**The Story of Communication and Signs**

**Presentation notes.**

You are picking up from where you left off. This is the story of the greatest of human achievements – the creation of the human language. Obviously people spoke before they wrote. There is this overarching story of language, which is about both oral and written language. But this is about written language.

We talked about the story of the coming of the Universe. And then we talked about the story of the coming of life, of the plants and animals. And then there was the story about us. The story about men and women and children, people just like you and me, and they came with 3 gifts. Does anyone remember what those gifts were?

Well today’s story is a once-upon-a-time story. But it’s also a once-upon-a-time TRUE story.

We think that from the very beginning of time, humans were speaking to each other. Then they thought it would be very useful indeed to be able to talk to each other without using their voices. Just like you and me, these people needed to get their food. They needed to communicate with one another exactly where the best berries could be found, and the best fish could be found. And they had to tell the whole group, because there was no other way. Well you can hear me because we are all close together. And maybe if I went close to the window, the people on the next floor could hear me. And maybe if I shouted really loudly then the people across the street could hear me. But if I could make a sign of what I wanted to say then people would be able to hear me tomorrow or the day after, or even a very long time from now. So people used signs to communicate what they wanted to say. Like sticks and stones. But what do you think could happen to sticks and stones if you left them lying around?

So they started to draw pictures. Like this one. What does this picture look like to you? Maybe a bison. And maybe when they left this picture around it meant there is a herd of bison somewhere around here. And how about this picture? Well maybe we could count these marks 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10 and maybe that said there are 10 bison around here. And maybe that tells people there is enough food.

But making signs isn’t always easy. Well there were a people called the Sumerians. They had a lot of mud, loads and loads of it. Because they lived between the Tigris and the Euphrates. And when you have lots and lots of something you try to do something with it. Well they made clay tablets and they made marks on it. They made signs on it. And those signs were called cuneiform, which comes from the Latin for cunei which means wedge, maybe because the tablets were wedge shaped. And they’ve found piles and piles of these tablets, believe it or not, from all that time long ago.

Well then the Egyptians came along and they made beautiful pictures like these. You could really call this picture-writing, couldn’t you? Well they called it heiroglyphics, which means ‘holy carved writing’, because they thought only the priests were in on this secret. What do you think these are pictures of? Duck, fish, ox, grains.

What the Egyptians did, they also had a reed. And they used a sort of paper. And they used <> to make ink. So you can see that these human beings are using their minds and their hands to make things that help them to communicate with each other.

Now the Egyptians loved to make these signs. Look at this one. It is called a cartouche. We think it was made for the Queen Cleopatra. It is very beautiful, all these signs. But we don’t really know what it was saying. But it’s still very beautiful.

Look at these pictures. What does this look like? A bird, yes, like an eagle. And then this eagle with a man’s head came to represent soul. And then this came to represent the sound A. But it was all sort of mixed up.

After a while, something came along to solve the problem. The Egyptians were farmers, and there was this other group of people called the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were sailor and traders. They were excellent traders. And they needed to keep records of what they bought and sold. They had something incredibly special. They had the secret of a purple-red dye called Tyrian purple. People think that is why the Phoenicians were important. But that is not why they are so important. They needed a way to make records quickly. And so they came up with this fantastic idea, this incredible idea, to make symbols for the SOUNDS of their language. We think they had 22 sounds in their language. Well look at this one – it looks like a triangle. And that one, it looks a bit like a house doesn’t it.

Well it’s really interesting with this one here. Sometime later, it began to look like this: A, our letter A. And maybe the plan of the house, the courtyard, maybe it ended up looking like this B. Just as they speeded up writing it. That’s what we think at least.

The Phoenicians discovered that once you use symbols for sounds, it is much easier to write down what you mean and much easier to find out what others meant. Remember these were traders and they went all around the Mediterranean sea. Well they passed on what they had to the Greeks. And this is more Greek-like than Phoenician like. The Greeks, the first letter of their language was Alpha, and the second letter was Beta. What does that sound like to you? To me it sounds like alphabeta, or alphabet. This is where we get our alphabet from.

Now of course the Greeks had dealings with the Romans. They really fancied these symbols. But they wanted to make them even more beautiful, and make them in stone so that they could last forever or at least for a very long time. So those Romans, from so long ago, made the symbols like this. What do you think these have begun to look like? Yes, they look a lot like our letters don’t they?

Well after a long, long time and after many, many changes, as they passed through the hands of different people over time, we come to these. But I think we must remember that it is due to the Phoenicians, to those merchant traders from long, long ago, that we owe the alphabet. It is due to them that we owe a debt of gratitude for this great gift that they have given us.

Some people thought these signs were magic. They couldn’t see how these little signs could tell you anything. But we know how they work, don’t we? Because of these signs, and their sounds, that we got from the Phoenicians, we are able to read all those wonderful books. Because human beings agreed not only on the sounds and the symbols, but how to combine them. And a long time ago, in the Children’s House, you came across these symbols, and you learned how to combine them, and that’s how you, just like the Phoenicians, learned to write and to read.