

Storytelling and Culture Learning Center

Handout A: Why We Tell Stories

Hints for students: This essay describes many reasons that people tell stories. Each one is printed in italics to help you spot it. Some reasons are mentioned more than once; see if you can find ten different reasons described in this handout.

Stories are everywhere. We hear them at home, at family gatherings, on television and radio, in school, on the bus. Whenever and wherever people get together they tell stories. *Some of the stories describe movies or television programs. Others tell of funny, exciting or interesting things that happened. Still other stories are passed down in families-stories of how our parents met or how our grandparents endured great hardships to raise their families. We tell our own stories about mistakes we made, things we did or didn't do, or experiences we should have avoided. We tell tales of events we learn about in the news that are interesting or sad.*

We tell stories for enjoyment, of course. But we also tell stories to make sense of the events that happen to us, our families, or people and events we hear about in the news. Stories also give us lessons about life. Dylan Pritchett, an African-American storyteller, who travels the country with tales from Africa and stories about African American life, explains,

“So many things happen to us every day that it is sometimes hard to make sense of them. Storytelling helps us do that. Storytelling helps us give order to our lives. It helps us organize our past and plan our future. Stories help us identify actions and behavior so we can avoid repeating mistakes.”

Storytelling is as old as civilization. Before people invented writing, storytellers *entertained people or passed on important information.* The Greeks and Romans told myths about gods and goddesses that helped them *explain things in nature.* Folktales, hero tales, tall tales, and animal stories such as Aesop's fables, which date back hundreds or thousands of years, *teach about morals and how we should or should not behave.*

People all over the world tell stories. For instance, African-Americans and Cape Verdeans *describe hardships and hopes* and tell jokes, riddles, proverbs, and folktales. For African-Americans, the stories might be of Anansi the spider or Brer Rabbit. Cape Verdean tales feature Nho Lobo, Mr. Wolf, and his nephew, Tubino. Nho Lobo is usually portrayed as lazy, greedy, and constantly hungry. He always tries to trick Tubino into doing his work or getting his food for him.

Stories play a special role in other cultures including Native American and Alaska and Hawaiian Native cultures. Each of these groups has a strong oral tradition. In these cultural communities, Elders are valued as “Keepers of Wisdom” who *pass*

on cultural knowledge. Through their stories, Elders provide community members with tools for making sense of life events such as birth, marriage, and death. *They pass on lessons about life, history, beliefs, and values from generation to generation through stories.* Some of these important lessons are: One should not be greedy, or selfish, or boastful. It is wrong to make fun of others, or take advantage of weaker people. In Alaska Native cultures, stories usually don't say what the moral is, because each story means something different to everyone who hears it. Adults know that stories *help their children learn how to learn* – because it is the child's job to listen carefully, and then figure out why the adult told the story, and what it is about the story that is important to know.