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2001

HUMANITAS SPEECH

Since the time my kids were little I've always told them stories when I put them to bed. And sooner or later, there's always this delicious moment when I know the narrative has taken hold. I can tell by the sound of their breathing. Everything slows down as they surrender to the call of a story.

As a child I, too, was obsessed by stories. I insisted my mother tell and retell our family myths until I knew them by heart. I read the same books over and over until they were dog-eared. I began writing stories for myself long before I knew how to punctuate.

And so, perhaps inevitably, stories became the currency of my professional life. Day after day I am drawn by some unnamable impulse to live out in, in my imagination, other lives and other possibilities.

But what is it, exactly, about stories that makes them so compelling? Are they simply "a series of events arranged in their proper sequence," as E. M. Forster put it, "dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death."

Or is it that a story gives us a chance us to safely participate in circumstances we will never know? (Daily life, after all, rarely offers opportunities for glorious heroism or agonizing defeat -- whereas in my writer's life, I have stormed battlements, fought wild animals, braved tragedy.) Is a story, then, nothing more than some form of acting out, a nod to the contingent life: a kind of quaint dress rehearsal for events we hope will never happen?

Or is it something more...

A new psychoanalytic theory suggests that an infant's first cognitive leap is a narrative one: that the very first story we learn is

the story we invent to explain to ourselves the relationship between our mother and father. ✓

In the Serengeti, a young Masai warrior learns the nuances of the hunt by listening to the tales of the great hunters who have preceded him.

In law school, an aspiring jurist studies case law – stories, essentially -- in which the vagaries of human behavior are carefully parsed in a vain search for consistency.

What is advertising but the shortest of short stories: “This is the tale of the woman whose husbands’ shirts had ring-around-the-collar (Act One), who searched for and found the right detergent (Act Two) to get rid of them and thus win back her husband’s love. (Fade Out.)”

Freudian theory is couched in the old stories of Greek Myth.

The Bible is written in parables.

Even politics is shaped in melodramatic terms: the heart-tugging tale of Elian Gonzalez; the top gun adventure saga of the Chinese Fighter Pilot.

In fact, there has never been a time in which stories are not central to our experience. ✓

From the earliest moments of human history, as a group of Neanderthals squatted miserably in a damp cave before a meager fire, beset by an inhospitable universe and fearing an unknown God, one member of the tribe stood up and began to speak about their lives, about the trials of their day. He probably wasn’t the strongest. Or the bravest. Definitely not the most handsome. And yet, there was something about him, something that made everyone

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gathered there stop their pounding for a moment, and their scraping and their chewing and begin to listen. What had they come to expect from this speaker? What did he intend?

Imagine his world. Savage beasts. Scarce food. Awesome storms. The briefest life expectancy. And yet, as he stood there and spoke of what he had seen, gave a name to things, suggested the connections between one event and another -- a bit of the terror, some measure of the fear of the unknown, must have fallen away. As he talked in familiar terms of where they had journeyed and where they were going, those gathered must have taken some comfort, found some respite, taken heart that there was meaning to be found in their world -- at least as long as his story lasted and the fire dwindled.

But was his world, really, so very different than ours? The vaunted Age of Information may have brought us closer, but it's also brought us closer to despair: minute-by-minute bulletins of wars and disease, of poverty and prejudice, of accident and unhappiness and cruelty. We are not just sick of information, we are sick from information. We are bombarded by facts, over-stimulated by images, overwhelmed by an endless and chaotic montage of quick cuts and streaming banality. How do we make sense of the whirling wheel of our experience? Who do we turn to in order to find the meaning in our world?

To the people in this room.

In a disenfranchised, wired world, people aren't turning to religion, they're turning on television. They sit in darkened rooms in front of flickering screens and seek a much-promoted connectivity that only manages to make them feel more alienated. The computer promises communion, but provides instead something undifferentiated, enervating, anomic, neutral and numb.

And so it befalls us, the storytellers, to help organize peoples' experience. In the absence of the sacred, it is our job to provide language for the mysteries, to offer interpretation of the chaotic.

To minister, if you will, with our stories.

But how can we presume to know the world? What gives us the privileged view? How can we find the knowledge and the wisdom necessary to offer insight and explanation.

By looking inward.

By writing the stories we need to write, the ones we can't help but write, the ones that emerge, unbidden, from our most private and secret places.

Because the act of writing a story is, in itself, a search for meaning. In Kafka's words, writing is "the ax to unlock the frozen sea within us."

And it is in our stories that we become who we are.

It is writing, itself, that helps us discover what we know, writing itself that reminds us what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, banishes demons, encourages us to reach higher, dig deeper. Like the Neanderthal in the cave, we tell stories to keep the darkness at bay. But it is the inner darkness of which we are most afraid. We comfort ourselves with stories just as we comfort our children before sleep.

And somehow, magically, by serving ourselves we manage to serve others. And that story which is most secret, most idiosyncratic and personal, miraculously becomes the most universal. How many times has someone come up to you and said,

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Now I realize how self-congratulatory this might sound. But this is, after all, a day of congratulations. You are here today because you chose the tougher road.

And later this afternoon we will all be back out there, fighting the temptation to choose the path of least resistance, to make that one extra compromise, to concede the fight to those who are venal, or cynical, or simply stupid or lazy.

What can I possibly offer to gird you for that struggle -- except to remind you that your stories matter.

As the Zuni proverb has it: "there are no truths, there are only stories."

And for some obscure reason, we are the ones who have been chosen to tell those stories, to tell the story of the world to itself. It's an extraordinary blessing and an even more extraordinary responsibility.

But we have no choice. It is not only our job. It is our calling.

Congratulations. And keep writing.