



Video Story Transcript

The Teacher as Learner

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe2sF8GJtqg>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name's Nancy Donoval, and I've been a working storyteller for a lot of years. And I want to tell you about some adventures that I had as an artist in residence, in the state of Illinois.

I went to this one school for a week and they welcomed me. I've never been to a school like this before. I was gonna to do an assembly of stories for different grade levels; K-2, K-3, and then fourth, fifth, and sixth and then I was gonna to be in the reading teacher's room. And each classroom was going to come to me for, for one little session on storytelling. And we talked about different things I would do with different classes and different grade levels. But when I got to the school, oh my goodness, they had prepared it so much. There were signs everywhere. "Welcome storyteller. Welcome to Nancy Donoval." I went into the women's bathroom and there were signs in there, welcoming me to the school. And the kids had made them all and they had laminated them. I felt like a wanted, special artist.

It was right around Halloween. So, I went in to do the assembly. It was one of those big cafetorium with the kids all spread out like a sea of them around me. And I'm standing there with the microphone and I start telling some ghost stories because it's around Halloween. And everything is going great and then I start telling this story from a book by Linda Williams, called The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid Of Anything. Because this was the younger group of kids and I didn't want to tell anything too scary. And as soon as I started the, this one group over in a corner, erupted. There was just noise, and commotion, and moving around, and then, and then the teacher saying, "Shh." I thought OK., is it the Linda Williams fan club? Is it people who really hate this? What is happening there? But I was just doing the story. I found out later, that was the second-grade ESL class and they had just put on The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid Of

Anything, the Spanish version. So, as they were listening to all these stories that were in English and catching what they could or what they couldn't. Suddenly, I was telling a story that they *knew* that was for them.

I had so many kids come in and, and do the different groups but the classroom, I remember is that group of kids coming in to be with me. They were so excited. I was so excited. I have no memory of what the teacher and I had planned to do. I do have a memory of thinking I don't speak Spanish. And while I've worked with kids of second language in groups, where it was a lot of different languages, or most people spoke English but a few people. I never had a full-on group of seven year olds, they really mostly spoke Spanish. I was feeling a little out of my depth and what was I going to do for them. And I thought, hmm, let's try instead of "oh I'm the teacher here to help you." They loved that story so much in Spanish. Let's have them teach it to me. And so, they started teaching me, The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid Of Anything, in Spanish.

I'm not very good with languages. I really struggled. It was fun because I knew the story. When we get to the sound effects like "clump, clump, clump, and, and snap, snap, snap," I was like, OK, I know how to do those. But I had so much trouble with all the rest of it. They were so gentle and so patient. And they, sort of, broke themselves up into little groups of who was going to work on what, who was going to teach me what. And I started seeing them mirroring all the behaviors that people had used with them, trying to get them to speak another language.

The person who was very ferocious with me. "No, no. Like this, like this." And then they would say it again, "Like this." And I would feel a little like, "I'm trying. I'm doing my best. I mean I'm not faking that I'm not good at this to make them feel better. I am really trying to do it."

And there was a boy named Luis who just attached himself to my left shoulder and somehow became the person who was determined that I would say the word *pantalones* correctly. He was so patient and so. (*Sighs*) He did that so many times. And he would say the word and I would say it. And to me I was saying it exactly like he said it. But I wasn't. They were giggling. They were laughing. They were the teachers.

They were the experts and I started realizing, oh, they're actually getting to see how hard it is to learn a new language. They're getting to see me not be able to do it in a snap. And I was hoping that maybe that made them feel like, oh yeah it takes a while to do this. And really they are much better at English than I'm ever going to be in Spanish. I loved that group of kids. I'm always going to remember Luis and I still really don't know how to pronounce *pantalones* very well. But you know, you can go to schools and be speaking a different language even when it seems like you're both speaking English.

I grew up in Chicago and that's where I was based at this time. And, and I was very comfortable in the urban environment. But I ended up doing residencies way out in farming country, in western Illinois. I remember working with a group of high school students and they were telling stories about hijinks their parents had been up to. And one of them started talking about when a group of his parents' friends, when they were teenagers, had stolen a bunch of watermelons. And they had taken the watermelons and they put them in the river to keep them cold and hide them and then they could eat them the next day. And I was horrified! Take fruit that you're going to eat and soak it overnight in a river?! I'm from Chicago. We dye the river green and the rest of the year, when it's not St. Patrick's Day, it is a lot of colors but mostly not the color of anything you want to soak something in overnight. And we realized even the same word "river" meant something totally different to them than it meant to me.

I even ended up going into this hog farming community. I was the first artist that had ever been to their town, ever. Five hundred people in the town. All the kids who were in the school lived on hog farms all around. And when they were working on making up an adventure for an animal story, they did a story about what they

knew and they created an amusement park for pigs. Everything pigs would like, troughs of food that the pigs when they pay their lunch ticket could swim in and open their mouths, and just everything would go in, and I would never have been able to think about what a pig would want for an amusement park. But they knew exactly what to do. It was the most homogenous community I'd ever been in. Everybody was white, everybody was a farmer. I think there was one Jewish family in town. People would tell me that to let me know that they did have diversity.

I was there for a month working with third graders. And the very last week a girl came into our class who had just been adopted from an orphanage in Russia. She had black hair. No one in the school had black hair. And her skin was darker and she was from this other country and she did speak English and we were kind of at the end of the residency and we'd done most of the work that they had to do. And every day I would tell them new story as part of our work and she came in. And I thought, hmm, hmm. Russia, Russia. I knew a story about Baba Yaga. It wasn't one I'd really performed but it was one I knew. And I told it. Not to say, "Hey little girl, I know all about Russia," but just because I thought, in this room, where she looks so different from everybody, maybe she's heard this story and I can give her something familiar.

She lit up. And then after the story, corrected me on how it should go. Because, of course, I got the story from a book and she'd actually heard it from someone. "No, no, no, that animal in the story that would have been a mouse not, not what you were saying." And she drew these amazing pictures of Baba Yaga's house. The house on chicken legs. And she had a detail I'd never known about, this chain around one of the chicken legs, keeping it to the ground so it couldn't run away. I still have her pictures. And I helped welcome her in to that community and she helped me know that story a little bit better.

I have one last group I want to tell you about. It's a group of seventh graders, not in rural community at all, right there in Chicago where I grew up. But it was an inner-city school. And when I went into work but the seventh graders, four classrooms of seventh graders, in a Chicago public school, it was almost all immigrants. They had 31 languages spoken in the room. At least a half to a third of the kids there were not born in this country and the vast majority of the rest of them, their parents were not born in this country. There were a couple of people that their grandparents had come from another country. But this was the United Nations in a classroom. And the principal had brought me in to say that in a week, which was one hour a day with each group of seventh graders, she wanted them to be able to tell a story from their life. That by seventh grade you should be able to get up in front of people and tell a story from your life.

And I went in to work with them. And one of the things I do when I work with kids is that, we go around the room and I have them say their name out loud, and then tell me something that they really like. And then, we come up with a gesture for it as a memory tool. Because I've learned my lesson, that kids really end up getting worried about doing it right. And if I'm trying to learn their names and come back the next day, and come back the next day, I always tell them, I'm not going to remember all your names. I'm going to get some wrong. By the end of the week, I'll be better. But that doesn't mean I don't remember *you*. And I need you to really tell me something you care about and we'll come up with a gesture to get it into my head.

And I remember this one kid, who his favorite thing was roller coasters. So, the gesture he came up with was, (*makes downward gesture*). When I went back the next day it was like, ahhh, OK. I remember that name. I remember that name. I remember that name. I got to him, I couldn't remember his name. And it wasn't like the kids were against me, I know we have you know things about junior high, they wanted me to do well. And suddenly, this charade show was going on, of, of everybody doing things that he kept doing this, (*makes downward gesture*). And I could not remember what that was. And finally, I went, "Roller coaster, roller coaster!" And then I still couldn't remember his name and all of the kids started going, (*makes stirring/tossing*

gestures) I'm totally lost. Totally lost. Yeah, his name was Caesar. And they were showing me mixing up a salad. And that's part of why I asked them for their name so they say at least one thing to me and we have a relationship.

But then we started moving into them trying to tell stories from their lives, they were pretty much like, I don't have a story. I don't know what you mean. And I started thinking about my grandfather who came from Czechoslovakia. And when I was a kid, I thought it was so amazing that he grew up in this other country and he knew this other language. And I try to get him to teach it to me. And he would say, "We are American. We speak American." He would put his whole country aside. And I started thinking, I wonder if these kids know that they have stories that are from their country?

When I became a storyteller, I started hunting for stories from Czechoslovakia. Anything to make me feel connected to the homeland. And I got them all in books. And I remember going to the Museum of Science and Industry and telling for this Christmas thing. And, and, oh, I'd be all little kids, and being very, ahh, you know, high-powered participation, secular, holiday stories. And then my last group was two, two women; one in a wheelchair, and then the old one pushing it. And as soon as I started this story, just for them, a new story I was learning that was quiet, and not participatory, but from the country my grandfather came from, the woman in the wheelchair fell asleep. But the other woman just watched me and watched me and watched me. And afterwards, she came up and in that universal grandmother gesture, she curled three dollar bills into my hand, and said, "You just gave me back my childhood. You just gave me back my grandfather's hands. When I was young and I grew up in Czechoslovakia and I would sit on the floor by the fire and he would sit on a stool. And he would tell me stories, including that story. And I would watch his hands." And all I could think was these stories really come from the country? 'Cause I'm just in the folktales section at the library. But the stories in the books really come from there.

And I'm looking at these kids who feel like they have no stories. And the next day, I brought in a huge crate of books, a whole bunch of folktale books. And I said, "I'm not giving these to you but I want you to actually have a chance to look at where you come from and all the stories that are connected to you." And I just started grabbing them, "Who's from India? Who's from India? Stories from India?" handed it to them. "OK. Russia. OK." Just everything. "Who's Buddhist. Let's have that." All the different collections and they dove into them. They were so hungry for them. And at lunchtime these two kids came up to me and said, "Did you have any books from Puerto Rico?" I said, "Oh, no, I don't. I don't have any books from Puerto Rico but I know a couple stories from Puerto Rico." And they skipped lunch and sat there with me while I told them stories from where they came from, where their parents came from. Two girls from Vietnam had been very clear that they had no stories. They knew no stories. They had no stories. But I had a book of all these different versions of Cinderella from different countries. And I just started going through the Table of Contents, not reading the names of the stories, and what country they were from. And the very last one on the book is The Story of Tấ m and Cám from Vietnam. And those two girls, (*gasps*), they knew that story. And then they wanted me to read it from the book. And I said, "Why should I read it from the book? You know the story." They told it. And then they started telling us about the school they'd gone to in Vietnam and the bell that was rung to bring them into the school every day. And the cute boy who usually worked at the gate. They had story. They just needed to know where they came from.

I have to say pretty much every one of these experiences had a moment of me going, "I have no idea what to do now. I don't speak these languages. I don't know their cultures. I don't want to." And every time the right thing for me to do was instead of trying to teach them, let them teach me.

