

Refereed Article

Children's Literature for Adults: A Meaningful Paradox

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Abstract

Children's literature is immensely suitable for discovering themes in spirituality with adults. The theory proposed here for the use of children's literature for adults is grounded in common understandings of how adults learn. It proposes that children's literature enables significant adult learning because it facilitates learning through experience, responds to the adult need to have relevant educational experiences which enhance critical thinking, and enhances the spiritual development of adults. These three building blocks assist adults in building a personal narrative which has ultimate meaning for them and for their spirituality.

*As great scientists have said,
and as all children know,
it is above all by the imagination
that we achieve perception and compassion and hope.*

—Ursula K. LeGuin

Introduction

When she needs to develop the theme of ecology, Casey Doyle begins her professional development sessions with a reading of Sara Waldman's *Light* (1993). Similarly, Louise Thayer uses Robert Munsch's *Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat* (1989) in her women's spirituality group to challenge traditional ways of thinking, especially gender stereotypes. She also uses it to increase appreciation for the use of literature to explore philosophical concepts. Literacy instructor James Peters uses

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Arthur for the Very First Time (MacLachlan, 1980), a story of a little boy who investigates the world through the use of the senses, to introduce his adult learners to learning and teaching styles.

These personal accounts of teaching, told to me in casual conversations, are indicative of the increasing adult interest in children's literature, yet little has been written (see Sharp, 1991; Smallwood, 1992;) about the use of this literature to teach adults. It may be that the use of children's literature is sporadic and used exclusively in informal settings such as retreat centers and other small group settings, which are frequently not documented. More likely though, there is a certain reluctance on the part of adult educators to share a seemingly elementary practice because it has no sound grounding in adult educational theory.

In this article I seek to demystify the use of children's literature, offer suggestions for its effective use, and begin to build a theory through which to understand the ways in which children's literature can be used to educate adults, especially to enhance their spiritual development. In using the term children's literature I include any literature that has been intended primarily for people under the age of fifteen, including picture books, folktales, myths and legends, and fairy tales, though my primary area of interest is picture books. I focus on these because of their accessibility and because of the ease with which they can be adapted and implemented with adult learners. In using spiritual development, I include those who seek deeper union with an Infinite Being, as well as those who seek a connectedness with nature and the world as profound sources of personal meaning.

Unique Attributes of Children's Literature

My interest in this use of children's literature stems from a strong conviction that the writers of this literature are often resolving adult dilemmas when writing and, more specifically, they are seeking to understand and explain their own relationships and interpersonal issues when they write. I am thinking especially here of books like *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis (1973) or *Alice in Wonderland* (1970), written by a British mathematician, Lewis Carroll. When examined, *Alice* contains myriad themes such as logic, life, death, escapism, illogic of people, and cruelty. It is a complex book and one that may be read by a wide spectrum of readers who represent an equally wide range of ages. Consequently, *Alice* is read simultaneously in adult book circles and young children's story hours at the library. It also is frequently cited in works of

literary criticism. Of course, one cannot forget that Grimm's fairytales were written for adults, a point which needs to be made to adult learners when introducing a children's selection for the first time. The adult agenda of concerns is front and center in children's selections, though infrequently acknowledged or cited in adult education.

Since the parent is often the one who buys or borrows picture books, it makes sense that their selection is based generally on adults' personal interests and beliefs. Not surprisingly, a cursory glance at any bookstore display reveals that children's literature captures succinctly a variety of life motifs, including fear, joy, death, and new life, and casts them in sharp relief. Children's literature has the unique ability to present simple plot lines and bipolar opposites of heroes and villains (Berger, 1997), thus making most selections immediately comprehensible and relevant for a variety of adult education settings.

Robert Munsch's *Paper Bag Princess* (1980b), for instance, challenges traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes of the ideal man and woman and prompts readers to examine their meaning schemes and perspectives. The wonderfully illustrated *See the Ocean* (Condra, 1994) provides ample opportunity to think about one's own assumptions and limited worldview. This book provides a discussion of what constitutes human blindness, all told through the story of a family's trip to the ocean and a little girl's inability to see. Interestingly, the author focuses not on her blindness but on the many ways that she is keen and perceptive, causing the listener to think about what really constitutes sight and lack thereof. Well-chosen selections can do much to increase self-understanding and adult spiritual growth. By beginning with a children's story, the adult educator can then invite adults to share their stories and to begin the process of continuously creating and writing their own lives. Children's literature helps in this process, innocently but effectively raising questions and provoking responses (see English, 1998).

The Research Literature

Interestingly, the available research shows that children's literature has been used with children to teach religious values (English, 1998; Gooderham, 1994; Shaw, 1995) and to provide information about other religions (Stafford, 1993). Children's literature has been effective with adults in second language instruction (Smallwood, 1992) and with low level literacy adults (Sharp, 1991). Extensive studies of the themes and motifs in folktales and other genres have also been conducted, though

not necessarily with the education of adults in mind (Propp, 1968). For instance, Bruno Bettelheim's seminal work, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1977), discusses fairy tales from a psychological perspective, but it does not provide an extensive study of their use to facilitate adult spiritual development. This absence of academic attention is intriguing given the extensive emphasis in education and cognate areas on the use of narrative and the importance of constructing narratives based on one's own life (Boud & Miller, 1996) to attempt to move beyond the meta-narrative and its inherent constraints (Lyotard, 1984). I argue that children's literature provides a unique way of unfolding one's own story and allowing for the consequent development of self.

Proponents of narrative have tended to focus on adult literature and experiences (e.g., Randall, 1995). The essence of the story/literature selection is the connection to one's own story, the connection of one's own experience to the new experience at hand as a means of deepening self-understanding and learning from the narrative. Ultimately, one's own identity is a conglomeration of stories, beginning with one's personal story and expanding to how one relates to the stories of family, community, and larger world. Individual stories connect to the larger stories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Proponents of narrative (Streib, 1997) suggest that only in knowing one's own story can one know the fullness of the story of humankind. Children's literature assists in the development of a narrative approach by "using a range of literary devices to defamiliarize and challenge their readers so that what is being read raises questions and encourages imaginative and intellectual play" (Gooderham, 1994, p. 172).

Randall (1995) discusses the notion of re-storying, using the term "poetics of learning" as a way of naming the process by which adults story and re-story their lives. According to Randall, one of the crucial distinctions among individuals is their way of "storying" and "re-storying" their lives. The role for the adult educator is to assist students in the process of telling their story and of re-storying their lives by establishing and nurturing a supportive climate, creating a space for the learners' open expression, self-revelation, and continuous development of self. The role of the educator is that of co-author of the learner's story. Randall describes the adult educator's role as one of exposing learners to works of fiction, biography, and autobiography. For Randall (1995), the adult educator is a midwife of sorts, allowing the learner's story to unfold and develop by creating a welcoming space and encouraging the development of voice.

Randall (1995) likens the process of re-storying to Mezirow's perspective transformation and Freire's conscientization. In this sense the adult educator enables students to become authors of their own stories and texts. Children's literature can be used in the same way that Randall suggests—in place of fiction, biography, and autobiography, to begin the process of storying and re-storying personal lives. Because of its length, clarity, and direct focus on a theme, children's literature is especially suited for adults. It is even more promising when grounded in the principles of adult education.

Basis for Use in Adult Education

The theory proposed here for the use of children's literature for the education of adults is grounded in andragogy, a set of assumptions about how adults learn (Knowles, 1989). There are three parts to my proposal. The use of children's literature to teach adults (a) is consistent with the andragogical premise that all significant adult learning comes through experience, (b) can be very effective because it responds to the adult need to have relevant educational experiences which enhance critical thinking and creativity, and (c) can be used to enhance the spiritual development of adults. These three building blocks assist adults in building a personal narrative which has ultimate meaning for adults and their spirituality.

Learning is Grounded in Experience

The primary characteristic of using children's literature to teach adults is its grounding in learning from experience. A particular selection is used to assist the learner in identifying or naming personal experience as a starting point for learning. This is consistent with John Dewey (1938) and pioneer adult educator Edward Lindeman's (1926) claim that the chief purpose of adult education is learning from experience. This experiential learning theory has been carried further by Boud and Miller (1996), Kolb (1984), Mezirow (1991), and Schön (1983).

Children's literature suggests issues and challenges adults to focus on them and learn from them. The book *Harry and the Terrible Whatzit* (Gackenbach, 1977), a playful account of a young boy's extreme and deepest fears, can be useful for adults struggling to deal with their own fears and obsessions. When a person is told a story for children, he or she listens for the points of connection, for the places where one's own story meets the new one being heard. Through the identification of experience

the learner connects his/her experience with that of others. The artful telling of a children's narrative results often in personal connection for adults and leads to the gradual unfolding of their own narrative. The point at which adults begin connecting their own deepest longings, fears, and dreams to others is the point at which they begin storying and re-storying their own lives.

Focus on Real Life Dilemmas and Problems

The second characteristic of a theory of using children's literature is that it focuses on the "stuff of life" and, therefore, appeals to adults and facilitates their learning. Meaningful children's literature concerns itself with life motifs such as fear and pain, love and death, and rebirth. These crucial life themes and motifs engage adults in discourse about the self, engaging their own interests and challenges and facilitating their storying of their own life and issues. One only has to think about the issue of death in *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) to realize the power and the potential of story. The children's story provides adults with the opportunity to critique the story, name their own story, raise the issues in their lives, analyze them, and critique the assumptions that led them to that place. Used well, it assists them in solving real life challenges and dilemmas.

A prime example is the picture book, *Love You Forever* (Munsch, 1980b), which begins with the mother's care for her son in his infancy and ends with his care for her in her twilight years. This book engages the adult because it deals with the life cycle of birth to death, the eventual loss of ability and the need for the child to become adult, the adult to age, and the child to become parent to the parent. Used in this manner, the purpose is to have the story serve as a springboard for discussion of pertinent themes in the life of the adult. It helps in dealing successfully with the deepest personal emotions, values and beliefs, concerns, and longings—with the spiritual center of a person. Children's literature would be useful for groups of adults struggling with the issues inherent in being part of the sandwich generation. It raises issues of responsibility, pressure, stress, and connectedness.

Facilitates Adult Spiritual Growth

The third aspect of the theory is that children's literature can be used to facilitate the spiritual development of adults. The selection, *Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat* by Robert Munsch (1989), can be used to engage adults in discussions about the multiple images of God that are available to us, of the various manifestations of spirituality that are pos-

sible. *Giant* is the story of a Giant and a Saint who fight and fight. Only a little girl can set them right. While they wait to see if God (Is it a soldier? a person?) can come to save them, the little girl does. Only then do they realize that God comes in the most unexpected of forms. This book challenges stereotypes, offers new ways of experiencing the Ultimate Being, and offers new hopes for believers who are disenfranchised from patriarchal religions and spiritualities. Similarly, the allegory of life and death in *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf* (Buscaglia, 1982) challenges the reader to confront basic human spiritual issues of life and death in a deliberate way. It encourages adults to examine closely the major issues in their lives and to question their deeply held assumptions and beliefs.

A selection that could be used for the examination of issues in self-care is *Oh, The Places You'll Go* (Seuss, 1990). This picture book invites the reader to go on a journey through life with its ups and downs. It forewarns the reader of what is to come, of both the pleasant and the not so pleasant. "When you're in for a slump, you're not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done" (n. p.). It evokes memories and images of the trials and tribulations of life and assists adults in the struggle to think about how one is called to care for oneself and one's body. Within the context of humor, this book safely raises issues of ultimate concern and challenges adults to think about their own caring. It creates a safe and inviting place for them to learn and explore issues of concern (Vella, 1990).

Through the telling of the story of the other and connecting it to our own, adults connect with larger life issues and themes, expand horizons, and work continuously on the creation of their true selves. Adult learners build their own story, creating a story that connects to the larger world story.

Implications for the Education of Adults

The practice of using children's literature to teach adults offers fresh possibilities for working with adults, especially in small group situations. Used to raise issues and confront basic human dilemmas, children's literature can assist adults in their spiritual development. Although children's literature does not intend to replace great works of adult literature in uncovering and building life narratives, it can be used in similar ways to accomplish similar purposes.

One of the main challenges of using children's literature is for adult educators to move beyond their own fears and apprehensions that learn-

ers will be dismissive of literature meant for children. As with all teaching innovations, this hurdle can be addressed only by educators who truly believe in the power of story to transform. Those adult educators who are committed to the use of story will realize that children's literature is a vehicle for teaching and that, with an educational goal such as the development of adult spirituality in mind, children's literature can become an integral part of attaining the educational goal. Skillful educators will use children's literature within the context of a larger educational plan and context, and they will move learners beyond the mere reading of a text for enjoyment to the utilization of the story as a springboard for critical thinking, personal reflection, and ongoing growth and development. Of course, it is wise for those adult educators who are not totally committed to the value of story to refrain from using children's literature, since their negativity and hesitation will be communicated to learners. Also, all adult educators will want to gauge the comfort level and openness of particular groups of learners before introducing children's literature. However, once a safe and comfortable classroom or group climate has been established, a single children's reading usually can be used effectively. From then on educators will need to critique their teaching encounters and decide whether or not to continue to use this literature.

The narrative approach to adult education, to which children's literature can contribute, enables adults to construct knowledge out of experience. A narrative approach invites adults to focus on their own story/experience, to identify the issues and challenges in that experience, and to begin the process of retelling and reconstructing that experience. For instance, it is difficult to imagine any group of baby-boom adults, who are sandwiched between aging parents and growing children, who could not identify with Munsch's *Love You Forever* (1980a) and who could not use that story to help them understand their own fears, anxieties, and hopes as they experience middle age. Children's literature is a way of educating adults that honors their own stories and invites them to participate in the storying of their lives and in the reconstruction of that experience.

A narrative turn in adult education honors the principles of andragogy, utilizes experience, engages learners in the immediacy of their own lives, and challenges them to explore issues of ultimate concern. Children's literature invites critical discussion and challenges previously held assumptions of adults. Here I make some suggestions for the use of children's literature in adult education.

Given the possibilities for the use of children's literature and its accessibility to a wide range of learners, I question the almost exclusive use of adult literature to begin the storying process. I suggest that while adult literature has a place, it is one that can be shared with children's literature. For many adults, especially those of low-level literacy, children's selections may be more appropriate and conducive to education and to a narrative approach. For instance, a story such as *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf* (Buscaglia, 1982) may provide, as much as any lengthy piece of classical literature, a very non-threatening segue into a discussion of grief and loss.

Since all adults bring stories of their experience, a premise of andragogy, adult educators should take seriously the practice notion of beginning with stories, connecting them to other stories, and assisting adults in their own narrative construction. In order to build individual stories, adults ought to start with the narratives of life, not with the grand or meta-narratives which have lost meaning for many. For instance, beginning a women's spirituality group with the amusing and straightforward *Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980b) likely will elicit from many female learners similar life experiences of being valued for physical attributes.

Finally, much effective adult education focused on adult spiritual development occurs in small group settings where the opportunities to build trust among learners and between learners and facilitators are high. In these groups the likelihood of using children's literature successfully is increased because learners are typically open to innovative experiences and ways of learning. The use of children's literature in these situations is conducive to group size, length of time in session, and purpose of session. It offers new possibilities for honoring the sacredness of the personal story and for facilitating the adult construction of new life stories.

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