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"Storytelling in the Age of Videoconferencing"

What is storytelling?

Story can be defined as *a series of events*. Storytelling can be defined as *relating a series of events*.

A story gathers data into a package and gives it a meaning. The whole is manageable, graspable, digestible, and on a human scale. A story usually has a point, so after hearing a story one likes, one tends to feel oriented and have a sense of what to believe and what to do. The experience of stories tends to give one feelings of comfort, warmth, and of being safe among family, friends, and community.

Stories also express world-views, in that a story-presenter not only lets one know what happened, but also often expresses a point of view about what happened (through the selection and framing of the material, to begin with). Thus, presenting a story is an attempt to persuade people to see (that is, to understand) things in a certain way. A story can be a model of the past, and a model for the future - and thus the validity of stories is often contested.

Storytelling and story-listening are synesthetic experiences, involving immersion in all of the senses. While listening to a story (or reading a story) one creates internal imaginary visualizations. This is active and hard work, involving the use of language, the exercising of judgment, and critical thinking.

Whether a story's characters are humans, animals, divinities, aliens, or other types of beings - all stories are about characters in psychological, emotional situations. Story listeners (or readers) project themselves into these characters, and imagine themselves in these situations. The listeners can consider if they might do things similarly to or differently from ways the characters are doing things. This gives the listeners practice for living.

Types of stories include,

- 1) Documentary Stories (including Personal-experience/Autobiographical, Journalistic, and Historical Stories).
- 2) Folklore Stories (including Epics, Myths, Legends, and Folk Tales such as Animal Fables and Fairy Tales).
- 3) Original Creative Stories.

Most European fairy tales came into being after Christianity was adopted by the local kings, and pre-Christian goddesses (and the worship of them) were outlawed. Goddess lore then re-surfaced in fairy tales, featuring fairy godmothers with their magic powers, etc. This type of fairy tale, incidentally, has not developed in India (where I live), in part because the most ancient goddesses here are still worshipped and taken very seriously by members of certain communities. Stories in India often cannot be differentiated into the genres of fairy tale, animal fable, epic, and history - many traditional stories in India involve all of these genres.

Globally the telling of folk tales is indeed dwindling, although there is a core group of them - especially some animal fables and fairy tales - that are often still told to the very young. Folk tales can be defined as *stories composed by communities, and passed down from generation to generation*. These days people may not be telling many folk tales, but people are still referring to many of these stories and their lead characters. Some new folk tales are arising, sometimes referred to as "urban folklore".

People are certainly still talking to each other. The need to inform and entertain each other remains. Conversational storytelling (*telling family and friends what one did today, and what one is hoping to do tomorrow*) continues to constitute most of human communication. People continue to yearn for connection, community, meaning, purpose, direction, a story they can believe in, and membership in a group that is based on a story one cares for.

An important aspect of storying (*thinking about stories*) is the recognizing, analyzing, and creating of metaphors (*things that represent and symbolize other things*). Metaphors may help to communicate that what a character has experienced is not just a private issue, but also occurs in nature (if the metaphor involves nature), or has been experienced by others in one's culture (if it is a conventional metaphor).

How to be a good storyteller?

When undergoing training in story composition, it is often useful to explore and construct one's Life Story. Once one becomes aware of prominent themes in this story, one may be better able to select, shape, and communicate any other story. Doing such story work may involve (literally or figuratively) finding one's voice - a voice that can be engaging, authentic, and spontaneous.

When preparing to tell or write a story, it may be useful to identify the story's *Defining Moments* (also known as *Dramatic Moments, Moments of Decision, Moments of Truth, Turning Points, Pivotal Points, Crucial Scenes, Key Scenes*, etc). It is often a story's Defining Moments that one wants to act out, and bring to life, as a way of really getting into a story and sharing what the story is all about.

Activities a storyteller or storywriter may engage in include (from the most authoritative, to the least):

- 1) *Commanding* (telling people what to do).
- 2) *Interpreting* (commenting on what happened; explaining what it means and how it may teach us lessons about what to do in our own lives).
- 3) *Narrating* (telling what happened).
- 4) *Pretending to be a Character* (play-acting, role-playing and fantasizing).

When communicating a story, one needs to balance between: summarizing scenes (conveying essential information) and giving scenes "the full dramatic treatment" (especially by role-playing characters, giving voice to their speech and thoughts).

As a trainer in storytelling, I would say one weak point in many people's story performance is their shyness regarding stepping into characters and role-playing them. Acting-out characters need not involve extensive voice modulation. However, to be able to effortlessly pretend one is someone else does involve a certain flexibility of psyche, imagination, and identity.

When one pretends to be a character in a story, and speaks as that character, this invites one's listeners to pretend to be other characters in the story. For, when story characters speak, they are often speaking to other story characters. By looking at a listener as one role-plays a character, one treats the looked-at listener as the character who is being addressed by the character one is role-playing.

In this way, a storytelling event becomes a group fantasy role-playing event, led by the storyteller. This magical psychological imaginative social process separates storytelling from all other ways of presenting and experiencing stories.

Is videoconferencing going to save the art of storytelling?

Some people - especially some of those in the field of physically present storytelling - feel the presentation of story only qualifies as storytelling if the story is presented in the course of an ongoing social event, with tellers and listeners able to give feedback to each other as the event unfolds.

These days, even many primarily *one-way media* story experiences are becoming more interactive, and thus more storytelling-ish. For example, increasingly one can SMS, e-mail, or chat to affect the outcome of a TV show.

The leading technologies of an era affect one's worldview, even when one is not using these new technologies. The older technologies are of course still used, but they exist in the shadow of the new technologies. Many times, the older technologies are re-cycled, and are used in relation to the new technology.

Each medium of communication has its biases. For example, writing and reading is sometimes said to color content with loneliness, or at least, aloneness, because writing and reading are often done alone. To write is to accept receiving only *delayed gratification*, involving others possibly receiving one's message and replying to it at later times.

Storytelling in physically-present communication is generally considered to be warm and empowering. The social situation of togetherness and love tends to color the content to give the message that an individual, and small groups of individuals, can *do it*, can survive, function, and thrive - just as they are doing in the course of the storytelling event itself. Feelings of alienation tend to be opposites of physically-present storytelling.

Videoconferencing can be defined as a *communication event in which participants send live audio-and-video of themselves to, and receive the same from, each other*. Other terms for videoconferencing include *video calling, video chatting, tele-present communication, and interactive video-mediated communication*. As with all forms of mediated communication, one must learn how to communicate through videoconferencing comfortably and effectively.

Videoconferencing strikes me as having epic, and manic-depressive, aspects. This is because it is so grand to be able to videoconference, and so sweeping: in the course of a videoconference, one can write; draw; watch online video recordings; observe and manipulate other online material; etc. If on the other hand a videoconference connection is not fully made, the experience can be very frustrating - and if a group is involved, very embarrassing.

Today many people mourn the loss of social skills in young people who are involved with online communication. However, the Age of Videoconferencing is just beginning! Soon videoconferencing will be the default form of interactive telecommunication: if one would be telecommunicating without videoconferencing, one would be asking, "Why?".

As videoconferencing comes into its own, the need to be able to converse (not just to lecture) via videoconference will also be increasing. The social skills required for beginning, conducting, repairing, and ending oral verbal conversations will be needed all the more - together with the new skills of overcoming the possible disconnects of the videoconference process (possible delays of one's partner's replies, possible lack of eye contact, etc).

Videoconferencing could go a long way toward eradicating two of the great nightmares of modernity: loneliness and unemployment. Via videoconference we could teach each other, counsel each other, sell to each other, do chores for each other, babysit, and so on. Videoconferencing - in conjunction with asynchronous telecommunication methods such as e-mail, websites, and leaving messages on social media pages - can serve very small niche markets. *Communities of Choice*, in which people can participate online, are becoming increasingly important in many people's lives.

At this moment in history, many traditional cultural practices are disappearing, and dominant mass languages, cultures, and crops are spreading. Middle-aged and elderly people are the last ones in the history of the world to be raised in cultural environments in which the local non-electronic heritage was primary. Even tribal people in such places as India, New Guinea, Borneo, and the south Pacific region are abandoning their cultures. At the same time, the land in which their communities have lived for tens of thousands of years is in many cases being lost to "development". It has been established that biological diversity is good for environments (maintaining water, cleaning air, retaining ground-soil, etc). The case needs to also be made for the nurturing of linguistic and cultural diversity. And biological, linguistic, and cultural diversity are often intertwined and mutually-supportive.

Performance of, discussion about, and training in forms of storytelling - including through videoconferencing (with translation when needed) - can play a part in helping people to develop their traditional cultures. In addition to facilitating videoconferences in which storytelling training is given, the Storytelling Institute I direct often arranges Ethnographic Videoconferences, in which people can tell each other personal and group stories, and can discuss these stories. (1)

Dating the Story of Our Existence

The time may have come for us, as a global community, to adopt a truly global dating system. At present, the most wide-spread system of dating time involves conceiving of time pivoting around the birth of a heroic figure of a particular culture. This could be perceived as a colonialist practice.

BC ("Before Christ") and BCE ("Before Common Era") refer to time before this hero's birth; and AD ("Anno Domini", "In the Year of Our Lord" in Latin) and CE ("Common Era") refer to time after this birth.

Instead of this dating system, time could be dated in relation to a wonderful human achievement which was contributed to by many members of the global community. One such achievement is the first time a human broke the bounds of gravity and entered outer space. This occurred in what is known as 1961, when Yuri Gagarin of the Soviet Union was sent into space in a spacecraft that orbited the earth. Time before then could be known as "Before Space", "BS" (1960 would be 1 BS); and time after then could be known as "After Space", "AS" (1962 would be 1 AS).

Two South Indian Stories

Two of my favorite south Indian stories are below. Both involve a woman dealing with the situation after her husband has been unjustly killed. One thing I like about the "Epic of the Anklet" is that the king punishes himself when he realises he has made a mistake. One thing I like about "The Youngest Brother Story" is that the life-giving qualities of the animals and plants counter the destructive qualities of the older brothers.

"The Epic of the Anklet", a story told by people of Tamil Nadu, south India (population, approximately seventy-five million):

Approximately 1,500 years ago, Kannagi (pronounced kun-na-gee, rhyming with see; a young lady) and Kovalan (pronounced ko-va-lan; a young man), married in Poompuhar, on India's east coast. After some time, Kovalan went off with a dancer named Madhavi. A year later, he returned home. He and Kannagi walked to Madurai, a distance of about 250 km, to start a new life. There Kovalan was falsely accused of stealing the local queen's anklet, and was unjustly put to death by the local king (the Pandian king). Kannagi came to the court and proved her husband had been innocent of this crime. The Pandian king punished himself for the injustice he had done, by simply laying down and dying. Kannagi walked around the city three times, tore off her left breast and threw it against the city wall, and called for the city to burn - but for good people and animals to be unharmed. Agni, the god of Fire, accomplished this. Kannagi wandered to the western mountains, where some people worshipped her and she founded a new tribe in the jungle. (2)

"The Youngest Brother Story", a story told by the Kaani Tribal people of Tamil Nadu, south India (population, approximately twenty-five thousand):

Six older brothers invited their youngest brother to come to the forest to hunt wild pigs. However, deep in the forest, the six older brothers turned on their youngest brother and stabbed him to death with their spears. The youngest brother's two dogs went running back to the village. By whining and nudging, they pleaded with the youngest brother's wife to come with them. They led the wife to her husband's body, laying on the grass. The wife fell to her knees and began to lament (weep and scream). Nearby, a snake and a mongoose were playing - which was unusual because usually they are fighting. The snake observed the situation and said, "Please do not weep, madam. We will get the medicine and bring your husband back to life". So the snake and mongoose got the needed plants, ground and mixed them, and applied the paste to the youngest brother's skin. He revived, to the great joy of his wife. The Youngest Brother, his wife, and his two dogs returned to their village. They told the village elders what had happened, and the six older brothers had to leave the village.

- (1) An article on "Ethnographic Videoconferencing" is at www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/44.pdf . Links to recordings of a number of Ethnographic Videoconferences are near the top of www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com .
- (2) A brief article about the "Epic of the Anklet" is at www.storytellinginstitute.org/14.pdf . A longer essay relating to the story is at www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/18.html .