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The Sharing Heart

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I never thought of being a librarian when I was a kid. Not even as a fallback just in case my inevitably successful NBA career was cut short by injury. But if I had said I'd be a librarian someday, people who knew me would have said: "That's perfect. Libraries are quiet, and so are you." Fifteen years later, with a fruitless English degree (my inevitably successful great American novel didn't materialize either) and three years as a bookkeeper (the most exciting thing about that career was being able to say that my job title had three consecutive double letters... somehow, that's not enough), I thought about becoming a librarian. I liked books and I was kind of interested in computers. Besides, I was still one of the most introverted people I'd ever met (although, of course, introverts don't meet many people). So I pictured myself quietly cataloguing books in a basement room somewhere, or maybe pursuing research relentlessly. Others would turn my humble efforts into ground-breaking literature and I would quietly claim a bit of credit for myself.

I enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley Library School and took some classes. They were interesting enough, but "Children's Literature" stood out. This class made me remember where my love of reading really started. When I was a kid, I not only read books, but I talked about them with brothers and sisters (I had six). It struck me that I might really enjoy talking about books with people and sharing favorite authors and stories just like I did with my family growing up. I realized a children's librarian does this. So the following semester I took "Storytelling." The notion of telling a story to classmates, most of whom had done this before, terrified me; but things I learned in the class helped me through it. I came to realize that the folk tales I would tell had survived hundreds of years and thousands of storytellers. No one had killed them yet. So a shy, introverted former bookkeeper couldn't do much harm, as long as he stuck to the story. I practiced *The Foolish Man*, my first tale, for weeks until I knew it perfectly. The events of the story were so neatly contrived that the audience would get it, regardless of my delivery. The performance was not perfect, but the story worked, and the pattern of relying on the strength of the story has carried me through twelve years as a children's librarian.

Soon after library school I found a job and started telling stories and talking about books with kids. For the most part the first year went pretty well, although there were some difficult moments. During a televised awards presentation for young authors I forgot my speech and stared silently at the camera for thirty seconds. It felt like thirty years. But dreaded moments like these weren't such a big deal. The smiles and appreciation that came my way easily outweighed the mistakes. I found that by putting myself in front of a group of kids, armed with good books and stories, I was making a difference! Kids would ask for copies of the titles, and kindergartners would acquire their first library cards with excitement glowing in their eyes. Even the rough times ended triumphantly. I visited one fifth grade class during my first year in which the teacher had absolutely no control, and I felt like I was talking to the air. I pushed on, telling myself that the books I'd selected were worth the effort. A few days later, one girl from that class came in asking for a book I'd talked about, *Julie of the Wolves*. I found out then that I could handle being ignored by 29 kids if the 30th listened and became excited about reading.

By choosing good books and stories, I recognized I didn't have to win an audience over with my person-



Steven marches in a parade as "Cat in the Hat."

ality. *Frog and Toad* were the funny guys, and *The Gunniwolf* was scary. Me, I was simply the go-between, introducing the characters to the kids. But things eventually got muddled. Maybe the characters in the stories were funny, but I was the one receiving the laughter, not *Frog and Toad*. I'd walk into a classroom with books and maybe a puppet or two and I'd hear someone say, "this guy's funny." I have to admit, I loved it! Gradually I got to a point where I was glad, even eager, to share the spotlight with the characters in my stories. In other words: I became a ham. After years of avoiding any kind of attention, I actually looked forward to standing in front of a bunch of kids and entertaining them (as long as I had the security of books and puppets along with me). I like to think I've kept things in perspective. I realize I'd be nothing without *Anansi the Spider* and *The Big Bad Wolf*, and that if I were asked to speak to a group of kids about anything that didn't have to do with books and the library I'd be just another boring grown-up. But this shtick works out fine, because spreading the library message is not only fun, but what I want to do.

The work I do is important. I knew from the start that getting kids excited about books, reading, and the library was valuable, and that people who did this made a

difference in the world. It would have been disappointing to have missed out just because I was shy. 🐸

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Halloween storytelling.