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Worship leaders can also get books containing a number of stories within one volume. The stories are often grouped around a central theme or idea and can be used in multiple services. Books such as *Earth Tales From Around the World* by Michael Caduto, *Peace Tales* by Margaret Read MacDonald, and *Ready-To-Tell Tales* by David Holt and Bill Mooney all offer a number of stories appropriate for children's worship services. (For more titles of children's books to use as part of a worship service, see Storybooks, page 222.)

When selecting a book for use in worship with children, consider not only how an adult might interpret the story but also how children might view the events it describes. According to psychologist Jean Piaget in *The Psychology of the Child*, young children do not think the way adults do; they rely on intuition rather than logic. As a result, the connections children make with a story may differ from those adults make, and some stories may have an effect quite different from what was intended. Carolyn Brown, in *You Can Preach to the Kids, Too: Designing Sermons for Children and Adults*, reports that while some stories in the Bible may have spiritual meaning for adults, children may be terrified by them. Being sensitive to these differences in perception can help guide the selection of stories.

### Telling vs. Reading

Using stories effectively in worship services does not mean simply finding a book and reading it word for word from beginning to end. Good stories in worship are told rather than read to the participants. Maintaining eye contact is important to sustaining listeners' interest during the telling of the story.

Good storytellers pause frequently to set the tone, create suspense, and let the participants absorb the crucial elements of the story. They also vary the volume and intensity of their voices to emphasize important points or establish a mood. Sounding frightened, angry, or happy (when the events in the story warrant such emotion) adds important color to a story. However, use caution when trying different accents or voices; the result could produce laughter that might distract listeners from the true meaning of the story. There is also the danger that using different voices or accents might come off as mocking or insulting to the groups of people who are imitated.

For worship leaders who are uncomfortable with telling the story, there are some ways to improve a presentation even while reading. Practicing reading the story aloud several times can improve the flow of the words; it also provides the opportunity to read it different ways to see which is most effective. Rehearsal has the added benefit of making it easier to look away from the page regularly and then find the place in the story again. If a leader is familiar enough with the story to make eye contact and simply glance at the page at regular intervals, it will help create the impression that the leader is telling the story rather than reading the words.

Another method is to use a finger to keep track of the right place in the story, allowing the storyteller to easily glance down when necessary. Reading the story word for word is usually not crucial; communicating the general concept is the key to effective storytelling, not reciting the actual words themselves. So it's best to simply continue reading if an error occurs. Chances are, the listeners will not even know that the wrong word was used or a particular phrase was left out.

Skilled readers are comfortable holding a picture book off to the side so it is visible to listeners. Familiarity with the story line and wording helps the reader merely glance sideways at the book for reminders as the story proceeds.

Rev. Carol Taylor uses an innovative technique to hold a book up for a group as she reads it. She writes the words of the story

on paper or Post-it notes and sticks them to the back of the book. Then she can read the story word for word while holding the book up to let listeners see the pictures.

Experimenting with different methods can help storytellers determine the approach that is most comfortable for them.

## Interactive Storytelling

The shorter the better is a useful principle in selecting stories for children's worship, particularly when young children will be present. Listeners' attention may wander if the story takes too long to get to the point. If the children do not pay attention, it does not matter how good the story is.

However, it is possible to use longer stories and keep the attention of even very young children by using a few innovative techniques. Encouraging children to act out portions of the story, make hand motions or sounds as part of the action unfolds, and repeat a line that occurs multiple times are all good ways to use longer, more involved stories with positive results.

For example, when using the story *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, children can act out the story by slapping their hands on their thighs and clapping their hands at appropriate moments in the story. Children can be encouraged to make animal noises to correspond with the characters in the classic folktale "The Little Red Hen" or join in saying the line "Not I!" which occurs over and over again in the story.

Longer stories can also be accompanied by props, such as a kettle with a rock and assorted vegetables for the folktale "Stone Soup" or paper hearts for the story *What Is Love?* by Etan Boritzer. Other props that might be used to illustrate themes are autumn leaves (transitions or change), feathers (flight or sky), and yarn (the web of life).

Even the simple use of questions throughout the reading can help sustain interest during a long story. The worship leader can pause every now and then to ask listeners a question, such as "What

do you think is going to happen next?" or "Is that a good idea?" Storytellers should be prepared for some wild and way-out answers as well as some very thoughtful ones and should be ready to bring the group back to the story if some of those answers threaten to pull the service too far off track.

Generally, when interactive elements are incorporated into a story, more interest will be sustained and more children will enjoy the experience. Participants cannot "get it" if they don't pay attention to the story.

## Multi-Sensory Storytelling

A good story uses more than just the sense of hearing to involve participants. Visual elements in the form of pictures or props help generate and hold interest as the story is told or read to the group. However, there is no reason to feel limited to only the visual and auditory senses when using stories as part of worship.

The smell or even taste of homemade bread can complement a story about bread or coming home. Candles as part of a winter service can add a beautiful and powerful element, particularly if scented candles are used to evoke memories of family traditions around the holidays. Special food is essential for any sort of Seder service and can also be used in celebrating other special holidays, such as Divali or Day of the Dead.

To incorporate the sense of touch, shells or smooth stones can be passed among the participants during a story about the sea or other body of water. Children can plant flowers or vegetables as part of a service celebrating the arrival of spring or focusing on the importance of taking care of our earth.

By going beyond simply telling the tale, worship leaders can present a highly memorable experience. The lesson behind the story is synthesized and processed by individuals on a deeper level when multiple senses are involved and different learning styles are considered. Through a little creativity and imagination, the story becomes more than words; it is absorbed and an "Aha!" moment

is created for the participants, who may then come away from the worship transformed by the experience.

### Mini-Sermons

When sermons are used as part of children's worship, they may be referred to as mini-sermons because they are much shorter than traditional sermons and usually involve interaction with the participants. Questions may be asked and ideas may be solicited as part of the mini-sermon. A prop or visual may be associated with the idea behind the mini-sermon, such as an umbrella to symbolize the church community or a box of crayons to represent diversity.

Mini-sermons are addressed directly to the participants to draw them into the service, and unlike most stories, they state clearly the lesson to be learned. They do not have characters who think and act as part of the overall lesson. However, just like good stories, mini-sermons teach important lessons and are designed to appeal to children. Both stories and mini-sermons rely on well-crafted messages and well-executed presentations.

Themes of mini-sermons often center around what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, explain a concept behind one of the seven Principles, or explore aspects of the six Sources of our living tradition. These short sermons are an effective way to communicate important ideas and moral ways of living as part of a worship service for children.

## Meditation and Prayer

The spiritual practices of meditation and prayer promote emotional healing and a deeper awareness of both the self and the world. John Hudson, in *Instant Meditation for Stress Relief*, says that although meditation is associated primarily with the religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, some form of the practice is used in most major religions of the world. Many Unitarian Universalists find it an enriching experience that promotes spiritual awareness and self-discovery.

In addition to its use as a personal spiritual practice, meditation is frequently an integral part of Unitarian Universalist worship services. It can be spoken, guided, or silent, depending on the framework of the service.

Meditation and prayer in children's worship calms the children's bodies and minds. More than a temporary method to induce relaxation, regular meditation teaches children a useful technique that they can rely on to help them in difficult times. Meditation can also serve as a form of prayer or reflection. As children grow older, they can use meditation to engage in positive self-talk or focus their thoughts during times of stress.

No technique can more effectively help Unitarian Universalist children deal with the transitions and challenges they will face in life. Knowing how to use meditation is a valuable skill that promotes the kind of soul-searching necessary to guide a person through times of uncertainty or to keep one calm during times of stress. Furthermore, no other spiritual practice is as compatible