

Storytellers as Transformational Leaders

By Carol McCormick

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” — *Mahatma Gandhi*

“The followers become leaders and the leader [himself] is transformed.” — *James MacGregor Burns*

Around the time I launched my storytelling business, James MacGregor Burns introduced the concept of “transformational leadership” in his groundbreaking 1978 book, “Leadership.” Burns described leadership as a process in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality, motivation, and purpose. Unlike transactional leadership, which relies on rewards and exchanges, transformational leadership changes hearts, values, and even culture itself.

As I reflected on Burns’ ideas, I realized why I had chosen a profession that would probably never make me wealthy in money, status, or power. I became a storyteller because stories nourish something deeper. They nurture faith, hope, love, courage, and connection — not only in listeners, but in the teller as well.

I wanted to spend my life sharing stories that help people remember their humanity and their belonging to one another. In difficult times, stories can keep hope alive. They can help us laugh, grieve, question, heal, and imagine new possibilities. Through storytelling, I have sought to nurture my own spirit while also offering listeners moments of empathy, wonder, and transformation.

When a story is truly alive, listeners do not simply hear it — they feel it. They leave carrying something within them: a little more compassion, courage, or love than they had before.

Stories have the power to help us accept differences, anchor values, build inclusive community, spark curiosity and questions, help people face fears, nurture courage, inspire hope and imagination, strengthen self-esteem, and anchor faith.

Throughout history, transformational leaders have used stories, speeches, and moral vision to inspire collective action. Franklin D. Roosevelt reminded us that civilization depends on learning how to live together in peace. Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi believed ordinary people could change the world. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught that true peace requires justice, while Mother Teresa urged us to remember that we belong to one another.

Storytellers can continue that work through the tales we choose to share.

For accepting differences, stories such as *The Ugly Duckling*, *The Bremen Town Musicians*, and *The Lion and the Mouse* remind us that everyone has value.

To anchor values, stories like *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *King Midas* and the *Golden Touch*, and *The Empty Pot* encourage honesty, humility, and integrity.

Stories that build inclusive community include Stone Soup, The Mitten, and The Gigantic Turnip. These tales show how cooperation can create abundance and belonging.

To spark curiosity and raise questions, storytellers might share The Emperor's New Clothes, The Blind Men and the Elephant, or The Fisherman and the Genie. Such stories encourage listeners to challenge assumptions and seek deeper truth.

Stories about facing fear and nurturing courage remain especially powerful today. Hansel and Gretel, The Three Billy Goats Gruff, David and Goliath, and Mulan remind us that courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to move through it.

Stories can also help us imagine a better future. A Christmas Carol, The Happy Prince, and The Selfish Giant reveal how compassion and generosity can transform both individuals and communities.

A few stories, however, are like Swiss Army knives: they open conversations about empathy, belonging, power, fear, and transformation all at once. Among my favorites are Fatima the Spinner (Idries Shah), and Two Frogs (a German/Russian fable) that I have adapted to tell. Contemporary storytellers such as Margaret Read MacDonald and the late Doug Lipman also offer stories that invite reflection, healing, and dialogue.

Will you join me in becoming a transformational leader through storytelling? In a world hungry for connection, storytellers can nurture faith, hope, courage, and love — first within ourselves, and then within our communities. The stories we choose to tell may help shape the more compassionate and peaceful world we long for.



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About the Author- Carol McCormick has run a storytelling business for over 35 years. Her clients include festivals, fairs, corporations, professional conferences, early childhood, elementary and high schools, colleges, camps, libraries, museums, hospitals, shopping centers, senior residences, and parks. She is an educational entertainer who has shared stories, programs, and workshops at local, state, and regional storytelling festivals and conferences. Carol has led storytelling, creativity, and writing workshops and been a conference keynoter. Before becoming a professional storyteller, Carol was a classroom teacher and corporate trainer. She is the author of the children's book "A Bridge for Grandma." www.carolmccormick.net