

The Life Stories We Tell

Edmund J. McDevitt

Part of a speech presented at the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale

My father had a pet peeve. A man we both knew had a small supply of stories he would tell about his exploits as a fireman. They were recountings of his heroic rescues, his unique expertise as a firefighter, his bailing the chief and other officers out of trouble. He told them again and again, this small store of stories, and he told them in exactly the same way. He rather insistently inserted them into conversations, whether they belonged or not, creating context for them that put focus on him that he could not otherwise gain.

They were all fabrications. That truth, and the constant repetition, drove my dad nearly berserk. He never did directly confront the teller, a good thing; but he expended substantial energy trying to avoid being in the same room with him.

These were the man's life stories, his way of defending his life. Unfortunately, in his case, he was defending a life he never lived.

Not all stories we tell are such. Not all of us fabricate a life. On the other hand, not many of the stories we tell are 100% accurate representations of what happened, either.

This is not to say that *we* are lying in the telling of our stories. As I will point out, we are telling the stories we tell in the ways we tell them for particular reasons.

As we gain years and experience, most of us call upon a library of personal stories that we tell again and again. For some of us the library is fairly large. For others it's small. Whatever its size, that storehouse and its contents are of great value to us.

The stories we choose to tell and the ways we choose to tell them, and in what contexts, define for our audience who we are. We tell these stories to identify ourselves. We tell them to bring structure and order both to our own perceptions of ourselves and how others perceive us. Or we tell them to reorder and restructure those perceptions.

In suggesting this, I am referring to stories we tell orally in social situations – conversations, meetings, presentations, speeches. Short stories, novels and jokes have different requirements and conventions and, while their genesis might be similar to that of oral stories, their result is not. They are actually at a remove or several removes from our personal stories.

It used to be, not so long ago, that all stories were told orally, of course. Storytellers were the historians and the mythmakers, the carriers of belief and tradition. It is interesting to wonder if all those great stories started as personal stories and evolved into fables, then into cultural myths. But that's not my topic at the moment. I'm talking here about the stories that for each of us are the weld-points in our life structures.

Meaning determines the content of any of our important stories. The facts of a story only start the story, seed it, if you will, and the facts become less important over time.

This can be a problem if you are telling the story or relating an emblematic episode in the presence of someone who was there when it happened. That person will be much more interested in the actual event, at least as he/she recalls it. If this story has for your witness little or none of the emblematic value it has for you, the person will (unless he's a particular kind of painful person) probably wait until a private moment with you to straighten you out. If the story is one of your witness's own paradigmatic stories, you're going to have a problem because without doubt, its symbolic value and meaning for him will be different and even in conflict with the meaning it has for you. The problem will manifest itself in open disagreement with you. But this happens very rarely because all of us are quite careful about the audiences to whom we tell our stories. We don't tend to tell revised family stories in front of our siblings, for example, or in the company of other participants in the stories.

We tend not to tell out cherished stories to those who were there to witness them because the witnesses and their versions of events are not relevant, except to them. In fact, their versions of the same events may have emblematic significance to them and be relatively unrecognizable to us. The reverse is also true. We suddenly become critics and fact-mongers when we hear or read a version of a story in which we were involved, one rendered by someone else.

Here's an example of this last point. Recently I read a book entitled "Gracefully Insane," which is, or purports to be, a history of McLean Hospital, a famous private mental hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, near Boston. In a certain way the book illustrates my point about the facts of stories as opposed to the meanings and personal value of stories. I read the book for several reasons, not the least of which was that I worked there as an aide from about 1959 to 1961. The author at one point in the book discusses the founding of a school at the hospital for the many adolescents who had been warehoused there. He places the founding in the middle '60s. His facts are wrong. It was started as the Arlington School in 1960 and I helped to open it. This sort of lapse is important for a history. My point, though, is that it's not important for personal stories. We usually don't apply dates to them unless the dates have importance to our telling.

In fact, I have somewhere in my memory a section of my library that includes stories about the Arlington School, but I haven't told any of those stories for decades. They don't fit into the life I live today. So unlike my Dad's nemesis, who would tell his old stories anyway no matter the context, I don't need them.

For most people the library of stories is constantly in need of new shelves. We don't close the library. We gladly add to it. But any new story has to fit with what become the values and touchstones of our lives; it has to illustrate how one views oneself; to be successful with an audience it has to have instructive value; and, as I just suggested in my discussion of my Arlington School/McLean Hospital experiences, it has to have current value.

I have dozens of these stories. Let me tell you a couple. They illustrate how stories become stories, how accurate our memories aren't, and how ultimately unimportant accuracy is. Oh, by the way, I am the central character in the stories, and I do enjoy that, but I am not the point either of the stories or of this long Sunday digression. I just happened to be there and my other self is now telling you in dispassionate terms what happened.

Here's a story that shows one reason that I tell stories at all. Ten or twelve years ago (See? See how event time facts get erased?) I stopped at a TCBY store (they were once called "The Country's Best Yogurt," but they couldn't prove their claim, so TCBY it became). At the moment I arrived in my Honda Accord I was listening to a baseball game on the radio. (See? See how you remember the really useful facts - if they are facts . . .). I went into the store and bought one of those large sugar cones filled with white chocolate non-fat frozen yogurt and a long plastic spoon embedded in the top. I went back to my car opened the door, sat down, put the cone in my right hand so that I could close the door. I did that, and then switched the cone back to my left hand so that I could turn the key to get the baseball game on again. I turned the key.

If you have ever driven a Honda Accord, you will recall that Accords had automatic seat belts that ran in a track along the top of the door. So as soon as I turned the ignition key, of course, the seat belt advanced along its track, hooking my left hand with its white chocolate frozen yogurt cone as it went, and jammed that cone into the side of my face. The spoon was sort of in my ear and the yogurt and my cheekbone were one.

The very first thing I did was *not* to remove the trapped cone from my face. Rather, I looked (eyes moving only) to see if anyone outside the car had seen this happen, while at the same time beginning to laugh uncontrollably, wishing someone HAD seen it and, even better, had a video camera trained on me. Of course had there been such a person, I suspect that the story would be different today, but I'll get to that. Anyway, I removed the yogurt cone from my facial region, ate the contents, listened to the game and drove home to tell this story for the first time.

How is this story instructive? Well, it says a lot about me. I've always told funny stories. It's one of the things my family loved about me from the time I was a little boy. As my adulthood ensued I became more self-assured and learned how disarming it was to tell stories on myself, stories that made light of me. This story is one of the many weld-points in that part of my personal mythos that has me a funny, sometimes self-deprecating guy.

Other stories help me to locate or re-locate myself in my world and to notify others about my ethics and values. In a former life I worked for a company domiciled in Massachusetts. It is a software company that, very soon after I took the job with them, was acquired by a Canadian consulting company. I was on the sales team. When I went to work for them there were two sales teams selling two different product lines. The total sales staff numbered almost 30 people. Less than a year after the acquisition I was one of 7 remaining sales people, a phenomenon occasioned by the Canadian company's never having had any sales people and having not the first clue about how software is marketed

or sold or how US consulting works (they got almost all their consulting and outsourcing engagements through long-standing personal relationships and referrals – all in Canada). All the other sales people left in frustration. I stayed on, acquiring as I went a number of existing clients.

The company hired an executive to run our division, hoping that he could fix both the rampant systemic problems of the division and the loss of staff and clientele, to say nothing of the dying sales performance. He turned out to be, after a time, a tyrannical bully, one who in any meeting of his leadership team of 25 or so people would pick a victim and publicly abuse and humiliate him or her. Naturally, the victims felt constrained not to respond for fear of being fired. I found out after several months of this behavior that the support staff who didn't have to attend these Monday morning meetings had a pool on who the week's victim would be.

I attended these meetings, as did most of the remaining sales team, via telephone conference call. One Monday, right after the meeting began, the executive issued forth in a general and very demeaning tirade about his extreme disappointment with everyone at the meeting for not having shown, as he put it, "leadership" and "creativity" in dealing with our division's multiple problems. It was a stunning, even bizarre performance, made the more trying by his never quite specifying what, specifically we were supposed to have done or did not do. It went on for about 10 minutes. He sort of ran out of steam then, and went silent for a bit. Then, when nobody said anything, he said, "Well?!? Are you just going to sit there? Doesn't anyone have anything to say?" I instantly responded over the phone, "Paul, how could anyone possibly respond to a vicious attack like that?" He shouted into the conference unit, "I guess you and I have some issues, then, don't we?" I answered, "No more than anyone else in the room has right now." He then ordered me to send him a detailed review of everything I had been doing for the past month. It was very simple: I had been trying to close a major services renewal contract for almost a year – a \$14 million dollar deal – in the face of obstruction from our corporate staff that he refused to help with.

When I tell this story, the visceral disgust I had with this man comes through, and I mean it to. There is more to it. Not long after this episode, I closed the big renewal and despite a promise he made to me, this executive shorted me severely on my commission. I had another job lined up and decided to take it. Soon after I resigned, I had a phone "exit interview" with a sympathetic HR person, and I related this story to her, suggesting that she not simply take my word for it, but interview other members of this division for their feelings about this guy. It gratified me greatly to find out that three weeks after I left the company the executive was fired.

But why this story? It's one that serves to suggest what in my world is right behavior and what is not and to suggest that it's always worth exposing bullies; in fact, in my heart of hearts, I take great pleasure in doing just that. In a larger sense, it connects me to an ethical system and to a thread of human existence with which I want to identify. More importantly, I would hope that it tells my partners in conversation that such a thread exists and that it is always right to be part of it.

We all do this. We sometimes state rules without the stories to illustrate them – the Ten Commandments, our various legal codes, our Unitarian statement of principles. But humans have told stories, I suspect, since the advent of speech, and have told them to show what the right road is, or to suggest new roads – and even for very ugly purposes – to lead a tribe or a society to war, for example.

I'm not alone in constructing my particular mythos, by the way. I've had lots of support and contribution from others in the story construction and in the mythos building. We all have. That's the way it works if we tell stories at all.

Not all of us do tell stories. Just about all of us are story-listeners. But not all of us are story-tellers. Of those who are, the accomplished professionals – the Garrison Keillors and the Mark Twains and the Will Rogers – are one level of story-telling, people for whom stories are the very center of their lives. Those people and the rest of us who tell stories are driven to the telling for any number of reasons. One that intrigues me and is very mysterious is the possibility that for some of us it is an inbred instinct, which is to say that we cannot help it. Something in our cultural genes quite possibly drives us to be story accumulators and tellers. We are, in some sense, both witting and unwitting recorders, repositories and disseminators.

This can only be speculation. But it gets one wondering about why every culture had, before writing became widespread, individuals who held within them the songs and poems and histories and who traveled about singing and reciting them, those “singers of tales,” as Albert Lord called them in his wonderful book on the traditions of oral poetry.

Our cultures still have these tellers. Their media are both the same and different. They still sing. They still tell. But today they use movies and songs and rap and books and blogs and on and on. Endless stories, endlessly told today in a constant susurrant of electrons.

But to bring it back to ground level – we individually tell and listen to our stories to explain our lives to ourselves, to try to order and make sense of it all. Sometimes it's just to laugh. Sometimes it's to release powerful emotions. It's often a way to set or reset our moral compasses, or to admonish others about theirs. Whatever the reason, story-telling is something humans everywhere do.

So did I tell you the one about . . .? I did? Well, how about . . .mmm . . .maybe later.

10/8/04

© 2004. All rights reserved.