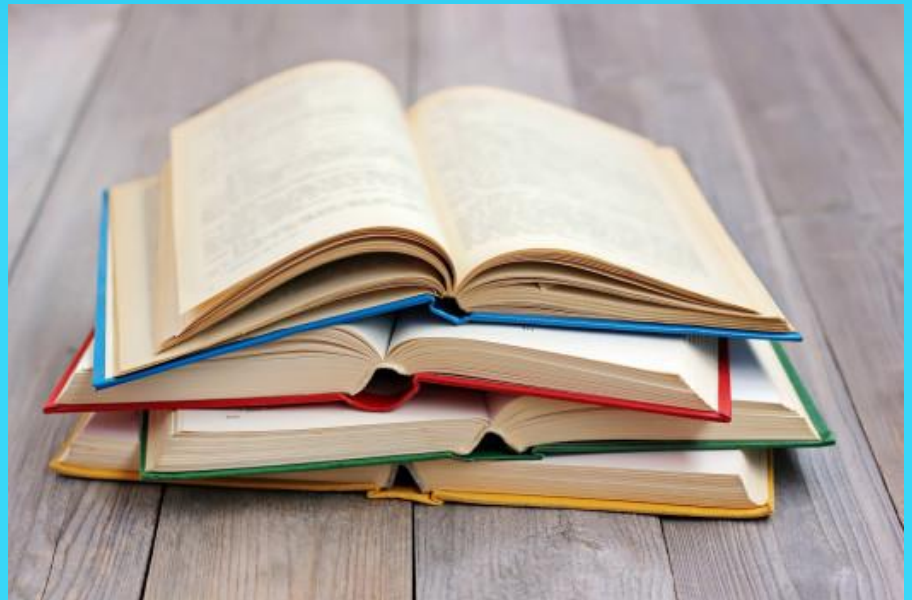
# When Conflict and Trouble are Good Things

**Raymond Mar, Keith Oatley and colleagues**

**Examined relationship between exposure to fictional stories and scores on social skills and empathy**

**Greater exposure to fictional stories correlated with higher scores on social ability, social support, and empathy.**

**Holds true even when gender, age, IQ, ability to be transported, and Openness are taken into account**





# Universality Across Time

**Iliad ( $\cong$  800 BCE)**

**Ramayana ( $\cong$  500 BCE)**

**Epic of Gilgamesh ( $\cong$  1800 BCE)**

**Creation stories**

**Mahabharata ( $\cong$  800 BCE)**



# All About Trouble

## Bhagavad Gita

**Krishna:** This despair and weakness in a time of crisis are mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna. How have you fallen into a state so far from the path to liberation? It does not become you to yield to this weakness. Arise with a brave heart and destroy the enemy.

**Arjuna:** My will is paralyzed and I am utterly confused. Tell me which is the better path for me. Let me be your disciple. I have fallen at your feet; give me instruction. What can overcome a sorrow that saps all my vitality? Even power over men and the gods or the wealth of an empire seem empty.

**Krishna:** One believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay?

# Stories in Interfaith Education

## Sanatana Dharma tradition (aka Hinduism)

Tales of the Panchatantra

## Buddhist tradition

Teachings of the Buddha/monks

Jataka tales



## Ancient Polytheistic/Indigenous traditions

Old Norse

Ancient Egypt

Ancient Greece

Maori/Aboriginal

Indigenous people of North and South America

Sub-Saharan Africa



# Stories in Interfaith Education

## Sufism

Stories of Sufi master (Pirs)  
Tales of the Four Dervishes

## Islam and Sikhism

Stories about the life of the Prophet Muhammad  
Stories about the 10 human Gurus

## Hasidic Judaism

Stories told by the rebbes  
Stories told about the rebbes



# Curricular Themes

**Compassion**

**Embracing the Darkness**

**Creation**

**Awe and Wonder**

**Blessings/Gratitude**

**Peace**



# Faith Traditions and Story

Focus on trouble  
and conflict

Ability to make  
societies work better

Exposure to ancient  
narratives



# Where to Find Us

<https://faithseekerkids.com/>

<https://faithseekerkids.com/presentations/>

<https://faithseekerkids.com/kidscurriculum/>