Slow Puppetry

~ Trice Atchison

The slow movement is a cultural shift toward slowing down life's pace in response to its prevailing hectic speed, increasing human connection, and taking better care of the planet. Since it started in Italy three decades ago with slow cooking, it has caught on in numerous other sectors. I propose to add a new category: slow puppetry.

A rushed story cannot land in a child's heart. This is something I've learned over the years as a narrator for the puppet shows my early childhood colleagues and I present at school and community events. By calming the pace of the spoken parts and allowing time for the puppets to speak through their gestures, children are left free to take in the story and images. The slower pace doesn't mean delivering a plodding and lifeless narration, it means allowing breath to flow in and around the words, carrying them directly from speaker to listener. Each puppet as well can have its rightful moment in the sun.

When I started narrating, I tended to speak too fast, until in rehearsals a harried puppeteer would plead, *slow down*. I wasn't confident that the gentle motions of the puppets during those wordless moments would be enough to capture the children's imaginations and convey the storyline. I worried that there would be awkward, empty space. But in time I learned that those spaces are essential. I began to write "wait" into the script in numerous places to remind myself not to race ahead.

Well-placed pauses work together with words to weave a story's spell. When the narrator pays attention to the pace and quality of voice and the meaning of the story, the puppets have a chance to literally bring the tale to life. This is especially important for the littlest children, who still rely on dreamy images to be able to follow along. Puppet stories told and acted out by a single teacher likewise benefit from approaching the activity with greater consciousness. Voice, pauses, and gestures can work synergistically to make even the simplest nursery rhyme captivating.

Puppets are the ultimate teachers of how to use gesture to communicate, because gesture is all they have. They gaze into one another's faces, set out innocently on a wooded path for a transformational journey, hide behind a rock as a bear lumbers by, lose their way, kneel by a pond to weep, and express hope when a little bird comes along to show the way home. That is the stuff of fairytale magic.

I was reminded of the importance of these moments recently while narrating *A Visit to Snow Mother*, written by my colleague, Somer Serpe. We've performed the play several times, letting it breathe a little more with each retelling. For instance, there's a moment where the snow children are called for a snack of snow porridge and gather round expectantly. This scene delighted our children, who are used to having rice porridge for snack every Monday. At first, this struck me as a non-moment in the story, something to skate over lightly in order to get to the more meaty parts. But when the expressive rod puppet Snow Mother had plenty of time to lovingly hand out the porridge to each snow child, our audience was transfixed. Here a humble activity from their own lives was given great ceremony, and they drank it in. A similar effect happened when the little girl "helped to carry piles of snow to cover all of Mother Earth's children that were not already tucked in under their snowy blankets." Hanging chimes lightly played while the simple action of covering the root children took place in its own good time. The children watched with knowing engagement at this moment reminiscent of their own nap time. They understood that it was an honor for the little girl—who had so longed to help with some real work but had been told to "run along"—to be allowed to participate in this sacred task.

Modern Western culture is generally uncomfortable with gaps and pauses; that's why even when we offer something different, as a gently paced puppet show for young children, pauses can initially elicit in narrators and puppeteers a feeling

of low-level anxiety: "Oh, no. Fill up the space!" In contrast, an image I recently saw beautifully illustrated the fullness of emptiness. Michael Kokinos, keynote co-presenter with Dr. Lakshmi Prasanna at the 2018 WECAN February conference, showed the audience a picture of a snake drawn by an aboriginal man from the northern Australian outback still living in traditional ways. Instead of being depicted as a thing apart, the snake emerged out of its surroundings while remaining embedded in it. The "empty space" was completely filled with dense cross-hatchings to represent a living, connecting substance. The seemingly (to us) empty background was as meaningful and present as the snake itself, forever intertwined.

When given enough time, sound effects for a puppet show—pentatonic chimes, a bird's call, the strum of a lyre, the crunching of dry leaves—can work their enchantment, too. Otherwise a moment meant to enhance the story can be cut short, like a chime muffled too soon and robbed of its resonating vibrations. Additionally, approaching the task of narration with a sense of presence means that technical difficulties can be noticed and not derail a performance. An inattentive narrator will not notice the tangled marionette strings that need a moment for undoing or the forgotten prop that needs a few beats to reappear in its right place. But a present narrator will calmly wait until the storytelling and action are able to glide back into sync.

This same principle seems to apply in every kind of human interaction: If the goal is to fill up empty space with *something*, then the effect leaves us feeling hollow. But if the intention is to make a heartfelt connection, even if a few strings get tangled, then the exchange leaves us full. ◆

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