

Protection Stories

~ Suzanne Down

We who have a love for stories and for the visual puppet show know they can be a healing gift for children. However, children and their parents have become increasingly overwhelmed and anxious in a very unpredictable world. Breathing deeply and rhythmically, the basis for our inner balance and equilibrium, has become endangered. As we confront this “shallow breath” epidemic, a child’s knowing that the world is a good and safe place has become threatened.

We can help by telling them stories that intentionally bring back a sense that all is well in the world. I have been developing stories for many years that specifically hold children in the metaphorical “mother’s arms.” I call them Protection Stories.

This story direction began for me when people started contacting me with requests for a healing story after 9/11, after the hurricane and flooding from Katrina, after the great Tsunami, after the continual violence and mass shootings in this country. I increasingly thought, all children need a story that will make them feel safe, that will surround them with story pictures, like layers of gentle sheaths of protection. This kind of story would give each listening child extra “skins” to meet the world of today. With the worldwide Covid crisis changing our lives forever, and now the horrific situation in Ukraine, these stories are needed more than ever. We all need them to be a vital part of our story and puppetry curriculum.

We tell healthy stories and little tales all the time, but we can make our intention more conscious. A deeper understanding will guide us in how we hold this kind of story inwardly, how we speak it aloud, and how we reveal it through visual images in puppetry.

For instance, Mama Bird is making a nest; she carefully weaves in twig and moss, grasses and leaves. She is wise in her creation of a home for her baby birds that will withstand wind and rains. The nest is nestled on a sturdy branch up high in a tree, hidden safely by leaves. If she is lucky she has found some thistledown or sheep’s wool to make the nest soft and warm.

You see, layer after layer of protective story sheathing is already established, even before the little tale begins. Then Mama Bird sits on the nest, where the warmth of her plumped-up feathers, along with

her wings, like a blanket, warms the eggs and later the wee baby birds. Mama Bird singing a sweet melody, the warm rays of the golden sunset, the gentle rustling of a breeze through the leaves saying, “Shhhhhh, shhhhhh, time to sleep little ones”—all add more picture layers that offer a soothing quality. Our own observations of the listening children will tell us what is needed. The children’s breathing becomes rhythmical and deep. All is well in the world.

We can specifically create protection tales, and we can also rethink some of our traditional and favorite stories to make them more therapeutic. When we see tenderness and vulnerability in the children, or when the hardening of their inner lives arises as the fast pace and intellectuality of the adult world presses in, we can look for stories that have a “shelter” in the story, a sturdy and safe home. We can choose an old favorite like “The Mitten,” or “The Little Clay Pot,” or any number of folktales about the animals who, one by one, share a cozy home.

But what of the traditional ending? A bear comes along and sneezes, sending the image of a cozy, reliable home for all asunder! From the viewpoint of a Protection Story, we can re-picture the ending image to be something stable and wonderful. Something like this: A bear comes along, let’s say Rumbly Bumbly the Bear, and tries to push his way into the mitten. In the chaos, a bee ends up on the bear’s nose. Instead of making the bear sneeze, which sends all the animals up in the air and out of their warm shelter, imagine Bee telling Bear, “Follow me, I know where there is a hollow tree that is golden full of honey!” Bear follows the bee to a feast, yum, yum! There is also a hollow log on the ground by the tree covered with soft moss, where Bear curls up for his winter sleep. You see where I am going. Bee returns to the “mitten” with her friends. Order is intact in their beloved home, and friend Bear is happy with much more than he had hoped for.

Harmony reigns. All is well in the world.

This is not to say that all your stories will have this intention. But adding Protection Stories to your repertoire of tales to tell through the year will serve the children well.

The story that follows is a true tale, inspired by my own mother who lost her straw hat in the wind one day. The seasons came and went, and one day, on a walk with my dad on their land, they came upon the hat. As in this story, it was covered with growing plants, and they found a mouse nest inside. It was magical. My mom still wears straw hats—I wonder if more adventures in nature await her.



Illustration by Deborah Grieder from *Tell Me a Story* (WECAN, 2013)

Grandmother's Hat

Once there was a grandmother who loved to garden. It was a lovely summer morning, and she went outside to work there. The garden beds were already overflowing with fresh, colorful vegetables and flowers. Butterflies and ladybugs nestled on the leaves and blossoms, and bees happily buzzed as they sipped the sweet nectar. Grandmother knelt down to weed the rows of carrots and beets, and then started to pick enough lettuce for a salad for lunch. Already the sun was hot, and she took off her straw hat to cool off.

Suddenly, a gust of wind whirled and twirled over the garden, and picked up her hat and blew it here and there, high and low! Grandmother started to chase after her hat, she reached high, she reached low, but the wind blew it higher and higher, and finally away from sight.

"Oh, my old straw hat," laughed Grandmother. "It was a good hat for many years, now it deserves a little adventure!" She kept on laughing as she picked up her basket of lettuce, and went inside to make her lunch. "What a fun little tale to tell my grandchildren!"

Meanwhile, the wind blew the hat far away from the garden, over a forest of aspen trees, and finally settled it down in a lovely peaceful meadow full of summer wildflowers. It was a happy place to land, and the hat was content to sit there and enjoy the blue sky, and sweet smells of the flowers.

Summer turned to Autumn, and the golden leaves of the aspen trees fluttered in the breezes and settled

down all over the meadow, and covered the hat with a blanket of gold.

Autumn turned chilly and soon after the first frost, beautiful white snowflakes fell over the land, and the hat was covered with a blanket of white snow. The snow fell all through the winter months, and the hat rested still, under many blankets of snow.

The spring sun began to warm the snow, and slowly, slowly, the snow began to melt, and the straw hat was able to peek out at the meadow in springtime. The rains of spring came, and the grass greened, and spring flowers started to grow all over the meadow. Some of the grasses and flowers started to grow in and out of the straw hat. The hat was pleased to become so lovely.

And when summer came again, with the sun high in the sky, and long hot days filled the meadow, the straw hat had become a beautiful garden. How happy the little hat was. Then one day a little mouse appeared in the meadow. When mouse saw the straw hat garden, he thought, "This might make a fine house for me." Mouse went closer and climbed all over the straw hat, and even nibbled a little hole in the hat, like a window, and looked inside. Oh my, what a big room and high ceiling there was. Yes, indeed, mouse had found a wonderful house. A gold straw hat, white mouse, colorful flowers and green leaves.

He went all through the meadow gathering soft feathers, and flower petals. He went into the forest to

find some moss and brought them all back to his new house. He went through the little window and made a soft nest to sleep in on the floor of the big room.

When his nest was finished, mouse looked out the window of his house. The sun was beginning to set, and the last warm golden rays of sunshine settled on the meadow and on the straw hat house. Mouse looked out for a long time, until the night sky began to grow deep blue, and the stars twinkled over the meadow and the straw hat house. All was well, and mouse was happy in his new home. He had one last look out at the beautiful world and said, "Good Night, Meadowland." Then he settled down in his wee, soft, cozy nest in the big room with the high ceiling of his new straw hat house. How peaceful it was. ♦

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