

*The Storm Hit Suddenly:
Blizzard Stories*

Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Discuss and share blizzard stories. Develop, expand, and write a blizzard story as a group or through one-on-one interviews. Staff, a traditional storyteller, or writer can direct the lesson plan. With the one-on-one interviews, the participants can work in pairs.

TIME:

Three and a half hours over three sessions.

MATERIALS:

- Pencils
- Pens
- Letter-size paper
- Audio recorder (if possible, to record a story a participant may tell that can later be expanded)
- Large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper (25" x 30" is standard)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

These activities are designed to increase socialization between individuals through the sharing of interesting stories or experiences held in common, thereby addressing both loneliness and boredom. Blizzard stories are narratives with which most everyone who has lived on the Northern Great Plains can relate. Therefore, most everyone can contribute to the process, in this way helping to address a sense of helplessness.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:

The arts, such as writing, have been used successfully with chronic pain management associated with maladies like arthritis, migraines, and cancer. Chronic pain also has been linked to depression. Artistic opportunities that distract the sufferers’ perception of pain has the potential to be one of many “tools” that can be utilized by healthcare professionals in the treatment of chronic pain.

--Camic, Paul M. “Expanding Treatment Possibilities for Chronic Pain through the Expressive Arts.” In Medical Art Therapy with Adults, ed. by Cathy Malchiodi. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Ltd., 1999: 43-61.

“This meta-analysis confirms that reminiscence therapy is effective in improving cognitive functions and depressive symptoms in elderly people with dementia. Our findings suggest that regular reminiscence therapy should be considered for inclusion as routine care for the improvement of cognitive functions and depressive symptoms in elderly people with dementia, particularly in institutionalized residents with dementia.” [Abstract]

--Huang, H. C., Y. T. Chen, P. Y. Chen, S. Huey-Lan Hu, F. Liu, Y. Y. Kuo, and H. Y. Chiu. “Reminiscence Therapy Improves Cognitive Functions and Reduces Depressive Symptoms in Elderly People with Dementia: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials.” Journal of American Medical Directors Association 16, no. 12 (December 2015): 1087-94. doi: 10.1016/j.jamda.2015.07.010.

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (1 TO 1 1/2 HOURS):

1. To provide the necessary cultural context for blizzard stories, the person directing this activity or a volunteer should read to the group the introduction to Chapter 3 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, which is entitled “The Storm Hit Suddenly: Blizzard Stories.” This can be found on pages 58 and 59.
2. To jog memories and to encourage the sharing and discussion of this particular genre of stories, read selections from Chapter 3 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.
3. Ask participants to share a blizzard story they remember, have heard, or have experienced.

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. Explain that the participants will build upon the previous session by writing or expanding on a blizzard story by asking and responding to a series of questions.
2. To illustrate, as a group or individually, read folklore item “20. A Light in the Distance” from page 74 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, or as provided at right:

A LIGHT IN THE DISTANCE

This one family was driving on a highway in North Dakota when it started to blizzard. The storm got so bad that they could not see the road at all, so they stopped.

It was white all over, but the husband saw a light in the distance; he figured it must have been a farm's nearby yard light. So he told his wife and kids to stay in the car. The man was going to try to walk to the farmhouse, since he figured the light was only about twenty yards away.

In the car the family waited and waited, but the husband never came back. The wife and kids stayed in the car, turning the engine on and off all through the night so they could keep warm.

Then, the next morning when the storm finally cleared, some snowplows and the police found the woman and her children in the car. They were frostbitten in some places, but were otherwise okay. The husband was found about eight yards from the farmhouse. He had frozen to death before he could reach it.

--Devils Lake, ND (1985)

3. Re-read sections of the story “A Light in the Distance” as indicated below. Then ask the corresponding questions printed in blue font. Through this series of questions, discuss the narrative and record the responses for each section. Participants should be encouraged to respond according to their own personal experiences. If the activity is part of a group process, record the responses on large sheets of paper hung on a wall that participants can refer to and also add to during the discussion. (Not every question nor every response has to be used.)

- “This one family was driving on a highway in North Dakota when it started to blizzard.” **(Describe what it’s like driving in a blizzard. How fast do you go? What does driving in a blizzard look and sound like? Record the responses.)**
- “The storm got so bad that they could not see the road at all, so they stopped.” **(When stopping on a road in a blizzard, what concerns might someone have? What would they feel like and what would they do regarding those concerns? Record the responses.)**
- “It was white all over, but the husband saw a light in the distance; he figured it must have been a farm’s nearby yard light.” **(What would a light in a blizzard look like? Describe how he appeared when looking at the light. Record the responses.)**
- “So he told his wife and kids to stay in the car. The man was going to try to walk to the farmhouse, since he figured the light was only about twenty yards away.” **(What do you suppose the husband was thinking or feeling when he**

decided to walk to the farmhouse? What about the wife and children; what do you suppose they were thinking or feeling? Describe what a person would be wearing—especially the husband. Describe what you imagine it was like for the husband to be walking in that blizzard. How and what would he feel? What would the wind be like, and how would it feel against his body? How does one walk in a blizzard? Describe a person’s sense of direction in a blizzard. Record the responses.)

- “In the car the family waited and waited, but the husband never came back.” **(What would the family have felt like or talked about while waiting? Record the responses.)**
- “The wife and kids stayed in the car, turning the engine on and off all through the night so they could keep warm.” **(Describe the sound and feel and what it’s like trying to start a car throughout the night in that situation. Record the responses.)**
- “Then, the next morning when the storm finally cleared, some snowplows and the police found the woman and her children in the car.” **(Describe what you think it looked like outside the car that morning. Describe the sky, the snow, and the car. How do you think the woman and her children reacted upon seeing the snowplow and police? Record the responses.)**
- “They were frostbitten in some places, but were otherwise okay.” **(Where do people usually get frostbite? What does it look and feel like? Record the responses.)**

- “The husband was found about eight yards from the farmhouse. He had frozen to death before he could reach it.”
(How do you imagine the husband to have been when he was found? What were his clothes like? What did he look like? How was he in the snow? Record the responses.)

4. Explain to the participants that the responses will be incorporated into the narrative and will be reviewed in the third session. After the second session, the writer, storyteller, activities coordinator, or whoever else might be leading the activity should incorporate the responses into the original text to make it a longer and more descriptive narrative.

SESSION 3 (30 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

1. Give each participant a printed copy of the expanded blizzard story.
2. Read the expanded blizzard story to the participants and ask them if they recommend or would like to make any changes. If so, make the changes. If not, have each participant, as an author, autograph one copy of the story, which can then be photocopied and distributed to share with each participant’s friends and family members.

An example of an expanded, more descriptive narrative, based on the series of questions above, is provided to the right. The original text is in black font, while the added responses are in blue:

A LIGHT IN THE DISTANCE

(revised and expanded with participant responses included)

This one family was driving on a highway in North Dakota when it started to blizzard. I imagine the car was inching along. Sometimes, the grass on the side of the road looks different from the road, so you can follow that. Other times, a person wants to steer the way the wind is blowing and that will take you to the opposite ditch. I remember once my husband got out to walk in front of the car so I could follow him and stay on the road. The storm got so bad that they could not see the road at all, so they stopped. When stopping, you’re always concerned that you might be hit from behind. Stay in your car so another driver doesn’t hit you. Don’t pull over so far that you drive into the ditch, in which case you won’t be able to drive away when the storm lets up.

It was white all over, but the husband saw a light in the distance; he figured it must have been a farm’s nearby yard light. The light would flicker, depending on the wind gusts. It would be like when a light bulb flickers before it burns out. Distance is deceiving in a blizzard. So he told his wife and kids to stay in the car. The man was going to try to walk to the farmhouse, since he figured the light was only about twenty yards away. He was wearing a cap with earflaps and his warm overcoat. His gloves were big and bulky, so he felt he could put his hand in front of his face as a shield from the wind. You need

to walk leaning forward when you're walking into the wind. When everything's white, the wind gusts tend to make you walk in circles.

In the car the family waited and waited, but the husband never came back. The mother and the children prayed that their dad would be safe at the lighted house. They sang all the songs they knew and then they prayed again. Finally, the smaller children fell asleep. The wife and kids stayed in the car, turning the engine on and off all through the night so they could keep warm. The mother forced herself to stay awake because she was afraid the car would fill with carbon monoxide. She had the window that was away from the wind cracked open. She didn't dare let the engine run continuously because she was afraid the car would run out of gas. But she had to be sure to start it frequently, so the engine wouldn't get too cold. If she waited too long, she would have to use the choke and pump the gas pedal up and down while the engine sputtered to a start.

Then, the next morning when the storm finally cleared, some snowplows and the police found the woman and her children in the car. When the children woke, the wind had died down and the sun sparkled on the snow. But where was their dad? Then they heard a noise and saw a snowplow in the distance. They were afraid when they saw the police car. What was wrong? They were frostbitten in some places, but were otherwise okay. The police had them wiggle their fingers and toes. Two

children had frostbitten toes. Their noses and cheeks were okay because they had cuddled against each other when they fell asleep. The husband was found about eight yards from the farmhouse in a little cave he had made in the snow by some bushes. He must have thought he could rest a bit before starting out again for the light, but the cold temperatures were too frigid and he had frozen to death.

--Devils Lake, ND (1985)

3. This same process can be applied by the participants to blizzard stories they themselves remembered, heard, or shared in the first session. The group can select one or more stories they shared from that session and expand on it in the same way. This procedure could work for a one-on-one interview process, as well. A series of blizzard stories can be expanded by the group and compiled into a booklet comprised of their own blizzard stories. Personal blizzard-related photos from the participants also could be incorporated, thereby adding a visual element to their expanded, more descriptive narratives.

4. We encourage that blizzard stories remembered by the elders themselves be developed. However, if blizzard stories from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* are utilized and expanded upon, appropriate citation and credit of the book must be made.

HELPFUL HINTS:

- If working with a small group, there should be no more than six to eight residents per group, so that everyone can see and hear.
- New people may attend the second session. Don't be discouraged if the same people don't all come back. Flexibility is the key. When the process is completed, however, distribute a copy of the finalized narrative to all who participated regardless of the level and consistency of their participation.
- If working with a group that keeps changing, remember the process is more important than a polished finished product. A finished product is great, but the main goal is to alleviate boredom, loneliness, and a sense of helplessness—even if it's just for one session.

AUTHOR • CAROL HART:

Carol is the Executive Director of the Northern Lights Arts Council in Langdon, North Dakota. She manages the organization's local *Art for Life Program* in partnership with Maple Manor Care Center. She has a Bachelor's degree in English, a Master's degree in Speech Communication, and taught English and coached speech in Langdon for twenty-six years. Carol, with writers and traditional storytellers, worked with residents of their partnered elder care facility to write family stories. Some of these stories were then published in the local newspaper, as well as in a brochure explaining their program.

AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.