

Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe.
But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.

Indian Proverb

Our stories help make sense of what happens in life.

Megan Sukys

finding your voice

by Bonnie Neugebauer

We sat at her feet in the garden, listening to stories. Aunt Dollie had been a missionary in China, so most of her stories were based on Biblical characters and themes. But as a young child all I knew was that she could make the lions roar and the road dusty. She was my first encounter with a gifted storyteller; the power of her stories created images that still live in my brain after 54 years.

As an adult I tried my hand at capturing the attention of a class of kindergartners. I put on a floppy hat and a shawl (don't ask me to explain this costume) and I tried my voice at telling stories. I wasn't very good at it. The children spent most of our time together trying to get me to admit that I wasn't really the story lady, but, in fact, myself.

During the evolution of my professional career, I was challenged with the opportunity to give presentations. I knew that every good speech begins with a joke or a story; but imagine a person who can't remember a punch line embarking on a telling in front of 300 people (pictured in their underwear, of course). Scary.

I had heard many gifted speakers, and I wanted to be like them. I wanted the brilliance of Lilian Katz, the playful spirit of Luis Hernandez, the insights of David Elkind, the heart and memory of Docia Zavitkovsky, the power of Joan Lombardi, and the humor of Bill Cosby. Every attempt to be like someone else was a miserable failure — I learned through challenging trial and error that I can only be

myself — I can only be as smart, funny, creative, and entertaining as me.

In baby steps I tried out being me. It was quite a revelation to learn that people wanted to hear MY stories. They wanted to hear about me. They laughed when I told them stories about Roger and me, a marriage and a business struggling to make sense of it all, and stories about our life as a family. I could make people laugh just by talking about my husband — this could be fun! And I learned that the stories people liked the best, the ones they remembered, were the ones in which I wasn't perfect — the bigger the mistake, the louder the laugh, and the longer the memory.

So now I tell stories, lots of them. And I tell my stories best when I have a good listener. The best listener I've ever had is Luis Hernandez; yes, even better than Roger Neugebauer! One balmy Miami day Luis and I were sharing a meal and the view and he started asking me questions about our beginnings. He was so interested and asked such good questions that I told our story the best I've ever told it — he made me re-interested in our story. I remembered things that had disappeared. I enjoyed the telling — and that made it stronger.

Now I also share stories in our magazine, risking to make my stories public and permanent. Although the presentation is quite different from performance to print, many of the issues are similar. Before I share stories in the

*Two things
make
a story.
The net
and
the air
that falls
through
the net.*

Pablo Neruda

What kind of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on.

Chinweizu, Nigeria

magazine, I tell them to you, perform them for you, in my head. When I work on a speech, I write up the stories so that I remember the details and organize the telling. In print or in person, everything depends on finding your voice.

To find your voice, you must:

- Trust yourself. Somehow you have to find the place in your head to accept yourself in the story you are telling. You have to open your mouth and just do it.
- Trust your audience whether you know you can trust them or not. Sometimes you need to pretend that everyone is sitting on the edge of their seat to hear your story. If you believe it well enough, they will be.
- Be respectful in your inventions. All of us elaborate on truth (as remembered) to make our stories come alive. As long as your story is respectful of the event itself and its characters, and respectful of your audience, then details (even created ones) can help make your point.

Every fine story must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure, a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique.

Willa Cather

- Listen to and read the stories of others. Analyze, enjoy, and learn.
- Make mistakes. Maybe you'll be a fabulous storyteller from the moment you utter the first word, maybe not. But it's psychologically safer to expect some low points.
- Sort details. No story is worth all the details. Every story has a point, and only the details that build the point are worth air time.
- Refine your skills. The other night we went to the play, "How? How? Why? Why? Why?" performed by Kevin Kline, a master storyteller. He told difficult stories with great humor and nuanced skill. Knowing when we had heard as much as we could take in, he would make us laugh so we didn't stop listening. Crafting the art takes a lifetime of tellings. Enjoy the journey.
- Tell the stories that belong to you. The best stories you can

Telling a true story about personal experience is not just a matter of being oneself, or even of finding oneself. It is also a matter of choosing oneself.

Harriet Goldhor Lerner

Homo-fabula, homo-historia, we are story; story is us. We communicate and experience life through stories every day of our lives.

Andrew Melrose, Write for Children

Beginnings Workshop

Release your stories into the world and see what happens.

tell are your own stories. You have the context and the passion already inside you. If you need to invent or borrow a story, you need to figure out a way to make it personal, to make it your own.

- **Observe.** We all work to be skilled observers of children, and the stories we tell of our lives with them often capture the essential details. As we broaden our observations of life, we can put our early childhood skills to the task.

Our stories connect us.

"Our stories help make sense of what happens in life."
Meghan Sukys

Our stories stretch us.

Our stories bring alive different lives, different perspectives; they challenge and expand our thinking.

Our stories entertain us.

"The most riveting stories . . . are the ones that are told out loud, one person to another."

Megan Sukys

Invite others into your life by telling your stories. Be an advocate for children by sharing stories of your work. Invite children to share their stories and value the stories of others. Create storytelling communities wherever you have influence. Release your stories into the world and see what happens.

*Storytelling
is fundamental
to the human search
for meaning. . . .
The past empowers
the present, and the
groping footsteps
leading to this
present mark the
pathways to
the future.*

Mary Catherine Bateson,
Composing a Life

beyond words . . .

Schon Elizabeth Beanblossom

Friday, April 11, 2008

11:29 AM

6 pounds, 13 ounces

19.5 inches

Parents: Alison and Blake Beanblossom

Grandparents: Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer

Sue and Bill Beanblossom

