

Telling to Elders

By Judith Black

I was a failure in developing and sharing programs with elders. I fumbled and bombed many times, and will never forget, mid-story, one man in a nursing home, shaking himself awake and squawking, "Is she still talking?" He went back to the land of nod and I knew that this wasn't my *métier*. The problem, I finally had to admit, was that I was pushing my agenda instead of paying attention to theirs. I wanted to share ironic tales of an irresponsible government, tell folktales chock full of the wisdom I assume they exuded by this age, and enable them to think about their families and communities from new, interesting, vantage points. "Is she still talking!?"

On top of an inappropriate repertoire I suffered from inhospitable environments and enormous doubts about my ability to engage this particular audience. What right did I have to tell stories to someone whose present needs and priorities are so very different from my own? What right did I have to tell stories to someone who has so many of their own stories that no one is listening to?

I remember, as a child, noting how my grandparents memories took up most of their conversation. In their retirement my parents' memories now take up an increasing portion of their focus. I rail against the idea of living in the past, and one day while visiting my parents in their retirement home in Florida tried to duel with my father over this issue. A bright man, who finished his college degree in his 50's, built his own business and was active in his faith and community, he now sits in "his" chair (woe to anyone who tries to sit in it) and watches afternoon television, whose scheduled reruns of *Bonanza* and *In the Heat of The Night* he has committed to memory. "Daddy, why do you waste yourself sitting here? You could be doing a dozen productive things. Do you want your mind to rot?" He takes the clicker, momentarily lowers the sound (a miracle in itself), and eyeballs me patiently. "Dear," he begins, "have I been a good father?" "You've been the best," I chirp. "Was I a good husband?" "You still are," I reply, noting my contented mother. He continues. "Was I a responsible community leader?" I recall the various fund raising drives that emanated from our dining room table. "You bet, Daddy." "Was I a reliable Temple member?" "Yup! We sang off key at all the father-daughter events." He makes his point. "Good, so leave me alone." (Putting the volume back up) "Now I want to watch TV."

Who can argue with that? And so, too, I had to reexamine the tales and

programs I had prepared for elders: folklore unfamiliar to them, tales of political and social strife, personal sagas of dating or parenting. No wonder I was such a soaring failure. They didn't care about these things. Like my father, they wanted and deserved a walk with the familiar. You don't always have to climb Everest. By a certain age looking back on the scenery is just as honorable.

So my material was inappropriate. And the venues didn't seem welcoming, either. Once in a nursing home, assisted living facility, or rehabilitation center, I often found an environment subtly hostile to my vocation. In many environments developed for elders, routine is sacred. My heartfelt rendering of the high point of a tale did not inhibit an aide from entering and administering medication, a family member from dropping off some slippers, or a loudspeaker from noisily announcing "Bingo in ten minutes in the dining room." (I noted nervously that "Dining Room" was emblazoned right over the space I was presently performing in. Even though half of my audience was nodding off, in part due to their medication, in partial response to my program, they would all be rudely awakened in a few moments when the dedicated gamblers came pouring in.) "So," I hear you ask smartly, "why bother to tell in these settings at all?" IF you can shape the environment to honor the art and the listeners, and IF you can find the right material to speak to the head and hearts of those present, then a wonderful generous outpouring of warmth and memories will flow like a river. That river will lift you and carry you to times and places you could not have taken yourself.

Let me deal with the physical set-up first. It is up to you to educate your host and insist on what you need to create an environment that honors the listeners and the art form. The most obvious tactic is to ask for so much money that your host wouldn't dare do anything to interrupt their huge investment. (Good luck. Small entertainment budgets which need to be stretched over the course of a full year inhibit the payment of large sums.) The programs most often employed in these settings are musical cabarets. They require short periods of focus. Our art is different, and by informing the host of the nature the work you can create an ally.

Explain how the opportunity to enter a trance state and create personal imagery, so important to the success of storytelling, requires a focused environment. Interruptions make it difficult to sustain that focus. Clear sight lines and being audible to the audience are paramount. Now that I have to cup my ear in a busy room to hear what a friend is saying, it is much easier for me to understand the frustration of an elder who can not hear the presenter. If you are not a natural boomer, use a sound system. Stand as far away from the exits and entrances as possible, as there will be some movement which can't be avoided. Before you begin, request that announcements be held until completion of the session. These are a few of the physical details to think about prior to your presentation; and know ultimately that the audience is more used to the interruptions than you are, and you might have to flex with their needs.

Elder audiences have their own emotional constitution. It is a simple fact of nature that as our body ages it loses some of its agility and stamina. It is easy to mistake a slack facial posture or slouched physical bearing for disinterest. Often, after sharings, those who sat with what I perceived to be the most curmudgeonly looks on their faces have come up to me and poured out their thanks and enjoyment. These audiences don't usually laugh as loudly, respond as overtly, or even applaud with the vigor you might be used to. These external reactions often have little correlation to their level of understanding and enjoyment. It's just that the body is tired. The soul is still bright.

"The Home Front," a snapshot of an American family and their lives between Nov 1944 and June 1945, punctuated with the songs of the era, is the vehicle that finally has connected me to elder audiences. (and just a hairs breath before entering their ranks!)

The story, originally created for the Springfield Armory/US Dept of the Interior, was researched from the Armory's archives and through interviews with women who had worked there during WWII. It was conceived both as a teaching tool and as an honor to the female work force of the era. The story on its own was nice enough, and it did capture the attention of elder audiences, but it wasn't the story magic we all yearn for. It was not until my buddy Roz Epstein heard it and said "Judith, it's not WWII without the music," that we teamed up to create a musical and learned a valuable lesson about awakening and engaging the memories and imaginations of elders.

After trying out our new work with varied audiences it became clear to us that music accesses a different part of the brain from the spoken word.

A familiar tune stimulates the listener, enables her or him to recover experiences that emanated out of that songs genesis in their life, and based on this very personal connection, empowers them to maintain an investment in this new story that it is now attached to.

Roz begins by playing tunes of the era for fifteen minutes. Folks are welcomed to sing along, and many do, already drawing themselves back in time. I open the program with a popular tune whose words are on a giant board and invite, beg, beseech them to sing all with us.

These songs are in their hard drive, so to speak, and the listeners become present, alive, and invested from the start. When the heroine writes to her husband about collecting red ration stamps so she can send him salami, I see heads nodding, faces lighting up with recognition, people nudging each other with the shared memory of what it was like to live "without." When a husband debates with his wife about whether she should go to work, I hear gentle laughter from those who fought this battle 50 years ago when they entered munitions factories during the war. When I sing "I'll Be Seeing You" and see old partners reach for one another's hands, a woman who had appeared to be sleeping mouthing the words with me, a soldier of the South Pacific fleet, who'd

come in uniform, re-conjure his 18 year old sweetheart in his mind's eye, I know that the audience is connecting deeply. Before breaking for intermission we invite audience members to share war-time memories. Like yeasting flour, their memories have swelled and fermented, and we hear tales and anecdotes that make us all laugh, cry, and sigh with the bitter sweetness of a war era past. By the show's end, the entire audience is singing 'You'll Never Know,' with Eta, the heroine, to the husband on the Italian front who cannot hear her. Yes, it is shameless emotional manipulation. It also represents a truth of this era, and one that resonates with heartfelt honesty.

When we leave these jobs, Roz and I marvel at how much we love this work.

Neither of us had ever seen ourselves working with this population (though we will join them soon enough), and yet finding just the right material and learning how to communicate it so that a full circle of energy, experience, and remembrance is created, has made this work a joy in our lives.

Note: Judith and Roz no longer perform this piece together. Every project has it's natural life. The story is available on DVD and tape (sans music) at <http://www.storiesalive.com/orderform.html>. Judith is available to perform it with Roz's recorded music.