Rock-a-bye Baby

~ Pamela C. Perkins

"When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall. . ."
and so, as the familiar nursery rhyme describes, the baby descends from spiritual worlds to be born on earth, "cradle and all." The newborn arrives out of the rhythms of the maternal womb into a chaotic, primarily unfamiliar world of sensory experience. But from the very beginning, language has woven "a subtle linguistic fabric into the foundations of our developing organism," as educator Michael Rose puts it (*Living Literacy*, p. 74). He explains in more depth:

> *Already in the 'inner ocean' of the womb there are sounds to be heard by the embryonic ear. The character of these sounds is influenced by the medium through which they are transported: these are 'water' sounds, perceived in darkness and part and parcel of the rocking, swaying, rising and falling of the amniotic waters that cradle the curled foetus in the season before the seasons of the sun. Ever-present amongst these mingled water sounds is the beating of the mother's heart. Never again, once the moment of birth has passed, do we experience the pulse of life coming equally out of the world's periphery and equally out of our own centre. Never again can the two sides of our eardrum be quite so intimately linked.* (Rose, p. 74)

In recent years, an increasing amount of research and professional attention has been directed to fetal sensory, emotional, physical, and neural experiences. Michael Rose's description, however, gives one a sense of the in-utero experience from the perspective of the incarnating child as an active, rather than more passive recipient of the maternal and its own biological circumstances. He continues:

> *Waterborne language speaks to us musically, and we hear it* feelingly. *A baby will be attuned both to its mother's voice and its mother's mother tongue. This has nothing to do with the actual words spoken, but is rather a response to the nuances of vowel sounds in particular and to the musicality of phrasing that identifies one language as distinct from another. Through the faculty of imitation. . . the unborn child attunes herself to the mother tongue. What sounds into the child becomes a formative power that shapes the physical organism and sets its seal upon that organism's utterances. The basic equipment and capability for making vocal sounds, including those of speech (in any language, whatever the child's nationality), is given by heredity; the tuning of this equipment is made through imitation.* (Rose, p. 74)

Language is inseparable from the relationship between those who speak and share it. Its development is enhanced for the infant by activities such as humming, singing soft lullabies, and rocking, all of which further support the baby's rhythmical adjustment to its earthly surroundings. Yet language is not wholly and simply a matter of spoken words: words are not language itself but rather the vehicles of language. Language encompasses the fullness of life's expressions and meaning. Michael Rose explains:

> *Through the bonds of sympathy develops the language of communication. To begin with this language is pre-verbal: it is the language of movement and gesture. The activities of feeding, washing and dressing are fundamentally linguistic activities. . . The infant's vocal accompaniments to these early ministrations are expressions of pleasure and displeasure, articulated through a musical vocabulary of changing pitch, timbre, rhythm and volume. Though musical rather than verbal, it is a language with its own inherent grammar and syntax: it is designed to express emotional meaning just as clearly as words may express intellectual meaning .* (Rose, p. 80)

The sensitive parent or caregiving adult not only tunes into the child's vocalizations but also responds to them vocally in the right way. In a 1998 BBC radio report, Libby Purvis and Dorothy Selleck stated, "Now, thank goodness, researchers with all their instruments and neurological expertise confirm that a close, bonded mother will quite automatically use tones and rhythms and intonations which are calculated to promote early

language development." Another British researcher, Colwyn Trevarthen, develops this concept further:

> *Mothers find that they can move the baby's body in rhythmic ways and chant and sing songs and the babies like it. . . so we find for example that mothers sing nursery rhymes which have got very clear phrases in them. The baby is vocalizing on the final vowel at the end of the phrase, synchronized with their mother, and they often do it in tune. They can pitch their voice so it matches, so in fact the two of them are trying to produce something together* (Trevarthen, 1998).

The expression "mother tongue" is especially apt, for indeed, language is our "second mother." In the care of this mother, we learn all of the nuances, attitudes and ways of seeing the world around and within ourselves that are indigenous to our culture. According to Horst Kornberger in his book *The Power of Stories,* "Language is pre-intelligence in its most artistic form" (p. 106).

Kornberger describes our first experience of story, stating that it is the most important tale of all.

> *Though we never remember it, it is the one tale we never forget, for it has become who we are. It has shaped us before we have shaped ourselves. It is the tale of care, told by the mother in the primal language of love; it is her presence and warmth, told long before words, in the vernacular of touch, the texture of skin, the taste of milk, the cocoon of warmth.* (Kornberger, p. 105).

Thus the first tale an infant hears is spoken in the language of love, and love is synonymous with life. Ideally it is the tale that anchors us emotionally, and forms the bond that weathers all storms. One might say that this first story is the blueprint for all other tales to come. "It is the first of securities, fulfilling the most primal of needs. It is the foundation stone on which our edifice of soul is built and it provides the matrix of our future health" (Kornberger, p. 107).

As we speak to the baby during caregiving routines, the infant begins to respond with coos and other vocalizations. Perhaps we hum softly to lull a child to sleep or simply, as an expression of togetherness, love and connection. Kornberger describes these soothing tones we use in interacting with the baby as "siblings" of the mother tongue that are "as playful as any brother or sister." In regard to the hum, he states that "it is born at the same time we are, she is our delicate twin-sister (the ruffian nursery rhyme is the older brother). The hum continues the music of the womb. It is the softest of all songs, the swaddling clothes woven from the mother's voice. The hum is the first music, a primal song in which mother and nature still coincide. Like a slow, warm steady cradle it calms the baby into contentment" (p. 108).

A hum wells up from the depths of tenderness within the heart and soul, and needs neither the sanction nor guidance of any official "tune." However, within all cultures, a wealth of traditional and contemporary lullabies is available to bring further joy to infant and adult. These resources may already be part of the mother or caregiver's own childhood memories, or learned directly from others. A rich variety of resource books are available, many of which include CDs. These latter are not intended for use with the infant or young child, for no mechanical recording, however lovely, can substitute for the warmth and connection of the living human voice and the relationship that transpires between infant and adult.

Hums, cradle songs and lullabies are gradually followed by finger plays and little rhyming games that involve gentle, playful touch, such as "This Little Piggy Went to Market." Being together evolves into doing together; movement and language coincide and this, in turn, stimulates brain development.

Nursery rhymes come next. These small stories have "already jumped from the mother's lap." Kornberger introduces nursery rhymes like this:

> *They are more adventurous siblings than finger plays. They don't need to be learned: they are already known. . . they are playmates made of language. Through them an ancient layer of language echoes in modern times. They are a version of the old magical invocation. . . They seize us the moment we hear them and they never release us. When we have long forgotten other verses we still know them by heart."* (Kornberger, p.109)

Every culture has a wealth of folk songs, rhymes and folk tales that are full of life, wit and wisdom. "Through rhythm and repetition, both of sound and image, the nursery rhymes sing themselves into the child's consciousness and memory. Repetition confirms experience as an enduring reality. The more specifically things are repeated, the more real and meaningful they become for the little child' (Rose, p 87).

Of the many people who have devoted years of study to the wisdom of nursery rhymes and fairy tales, two outstanding voices serve to inspire and guide our work with young children. Therapeutic storyteller Nancy Mellon and master puppeteer and storyteller Suzanne

Down, each in her own way, reveal the inherent power of story medicine in the lives of young children.

In her book *Storytelling with Children,* Nancy Mellon describes nursery rhymes as "little rituals chanted in groups (with children also inwardly imitating the adult's spoken word). . . Rhythm, repetition and rhyme prevail over meaning. . . these rhymes belong to story medicine. They are primal medicine, like good food and joy. Nursery rhymes are indeed the nursery of all other tales; they are the stories we start with." As nursery rhymes are part of most people's childhood memories and are readily accessible, even in these media-laden times of declining reading, writing and linguistic skills, they provide the caregiver with an easy and lighthearted "entry point" into the world of storytelling. Mellon continues,

> *Rhyming words also support our need for rhythmic order and satisfy our ears' need for expectation and closure. . . Words that sound almost the same, chiming and echoing through a nursery rhyme or story, encourage listening and language development. Well-spoken rhythmic stories vitalize the child; rhymes and rhythms encourage the tremendous cumulative task of building their own bodies. Recurring rhythm sways their circulatory system towards greater life. Rhyme may encourage bones, sinews and connective tissue to grow. Rolling and pulsing word repetition gives a sense of orderly progression—the sense of being safely embedded in a whole, nurturing context. . . Every rhyme and tale repeated with attention to each word warms the child's loving response to language.* (Mellon, p. 30)

Although nursery rhymes may seem to have a humble place in the world of literature, one can begin to see that there is profound wisdom imbedded within them. They evolved in a time when an unconscious sensitivity to cosmic and earthly rhythms was directly experienced. They have withstood the dilution and adulteration that other old traditional tales arising from the folk souls of various cultures have suffered.

Suzanne Down, director and founder of Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry Arts, similarly explains that the value and importance of nursery rhymes are not contained in the actual word content but rather, in "the power of rhythm and repetition to help facilitate a clear, healthy breathing, circulation and immune system, throughout the body, right down to the toes!" She adds:

> *The nursery rhymes work right into the heartbeat and circulation, not into head thinking. They mirror the cosmic rhythms for the young child finding his or her way on earth. As timeless world rhymes, their language has become lifted and alive rhythmically in the world ether. This means they have an added etheric quality to them. Rhyme, repetition, and rhythm: these qualities penetrate into the very physical organism, supporting healthy physical and emotional circulation throughout the body. . . through the experience of the nursery rhyme, all comes into order and balance*" (Down, undated).

In one's everyday consciousness, it is easy to see how nursery rhymes support literacy directly through their inherent rhythm and musicality. The perspectives of Nancy Mellon, Suzanne Down, and others necessitate thinking outside of the more concrete, material box or exchanging the more linear approaches to literacy for a more all-inclusive understanding of the wholeness of life and being.

To round out the picture of the importance of nursery rhymes, Nancy Mellon draws an analogy between the digestion and assimilation of physical food and the soul nourishment children receive as we recite, with regularity and enjoyment, these simplest of tales:

> *Just as digestion and assimilation improve with a regular meal schedule, so do stories when they are part of the day's rhythm. . . you are telling for [the children's] future selves as well as the present. Animals, humans and plants share their rhythms together. Our primary pulses move in a steady beat. Poems and stories which express this rhythmic music are the natural food of growing children.* (Mellon, p. 30-32)

As with healthy foods served in well-balanced, regular, aesthetically presented meals, nursery rhymes and all stories that contain this "rhythmic music"—especially those that are further enhanced with movements of finger and hand gestures or visually with puppets—truly feed the soul of adult and child alike. They help to connect us with the natural rhythms that flow through all earthly life and beyond.

The tales that follow songs and nursery rhymes should be simple and straightforward at first. Little stories that reflect the natural environment surrounding the child are ideal. Suzanne Down says, "Whenever we can bring warm and joyful wonder to the world around us, and share that with a child, we change the soul of a child forever." The storyteller voice lies within each of us, initially shy and reluctant perhaps but with practice, it becomes vibrant and

strong; from this story voice come living images that children thrive on.

The adult herself needs to delight in the story for it to fully unfold in a child's soul. According to Suzanne Down,"We must genuinely feel the wonder in our own inner life first, and then it will clothe the story voice and story pictures with authentic magic!" It is important for the storyteller to remember that the child is an integral part of the story context, for it is only in the child's imagination that stories come truly alive. It is the child who inwardly gives them final shape and form. Stories are best told in a quiet space, using a calm and natural voice, for a young child needs no added drama. "Leave that to the imagination of the child—she will know what to do" (Mellon, p. 110).

> *How we speak to impressionable children is likely to affect them for the rest of their lives. . . attention and commitment is required to speak with truth, humor and loving kindness. Whether parents or teachers, we can intentionally invite warmth to fill and organize us from top to toe, and seek a spiritual outlook, so that love and respect can flow from our words. . . Children need clearly pronounced words that begin, continue and round off with a sense of deliciousness in the mouth and freshness in the air - like a peach. The clarity, warmth and sincerity of the stories you tell, help them [the children] to develop these qualities in themselves. . . your voice is a subtle instrument that attunes [children] to both inner and outer realities. Young children especially require whole stories: during a story everything else can wait. Undivided story time helps them build integrity in all areas of their lives* (Mellon, p. 34-36).

The importance of clear speech and the responsibility of the adult to become aware of and improve his or her voice cannot be overestimated. In *Living Literacy* Michael Rose states that:

> *Language longs to be elaborate and detailed, alive and complex. . . it is empowering to express oneself clearly and much joy can be had from the artistic use of words. Language is the soul out loud, the open space for feelings to air themselves and the platform for meanings to meet and converse. The language we use is a story in itself, so let us take care of it from the beginning and tell it in the right way. . . Like a good story, language must avoid abstraction. In childhood, all abstractions are strangers. They act like alien intruders in the soul, burdening the child as with heavy lumps of undigested food. Children cannot deal with them. Intellectual content is foreign to a child's soul as it is to a good tale.* (Rose, p. 107)

Young children live in the present, in the doing and being, from moment to moment. When we tell children stories, we want them to share in the deliciousness of the sounds, in the living, authentic images of their direct experiences. Rather than an abstract media image, it is much more meaningful, enjoyable and nurturing to create a word picture about the cat next door, the neighbor's cow, the shell on the beach, or the caribou in the tundra that they have seen or touched, cared for or wondered at through direct experience. ◆

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