

## **The Awongalema Tree (Based on a Traditional tale from Zimbabwe)**

As with all stories I tell, they evolve, and whilst the spirit of the story is very true, the content is very much mine. There are a number of versions of this story available online and in books.

This story can be told as a one off in a class setting or delivered as a project, typically over 6 weeks, with week 6 being the 'Show and Tell' version. It can be developed into a dramatic musical play and you can go into as much detail with costume, masks, props (eg: The Tree) as you like. The notes here pertain to the project version and storyline development because in a 'one off' telling you will only have time to run the story. (In the film at the website one of the sessions is a 'one off' to illustrate the difference to project work) Below is a narrative you can use as a platform for improvising the story. I never tell it the same way twice. Learn the key elements and build from there.

Narrator: Once upon a time, long long ago and far far away in a great clearing in an ancient forest had gathered a group of animals. There was a serious problem which they needed to solve. It had not rained for many months. The watering hole was dry. The river was dry. Even the great lake was dry. The animals wondered what they could do. (Ask for suggestions from the children bearing in mind you have to steer the story back to where you want it to go) They tried digging but all they found was dirt. They tried praying to the Gods for rain but no rain fell. They tried everything but to no avail. "What are we to do" they cried.

The old elephant, who was 189 hundred years old, stepped into the clearing and spoke thus:

"I remember" he said "when I was just a baby elephant, that my Grandfather told me a tale of a tree. This magic tree is hidden somewhere in the heart of the forest and if you can find this tree and speak its name, a magic word of great power, water will spring from its roots and you can drink until your belly is full. (You can add marvellous fruits to the tree too if you wish)

The animals were very excited to hear this news. "Show us the way, Old Elephant" they said, but the elephant did not move. "Come on" they called; "Let us go to the magic tree"

Still the elephant did not move. "I don't know where it is" he said "I only heard the story once and now....now I have forgotten"

"Forgotten! But elephants never forget" the animals cried.

"Well this one has" he mumbled.

"What are we to do?" they said.

The elephant spoke once more. "In a cave at the top of yonder mountain there lives a great and wise spirit. She knows the answers to all things. Find her and we will know the way to the tree along with the magic word."

The animals discussed who should go and they chose the Hare because of his speed.

The hare was excited to be chosen and said "Hey hey...don't worry. I'll be up and down the mountain before you can say lickety-split and he scooted off up the mountain.

Find a character for your Hare utilising voice and body/facial expression.

Ask how does the Hare move?

Then demonstrate the Rhythm and have the children echo it.

Hare goes running Hare goes running. Repeat as required.

Be careful with speed and aim for a steady rhythm. Bass drum beat can help here. (Accent on H of Hare and R of Running)

When the hare reached the top of the mountain he found the cave of the Mountain Spirit and called out:

"Mountain Spirit, speak to me, tell me the name of the magic tree."

(Help the children to learn this phrase so we can all 'call' out the question together)

The Mountain Spirit replied AWONGALEMA and also gave instruction to the Hare as to the whereabouts of the tree.

The Hare was so excited he dashed off down the Mountain:

Rhythm: Rumble (Fast and Loud)

He was way too excited though and not paying attention to where he was going (All hands up at this point led by you)...and he crashed (All hands down with a big bang...might need practice) into a tree, banged his head and knocked himself out and promptly forgot the Magic word (and the directions of course but you need not repeat this unless someone asks)

When he came too he was a bit wobbly on his feet but made his way down the mountain. When he arrived at the clearing he was greeted enthusiastically by the other animals.

"Hello Mr Hare. How was your journey?" they asked.

" He he he ...ooooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

"Did you see the Mountain Spirit?"

" He he he ...ooooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

"Did you get the magic word?"

" He he he ...ooooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

The animals were puzzled but on closer inspection saw that the Hare had a bump on his head. They gave him some comfort and found a place for him to rest. (Does anyone remember the Magic word in the group?)

"Perhaps we should choose someone who is a bit stronger" they said.

The Buffalo stepped forward and in a deep Buffalo voice said:

"I will go. I am big and I am strong and I will bring back the magic word."

The Buffalo set off. How does the buffalo hold himself. Horns? Voice? Face? (Ask the children will his 'rhythm' be the same as the Hare? Get some examples on drums or through movement)

Then demonstrate the rhythm

Buff-alo Gall-oping Buff-alo Gall-oping. Repeat as required.

The Buffalo reached the top of the mountain and found the cave. In a deep Buffalo voice he called out: (Children can join in here with their deep Buffalo voices)

"Mountain Spirit, speak to me, tell me the name of the magic tree."

The Mountain Spirit replied AWONGALEMA and also gave directions to the Hare.

The Buffalo was so excited he dashed off down the Mountain:

Rhythm: Rumble (Fast and Loud)

He was too excited though and not paying attention to where he was going and he skidded (All hands up)...and crashed ( All hands down)into a

rock, banged his head, broke a horn and knocked himself out and promptly forgot the Magic word. When he came too he was a bit wobbly on his feet but made his way down the mountain. When he arrived at the clearing he was greeted enthusiastically by the other animals.

"Hello Mr Buffalo. How was your journey?" they asked.

" Well....oooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

"Did you see the Mountain Spirit?"

"Well....oooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

"Did you get the magic word?"

"Well....oooohhh...errr I can't remember" he said.

The animals were puzzled but on closer inspection saw that the Buffalo had a bump on his head and a broken horn. They gave him some comfort and found a place for him to rest. (Does anyone remember the Magic word in the group)

"Perhaps we should choose someone who is a bit wiser" they said.

Here enters the Lion, The King of the forest. (A Queen is also optional) Here I demonstrate the King's walk. Hands behind back, chest puffed out, nose in the air...walk around 'like you own the place.' A royal style voice.

"My dear and loyal subjects" he said "I shall undertake this arduous journey on your behalf and I will return with directions and with this magic word because as you all know I am the best of us. That is why I am king."

One or two animals rolled their eyes (but carefully so the King could not see.)The animals loved their King but they did think he was a bit Snooty (Full of himself, Proud, big headed) but would never say so as he was incredibly powerful and could eat anyone of them!!! 'Hurray for The King' they cheered. 'He will save us'

The King set off up the mountain.

Snoo-ty Li-on Walk-ing Slow-ly: Repeat as necessary.

When the Lion reached the top of the mountain he found the cave of the Mountain Spirit and called out in a Kingly voice (All together):

“Mountain Spirit, speak to me, tell me the name of the magic tree.”

The Mountain Spirit replied AWONGALEMA and also gave instruction to the Lion as to the whereabouts of the tree.

Now the lion did not get to be King for no reason. He was very clever and very observant. He'd noticed on the way up the mountain both the tree and the rock where the Hare and the Buffalo had crashed and deduced that they must have been rushing.

“Well I'm not going to rush” he said” I'm the King. We don't do rushing. We get other people to do that for us. I will take my time and walk down the mountain the way I came up. So he put his hands behind his back, puffed out his chest, stuck his nose in the air and began to walk downhill.

Snoo-ty Li-on Walk-ing Slow-ly: Repeat as necessary.

Now whilst the Lion was nearing the top of the mountain he was unaware that below him on the path a small crack had been opened which had now turned into a much wider one, stretching all the way across the path and opening up into a deep deep hole. (Sometimes I might suggest a small earthquake had taken place) As he walked along with his nose up in the air he was of course oblivious to the danger. What might happen next? (You can play a game with someone being the lion and something representing the hole.)

Of course the Lion fell down the hole and landed with a bang! (Whistle a descending sound and use hands to denote fall from high to low, landing with a thud)

The Lion tried but could not climb out. He called for help.

(Everybody call HELP) No one came. Perhaps he needed to call louder.

He called again, louder.

(Everybody call HELP) Still no one came. So he then did what all lions do when they are cornered or trapped. He roared.

(Everybody ROARS) Despite the roar the Lion remained in the hole without help. Not for 1, not for 2 nor 3, nor 4 5 or 6 days...but 7 days. A HOLE week (ahem!!! It's bad joke time...egg it up))

Eventually the Lion was to be rescued by a troupe of ex circus monkeys who just happened to be passing by the hole...but that's another story.

Meanwhile, back in the forest the animals grew restless. Many days had passed and still no sign of the Lion.

"What could have happened to him" they wondered.

"Maybe the Mountain Spirit has eaten him. Maybe he found the tree and left us all to starve. You can engage the children in the maybe scenario, reminding them that they are in the forest and don't know the Lion has fallen in the hole.) Eventually the animals came to the conclusion that whatever was going on, this mission was obviously too dangerous. Something had happened to each explorer. The Hare had lost his memory, the buffalo too and now the King had vanished. One by one the animals began to say "I don't want to go. Maybe you should go" and point to someone else. No one wanted this onerous responsibility and so the buck gets passed around.

(Here ensues a mass pointing and shouting. Lots of fun. Let it go on for a few minutes and bring the group to silence)

All the while the animals were arguing they hadn't noticed the tiny creature that had walked into the clearing.

In a tiny voice he said "I'll go"

The animals looked and there in the glade was the tiniest tortoise any of them had ever seen. He was about the size of a matchbox. (How are you creating the Tortoise character? Face? Voice? Movement?)

The animals looked at the Tortoise and then up at the mountain. They looked at the Tortoise and then again, up at the mountain. Once more they did this and then they all began to laugh and to point.

"You can't go up that mountain" they said "You're too small and you're too slow"

The tortoise looked at the animals and spoke very softly "I can because I am stronger than all of you"

"Ha ha. Don't be silly. What makes you think that?" they said

"Can you carry your house on your back?" asked the Tortoise. The animals were stunned. Not one of them could answer yes. (Here we can

ask about animals in the forest. Does the monkey carry his house? Does the parrot carry hers? Careful with snails ;))

Eventually the animals came to the conclusion that there was more to this tortoise than met the eye.

"OK Mr Tortoise" they said "We think you should give it a go. Good luck on your journey"

So the tiny tortoise set off. (Use one finger as a tortoise foot)

Tor-toise Ta-king Ti-ny Foot-steps: Repeat as necessary.

The journey is long and difficult and as the tortoise gets higher it gets harder and he gets slower. At the top he collapses exhausted and sleeps. When he wakes he finds his way to the cave and calls out in a tired tiny tortoise voice.

"Mountain spirit, speak to me, tell me the name of the Magic Tree"

At this point we can ask again if anyone remembers the Magic Word. If yes ask the person HOW did they remember? If not we can ask about how difficult remembering can be and then wonder what strategies might work. I explore this in different ways with humour. Here you are leading them to the conclusion that repetition of the phrase is the key. Vocal repetition. Singing is more fun than saying.

This leads us into the Awongalema Song. Play 4 beats, sing a verse and repeat...as we go down the mountain there are options for ending. Maybe all that singing causes the tortoise to lose his voice. Maybe he sings softly so he does not. However you form the last journey you should aim to end with the tortoise sharing the word with the rest of the animals and then leading them to the secret location.

Here I describe the tree as gi-mormous and blue and so tall that its branches are hidden in the clouds...you can go where you want with the description and if you have made a tree as part of the project then you work with that.

The final act is to surround the tree, hold hands and say the Magic word three times. Then brushing our drums we create water sounds. Everyone get to drink their fill and we celebrate the tortoise with song.

Here I use a traditional song from Ghana called Kpanlogo ( in the video)  
but you can use any song that is celebratory or even compose one.