

## **Laura Simms**

### Being in the story: Achieving the Impossible

NEW YORK -- All I know about storytelling in peacemaking I have discovered in impossible situations. The need of audiences taught me to improvise, learn, and surrender expectations. Questions haunt me: How can I benefit listeners? What key might open a heart? What image or state of mind might focus, provide solace, delight, pacify, empower? What is the role of story in this moment?

I trust that listening uncovers and awakens inner capacities for happiness, self awareness, communication and transformation. Listening -- for both teller and audience - - sanctions the place where body and mind synchronize, allows thoughts and feelings to arise with less need to react with restraint. Preconceived notions of what peace is pale before the visceral experience of feeling without fear and trusting one's inherent goodness.

I spent July 2005 in the Romanian city of Buhusi, where I conceived a program to renew the heart of the community by saving its zoo and creating a related program for Roma children. For the zoo, I brought volunteers: two zookeepers, a young biologist and volunteer animal protection workers. For the children, I designed a storytelling-based program with movement, drawing and daily visits to the zoo. Photographer Zsolt Suto came to teach the kids to take pictures. A Romanian therapist from the group Ovidiu Rom, which takes Gypsy children off the street and trains their mothers for menial jobs, served as my translator. We were to number five staff and 25 children.

The first day no children arrived.

The children live in a slum called Le Colonie, and school is not a normal part of Roma life. So we jumped in vans and went to find them. Stray dogs and barefoot babies greeted us as we walked down mud roads to knock on doors and remind parents that our program had meals and activities. By 10 a.m., there were 10 kids in their best clothes. We had lunch together and talked about what we planned.

On day two, 32 children arrived. We made a circle and, through a miraculous feat of energy and focus, they introduced themselves as we turned name-sharing into an irresistible rhythmic event with repeatable gestures.

Then I told three stories translated on the spot. The ragamuffin gathering broke into cacophony every "still" second. Discipline was out of the question. The kids paid no attention if they chose not to. They were used to frenzy and adults yelling. But they sat silently through the storytelling! We spent our last hours at the zoo.

Torrential rains flooded Moldavia overnight and six wet children arrived. Le Colonie had been evacuated. For three days as the rains continued to fall and wash away villages, we staged black garbage bag fashion shows, gave out sandwiches and swept water out of animal cages with whoever showed up.

The rains finally stopped on the last day of the week. Fifty-four children ranging from age 3 to 18 appeared. I abandoned the program for a smaller group and began to mainly engage them in stories to increase their self and mutual awareness. More and more children kept arriving until the last day we counted 97 children.

"Circle! Circle!" the kids all called out as soon as they had breakfast. The repeated ritual of gathering and introducing ourselves started every day. It steadily expanded social skills saying one's name in the center of the circle, calling someone into the circle to say his or her name, shaking hands and greeting each other, declaring the name of an animal one liked, sharing something seen the day before. Each child was important. Each name

was repeated in unison. These routines gave us form and a sense of accomplishment and, in the process, we became a story of our shared experience.

My concerns were how to slow down the kids so they could listen, feel and communicate with one another, enjoy themselves, think creatively, get a sense of cause and effect, and discover the satisfaction of paying attention without punishment or rigid discipline.

I invented a daily storytelling event which engendered these goals.

I began with a Romanian fairytale with many characters about the power of kindness.

"There was once a boy," I began, adding "born in the city of Buhusi." They cheered!

"What was his name?" I asked.

Romeo pointed to a boy and said, "His name was Alexander."

I began again: "Once upon a time in the city of Buhusi, a very, very long time ago there was a boy whose name was Alexander."

Each time the children named something from their group they focused more deeply. Forty-five minutes later the story ended with all participating.

"Happily ever after!" they shouted.

"But first there is a wedding dance and a feast," I replied.

We went outside to invent a wedding dance that filled the schoolyard. Some of the kids took wedding photos, with tips on image framing and focusing. Then we marched to the zoo in satisfied pairs, equipped with journals, throw-away cameras and crayons. People stopped to watch this fabulous parade. We carried plastic bags to stash grass for the deer and baboons. Nothing was wasted. Other days we found logs for the dingos.

Having had this time together, it was easy to break into groups that were structured with intention and learning. We formed clans with animal names to observe animals and draw pictures. The promise was that we could then make photos having truly looked and seen.

We continued daily: The telling was now a mutual invention. It shifted into wonderful discoveries, such as, "Who was the one who was not in the story?" There were moments of total chaos. Because the stories were really our own and they could participate successfully with intelligence, imagination and generosity, the chaos arose and subsided. Their energy was not suppressed, but put to use.

The final day, I said I had lost my story. I needed them to help me find it. So I began, "Once a long time ago in the city of Buhusi there was a....?"  
"An old man," a girl called out.

I became the storyteller in search of a tale, and they became the memory of all the parts. As it unfolded, I kept repeating it back to them, reiterating a structure they could feel good about. When it was over, they were thrilled.

The next morning parents and others were coming to our final party. The zoo was full. The kids gave tours explaining how to behave in a zoo, so the animals would not be stressed.

Despite their often tragic lives, in these two weeks they discovered they could work together, succeed, take pictures and help a zoo, while listening, learning and becoming the hero and heroine of their own tale.

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