

## Scheherazade Was Right!

There was and was not—Allah be praised!—a people who became marginalized. Abracadabra, 9/11, Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and Arab Americans and Muslims were suddenly fair game for racial slurs, suspicion, even violence. For almost four years, children and adults have heard invective, mindless chatter and bad jokes that indiscriminately lump all Muslims and Arabs into the category of they-who-must-be-got-before-they-get-us. It's stated as truth!

But the truth that stories tell is that “they” *are* “us.” We are, all of us, cruel, deceitful and foolish —or none of us are! We are all clever, heroic and compassionate. It is in the world's stories that we discover our common humanity. Why not look to stories from the Arab world for an antidote to the poisonous racism that assaults our Arab and Muslim neighbors each day?

Hodja's clever retorts may not bring peace on earth, but they interrupt the droning narrative of war. Ali Baba's “Open, Sesame” may not unlock a closed mind, but it might loosen the latch. When we tell stories rooted in the Middle East, we also relieve in some small way our country's chronic intolerance of Arab peoples and cultures.

At UTSA's Institute of Texan Cultures, one of the djinns we summon to help educators become more successful at such tasks is James Banks of the Center for Multicultural Education, University of Washington at Seattle. His *Typology of Multicultural Education* describes four increasingly sophisticated approaches to teaching diverse cultures. These “approaches” (for teachers) may also be viewed as “learning stages” (for students), and we storytellers can use them to understand both ourselves and our listeners.

Briefly, they are:

1. The **contributions approach** focuses on heroes, holidays and discrete cultural elements such as ethnic foods, festivals and folk dancing. Ethnic heroes tend to reflect dominant social ideologies and be less radical.
2. In the **additive approach**, cultural content, concepts and themes are merely added without disrupting the Eurocentric or mainstream canon, for example, adding a book to the curriculum without changing its framework. The experiences of cultural groups are still viewed from the dominant perspective.
3. The **transformation approach** restructures the curriculum so that concepts, issues or events are viewed from different perspectives *including* the mainstream perspective. In this approach, students read and hear the voices of the victors *and* the vanquished. They learn that knowledge is socially constructed.
4. The **social action approach** extends the transformation approach by pushing students to make decisions and to act on social issues important to them and their community.

(Banks J., *Introduction to multicultural education* (3rd ed.), 2002. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.)

When we tell a simple Arabian story, even a sanitized variant or a retelling by a western author, we are using the Contributions Approach, stage 1. *This first stage should not be minimized!* Culturally accessible stories are the point of entry.

Choose stories already loved in the west (Hodja/Dhujja stories, The Bedouin's Gazelle, Aladdin, Somerset Maugham's "Appointment in Samarra"). Bridge stories already in your repertoire with verses from Rumi or Gibran. Practice using proper terms (mosque, djinn, sheikh) and look for ways to reveal their meanings in context. Footnote the Middle Eastern roots of stories you already tell. ("The Peddler's Dream" and "Old Dry Fry" have antecedents in *The Arabian Nights*, for example.) Avoid elevating the mainstream perspective with phrases such as "*They* believe...." (Translation: "But *we* know better.") You do not have to be perfect; you simply have to follow your love of story into the Arab world.

To understand this stage from a learner's point of view, reflect on one of your own recent forays into a new culture. Probably your first "taste" was in a restaurant, a museum or shop, a photographic image, a song. You turned the corner, and there was a Nubian bracelet, a postcard from Prague, Andean street musicians, a sushi sample tray, children smiling after the tsunami on TV. Somehow that first sensation inspired you, and the door to the culture was opened. A culture's stories have the same effect.

Next, add *several* Arabian stories of different genres--legends, fables, wonder tales--or intentionally tell the one story you know more often. The Additive Approach, stage two, means just that: add. Open the door for more listeners, and open the door wider.

When we do our best story work for an audience we know is ready, we can use the transformative approach. In a program of stories from Arab lands, I might start with a simple humorous tale, a fable or folktale that features a Muslim practice and, later in the program, arrive at a fairy tale or legend which includes a jarring motif: a wife beaten or a daughter given as bride to a guest. Such motifs certainly occur in western stories, but my audience *knows* other western stories--a galaxy of them!--so the incident pales like a distant star. If it happens in the first Arab story they hear, it blazes in their sky and comes at them like a fireball. Worse yet, if they are prejudiced, it justifies their position. When they hear the taboo after a few accessible stories, the jarring effect soon passes; listeners move beyond it and hear the story to its universalizing end.

Stage four storytelling is worth special consideration. It occurs most often within a culture, not outside it. Consider the most sacred texts of your faith, the most intimate stories of your gender or sexual identity, the most painful memories of your family or ethnic heritage. These are usually told in familiar company and sometimes simply alluded to, left unspoken. There are occasions when such stories may be told to an uninitiated audience, but probably differently from how they are told "inside." Even then, the attempt is not without risk

Also risky is the attempt to tell the intimate stories of another culture. However clearly an outsider may think s/he understands, s/he can only interpret, not bear witness.

(Interpretation is what we do in stages 1, 2, and 3, where it is important only that the storyteller not bear *false* witness, that is, *mis*-interpret and do harm by reinforcing stereotypes, wearing an exaggerated costume, mimicking an accent or attempting to justify a story choice with apologies like “Some of my best friends are Jews!”)

If all this “risky” business sounds complicated, here are the simple “Dos” and “Don’ts”:

1. *DO* learn a story from the Arab World.
2. *DO* evaluate the stage of cultural understanding at which you, personally, have arrived.
3. *DO* estimate the stage of your audience, and choose your approach to tell accordingly.
4. *DO* add *another* story from the Arab world to your repertoire. And another. And Another.
5. *DO* invite Arab and Muslim friends to a performance; ask what they think, and give credence to their observations.
6. *DO* seek out Arab listeners after a program. Ask if they had heard the story before and if they thought you did it justice. (Note: Be courageous about this. I have never had anyone express anything but delight at having their stories told! Some also offer memories or variations which will enrich your next telling.)
7. *DO* listen closely to your narrative for the subtle western view or the lingering stereotype; eliminate them.
8. *DO* consult the Banks Typology when preparing stories from another culture, especially marginalized cultures or those with a recent history of oppression.

And remember what that Arabian princess/storyteller Scheherazade accomplished:

*With great faith in the power of story, she married Shahryar, the angriest sultan west of the Indus. His queen had betrayed him, so he killed her and (there being no anger management classes available) turned to revenge. Each day he married a new maiden and, the next morning—shlk!—off with her head.*

*Now Scheherazade and Dunyazade saw all this happening for they lived in the palace with their father, the Sultan’s vizier. Scheherazade, especially, was alarmed at the decimation of her sisters!*

*Now, I do not mean her sister, Dunyazade. I mean all her sisters. All the women. If you have ever been in a mosque, you know exactly what I mean, for there is a palpable sense of sisterhood in the women’s room, an embrace that enfolds even a visitor such as me. Even now, I can almost feel that deep one-ness among the women as we press arms and elbows and hips, bowing in a line of prayer. Those are the “sisters” Scheherazade wanted to save.*

*And she knew exactly how to do it, but to get close enough to carry out her plan, she would have to marry Shahryar. Dunyazade grasped her scheme immediately and even agreed to help, but their father, one of whose duties was royal executioner, was not easy to convince. At last, Scheherazade and Shahryar were*

*married, and the next morning, for the first time in a long while, the sultan did not wake up and order his bride's decapitation.*

*Why? Because she told him stories! All night long until the sun rose in the middle of one. She stopped. "To be continued," she said. Of course, Shahryar wanted to hear the end, so he postponed the daily execution. And thus it went for a while.*

*On the 145<sup>th</sup> night, Shahryar looked at Scheherazade tenderly. On the 270<sup>th</sup> night, he dismissed the suggestion of an adventure tale, saying "Tonight my mind is more inclined to higher things and would rather hear words of wisdom from you." And the rest is hist...er, legend.*

*The point is that slowly, very slowly, story by story, night after storied night, her tales softened his heart, dissolved his anger, and he was made whole. It took almost three years, 1001 nights, but her plan worked. The king was transformed; her sisters were saved, and Scheherazade's world became safe and lovely.*

You can wear down hatred just like Scheherazade did!

Have faith in your art. Know yourself. Know your audience. Choose stories to soften hearts in our divided community. Progress is imperceptible, but don't stop! You are doing the work of peacemaking.

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