

In Pursuit of Excellence: Storytelling and Chinese Restaurants

Why don't we create a national committee to license storytellers?

I've worked out an 18 point, three tiered, protocol for evaluating excellence. Once a teller has obtained their license and gotten their tier and ranking as a 1,2,3, or 4 star teller, subject to re-ranking every 5 years, they may go out into the world to represent our art form.

I hope this sends Orwellian chills down your spine. Any number of beautiful religious theologies have gone this way and turned into narrow, ossified, churches or synagogues of one stripe or another. No, let us promote excellence in storytelling the same way we might hope for the propagation and excellence of restaurants.

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"Hey there's a new place around the corner. It's called Ming Garden."

"What kind of food do they serve?"

"Primarily Szechuan style."

"That spicy stuff?"

"Yup"

"MMMMMM, Any reviews?."

"Yeah, one in the window by the Boston Globe. They say the foods spicy, yummy and, abundant, but the place is slow."

"Expensive?"

"It's a little pricier than most, but hey, you get a table cloth!"

"Great we'll try it Friday when we have time."

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Imagine this same type of conversation around our art.

"Honey, there's a new storytelling series at the Arsenal Center for the Arts."

"Ach isn't storytelling for kids?"

"I read an article that said this series is for adults and that the tellers will touch on everything from politics to sex."

"How do you know they are any good?"

"I don't, but they have a web site that lists the tellers for each night, and you can access reviews and articles about them. Some of the sites even had short stories you can hear. I want to try the one that's telling updates of Chinese folklore, and I think you'll like the guy who tells funny stories about getting lost in cyber space. They both have great reviews."

“Sounds good. Let’s try them.”

Ours is a folk art that has thrived for thousands of years because it speaks to the hearts, minds, imaginations, and needs of its listeners. It is this attribute that separates it from other ‘performing arts.’ Communicating with the listeners before you requires starkly different skills and knowledge than standard theatrical performance. Sharing the ancient tales of the Comanche with anthropologists and students of indigenous cultures, requires a deep connection to the history of the people, as well as an ability to bridge and translate an ancient culture for the understanding of a contemporary one. He or she who can do this surely represents excellence in our humble art form. To be successful with a group of 3 and 4 years olds one must be able to physicalize both characters and concepts so that preverbal children can enjoy and follow the story line along with those who have a good grasp of language. It would behoove the teller to devise an inclusive sensory-motor component, as this is their primary learning modality and choose material that speaks to their developmental issues. He or she who can do this sure represents excellence in our humble art form.

Storytelling is not a fine art. There is no one way to do it successfully. Truly good storytellers define themselves.

One argument for standards of excellence is that bad storytelling scares folks away from the art form for a lifetime. Has anyone ever had a bad meal at restaurant and said, “I am never eating out again!” Most of us simply avoid that particular establishment and next time try another with a different chef/teller. In order to promote ‘excellence’ we must first promote storytelling in more venues than we have ever dreamt of it flourishing in. In psychology classes and anthropology departments, the House and Senate floors, community and elder centers, zoos and natural wildlife preserves, boardrooms and classroom, theaters and parks, doctors offices and counselors offices, etc. so that it cannot be easily defined by material or style. When storytelling is happening everywhere we will all understand just how broad it's appeal is and have a big fat basis upon which to make our judgments. When story telling is as omnipresent as egg rolls, it will become clear that not every egg roll is going to excite your taste buds, but there are lots of appetizers in this world. So eat on!

Their greatest skill may be:

- Wrapping their tales around their listeners
- Creating a safe alternative world for listeners to enter, experience a catharsis, and exit safely.

- Using sound and language that wakes up the listeners imagination
- Understanding and sharing the humor in sorrow filled human experiences
- Using the listeners as a sieve through which to interpret the tale
- Blowing the smallest experience into gut wrenchingly funny tall tales.
- Identifying the humanity in banal, repetitive, human rituals.
- Challenging our deeply held mores with such charm and aplomb, that we are able to question them.
-the list of ways to be excellent is endless and idiosyncratic.

When you go hear Lorin Maazel conduct Mahler's 6th Symphony, you want your heart broken by the last movement that symbolizes the hero's death. You expect and get basically the same music every time you hear it. Storytelling is not a fine art. There is no one way to do it successfully.

Truly good storytellers define themselves. Their greatest skill may be:

How on earth could one quantify excellence? Would it not be better to simply popularize the art with the same attitude that one takes towards Chinese Restaurants:

- The more the better
- The more diverse the better
- Advertise honestly and clearly
- Let the patrons sort out what works for them.

Are you a Pu Pu Platter, or a spicy Szechuan with brown rice person? There are enough different establishments to make you both happy.

Are we concerned that storytelling will be seen as a mediocre art form because mediocre is the only storytelling that most people have been exposed to?

If this is the case, do we create a national committee to license storytellers?

Work out an 18 point, three tiered, protocol for evaluating excellence, and give them permission to tell only once they have obtained their license and get their ranking as a 1,2,3, or 4 star teller, subject to re-ranking every 5 years? Do we attempt to do what every theology has done, and create an institution where once an idea, an action, or a behavior guided us? This creates a lot of work for bureaucrats and tends to ossify a once brilliant or human way of responding to our world.

Or do we try and promote storytelling as an art used in every educational, community, family, and business gathering. A grass roots form of communication, entertainment, historic recording, that speaks to and for the

My father and I were once having an argument about funding for the arts.

“But daddy” I wined “The arts convey our cultural heritage, we cannot let them die. If that involves govt. funding, so be it.”

“Baby, football, baseball, basketball, they don’t require government funding. Why? (He always loved rhetorical questions), Because people love ‘em. They are willing to pay for them. If your ‘arts’ really entertained, people would pay for them too and you wouldn’t have to go around begging all the time.”

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My dad is big believer in the market place as the great equalizer. What’s good will thrive or survive, and what’s bad will fade away. Why then does Dominoes Pizza, Dunkin Donuts, and Walmart still maintain such a huge market share?

They, all three, offer bad product. So my dad’s equation does not work. Why would people go back again and again for a bad product?

1. They can’t afford a quality product
2. They have grown used to this mediocre level of delivery
3. It is their tradition/family history to use such products
4. They believe the promotional hype rather than the reality
5. They don’t care and use what is most convenient

Contrary to the idea of establishing any type of single standard by which to judge storytelling and storytellers we should look at sharing our work like establishing Chinese restaurants, the more there are, the more people will come and eat in them. The ones that do not meet the tastes of any population will eventually go out of business. The rest will find their clientele and thrive. What we need are not a set of standards, which would limit, but multitudinous venues that offer honesty in advertising, so that all types and styles of telling can find their communities of listeners and flourish.

Please explore Judith's web site: www.storiesalive.com

summer class:

www.tellingstoriestochildren.com

winterclass:

<http://www.storiesalive.com/MakingStories.html>