

Greetings:

First of all I must say a huge thank you.

Thank you to Storylines for this unbelievable acknowledgement. And thank you to Storylines for your tremendous commitment to NZ literacy.

I am not sure if there is any other country who have such a group of dedicated people who support and promote children's literacy like Storylines NZ. How fortunate are our children.

Regarding the Margaret Mahy Medal, I am sure that every recipient of this award, would have considered it a great honour.

Personally for me- to receive this honour from my fellow Ne. Zealanders is so very special and beyond words.

As a teacher, parent and grandparent of course I was constantly reading Margaret Mahy's stories to my children. And it goes without saying they were stories well loved.

I had the pleasure of meeting Margaret on a few occasions. Once at that dreadful LA airport, how astonishing it was to stumble across Margaret Mahy, amongst the milling mass of sameness, there she was, looking like a character who had escaped from one of her own stories. There was no mistaking this extraordinary, exceptional New Zealander. She once said *that magic did exist but was just not visible to all*.

I don't think anyone at the LA airport would have recognized there was magic among them, except me. I was privileged to have some magical moments with her. While I greatly admired her talent, I also greatly admired her humility. I am sure she didn't see herself as the *Tana Mahuta* of children's stories, but we know she was. Along side this *Tana Mahuta* I feel like a tiny speck of lichen, clinging to the bark.

So this is an honour and I thank you sincerely for bestowing it on me. You will never know how much it truly means.

When Dr. Libby rang and told me about all this she said it came with a tag- to deliver a lecture.

Thinking about what to say, I found rather a challenge; What is new? What is different?

[Marie Antoinette said,](#)

There is nothing new, except what has been forgotten.

And so, I share with you this evening- a topic that is nothing new and not forgotten I am sure, especially with the audience here this evening.

I just thought my best option was to share something that is meaningful to me and resonates with my soul. Something that embodies both my love for children and my love of story.

Whether it is a lecture in the true sense of the word,
I am not sure.

I have titled it: **Everyone has a Story.**

Our story is the fabric of who we are, woven together with many threads. We don't accomplish anything in this world alone, it is the weaving of the many threads- the characters, the incidents, that create the pattern in the fabric. Our lives consist of many and varied experiences. Some major, others maybe just small incidents but if we weave the threads of them all together, then we have one long story. There will be many different characters, settings and plots. But at the centre of this story is ourselves.

"Scientists have discovered," says Jonathan Gottschall, "that the memories we use to form our own life stories are boldly fictionalized. And social psychologists point out that when we meet a friend, our conversation mostly consists of an exchange of stories. We ask 'What's up?' or 'What's new?' and we begin to narrate our lives to one another, trading tales back and forth over cups of coffee or glasses of wine, unconsciously shaping and embellishing to make the tales hum. And at the dinner table we share with our families, the small comedies and tragedies of our day."

Stories fill all the spaces in our daily activities.

We may feel that our stories are too too insignificant and don't matter to anyone else. But I believe everyone's story matters, and that these stories are important to share and to pass onto others, especially the children in our lives.

Each generation need to hear our stories. We may not have written stories and be published authors, but we can all be storytellers. We can delve into our lives and recapture the stories that are lurking there, craft and re-craft them, polish them, commit them to memory and bring them to life by telling them.

Sharing our stories with others is a gift we all have to give- a gift of who we truly are, what has defined us and what we care about. Our stories give our lives meaning.

Storytelling as we all know, is nothing new- it is as old as mankind. According to Ursula Le Guin,

'There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.'

Dr. David Leeming, in his book, *Storytelling Encyclopedia*: asserts that *'storytelling and our obsession with narrative, is a characteristic of every culture throughout all of time. Humans tell stories, and we somehow wouldn't be humans or connected to each other if we ceased this life-giving and culturally affirming action.'*

We need to keep this ancient art from dying out. With the invasion of technology, I am nervous about its future. And question whether modern society may have abandoned storytelling.

Rich are those children whose parents and grandparents shared their stories.

Stricklan Gillian in the final verse of his poem, "I Had a Mother Who Read to Me," writes:

*You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be --
I had a Mother who read to me.*

Not to take anything away from the reading stories aloud, but in addition, I think we could add: I had a mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, teacher, friend, who *told stories to me*.

I don't ever recall my mother telling me stories because I have very little memory of her.

When I was five years old, my life changed forever. My mother and maternal grandmother were both killed in a car accident. The way my father coped was to block out her memory. He was so devastated by this loss, that it seemed impossible for him to talk about her. And so, who she was and what she was like, is a vacant space in my life. She was only 38 years old, but I am sure there were stories from her childhood and had they been shared, they would have given me a glimpse into the fabric of her life. They would have provided a precious thread in helping me know and understand a little about the person who was my mother.

I was not a 21st Century child- obviously. Our 21st century children are thrust into a media-soaked environment.

My background was devoid of any technology whatsoever. In fact, we didn't even have a radio let alone a television. My father believed these things would bring an outside, worldly element into our home. He wanted to protect us from such influences.

My father was a literary man. Education was important to him. He was fortunate to have parents who could afford to give him a secondary and university education, which was not common in those days.

He didn't read stories to us, but most nights after dinner he recited poetry, usually narrative poetry. The love of poetry I have today, is a result I believe of that early exposure, saturation and immersion I had as a child. Poetry helped me gain an ear for rhythm. It is a precious gift.

My father also told stories – some stories from his own life, but mostly bible stories that he had committed to memory. Daniel in the Lion's Den, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He was a shy and rather reserved man, but he could tell stories well. He told them in such a way powerful images formed in my mind. I could see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, strolling around in that fiery furnace without a hair on their head singed.

Images that form in your mind have been called "brain movies," say Conner and Wilson. They believe brain movies can be more exciting and memorable than a Hollywood film. Learning to create brain movies can help us comprehend. I have to admit though, struggling to comprehend how anyone could survive a fiery furnace and being the type of child I was, could have been tempted to test it out.

What did I gain from listening to these stories – a rich vocabulary, a sense of joy in language, and a love for how it sounded -what wonderful names they were to me- Shadrack, Mesahack and Abendigo- they have a real sense of rhythm – you could say- poetic. Story is the language that kids deal in. Unbeknown to my father he was creating for me, brain movies. A vicarious experience where I became right there, in the fiery furnace with Shadrack, Meshack and Abendigo. And those brain movies still remain with me today. Stories belong to the child forever.

However, stories are also valuable to the teller. By listening to the bible stories my father told and his personal tales, meant placing value on his experiences and what was important to him. By me showing an eagerness to hear them over and over again strengthened our relationship and created a bond.

My paternal grandmother was a wonderful storyteller. I learnt about her life through the many stories she shared and gained a greater insight into who she was. She had a repertoire of stories and songs and narrative poems. The purpose of most of these was probably to help us think about values, ethics and principles of morality. Never in a threatening way, but with care and compassion. So many times I heard the story of the greedy mouse who scampered off with an enormous slice of plum cake, gobbling it greedily down to the very last crumb without sharing one small morsel with his starving relatives

It was a gruesome tale really, the mouse died an agonizing death, utterly self-inflicted through sheer greed, and yet my grandmother's gentle voice told it with compassion.

Jacqui Banaszynski says, *Stories, told with compassion and care, are one of the ways human beings can know ourselves and each other. They teach us where we come from and give us a sense of possibility about where we are going. They have the ability to transport us to another's experience, to reveal a new perspective, to offer a sense of possibility. At their most basic, they archive our existence. At their most sublime, they reflect our humanity.*

I can add however, the story reached its target. I was never tempted to take the largest piece of cake. Images of the greedy mouse writhing in agony with no hope of survival flooded my mind.

And the words remain today: *all little children a lesson may take and some big ones may learn from the mouse and the cake, not to be over selfish with all that you gain or the best of your pleasures could turn into pain.* I have to say there was no evidence of greediness ever displayed in my grandmother's presence by any on of her 17 grandchildren.

In my Grandmothers' 90th year we recorded her stories and poems and songs. Now I have her voice and a permanent record of all she shared, a glimpse of who she was – a precious gift preserved for future generations- I hope! When our own grandchildren turn nine we take them on a memory trip. Part of this trip consists of sharing the stories and poems handed down to me. But with the influence of this digital age, will they remain, or will the art of storytelling become a fading skill?

I believe we all have a responsibility to keep this ancient skill alive, a challenge because our children today are digital natives. Can we lure them from their digital tools and numerous TV channels to listen to our stories. Will these hold the same fascination for them?

While I recall resenting the fact growing up that we didn't have a radio or television and hated being different to other kids, now I think it did have many advantages. One major one being in helping to develop a lively imagination.

There have been many studies that have looked for differences in the creative imagination of children from homes with television, compared with children from homes without. And I guess it is no surprise that not one produced evidence that television boosted creativity.

Reading stories or listening to stories requires creative imagining- the forming of mental images about the setting, the characters, what they look and their emotions. This is a cognitive challenge – brains are designed for this challenge. An over abundance of television viewing limits experience in imagining and lessens creative thinking skills.

Deepa K, an education consultant, says, *'Storytelling is an interactive activity but on digital mediums it becomes a one-way thing where someone is telling you what to think and showing you an image that they think is appropriate. Thanks to this, your brain becomes a dumping ground because you stop using your imagination and your thinking powers by relying only on what is being spoon-fed to you'*

I feel for parents today – it is a struggle, given the choice, we know that most children will opt for techno gadgets, but they need to be taught to think outside the box. Somehow we need to entice them with a different alternative and sometimes it just requires saying ENOUGH!

I was an impulsive child- an inconsequential thinker my husband says. But this defect in my personality, provided fodder for many stories.

A personal story that I have shared with my children and grandchildren, is 'The Red Shoes'

I lived on a farm until I was five years old. On that farm we had a bull, a huge black bull. It seemed to live mostly in the paddock next to the house. I was terrified of this bull. It bellowed and pawed the ground with its hooves, tossing its head and glaring at me with mean red eyes. My brother said I should never make the bull angry. One day my mother decided we needed new shoes. In the shoe shop window was a pair of I fell in love with a pair of shiny red shoes I wanted them. *My brother said I shouldn't get them. He said I should get black like him he said the bull would chase me. Bulls he said, hate red. But being of rather determined nature I wanted the shoes. So my mother let me have them. When we got home there was the bull, bellowing louder and pawing the ground. I put my shoes under my coat and ran inside desperately looking for a place to hide my shoes. I was sure I could feel the bull's hot breath behind me. Then I saw the oven, it was an old oven- didn't have a glass front. I put my shoes in there . . .*

Of course I made my children and grandchildren terrified of bulls. Once my four-year-old red headed granddaughter and I were crossing a paddock and there was a bull over the fence. In a flash she whipped her jacket over her head. The story misinformed her of course, as bulls are colour blind and she probably would have attracted its attention far more by the movement of the jacket. However, what they did gain from that story I hope, was a lesson in inconsequential thinking.

Another story I liked to share was the story of the apple tree. Outside our house on the grass verge we had an apple tree. This tree became our special place – it could be anything we imagined. This was our tree, at least we thought it was until the summer the Gray kids moved next door. There were five Gray kids. They took over our tree completely. They even made a sign that said, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' My brother said that would be ridiculous , we couldn't be prosecuted for being under our own tree.

Then when autumn came and apples appeared, the Gray kids came creeping like a row of robbers up to our tree and picked all of our apples. We complained to our father, but he said it wasn't our tree, we would just have to learn to share it. He said, sharing something you really like and want for yourself will make you feel good, But we didn't want to feel good. We wanted our tree back. So we concocted a plan. We skimmed of the top layer of grass under the tree and made a deep trench around the base. Then we filled the trench with thistles. Over the thistles we placed some light sticks, then we carefully replaced the grass.

Of course the Gray kids came , clambering over the fence and straight into the trench. There were howls and screeches about hornets as the Gray kids sprinted back home.

When Dad found out about it, as parents inevitably do, he was furious with us. We had to go to the Grays and apologise immediately. Mrs Gray was lovely, she invited us in and gave us lemonade and chocolate chip cookie.

As we were leaving the eldest Gray kid sidled up and said, you win, we'll find another tree. This was victory, But it felt empty, like a box of chocolate wrappers.

"No," we said, "lets share the tree."

So we shared the old apple tree with the Gray kids and had heaps of fun. We learnt they had names, - Colin, Mickey, Trevor, Bobbie and Liz. And we learnt sharing something we liked and wanted for ourselves, did make you feel good.

I believe in sharing stories such as this with the children in my life is a way of helping them have an idea of accepted behaviors and acts to avoid. They are effective in providing opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas.

There maybe differences because of the era or differences dictated by culture, but the basic emotions of childhood are the same the world over: fear, anger, joy, sorrow, excitement, jealousy etc And these kind of emotions are what telling our stories will portray, making connections regardless.

My father remarried probably because we were so dreadfully annoying to the many nannies who came and went. And yes, nannies provided fodder for my stories to tell.

Eileen Daly, was the first nanny I remember. She was a large, grim, foreboding woman with hair severely pulled back into a tight bun. My brother always said she was really a witch without witch's clothes. I seem to remember she always wore heavy shoes, even inside- no soft warm fluffy slippers for her. She stamped on our bare toes with her heavy clomping shoes, for the slightest misdemeanor. The next nanny was Janey she was as small as Eileen Daly was large and her discipline was opposite – non-existent, so we ran wild and woolly, rowdy and rampant – with a newfound sense of freedom. But without discipline, there were no boundaries, no sense of security

The nannies had to go, so we devised ways to help them. Noise, lots of noise, spiders on the bed, frogs in the bath, were some inventive ideas.

I think my father, in desperation realized it was necessary for him to remarry and so into my life came Helen. She was a kindly soul but her presence too allowed me to collect stories.

I guess if we had had television, or techno gadgets we would have been watching, blogging, swiping, tweeting, twitting, googling or whatever. And if that had been the case, Helen's bag of knitting would never have met its fateful end.

Helen was a great knitter. She would knit garment after garment but never get around to sewing them together. Always there was a huge bag of perfectly, intricately knitted garments, waiting to be worn by a number of deserving people.

One winter's night while my father and Helen were doing the dishes, my brother and I decided to play slap tag with her bag of knitting, directly in front of the open fire. I recall the bag whizzing towards me at great speed, I recall ducking and I recall very clearly the bag and all its carefully crafted contents flying into the fire. It was over in the blink of an eye. A hissing, sizzling sound, some thick smoke, then nothing. Just the flames crackling, cheerfully away and a few strands of wool clinging to the wood logs like roasted worms. No evidence that a bag of knitting had ever existed.

For weeks Helen hunted for that bag muttering constantly "Its the biggest mystery to me where that bag of knitting went." Telling this story now brings a lump to my throat- how absolutely and utterly dreadful. Poor Helen. I wish I could make amends. But sharing stories like this allows children to realize that you are human, you too were once a kid, reckless, impulsive, self- focused, prone to stupidity. It's an opportunity to discuss the rights and wrongs the consequences, and to help them make connections to themselves - their own faults and failings. It develops empathy helps children learn how to face challenges and solve problems and learn what is admirable behavior and what isn't.

As a result of Helen coming to our house, I gained three more siblings.

While I often think that losing my mother was difficult these new siblings became very special to me- And in life, what is taken away on one hand we often find is given back in some other form.

My new siblings did become targets however for my imagination- and more fodder for my stories.

One Sunday afternoon my brother and I were taking the baby for a walk in the pram, when over the hedge we spied clumps of huge field mushrooms. There were so many we figured we could sell them, make some money. The problem was we had nothing to collect them in.

Then I had a brilliant idea, or so I thought at the time. We could use the pram. So we took the baby out and lay him on a blanket, dragged the pram through the hedge and began loading mushrooms into it. Every so often we peeked through the hole in the hedge, to check on the baby, like most responsible siblings would do. We could see him, gurgling happily sucking on the ears of his blue rabbit, chubby legs waving in the air. We got so involved in the mushroom gathering, conjuring up ways to spend the money we would make, that we forgot to check on the baby. When we finally remembered- shock horror. He wasn't there – blanket ,baby and blue rabbit had simply vanished.

I will leave the story there and let you imagine the end. I could never do that to children however, why because it is not a satisfying ending. It is the ending where the listener can realize and learn the lessons, the values and the importance of the whole story. An effective ending seals the listener's satisfaction and hopefully leaves them thinking and talking long after the story is finished.

These personal stories I have shared are part of me. Of course they aren't all my stories but they are events that set my compass. They allow my listeners a glimpse into what has shaped my life.

It was these stories and many others, that were the kernels in my idea seeds. The seeds that grew into written and published stories. I do believe however it was first the telling of these stories over and over that helped crystallise my thoughts so that the writing became easier.

In telling stories it is important not to tell what happened but tell a **story** about what happened. It is the detail that brings the story to life. Weave the events into a real story, with maybe a tad of embellishment, borrowing techniques from fiction writers.

Donald Davis said, *'The real difference between telling what happened and telling a story about what happened is that instead of being a victim of our past, we become master of it.'*

However, it is important to work hard at the stories we create. Just like the written story, a storyteller must craft and re-craft the story many times over.

They need to be told and retold. As Marni Gillard says, *'Work with them like clay. It is in the retelling and returning that they give us their wisdom.'* -

Telling stories plays a different role to reading stories. We know that telling stories does not take the place of reading stories, but rather a complimentary, essential addition to literacy development. Reading stories and telling stories are siblings.

Jane Yolen in her book, *Touch Magic* describes how she remembers listening to a storyteller recount the history of the Greek hero Perseus, and when the storyteller came to the part where the hero held up the head of the gorgon Medusa, she held her own hand aloft.

I could have sworn then as I swear now, she said, that I saw snakes from the gorgon's head curling and uncurling around the storyteller's arms. At that moment, I and all the other listeners were unable to move. It was as if we and not Medusa's intended victims had been turned to stone.

Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss in *The Power of Storytelling* explain

Story telling sets a teller free from printed text and each telling can be unique. Reading to an audience, the reader can see the audience only through layers of words on a page. Storytellers are richly rewarded by seeing the wonder and excitement on the face of their listeners.

Sara Bryant in her book, *'How to Tell Stories to Children and Some stories to Tell,'* says.

'The book in hand or the wording of it in mind, binds the reader.

The storyteller is bound by nothing. The story teller can stand, sit is free to watch the audience, free to follow or lead every changing mood, free to use body, eyes, voice as aids in expression. Even the mind is unbound because the storyteller can let the story come in the words of the moment. For this reason, a story told is more spontaneous than one read, however well read.

While I think it is so important for us to be storytellers, it is also vital to encourage the children in our lives to be storytellers too.

Studies by Mallan show there are hugely positive effects in intellectual, social and emotional development of children, who are encouraged to be storytellers.

The latest neuro-marketing research has demonstrated that our brains remember stories better than any other form of information-sharing, making stories the best way to teach just about anything!

[Rudyard Kipling](#) said, 'If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.'

Joy Cowley reiterates,

What brings stories to life, she states is detail!

Quoting from Joy, 'I asked a 6 year old boy what they ate when they went to McDonald's. Actually, he didn't tell me. He answered with a story, "My sister got a strawberry milkshake but she squeezed it and it went over the floor and I trod in it. Dad got lettuce in his teeth. Mum said, "You got lettuce." So Dad makes this face to show the green lettuce in his teeth, and Mum says, "Ooh! Get rid of it!"

And Dad said, "No, I'm saving it for a snack."

Not the telling of what happened but a **story** about what happened- the difference is in the detail.

Kaufman says, *'Children's use of story is an effective instrument for an adult to learn more about the child. What story they choose and how they choose to tell the story, are indicative of what the child thinks and feels, expressed uniquely during a particular time period. The process of selecting, practicing and telling stories is a way for children to explore themselves and relationships between people*

He says, *they are also a way of acting out the fears and understandings that are not easily expressed in daily routine.*

From a learning perspective naturally telling stories, develops language skills, but can increase the confidence of children who find reading or writing a challenge, motivating them to engage more and according to some studies can strengthen their ability to think creatively about mathematic operations. (Lo Cicero et al 1999)

I believe it is crucial to hold on to the art of storytelling. To build a repertoire of stories that we can share with those who will come after us.

Some may say, I have no story, but dig deep, they are there, waiting to be shared. According to Aaron Holt *'It only takes three generations to lose a piece of oral family history. If you want to avoid losing those precious family stories passed down through the generations, the story must be purposely and accurately repeated over and over again through the generations to be preserved.'*

He said, *'I guess, as I get older, I become more conscious that I am part of a generation whose time came and is going. Can I hope that some of my stories might have life?'*

Phillip Pullmann says, *'After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.'*

The stories we have are the threads that weave through the fabric of our lives, the threads that hold us together as people. We may accomplish many things in life but the most precious creation we have, are our stories. These give an insight into who we are and inevitably who we were.

The author of the *'Secret Life of Bees,'* Sue Monk says, *'Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.'*

Quoting from Vera Nazarian.

The world is shaped by two things – stories told and the memories they leave behind.

And Alexis Smith says

In the end, only the stories survive.