

Getting It Off the Page

Stories emerge from an oral tradition. Once they are committed to print they are ossified. Have you ever tried to tell a story exactly as it was printed? If so you know just how stilted it sounds. In order to breath life back into a tale, you must make it your own. Following is a process by which you can do just that.

1. Choose a fairy or folk tale. This can be a story that you recall from your own childhood or one you have once or are now reading. Start with a simple story that grabs your attention and you enjoy. (You'll be telling it a great deal!)
2. Reread or mentally review the tale.
3. Create an 'outline' of the story. We are a language based culture. I would like you to get away from language at this point in your discovery. Stories are just a series of images. Thus I would like your outline to be just that, a series of images that will help you recall the sequence of your story. Don't worry about artistic skill. Actually, the more artistically skilled you are the longer and harder this process will be. In shapes or symbols or literal forms or occasional words if you need them, create a visual prop on a large piece of paper that will help you remember the sequence of events.
4. Put away the written tale. Now, using your unique outline, tell this story to a willing listener. Find someone who will listen attentively and not offer suggestions or criticism. (This unfortunately sometimes rules out family!)
5. Find a comfortable spot, away from distractions, and close your eyes. Do a little deep breathing into your belly to calm, relax, and center yourself. If you are having any tension, acknowledge it by tensing up that particular muscle and then letting it go. Once you feel mellow, create in your minds eye the first scene of your story (keep you eyes closed for the entirety of this exercise). Paint as many specific details as you can, drawing on your own imagination to tell you about the space, utilizing all of your available senses. Look for what makes the space special, different, specific to this tale. Once you have a detailed opening scene in your imagination, allow your cameras eye to move forward. Film your story in complete detail. Like a camera your imagination can allow you to take a close up shot on something important, or pan so that the larger world of the tale becomes evident. You can fast forward through parts that don't seem important or are endlessly repetitive. You can slow down the camera to catch important actions or episodes or details. If you forget a section, you can always rewind! Paint you final scene with the same care and detail as you gave the opening. When you have finished find another willing listener who you can tell this expanded version to.

If you are having a hard time focusing for this exercise, then set up a tape recorder, press the record button (don't forget tape!) and with your eyes closed tell your story to the machine. As you tell try very hard to imagine every detail before you speak it. Don't listen to yourself, allow the next scene or image in the story sequence to define what you will say. When you have finished, find a willing human and retell the story with the details you have discovered.

6. There are a million ways and reasons to tell any story. All you need is one. That one is very important and will shape your telling. Take a contemplative moment now and think about one thing you really like about this story or one reason you'd want to share it with others. For instance I love the story of Hansel and Gretel because it affirms a child's greatest fears (abandonment) and models how you can overcome any difficulty if you build trusting relationships and use your wits. You might like Snow White because of the evil queens inability to accept aging gracefully! You might like Little Red Riding Hood because you want to put the fear of G-d into children about talking with strangers. You might want to tell Little Red to dispel children's fears that a single mistake will end everything. This story could do either. How you tell it will depend upon your motivation, your reason for telling it. Figure out why you want to tell the story you've been working with.

7. With that reason in mind make another film of your tale choosing primarily details and behaviors that will feed into your reason. For instance, if I am telling Little Red Riding Hood to warn children away from strangers, then in my film (Which I am making with my eyes closed in a relaxing and secluded environment) I will emphasize certain scenes and images, such as the mother warning the daughter, the daughter flaunting that warning by leaving the path, and the wolfs' approach because she left that path. When you have completed doing this you will have a highly revised tale that, yes, you should go and tell to a willing listener.

At this point you now have a story ready for a larger audience.