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What Matters

Ultimate Questions

What is a Good Life?

Engaging Sceptical Minds with **Ultimate** Questions
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'To throw alongside of' ***– Storytelling in the Primary Classroom***

Naked Truth was walking down the road one day, as was her custom, and as usual, everyone who saw her turned and ran in the opposite direction.

And then Truth saw Parable, all dressed up in beautiful clothes, and surrounded by people, listening to every word he was saying. And Truth went up to Parable and said 'Why does everyone love and listen to you, and no-one listen to me?'

'Well look at you Truth,' replied Parable. 'You're naked! What do you expect? Here, wrap yourself in my coat, add a scarf, put my hat on. I'm sure people will listen to you now.'

And sure enough, when Truth was dressed in some of the clothes of Parable, people were much more willing to hear.

For religious educators, who speak to the spirit, Naked Truth will simply not do.

The word 'parable' is the translation of two Greek terms – *parah* meaning 'near' or 'vicinity,' and *ballo* meaning 'to throw'. Together it means 'to throw along side of'. A story can insert an image into the heart of the listener, where it can take shape and grow. It can slip into their psyche without being noticed – in the same way as a dream – it can inspire and whisper Truth without being challenged or rejected by the analytical mind. It can become what the listener needs it to be without imposition, whereas a stark statement of 'fact' or 'instruction' invites our students to respond with either acceptance or denial.

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As a religious educator and professional storyteller for three decades, I have come to feel that nothing can take the place of stories towards developing a religious or 'spiritual' sensibility. This 'throwing alongside of' is a way to develop metaphoric thought, an ability to transform 'hard rock into springs of water' as it is written in Psalm 114:8. And when we are unable to do so, it is those hard rocks that we have thrown so bitterly at each other throughout history.

If we only teach the Bible literally, we establish a polarised and static relationship. The 'this is what it means' approach stymies a personal relationship with the word of God, and leaves little room for fleshing out the meaning for oneself, for growing with the text throughout a lifetime. Moreover, an understanding of metaphor can capture a troubled soul and give hope like nothing else. One small flower in a desert can provide a meaning for suffering. It can be enough to transform hopelessness into hope, or for a desperate spirit to decide to rise up and bloom.

Stories from the Bible were originally *told*. Most people were unable to read, and in the listening is a deep satisfaction that harks back thousands of years. Whatever we wish to explore with our students – qualities such as generosity, justice, peace, loving kindness, awe, diligence, discipline, humility – there will be a story that will engage, delight and convey the most difficult of concepts. These stories need not come from ones own tradition; in fact there is much to be said for drawing from many sacred traditions and folklore.

Having established the case for storytelling in the RE classroom, I want to offer some practical ideas for stories and their application with your students, particularly younger ones.

Moments

I use *moments* a great deal in my teaching. By way of example, I will take use a short scene from the life of Jacob (Genesis 28:10-22).

So Jacob went out of Beersheba, on the border of the desert, and walked alone, carrying his staff in his hand. One evening, just about sunset, he came to a place among the mountains, more than sixty miles distant from his home.

And as he had no bed to lie down upon, he took a stone and rested his head upon it for a pillow, and lay down to sleep.

And on that night Jacob had a wonderful dream. In his dream he saw a ladder leading from the earth to heaven; and angels were going up and coming down upon the stairs. . . And God said to Jacob:

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac your father; and I will be your God, too. The land where you are lying all alone, shall belong to you and to your children after you; and your children shall spread abroad over the lands, east and west, and north and south, like the dust of the earth; and in your family all the world shall receive a blessing. And I am with you in your journey, and I will keep you where you are going, and will bring you back to this land. I will never leave you, and I will surely keep my promise to you.

And in the morning Jacob awakened from his sleep, and he said:

"How awesome is this place. Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it! I thought that I was all alone, but God has been with me. This place is the house of God; it is the gate of heaven!"

And Jacob took the stone on which his head had rested, and he set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on it as an offering to God. And Jacob named that place Bethel, which in the language that Jacob spoke means "The House of God."

Creative writing

Having told the story, I enquire of the students, *Where did this story begin for you? Which moment in the story stays with you the most?* When students identify the most resonant moment for themselves, it usually reveals something about their unconscious self.

Having identified *the moment*, students can close their eyes and go in their mind to the place where it occurs. In that quiet state, ask what do they see, hear, smell, touch, feel, taste? What surprises them? Notice the small details, the cracks, the insects, the sounds beyond the sounds, the different layers of scent on the breeze. Ask them to now write down everything they remember experiencing.

Students now choose a character in that moment. They can be animate or inanimate. If their moment was in Jacob's dream, they can be the ladder, an angel, the rock upon which Jacob lays, Jacob, a blade of grass, the wind...They can choose whatever is in that moment as a character.

Now write:

I am..... (rock, angel etc)

I see.....

I hear

I taste.....

I touch.....

I smell.....

I feel.....

Encourage students to draw from the details they had previously written, not to forget the tiny, often overlooked details. Very often it is the small details that give the writing a poetic flavour. They can write for 7 – 10 minutes. Then those who wish can read their piece.

The writing usually has a very visceral and literary quality and they will be pleased with what they have produced. I have the class

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listen for what worked in the piece. Not simply, 'I liked his choice of words', but *which words* exactly. The more detailed the students are in what worked in the piece they heard, the more a) demanding the exercise, b) valuable the feedback, and c) far reaching the experience. For you, the teacher, the listening to the piece is extremely demanding. It is important that you listen for hidden meaning, for when a detail becomes symbolic of something greater, and speak of that to the writer. In this way you are encouraging great writing, deeper understanding of text, metaphoric thinking and deeply honouring the students.

Drama

From the moments that the students have chosen, ask them to form a group of 4 – 5 and to choose one moment from amongst the group. They are to create a *frozen moment* of the moment. Once again, they can choose to be animate or inanimate, they can choose to be different aspects of the one character – anything at all. They will find their position mostly in the doing, not the talking, and I do not give much time to ponder. Just decide which moment, get a character and do it. On the count of three 1,2,3...freeze. One group presents to the rest of the class. The moment they have chosen may not be evident in the tableau, and neither may their character be – but what we will be able to see is how they *feel* about the part they play in

this drama. 'If you are rock, what do you feel about the fact that Jacob is resting his head upon you? Proud? Fearful? Maternal? Then lets see it. Again 1,2,3... freeze.'

Encourage the students who are observing to walk around and look carefully. The tableau is usually quite theatrical. Photos can be taken to make a living book of the story. The tableau can be part of a performance in the telling of the story. I have created a piece where the narrator walks slowly across the stage, and as the moment is voiced by the narrator, a spot shines upon the group on stage in tableau that is depicting it. In this way, 'living' frozen scenes of the story are highlighted throughout the telling.

It is important to remember in drama and creative writing that the more the exercise is restricted, the deeper the students can go. If we 'put on a skit,'

it will almost inevitably be caricatured and superficial. If students only have use of their face and stationary body, it is more likely to provoke a more thoughtful response.

Accessing emotion and empathy

Children from K – Year 12 love this activity:

'You are Jacob, walking in the forest. You have stolen your brother's birthright. You have betrayed your father. You are alone. How do you feel? Let me see it, 1,2,3...freeze.'

'If you can, name what you see in their face as you look around – I see fear, I see guilt, I can see hope...!'

'You have just had an extraordinary dream, you are waking up, and you see a forest that is different from the one you went to sleep in. This is an awesome place, the dwelling place of God. How does it feel to wake in such a place? I want to see how that feels... 1,2,3... freeze.'

The students may never have expressed awe. What we are doing is helping them access the feeling of awe and wonder from within, offering them the knowledge that this feeling exists and is available.

Midrashing

The Rabbis write stories to explain or expand parts of the Bible that are enigmatic or anomalies. The process is called 'midrash,' and it means 'to flesh out.' One midrash is

about the angels going 'up and down.' Why not down and up?

Pose the question, and in groups, ask students to write a story or offer an explanation as to why this is so.

The Rabbis answer the question through midrash: the angels live amongst us all the time, and that is why they first go up the ladder, to then return by coming down.

Ask more questions. What is an angel? Have you had experience of an angel? In Hebrew the word for angel is 'messenger.' What does that mean to you? Paint your interpretation of an angel.

Looking for questions in texts is a good way to initiate the process of writing midrash in response.

Awe

Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it! Genesis 28:16

I have always found this to be such a beautiful line – that the House of God could be anywhere.... here...now.

Students could either write the words and decorate and frame them for their rooms, or find a place alone in nature if possible, and on a rock, with paints or markers, write those words on the rock, and decorate to place in their home or garden. They could even take some fragrant oil and anoint the rock, in honour of the House of God, which could be anywhere, depending upon intention.

Blessing

God gave Jacob a blessing. Reflect quietly and write a blessing to yourself. *What do you wish your life to be blessed with?* Write a blessing to the earth. Write a blessing to your parents, friend, sister, someone who is ill, someone who has died...

All these activities can be used with any story; Biblical, folktale, or fable.

Folktales and Fables

The Internet offers countless resources for folktales that hold within them qualities that religious educators hope to examine with their students. Almost any story will do, as long as the intention for the story is clear. I use the following story to help younger students see the different ways one can be 'strong,' and to give them an opportunity to self reflect.

How Beetle got her Colours

In the forest where the animals mostly got on with each other, there was one animal that just couldn't resist bullying and teasing and taunting the animals that were smaller than him. And especially he would tease beetle.

You're brown and you're little and you're slow and you're plain

*Bet you don't even know your own name,
Can't even see the point in you
You can't do anything like I can do.*

And because beetle was a wise little creature, she just would just creep along without saying a word. Now in that forest there lived an old, wise and rather magical parrot, and she heard rat teasing beetle just one time too many. She was up to her beak with it. And she flew down and she said,

*I'm tired of hearing you teasing like that,
Its time that we ended this, so listen here rat,
We'll have a test that's created by me
Beetle and Rat shall race from here to that tree,
And the winner of this, now you all take a note,
Shall choose their own colours for a brand new coat.*

That doesn't sound too hard, thought rat. *I can certainly go faster than that slow coach beetle.*

And so parrot began, *Listen to me....one two three.*



Fables are like grown-up proverbs. In the telling there must never be 'a – and the moral is.....' The stories need to stand in relationship with the students without interference.

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And off they raced... and rat was running across the forest floor, flying like the wind he was, and he when looked back he couldn't even see beetle she was so far behind. Rat could already see that new coat he would soon be wearing. And there was the finishing line and rat saw...what? BEETLE! She was already there, sitting on the other side of the finish line.

How'd you get here so quick? rat said.

And beetle looked him in the eye, and do you know it was the very first time rat had ever looked beetle in the eye.

And beetle said quietly, *I flew.*

You flew? I didn't know you could fly.

Parrot:

*Well there is much you don't know of the animals here,
It's because you don't ask, that is perfectly clear.*

You judge by appearance and that's just plain wrong,

I wonder now if you'd sing that same song.

And rat began to feel rather small and grey and silly and plain.

I thought you were brown, little slow and plain

Thought you didn't even know your own name

I couldn't see the point in you,

But you can do something that I can't do

And parrot was glad that rat had learnt a lesson, and beetle chose a coat of blue and gold and green iridescent colours, such a wonderful coat, and she still wears it to this very day.

Careful questioning of this story can reveal a great deal about the students and their experience of themselves, the school and life in general.