

“History Stories” Reinvestigating Our National History

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Abstract: History, far from being a definitive science, is more often studied as a single vantage point on an event or movement. This article will propose how, through storytelling, history can be presented and analyzed through multiple vantage points with enormous benefit for both the developer of the tales and their intended audience.

Keywords: History, American History, History Stories, Storytelling, Cultural Bias, Racism, Sexism, Education, Moral Education

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is the art of passing on, in oral prose, the feelings, observations, and experiences of living beings.

History is defined as “the systematic narrative of past events as relating to a particular people, country, etc.” *

Though one is considered an art and the other a science, the two obviously have a great deal in common. I propose that in creating *History Stories*** we can take the best of both and, with honesty and intelligence, and do what historians have been afraid to do for centuries: **acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple vantage points**, illuminate them, and present them. Doing this achieves two significant goals. The first is to create a wider, more inclusive lens through which to filter our understanding of the past. Students and audiences will have a broader pallet by which to analyze the lessons and themes that history presents. The second is that by presenting this broad cross section of historic vantage points, via story, our listeners are called upon to identify with people outside of their circle of experience, thus creating a sympathy in the listener for people and situations they might never of related to otherwise.

A CROSS SECTION OF VANTAGE POINTS

Events occurred, but how we perceive and interpret them is a very personal process. Grounded in our particular gene pool, set in a specific social, economic, political and psychological milieu, none of us will see the same event identically. History may be the blueprint of our past, but the interpretation of it depends upon who is reading that blueprint. I propose that through the creation and telling of *History Stories* we can share a broad array of viewpoints, opinions, and interpretations of any single person, era, or event. Indeed, there is no one correct interpretation of the American Westward Movement, but by making sure that many honest stories/perspectives on it's events are shared we gain the capability to broaden people's point of view. When I studied American History in High School, “The Westward Movement” was always featured. Covered wagons, cowboys, and Manifest Destiny were rolled into an exciting picture of a nation's growth. As a young adult I came to understand that this same action also entailed the genocide of Native Americans. It was the new Americans' complete lack of understanding, disrespect, and

* Random House Dictionary

**Let us define History Stories as stories whose characters (real or imagined) lives are based in authentic, well researched, fact and detail.

incorporation of violent imperialism that catapulted them toward the destruction of an indigenous culture. As a near elder I now realize that both stories were true *for the people who told them*. The European immigrant saw only new hope, new land, new beginnings. The Apache, Navajo, and Sioux saw their land, religion, and way of life brutally destroyed. Only in hearing both accounts told with full belief and detail can we learn about the forces that shaped our past and make intelligent, informed, heartfelt decisions about our future.

A number of year ago I had the privilege to work on a commission from the U.S. Department of the Interior. The resulting story, *From Her Arms to His*, is about the women who manufactured M1's during WWII at the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts. During the process many facts, documents, and interviews of employees were made available to me. It would have been a simple task to create a drama based on this existing information, but I wanted to offer another perspective on this era, it's women and their work. It struck me that the most interesting details, scenarios, and themes are never spoken, but written invisibly between the lines of historic documentation. The world knows that these women constituted 55% of the work force, sacrificed on many levels, and maintained the most remarkable production rates this nation have ever seen. These facts would all be included, but what was it really like for a woman to enter a man's world? How did the extensive sexism and racism, that was the fabric of this nation, effect them? Did the women who worked at the Armory really give the work up readily to homecoming GI's? One of the Armory's historians warned me (with a John Silber ** grin) to be careful about "revisionist" interpretations. "These were the forties—women and blacks didn't expect to be treated equally." He was telling me 'Don't try and skew history to meet your own biases.' I knew the facts. Women were not treated equally. African Americans were treated abominably. My historian friend was correct that official structures did nothing to address these issues. But is that the end of the story? In interview after interview, I did not find a single woman who joyously or even passively accepted their lower pay scales. I never spoke to an African American employee who believed that their lack of promotion was 'acceptable'. Both groups spoke in loud voices that were never officially recorded. Expressing their view, within the appropriate historic context, became my job. In the midst of a glorious national effort to maintain production levels during a world war, there were other stories too. These were the stories of women finding their strengths in a high-powered, unsupportive, industrial environment. These were the stories of African American women 'reassigned' from one operation to another because their production levels enabled them to make 'too much' money. These were the stories of middle-aged women who, despite their training and technical experience during the war, were destined to work minimum wage jobs for the rest of their lives once victory was announced. These stories are also history. From Eisenhower's glorious battles, to Rosa Ward's legal suit against the Armory for bias in job assignments, we must tell all the stories. By hearing all of them we are better able to understand the diverse forces that shaped our past. If we can't get a full, honest picture of our past, how can we make informed, intelligent decisions about our future?

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

** John Silber: Retired Chancellor of Boston University famous for both his run for Governor of Massachusetts and his hyper-allergic responses to Women's History, African American History, and other "revisionist" forms of history making.

There is another, possibly more profound, reason for shaping and telling *History Stories*. By sharing stories that represent a very specific, personal, viewpoint we are not only broadening our listeners vantage point on a time or place in history, but we are also drawing them, heart and mind, into another person's world. When you have heard and empathized with someone's story, a new window—**their** path of thought and logic—has been opened to you. The ability to identify and empathize with someone else's experience is an essential variable for good collective decision making and, ultimately, an important step toward living peacefully in a multi-cultural world. As practitioners of our art well know, a good story has all the power of drama. The listener identifies with the main character, enters their world and travels with them through the pain and joy of their experience. When we enter that world outside of our own our intellectual and emotional understanding of the 'the other' is broadened.

My friend Anna is the child of Holocaust survivors. Her parents both survived Auschwitz. To say this experience marked them and their children would be an understatement. There was never a day in her life that my friend was not reminded of the horror her parents suffered. Anna could have chosen to accept the cloud of the death that surrounded her life, curse all German's and Poles as her parents did, and live with a pall of fear around her. This was not who she wanted to be, but until Anna could broaden her world with other stories/points of view, she was a prisoner to the one story she knew. Anna has become the central figure of an organization that brings the children of victims and perpetrators together. They tell one another their stories. The process is painful, but ultimately in being privy to one another's lives, hopes, desires, fears and ideosyncracies, all the people involved start to see each other as individuals. They stop thinking of themselves purely as victims or perpetrators, and emerge from the experience able to see each other's lives as detailed, conflicted and hopeful as their own. They are set on the road towards peaceful coexistence.

When in conflict, if we can understand and empathize with our adversaries needs and wants and the events that lead them to conflict, we are more likely to be able to create a compromise that will best meet the needs of all involved. Good guys and bad guys are few and far between. Most of us have a story, a good one. Now I can't claim that Israelis and Palestinians, upon hearing one another's stories, will suddenly unite into a single peaceful democracy or that Croats and Serbs will embrace and put down their guns, but chances are they'll lean further in those directions. A good story is a window into someone's world. Once you have been there it's a little harder to shoot through the glass, and a little easier to knock again at their door.

CONCLUSION

Traditional history books tell us what happened through the sieve of those who shaped and controlled the events and environment discussed. The other stories—the ones of those who lived within that world—must be heard. Without them we can never understand the full historic thrust of any event. Story allows us to see and feel how people lived within a given historic context. We can witlessly promote a narrow, 'traditional' viewpoint, or we can search out and share the many stories and views on any era or event. Rather than trying to make a *History Story* non-biased and inclusive, tell it from many unique vantage points and encourage others to do the same. After hearing as many stories as possible, we can get a sense of the true range of the person or event being discussed, or the problem that must be solved. In sharing multiple perspectives on any event or situation, we stretch our own capability as a human being to understand and empathize with those whose experiences are outside our own. Without this ability we can never learn the skills of compromise and collective decision making; ultimately, we sabotage our efforts to create

a peaceful world.