

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop

Julie Paiva – How you show up matters.



David:

Okay. So, let's see what might be the circumstance in which a hedgehog might put a top hat on.

David:

Hi there. This is David and welcome to The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories workshop. We're so glad you've come to visit this podcast where we delve into the process of creating a Sparkle Story. What you're going to hear is a conversation between me, our chief storyteller here at Sparkle and a special guest. Our guests are people from all walks of life. Some of you may know, and others, you may not, but all are conscious of the stories that we tell our children and their impact.

So I ask all of our guests "What do you think children need to hear right now? And we have a conversation that will ultimately lead to a produced audio story for children. And we'll share a bit of that story here after our conversation.

So today, I will collaborate with Julie Paiva. Julie is a screenwriter, a storyteller, a mom of one child, and a first grade teacher - to many very lucky kids. So thank you for joining us - and we hope you enjoy the conversation and the process. And be sure to listen for a special message from Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories at the very end. Now here's our conversation.

David:

Hi Julie Paiva. Welcome.

Julie:

Thank you so much. Glad to be here.

David:

Well, I'm really glad that you are up for this. Thank you. And at the end of a school day, that's doubly impressive.

Julie:

Thank you. I'm excited. I'm curious.

David:

I am. I want to just jump right into first grade because you and I have that in common. I taught first grade too. So, I would love to hear a little bit about your experience as a first grade teacher, because there is this thing that was said, which I took close to heart, that you never forget your first grade teacher. I think of my elementary school and I can only remember my first grade teacher. Why do you think that is?

Julie:

I think it's when your learning turns on in a certain way. I mean, of course in preschool and kindergarten, your exploration and curiosity is already there but it's the first time you become a scholar. I think that moment and the how proud they feel of that, that we're now connected for life with them on that journey.

David:

Absolutely. I can't remember my first grade teacher's name, but I remember what she brought and what she brought was storytelling. She brought me storytelling. That was where it started for me. You use storytelling, don't you?

Julie:

I do. Yes.

David:

Talk about that.

Julie:

Well, as in my personal life, I also do storytelling. So, it's very natural to want to put it into the classroom as well. We had at one of the schools, a storyteller that would come in once a month. I would say his name was Mr. Harry. I would be in the room while he did his storytelling and watching the way the kids were absolutely silent and hanging on his every word was magical. I kept like... I don't want to say stealing because teachers share everything, but just absorbing as much as I could from what he did in the smallest of things, just the pauses alone. I think I got a lot of permission for drama and how to add drama into storytelling for children.

David:

The pause. That's huge. I've thought about and practice the pause quite a bit and there's a ton of magic that happens in the pause. Do you use that throughout the day with your teaching consciously?

Julie:

Yes. 100%. He would always end every single story with, "And that, is the end of the story." Every time I read a book aloud, I do that at the end. It's that... I get the chills in that pause.

David:

Yeah, me too. It's dense with magic. It's almost like something just got created and it's in front of everybody and all the children are just amazed at it, whatever you just built.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

But you said storytelling is also in your personal life. What do you mean?

Julie:

So, I'm a writer too on the side. I write screenplays primarily and little stories, personal stories. So, I've done different shows. One was called Mortified where you get up on stage and actually read real journals from high school. There's a director who kind of takes you through some of your journals and helps weave them into a narrative that makes sense. Then another one called Save The Date, which is about the worst date you've ever had in your life. So, I shared that with an audience as well.

David:

So, you're fine just getting up there and just kind of exposing all the embarrassing things or potentially embarrassing things that have happened?

Julie:

Yeah. They are embarrassing. I don't know if I'm fine with it, but I do celebrate it, as awkward as it is. I find that it's helpful to other people to have that humility, to be just laying it out there.

David:

Is there a part of that skill that shows up in the first grade classroom appropriately of course? But you know, that sort of vulnerability that's there?

Julie:

Yeah. That's interesting. It does. I notice, especially right now, because I'm teaching on Zoom. There's a lot of parent ears, right? Right in the wings. Sometimes we'll get even little emails from the parents like, "Oh, I can see you've got a good sense of humor" or they're catching these little things that I'm saying. But I notice, I think I'm more aware of the vulnerabilities because I know now someone else, another adult might hear them.

David:

How do you maintain that love and connection with your children, with your students, when this is the access point? Through Zoom.

Julie:

So, I'm really lucky. I actually go into my classroom and teach from there. So, I spent... If you heard any distraction there, that was me, very discretely trying to get my daughter to stop bringing Legos and playing with them at my feet. That's what happened when I taught here. It was really difficult because of course my ultimate priority is my personal family. Yet when I'm on Zoom, my priority is my class, my school family. So, every child that's staring at me, I want them to feel like they're my child almost, you know? Then I've got my actual child watching me give all this attention to other students and me just, you know, trying to push her out of the room. It's really a challenge. How do you give that much love? So, I was exhausted. It was heartbreaking and it was very difficult. Now I have the separation. So, I'm lucky.

David:

But you can't escape the heartbreak of being a first grade teacher. That's kind of a quality in all first grade teachers is they're willing to have their heart broken over and over again.

Julie:

That's so true. No one... I've never said that or heard that said out loud. It's very poignant and very true.

David:

That's what I found. I actually found that to be one of the privileges of it and what I miss about it. I, to this day, say it's the best and the hardest job there is. Part of it was the heartbreak and pain of it is real and vulnerable and the connection is so intense with these children.

Julie:

I actually remember that my very first year teaching, which was almost 20 years ago now, having to say goodbye to them at the end of the school year and just being so confused. Like how am I going to do this every 12 months? You have to say goodbye to your family.

David:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Terrible and wonderful. So, you have a first grader in the house when you get home from first grade.

Julie:

That is being taught on Zoom. Yes.

David:

So, you're all just in a pool of first grade.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

How's that?

Julie:

It's really overwhelming. At the same time, it's probably one of the greatest things getting me through COVID and quarantine because as much of a struggle and I'm so depleted at the end of every day, and yet at the beginning of every next day I'm given so much love and hope. They're all just staring at me waiting, coming back to storytelling, really, no matter if I'm teaching math or language arts or whatever it is, they're there waiting to be entertained or to learn something new or to be given some hope. So, that's kind of... I think that's a big burden and it's also a really special treat to get to be the person who brings that to someone.

David:

And tells those pivotal, transformational and healing stories to them every day. They expect that of you and you deliver.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

Do you tell stories at home as well? I mean, they may not be once upon a time stories, but you never turn the storyteller off. What's it like at home with your child, your story relationship between the two of you?

Julie:

She's a big storyteller. Yeah. She's a talker and really inventive. I read her two stories every night, but a lot of times we'll just make up a story and there's always that it's like getting on stage. You have the nerves of thinking, "Well, I don't have a story in my head." Then you just say the first thing that comes and the dominoes start to fall into place. At the end, you're like, "Whoa, this is a really good story." Sometimes.

David:

I know. Just pulling it out of the ether. So, our business Sparkle Stories, where we have online stories for kids, all of those most popular stories series came out of bedtime with my boys. Every single one of them. For the first several years of the business, they were a part of business model. They'd be my test group. Then into the production it would go. So, they heard every single Sparkle Story before it ever manifest.

Julie:

Aw. Which also means that they helped you, like they inspired you I'm sure, whether they actually gave you ideas, but just wanting to give them that gift. All that love you have for your kids is in every single story then.

David:

The collaboration was very clear.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

It was understood between us. Well, you are perfectly positioned then when I'm hearing what happens in the classroom, hearing at what happens at home and then your alternate storytelling and writing life. So, I'm very curious to hear your response to the question. What do you think children need to hear right now?

Julie:

It's a big question. I'm honestly going to say the first thing that came to me because a lot of things come to me and I think, "Oh, well, what should I think is the thing" but what really came to me, especially I think in this last year of life that we've all been living, is they need to hear that there are consequences. Which might not have been what you'd think I'd say, but I really feel like they... Especially right now, children have lived a life in these last few years for six and seven year olds, again, it's kind of the beginning of where their memory will start I find, where life has not gone as it typically should. You know, good and bad, right and wrong, all of those lines have been blurred. I find that I think kids need right now to hear, "Oh, but yes, there is usually a path that things fall. If you do this, there's a consequence to that." It could be a good consequence or a negative consequence, but there is an order to life that typically exists to give them some sort of comfort.

David:

Unpack this. I'm loving this. The within the consequences, I'm hearing form, that there's form, and I'm also hearing that there's agency. Which is of course, the eternal tension between, you know, is it all laid out for us or do we have the will to carve our own destiny? I'm really interested in this idea and how to give young children skills so that they can be self possessed and resilient, and at the same time open to their world, you know?

Julie:

Maybe boundaries is another way also to say it. Like, especially in this past year, there's so much allowance for you can have any emotion you need or if you don't get that done, it's okay. Well, it's on Zoom, so we're not going to hold them accountable for sure knowing this. The lackadaisicalness of that, as important as it is to give everybody the space to breathe in this chaos, without the expectations being placed upon them, they won't rise. There's nothing for them to rise to.

David:

Or bump up against. Yeah.

Julie:

Yeah. Yeah. Two weeks ago, I said, "Well, I know we're being sort of lax on certain things but I want to assess my students on all the snap words, high-frequency words, they've learned up until now. I want to see which ones they don't know yet." So, I did this assessment and I got all their words and I was going to email them to the parents. Then I thought, "No, I should tell them the words they need to work on." So, we went through this practice of one day, everyone got their words, they wrote them on a post-it note and stuck them either onto their computer or somewhere on their desk. Then every day they had

to be accountable for if they wrote that word, it had to actually be spelled correctly. So, now it's been seven days and mom just emailed me and said, "I'm in shock. It's like a miracle. My daughter's suddenly spelling all the words correctly, and even her inventive spelling is more on par." I said, "You know, I think sometimes it's just them knowing that it matters."

David:

So, that's the consequence. That is the you're going to build a space. You say, "Okay, I am setting an expectation," which is that you're creating a space. If you do this, then this will happen. Then they do it and they see it and feel that the world is dependable.

Julie:

Yes. Yes. The world being dependable. This is a crazy time in the world. But yes, I still need to give them that framework of dependability.

David:

There are things, there are eternal things that have existed in human kind. We really do respond to kindness. We really do respect people who are authentic and work hard.

Julie:

When you said that it just made me think, the one thing that is still always dependable is like attracts like, and hate attracts hate, right? So, no matter what the rules or the chaos is, kindness is always going to bring more kindness to you and anger will bring more anger. At the very essence, I know they're in first grade, but ultimately that's what I'm teaching them.

David:

Well, there's a consequence. That's the, what you put out has a consequence. Like doing a little extra work around our spelling to see what happens, see what comes back. Oh, there are consequences. You feel good.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

I love this. So, let's find a character. Let's find someone who's going to learn this lesson and someone who's going to teach this lesson. It doesn't have to be a person. It can be an animal. It can be from another time. It can be from a place far, far away. It can be in the future. Are there any images that are bubbling up for no particular reason? A person, an animal?

Julie:

Yes. I'm picturing like a hedgehog?

David:

Oh, I love it. The concept. So, is the hedgehog do you think going to learn about consequences?

Julie:

Well, I think he might be teaching the consequence because he has a top hat on.

David:

Okay. It is a formal hedgehog.

Julie:

Yes it is.

David:

Okay. A formal hedgehog.

Julie:

Black satin top hat.

David:

Very fancy. Okay. So, we've got a fancy hedgehog that is in a position to teach someone else. So, let's fill out the reason why this hedgehog has got a top hat on. Okay. So, let's see, what might be the circumstance in which a hedgehog might put a top hat on?

Julie:

Well, I think he's a teacher...

David:

Okay. All right.

Julie:

In the forest.

David:

It's pretty much normal for teachers in the forest, that's what identifies them as a top hat, that's a teacher thing. So, we've got the top hat. We've got the hedgehog. School is beginning. Is it school in the forest? Is that what's happening?

Julie:

Yes.

David:

Can you describe the classroom to me?

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

What's it look like?

Julie:

There's a little grassy field with some white daisies and a tree stump where the hedgehog comes out and then it's also where he stands to teach. He lives in there.

David:

Golly. This school, if I may, feels a little like dramatic. It's got some pizzazz.

Julie:

Oh yeah.

David:

He makes a big entrance and he's got his hat and he comes out and does a little show.

Julie:

Yes. He probably had aspirations to act at some point. Now he brings that to the classroom. That's probably why he's so theatrical.

David:

Sounds like it. Yeah. It's a good place.

Julie:

That's just his back story. Yeah. It's just his backstory.

David:

Maybe. Maybe it's his backstory. So, we have... And we needed mister... It's a mister, right?

Julie:

Yeah. It is a mister.

David:

Okay. Mister... Just as a name holder for the time being.

Julie:

Yeah, Mr. Key-Wand.

David:

Mr. Key-Wand. It's just a placeholder.

Julie:

Key-Wand.

David:

Nice. Mr. Key-Wand. Perfect name. Is real excited. You know, first day of school, I can just feel him in the stump, children are coming. Are they hedgehogs or are they a variety of forest folk?

Julie:

Variety. Variety.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

Is this a first grade sort of scenario where this is their pivotal moment where they're going from play and into more rigor of academics?

Julie:

I mean, why not?

David:

Okay. All right. All right. Let's put it there. So, big responsibility, you know, and this is part of what he's excited about demonstrating. So, big moment. He can hear the bustling and the buzz that's all happening out there. Out he comes and he's got a picture of how this is going to go. How's it go?

Julie:

No one's paying any attention to him.

David:

What are they doing?

Julie:

There is a bunny and a blue bird fighting in the back.

David:

Are they students?

Julie:

Mm-hmm. They're students and they're arguing about something.

David:

Okay. This has everybody else's attention?

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

Okay. So, there's a bunny and a blue bird. My money's on the blue bird, but the bunny and the blue bird are getting into it. All the attention is going to the back. Back of the heads, back of their bodies. You know, this is not good. This is not a good start. So, I'm going to imagine that he climbs down from his spot. Okay? Is he going to try to get everybody's attention from the front or is he going to go to the source?

Julie:

Great question. I think he'll start by trying to call to get their attention from where he is, but when it doesn't work, he's going to huff and puff his way...

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Directly over to...

David:

Huffing and puffing. That feels important to me somehow. The huffing and puffing. This is... Okay. This is part of his thing. The huffing and puffing. I think that's part of his backstory, the huffing and puffing. Was that a signifier of his or something that he would do when things weren't going well?

Julie:

It was a frustration. He spoke too quietly, always on stage.

David:

Ah.

Julie:

No one could hear him. So, he never got apart. He was known as not being a very good student as an actor, and the loudest he could ever make himself was huffing and puffing. So, when no one would ever hear him and they kept saying, "Can you start, it's time to start. I can't hear your line." The huff and puff was his exit cue basically.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Huff and puff and storm away.

David:

Huff and puff and storm away. I think maybe that was a nickname for old... You know?

Julie:

For old Key-Wand.

David:

Old Key-Wand huff and puff and storm away. You know what I'm saying? Poor buddy. So, here's his opportunity to mold young minds. Big moment, his big entrance, and they're not paying attention to him. It's happening again. The huff and puff comes back. Now we can't storm away can he? This is his classroom. So, he's going to huff and puff and go right to the source. He gets to the bunny and he gets to the bluejay. Is he familiar with these two? Does he know them or is this the first instance of encountering them?

Julie:

He knows them.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Because they're villagers, you know?

David:

Okay. All right.

Julie:

Yeah, and he takes a very hefty stroll every Sunday to be seen by the villagers.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

Well, what's his impulse? What's the first thing that you do in this situation? What would you do?

Julie:

I think I'd make my voice louder than theirs...

David:

Okay.

Julie:

To get them to get... Get their attention.

David:

Okay. All right. So, louder and louder, and this is a dynamic for him. This is a thing where people have been asking him to raise his voice, raise his voice, raised his voice. I have a feeling that initially it's not working.

Julie:

Yeah. They can't hear him, but then he finally shouts. But it's not a direction, it's a question. He says, "What's up? What's up?"

David:

Are you picturing a response by the whole group?

Julie:

I think they all look up at first because they take it quite literal, "What's up?"

David:

What's up? What's up?

Julie:

They all... Yeah.

David:

Okay. So, "What's up" gets interpreted perhaps as look up and I'm going to guess that the children may respond in an instinctually taught way that young ones might. So, I'm picturing them starting to move and hide. Does that feel right to you?

Julie:

They really all just stare straight up.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Yeah.

David:

All right. So, they're kind of frozen there.

Julie:

They're frozen.

David:

They're staring straight...

Julie:

Yeah. Like a deer in headlights. You know?

David:

Okay. All right. It gets quiet. There's this kind of quiet for a little while. This is a moment. This is a moment for the teacher. Something occurs to the teacher. Something as in an image that comes to the teacher that might have to do with his past. Maybe it's in theater. Maybe it's when he himself was young, but can you scan his past, this hedgehog, and see if there's something that's lining up for this moment?

Julie:

Yes. Because all those times he huffed and puffed off stage, he never got the attention of the people in the audience. This time he spoke loud enough and although they're actually all looking up, the silence is his attention.

David:

Yeah.

Julie:

So, I think he's really happy actually in that moment, like it was a breakthrough for him.

David:

Yeah. Yeah. It was a breakthrough. In that silence, maybe we call it a pause. In that pause, something happens. Something switched. Something changed. I wonder, what are you picturing happens next? Is the first person to move or speak him, either of the blue bird or the bunny? Or someone else? You don't need to know what they do, but I'm just wondering who breaks the silence.

Julie:

I think the bunny does.

David:

Okay.

Julie:

And looks at Mr. Key-Wand and says, just pure excitement, no idea that he's caused any strife...

David:

Mm-hmm.

Julie:

"Look, it's Mr. Key-Wand. Good morning Mr. Key-Wand."

David:

Mr. Key-Wand is what's up. The spines are up. Mr. Key-Wand is... They see him for who he truly is, who is in charge. Now Mr. Key-Wand can begin his art, can begin his process, and go into the lesson. It's almost like that pause has made a real present tense moment, a real connection between the teacher and the children and the environment and the sounds. They're all right there. It's almost a precious, sacred space that they have accidentally walked into. So, what's the rest of the morning going to look like for Mr. Key-Wand and these children?

Julie:

Well, I think he just kind of breaks into his lesson...

David:

Okay.

Julie:

Almost like if he had ever had the chance to do that monologue or that play. I mean, he almost goes into his first lesson, but as though in his own mind he's performing the play that he never got to perform. If that makes sense.

David:

Yes, it totally makes sense and it's exactly what I was seeing, is that there's like a song or a monologue or some part that he never got to do. Weirdly it's appropriate right now. Like whatever that song was that he was supposed to sing from, you know, that smash hit Two Robbins and a Deer that was really big at the far end of the forest.

Julie:

Yes.

David:

He was going to sing his part. Never got to because, you know, he was old hold huff puff and walk away. Walked away. He didn't walk away this time and maybe breaks off into that song and the children are in love. This is their teacher who can do that.

Julie:

He now created immediately a bond. They're now not just a group of villagers, they're a class, they're a family.

David:

So, it's our teacher that goes through and learns the lesson really about consequences that the previous life in theater, he was just putting out, can't do it. Can't do it, and he couldn't. In this case, in that pause, there was an invitation. You want to do that? You want to do what you did over in the theater, or do you want to try something else? That little bunny, we know that bunny, we know that bunny that just makes your day.

Julie:

Yeah. The bunny that believed in him.

David:

Yeah. Yeah, and saw his potential. Saw that he is her teacher, and he's amazing. Yeah. That would be a very sweet story. So, I think that that is a message that the children would love to hear from both sides of that, because I think it is something that children and really everybody, but children in particular, they

really do want to love their teacher. They really do want to love the adults in their lives and see them as their best selves. That's a real gift to them. It asks us to step into that space.

Julie:

And teachers give so much in their profession, and yet that is what they get back which is worth more money. You can't put a price on the love and the admiration a first grader has for their teacher.

David:

It's why it's the best job in the world, and the hardest job.

Julie:

Was this actually a therapy session? For me it was.

David:

For me. Yeah. This is great. Oh boy, I miss teaching. I'm so glad you're a teacher. Those kids are really lucky.

Julie:

Aw. Thank you.

David:

Yeah. Yeah. I can see it very clearly. I can see you in the classroom very, very clearly. Yeah. Well, thank you, Julie. This has been just a joy and we found a story. So, I'm going to now work on creating that story and sharing it with you and seeing what you think of it. Then children around the world are going to listen to it.

Julie:

Oh my God. That's amazing. I can't wait to hear.

David:

Yeah. Me too. Thank you, Julie. This has been really good.

Julie:

Thank you so much. All right. Thank you.

Child:

Can't wait!

David:

Perfect.

Hey there, this is David and you are about to hear a part of the finished story that was based on the conversation you just heard. It was really lovely for me to go back to my own memories of the first grade classroom and join Julie there as the role of Ms. Key-Wand. Oh, there is one change that I did make. The name. We in Sparkle thought this character was better as a miss, rather than a mister. So, here is part of Miss Key-Wand's big entrance. Enjoy.

Ms. Key-Wand's big entrance. Once upon a time in the far corner of the forest, there was a stump surrounded by a stretch of moss. If you happen to be walking through the forest, it is very likely you would pass by not knowing that for the young forest animals, this was a very important stump and a very important stretch of moss, for this was Ms. Key-Wand's classroom.

It was the first day of first grade for the young forest animals and it was also Ms. Key-Wand's first day teaching. She was excited. She was nervous. She had a plan and a desire for her entrance to be big and bold and powerful. She hid herself in the stump at the far end of the forest. She listened as the forest children, the little bunnies and mice and birds and lizards, all arrived and found their seats and said goodbye to their parents, and then talked and talked and fussed and mumbled. Ms. Key-Wand's waited and waited, imagining them cheering, and then she came out.

Ms. Key-Wand was the Forest Academies new first grade teacher, and as the first grade teacher she was the one who introduced learning and schooling and education to the young forest animals. She had been hired for her many talents, including singing and reciting as well as the masterful way she brandished the worn satin top hat that she kept propped atop her spiny head. Yes, a hedgehog wearing a top hat is certainly curious enough, but the staff of the school marveled even more at her skill with the hat. She'd use the hat to make a point. Sometimes throwing it, sometimes spinning it, sometimes treating it like a puppet and sometimes dancing with it. The hat was clearly a vital part of her teaching and everyone was excited to see how her first day in the classroom would go.

Lisabeth:

Hi, this is Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories. What you just heard was a snippet of the full collaborative story that David and Julie created together. To hear the entire story, as well as over 1300 other original stories, visit us at sparklestories.com. The stories from this podcast are all free to listen to. You'll find them on the browse page. While you're there consider subscribing. You can start with an extended free trial when you use the code `storying. S-T-O-R-Y-I-N-G`. That way you can enjoy all of the stories in our library as often as you like. In particular, you might enjoy our Junkyard Tales collection, which we have been creating from 2010. So, over 10 years of stories, about a fun lovable bunch of animals that live in a junkyard.

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories workshop was produced by Marjorie Shik. The audio editor is Nate Gwatney. Theme music composed by Angus Sewell McCann. For this episode with Julie, we are grateful to her daughter who let her mom play with us for a little while and to Megan Strange for connecting us.

I particularly loved being reminded about how people will often reflect back to you, whatever you're putting out and that really more than anything, it's always best to show up in a way that's true to your own heart. We hope you enjoyed it.

If you enjoyed this podcast, please consider following us and leave us a review and let us know what you think. Thanks for listening.