

STORYTELLING CREATES CONNECTION

by Susan O'Halloran

How do we find what divides us? How do we listen to another person or group's perspective? I believe that storytelling gives us a way to talk about potentially divisive topics. If our discussions are not grounded in personal experience, talking about controversial subjects can easily become argumentative debates where people feel even more locked into their opposing positions. Stories give us a compassionate way to interact by moving us from argument to dialogue, from a debate team mentality ("I'm right; you're wrong") to the language of the heart ("I hear you; I care").

I am a professional storyteller. I have the best job possible – I actually make my living telling people fables as ancient as the mountains and sharing incidents from my life as recent as what happened to me today. I also gather other people's stories or get them to tell their own. I do this because I believe we avoid "difficult" subjects such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities not because we don't care, but because we don't know *how* to care. The difficulties of the world seem like too much until they come to roost in our own family. Whoa! Then, they get our attention. Hearing about people's lives, seeing the world through their eyes helps to make them a part of our family, a brother or sister sometimes or a distant relative at other times, but, at least, never a faceless face in an overwhelming sea of invisible human faces.

Since 1996, I have been involved in a story project under the umbrella name of *Kaleidoscope* (Named after the corporate diversity firm with whom I have the pleasure of working). I partner with Father Derek Simons, a storytelling fan who runs a communications ministry through his religious order, the Society of The Divine Word. We shared a common vision of using both professional storytelling and the gathering of non-professional, community stories to promote understanding and reconciliation around issues of difference.

Real stories show our common humanity

In one of our professional performances, *Tribes & Bridges*, the audience hears my co-performer, Antonio Sacre, a Cuban-American storyteller, talk about getting into a fight in the third grade with the class bully, Larry Sergeant. Larry is two years older than everyone in Tony's class. After the fight, sitting in detention with Larry, Antonio learns that Larry is two grades behind because he's missed so much school. His father beats him and, then, keeps him out of school until his bruises heal.

In one of my gatherings of community stories, I videotaped a grown woman as she described hearing ethnic slurs on the grammar school playground. In the video, we watch this adult well up with tears, the sting of humiliation still raw in her soul thirty years later.

In another interview, we hear the story of a young woman who only had two sets of clothes as a young girl. She'd wash one set in the bathtub each night but, sometimes, the clothes wouldn't dry. She'd be forced to wear the same outfit to school two days in a row. Her classmates' teasing was relentless.

Both the live performances and the non-professional, community sharings ask, "What would happen if we knew each other's stories?" What differences would it make if we knew

each other better personally and what difference would it make if we knew the radically different experiences we've had in this shared country called America? I want to tell and help other people tell our country's fuller history, the very stories few of us have heard, the stories that can help explain why so many separations exist between groups and what we might do about these false divides.

For example, in our videotaped interviews called *Kaleidoscope Voices*, an American Indian woman explains the concept of a sovereign nation. She speaks about how few of us learn in our current school systems about America as a nation with many sovereign nations within it. "Without this story," she asks, "how are people to make sense out of different rules or laws for Indian people and other Americans? No wonder we have fights over things such as land and hunting rights."

In our professional performance piece, *Tribes & Bridges*, my other co-performer, La'Ron Williams, an African-American teller, describes a nurturing, third grade teacher taking the brown paint out of his hand when he wanted to color the people he'd just drawn and, without a word, handing him, instead, the (peach-colored) paint marked, "Flesh." In his story, La'Ron tells of the many ways within his mostly black school that the well-intentioned white staff taught him to feel ashamed of who he was while, at the same time, unwittingly teaching his white classmates to feel "better than."

Without diatribe, with simple sharing, we are able to tell the stories of the ones who have been designated as outsiders in our country and, at the same time, make the invisible lessons and privileges of the insiders more visible.

Information can lead to action

Why is it important for people to hear stories of how racism and other categories of "more than" and "less than" were created? So that they can feel empowered to un-create them. There are two popular ideas about diversity in our culture right now. One is that "People who are different just don't get along. It's human nature." And the other is that "It's all been done. The laws are changed. It'll just take time to integrate the changes." Both these beliefs leave us little to do but accept racial tension and violence or to blame the outsiders for not "making it."

Some adults (parents and professionals both) are afraid that if we don't paint the United States in all of its glory (only), citizens and young people will become disillusioned. But when we hear how things got to be the way they are today — how our country started with and has fought to maintain a system of insiders and outsiders from the beginning — then we can begin to see that the inequities around us are not "natural" and that changes in law, unfortunately, have not always guaranteed fairness. Through stories, we learn that the inequities of the past and present have come about through human decisions, which is to say, we can make different decisions today. The truth can be painful, but it can also be empowering. Our love for our country can hold all of it: what we are proud of and what we wish to change.

The Power of Stories

One of the most frequent remarks after our live shows or after community members hear each other's stories is "I didn't know that." You can't change something, if you don't know it's there. Telling stories of exclusion as well as the incredible sacrifices and gains towards

inclusiveness lets us know that we each have a part to play and that we do not have to make the journey alone. When I perform my story called *The Garbage Story* and explain to my audience how a community came together to change the allocation of city services or when a woman tells students of how Japanese Americans and their supporters won reparations from the U.S. Government after World War II or an African-American man shares with his fellow parishioners how he has combined corporate success with staying in touch with his cultural roots, these success stories tell of all we can accomplish together.

The power to *connect* is one of storytelling's most remarkable gifts. Storytelling can inspire us to see our country and ourselves as mosaics of strength, strong enough and large enough to hold everybody's story.

Susan O'Halloran is a diversity speaker and professional story artist who uses powerful and engaging stories to grab her audiences. She is an author of four books plus diversity curriculums, CDs and films. *The Chicago Reader* says O'Halloran "has mastered the Irish art of telling stories that are funny and heart-wrenching at the same time." She can be found at: www.susanohalloran.com or by calling 1-866-997-8726. (Creative Commons License: This article may be reprinted when this full byline is used.)