

## **The “I” in Politics: Using Autobiography to Explore Social Justice Themes** **By Susan O’Halloran**

I tell many kinds of stories but when I am telling autobiographically, the stories fall into two broad categories: personal stories and political teaching stories. In this article, I’m going to share a few things I’ve learned and struggled with concerning the differences between these two types of tales. Take these musings not as strict how-tos, but as signposts for the journey.

### **In political stories, I often start with the theme**

When I’m working on a regular (if any story can be called that) personal story, I’m usually called by an image or memory. For example, I don’t know why but there’s something about remembering my grandparents’ quilt made from wool scraps from my grandfather’s old suits that sends me deeper into the time when that quilt was lying across a bed in our rented cabin on Lake Michigan. And didn’t it rain our whole week there? I’d lie on my grandparents’ bed and watch the wood beams in the ceiling change to a deeper brown, becoming soggy with moisture. And isn’t that the week – how old were we? Three? Four? - when Patty Lubjeck fell into the recently-dug foundation for the new recreation center? The hole was filled deep with water from all the rain and a broken water main. I heard Patty scream for help, turned and saw her arms waving to me, slicing the air in stiff, mad circles like helicopter blades. I didn’t know whether to search for a two-by-four long enough to reach her – could I even pick up such a board? – or run the two blocks back to her cabin and get her Mom.

You get the idea. I hop from picture to picture, without a clue of what I want to say, where the story is headed or what it might add up to in the end. I just follow the images, often to a temporary dead end of anecdote-only status. Scores of these incomplete descriptions sit in my journals and file drawers until every so often they make themselves known, “Pssst, Sue. We could be a story now.”

However, when I’m working with political stories, I don’t start with an image. I start from the theme. From the beginning, I *know* I want to show the history of U.S. involvement in Central America. I *know* I want to show how segregation was created in Chicago and other cities. I *know* I want to give an historical example of people taking a stand for justice. These are teaching stories. However, to say I know where I want to end up doesn’t mean that’s where I’ll actually land. Many times in doing the research, I find the story is much more complicated than what I initially thought. Whether I’m telling personal stories or political stories, exploring image or theme, doesn’t mean I know at all what story will emerge.

### **How much “I” there is in my political teaching stories varies widely**

Though all of my political teaching stories are autobiographical in nature how much I am actually in the story as a character differs greatly. Sometimes I am at the center of the story, using my own first-hand life experiences to clarify the chosen theme. Sometimes I am peripheral to the central story, peering in around the edges of history trying to understand. Sometimes it is a combination of the two. Here are some examples:

*The Garbage Story:* A story from my high school days of some of my first awakenings to the issues of race. I am at the center of the action witnessing a Civil Rights demonstration. The audience follows me through my experiences and discoveries.

*Dividing Lines: The Education of a Chicago White Girl in 10 Rounds:* This story of segregated housing in Chicago is a blend of my own experiences plus historical information transmitted through stories other people tell me. You learn as I learn.

*The Oberlin Rescue of 1858:* This historical story of a town's refusal to obey the Fugitive Slave Law has an autobiographical frame. At the start, I tell my audience what I am searching for – a story of “good white people.” Then, as I recount the Oberlin Rescue, I am able to comment on how these historical figures are or aren't fulfilling my need for white role models. I get mad at them; I root them on. This extra layer of my elation or disappointment laid over the ups and downs of the historical events provides a double rise and fall emotional arc and mirrors the story's theme: flawed people – just like us – cause social change. If we wait to do it “right”, we'll do nothing at all.

How much “I” is in the story seems to depend on how much of the story is personal history vs. how much political, social history the tale requires.

### **I allow myself to become a character in service of the story's purpose**

In many of my stories, I allow less than stellar parts of my personality to show so that the voyage has a starting place, a point from which to grow. Because I am a stand-in for the audience, articulating their doubts, I whine, guffaw and complain where they might. Tons of data can be transferred without the audience feeling as though they've just crammed for a midterm.

For example, in my story of taking my sons to Guatemala, *Moments of Grace*, you can forget that lessons are even being learned as you get caught up in my goal – to educate my cynical, post-Watergate sons how we (enlightened adults of the 1960s) work for justice. As soon as I state this lofty (read arrogant) goal you *know* I'm going to fall. And part of you is going to enjoy watching me fall. While you're witnessing my neatly prescribed plan unravel, I can fold in information about the stealing of the Mayan people's land or the CIA toppling a Democratically-elected president because there's forward motion; there's suspense: when is she going to get hers?

Because the audience knows the questions with which I, the character, am struggling, they get the significance of any fresh information. Like a good mystery novel, they know when new evidence has been introduced – now what will this know-it-all do with that bit of incongruity? If the audience and the character are having realizations at the same time, it's more likely the audience will change with the character. There's a chance the audience will end up understanding what I'd like them to understand, not because I preached at them or because I'm the authority, but because we took a journey together.

### **I come right out and explicitly say the meaning of the story**

In my personal stories, the meaning is often implied but unspoken. The audience's "Ah!" at end of the story tells me they got it, even if everyone in the room might articulate the point of the story differently. However, in a story such as *Dividing Lines*, I come right out and say, "These politicians, bankers and developers used us! Don't let them do it again!" I go on to say what we can do about the problem of segregated housing today. I am that blatant because I am very clear that this story is a teaching, organizing tool. I joyfully serve as a recruitment strategy for groups with good causes. People hire me to rally and educate their members and to point them in the direction of action.

The trick here, of course, is to provide inspiration, to show people that the solutions are truly doable, without bringing the whole piece to a grinding halt through a laundry list of action steps. I use my craft: I present with humor, suspense, heartbreak and drama. I'll also use simple staging when it contributes to the theme. *Dividing Lines*, for example, is done in a metaphorical boxing ring. I wear boxer trunks, tank top and shoes. A bell announces the rounds as I duke it out with a black glove and a white glove on either hand. I can teach and organize, but I must always entertain. And, then, when time allows, I follow this one-woman show with handouts of resources and a question and answer period. Story can do what no other art form or media can do, but it can't do it all.

### **Crafting political teaching stories is a long, messy process**

I want to make it clear that this style of telling wasn't stumbled upon one day and voila! Captivating social history was born! There is no formula. I have attempted to tell some of these stories for years before they found forms juicy enough to see the light of a stage. I could bring you a very long line of witnesses - good friends upon whom I foisted first draft ventures. They could attest to their utter boredom as I rattled off pages of facts that to me were absolutely fascinating. Their looks were godsend. They said loud and clear, "It's not a story yet, twenty minutes of this and festival audiences will be diving out the sides of the tents!"

This glorious and excruciating process of sifting through mounds of data and searching or listening for a story continues, never stops. For example, I have been trying for several years to tell the story of how the "white" race was invented. When Europeans first came to America, there were no white people. Yes, there were Englishmen, Portuguese, Spaniards and so on, but people hadn't been taught to think of themselves as "white people" yet. Racial categories are arbitrary creations concocted for political and economic gain. I *love* this story and think it's crucial for understanding and ending racial conflict today.

I attempted to create an autobiographical performance piece on this theme, once again, this year. One major problem - my grandparents came to America in the 1880s and early 1900s. The legislative and political shenanigans that created the white race happened mostly in the early and mid-1800s. I had no family link to the 1800s Democratic Pro-slavery Party, for instance. However, that didn't stop me.

I lined up scores of my grandparents', parents' and my own anecdotes on being Irish. I tried a personal framing form like in the *Oberlin Rescue of 1858* story. I tried making a list story - 5 ways the white race was created and 5 ways this illusion affects me today. I tried language hooks, repeating phrases, to move the story between the historical material and my family reminisces until friends who listened to these first drafts actually looked nauseous from being whipped back and forth in time so often.

I put the “How My Irish Family Became White” Story aside yet again. However, out of this last attempt I received the gift of a story about my grandmother coming to America. This story says nothing about the invention of the white race. It is a thank you letter, a love letter for all the hardships my Grandmother endured to make my life possible. *My Grandmother’s Story* has political undertones, the way any immigrant story might, but it is at heart a very personal, sweet family story. I have often found a different story on the way through a story that didn’t work. I’m glad I found this one.

In the end, for all their differences, I find that personal stories and political teaching stories are similar in the way that matters most – when done well, when the story ends, the audience feels more connected to themselves and each other. We encounter our despair, our immeasurable victories and the perfectly imperfect, common experience of being human.

Editor’s Note: Susan O’Halloran’s *Garbage Story* can be found on the video *Tribes & Bridges at the Steppenwolf Theatre*. *Moments of Grace* is on the CD *Moments of Grace and Other Stories of Hope*. *The Oberlin Rescue of 1858* is on the CD *Searching for Heroes* and *Dividing Lines: The Education of a Chicago White Girl in 10 Rounds* on the CD of the same name. *Grandmother’s Story* will be available on CD in August 2004. These and other resources and organizations related to social justice can be found at [www.susanohalloran.com](http://www.susanohalloran.com) or [www.racebridges.net](http://www.racebridges.net).

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