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Unpacking the Stories

Telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what makes our lives worth living. They are what makes our condition human.

Richard Kearney

No novelist or biographer can ever show us such fine shades of feeling as those which we could distinguish if we could contemplate our own loves, our own ambition, our own jealousy, our own happiness.

Andre Maurois

Until lions have their own histories, the histories of the hunt will glorify the hunter.

African Proverb

First, of course, some stories, vignettes and anecdotes...

I like listening to people and I like asking them questions. I like to hear what people do and how they arrived at what they do. I like to hear about people's experiences, their families and their choices. Essentially, I like listening and asking questions about their stories. Why? I'm, not sure, except that as I listen, two things happen. One, I enter into a kind of meditative state where my judgement is suspended and I'm just taken along with the words and experiences like a surfer on a wave. And two, as the someone is talking, I find myself thinking about my own life and choices, making comparisons, looking at what was the same and different, thinking of and reinterpreting my past and/or present life in light of the new stories I am hearing.

When the World Trade Center was destroyed, the first thing people wanted to do, was to find out if friends or loved ones were safe and then to let others know that they were all right. The next thing they wanted to do was to tell their stories; about where they were when the planes hit and where they were when the buildings collapsed. Why? Again, it's hard to be sure, but surely, being able to tell and listen to stories about something so horrific, helped people take what was a personal experience and make it part of the communal dialogue. The isolation they felt, even while realizing they were with others as tragedy occurred, was only fully transcended in their use of the common language of storytelling to help fill the well of collective experience.

Once a friend of mine, an African American with long dread-locks went to a school and told stories. A young boy about eight years old raised his hands before my friend was about to speak and welcomed him back from the previous year. My friend thanked him, but told the young child that he hadn't been there the previous year. The boy insisted and my friend, getting frustrated, asked what stories he had told the previous year. When the boy mentioned two stories that I tell, my friend rather triumphantly declared that the boy had been listening last year to Marc Levitt and that he was Caucasian. The young child thought for a second and responded, "No, last year you were White and this year you are Black!" Somehow this child understood something very important, that while outward appearance was different, story comes from a common source.

One day when I was just out of college and had recently moved to Seattle, Washington, I was in a particularly contemplative mood walking down a street in that beautifully green and open city. I passed by a restaurant, where in the front window, a chef, in a large, floppy cook's hat and gleaming white suit was cutting meat from a spit for a sandwich he was about to make. As I watched the way he sliced the meat, looked at his clothes, considered how he stood, and where he stood, it struck me that I was looking at the end product of thousands of intersecting stories. These stories, I realized, went back in time further than I could imagine and included everything from the history of meat carving to the evolution of the toque, the chef's hat. All of these stories were then mediated through the lenses of the man's psychological and physical history, which themselves contained stories that could stretch back further than anyone's personal and cultural memory. It was here that I recognized that 'Story', loosely understood as the cultural and personal messages we inherit, redefine and transmit, really are the fabric from which the world is woven.

In the United States there has been, in the last twenty years or so, a big debate around the observance Columbus Day. Although most people over 35 were raised to believe that he 'discovered' America, historians, now consider this understanding of Columbus' significance, largely fictional. While he clearly made a journey, mistakenly ending up in the Caribbean rather than in India, he was neither the first person of European descent to make it across the Atlantic, nor was 'discovery' possible when there were already quite a few people here already in 1492. Nonetheless, his story, his holiday, his parade, persists primarily because it fits well with other stories that still need to be told by certain groups in our culture. These include the Italian American community and those writing textbooks and teaching courses emphasizing the triumph of heroically persistent White men as a defining story of the building of the American nation.

Sitting on a non tourist train from Cairo to Luxor a very helpful Egyptian man, about forty years old came up to me and asked if I were going to the Aswan Dam. I told him that I didn't think I would. He said, "You must" and gave me a small brochure about the dam. It was filled with facts... amount of electricity generated, amount of water held back, facts on when the water is released etc. Nowhere in the brochure however, was the story of those people whose lives had been disrupted when the dam flooded their villages. Nowhere in the brochure was the story of the Nubians and their culture. Even though I appreciated the man's hospitality, the seemingly 'scientific' aspects of the dam bored me. I missed the stories of those people whose stories was somehow deemed unfit, not important enough or somehow threatening, to tell.

The above stories, vignettes and anecdotes begin to tell you various reasons I feel that listening to, telling and thinking about 'story' is so important.

I have been using stories in my work for children and adults for twenty years and am still amazed how both children and adults thirst for story. Children yearn for story after story with more passion than they would show for a candy bar. Adults love to tell stories any chance they get, whether it is personal experiences, family stories, folktales or just plain gossip. Rarely am I at a gathering when someone doesn't ask for a story. We thirst for stories, We yearn for stories and as I tried to make clear from some of the vignettes at the top, 'We are stories!'

What do I mean by this? Are we really stories? Are we composed of stories? Well, to the extent that as we can 'create' our bodies through the images we have of ourselves and that the tensions we carry around with us continually reform our bodies, it is not too far of a stretch to say, yes, we are our stories. To the extent that our genetic codes are subject to environment and cultural changes that have to do with our continuing re-adaptation to our environment, we certainly are our stories.

The German and American psychologist, Wilhelm Reich talked about how our trauma's are stored in our body in various places. The history of our jobs, of our disappointments, our triumphs and failures are embedded into our physiology. Why else when we see a person whose shoulders are slumping and whose gait is slow, would we

imagine that the man has his share of disappointments. Why else when we see the happiness and exultation of the face of a child would we imagine that they have had a good home life story?

All this said, it is clear that stories are not only what we eat, what we breathe but also what we breathe with and what we chew with. Stories form the way we interpret and therefore construct the world.

What are the implications of this knowledge for an educational philosophy?

For one, in the West there has been an increasing emphasis on 'individualism' and on the logic of market capitalism. This certainly isn't new. In some ways it's been part of a wave that can be traced back at least four hundred years. However, this outlook that emphasizes the individual as a distinct entity with non-porous borders has been increasing in speed and certainly lately. On the social level what is described as market capitalism, the idea that we are free individuals making rational decisions at the various market places of products and ideas is dominating discussions in the political and economic halls of power in nations under the entrenchment of commodity capitalism. People are seen as individuals responsible for their own well being, capable of pulling themselves 'up by their bootstraps' as we say in the United States. Of course lost in this discussion is the extent to which people with wealth and power have benefited from their relationship to others with wealth and power. Lost is an understanding of how those people have utilized this power to gain access to the wealth of the society as a whole. For instance, when people in the computer industry attribute their success, to their entrepreneurial genius, they conveniently forget that the beginning of their industry was subsidized by government research grants and institutes set up to incubate that industry. Nonetheless, that being said, our myth about 'isolated and self contained individuals' sets the agenda for most discussions in political and economic arenas.

However, when we look at how we are constructed as human beings, when we understand how the 'real' story we share and experience, is the shared water, air and food and language that gives us sustenance and identity, we understand our mutual dependency. Our very language, the way we understand who we are, define ourselves and create and recreate who we are, is constructed socially. Our way of defining who we are, to ourselves and to others, has to do with how we choose to interpret and navigate the matrix of relationships that form a 'society' and culture as much, if not more than the results of solitary exploration. In fact, solitary exploration is itself probably a misnomer since it implies that we act and think outside of a social context.

The implications of this awareness are vast. If we truly look to the way in which 'story' constructs us and the world within which we live and are part of, we can no longer see ourselves as isolated individuals outside of community. As we understand how we are actually composed of and constructed by 'story' we begin to understand ourselves as part of a collective, ultimately responsible to and dependent upon that collective for happiness and health.

Teaching children and adults to listen to tell and to pay attention to their stories is then indeed a revolutionary act. It is a revolutionary act because if we follow the trail of the 'self' long enough we come ultimately to the 'land of us'. This is indeed a revolutionary understanding in a world that increasingly privileges individual gratification and privatization and justifies entitlement for the wealthy at the expense of the majority as a natural order of the 'fittest' becoming more successful than those without 'natural' or 'G-D' given talent.

What does this mean for educational practice?

From an educational point of view recognizing the importance of stories is a key principal in an educational philosophy that prioritizes the experience of students, encourages listening and reflection, contextualizes lessons, recognizes and appreciates different points of view and helps to create confident citizens ready to participate in genuine democracy.

In my own work with stories and education I use them in a number of ways.

One, I use personal stories of everyday life to stimulate students to write about their own personal experiences. Depending upon the age, stories about getting lost, lost love, sibling rivalry help students observe and reflect upon their lives. Like miners looking into a stream for flecks of gold, these stories give students a chance to filter through the vastness of everyday experience to find nuggets of their own 'heroic' stories. How often do we let life go by with all its richness, all its detail, all its drama and indeed its mythological resonance, and by not paying attention, let it go into the undifferentiated ocean of our memories. By telling stories about everyday events, by honoring everyday events, I essentially create mental 'filters' in the mind of children, designed to capture some of the richness and meaning that living and participating in the world brings.

We have an incalculable amount of sense impressions flooding our heads each minute and stories help to prioritize those experiences and allow us to make sense of them and to make them part of our life story. Stories help us to order our impressions in a way that helps them become the raw material for the continuing process of re-examination and re-formulation of our lives. In a way, this is what therapy is about as well. The therapist listens to the story you tell, helping to identify those elements of our history and daily experiences that can provide a 'healthy' narrative line. The 'story about our selves', if the therapist is successful, gives us a sense of power, confidence, humility and gratefulness and provides us with a flexible framework within which to contain new experiences.

However difficult it sometimes is to get students to write based on contrived prompts such as, 'Suppose you see a woman selling magic cookies on your way home. What would you ask her for?' getting kids to write about their own lives is much, much easier. When we actually experience emotional richness, it is much easier to remember detailed content than it is when you have to 'make-up' a setting and a situation. When children are encouraged to access their own memories, they become confident participants in the world of storytelling. This validation will hopefully stay with them as they age entering adolescence, teenage years and adulthood, not afraid of who they are, not ignorant or silent about who they are, but progressively more open, wise, and giving with themselves as they relax in the comfort of who they are.

Secondly, I teach history through one-person narratives, narratives about historical characters and places, often combined with music. When facts and events are embedded in narrative they are more easily understood and digested, have a greater chance of being remembered and are more meaningful. Discreet and separate facts, separated from the narrative context within which they have relevance are only useful for tests and game shows, not for life. By teaching history through story your 'audience' has a better opportunity to learn from history and to utilize that knowledge to actively engage in the world.

Third, I use stories to teach 'character education'. By learning to appreciate and to listen to stories we can learn to empathize with others. While we empathize with others its harder to have the hubris of certainty. Humility about our own opinions makes getting along with others easier and indeed, essential for the development of our own intelligence. Getting along with others and having empathy for their experiences allows us to critically assimilate their understandings into our world view and in fact, leads to compromise and consensus building, key elements in any relationship, work or personal. Just as an eco-system is healthiest when it is not 'monocultural', a social system benefits from diversity as well. A variety of points of view enable us to have and sustain numerous and spontaneous solutions to whatever problem we are confronted with.

Diversity helps make 'black and white' solutions intolerable. Diversity helps to produce ambivalence and an understanding of 'shading' and complexity rather than stark contrast. After 9/11 there was a 'crack' in the American armor, where momentarily people were confused and open to considering the role, we as a nation play on the world's stage. Soon however, our multiple interpretations solidified and most of the nation rallied around the media's and the politician's call for revenge. It is my opinion, that we 'fell' for that story precisely because our nation lives inside of a good and bad paradigm, one certainly echoed by President Bush in his 'axis of evil' speech

as well as subsequent religious tinged rhetoric. Our lack of stories with ‘shading’ made it difficult to hold an ambivalent relationship to a complex situation.

Fourth, I use stories to understand the ‘larger’ picture. Like the Columbus narrative, stories that form dominant narratives, helping to form ‘national identities’ need to be challenged by ‘counter-narratives’ that us form a more balanced picture of a nation and its history and of the contributions of its citizens. In the United States for instance monuments surround us for ‘dead white men on horseback’. These tell a story about who and what we honor as a nation. The story it tells leaves out the contributions of women and people of color and of people dedicated to peace and justice. This ‘story’ also sets expectations in motion; expectations that define what people can aspire to in life. If only Caucasian men accomplish all that is heroic, what hope is there for those who are not white and middle aged? The brochure in the train in Egypt, by not telling the stories of those people whose homes were flooded, wiped out an important element in the ‘great advance of technology’ story...that some people were sacrificed in the name of progress. Without this story, we tend to forget that this choice was made, (often through conflict) which is still being made to this day. It’s so much easier to flood a valley, build a nuclear power plant, and genetically alter seeds when we don’t ever here about the ‘unintended’ consequences of that choice and instead see it as ‘inevitable’. It’s also so much easier to conduct wars, when we never hear the stories of dissenters. It is much easier to accept stories of racial inferiority when we don’t hear stories of minorities’ successes. It is much easier to accept ethnic cleansing, holocaust or religious warfare when are not faced with the humanity of the ‘other.’

And finally, fifth, I use stories to help students and adults re-connect with a sense of place. In the United States and increasingly in Western Europe, we live in a world where ‘everywhere’ and ‘here’ are becoming the same. The American suburbs, woven together by ribbons of concrete highways, decorated with clown colored buildings selling fast foods and low priced gasoline and gigantic box-like ‘super-stores’ filled with an over abundance of consumer goods, are more and more wiping out local landscape. These locales, originally reflecting years of interaction between humans and the ‘natural’ world, are disappearing under the built expression of global consumer driven capitalism. With this overlay on the local landscape, local stories, local wisdom about working with the land, about healing techniques, about child rearing techniques is being overwhelmed by new ‘truths’ fed by a ‘mass culture’ whose job it is simply to ‘sell’. Like a tidal wave, this homogenization of ‘place’ takes place at incredible speed, quickly creating new consuming, family and work priorities that render older forms of knowledge, behavior and community antiquated. As a result, the West as an extremely difficult problem of ‘disconnectedness, with depression avoiding drugs helping adjustment to this rootlessness. This is certainly not just a predicament faced by the ‘West’. Nor is it just a rural phenomenon. The logic of globalism expresses itself the same way everywhere.

By researching and distributing stories that still have their roots in living in and with a specific landscape, rural or urban, we can foster a sense of ‘place’. By listening to and interviewing elders, by learning about an area’s history, by researching and telling folktales and myths, we can find values different from those that define a consumer driven, competitive society. We can learn how to survive and prosper on the land without compromising its future use and our society’s health. We can find examples of people forging community or struggling against injustice and heroically raising families, planting gardens, or feeding neighbors. By finding, and telling stories from the ‘local’ we can hear about the value of reverence, hope and humility, which all helps us to lay down roots down in a world becoming increasingly rootless.

Epilogue

In our conference, many questions came up about the role interactive/digital technology can play in education. Many promises were made, promises that parallel our most utopian impulse... active engagement in the creation of text, representation of multiple narratives etc. As Henry David Thoreau asked when told that Samuel Morse had invented a way messages could be transmitted by wire over thousands of miles, “But what will we have to say’ we must ask that question as well. Or as he famously added at another time; “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys

that distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.” This, it seems, is what we must be vigilant about not letting happen. Making sure that stories are being told, heard and sought out is one way to make sure that the ‘digital revolution’ is not another form of cultural imperialism that looks on all other forms of knowledge and practice as ‘less’ and the wisdom derived from other experiences ‘primitive’.

I suppose however, for whatever little bit it is worth, ultimately my voice and vote would be for proceeding... with caution, into this new and potentially powerful technology. In spite of what interactive/digital technology promise however we must always remember to ask, “Who is telling? What are they telling?” and ‘What story is not being told’.

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