

## Story Study: *The Giving Tree*

### Key themes and ideas:

“Once there was a tree... and she loved a little boy,” begins *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. Every day the boy would come to the tree and eat her apples, swing from her branches, and slide down her trunk. The tree was happy. As the boy grew older, though, he wants other things to make him happy. He asked more and more from the tree. The tree gave and gave, eventually giving away things she would never get back. The boy goes away and stays away for a long time. The tree grows lonely. Eventually, the tree has given everything to the boy, who has himself become an old man. An old stump, she thinks she has nothing left to give. That is, until the old man needs a place to sit and rest. In the end, the boy sits, “and the tree was happy.”

*The Giving Tree* gives us a platform to explore the delicate balance between giving and taking, and leaves us to make up our own minds. It helps us think about the relationship in our own lives, the often-subtle differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and the very real relationship between nature’s limited natural resources and humankind’s greed.

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### Read the Story

**Before the session:** Read through the book to yourself, both quietly and spoken out loud. Practice reading it slowly and carefully. Study the pictures for details about the story, or for pages that may be worth lingering on.

While you’re reading the story, take pauses and ask yourself questions about the story and the characters. What is the boy to the tree now? How does the tree feel about the boy at this point? When the tree says she is happy, is she telling the truth? What does it mean to be happy for the tree? For the boy?

The message of the story, just like the relationship between the boy and the tree, is quite complicated. The questions above can have many different answers, depending on what page of the book you are on, and what sort of reader you are. Accordingly, there are many different ways to understand and interpret *The Giving Tree*. Before reading it to your child/children, make sure you have explored at least a few of these possible readings, using your own reflections and the discussion questions included here.



**In the session:** Hold the book up and ask your child/children to predict what the story may be about. Using the picture, the title and the synopsis at the back of the book as their first clues. Then, read the story. Go slowly and speak clearly.

Pause while reading to ask questions of your child/children like the ones above, based on the discussion questions below, or based on your own reflection on the story.

### Discussion Questions & Topics

#### For Consideration Before the Session:

- The book is meant to teach us about dangers involved in both giving and taking. Why is it helpful to look at both dangers together?
- If you spoil a child, are you showing the child respect?
- What happens if we give too much? What happens next?
- How can educators learn from the story? What about parents?
  - Are you/they making some of the same mistakes as the trees?
- Can helping people too much be disrespectful?
- Can helping people too much make them weak?
  - How are these dangers related or interdependent?
- Why does the boy just take?
- Where do you think he learned this behaviour?
- Is the tree responsible for the boy's behaviour in any way?
- The boy sees himself as a victim. Why? Why is this victim identity so important to the story?
- How might the tree be responsible for the boy feeling helpless to solve his own problems?
- Is the tree a victim? If so, how? If not, why?
- How might the way that the tree treated the boy when he asks for things make her partly responsible for the way that he eventually treats her?
- Both the tree and the narrator refer to the boy as a boy even after he has grown up. How does the tree getting stuck treating the boy as a boy make it hard for him to handle adult responsibility?
- Could the tree be fairly compared to the devouring mother from Freud's adaptation of Oedipal myths?
- How might the tree be using the boy?
- Who has the power in the relationship?
- Could the tree be using her role as a nurturer to the boy to fill some other hole in herself?
- Could she be stunting the boy's development because she needs him to stay a child for the sake of her own self-esteem?
- How could the tree have helped the boy in a way that respected him?
- How would you feel if you were the tree?
- The story doesn't give a clear moral guide or even an obvious ending. What does the last picture mean?
- Was the tree really happy? Look at the different times the book says she is or isn't.
- What does "happy" really mean? Can it be easily and precisely defined?



- Why do you think Shel Silverstein left things in such an unclear way? Is life clear? Do all parents do a perfect job raising their children?
- How might the story be a metaphor for humanity's relationship with the environment? This book was written in 1964 before we had a good understanding of climate change, but some people were already beginning to see issues with the way people treated nature. Is it more or less relevant now?
- How can the story help us think about *ubuntu*?

**For Discussion with your child/children:**

- What is the story about?
- What kind of relationship does the boy have with the tree, and the tree with the boy?
- What happens in the beginning, what happens in the middle and what happens in the end of the book?
- How does the tree change?
- How does the boy change?
- Is the tree being selfish?
- What do we need to feel happy?
- Why does the book continue to call the boy "The Boy" even when he gets older?
- Do you know any grown-ups who act like the boy?
- Does the tree respect the boy?
- If you respect someone, how do you treat them?
- The boy sees himself as a victim. Why?
- How would you feel if you were the boy?
- How would you feel if you were the tree?
- How can the story help us think about our relationship with nature?

**LEARNING ACTIVITY 1: Leaf Crowns**

**Supplies:**

- Paper
- Stapler (with staples)
- Glue
- Leaves (or access to garden with leaves available)

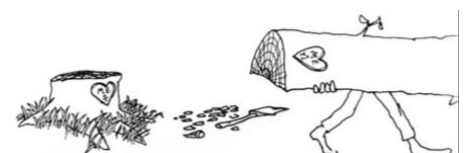
**Instructions:**

1. **Before the session:** Make a sample crown using the instructions below. Also, take a survey around the area where you will be doing the lesson. If there are lots of trees and leaves around, make sure the area is safe for your child/children to explore. If there are no trees, you will need to collect a large pile of leaves from elsewhere and bring them to your child/children. Make sure you do not pick the leaves too early, as they will become too dry and brittle.
2. **In the session:** Flip to the page in the book where the boy turns the tree's leaves into a crown and "plays king of the forest." Your child/children will now get a chance to do the



same. Let them study the boy's crown and think about how they might like to make their own.

3. Start by making the base of your crowns. Take a strip of paper and bend it into a circle. Then, fit the circle onto the head of your child, adjusting the size based on the child's head, then staple the ends together. Older children may be able to help each other with this step, while younger children may need to do it one at a time, with you helping each one individually.
4. Once all your child/children have their crown bases, let them go and hunt for leaves outside, or come up and grab leaves from your collection. Encourage them to try and think about what sorts of trees the leaves come from, as well as the different shapes and colours the leaves take on.  
**If necessary,** your child/children can also cut and colour in leaves out of paper.
5. Finally, have your child/children set their crown bases on the table and begin gluing leaves to it, building up the crown. Make sure your child/children do NOT use the glue while the crown is on their head, so that the crown does not get stuck to their head or hair. Once the leaves are added, leave the crowns in a safe spot, until they are dried.
6. When all of the crowns are decorated and dried, let your child/children go around playing King of the Forest. Let them speak to the trees, play, and enjoy themselves. However, warn them that the crowns (and the leaves on them) are very delicate, and may break very easily.
7. Before leaving, ask your child/children to think about what they have done. What have they made? What did they make it from? Where did the materials come from? Do they think the trees are happy to see their leaves made into crowns? Now that they have crowns, will they continue going back into the forest, or will they go somewhere else to find a different sort of happiness, like the boy?





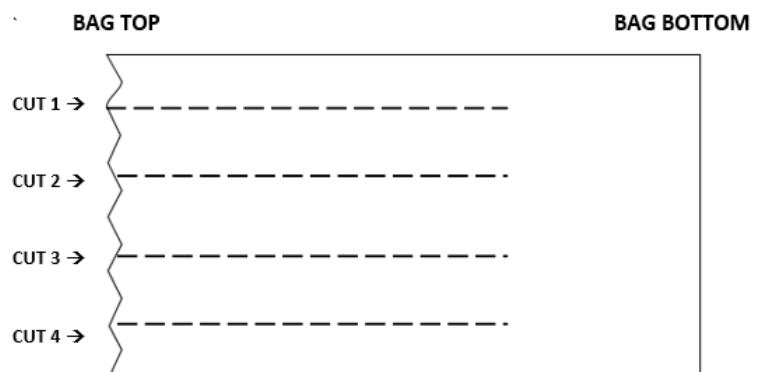
## LEARNING ACTIVITY 2: Paper Bag Trees

### Supplies:

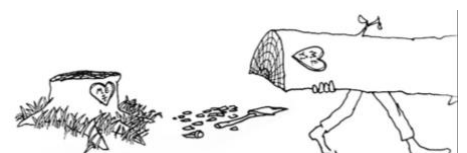
- Paper bags (one per child)
- Scissors
- Paint / markers (optional)

### Instructions:

1. Distribute scissors and one paper bag to each child. Tell them to leave the bag folded and closed. Using scissors, make four evenly spaced cuts from the top (open) end of the bag until they are three-quarters of the way down to the bottom (**see picture**).

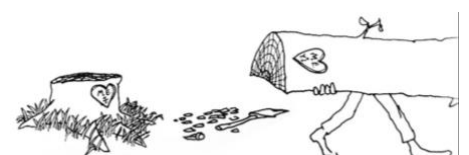


2. Once the cuts are finished, open the bag up so the bottom expands to its full size. Then, using your fingers, press firmly around the edges of the bottom to create a solid base for your tree to stand on. This will serve as the roots of the tree.
3. Once your base is solid, hold it in one hand, and with the other hand start twisting the rest of the bag in one direction. This will create the trunk of the tree.
4. Once your trunk is solid, create branches by separating the strips created by the 4 cuts, and twisting each of these on their own. You can experiment with twist tightness and direction, giving your tree a wide array of branches (see picture below for example).





5. **OPTIONAL:** Use coloured paper, markers, or paint to add leaves to your tree.
6. Once again, after the activity, ask your child/children to think about what they have done. What have they made? What did they make it from? Where did the materials come from? Do they think the trees they made are happy? What about the real trees that got cut down to form the paper? Are they happy, now that you turned them into something beautiful? Explain that, now that each child has their own tree, they will have a relationship with it, just like the boy in the story. How will they take care of your tree? What sort of relationship will they have with it?



### LEARNING ACTIVITY 3: Life in Tree Rings

#### Supplies:

- Paper
- Crayons
- Watercolours
- Paint brushes

#### Instructions:

1. Explain to your child/children that today you will be doing an activity about **age**, and how to measure it. Begin by asking simple questions: What is age? Do you know your age? How do we measure ages?

Open *The Giving Tree* and ask about the age of the Boy. How old do you think he is? How can you tell? Flip through the pages as he gets older and older, and have your child/children point out the details that Silverstein uses to show his age (height, beard, hair, etc.).

Now, ask your child/children: What age is the Tree? How old do you think she is? How can you tell? Your child/children may or may not have an answer, because the tree does not age as obviously as the boy. For a clue to how to measure her age, turn to a page that starts “after a long time the boy came back again.” Here, the tree is a stump. Get your child/children to look closely at the stump. What pattern is this? Why might that be important? The answer is that we can measure the age of trees through **Annual Growth Rings**, just like the rings in the illustration.

2. Give your child/children a brief explanation of tree ages and Annual Growth Rings using the Info Sheet at the end of this document. Let your child/children study the pictures closely, and if necessary, draw a sample set of tree rings on a chalk board or large piece of paper to help with your explanation.

Once your explanation of tree rings is complete, tell your child/children that they will now get the chance to represent their own life and age using tree rings.

3. Distribute paper and crayons to each child. Have each start with a small circle in the middle of their paper. This represents them from birth to their first birthday. Then, they should add a new ring for each year of their life (i.e. 7 rings if they are 7 years old). Your child/children should **push down hard with the crayon**, as this will be important later on.
4. As they draw, encourage your child/children to think about the information they’ve just learned about what sort of information tree rings contain. They not only tell age, but also the different types of events. Walk around and help your child/children to think about the different things that have shaped their lives so far, and how they might be able to express that in art. Encourage them to **use different colours** for each ring, to make certain rings **bigger or smaller**, etc.

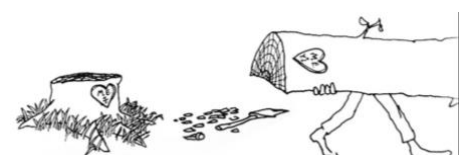
For younger children, simple drawing rings may be enough. For older children, encourage them to **draw symbols** or **write words** that represent the different sorts of growth they



experienced in each year of their life. If they had another sibling born, perhaps they can draw a baby. If they lost a relative, perhaps they can honour them by writing their name or drawing a picture of them.

5. Once all the drawing is done, distribute watercolours. Your child/children can use the paint to fill in their trees, and also observe as the wax of the crayons resist the paint, leaving their lines and symbols unchanged. Hang the finished paintings in a safe place to dry.
6. As a closing exercise give your child/children the opportunity to present their tree rings to you or each other. This is an opportunity for them to practice speaking in front of their peers, and also a chance for them to open up about significant experiences in their life if they wish.

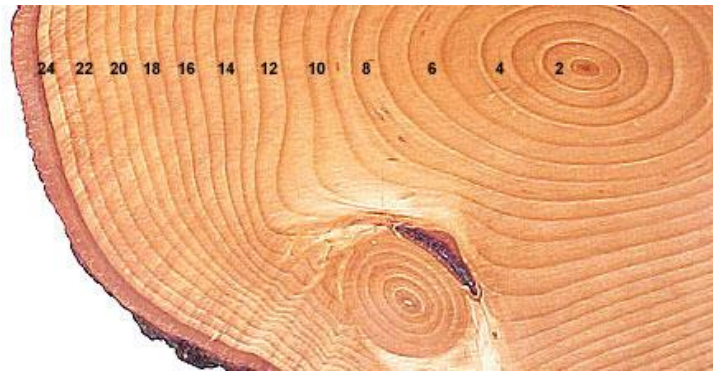
You can also lead by example, presenting your own tree rings, and talking about your own experiences, as a way of opening up your child/children to the idea of sharing.





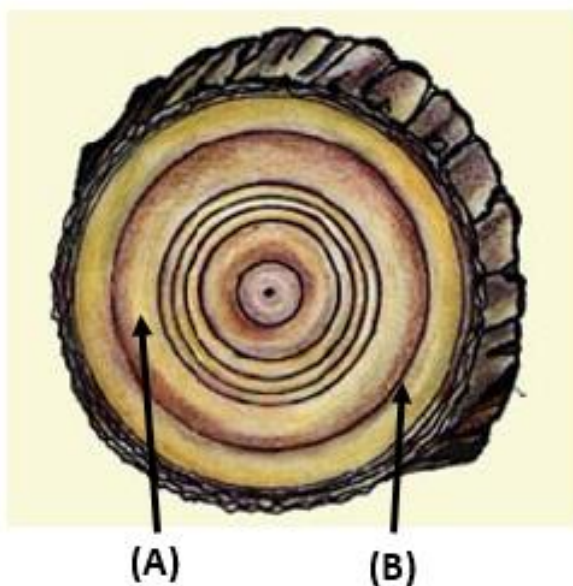
### Tree Annual Growth Rings Info

Just like all living things, trees are constantly growing. They not only grow taller, stretching towards the sun, but they also grow **wider**, expanding their trunks outward, each year. We know this because the outward growth leaves behind **a trail of rings**, starting from the tree's centre and expanding outward like a target as the tree ages. These are called **Annual Growth Rings**.



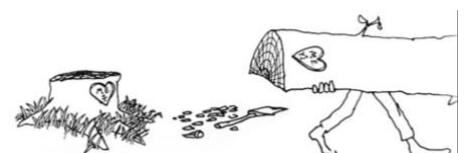
#### Annual Growth Rings works like this:

Each year, during the rainy season (often the Spring), the tree grows very quickly because there are lots of nutrients available. This is when trees form the lighter, wider sections of the rings **(A)**. For the rest of the year they grow very slowly, either because the summer heat prevents their roots from receiving enough water, or because the winter cold forces them to protect themselves. This is when the dark, thinner parts of the rings form **(B)**. When the rainy season returns, the tree starts forming a new ring, **marking another year** (see numbers above).



While Growth Rings are useful for knowing the age of a tree, not every tree grows in a place where the seasons change. In places like that, trees **act like history books** for different **weather events**. If one year had a long period of intense rain, trees will have form wider light rings to reflect the extra nutrients. On the other hand, if the tree's surroundings are struck by long periods of drought, cold, or fire, the darker rings will appear closer together, because the tree was unable to grow due to lack of nutrients.

Scientists therefore can **use old trees to understand how whole ecosystems have been affected over time**.



Tree Rings Picture (Large)



## LEARNING ACTIVITY 4: Relationship Stories

### Supplies:

- Magazines
- Pencils
- Paper (lined or blank)

### Instructions:

**NOTE:** *The discussion portion of this activity may be too emotionally advanced for some young children. However, the creative activity involved can be done by all ages, and repeated more than once to help your child/children understand its message. Use your judgment to adjust the activity to suit your child/children's needs.*

1. Open the activity with a discussion of the relationship between the boy and the tree in *The Giving Tree*. Use the questions below to help define healthy and unhealthy relationships:
  - What kind of relationship does the boy have with the tree? Is it healthy, unhealthy, or a bit of both? Use evidence from the book to support your ideas.
  - How does their relationship change over time? What causes it to change?
  - Does the boy respect the tree? Why or why not? How do you know?
  - Does the tree respect the boy? Why or why not? How do you know?
  - How does respect affect a relationship? What does a relationship with respect look like? What does a relationship without respect look like?
    - Ask your child/children to think about relationships in other stories or books they know, through the lens of respect and healthy vs. un-healthiness. Think of examples of both healthy relationships and unhealthy ones, and share them with the group.
  - Put yourself in the shoes of the boy. How do you feel about the tree? Then, do the same for the tree, thinking about the boy.
  
2. Once you have discussed the different sort of relationships, and how complicated a single relationship can be for both of the people (or trees) involved, distribute magazines, paper, and pencils to your child/children.
  
3. Your child/children should flip through their magazine and look for a picture displaying some sort of relationship. It can be two people, one person and nature, two animals, an animal and a tree, or anything. Then, have them spend a few minutes imagining what the relationship in the picture is about. Have them put themselves in the shoes of the people/creatures featured, and use creativity to come up with some sort of story that explains the picture.
  
4. Once they have come up with a basic story idea, have your child/children write down the relationship they imagined (note: young children who are not yet reading and writing can either draw pictures or pure imagination to record their story). How did the relationship start? What emotions were shared? Is it a respectful relationship? Why or why not? How did the relationship change over time?



5. After your child/children have had enough time to develop their stories, allow them to present their stories to the group or to you. They should hold up the picture they chose, and explain the relationship they imagined in it. They should talk about whether they think the relationship is healthy or unhealthy, and why, using details they created.

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*Thanda is a non profit organisation based in rural Mtwalume, KwaZulu Natal South Africa. Our curriculum is made up of activities that we have developed over 12 years. The ideas and inspiration for our activities come from is a wonderful combination of educators, books, websites, YouTubers, and other places and people on the internet. We are very grateful for all of them. Where we use ideas or activities directly from a source, we always endeavour to give credit to the creator. We do not endeavour to profit from these story studies, we only wish to add value to the lives of people we may have the opportunity of crossing paths with.*

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Thanda is a non-profit Organisation based in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa  
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