

Stories for the Journey

Nancy Mellon

Hanan is a sturdy Israeli lawyer and a devoted father who experiences the great joy of storytelling almost every day with his young children. He insists that he would have missed this pleasure were it were not for his wife, Tsiptori, who has been practicing storytelling as a healing art for several years in the Jerusalem area. Recently I had the privilege of traveling along with Hanan, Tsiptori and their children for an exhilarating dip in the Dead Sea. I asked Hanan for permission to share some of the ongoing story he has been telling his children.

Hanan's saga began four years ago as he was driving his daughter to school for the first time. She sat beside him in a car seat, both of them feeling the anxious, hesitant excitement that often accompanies this special event. Just as they were pulling out of the driveway in the early morning for the half-hour journey to school, Hanan decided to rise to the occasion and attempt to tell his first story for her. His daughter quickly became completely happy. Since then she has looked forward to each departure for school because of the special story they share. Hanan has continued what he began that day every weekday morning for the past four years. His young son, who heard every detail of the story from his sister, eventually joined them en route to school for his first day of kindergarten. Both children continue to remind their father of details he has forgotten.

That day as we drove together, Hanan and the children retold the story for me. I was fascinated and impressed by how Hanan reflected even the most subtle emotional challenges of his children in his story. It has been a vehicle for them all to grow emotionally very close together. Even after four years, Hanan is still amazed as the story unfolds that springs from his desire to manifest fatherly wisdom for his children. As we sped along the highway that day, Tsiptori listened with joy for the lovingly intuitive imaginations that her husband continues to discover despite his many rational concerns. I scribbled notes as he and his children, now eight and five years old, reviewed their beloved going-to-school saga.

It began: Once upon a time a beautiful little Princess lived with the king and queen in a golden

palace. The Princess had a special friend who was a dwarf. Three other close friends always stayed near her, Squirrel, Rabbit, and Mole. She fed them and they played hide-and-seek and many other games in the nearby palace garden and woods. At night the animals slept with her in her room. One day the Princess and her parents noticed that Dwarf was sad. He confessed that he was sad because he had been away from Dwarf-land now for years and missed his parents and friends. He wanted very much to see them again, but to get to Dwarf-land required a very challenging journey across a huge forest, a valley, and a rushing river, and through very high mountains beyond the river.

The Princess suggested that her three loyal friends accompany him, and they agreed to this plan because they loved the Princess, and they understood that Dwarf could not go alone. Many anxious and excited preparations were made (these took several days for Hanan to describe). A long departure feast at the palace followed, and at last all was ready and the travelers said their farewells and started into the woods.

By the time Hanan had reached this part of the story, many weeks of school had been successfully navigated. Communing with his daughter through the story process, he had found within himself a deep well of patient inspiration and intuition he had never dreamt of finding. Even today he says that his storyteller's voice often sounds strange and fascinating to him as he listens to the story with as much deep amazement as his children do.

Now, four years later, the dwarf and his many friends are still, in exquisite and leisurely detail, wending their way toward Dwarf-land. As the episodes evolve, each day finds them traveling farther from the palace into more courageous and complex adventures. At first, as they trod less familiar ground, their greatest challenge was just to keep going. As each evening drew near, again and again they learned how to choose safe places to make camp and to decide together which of their supplies to eat for supper, and who was to sit guard as the others slept. Each of the travelers offered different contributions: Dwarf, his skill with wood

and humor; Rabbit, courage and swift legs; Squirrel, helpful suggestions and cleverness at solving problems; and Mole, honest timidity and insecurity. Each one helped and ate and curled up in its own way to rest and dream.

As the trees grew thicker and taller, unfamiliar sounds often alarmed the friends. Sometimes they wanted to turn back. Three little foxes who were afraid slept secretly by their fire at night and gradually became less skittish friends. One day a strange wailing filled their ears, and they discovered a wounded tiger with a thorn in his leg who told them he knew about their Princess and thought her very nice. When the tiger was feeling better, he offered to travel with them to lend his strength and courage. If one of the travelers grew sick, they called for Brown Bear, well known among all the animals as the best healer in that part of the wood. Bear would come to offer additional medicine of herbs and healing mud and water.

During the long days and in the evenings the creatures often longed to see the Princess again. At night they dreamt of her. Sometimes her beloved owl messenger would bring them news and cookies in a little bag. In return Dwarf and the creatures would draw pictures and send them back to her in its beak. The Princess always remembers, and is deeply interested in each one's birthday. Though it can be difficult for her to find their whereabouts, by riding on Eagle she manages to attend each birthday, bearing gifts and poems. It can take days for Hanan to describe the birthday celebrations in the deep woods, for in addition to the excitement of the Princess's visitation, each creature takes time to find or make a special gift. Old and new friends from the surrounding woodlands receive special invitations. Birthday food is gathered and prepared from dew and streams, roots and berries, bark and leaves.

As Hanan's confidence in his own intuition and imagination grew apace, episode after episode reflected the interests of the children and also their needs and fears. They met many strangers whose habits gradually became more familiar. One day the path narrowed to an impasse. Dwarf and his friends again thought they should give up their journey, until Squirrel went to ask big animals for help. He found a kind hippo and some high-spirited elephants that agreed to walk in front of them. They

thanked these generous creatures and asked them to keep the way open for their return. For a while bad witches bothered them, until many friends gathered and worked together to build a house for them. When the witches received what they needed, they became good and helpful in return.

The travelers always receive help somehow with their challenges. In one episode they were given a box from a magical friend. When they shook this cube of gold and spoke the right words, they would find things inside it to help them solve even the darkest problem. One day they discovered that the forest colors had been stolen by monsters who were painting the forest and all its inhabitants black. With the help of forest fairies and the golden box, the animals gathered enough courage to sleuth out the monsters' den and restore the light by forcing them to restore all the colors again. Other adventures portrayed dark creatures lurking behind walls and dangerous giants.

Now and then the travelers happen into another story that the children know. In one adventure, they met the Prince when he was preparing to enter the thorny thicket surrounding Sleeping Beauty. The creatures and the Dwarf encouraged him, and when the Prince emerged intact, the travelers were invited to his wedding. The newly awakened bride loved meeting the Dwarf, his fellow travelers, and all their retinue. It took Hanan several weeks to describe the details of the spectacular wedding celebration. With fatherly care, he has learned to sustain a leisurely narrative pace. Hanan's ongoing story, encouraged by his wife, has created a mood of peaceful confidence and warmly weaving, ever-renewing adventure that pervades their life together.

What might have been a chilly and confusing morning drive to school for father and children has instead been an opportunity to knit an astonishingly intimate fabric of heart and imagination.

Nancy Mellon is the author of Storytelling and the Art of the Imagination and Storytelling with Children. Her newest book is about the vital links between human physiology, personal development, and storytelling imagination.

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