

Creating New Stories

Some Practical Ideas - compiled by Peter Privett

When writing or creating your own stories or object boxes, it is important to be aware of the complexity of both linguistic and visual language. What priorities, processes, values and philosophies underlie the process?

The following questions are offered as possible reference points. These questions and others probably need to be referred to throughout the creative process.

- ❖ On what level is the language operating, be it words objects images?
- ❖ Is it sign, symbol, image, visual aid?
- ❖ In what ways might we deepen the understanding of signs and symbols?
- ❖ What is the educative task?
- ❖ Does the language, both visual and linguistic, limit us into just Christian language or can it have a more archetypal nature that can speak to a wider audience?
- ❖ Is the language, both visual and linguistic, open or closed?
- ❖ What aesthetical issues need to be taken into consideration?

WRITING AND MAKING AN OBJECT BOX

One of the values at the heart of Godly Play is the idea of building and working in community, and I would suggest that this be at the heart of the process of creating object box stories. Instead of trying to do this alone, make it a corporate piece of work.

Choosing the story

The big question to ask here is:-
Why this story?

What are the criteria we've used to choose this new story?

Whose needs are being met? Sometimes there is great pressure from the adult community that children ought to have some information on a particular subject.

A useful set of criteria for choosing new stories might be set it alongside the fourfold existential boundaries that under-gird our human existence.

So in what ways might this new story help children give voice to the issues of being alone, relating to freedom or lack of it, facing death, or the big questions about the meaning of life?

What new issues does this story raise that are not dealt with in already existing stories?

What might be the starting-point? Do we start with a story and then find the objects or does a collection of objects suggest the story?

There are no right answers here. I'm suggesting that there needs to be some discussion and awareness of the rational before you begin the exercise.

This discussion is a community exercise which may involve a range of people, including the children themselves. Often after hearing object box stories, children are inspired to research and make their own.

RESEARCH THE STORY

- ❖ If it is a Bible story, it needs to be read in several translations. You will also need to consult commentaries.
- ❖ Discuss the story with your minister, spiritual director, Bible study group, Godly Play teachers.
- ❖ If it is a story about a saint or other person, read some biographies, dictionaries of saints.
- ❖ If it is a story about the church traditions, consult libraries, your minister.

Genre

- ❖ What genre will this new object box help develop. Is it sacred story, parable, liturgy or some other?
- ❖ To what spiritual work is the new story speaking? Is it to do with identity, helping to see the world in a different way, creating a sense of connection developing a deeper sense of silence? Or is it some other work?
- ❖ What wondering questions will be appropriate to help people get inside the story?
- ❖ If you create a new genre you'll need to think out the theology and how this serves the needs of the children.
- ❖ Where might this new story sit in the room, where might its home be?

Variety and Familiarity

- ❖ Di Pagel, an experienced Godly Play Trainer, in her advice for creating object boxes, suggests that there might be a variety of styles in every story. She suggests that in every object box there is something to unroll, something to sprinkle, something to open.
- ❖ Are there objects, phrases symbols that are already used in the core stories that might be helpful to develop links? For example in the new story of Isaiah objects such as the wolf and the lamb from the Good Shepherd are used as is a set of creation cards representing the new creation promised by Isaiah.

Write and rewrite – it is a community process

- ❖ Don't do this alone - work with a group of people
- ❖ Think together about the important themes and shifts of action in the story
- ❖ Each person can then write an outline of what they would like to say in the story. Each person then writes the story down
- ❖ Let it sit for a while...a day or two before you come back to it. Rewrite as necessary
- ❖ Decide what objects you will include.
- ❖ Does every part of the story need an object or are some things best left to the imagination
- ❖ Are the objects just visual aids or do they have a deeper more symbolic meaning?
- ❖ Then come together as a group and share the different versions. Decide together what you liked best what was important. Then ask the key question:-
"What would we leave out and still have everything we need?"
I have a poet friend whose advice to his creative writing group is, "Murder your darlings!" It's hard advice to follow but sometimes necessary.

Synthesis

- ❖ You will now have to synthesise your findings and agree on a prototype story.
- ❖ Agree on an underlay and the objects to be used.
- ❖ You may think that having done this, the task is over. However it may be that it is necessary to repeat the processes especially after you've trialled the story with different groups.

Locate and select objects

- ❖ Craft stores, discount department stores, toy-shops, start looking at ordinary shops with object box eyes.
- ❖ Local artists and crafts-people are an invaluable resource. Show them the story first and talk together about the principles and values so that they understand the different criteria.
- ❖ If you can't find or make what you need, consider using photographs, a drawing from a magazine. You may have to give up on some objects, the story can still be told without them.

WHEN SELECTING OBJECTS CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING

Is the material appropriate for children in several developmental stages?

- ❖ Will the smiling cartoon like face appeal to older children? Are the trays a size that children can carry by themselves?

Is the material appealing enough that children will want to work with it?

- ❖ Does the wood grain invite a tactile response? Is the fabric colourful and clean? Do the materials look as if they have been lovingly made?

Is the material safe for children to work with?

- ❖ Look for sharp edges, wood splinters, loose wicker, or rattan in baskets.

Is the material durable?

- ❖ It is better to spend more for materials that will last? Will they withstand use by many small and large hands?

Will the material be easy to use?

- ❖ Will wooden figures stand on felt and are they sanded enough not to snag surfaces?

Will the materials distract from the story itself?

- ❖ Are the children more interested in the glitter on the Star of Bethlehem than they are in the idea that the star led the Magi to the newborn baby?

Does the material limit the listener's point of entry into the story?

- ❖ Is the material open-ended enough to allow for children in different stages of faith development to enter into the story and use it to find meaning in their lives?

Is the material the best you can afford?

- ❖ Are you showing the children the value and importance of the stories we tell by using high quality storytelling materials? We use our best in the church furnishings, vessels and vestments. Must we settle for less than our best for materials used by and for children? As in the rest of the Godly Play room natural high quality materials is the norm

What containers might you use for an object box?

- ❖ Individual objects in small boxes, containers or bags help to keep them organised and add appeal.
- ❖ Do the boxes or containers detract or add to the story?

Does the material evoke the mystery of the Presence of God?

- ❖ The use of beautiful liturgical and storytelling materials helps children's attention to what they might otherwise find ordinary. In parables, sacred stories, and liturgy, God speaks directly to the heart, a heart which is deeply drawn towards beauty. Beautiful materials can draw us into a faith experience that transcends words.

TEST YOUR STORY

- ❖ Test your story in the classroom
- ❖ Listen to what the children say. Watch their response
- ❖ Keep the story in your room and observe the children
- ❖ Do they come back to it again? Jerome Berryman regards this as the greatest test!

Offer your story to others to test

- ❖ Ask them to report back the reactions
- ❖ Discuss any changes they would make and why

Time Time Time

- ❖ Remember that one of the important things is the process, not necessarily the end result. Jerome Berryman has only recently put stories into the public arena through the publications of the Complete Guide. Some earlier stories have been discarded, others have been worked reworked and reworked over a period of 30 years. So take time.