

Mnemosyne: A Goddess for Storytelling, Creativity, and Reading Comprehension

by Peter C. Orlando

Storytelling, Memory, and Learning

Storytelling and creativity are means we use to cultivate memory for cultural values. Without them, teaching reading comprehension may sound like talking into an empty drum. Reading problems are rampant not because we do not know how to teach children how to read but because we have neglected to develop memory skills.

Consider the story of Mnemosyne. Mnemosyne was the Greek goddess of the Muses. Consequently, she became known also as the Mother of Inspiration. She was given this privilege by Zeus to name all the things of the earth. She became in that instant the goddess of speech and language.

Moreover, she was the goddess with beautiful hair. Psychologists know that hair in projective drawings is usually related to sensuality. Wild, ugly hair turns our attention in one direction, while beautiful, flowing hair brings us to other considerations. Hair points to the center of our *persona*—the way we want to be seen by others. It deals with our self-presentation.

Mnemosyne was beautiful, reaching out to the world with long, flowing, abundant hair. Zeus just had to have her. He slept with her for nine days and nights, and she gave birth to the nine celebratory Muses: Calliope (patroness of poetry), Clio (patroness of history), Melpomene (patroness of tragedy), Euterpe (patroness of flute players and of joy and pleasure), Erato (patroness of erotic poetry), Terpsichore (patroness of choral dance and dramatic chorus), Urania (patroness of astronomy and celestial forces), Thalia (patroness of comedy and bucolic poetry), and Polymnia (patroness of sublime hymn and faculty of learning and remembering). The latter gave birth to polyphony, or counterpoint, which is the art of combining melodies, when each is independent though forming a part of a uniform production—a beautiful metaphor for how we diverse individuals can make sweet music together without threatening our individuality.

However, the point to come is that involvement in the delights of the Muses facilitates memory and reading comprehension.

Mnemosyne is a metaphor for what we must do to learn. Ultimate realities such as truth, knowledge, words, and celebration all go together. Much too often we forget about the “celebration” part. How can we accept Mnemosyne and cast aside her daughters? To have the cold knowledge of good, evil, and beauty without the vibrancy of celebrating life is blasphemy. How can we live in paradise without celebrating the beauty with which we associate it or without being grateful for what we have? Mnemosyne comes alive as the goddess of the myriad celebrations of life and reason through song and dance. Gratitude is the attitude. How can we be grateful and not celebrate?

Nor can we teach reading if we are boring, dried prunes. We teach more effectively through enthusiasm—the Greek word (en-thus-iasm) that means the energy (ism) of being (en) in God (Thus/theos). This energy is inherently celebratory, and through it Mnemosyne comes alive. As the goddess of speech and language, she is most avid in storytelling and engaging dialogue. Through it—co-creative conversation, dialogue, sharing, and all forms of personal contact through words—knowledge is born. As such, Mnemosyne is the goddess of those who teach: teachers, professors, parents, and therapists. Reading problems boil down to difficulties with word retrieval, verbal concept formation, verbal comprehension (words, plots, and themes), and sequencing and verbal expression, but especially with short- and long-term memory.

In order to learn from our mistakes and successes, we have to keep them alive, without shame and guilt blunting reason. Song, rhythm, poetry, art, sharing—everything that is celebratory—keep guilt and shame in perspective and permit us to think through the issues at hand and learn to avoid the pitfalls that repeat themselves over and over in our lives.

The ancient Greek Pindar (522 B.C.E./Ode 7.11) said:

If someone is successful in his deeds, he casts a cause for sweet thoughts into the streams of the Muses. For those great acts of prowess dwell in deep darkness, IF THEY LACK SONGS, and we know of only one way to hold a mirror up to fine deeds; if, by the grace of Mnemosyne with her splendid headdress, one finds a recompense for toils in glorious song.

Mnemosyne is the Greek root for the English word “memory.” How do ADHD children forget most of their vocabulary words but remember each and every word of every song on the hit parade? How did the ancient storytellers place in long-term memory the entire books of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

The *Iliad*, for example, was written with the Idyl—the Greek word for “little pictures” or “charming simple episodes.” Homer used words to create little picture episodes set in dactylic hexameter (2 dactyls, 1 long syllable, 1 dactyl, and 1 long syllable). Accordingly, Shakespeare and two-thirds of English medieval and Renaissance poetic forms used the iamb in iambic pentameter (a metric foot = 1 short syllable followed by 1 long syllable or 1 unstressed syllable followed by 1 long syllable). These rhythms bring the force of the nondominant side of the brain to bear in the verbal areas of the neocortex and forge them into long-term memory. It is bringing the passion of hell into the concepts of paradise in a manner we will never forget. The nondominant side of the brain paints words with the living color of passion and movement. We need to learn to talk using “idylls.” They are like flashbulbs taking snapshots of our memory bank.

Mnemosyne is the goddess who allows people to recognize themselves, others, and all the things of the world—and not just name them correctly. She makes connections between all people and things. She does not just bring the universe forward as in a quiet “show and tell.” She reveals “cause and effect”; she organizes “before and after” and all time. She makes the required distinctions between similarities and differences that form the bases of all knowledge, as Aristotle taught us. This is the work of the nondominant side of the brain, which does not operate like a chilled frog. It fulfills its sacred purpose when the floodgates of feelings and movement open. We know that when we have hemisphere disturbance, we can name people without knowing who they are or we can know who people are without recalling their names.

No society or person can survive without memory. Memory is the bridge between the past and the future. Without memory we are frozen in the present, like ice statues. In spite of what Gestalt therapeutic devotees might tell us, a present without a past and a future is a living hell. Ask an Alzheimer’s patient or a person suffering with dementia how self-actualizing memory loss is.

Furthermore, only arrogance would assign Mnemosyne the role of goddess of underdeveloped countries because of their dependence upon oral traditions rather than the printed word. The printed word without retention, recall, and story comprehension is like being the chosen frozen, if the written word is First World “stuff.” It is a form of analysis paralysis. It is partial rigor mortis with the vocal cords trying to talk without moving the muscles of the mouth, lips, or eyes. Comprehending what we read involves relying upon memory skills.

Stop Fighting Upstream

When we attempt to teach reading without cultivating memory at the same time, we are fighting and negating hundreds of thousands of

years of evolutionary brain development based upon auditory memory and oral traditions. It is no small wonder that some of the most pernicious learning disabilities we face today are based upon deficiencies rooted in memory and auditory processing: *autism*, which locks out auditory processing from visual ones; *depression*, which uses memory to induce guilt, shame, anger, and memory loss to forget the needs and feelings of others; *character disorders*, which have no guiding internal voices of conscience; and *schizophrenia*, which uses verbal memory to torment one's self.

Teachers and parents sometimes have taught students to disdain memory because they have suffered the traumas of rote memory exercises as children. Nevertheless, I can tell you as a school psychologist that it is practically a waste of time to teach students how to read if we do not implement skills to strengthen memory at the same time.

Do you know what "the same old stuff" means? The same old stuff is when students go to special education to learn reading because they are flunking reading in their general curriculum. Because they do not know how to read, they are given smaller groups, less work, and lower expectations. However, now they feel worse because they fail reading with those steps too. If memory is at the root of reading problems, heal memory. If sequencing is at the root, treat sequencing. Don't just teach reading.

Reading comprehension is not something anyone obtains by going after it directly. It is a byproduct. It is the result of how we use our eyes to take in more words and phrases instead of centering on one letter or word at a time. It is what Piaget called "decentering." Combine this with storytelling or creative sharing and we have a winner called reading comprehension.

There is a story told in ancient Greece about the pros and cons of reading over auditory learning. Plato writes (*Phaedrus* 247e/275b):

[T]he Egyptian god Theuth, who also invented numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy . . . and dice . . . came to Thamus, the god who ruled Egypt, and showed him his new inventions and suggested that they should be taught to all Egyptians. . . . [W]hen they came to the letters, Theuth presented them thus: "This invention, O King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." . . . Thamus answered: "This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters, which are not a part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of

memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but appear wise.”

Socrates, Plato’s teacher, refused to write. That great teacher never wrote a word. His way of teaching was talking to people and asking them questions. Plato quotes Socrates in the same book cited above (*Phaedrus*, 275d):

Writing . . . has this strange quality, and is very much like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say one and the same thing.

Storytelling as Indirect Direction

An increasingly common psychiatric diagnosis for children and adolescents is *Oppositional Defiant Disorder*. More and more children today simply do not accept being told what to do.

No one wants to be told what to do. Our children mirror their adults’ fear today of leadership. We still are in an era of rugged individualism. It seems that more and more students refuse to learn anything from others (such as their teachers). They insist on learning only from themselves by themselves and for themselves—the hard way. Storytelling and friendly dialogue are ways to direct people without telling them what to do.

Talk therapies require a commitment to change by verbal problem solving. When we tell stories, students are left on their own. With their own minds, they explore the suggested theme. They decide how to apply what is said, each in their own way, to whatever they choose to target within themselves as something they need to change. They never need to disclose what is happening within the secret recesses of their minds. If anything is shared, it is in the context of a community talking and interacting together. No one is an identified patient.

Creative dialogue and storytelling hook oppositional people into listening. Storytelling does not force a point for reflection. The stories are nonthreatening and loving invitations to listen. They are moments of silence in a loud and busy world. They can get up close and very personal, but the effect occurs only through the work of the listener rather than the storyteller.

Storytelling: An Educational Tool

Telling stories reinforces the point that education can be fun. It introduces the child to oral patterns. It develops listening skills. It teaches ethics without violating the precepts of the separation of church and state. It provides love for words. It develops comprehension by illustrating story line and plot rather than letters, words, and word order. It grips the mind by the rhythms and feelings of the nondominant hemisphere of the brain. It is the handmaid of cultural diversity.

Storytelling and Personal Health Instills Psychological Health

Talking well together preserves a sense of wonder about ourselves. The world is vast and inexplicable. It is baffling in its diversity and myriad forms. I am referring not only to the world outside ourselves but also to the world within us all. Storytelling and verbal sharing appeal to our need to understand: to belong and predict. Storytelling is an amelioration of fears; it communicates needed information; it reinforces a sense of order and justice. We learn to predict outcomes.

Verbal sharing contains an *organizing principle*. The events of one's personal history are placed in perspective. People begin to understand that they are not the playthings of the gods. We are not monstrosly taunted and haunted. There is an order, justice, and purpose in community and personal history. Problems can get solved, and I can do it too! We gently learn to "get over it" and "get on with it." There is an *integrative principle*; things fall into place. Energy is released to do positive and productive work. Suffering is not stupid. There is cleansing, absolution and atonement, and hard-earned achievement; there is a *purgative principle*.

When we share stories and talk meaningfully together, we create common experiences even though participants foster their own inner visual images. Storytelling is a way to foster spirituality without religiosity. Storytelling and human dialogue fulfill a human need to express beauty through language—through the love of words. I am stating that I think humans have a hard-wired neurological need to enjoy words. Finally, it is a way that men and women can consort with beautiful Mnemosyne and provide immortality to one's life and ancestors. It is important to locate or create relevant stories to tell children. Children are well served when they share life's highs and lows through creative forms of discussion.

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