

COMMUNICATION IN SIGNS

I have been telling you some stories about the earth, how it came to be, how plants and animals live on the earth, how human beings live on earth.

The story I want to tell you today is about a time after men and women, boys and girls, were living on the earth. We do not know exactly when this was, but it was a long time ago. We may never know exactly.

No matter, this is a TRUE story.

When men, women and children first lived on earth, they needed food to eat. Because this was a long, long, long, long, long time ago, there were no supermarkets. But the earth was ready and they found good things to eat. They also told each other about what they had found that was good to eat. This worked out just fine except there turned out to be a problem. Suppose I needed to tell someone who was sitting next to me and was not within shouting distance – how could I tell this person?

SOMEONE, we don't know who or when – someone decided to make a picture. The picture said what might have been said in words if the person had been there. For a long time, this is what people probably did.

Pictures were made of what was important and what they wanted others to know. For example, the hunter wanted to record that 10 animals were spotted. The hunter may have drawn a picture of an animal with 10 strokes underneath.

Time went on. A group of people called the Egyptians lived in northern Africa on the banks of the Nile River. They made lots of pictures, some carved in stone, some painted on stone. And they did something else – they made paper from a plant that grew near the river. They first painted pictures on this paper with a brush and later used a pen to write their picture messages.

As you might imagine, sometimes people got confused by pictures. This was especially true when people started using the same picture for different meanings, as the Egyptians did. For example, a picture of a leg could mean:

1. a leg, the object called leg
2. an idea, to run because the leg was used for running
3. a sound, corresponding to mean “quickly”

A people called the Phoenicians also lived around the Mediterranean Sea, north of Africa. They sailed to lands around the Mediterranean and sold many things – ivory, spices, incense, slaves, silver, ornaments, glass – and one very, very special thing. Only the Phoenicians carried this. Somehow they had discovered that a certain shellfish contained a tiny particle of bright red coloring matter. The fish were gathered by the millions and crushed to gather this coloring. Because this dye was so hard to get, only the kings were able to dye their clothes with this color. Because the Phoenicians were the discoverers of this dye, they alone carried it and so to them this was their most important business.

But important as this dye called Tyrian purple was to the Phoenicians, it is not why they are part of this story. The Phoenicians traded with the Egyptians who by now had pictures that meant just sounds, not only the objects. And they were merchants who needed a fast way of recording so they kept (very cleverly) only the sound pictures of Egyptians. This kind of picture

could tell many different things and, best of all, it was easier to tell just what was meant when the sound was made. The Phoenicians found out what you found out when you learned the sandpaper letters – this mark makes this sound.

Even though it was the Phoenicians who were the first to use what we know as the alphabet, you might not recognize their letters. So this is not quite the end of the story. Other people made changes in the letters.

The Greeks changed the shapes of the Phoenician letters and the Romans changed these even a bit more. It was the Romans who named these letters the alphabet. The Roman letters are the one you would recognize. The sandpaper letters you learned are almost the same as the letters used by the Romans.

Remember I was reading *Charlotte's Web* to you the other day. It is the Phoenicians who used the idea to write only sounds on paper. Because they invented a sound alphabet, I could read those sounds back to you and tell you the story that the author, E. B White, wanted to tell you. I think we should all say a big "thank - you" to the Phoenicians. Don't you?

(Kay Baker. All rights reserved. 1993)

Notes on Great Lesson: Communication in Signs

Sequence:

1. Mentioned in the Great Lessons: God Without Hands, Coming of Life, Coming of Human Beings.
2. People communicated with each other but events led them to make pictures; to tell someone not present: to record something for later telling.
3. Egyptians used picture writing, which to some degree developed into sound writing. Still element of guessing.
4. Phoenicians used only sound pictures. Guessing not so likely.
5. Connect with child's knowledge of sandpaper letters.
6. Mention the Greeks and the Romans – their letters look more like ours.
7. Thank you to the Phoenicians
8. Leave children alone to ponder.

Activities for the Children:

1. Bring in some pictographs, ancient and modern.
2. Make pictographic stories.
3. Study any particular aspect from the story: crimson dye called Tyrian purple, Greeks added vowels. Romans known for beauty of their writing.
4. Study of writing on different surfaces: stone, papyrus, paper.
5. Later on, time-lines of people involved in development of writing. Where did these people live? Who lives there now?
6. Different hands for writing. Copperplate, calligraphy.
7. Visits to museums.
8. Are there any other alphabets than the one we use? Japanese? Chinese? Is this pictographic or sound letters? Combination?
9. Invent your own alphabet – pictographic or sound.
10. Hand Time-Line – bring out and talk about people's lives. How did people communicate before writing?