

About Stories

Keynote for Sierra Story Winds Weekend Retreat

Delivered October 18, 2014 by Milbre Burch

Murphys, CA

Let me begin by saying thank you for inviting me to join you this weekend. Given that your original featured presenter was MaryGay Ducey, the Great Mother of West Coast Storytelling herself, I was moved that she, BZ Smith, Cynthia Restivo, and the rest of the committee would think me worthy to fill in when MaryGay was unable to be here to pilot the maiden voyage of the Sierra Story Winds Retreat. If you don't know her, she is a local hero and a national beacon of storytelling artistry and activism – truly a champion's champion. MaryGay and I have had a long history together, meeting in the late eighties on the board of directors for what was then called the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling. As two expatriate Southerners whose female forebears had taught us a thing or two about being strong women with a deep sense of social justice and a wicked sense of humor, we fell in together right away. When, as a nursing mother I began to come to the board meetings and conferences with my infant daughter in tow, MaryGay was our very own Mary Poppins, imparting her strategies on meeting the needs of a hungry baby while following an agenda that did not take into consideration a regular feeding schedule. (Many years later I saw a tee shirt with the slogan: "I make milk. What's your super power?" Oh, what I would have given to be able to wear such a shirt to those meetings!)

Twenty years later, though we lived on opposite coasts, MaryGay and I worked on a joint book project collecting folktales and literary fairy tales about mothers and

motherhood from around the world. And though the publisher changed hands during our project and declined to publish the finished manuscript, August did release our tandem album of tales from that collection. It's called *Because I Said So: Stories about Mothers and Kids*. MaryGay and I have performed tales from our collection throughout California – in San Diego, Beverly Hills, and San Rafael – and at the National Storytelling Festival. Thus I have witnessed firsthand her leadership, her artistic skill, her keen mind, her generous heart, and her steadfastness as a friend. And I will celebrate with you when MaryGay is able to share her wit and her wisdom at a future Sierra Story Winds event.

Meanwhile here we are together in the beautiful, historic town of Murphys, at a gathering of California storytellers. Though I flew here from my current home in Columbia, MO, I count myself among you. Three generations of my family have lived in CA. My father was raised in Oakland. My mother was raised in San Pedro; her parents and siblings lie in Inglewood cemetery. At 91, though dementia had robbed my mother of many of her memories, she remembered still the lure and the sparkle of the cold Pacific waters. Following her death in 2012, my family made a trip to cast her ashes into the ocean at Point Fermin.

My Mississippi-born husband and I – a transplanted Georgia girl – met and married in New England before moving to the West Coast in 1988. Residing in a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Pasadena for over a decade allowed us to regain some of the richness of spirit and cross-cultural connectivity that we had been denied growing up in the segregated South. Our daughters were born in LA County, and both returned to the West Coast for college, so most of our disposable income has been invested in the Golden State. Since the early twentieth century, California has placed its mark on my

extended family, and none of us can erase it. Nor would we want to. So this for me is a kind of homecoming.

I have called my talk this morning simply “About Stories.” If you are new to the storyteller's journey, then what I say may give you a crust to nibble on in the years ahead. If you have been traveling this road for a while, I hope my words will provide crumbs from a familiar loaf, the taste of which may remind you why you left home to seek your fortune via this route in the first place. Novice or professional, we understand that story sharing is a powerful way of knowing the world and connecting to one another. It is grounded in "memory, imagination, emotion, intellect, language, gesture, movement, expression . . .and, most crucially, relationship in the living moment – person-to-person or person-to-group" (*Storytelling, Self, Society* 1.1, 3).

Over the last 35 years, I have thought about, read about and investigated storytelling from a number of perspectives: that of a practicing artist, an activist, a storytelling series producer, a workshop leader, a writer, an archivist and a scholar. In fact, I went to graduate school because I wanted to learn to think more deeply about what I had been doing for three decades. Seven years and two degrees later, I have gotten the 30,000 foot view of what many of us in this room have been doing "on the ground" as participants in the forty-two-year old festival-based American storytelling revival. But most of my education about the art form remains embodied knowledge from my first two decades as a teller – what I've learned by performing in elementary schools and elder hostels, at colleges and conferences, in community and correctional settings – and what I've learned by listening to other storytellers perform and talk about their process.

So here are ten things I know:

1. Whether we are working with oral tales, family stories, historical material, tales from literature, legend and lore, character monologues, stories we've overheard, tales we've imagined or images from a dream – we are called to pass on narratives that say something about the world as we understand it, or remember it, or long for it to be. This leads me to believe that if a story doesn't speak to you, it doesn't belong on your tongue. Leave it in the air for another listener. If your mouth stays closed and your ears stay open, the next story you encounter may beg you to tell it. There's no denying that some stories command our particular attention. In 1983 while attending Sharing the Fire, the New England Storytelling Congress, I heard librarian Richard Ashford tell "Odilia and Aldaric," a saint story from the eighth century. He sat in a chair, lifting no more than a finger, to recount the miraculous exploits of the willful daughter of a willful father. Given my Presbyterian upbringing, saint stories were new to me. But as the willful daughter of a willful father, I had lived that story. And hearing it told that day, I felt as though I were being pinned to my seat by the harpoon of the story's arc. All the while the man sitting next to me snored softly. So a tale that took up immediate residence in my heart, had bypassed his entirely.

2. For every tale that is told, there are many versions heard by the members of the audience. Each listener has a mental and emotional "screen"—woven of gender, age, race, ethnicity, interest in a given genre, language fluency, cultural beliefs, etc. It is through this experiential screen that story images must pass. Depending on the weave and measure of the screen, some narratives penetrate deeply and memorably into the mind of the listener, while others are barely admitted entry and dwell just on the doorstep of fading memory. It's an important lesson for a storyteller: no matter how good a story is, it

may not speak to everyone in your audience. That's why God in her wisdom gives us wide and varied repertoires and disperses us throughout the world to engage a multitude of listeners.

3. A storytelling event is made up of four elements – the teller, the listener, the tale itself and the context in which the telling unfolds. This is true whether we're gossiping with a friend at the kitchen table or telling to a thousand people in a festival tent. In either circumstance the teller, the listener, the tale and the setting all play their respective parts in creating a one-of-a-kind event in which the co-creative act of storytelling can take place in the imaginal space between the mouth and the ear.

Many stories work for all kinds of audiences in all kinds of settings. We know that from experience. But our venue host may not. But it is our responsibility to make sure that our sponsor is on the same page with us – or we with them – to ensure that the setting, the listeners and the story are well aligned for an effective listening experience. Otherwise that storytelling event may be dead on arrival – because the sponsor asked for scary stories but gathered an audience of preschoolers, or the principal of the school admonishes the students not to make a sound just before you go on.

The first time I told stories in a Rhode Island women's prison, my show was announced by a guard who went down the hall calling: "Storvy Houa! Storvy Houa!" And I thought: These women are going to kill and eat me! But despite that inauspicious beginning, some of the inmates were willing to forego a screening of "Psycho Two" to come hear what I had to say. And I learned to speak up for what I needed to create the right space for telling stories to a given audience.

4. In a live storytelling exchange, not just the words, but the unspoken aspects of human communication also come into play. Now here I should admit that I am a recovering mime, so I am particularly sensitive to the kinetic piece of the storytelling puzzle. But I am not saying that everyone must use gesture or movement or characterization in performance. However subtle, the teller's body language is read by her or his audience; it is like a living text filling in nuances beyond the words being spoken. So we want to be mindful of what our bodies are communicating, lest our clothing, our posture or our vocal dynamics make a statement we didn't intend to make. For instance, wearing a skirt with an elastic waistband that lets go as you mount the high school stage, or wearing sweat pants without a jock strap in a performance at a conference, or saying something in a voice that refutes your words: (nervously) "Hi, I'm glad to be here today at the Nuclear Waste Facility's Family Halloween Party..."

In turn, the listeners' body language plus the sounds or silences of their response helps communicate their level of engagement back to the teller. But sometimes as performers we take it personally when there's a disappointingly small turnout or we misread the facial expression of a listener, and emotionally distract ourselves from being fully present to the tale we are telling or to the listeners who did show up and are engaged. Have you ever looked out into the audience and seen this face (grimace) and thought: that person hates this story, or hates my jacket, or hates me? Invariably that same person comes up afterward and says (with a grimace): "I really liked that story!" So before you communicate your imagined failure to your listeners consider this: The Reverend Dr. Margie Brown says, "Fear is excitement without breath." Then breathe

deeply and begin. Remember that storytelling is like the sweepstakes: you have to be present to win.

5. This news just in: Paul Zak has done research on how listening to stories can change our brain chemistry. Google him and you'll find a video on you-tube on "the future of storytelling." Zak observed that stories with a dramatic arc cause the brain to generate two chemicals – cortisol and oxytocin. That's why we *experience* both stress and empathy for the characters in stories, and why listening takes us deep into a trance-like connection with each other. The department of defense has paid for some of his research, so let's make sure we redouble our efforts to use stories for peace and justice and reconciliation. Make no mistake: as a "disruptive technology in an over-mediated world, storytelling is powerful stuff.

In the mid eighties, Jungian storyteller Gioia Timpanelli performed at a National Storytelling Conference outside Jonesborough, TN. She told "Beauty and the Beast" in English interspersed with Sicilian, in deference to her great-grandmother whose storytelling was well known in her native village on the island of Sicily. Gioia's stirring together of two languages created an aromatic feast for the ear. Once she had us all captured in the web of the storytelling trance, though, she intentionally broke the threads by interrupting her own narrative cadences to ask a rhetorical question: "Who is this beast who makes us leave our father's house?"

Thirty years later I still remember what it felt like to be swept up in that story, and intrigued by that question, since at the time, I had only recently left my native South to live a thousand miles away. Gioia looked out at the audience as she spoke and at one point, her eyes met mine and lingered there. In that moment, the room disappeared and I

saw a quiet pool of water in the woods on a moonlit night. But, it wasn't just a vision; it was a *sensation* for *I was that pool of water*. A deer walked into the glade and bent to drink, a long, refreshing sip. When Gioia looked away, the spell was broken and I found myself back in the conference venue. She acknowledged later that my listening face had kept the story going for that moment. That's how I got my first inkling of how deeply one could fall into a story and how important the listener is to the teller. Never again did I mistake storytelling and story listening for mere acts of entertainment and consumption. I knew instead that a teller can take her listeners into a deep space of imagining and brings them back with knowledge of an unseen world.

Fast-forward ten more years for my second inkling along these lines. That's when I visited storyteller Heather Forest at her home on Long Island. We sat in the rose garden as she told me a story she was working on: An interweaving of "Beauty and the Beast" with another French fairy tale, "Riquet of the Tuft." From the two she created a story within a story. Both the frame and the inner tale dealt with seeing the Beloved through the eyes of Love. A few months later, I emceed Heather's hour-long set at the National Storytelling Festival where she told the two intertwined tales. Sitting to the side of the stage, I was in a position to watch both the performer and the audience. As the tale drew to a close, I saw how each member of the audience leaned into someone else. Hearing a woman speak of recognizing her lover's soul-self despite his Beastly visage had even men in the audience weeping openly. When the set was over, the audience was so entranced that they lingered in their seats. To me they looked transparent: it was as if I could see the tent poles through their bodies. They had been so completely transported by the tale that they seemed insubstantial for the time it took them to transition out of the

imaginal realm and back into Real Life. What I saw that day reminded me that story listening is a transformative experience during which listeners can be lulled into breathing, laughing or weeping as one. And if we have participated in such a storytelling trance, we leave the event with an embodied sense of community.

6. Stories don't just change brain chemistry, they can change behavior – and even save lives. Once upon a time, I waited in a long line outside the women's bathroom at the National Festival. Just in front of me stood Dallas-based storyteller Elizabeth Ellis. As we waited for the line to move, I was trying to get up the nerve to ask her for permission to perform one of her stories. Intimidating as the prospect was, by the time we had made it to the stalls, this relative newcomer to the revival had introduced herself to a storytelling super star and asked if I might tell her story about how Grandmother Spider stitched the earth and sky together. She said yes – as she has said so many times when asked to give of herself to the storytelling community.

Grandmother Spider

The grandmothers tell us that in the old time, the earth was the land of the people and the sky was the land of the spirits but there was nothing to hold the two together, and the earth just kept drifting further and further from the sky. And the people were frightened for they feared that if the earth drifted too far from the sky that when they died their spirits would be unable to find their way to the their new home in the sky.

And so a council meeting was called and when the fire was lit, Bear stepped forward saying: "I am the strongest of the people! I will force the earth into staying next to the sky." But for all his strength, it was a foolish task and the earth just kept drifting further and further away.

Coyote spoke saying: "I am the cleverest of the people! I will trick the earth into staying next to the sky!" But for all his cunning, it too was a foolish task and the earth just kept drifting further and further away.

And the people cried out: "Our brother with his strength! Our brother with his cunning! If they cannot help us, who can help us?"

That's when they heard a tiny voice call out from the tall grass that surrounded the council fire: "Now let an old woman try her skill!" And they looked and saw Old Grandmother Spider walking on her bent gnarled legs.

They laughed and said: "How can one so tiny help us when our brother with his strength and our brother with his cunning could not help us?"

But she did not hear them for she had already begun what would be a long journey to the end of the earth. And when she reached the end of the earth, Grandmother Spider looked out across a vast distance, and she could just see the land of the sky.

Reaching deep within herself, she spun a long, thin, silken web and she threw it, but it fell short. So she spun again, a long, thin, silken web and she threw that one, but it too fell short. So she spun a third time, a long, thin, silken web and she threw it and it fell jus short of the land of the sky. So gathering all she had spun before and reaching deep within herself, Grandmother Spider spun a fourth time, a long, thin, silken web and she threw that one and it reached the land of the Sky and it held there.

Then Grandmother Spider walked across that web on her bent gnarled legs and when she reached the land of the sky, she rested. And after she rested, she spun again, a long, thin, silken web, and she threw that back to earth and she walked across that one.

*And so, resting and spinning, spinning and resting, back and forth, forth and back,
Grandmother Spider Stitched the earth and sky together.*

*And when she was done, she spun again, a long, thin, silken web to tie the
mountains in their places and the rivers in their courses so that the world would no
longer be in chaos. And she spun one last time, a long, thin, silken web and she tied it to
the hearts of each one of us, so that during the day we may go where we will and do what
we will, but at night when darkness has fallen, each of us feels a tug against our hearts to
return to our homes.*

*So you must never kill a spider or destroy her web, for she and her daughters and
their daughters after them are doing the work of the tiny creatures of the world. The work
that holds the world together. (This story was created by Elizabeth Ellis, and is used with
permission.)*

“Grandmother Spider” changed my life in two ways: it provided an image of a postmenopausal female adding value to her community and being recognized for it by those who originally discounted her. And it made me deal with my fear of spiders. To tell the story with any integrity I had to incorporate its wisdom. That meant I had to learn to reign in my phobic, genocidal impulses toward spiders, and become a catch and release girl. Countless generations of arachnids owe their lives to my telling of this story for the past thirty years. And for me, changing an irrational, fear-based behavior was a small but profound step toward living into who I wanted to become in the world. The story of “Grandmother Spider” and its impact on my life became an unconscious model for telling stories about other vulnerable populations.

7. Even when stories can't save lives, they can allow us to live through a happy ending. In 1986, I was invited to the St. Louis Storytelling Festival. Much of it

takes place at the Museum of Western Expansion under the Gateway Arch. But the tellers also travel to outreach sites and that year I was sent with other tellers to a children's hospital. Our audience was gathered in the dayroom at one end of a ward, and as the group assembled, I began to wonder what I could tell, keeping in mind that most of my young listeners were away from home against their will, and didn't feel well! Talk about a challenging context for a successful storytelling event! At that time I had recently begun telling the Micmac Indian Cinderella story, sometimes called Little Burnt Face or The Rough Faced Girl. I had noticed that young children all the way to adults seemed to respond to that story.

Just before the hospital show began, one last child was wheeled into the room. She had an IV hanging over her wheelchair and a few golden curls around her face, but the rest of her head was bald. She was being treated for cancer. As I was telling Little Burnt Face and got to the part where the heroine's burnt hair grows back, I happened to look at that child, and her face was radiant! I thought to myself: this is the moment for which I learned this story. After the show, I went over to her and said: You really listened well to that story! And she said: I really liked it! When I flew home to Providence, Rhode Island, I told another storyteller about this child and her reaction to the folktale. My friend said exactly what I was thinking as I left the hospital that day: I hope she lives to see the day that her hair grows back. But then it was as if a light bulb went off in my head because I suddenly understood that when she was listening to the story, she *was* living through that day. And sometimes that's all we get. And sometimes that's enough.

8. Stories can challenge us to expand our understanding of what it is to be human. Even stories that are populated with Animal People or Magical Beings. "The Ice

"Bear Child" is an Inuit folktale found in Margaret Read MacDonald's book *Look Back and See: Twenty Lively Tales for Gentle Tellers* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co, 1991). It is also the centerpiece of my show "Changing Skins: Folktales about Gender, Identity and Humanity." The entire show is performed research on the wealth and persistence of gender-bending folk tales and folk practices around the world. It interweaves traditional tales with personal observations and historical and contemporary thinking about the naturally occurring diversity within human and animal gender expressions. Oral tradition stories are essentially the poetic or metaphoric retelling of someone else's very good or very bad day. They are postcards from the past that can help to illuminate what we think of as "contemporary" issues and can become powerful tools for diluting and dispelling ignorance and fear in the present day. I was moved to create "Changing Skins" in part because I knew a child whose gender identity did not match his physical anatomy. When I discovered folktales dealing with the permeability of gender, I wanted to know more. By sharing what I had learned – first from folktales and then from science and sociology – I wanted to make the world a little safer for all of its children. Have you ever wondered why we are so often asked to check one of two little boxes revealing what's between our legs – a part of us that most of the world never ever sees. As singer/songwriter Dr. Peter Alsop has written: "It's only a wee-wee, so what's all the fuss?" Why does gender ambiguity make us so uneasy? While I was working on the show, I discovered the work of Australian poet and philosopher Michael Leunig. He writes:

There are only two feelings.

Love and fear.

There are only two languages.

Love and fear.

There are only two activities.

Love and fear.

There are only two motives, two procedures,

two frameworks, two results.

Love and fear.

Love and fear.

Given those choices, as artists, as educators, as parents, as policy makers, which shall we choose? Which will allow us to listen attentively to one another's stories so that we can untangle the knots in our sometimes-competing narratives. In our individual differences lies a vast wealth of knowing and being in the world. And when we combine those different ways of knowing and being, we strengthen our community, diversify our artistry, increase our storehouse of problem-solving strategies, and deepen our understanding of how to live in harmony with each other and the earth itself. But in the meantime, we are apt to hurt one another's feeling. But...

9. Stories show us how to forgive each other. In 1991, I developed a performance piece called *In the Family Way: Generations of Stories*. Written in the wake of my father's passing, it was my first effort to tell the story of what I'd learned by being Bill Burch's daughter. To get at the heart of our relationship, I employed a fairy tale. My father and I strained to know each other across the chasms of generation and gender. Any forward motion we made came about chiefly through the stories I would find and learn and bring home to tell him. When he died almost twenty-five years ago, I thought we'd make no more forward motion toward each other. Then I uncovered his wartime

letters to my mom. My brothers and I never knew the smitten swain who wrote to our mother from the ends of the earth. Instead we grew up thirsty for what our father couldn't give his children: a taste of tenderness. After the war, he kept his heart in a secret place, hidden away in a shoebox full of letters. Opening the box was an opportunity to slake our thirst at last. In fifty letters posted from China, Burma and India he poured out his love and longing. Through his writing, I met a man full of passion and resolve. A man who prized his wife and lived through hell to come home to her. And in this intimate self-portrait of the man Mom was married to for nearly fifty years, his children found that long-awaited taste of tenderness.

Parenting two young women has made me really wrestle with the idea of forgiveness. So even as my generation uncovers stories that allow us to forgive our parents, let us pray that our children uncover stories that allow them to forgive us.

10. And finally, stories remind us that we have agency.

Holding Up the Sky

An elephant was walking through the forest when he saw a hummingbird lying at his feet on the path, its wings outstretched, its tiny claws to the air. The elephant asked, "What are you doing there? I almost stepped on you!"

The hummingbird replied: "I heard that the sky was going to fall today and I am here to catch it!"

"You?" laughed the elephant, "You are only a little ball of fluff and feathers! You think that you can catch the sky?"

"Not by myself! But each of us must do what we can do, and this is what I can do!"

(This story is retold from Peace Tales: World Folktales to Talk About, by Margaret Read MacDonald (August House), used with permission.)

Between the Ebola virus, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the lack of human rights in many places – including our own inner cities – and the poverty and violence inflicted on children, it would seem that the sky *is* falling. And none of us can catch it by ourselves. But if we think globally and act locally, if each of us does what she can do, armed with a tool as powerful as story, we may be able to hold up the sky together. At least let us try!

Thank you for listening this morning.