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Telling Stories

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**Telling Stories:
Imagination, Understanding, and Existence**

--Lawrence Kimmel

"Telling stories is an act by which Man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight.... The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience."¹

--N. Scott Momaday

Prefatory Remark

In what follows I will be using Native American culture and literature as the primary focus for a discussion of storytelling. For this culture, the life of speech and the presencing of meaning through the sharing of stories are vital to the very existence and identity of a people. Momaday's remarks about the nature of the relationship between language and experience surely are not limited to the lives of Native Americans. His accompanying claim that we cannot exist apart from the moral dimension of language is no less applicable to our own culture, but showing the importance of an awareness of this condition requires a bracketing of the cultural insensibility that pervades the routine of our lives. The interest of this paper is not in Native American culture or literature as such, but what lessons it may have for a dominant culture which has forgotten the sense of, or lost the genius for, telling stories.

I.

It may well be that in the beginning was the word, but the word was not *logos*; it was *chaos* ...or *Eros* (desire) or *moira* (fate) or, for our purposes, *mythos* (story).²

¹ "The Man Made of Words" N. Scott Momaday, in *The Remembered Earth*, Ed. Geary Hobson. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980. p. 168

Somewhere in the beginning, or soon after, was the impulse to tell a story, to fashion wonder and terror and hope and triumph into a story, to make and mark the sense of it all.

A description of human beings as tellers of stories invites a comprehensive aesthetic in which human existence is understood as a creative act of imagination and remembrance. The conception of Man as a story telling animal³ shifts philosophical attention away from an abstract reason which reduces meaning to the truth value of propositions, and toward a more inclusive depth and diversity of meaning as sense. In terms suggested by Nietzsche, this shift is from a narrowly conceived *logos* (reason) to a fully imagined *mythos* (story). Nietzsche holds myth to be the cultural imperative of a healthy and creative people. He also uses myth as a measure of what he regards as the degeneracy of modern culture:

We are now "...able to approach the once-living reality of myth only by means of intellectual constructs. Yet every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity...Man today stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities."⁴

II

In Aristotle's definition of Man as a rational animal, human beings are: what we make (*poiesis*), what we do (*praxis*), and what we think (*theoria*). But perhaps more than all else, human beings are what they imagine and remember, and the creative act of telling stories gives coherence and continuity to the whole of human experience. Indeed, there is no "whole" of experience nor "human" in the absence of stories. Some sense and conception of narrative life and narrated world is as essential to the identity and memory

²Both Aristotle and St. John recognized '*logos*' (word) as fundamental or instrumental to understanding the nature of human being. We should record, however, that the primal character of *logos* is not limited to the agendas either of theology ('God'), or philosophy ('Reason')

³ This idea now has a place even in analytic philosophy, see *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p.205 ff.

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Trans. W.Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1967. Section 23

of an individual as it is to a constitution of community and to the *ethos* and history of a people.

In Nietzsche's analysis, Western intellectual history was once secure in the archaic genius of myth which delighted in the manifold of sense and the expression of difference, but has suffered a gradual erosion of natural myth and a corresponding loss of an inclusive and diffusive sensibility. In its place a compensatory progressive discourse has developed, centered preclusively in logistical utility. Nietzsche's call for a reevaluation of all values questions the faulty disjunction and problematic priority and dominance of *logos* over *mythos*, declaring that "truth is ...illusion of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; worn out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses."⁵ For Nietzsche, the discourse of truth has become so insistently familiar that it has degenerated into the leverage of domesticated agreement. In fact, "there are no facts, only interpretations."⁶

Nietzsche represents part of a movement in modern thought which has witnessed a devolution of the language of truth into languages of contending rhetorics, in which conflict is presumed and the contention for domination and power normalized. Marx, for example⁷, focusing on the material and social conditions under which dominant discourse and values are established and sustained, brought to light arbitrary and self-serving ideologies which structure the values, constructions, convictions and constraints of ordinary discourse. Freud developed a parallel thesis concerning the foundational psychology of language⁸, which further displaced rational, conscious deliberation and decision as dependable resources of knowledge, even in our own most intimate experience. Finally, even within the relatively stable and structured domain of the

⁵ "Of Truth and Lies" F. Nietzsche, in *Philosophy and Truth*, Ed. D. Breazeale. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979, p. 84

⁶ *The Will To Power*, F. Nietzsche, Ed. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1967, #481

⁷ *The German Ideology*, Volume One, Preface (1845); See also *Communist Manifesto* (1848)

⁸ Freud's most specific treatment of errors ('Fehlleistungen') in language and intention occurs in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*; but Freud's whole analysis of "the unconscious" is relevant to this point as it is developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

physical sciences, as Thomas Kuhn's reorienting (and revaluing) text⁹ on paradigm shifts in science shows, social context and historical and conceptual discontinuities attend even formalized, exacting, and systematic discourse.

Having said all this, it would be a mistake to conclude that all discourse, whether factive or fictive, practical or theoretical, critical or creative, is to be understood as "just so many stories", if by doing so we simply reverse the present bias and reduce *logos* to *mythos*. There is no small irony in the absurdity of such a worry, however, since it is difficult to imagine conditions of misology such that we would abandon the romance and empowerment of science. There is a lesson here that cuts both ways. Freeman Dyson, in a discussion of science and technology, cites¹⁰ Edith Nesbit's children's story about a magic city where one gets whatever thing one can imagine, but with a single and absolute codicil that one can then never give it up, or stop using it. This simple story, read as an allegory of the controlling metaphors of science and technology, has all the mythic force of the story of the Sibyl¹¹, and is for that same reason a nervous portent for the history of our future.

Nietzsche's positive remarks about the cultural need for the essential energy of myth, and the revaluation of *logos* and *mythos*, finds resonance in James Joyce's reminder about stories-- that every telling has a taling, and that's the he and the she of it. Once we have acknowledged the fundamental coherence of language in story, we can go on to distinguish and celebrate the diverse uses and kinds of tellings. The magnificent trilogy¹² which ends with *Finnegan's Wake* is Joyce's effort to find a language in which to

⁹ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962

¹⁰ *Disturbing the Universe*. Freeman Dyson. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1979. p.3

¹¹ Recall that the wood nymph asked for and was granted immortality. This gift of the god was, however, no blessed thing for a creature subject to the ravages of time.

¹² Apparently Joyce intended to write a fourth book in which mythic language would find a final place-- following the scheme of development of *Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegan's Wake*. The book was never written.

express the mythic in an age of what Nietzsche calls the *epigoni*, those born late into a language and culture which has the dead weight of the past about its neck.

We should keep in mind that it is not the language of science which today lacks credibility and substance. If we accept that in some important sense "all telling is a taling", this is neither cause for despondency, nor an argument in favor of a culturally cheapening relativism or skepticism. Human beings tell stories--of many kinds and shapes, for as many reasons and in as many seasons as the world and the gods will allow. The great worry of our time should be not that biology, physiology, physics, and geology are all discourses which tell stories in differing languages about related overlappings of finally different things. Even if we regard these as stories, "useful fictions" in Nietzsche's words, they are of a special and important kind. Scientific "stories" describe and explain; they do not aim to release or enchant, but to fix and bind. The more important point and lesson is that there exists no one story which is privileged to preclude or replace any other. Even if and when we have answered all the questions of physics, we have yet to ask, much less answer, the questions, of biology, or economics, or politics, much less those of morality or religion. We should rather worry that we tell and listen to so few stories which concern the deep and fundamental issues of empowerment in our mutual lives.

If our dominant culture has lost a creative and consolidating sense of the mythic, so too our individual lives are often lived out in a poverty of both place and time, and in the absence of a culturally integrating or individually redeeming story. In a broken tradition, stories often take on a mood of consolation. For example, Hannah Arendt, troubled by the decay of a common space and discourse which offers protection against isolation and the terror of totalitarian fiat, quotes Isaac Dennisen's somber remark¹³ that "...all sorrows can be borne if one can put them into a story, or tell a story about them." Martin Heidegger's philosophical version of The Fall-- a story in which the question of

¹³ *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. p.175

Being is forgotten in the mundane chatter of a busily efficient culture which drowns out the archaic poetry of the human spirit¹⁴--similarly chronicles the lost voices of the gods, the remembered earth, embracing sky, and the storied language in which Being expresses itself.

In the most general terms, our collective cultural relation to stories has become problematic and indirect. We have become people of the book, or, further regressed, creatures of the tube. In the passive context of electronic media, we have become neither listeners nor tellers of stories, but viewers of serials, of "soap works." In the place of active imagination, traditionally requisite to the preservation of culturally significant stories, a television "audience" of viewers now becomes a consumer of packaged and predictable dialogue which intends and goes nowhere.

There are still imaginative efforts of course--print stories in newspapers, journals, novels, the reflective and reflexive efforts of several industries. But even here, a story line on stories is that a once living tradition of communal stories, in which the origin and ideals, the history and prospects of a people were embodied, became in time, at best, products of marketing promotion, more typically a banal distraction of an abstract and specialized technology. To the degree one can speak of media stories, they have become the province and providence of professionals with energies engendered and deployed for commercialized entertainment: stories to sell soap.

III

We no longer notice, much less lament, that there are no tellers of stories who sing the wonders of the privileged first ones, of the grandeur of the gods, of the origin of time, and things, and death, of the courage and heroic deeds of the warrior, the wisdom and great words of the sage. It is not news that our culture no longer produces scripture, or myth, or fables, or fairy tales, epic or tragic drama. Such stuff is still anthologized for

¹⁴ "What Are Poets For?" Martin Heidegger. in *Poetry, Language, Thought* . Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971

the schools (again, a leveling network of agencies and industries); it forms blocks of requirements for the conferment of degrees for liberal education.

Two Native American writers who exemplify alternative cultural and literary possibilities drawn from the oral tradition of storytelling are N. Scott Momaday¹⁵ and Leslie Marmon Silko¹⁶. Their experience and writing, however different, is grounded in the poetry and memory of voices from childhood, and they both try to write in the spirit of telling stories in an oral tradition. They grew up within a tradition not under the obsession or imperative of print--of speaking not yet reduced to writing, of talking not yet reduced to media sound bites. Their writing testifies to some degree that there is still an accessible cultural model preserved in the story telling and sand paintings, in the dances, the Kachinas, the curing and celebratory "sings" of the American Indian cultures-- an essentially aesthetic culture which commends spiritual health. But the terms of accessibility in any important sense seems to be that the stories must be lived, must be experienced in the ritual setting, the shared silence, and the continuing tradition within which stories are told and heard. In contrast to anthologized collections in print, in the telling there is no point of beginning or end to the stories or the voices. In the oral telling there is only the telling of the same stories, which are never the same, which simply take up and leave off, a telling and listening not simply to pass or fill time, but to express and sustain an understanding of the way of a people. The heritage of time and place and the wisdom of stories come to presence in the telling. What is vital in the culture may be found in its form as well as its content, in the process which brings together generations, creates a sense of sacred place, of mutual understanding and acknowledgment, and enacts ritual celebration in singing and dancing.

¹⁵ Momaday's major works relevant to this discussion are *The Names* New York: Harper and Rowe, 1976 and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* , Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969

¹⁶ Silko's major works relevant to this discussion are *Storyteller* New York: Seaver Books, 1981 and *Ceremony* New York: Penguin Books, 1986

Is this prophesy or history? Premonition or admonition? An expression of anger, or despair, or recognition, or resignation? It all depends on how the story is told, and retold, and to whom, where...and each telling, even this one, will transform the story. There is, in any telling of this kind, an overlapping of personal narratives--of identity, of history, of social protest, of cultural difference and solidarity. As I have told it here, it is a story about the power of the story. But even in this abstract and removed context, one only understands the story if one feels its power, unless it touches and fits a story you are already living-- white bellied like a fish, or grown away from the earth.

IV

If there is a priority of sense to truth, and an interdependence of language and life, there are still limiting conditions within any culture with respect to what can be said, what stories can be told--not just what will be believed, but what can be conceived. Stories grow out of the life and memory of a people. In the oral cultures of traditional peoples, the mundane world is one in which plants, animals, rocks, streams, and clouds are alive. There is power for good or ill in everything, and both life and its expression in story must respect and make use of this power.

So far we have discussed story and myth with respect to apparent bridging of sense and intelligibility within literate cultures. But myth and ritual also involve the empowerment of language in spiritual life, and there is an important sense in which the life of a traditional people is grounded in the sacred, in magic, in the spirit of all things. Paula Gunn Allen refers to myth and ritual as "two wings of the bird of spirit."¹⁸ The "literature" of a tribal people is "mythic" not simply in the sense of making intelligible, but also of empowering, as having the capacity to generate and transform. The most familiar example is in the curing sings, the use of sand paintings in medicine stories which intend to purify and make whole. The language of the story shows the right way to proceed in walking the path of health, of power, of beauty, of wholeness.

¹⁸ *Grandmothers of the Light*, Paula Gunn Allen. Boston: Deacon Press, 1991. p. 7

The magic of words is hardly a mystery to those who read poetry, or enjoy a story, but there is a reverence for words which is special for a traditional people in a primarily oral culture. Momaday, speaking of the grandmother in *House Made of Dawn*, asks us to:

"Consider for a moment that old Kiowa woman, whose use of language was confined to speech, and be assured that her regard for words was always keen in proportion that she depended upon them. You see, for her, words were medicine; they were magic and invisible."¹⁹

Words seem no less so for the grandson: Alan Velie points out that, to Momaday, telling the story of the way to Rainy Mountain was as important as his making the journey was in the first place.²⁰

There are general issues about myth and story which connect with convergences in contemporary philosophy. Wittgenstein once remarked that it requires a whole person to have a whole thought. He presumably had in mind Kierkegaard's reminder that paradox is the passion of the thinker, and that the task of a serious thinker is have the courage to think one thought through to completion. Heidegger's familiar and final appeal is both simple and fundamental in its resonance-- to think Being. The traditional opening of stories can be modified in the following way to make the same point: "Once upon a time.../...and even yet...." Leslie Silko, telling a story begins, as to children: "You should understand/ the way it was/ back then/ because it is the same/ even now."²¹ The cultural foundation of the tradition of storytelling is a shared conviction about the continuity and wholeness of being and time. As in the "path of power," (the universe of medicine and healing), the story and the teller seek always to make whole, to bring into harmony, to connect "once upon a time" with "so it is, and so it shall be." This does not mean that all stories are positive or without conflict or pain, but stories are fashioned out of the residual memories and experiences of a people, and remain open to continuance

¹⁹ *House Made of Dawn* , N. Scott Momaday, Preface

²⁰ *Four American Indian Literary Masters*, Alan Velie . Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. p.28

²¹ Silko, p.94

There is always more to a story than is voiced in a single telling (what leads up to and away from both tale and telling) which everyone knows-- about old man Coyote, or Changing Woman, or the Hero Twins.

A parallel concern to Nietzsche's analysis of myth is to consider what is lost for a dominant culture in the absence of such telling, tradition, and stories. The spiritual power of language and stories of a traditional people seem no longer accessible to a rational, literate culture in which knowledge is power only to the degree that it can abstract, formalize, universalize and systematize. The facilitating logic of contemporary critical culture is a comprehensive activity of making distinctions and making connections, of breaking down and piecing together. An analytic culture centered in the *logoi* of *veritas* constructs a world which is no longer whole, but atomized, partitioned, controlled and subdued--one constituted and governed by rule and misrule.

In contrast to this, what still remains in the traditional oral culture of the American Indian develops surrounded by, and grounded in, natural beauty. The environment, which figures in all storytelling, is vital for a people that measures itself by the distance it can see. There was a comparable importance for classical Greek culture of the "*acro/polis*" the "high city" from which one could see the whole of that which gave the *polis* and its people their identity-- the tilled fields which sustained its life, the killing fields within which the citizens defended their gates, the burial fields which hold the ashes of their ancestors. In both the ancient and contemporary oral cultures, experience and speech are still natural and first order--voices and sounds not abstracted into bound books or reconstituted in points of lights on a television monitor. In the continuing if marginal culture of the Amerindian there exists the possibility and so aspiration to harmony, of finding resonance in one's life and actions with all things. The telling of stories in traditional cultures are always an occasion for learning "the way": in Lakota the expression is "to walk in the sacred", in Keres "to walk in harmony", and in the Dine "to

walk in beauty"; but common to all is the idea of the sacredness and beauty of life and world-- the quest is for a vision of wholeness, of The Way.

Fundamental aesthetic elements come together in the **telling** of stories in an oral tradition, for example the voice of the teller replaces the reference of the text, and the event of the telling, the performance itself, blends into the event which is narrated. Most importantly the poetics and aesthetics of this process, the making of something and the sensuous apprehension of that something, is written on the wind: nothing will remain of the story when the voice fades back into the silence except for what memory sustains, and what is renewed in the story and tradition that has been drawn upon and nourished by the community of teller and listeners.

I have perhaps too closely identified oral tradition with the survival culture of native peoples. An oral tradition has certainly existed within literate cultures as well, for example in the theatre, and in this context great writers have surely had a sense for both the power and fragility of the voice. While working on this essay I attended an outdoor performance in the mountains near Santa Fe (at St. John's College) of a summer workshop performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Against the backdrop of the mountains, summer storms sweeping in the distance, wind billowing the silken flowing robes of Prospero and Ariel, I marveled, as always, at familiar storied voices sustained these four hundred years now celebrated in a far distant place:

"...our revels now are ended. These our actors, as I foretold, are all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air. And like the baseless fabric of this vision, the cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, yea even the great globe itself, and all that it inherits, shall dissolve, and like some insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made of..."²²

This oral tradition of drama-- albeit one supported in print-- of "live theatre" is itself surely at risk, but attests to the importance, delight, and wisdom of voices, of a telling which comes out of and resolves back into silence.

²² *The Tempest*. William Shakespeare. Act IV, sc. 1

One thing missing even in the most remarkable of theatre experiences now, is any sense of the primal character of the language itself. In one of Gerald Vizenor's stories, a character refers to and comments on Scott Momaday's remarks that:

"... the 'word did not come into being, but it was. It did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it.' He was thinking about the oral tradition and the telling of stories. Silence and wind and water sounds were here before birds and fish. The birds knew how to sing from the wind that shaped their wings in flight."²³

There is an aesthetics of oral culture in the telling of stories, a making (*poiesis*) not just of a work, but of a space of imagination and life. In the context of Native American culture, this making invites a response in the literal and original sense of *aesthesis*, a sensuous apprehension of the life and time and space of a people. In this context, Momaday can claim with conviction, and persuasive force, that "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves..."²⁴ It is, I think, doubtful whether the "traditional culture" of the Native American, sustained only by the ghost threads of beauty, can survive the devouring haste and progress of civilized technology. It is a question of more than philosophical interest or literary achievement whether the spiritual reality of this people is anything but a fragile vanishing dream, or whether we will learn or salvage anything from its passing. Telling stories is a collective enterprise of imagination which preserves a culture; it is itself worth preserving as a resource for the renewal and appropriation of what is valuable in those cultures which do not endure.

End Note

This essay has focused on the sense of story, rather than truth in stories, in an attempt to offset the dominating discourse of *logos* and *veritas* --of reasoned truth--as the exclusive order deciding value. Once liberated from the controlling metaphor of *logos*, however, the truth in stories can be pursued in the manifold contexts of its appearance

²³ Wordarrows. G. Vizenor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978. p.117

²⁴ *The Remembered Earth*, p.167

and use. In general, story (*mythos*), has a concern for truth on a broad scale of perception and perspective, of world and life, of a person or a people; the telling of a story forms ground and horizon for the truth it carries. It is only within this larger story that versions of truth made of fact and assertion, argument and justification, theory and verification come to matter to us. Stories at a mythic level search for ways of being human within a universe which is finally beyond us, and serve to open up the truth of discourse (*aletheia*) into a comprehensive aesthetic of life and world. It is ironic, and a sign of our times that the appeal of telling stories must be argued and defended. The serious fictive literature of our times is itself framed in irony to distance the writer from both story and the embarrassment of any pretension to truth, since on the prevailing view, truth can only be conceived as universal and objective. In this context it is not difficult to understand the appeal of a simpler world, where truth is found in the telling of a story, not in the means of its verification. The spiritual strength of a simple world is paradoxically grounded in the complexity of human relations brought together in telling stories. A person, a self is a sustained act of imagination, This is true also of a people. Both have an identity through a creative activity which includes remembrance. Human life at its root is desire, in its fullness an adventure, and in the imagination of its telling it constitutes a culture, a people, a history. In acting, remembering, telling, we come together as human beings, we come together into human being.