

Stories Born of Real Life

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

Our life experiences, digested, understood, and re-authored for others is one of the most powerful modalities available to storytellers. Our lives are templates for all human experience. Listeners see mirrors of themselves in our experiences, and then travel through windows into new ways of looking at their own experiences. These stories beget other people's stories, and the weave of humanity draws a little closer. Don't be fooled though, just because these tales are born of our experiences, they require no less work to develop than a story from a folkloric or historic source. In fact, because you are wrestling meaning from your own life, it is often more difficult.

There is no one way to create a 'personal story.' If there was a cookie cutter for these then they would all look and sound the same. There are as many ways to do this as there are storytellers. What follows is merely one teller's experiences and techniques.

A personal story is not merely a retelling of your experience. This is for friends, family, religious counselors, and therapists. Publicly shared personal tales, like good literature and theater, has the obligation to engage it's listeners, take them on a journey, and offer them new/alternative ways of viewing their lives through a deeper understanding of yours. There is one thing all these stories have in common. In every case the teller has re-authored their experience. That is, they have shared the story restructured by their understanding of how and why it effected their world. You can retell an experience a thousand times and it will always resonate in the same way for you. It's your experience. Let's say that you experienced your mother, the first born child of an immigrant family, as a woman who bit horse shoes in half for fun and entertainment, then instructed everyone in a 50 mile radius of how they should do this. Once, as a thin, self conscious, young teen, you two were taking a bus uptown. You noticed that you didn't have the exact change that the bus required and wanted to go to a corner variety store and break a dollar. She insisted "no no, come on. Here's a bus." You were nervous about drawing negative attention. At your age you were nervous about any attention. When the bus stopped your mother dragged your shy, skinny 14 year old self up the stairs, and announced, from the front, in a voice that G-d might of used with Noah, "We need change. Who has some?" After negotiating and haggling with the driver, she finally sat down and when she looked over was affronted "What in the hell are you crying about! We're on the bus!" You've retold this episode a thousand times to demonstrate how she had the sensitivity of Ghenghis Khan and would humiliate anyone while scorching a path through life. Every time you retell it you're a little more convinced. So, what is the difference between retelling your experience and re-authoring it as a story? As storytellers, I believe we have an obligation to ourselves and our listeners to understand why we were effected by people and incidents. Only then will the episode open into a story that others can enter. As it stands we say "Yikes, she was bad." "Mine was like that too." "How horrible for you." etc. But we have learned only about your pain. To make this memory into a story that can move others, the teller needs to understand

why this incident has such resonance for him and if possible, see it from outside the experience. Using that insight to reshape the tale, the author has wrestled meaning from experience and is gifting it to us in a story.

Following are 4 models (hardly a finite number) for re-authoring our lives as stories for larger audiences.

FRAMING: You know that an experience has resonance for you. Frame it in the reason for that resonance and you have a tale.

Let's take the episode above. The teller asks himself: Why do I keep retelling this episode? He might come up with many reasons:

1. To prove that I have a right to hate my mother. She deserves my ire.....Does she?
 2. To demonstrate why I must set limits with my mother. A positive model for maintaining a safe relationship with a loved but difficult person.
 3. To understand why I dislike aggressive people.
 4. To understand why I feel shame when I cry.
 5. To try and understand why I was so vulnerable back then.
 6. To expose the horrors that result when the transit system demands exact change!
- No one but you knows why an incident lives within you, but that reason will enable you to frame the episode and make it accessible to others:

2. We all have relatives that, though we love them, are best visited within the confines of your or their home. Unfortunately some of them are our primary relationships. (Add the above incident) OK, so I love her, but traveling together is one thing we don't do together.

3. Every time I am working with a new group of people, at work, or socially, I get headache producing red flags around the 'big' ones. I don't mean physically big, but people that take up a lot of psychic space. The loud ones, the showy ones, the shameless peacocks, and the those that like to own the group with their opinions. For fifteen years of my adult life I have worked to place myself in situations where I will not have to deal with these giant vacuum cleaner people. Now at 35 I feel like a mouse constantly hiding in a world of cats. I am getting tired of hiding. I am even getting tired of my own outrage, and wonder where it started. It started where all things do, at the beginning....(add a couple anecdotes about your mother's behaviors as you grew and end with the one outlined above.) Was every 'big' person in my world my mother? Maybe it's time to expand my repertoire of friends.

5. As a child I was like a poorly rooted seedling in a storm. There were 7 of us, children of immigrant parents, who were survivors. They were burnt cedars in a forest that did not survive. There was little time for pattering around small roots. (add the bus experience) My roots had to get stronger, or they'd be given up to the harsher winds of this world. Ultimately I have that embarrassing woman to thank.

Each of these invite people with parallel feelings, if not experiences into yours. They emerge with a new vantage point on those feelings.

Another example from a completely different situation: As a child I asked my mother for the same anecdote at least a million times:

“Mommy mommy, tell me the prune pit story!”

“Oh, I’ve told you that silly story a million times.”

“Pleeeeeeeeeease.”

“Oh O.K. When i was a little girl we all did the long fast for Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of atonement, 22-26 hours sans food and drink). Oh, I got so hungry by three O’clock, I couldn’t stand it. So, I ate a few prunes and hid the pits behind the couch. At 5, just before it was time to go back to the synagogue, I heard my mother call out ‘Helen Edith Gruskin!’ Oh, I knew I was in trouble when my mother used my middle name. There she was standing with the couch pushed out the prune pits in her hand! How did she know?”

That was it, not a five part thriller, but I asked for endlessly. It would mean between little and nothing to others, until I could figure out why it resonated for me and used that understanding as a frame. Why was this anecdote so important? Only as an adult can I now look back and understand what it represented.

As a child, I was my mother’s great failure. She was perfection. Her hair curled perfectly into a lovely face. Mine hung like a sheep dogs over undistinguished eyes with a too big nose peeking out. Her figure was that of a Hollywood starlet. I was always chubby. Her kitchen and public rooms were neat as a pins and so clean you eat off of any surface. The floor of my room became visible only under threat of evacuation. She would always look at me and shake her head sadly. We seemed like different species.

There was this one story I would ask for endlessly.

“Mommy mommy, tell me the prune pit story!”

“Oh, I’ve told you that silly story a million times.”

“Pleeeeeeeeeease.”

“Oh O.K. When i was a little girl we all di the long fast for Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of atonement, 22-26 hours sans food and drink). Oh, i got so hungry by three O’clock, i couldn’t stand it. So, i ate a few prunes and hid the pits behind the couch. At 5, just before it was time to go back to the synagogue, i heard my mother call out ‘Helen Edith Gruskin!’ Oh, I knew I was in trouble when my mother used my middle name. There she was standing with couch pushed out the prune pits in her hand! How did she know?”

Ha, my mother did have a weakness, a failing! There was a chink in her armor. Maybe there was room yet for me to grow into perfection!

Many of us have felt diminished when standing next to our parental role models. For anyone with this or a similar experience, this story will now resonate with them and bring up their memories, thoughts, and tales of survival. It is no longer an idiosyncratic

experience, but now a story that links to the experience of others.

Finding the Heart of a Single Experience: Culling through an experience that has touched you, understanding why, and shaping the details, trajectory and characters to reflect that reason can leave you with a rich and powerful story.

Often something happens, it has a profound impact you, and you know it needs to be a story. How do you go from the experience to the story? A blessed friend and writer, Sarah Wernick,* has reminded me hundreds of times “Just because it happened doesn’t mean it belongs in the story.” For the story you create to address the power you felt, it is often necessary to cull out characters, events, and details which have little to do with your reason for sharing this particular incident. You don’t have to throw these characters, events, or details away, just keep them in your back pocket for another story whose theme they can reflect. You keep and develop the details, events, and characters that enhance your reason for telling the experience.

To create a story from the initially described experience you’d want to list out all the possible themes it could address:

- Mother-son differences
 - Mother controlling social situation
 - Preparing for situations: Outings with mother/Outings in general
 - The cultural norms of immigrant/survivors
 - Your shyness and it’s sources
 - Your shyness and it’s expression
 - The culture of public buses
- (there are no doubt plenty more)

The story cannot be about all these things, but could be about any of them. How do you know what you need to focus on? It’s at this point you want to work on an emotional map, to help you clarify what this story, here and now, is about for you. Alas, the above is a hypothetical person, creating a hypothetical tale. By way of an example, let me move to an experience that I recently defined through this process:

In 2005 there was funeral in our town for Army Staff Sergeant Christopher Piper, Special Forces, killed by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) in Afghanistan. In a small town, like mine, if you don’t know the deceased personally, there is only one degree of separation. You are sure to know his sister or father or children. The town circled the wagons to support this family. His entire platoon was coming in to help bury him. Half the town would march down Washington St. after the casket. Governor Romney (now running for President) would attend, as would Senator John Kerry (then running for President). The police would serve as a honor guard on their horses.

Then news reached us that the Reverent Fred Phelps and 14 demonstrators from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., would be picketing that day on a corner near

the Old North Church on Washington St. The followers of the Rev. Fred Phelps, who blame American tolerance of homosexuality for the Sept. 11 attacks and the resulting U.S. military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, have targeted Massachusetts for protests because, when this occurred, it was the only state where same-sex marriage was legal. They would be waving signs that read:

“We are protesting the sins of the nation”

“Fag in a bag”

“Thank God for IED’s” (Improvised Explosive Device)

“America is doomed”

This group has few friends, but they do have a 1st Amendment right to freedom of expression, and their money is made by suing towns that attempt to curtail this right.

The police met and came up with a game plan. They would invite the *Boston Police Gaelic Column of Pipes and Drums* which would break into a set of tunes every time the Westboro Church group began to chant and drown out their sound. The Police decided to back their horse up, rump side to the protesters, but their small numbers would still resonate with their agenda at Chris Piper’s funeral.

On the morning of the funeral, about 30 minutes before the actual service was to begin, and just after the procession, about 1/3 mile from the church got started, the main road into town shook with the thunder of Harley’s.

For all the world it looked like the Hell’s Angels were planning on attending the funeral. They drove right through the no-parking, no-entry signs set up by the police, got off their bikes and placed themselves directly in front of the Westboro protesters. The protesters demurred their rights, got back into the van and headed out of town. The church filled. The bikers left, and Chris Piper was mourned and buried.

OK, so in and of itself it’s a compelling experience. It could have touched you in many ways, from bringing up feelings of patriotism, to questioning the role of politicians in a family’s private moments of mourning, to considering the proper extent of our Constitutional Rights. My son was in Iraq at the time as a US Marine, and it brought up a lot of personal angst. The list could go on and on. This experience could spawn many many stories, but what was mine? Why did that experience resonated for me and how could I help others enter it?

In situations like this, I find that words are not helpful, and moving towards a more instinctual way of digesting the experience is necessary. *Emotional Mapping* (I made this up, but am sure it must exist under other names in other fields) is a technique i’ve found very useful for trying to understand what, in any given situation, was truly important to me. (All of your stories are about you. Even the folk tales and fairy tales you choose to tell, are told because you have some resonance with them. They speak to your life. If they speak to your life, they will, most likely, speak to others.) An Emotional Map is a drawing, using colors, shapes and textures, no literal figures, to recreate the experience. Exploring what each group of people, and each action looks like in color,

shape, and texture, forces you beyond the literal and into an understanding of meaning. In the Map I worked on for this experience the initial shape was a black hole. That represented Chris's death, and close to it were the bent, pale oblongs of those who loved him. Surrounding those were slightly straighter pastel, soft, shapes of those supporting the mourners, and finally a ring of soft blue, being the town around them all. I discovered two shapes, mostly outside, but cutting into the edges of the ring were the Westboro protesters, and the Hells Angels. The colors and shapes and textures for both these groups turned out in stark contrast to the rest of the map. They were hard, angular shapes of primary colors, with strong directionality.

You don't know what will emerge from an *Emotional Map* before you begin, but the result is illuminating. This story was, for me, about folks being allowed to mourn their dead in peace, and who can claim angelic status. Given that, the facts that the politicians were there, my son was in service at that time, the patriotic fervor that death yeast's, all did not belong in the story I needed to tell. These images would go into the back pocket for some other time. The story that emerged reads something like this:

In this life, there are protective angels and avenging angels. Reverend Fred Phelps and his demonstrators from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., are of the later type. They are sure that god is angry with this nation because we do not live by a literal interpretation of the Bible. We do not stone adulterers. We do not put to death folks who work on the Sabbath. Most significantly, we do not systematically and wholly condemn homosexuality. They are sure that both 9/11 and all the American deaths in the near east are God's finger pointing angrily at us. They protest at high school graduations (because the health curriculum mentions homosexuality) and military funeral, because the armed forces chooses to judge a soldier on their service record rather than who they choose as an intimate partner. The Westboro signs include:

"We are protesting the sins of the nation"

"Fag in a bag"

"Thank god for IED's" (Improvised Explosive Device)

"America is doomed"

Shirley Phelps-Roper, the Reverend's wife and a lawyer for the Kansas church, says that the military funeral demonstrations aren't targeting the dead soldiers but,

"We are protesting the sins of this nation. That doesn't exclude him."

Let's leave the avenging angels for a moment and come to my little oceanside town of Marblehead MA. In a small town, if you don't know someone personally then you know someone who knows them. Did I know Christopher Piper? Not personally, but my friend Karl, before I knew him had been married and divorced to Chris's sister. I know her because she owns a cloths store in town and Karl, to this day golfs with Ernie, no longer his father-in-law, who's a well known trial lawyer and a raconteur of some note. I never met Chris the soldier, but his mom, Connie, signed their son up for a program I run in town, and so I knew his son Chris jr. a wonderfully rowdy kid, and his sister Diedre....and that's how it goes on this little finger of land jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Army Special Services Sergeant Christopher Piper's protective angel was sleeping in

late on June 3, 2005. On that day, an IED, a roadside bomb, went off in Afghanistan, and Chris and 2 other soldiers were killed. Christopher Piper, through both his Marine and Army careers knew and accepted the occupational hazards of being a professional warrior. That didn't make it any easier for Connie or Chris Jr. or Deirdre or Lisa or Ernie. This is a moment in a small town when politics, and old differences are put aside, and everyone reaches in and makes a circle of support around the family, as they try to come to grips with a black hole where a father, a husband, a son, and a brother used to be. The funeral was planned for Old North Church. The parish, founded in 1635 is at the far end of the Washington St., a road that winds by the homes of the old fisherman, and the locally owned shops that are the core of this town. His entire platoon was flying in to give him a full military funeral. Half the town would process through the old winding streets, honoring the man, weeping with his family and mourn his passing.

Then the press releases started to reach us. Reverend Fred Phelps and his minions from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., were coming to the funeral as well. The word 'Abomination' was flying fast and furious from both courts. They had every legal right to have their views heard, but did Ernie need to hear people chanting "Thank god for IED's" as he buried his son, killed by one? The police met. They are not allowed to intimidate legal protesters, but they could certainly circumvent them. In a stroke of genius they decided to invite the *Boston Police Gaelic Column of Pipes and Drums* which would break into a set of tunes every time the protesters began to chant and drown out their sound. But their very presence was toxic and cruel.

On the morning of the funeral, about 30 minutes before the actual service was to begin, the Westboro protesters were in place and chanting. The women and children made up the front line. The Reverend assumed that people would be less likely to attack them! The funeral procession was about 5 blocks away from the church and heading slowly towards it when a sound like thunder filled the air. On the main road a moving cloud of angry black smoke, sounding like machine guns on a war front, came pounding into town. Maybe Phelps was right, because this must be hell on wheels. As they approached the church and slowed it became clear that is exactly what or who it must have been; Hell's Angels. They drove their hogs right past the police barricades and popped down their kick stands in a NO PARKING zone. The first guy to sling his leg up over his bike had on a leather vest that ended abruptly at a gut looking like a mountain ledge. On the back of his vest was emblazoned **Blackstone Valley Vietnam Vets**. The next guy to sling his leg over was rail thin and taunt as a telephone wire. His teeth were occasional and stained, and on his knuckles you could read V I E T N A M. A third had such a massively muscled upper body that he appeared to have no neck. Upon removing his helmet you could read, buzz cut in his scalp "VET." Everyone of them wore a symbol of the hell they'd survived, and one by one they placed themselves right in front of God's avenging angels. The police are not allowed to intimidate protesters, but these babies had PHDs in it. One little girl began crying immediately and hid under her mother's skirt. A boy grabbed his mother's hand and looked up in fear. One of the women actually whispered "We have a right to be here." And the survivor before her raised himself to his full 6'5" and muttered "So do I." Within minutes the children were all weeping, the women were packing their signs and the men were helping them all into the van that Rev. Phelps

watched from. Like a huge helium balloon losing it's gas they poured into the van, and in quick burst of exhaust , they sped out of town. The bikers then turned, stood as an odd honor guard in a neat line, held their helmets held against their guts, heads bowed as mourners passed. When the casket passed before them, in a simple unified movement, they snapped to attention, each one saluting a fallen brother, until coffin passed and they exhaled into an 'at ease' stance. They did not move a muscle until the church doors closed. Wordlessly they put their helmets back on, slung their legs back over their hogs, thundered down Washington Street. Watching that cloud of dust I ruminated that you never know what your angels are going to look like.

This story might change someday, because my reason for sharing it will shift to a new paradigm, a different reason for focusing on this event. In the here and now, because I loved the irony of two such extreme groups, both calling themselves angels, doing a form of battle so that a family and community could be left in peace to honor and bury their dead, this is the form the story is taking. Your rendition of this even might be quite different, depending on what drew you to it. That is the nature of personal stories.

PEELING THE ONION

Many years ago, a group of storytellers banded together to start the first adult concert series in the country. Doug Lipman, Elizabeth Dunham, Jay O'Callahan, Lee Ellen Marvin and myself decided that each year we would create a group show. **First Times and Forgotten Toys: *The Bittersweet Stories of Our Growing*** was our second group venture. I was miserable. "I don't have any stories from my childhood" I moaned. Ever the empathetic group they said "Find one." It was then I began peeling the onion. Behind every memory is another memory, but you can't get to the important core experiences without peeling off many layers and possibly tearing your eyes. Here is what you do. Choose a period of your life. Simply look through photo albums, or call siblings, or close your eyes and travel backwards. *Whatever comes up for you, don't judge it or question it.* Examine it, trying to recall as many details about the specific time, place, people, and incident as you can and note it down. Create index cards of simple pictures that represent these experiences or a few words to summarize them. Keep talking with folks who knew you, looking at more pictures and scrapbooks. Take in a film from the era you're exploring. Give yourself a long period for this random collecting process. Behind each well explored memory will be another and then another.

Once you have have a list that's about as long as the national debt, and not before, it's time to start analyzing. Look and see if commonalities come up that many of the memories fit into. Do many of the memories revolve around the same types of interactions with specific people? Do many of them occur in a specific place? Do you find certain feeling emerging again and again in some of them?

Begin to create categories that your memories can fit into. Create your own titles for categories. They might range from "Critical Mother" to "Big Loving Dog" to "Magic times at the Creek." There will always be memories that don't fall into any of the categories

you've created. That's fine. You can't use it all any way! Now it's time to look for interesting intersections and conflicts.

Stories are about movements in our lives, internal or external. A sweet memory of a beloved auntie isn't really a story, but a tribute. However if that same auntie helped you elude or conquer bullies, then you've got a tale. Look at your categories and think about how seemingly disparate events might have a pivotal twist in your life.

When looking at my categories, the image of a pathetically miserable childhood began to emerge:

Big Bad John:

(A semi-sadistic older brother whose teasing was merciless)

The Clicking Mother:

(For the sounds she'd make on the roof of her mouth when evaluating me, her constantly disappointing girl child.)

Dumb Dumb:

(Anecdotes about being a school failure)

The Blob:

(Anecdotes and memories related to being chubby/fat)

When we permit ourselves the wounds we can count up are more than the bullets fired. It's human nature. Telling these sad anecdotes would not be a story, but merely kvetching (a wonderful Yiddish term for complaining) and constantly reliving and reaffirming my self righteous misery.

As an adult I can look at these 'wounds' and am amazed. The truth is that I have a wonderful life. It includes love, work, lots of physical activity, and relationships. This is certainly not the person who would have emerged from the above described misery. Though drawn to the old hurts, like a moth to the light, something in that same childhood must have been very right. I continue to peruse my list and discover additional categories. There are many entries under an adoring father, supportive neighborhood, good friends, and something goes 'Bingo' when I get to another category entitled 'Fantasy.' It has dozens and dozens of memories in it. Each one is about a little girl who creates a world in which she is the princess and heroine. That little girl is vivacious, resilient, has a grand imagination, and an iron clad will. There were other supporting categories, but this is the one that seemed to most powerfully balance the diminished self. Children are brilliant. They take what they need to be healthy as long as it's available. The story that emerged, *The Real Sleeping Beauty*,** became a condensed afternoon in my 7 year old life that created parallels between these two realities. It's the tale of a child who doesn't just survive, but thrives through the gifts of 'personability'. This process can reap wonderful tales as you begin to see that the person you are today comes from many sources and having *peeled the onion*, you now have access to them.

WRESTLING THE DRAGON

The big stories are never easy or simple to digest, understand, and re-author. A number of years ago I was invited to be the guest storyteller at an annual event entitled **The Hollywood Literary Retreat** (Don't laugh, they didn't think it was an oxymoron.) They invite a well known screen writer, storyteller, and pop psychologist each year to a stunning mountain retreat north of the Hollywood Hills to investigate and reinvigorate the role of story and psychology in film writing. On the second day the screen writer and I constituted a two person panel discussing story.

The question came: "How long does it take you to develop a new work?"

Me: The big ones, the ones that evolve into full length (1-2 hours) pieces and address deep life changes, take me about 3 years.

Screen Writer: I never put a full 3 months into writing a screenplay until the commission comes through. Just give them a writing sample and develop a pitch line and hook that will dazzle.

At this point the earth under me began to tremble. The next question: "How much do you make for one of these pieces?"

Screen Writer(He was a big maucher): My last screenplay sold for 3 million.

At this point the earth open and sucked me down. They were no longer interested in hearing about someone who took 3 years to develop a work that had marginal financial profit attached.

We do this work to try and understand our lives, what happens, how it moved us and how it might do the same for others. This work is about transformation and if we're lucky, redemption, and it's a long process. If you know the end when you begin, then don't bother doing the work. You might know the literal end point of your story. It could be a death or a birth, or a healing, but getting there, that is your story.

For Instance:

I had never considered creating a story about my mother-in-law. Even though I had been instrumental in her relocation to our area and a major support during her decline and death, these things were simply what life requires. When the nursing home, after her death, inadvertently threw away all of her things including the pictures of her family that had been so important to her and represented the legacy she wanted passed on, I knew that a story would be the only thing that would keep her in our lives. Exploring her life began as a relatively simple tribute to a tough, complicated woman. My husband had always painted one clear picture of his mother, and that looked like a pitt bull. He and his brother's reluctance to visit, no less care for her in her old age was a strong indication of who she was to them. Talking to other family members and friends painted a completely different picture of this woman. My own experience of her was a mix of both vantage points. The research and ideas began to explode like tendrils from a banyan tree. This is about aging. This is about the immigrants journey. This is about multiple vantage points on a single life. This is about..... This kind of thinking is the kiss of

death because it narrows your conceptions as you continue to experience a human's life and how it resonates into yours. Remember all personal stories are about you. Not that you are necessarily the main character, but they are about where your life was impacted. I worked on stories about Trina (that's the mother-in-law) as a union organizer, a mother, a pitt bull who fought off greater bullies like her father-in-law and the administration of New York State. These were tributes to her, but still didn't ring with emotional honesty. I was dancing around the really compelling issue that fascinated me:

1. Why did one of the most mature, intelligent, and compassionate men I knew so hate his mother?
2. What happened that enabled him to put his arms around her near the end of her life and say "I love you mommy."

You'd think it would be obvious that answering these questions would create a story whose theme was redemption. It wasn't. It never is. Possibly it's easy for some, but I simply have to wrestle with the dragon. Collecting anecdotes, images, memories, and feelings, until something cohesive, and worth sharing begins to emerge. **Retiring the Champ: Coaching Life's Last Big Bout** ***is the tale that emerged. It's literally a template for helping your parents through the last few years of their lives, but thematically it's about the redemption of the most important relationship we have.

Wrestling the Dragon is the most difficult way to approach story because you come to it with empty hands. It is the intense research, commitment to look and feel with judgment, cross pollination, and many sleepless nights that begin to link themes, actions, characters. If an organization is actually paying you for this story, you be asked almost daily "Well, what is it about?" your answer can only be "Your faith in me to keep looking and listening for the heart of the matter."

This is blessed work because not only do you come to understand your own life from a new perspective, you have the opportunity to offer others a model for how to emerge from their hard times. We see our lives reflected in one another's and these experiences, reauthored as story, can act as a map to guide us back towards one another.

Other Stories on CD that model **WRESTLING THE DRAGON:**

Banned in the Western Suburbs: Stories about adult passions, choices and relationships are for the big people. These are tales about the projections, insecurities, fantasies, and realities that well up when one is attempting to attract and negotiate relationships with the opposite sex. Included in this collections is *The Window Washers*, as performed at the National Storytelling Festival's Midnight Cabaret. You'll laugh till your weep.

Ages 16 and up (2 CD set \$20)

“For a wicked good time...”

The Boston Globe

“One of the years Ten Best small theater productions...”

The Boston Phoenix

Adult Children of...Parents: is a comedic saga about the coming of middle age, and dysfunctional (is there any other kind) families. Can one woman raise her child, make peace with her parents, and grow in a way that is not a warped extension of her own childhood? The issues of this tale touch all of us who are trying to grow out of where we came from and into who we could be.

Ages 14 and up (Audio Cassette \$10 CD \$15)

“...not only painful and poignant, but gut-wrenchingly hilarious.”

National Honor Tape

The Boston Globe

Storytelling World Magazine

Retiring The Champ: *Coaching Life's Last Big Bout*

End of life care can be a great black hole or the beginning of new understandings and relationships within a family. When Michael, who always referred to his mother as “the little Pitt Bull,” discovers he is the only one available to guide her through the maze of Alzheimer's and into death, he feels the same thrill you and I might at the prospect of going for a root canal. You are hereby invited to take this journey; the physical one from downsizing and dealing with the medical and elder care establishment, the social one involving the delicate weave of family relationships and the spiritual one that takes this son from angry boy to soulful adult.

Ages 14 and up (double CD \$20)

“Judith Black is like a repertory company of one....She wittily conveys the trials and tribulations of one of life's trickiest passages, negotiating our parents' sometimes long and winding ending.”

Moby Strange Kennedy

The Improper Bostonian

“Like most of Black's stories, it's funny and touching, filled with colorful characters, accents and songs. And it's thought provoking.”

The Boston Globe

“Black's one woman show, *Retiring the Champ*, is about redemption...also like all of Black's tales, filled with laughter.”

The North Shore Sunday

Esau My Son is a funny, touching, and poignantly honest story about one parent and educators learning curve raising a ‘difficult’ child, and their ultimate lesson that not everything of value can be gauged by a cognitive profile.

Ages 11- Adult (CD \$15)

“Your funny yet poignant tale touched our guests on many levels-as parents, educators, providers, citizens...it was a gift to us all.”

Lori Berry

Executive Director Lynn Community Health Center

Looking For G-d's Doorbell is a tragicomedy about the American bar mitzvah experience. When your child asks for the hundredth time “Why are we doing this,” a parent is obliged to find an authentic answer. This is the story of that journey.

Ages 11- Adult (Audio Cassette \$10 CD \$15)

“...a wonderful evocation of the struggle to keep one's children rooted in Judaism. Judith's story reaches the depths where we all are one.”

Linda Weltner-The Boston Globe

That Fading Scent: A Seditious Comedy About Women and Aging

Women, yearning for some comedic empowerment as you barrel towards the far end of

your 'genital functions?' Men, trying to figure out how to support your beloved through these years? This is the show for you. Filmed live during a run at The Griffen Theater in Salem. MA .

"This is the thinking woman's version of Menopause: The Musical,..... Black is a warm and dynamic storyteller, exposing the legacy of bias against older women with a wry sense of humor. In fact, she shows how life after 50 can be wonderful.Smart and undeniably funny, *That Fading Scent...* is a great example of the power of storytelling."
The Orlando Sentinel

To Order: <http://www.storiesalive.com/orderform.html>

*Sarah Wernick died in November 2007 of an endometrial cancer. The author of many books in the health and diet field, she had the keenest eye and ear for a good story. She shared both that and herself generously and is deeply missed.

The story that emerged is called *The Real Sleeping Beauty* (It can be found on **OOPS MA: Songs and Stories of Family Life and **Adult Children of.....Parents: A Comedy About Dysfunctional Families** found at <http://www.storiesalive.com/orderform.htm> There will be a video version from the Timpanogas Festival up soon on my web site: www.storiesalive.com)

***http://www.storiesalive.com/repertoire/retiring_saying.html