

## Getting Ready to Tell Stories

Why is it important to learn the stories?

- First, “learning stories by heart” is a more accurate description of what we do than the word memorizing.
- When a story sinks into your heart, it also comes from your heart in the telling. Children know the difference!
- When we present the story from the heart it removes the distraction of having to look in two different places – the text and the materials – as you present the story. (Focusing your visual attention on the materials actually helps you remember the language.
- It gives the children only one place to look, at the story materials (This focuses their attention as well as yours.)
- Shows children that you love the story so much that you know it by heart.
- Enables you, eventually, to become fluent enough that you can work with any child who chooses any story material at response time.

Practicing

- Your goal is to make the story your own.
- Start by reading the story in your Bible. Read several versions if you can.
- Then read the lesson in the Complete Guide to Godly Play.
- Use the lesson materials or substitutes so you learn the story with your body.
- Practice with cue cards. Highlight key words or phrases.
- Audio tape yourself and listen to the story over and over.
- Practice in front of a mirror and watch the movements.
- Practice telling the story to a safe audience.

Developing Your Style

- Be patient with yourself, it takes time.
- You have your own unique style.
- The story belongs to all people and the children need to know that.
- Just do it.

Making “Mistakes”

- It happens.
- Just keep going.
- Make a choice – leave it or correct it when you can.
- Use your mistakes: learn from them.

The language of the Godly Play texts is carefully chosen, and it is important to be attentive to the language. But is even more important to be relaxed and enter into the story you are presenting. Telling the story from your heart, to the children’s hearts, is more important than getting it right.

## Tips for Memorizing Stories

By Elizabeth Gelfeld

Godly Play teachers have a lot to do before Sunday. There are the story materials to prepare, and sometimes we are still cutting out felt on Saturday night. We might also have to prepare art materials, coordinate the doorman and feast provider, and write something to tell the parents what their children are learning this week. And, then, we also have families, jobs, and lives. So when it comes to actually presenting a story, we study and practice as much as we can, but we're not taking any chances – we keep notes by our side.

I suggest that memorizing the stories – learning them by heart, and dispensing with the notes – is not only necessary to the art of Godly Play, it is spiritually enriching and fun, and not as difficult as it may seem. An important reason notes are inappropriate in Godly Play storytelling is that the notes become objects that compete with the story materials for attention – ours and the children's. It is not possible to be fully engaged in the story while we are referring to notes. And our engagement is one of the most powerful tools we have for nurturing the children's relationship with the stories, and thereby with the Spirit of God.

Our attention is also a powerful tool for classroom management. It is really true, as Jerome Berryman says in *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook* that, if the storyteller fully focuses on the story, so will the children. When my class starts getting restless, I immediately make Berryman's first-level response to disruptions: "Both co-teachers check themselves to be sure that they are deeply involved in the presentation" (p. 44). That means I bring my gaze down to the materials and keep it there. Usually, I don't have to go on to Level Two (remind everyone to "get ready again"). Only rarely do I have to make a third-level response and speak to any particular disruptive child.

But how can we know the stories so well that we feel confident telling them without notes? Most of us do not have hours to devote to memorizing: if we did, we'd be in college earning advanced degrees. Here are a few helps:

- Start with the intent to memorize the script, word for word. It takes energy to figure out which words you're going to use, which to leave out, and which to change; that energy is best saved for later, after you know the story. Of course, the final goal is not to recite the script. But departing from the script and making the telling your own is much easier and more rewarding when you know every word of it.
- It's not a good idea to start Saturday night to memorize the story you want to present Sunday morning. Memory is more reliable if it's accumulated a little at a time. Six sessions of 10 minutes each spread over six days, will result in much stronger learning than one solid hour, besides being easier to fit into your schedule. I do a lot memorizing on the fly, while washing dishes or sitting at traffic lights.
- Work on short segments of a story at a time. Godly Play stories are well organized for memorizing, as the paragraphs are usually short and punctuated by movements of the objects. With a longer story, group several paragraphs into a section. Sometimes, especially with longer stories, it helps to memorize backwards – the last paragraph or section first, then the next to last, and so on. Using this way of memorizing helps you avoid the problem of

knowing the first parts thoroughly – because you’ve practiced them the most – and having memory lapses toward the end.

- Use the materials or objects as memory aids. After all, that’s what they were for the ancient storytellers. When I began to prepare the lesson on the Twelve (the Apostles), I found that the groupings by threes in the da Vinci “Last Supper” really did help me remember who the apostles were, as did their symbols on the shields.
- Memory work tends to snowball, so try not to get discouraged if your first efforts seem fruitless. The first time I work on a story I retain very little, but with each session more sticks with me, and the more I learn the easier it becomes to add the rest. At some point I begin to feel secure with the story, and then the work of learning it becomes fun.

If a memory lapse does occur on Sunday, it isn’t the end of the world – nor even of the story. My first time out with a new class of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, I was telling The Good Shepherd, the story I have told more often and know better than any other. As I presented the materials and led the wondering about them, I was amazed at the response of the kids – they were going on and on, so imaginatively, guessing what all these things could be. I began to wonder how I was going to wrap up the preliminaries and get on with the story.

So I tried a bit of storyteller’s dramatics: I raised my voice slightly, widened my eyes, and said, “Once...” To my surprise, it worked. The children were instantly silent, waiting for my next move. I continued with that segment, through the words “I am the Good Shepherd.” Then I reached into the box and discovered to my horror that I had forgotten to bring out the sheep. I don’t remember exactly how I backed out of that one, I think I said something like, “Oh look, here are some sheep...this must be a sheepfold!” But not for a moment during that awkward transition did I lose the children’s attention. Nor did they seem to think anything at all was wrong with the story.