

Stories (un)Folding with the Origami Swami

Megan Hicks

I started telling stories with origami before I ever knew Storytelling was a thing. It was 80's, when the fourth and fifth graders at the Montessori school where I worked as library assistant discovered that I could decode origami diagrams.

Valentine's Day approached, and I showed them a simple, elegant little Valentine. Six easy steps. Nothing even remotely complicated. But there wasn't one kid who could remember the folding sequence from one day to the next. Without knowing what I was doing, I started finding similes and analogies for what was going on in the paper. "This fold creates a dog ear. You know. Like I yell at you about when you're too lazy to use a bookmark." "Ah! These folds could be two sneezes that flop your hair down over your face. Achoo! Achoo!" "Oh look. It's kind of like pulling your blanket up to cover your nose." Within a week, my first origami/story was born. I called it "Valentine Puppy." It's a simple narrative that cues each fold. Kids remembered the story and the story reminded them what to do for each next step.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uTErM5OuuQ>

This was about the time when I attended my first storytelling performance, which changed my life. I can zero in on the instant when I knew that Storytelling would be a perfect way to channel my writing and my lifelong desire to perform.

Origami was a fun hobby. But Storytelling was Art.

As it happened, though, origami is what I got called on to share with kids in summer programs. They would be paying me to teach at art camps and rec centers. I couldn't afford to turn down work, but I really longed for the day when my storytelling was ready for prime time. I sort of resented being pigeon-holed as an origami teacher.

The pigeon-holing continued after I got my library degree and went to work as a children's librarian. A few years into librarianship, my storytelling was coming along nicely. Simultaneously, more of those little paper-folding teaching stories emerged. Other library systems actually hired me to come do origami workshops as professional development for staff and as a hands-on craft program for their juvenile patrons. I still couldn't afford to turn down work, but inwardly I protested, "I'm really a storyteller, you know."

Now and then, librarians would tell me that "Valentine Puppy" or "Triangle Girl" or "The Great Sambini" had been a hit with their young story-time patrons, not as a teaching tool but for pure entertainment. They compared children's fascination with origami stories to draw and tell. During the story, the teller's hands are busy, and at the conclusion: Ta da! The reveal. Look! She's been folding (or drawing) a Valentine (a hat, a cup, a somersault, an apple) ... all along! Many of the grown-ups I had taught told me they'd never have the nerve to tell a "naked" story, but the origami drew attention away from "nervous storyteller" to focused it on "fascinating magic happening right here in front of me."

I don't know if I would ever have realized on my own that folding paper while you're telling a simple and, frankly, sort of pointless story could be classed as entertainment. All this time, when I was expressing resentment

that my serious art (storytelling) took a back seat to my little hobby (origami), the words I should have been using were, “Thank you!”

My first origami teacher, Lillian Oppenheimer, truly believed that origami could bring about world peace. I’m not so sure, but I do know that it makes people nicer, that it encourages sharing, that when kids learn a trick they can replicate and teach to other people their self-esteem soars. Much like when people learn new stories to share.

Origami is the simplest, tidiest, quietest, cheapest, smartest, safest, craft I can think of. Much like storytelling, it is so low-tech it can be no-tech, it is inclusive, requires no outlay of expense, and works best in face-to-face settings, in real time. “Stories (un)Folding,” my name for the fusion of paper-folding and storytelling, is a two-fer, and I encourage everybody who works with kids to try it, whether or not you consider yourself a storyteller or a crafty person.

If you’re gun shy about being the focus of attention, take comfort in knowing that as long as you’re manipulating that paper, the focus is on what your hands are doing. Have you ever been mesmerized watching somebody knitting? Same thing. So you can mumble and stumble and backtrack all you want, as long as that paper is morphing in your hands.

Here’s a pro tip for people who don’t feel crafty enough or who have trouble concentrating on two things— folding paper and telling a story — at once: Pre-fold your paper. If you watch that YouTube I linked to earlier in this post, you’ll notice that I pre-creased my paper so that I could maintain eye contact with the camera.

Pro tip #2: If you’re working with a big group, use a large sheet of paper. Scrapbook paper works well for most of my stories. Test it in a dry run and find out ahead of time if the size of the paper adds too much weight for the fold to be successful.

And those are all the pro tips I know. It’s really that simple. Not necessarily easy. But really uncomplicated. The most important thing is for you to have fun with it. Because if you’re having fun, even if you mess up,

the kids will have fun, too, and they'll love you for doing them the honor of enjoying their company.

When I was in library school in the 80s, we were limited to books and print media for origami instruction. Today, we've got video demonstrations on demand. Today, more even than in the 80s, we all need to do what we can to contribute to world peace. To that end, I hope you'll all give origami a shot, especially in conjunction with your storytelling. It's worth a try.

Here are some links to websites where I have found inspiration and clear instructions:

<https://origamiwithrachelkatz.oriland.com/>

This is the website of Rachel Katz, who was already well-established as a storytelling, paper-folding children's entertainer when I was just getting started.

Folder/artist Leyla Torres created a video blog:

<https://www.origamispirit.com/>

High production quality, lovely origami models, crystal clear instructions. Plus, with videos, you can pause and rewind as often as you need to.

Google "Gay Merrill Gross" and "origami," and choose the video link. You'll find tons of engaging stories, mostly in rhyme, written and performed by another entertaining story-folder.

<http://origamido.com/>

Michael LaFosse and Richard Alexander have produced at least two books of Story-gami. Their work is flawless.

Just start searching online and at your library. There's plenty out there to hook you, to further fascinate you, to challenge you, and to adapt to your own unique storytelling voice. And if you want a workshop/demonstration, give me a shout: megan@meganhicks.com.



Megan Hicks creates vivid, lasting connections between her characters and audiences of all ages, whether it's a fairy tale, history, parody, literary, or personal story. When asked which audiences she prefers — kids, teens, grown-ups, seniors... and which story genre — traditional, historical, personal, humorous... she answers, “All of the above.”

“Stories (un)Folding” is what she calls her unique take on the storytelling/origami mash-up that some folks call “storygami,” which she has toured throughout the United States and on four continents.

Megan lives near Philadelphia where she tells stories, writes, folds paper, makes trash art, and co-produces the Rose Valley Storytelling House Concerts.

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