

Storytelling with Children in Crisis

Take Just One Star – How Impoverished
Children Heal Through Stories

Molly Salans



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All of the names and circumstances in this book have been changed to protect the identity of Molly Salans' clients. For the same purpose, the name of the town she worked in and the agency she worked for have remained anonymous.

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*To the parents and children I've met and written about in this book,
who taught me about true hope and how not to give up ever,
To my mother who loves art and children,
To my father who I love unconditionally
And to my daughter Sarah who taught me about unconditional love*

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Stars'

O, sweep of stars over Harlem streets,
O, little breath of oblivion that is night,
A city building
To a mother's song.
A city dreaming
to a lullaby. Reach up your hand, dark boy, and take a star.
Out of the little breath of oblivion
that is night
Take just
One star.

Langston Hughes

Introduction

I have the pleasure of presenting this volume of precious stories written from the hearts of children who live in an impoverished area near Boston. Through the use of story and poem in the psychotherapeutic work, these children have slowly begun to understand that the stars, even just one, are theirs to take.

Some of the youngsters in this book have lived in foster homes and all have been reunited with their parents. Some are children of incest, others are children of substance abusers. Some were sexually, physically, and/or emotionally abused. Most have mothers who are survivors of sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse, and who, despite popular opinion, are struggling to be free of their dependence on public assistance. All of these children witnessed some form of domestic violence; all know of someone who has been killed. Many of their teenage siblings are already parents at the same age their mothers became parents, and very few knew their biological fathers. They all live in communities with run-down schools, overcrowded waiting rooms in medical clinics, streets lined with drug-dealers, and with kindergartners often left home alone in the afternoons to take care of their younger siblings.

In spite of these hardships, the children I met are also full of vigorous energy, often providing hope in circumstances which demand the opposite. The children's names and other pieces of information about them have been changed in order to protect their identities. This book contains their stories, stories which, while they were in therapy, helped them change and validated their hope. While I didn't use the storytelling process with every child, those who did engage in this process were helped. I have not seen some of these children for some time, but it is my hope that they are able to tap into and utilize the memories of these stories in time.

I do not deeply interpret or analyze the stories the children have told me. This book is not about analysis or research. It is about the lives of the children and, in particular, about the way they express their lives through

story. At the beginning of each section in this book I describe each child's life in general as well as the therapeutic process through which the stories are told. I include both the tales I told the child as well as his or her stories, written exactly the way they were told to me.

My first opportunity to incorporate story with therapy arose in 1993 through an internship I had at Boston University School of Social Work. There, I facilitated a group for six inner-city girls aged 10–12. At our first meeting they scattered to all corners of the room, pulling each other's hair, fighting, swearing, and spitting. One girl, the largest in size, chose to lie beneath a chair until the group ended, refusing to get up or even move. At the end of that first day I sat crying and exhausted with my supervisor and her supervisor, ready to drop the group or drop school. The head supervisor, understanding my creative talents, suggested I go home and write a fairy tale for each child.

By the next week, I had six fairy tales. I walked into the group, wishing the entire group would disappear. I told the girls I had a surprise for them, had them sit in a circle, and began storytelling. By the end of the first story, one of the girls suggested putting a chair in the middle of the floor. 'This is for the "Queen" of the story. She has to sit here.' Each little monster-girl did turn into a real queen that day. They beamed, they laughed, they added pieces to each other's story. At the end, one girl said, 'I can't believe it – you made us all princesses.' After this experience, the group literally turned itself around, and each girl behaved like the princess in her story. I couldn't wait to do more of this type of work.

In 1994, I began working as a home-based clinician at a state agency. At that time, I was comfortable telling stories, but still unsure how to introduce actual story writing from the client. I decided to stick with what I knew would work: poetry and storytelling. I began this work with Roberto, one of my first clients, a young Hispanic boy aged 12. Roberto was adopted by his grandmother and when I met him, had been expelled from four elementary schools. He had witnessed much domestic violence between his mother and several of her boyfriends, and had suffered physical blows as well.

Our first meeting was in his grandmother's garden on a summer morning. I was impressed that by 10am he was dressed, fed and waiting for me. However, those were the only positive impressions I received. We sat across from each other in silence. He sighed, folded his arms, and looked the

other way. Finally, when he would only give yes or no answers to my many questions, I asked him if he would like to hear a story. Since there was no response, and since I enjoy telling stories, I took his silence to mean assent and told him one. While I talked, I noticed that his breathing, focus, and body posture were more attentive. Afterward, when I asked him if he had liked the story, he shrugged in the positive. He remained non-verbal for the next five or six weeks. I continued to tell him stories. By the end of that time, he had attended school for two weeks. His grandmother pulled me aside, and said, 'So far so good, no bad reports from teachers yet.'

'But he's only been in school for two weeks,' I said.

His grandmother interrupted me, 'You don't understand,' she said. 'Usually by the end of the first week he has been suspended for talking back to teachers. Nothing of the kind has been reported so far!'

Amazed, I couldn't wait to see Roberto. We sat outside in the garden in the usual way, across from each other. When I began to tell him another story, Roberto unexpectedly and suddenly interrupted me with, 'Why are you always telling me these stupid stories?!' I was shocked and horrified at first, but then I realized he was actually speaking to me! And so began our first discussion. Roberto's behavior continued to change for the better throughout the year. He had a few squabbles with the teachers, and a few detentions, but nothing compared with past years. It's unclear precisely why Roberto really changed. Being kicked out of several elementary schools, and being removed from your mother's home at such a young age are devastating occurrences. When we met, Roberto's self-esteem was extremely low; he had reached bottom. But he was also an extremely intelligent boy and capable of insight. His grandmother's home was safe, disciplined, and full of love. Here, he had a second chance. He was ready to rise to this new opportunity and make changes. The stories I told him gave him food for thought and more impetus to make those changes.

Roberto's experiences encouraged me. I continued to tell stories to children and families until 1995.

As a result of the storytelling during therapy sessions, most of the time, parents reported small changes in their children's behavior. One client cleaned her room without being told, another received fewer bad teacher reports than normal, yet another went for an entire day without arguing with her parent.

Moonless Night

Debbie Carlton's house was immaculate; it looked as though no one lived there. Everything sparkled, glistened, and shone, from the chrome on the refrigerator, to the wooden handles on the cabinets. Often when I walked into their home I was struck by the smell of Pine Sol and air-freshener. A string mop, resting in a bucket of water, leaned against the wall, and the chairs were on top of the kitchen table upside down.

I first met Debbie and her family in 1996 and provided individual and family treatment for the next two years. Debbie was ten at the time and was the second to youngest. She was tall for her age, and thin. Her thick, brown hair fell in curls around her shoulders, and her large brown eyes were lined with long, dark lashes.

Both Debbie and her siblings were a great source of aggravation to their mother, Eileen, who worked hard to keep her home clean and her four children organized.

It was difficult to sit in the living room, in spite of the two sofas, as I was afraid to wrinkle a cushion or become a dust culprit. Her children were often such culprits, as Eileen Carlton frequently ran after them, calling them slobs, and yelling whenever they so much as left a crumb behind. In addition, Eileen followed their numerous cats around with a dust buster – cats which Debbie found on the street and adored, and which her mother could not stand, and often attempted to give away. Eileen constantly wiped animal hair off chairs, couches, tables, and counters.

Eileen Carlton's life had been extremely hard since early childhood. Besides being hit often by her mother's various boyfriends, she was neglected and deprived. The many drugs she took as a teenager did not help her situation, probably causing among other things, organic brain disease. Lost and not knowing where to turn, she involved herself with different

men who abandoned her. As a result, she was the mother of seven children by the time she was 25; three of these had died in tragic accidents. She spent many of her young adult years with her mother, as her life skills were greatly diminished and she did not have her own apartment, until Debbie was four years old.

When Eileen finally moved her children and herself into their own apartment, she became best friends with Kelley, the neighbor down the street. Kelley was also a single mother whose three children were much younger. Eileen relied on Kelley for many things, including transportation, groceries, parenting skills and, most importantly, 'moral' support. Eileen and Kelley shared the same views about life and, inadvertently, Eileen often sided with Kelley against her own children. The two families often ate dinner with each other and shared in the cooking and the cleaning. Kelley and Eileen's children often played together. In the summer of 1997, at a time when public assistance was forcing single parents to join either a back-to-school or back-to-work program, Eileen was hired to work as a bus monitor 20 hours a week for children with retardation. This was her first job in years and a remarkable accomplishment for Eileen. She relied on Kelley for after-school care.

Debbie and her sisters also had a very difficult time as youngsters. For the first four years of Debbie's life, her family lived with Eileen's mother. The difficulty was that the grandmother did not treat her grandchildren much differently than she had treated her daughter. The unrealistic expectations the grandmother had for her small grandchildren, and her methods of discipline (such as locking Debbie or one of her siblings in a dark room for hours on end), combined with extreme poverty, took its toll on the entire family. Eileen was either unaware of the situation, or completely helpless to change it. Her inability to think a situation through, or to think ahead, seemed to be damaged by the numerous drugs she had taken as a teenager.

The oldest daughter, Connie, was truant, promiscuous, and involved both with the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Department of Youth Services (DYS). She often ran away, and when she was caught and brought home, she tortured Debbie physically, emotionally, and verbally.

The second sister, Lynn, was shy, obedient, and silent. She often cleaned the house, prepared snacks and took care of the two younger siblings. One day, she too ran away, after smashing her two younger sisters' piggy banks

and stealing the little money her mother had in her wallet. Three days later she was discovered in an unsafe neighborhood, and in an apartment kept by men much older than she. Her new apparel suggested that she was ready to engage in posing for pornographic magazines.

The youngest, Billy, swore often, refused to follow direction, yelled frequently at his teachers, and lied constantly.

Throughout the two years I worked with Debbie, she was continually worried and anxious. She spent much time in her room alone talking with herself and her numerous cats. She had trouble focusing on homework and despised the neighbors down the street, 'because they take up so much of my Mom's time. She is always hanging out with them, and she is never at home with us. Then Connie comes home, throws all of my clean clothes on our bedroom floor, wears my clothes without asking, hits me hard in the back, and the shoulders, lights up a cigarette, and tells me if I tell Mom, she'll kill me.' We sat in the kitchen, where there was little privacy, and where we had to speak in whispers, so that a sister or a neighbor would not overhear.

After a month of weekly visits, I asked Eileen if there was a more private space we could use when we met. With surprising understanding, she replied, 'Of course there is. I know that you two need to be alone, and I know how important this is, and here you can meet in my babies' room. You know, I feel they are still with us, so I haven't quite gotten rid of everything. I keep this room locked...it belongs to my three babies. I clean it every day.' When she opened the room, it was even cleaner than the other areas of the house. And on the floor next to the radiator was a bunch of tiny shoes, all lined up in pairs. Eileen then said to us, 'Just sit in here, and if I need you, Deb, I will knock very loudly on the door three times, so you will know it is me!'

In the middle of this session, there were three loud knocks on the door, and Eileen walked in. She carefully placed two steaming cups of hot chocolate on the immaculately dusted dresser near the bed we were sitting on. Debbie's eyes lit up at this gesture and she sipped her hot chocolate joyfully. As she drank, I wondered how I could empower her. Finally, I asked her if she would like to write a story.

'YES!' she exclaimed. She crafted the following story without much help from me. When she finished her story, we talked about the characters.

Don't Trust Anyone Evil

by Debbie Carlton

A long time ago, deep, deep in the rainforest, there lived a Princess. She was the most beautiful Princess whoever lived at that time. She was not selfish; she was always kind to her people. If anyone needed help she was always there to help them.

One day an old, old wicked witch, disguised as an old lady, came to the castle to see the Princess. She made sure it was on a day when her parents were not home. After the old lady greeted the Princess, she said, 'You must follow the star that will lead you to the bigger village beyond your own. This necklace will glow when the star is right above your bedroom window; then you must walk down the clouds which sing like steps.'

As if in a trance, the lovely Princess took the necklace. When she went to sleep that night, she stayed up admiring its beauty and rarity, waiting for it to glow brightly. Finally at midnight, the moment arrived. The necklace glistened, and the Princess looked out her bedroom window and saw beautiful-looking clouds. She rose and walked out of her window, down the clouds which sang like the steps, following the star. She was led to an awful-looking village. Here the star stopped glowing and said in an evil voice, 'Come in, my child.'

The young Princess did not know how far she had wandered from her home. A spell had made her walk and walk and walk. And now she still could not help herself. Even though she felt scared, she walked into the evil village.

That old, scrawny witch was standing right in the first doorway of the first house. All of the ladies came out as soon as the old lady blew her whistle and shouted, 'She's here!' Her scream was louder than the morning bells. All of the witches came out to see who was caught this time. They all brought something with them: jewelry boxes, mysterious cups, pots, pans, spoons... The three last witches brought a wand, a huge pot and a spell book. The witch with the wand said, 'Hurry, hurry! Everyone come around.'

Meanwhile, when that horrible witch blew her whistle, the high sound echoed over the Princess's home. The King and Queen woke up screaming and crying. They understood something terrible had happened. They started to search for their daughter. They looked

through the whole village. There were no clues to be found. The clouds had gone back to the sky, taking the footprints with them. No one, not even one person, knew where the poor Princess had gone.

The King and Queen finally decided to enter their daughter's very private cave, where the old, powerful Lion slept. He was magical. He could turn himself or others into anything he wanted. Because of this power, he was seldom disturbed. He was there to protect the Princess, who he loved dearly.

When he found out she was missing, he searched his entire cave, but could not find her. He stepped outside, and lifted his mighty head in order to sniff the air. Alas, he could not smell out the evidence; it had all disappeared. But when he put his head down he saw in front of him a tiny jewel that had fallen from the necklace.

When he showed this jewel to the King and Queen, the Queen said, 'I have never seen a jewel like this.' And the King said, 'This does not look like any jewel any villager would wear. This must belong to one of the wicked witches. Oh...our Princess must be with them!'

'Well, you know how wicked witches are,' the Lion said. 'The necklace which this jewel was attached to must have hidden all of the evidence.'

The King and Queen called for all of their knights. They demanded that this noble army be dressed in their heaviest armor and carry their biggest shields and sharpest swords. They were told why they were needed and shown the jewel. All of the knights also knew this jewel to belong to the wicked witches.

Right in the middle of this, a horrible smell started to wind its way into the palace meeting room. The odor from the stew the witches were making was taking over the air. The King and Queen cried, 'Oh no, the witches are making a spell!' Then everyone in the whole village fell asleep, except for the King, Queen, knights, and Lion, who were protected by the Lion's magic.

The Lion helped everyone go to the evil village. But alas, the minute they got there they, too, fell asleep.

The poor Princess, meanwhile, was in the last place of the forest right in the center of the awful smell. Ironically, this place was also quite beautiful. There were rare plants, wonderful tasty fruits, and lots of animals. The Princess was sitting in a chair which had stood in this place for 100 years. The Princess had not fallen asleep yet