

The Story Lived . . . The Story Told . . . Haboo . . .

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The story began the moment I was asked to give this presentation. Did the invitation promote these experiences? Or, would they have happened in any event? Problem: *I will never know*. That they occurred at all is well within the range of quantum mechanics.

[1] The first event: I had agreed to give this talk: "Yes." Shortly after that agreement, I was rousting about in a second-hand bookstore, looking at "this" and at "that." I stumbled upon a book by one of my favorite writers, D. M. Thomas, and not having a single glimmer of consciousness about the book, I bought it. And what did I purchase? *Swallow*. And what, to my surprise, did I discover *Swallow* was all about? The novel is about a storytelling Olympiad in which a group of improvisationists compete for a golden wreath by *extemporizing narratives, the themes of which are set by judges*. The title of the novel is taken from an epigraph by Akhmatova:

There we caught
The ancient pain
Of swallows. . . .

And what is the pain? The pain of the storyteller's voice as he improvises the theme. Or, if you will, the pain we experience in telling any story and attempting to find the song in it. This was the first event on my journey to this moment.

[2] The second event: A group of psychoanalysts to which I belong hired a group facilitator to monitor our various "stories" about our collective journeys. Imagine my surprise when this corporate leadership consultant came to me and asked if I would read a paper he intended to give, and, further, advise him about its form and structure.

Note: This paper was presented at The National Storytelling Network annual conference, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, July 7, 2004.

This consultant had absolutely no knowledge of my impending task. And his paper's purpose? To provide a foreword to a book to be published on corporate storytelling. The book is *Around the Corporate Campfire: How Great Leaders Use Value-Based Stories to Inspire*, by Evelyn Clark. I would like to quote from the foreword, if I may.

Stories play a major therapeutic role in life. As earthly sojourners in the 21st century, we experience the outer world in society, organizations, and communities as paradoxical, rapidly changing, and becoming more globally interdependent. The outer world many times is at variance with our inner world. And this is the therapeutic power of storytelling. Authentic storytelling provides us with meaning, understanding, and coping behaviors to deal successfully with the variance of the two worlds in which we live. (vi)

This was the second event.

[3] One morning, a colleague appeared at my office door with a copy of a book she just sensed that I had to own. It was *The Power of Metaphor: Story Telling & Guided Journeys for Teachers, Trainers & Therapists*, by Michael Berman and David Brown. And as I thumbed through the book (very casually, I might add), the following arrested my attention:

A story can be called a metaphor if the listeners relate to it and draw a parallel between the action in it and their own lives. It has been suggested that if a picture is worth a thousand words, then perhaps we can regard a metaphor being worth a thousand words. (4)

I had yet to send in a title for this presentation, but there were cascading "storytelling events" happening to me, events that we analysts call *synchronicity*. A presentation was "telling me" as much as I was intending to "tell it."

[4] The fourth event: a professional woman, with whom I work analytically, brought me one morning a collection of stories from amongst the Northwest Indians. The title of the book: *Haboo: Native American Stories from Puget Sound*. I was dumbfounded! I had immediately to ask her, "But what does 'Haboo' mean?"

"Oh," she replied, "it means *I know that to be true.*"

When a story is told, responsive and sensitive listeners might well reply, “Haboo!” *I know that to be true!* Before the day was over, I had put the word “Haboo” in a prominent place in my office, using it often in the story telling of lives, as much as it is used in response to some observation I might make.

Haboo!

This was the fourth event. And, was there a fifth? Yes.

[5] I was having lunch with a colleague and by this time I was fully conscious of what was surprisingly happening to me as I planned this presentation. Quite suddenly, my friend said something to me so insightful that I had to write it out on a paper napkin! What my colleague said was this: “Our personhood is the sum total of the stories in which we appear. In stories, individuals come to life.” I asked my friend who wrote or said that, but he could not recall the name. What he recalled was the statement.

Haboo.

[6] And while not a contemporary event but a memory of my own life, I recalled what might be termed the sixth event. In my late twenties, I encountered my first psychoanalyst, a wonderful man by the name of Dr. Abrahamson. I was terrified of the appointment, of him. He was so imposing physically. But I heard a soft and gentle voice say to me, “Tell me your story!”

I had *never* been asked that before. Ever. It was my first conscious encounter with what I would later know to be *homo narrans*, story telling man, the means by which I come to know my personal and collective identity through narrative re-telling, the sharing of dream, and the imaginative reaches of a possible future.

Haboo.

Now as I approach the centrality of my intent, I find I must mention Alexander Marshak. It is he who wrote *The Roots of Civilization* and who first introduced me to the entire notion of *homo narrans*. For as an archeologist and anthropologist, Marshak was interested in the first steps in human communication, and for him, it was the insistent necessity to tell a story—of a miraculous event, of a hunting adventure, of a journey and its encounters. He asks, “What, then is “story”? And he writes:

The simplest definition is that communication of an event or process—that *is* happening, *has* happened, or *will* happen. There is a beginning, something happens, and there is a change or result, an understood solution; act one, act two, act three. It is in the nature of “story equation” that

it must be told in terms of someone or something. There is, in fact, no other way to tell story (119).

And, too, the problem and nature of “names”:

... [I]f you think about it, you will find that every name you can think of is part of a storied reference. Even the simplest name, the nouns or words such as “man,” “woman,” “old man,” “infant,” “boy-with-changing voice,” “girl-first-menstruating,” “mountain wearing green,” or “mountain wearing white,” *all imply stories* (Ibid.).

And thus it is: I am a “word” that is “storied” and “storying.” I am the story told; I am the story lived.

Haboo.

In the end, we are told, the summary is complete. In that frail hovering between life and death, the story of our lives passes before our eyes, a parade of images that succinctly and without commentary narrate in the milliseconds of infinity’s entrance *the story of our lives*. Having lived it, the story recapitulates itself giving to life’s cessation its beginnings and traversed paths. To have seen one’s life in that moving imaginal scenario, to have sensed the beat of life’s pulse and moment—this is psyche’s final statement. The story told, the story lived, the garnering of all that happened. *Haboo.*

For the greater part of mankind’s experience, its story has been collective, and the teller of the tale has been the oral poet and oral historian. The ear was the connection to the past, and the inner eye the translator of metaphor and homily, parable and augury. What was “individual” was always in terms of its enframement by the collective story. Translated: *I am my tribe. I don’t exist without my tribe*. In Southern Africa to this very day, the loss of tribal identity places one in *twasa*—wandering without identity in a lostness of soul.

If the individual were to become story, he would undoubtedly become the singular and distinctive hero of collective experience. To be a hero was to become immortal; to be heroic was to be cast in the shadow of the singular, unique, and totally utterable story of the hero. To be Achilles, Odysseus, Roland, Parsifal, Beowulf was to be the very history of collective potential; to be *like* the hero was to attain that most honored status: *heroic in the service of culture, “the idiot and private person” who had no tale, no singular story, no distinctive place in the collective history and epic of a people* (see Weiner and Simpson, p. 1369). There is no sense of the individual in collective life; there is only the sense of “member-ship” to a tribal consciousness. In the great war epic being told in our culture at

this very moment on television stations around the world, this is the plight of the battle, the angst of survival for individualism or collectivity.

Yet the point to be remembered is that memory, the connection to the past moments, was largely in the bodies of those “commissioned” to recall images and stories of the past. In our electronic culture, memory is outside the body, contained in the photographs, videotapes, and hard drives. Film was, and now digital imagery has become, the memory bank. Human memory does not retain the images and the stories implied; memory is in the media vaults. The personal challenge for every single person is not to abdicate memory and story.

It was Sigmund Freud, the towering genius of story, who restored the integrity of story, of personal epic, to all private persons. He established the scene, restored the point of view, and more, the screens and baffles through which story is seen to exist—the personal neuroses and complexes that have become psyche’s emotional base. How different the achieved attainment of being capable of telling story consciously from the center of being, knowledgeable and sensitive to the screens that would destroy, would “outer” the story in the utterance of misperception. Are we conscious that being “outered” is to have an inner life and story given to the “tribe” without a person’s permission? It is an agony to be true to oneself; that is, it is a hero’s task to be true to that which “must be endured.” An agony is not pain alone; it is more the perception of life’s fatefulness, of the conditions by which life has been given to an individual by the coincidence of parentage, the happenstance of environment and ethnicity. I am reminded daily of those individuals who struggle to tell the story from a “personal point of view”—not from mother’s, father’s, church’s, culture’s. Is there anyone in this audience who does not know the anguish of “telling my story” from “my point of view”?

The education of psyche is first the education to its essences and the acceptance of its facts. In the second phase of development is the creation of a strong sense of the *me* (i.e., the *ego*), to know its story, to sense it, to tell it. And it is the third requirement to transcend it, to grasp that one is not the victim of history, circumstance, fatefulness. To be “fully conscious to the end” is an exercise of the highest spiritual development, of education’s most precious gift. To be led out of one’s life is to be led to it, the *educare* of wisdom and humility. It is also what we know to be an initiation to personhood. The alternative is only being led to tribal or collective identification. In his introduction to *The Homeric Gods*, Walter Otto observes that to find one’s world—whether for a people or for an individual—is tantamount to finding one’s self, to attaining the realization of one’s own character.

I would suggest that the duty of every person is to garner the images that are life, that permeate life, and that promote life. The tension that will result will be enormous: to own, to possess, to garner, and then

to tell in some form, to be the teller of the tale in the truthfulness of that telling. This is what garnering is all about; it is what being in the epic mode is all about. To know one's story is to have a sense of felt life, to possess a narrative ego adequate to unfold the inner and outer events of life. It suggests being in possession of oneself in such a manner that life is experienced as being lived. The alternative is the sensation that life is living the individual out. This latter sense of life is always a terror: life engulfs. The "possession of oneself" is understanding life as a "fabric" woven and patterned. A personal possession of life accepts fate, *but insists upon its narration*. For life's text is a rich *textile*. Story's enemy is loss of memory, the amnesia that besets, the forgetfulness that finally becomes a sense of the daily and the daily alone. Memory connects, but as it embroiders upon story, it creates the life that never happened but ought to have happened. So much happens to every single one of us, and so little is re-called, so little re-membered.

Now to storytelling's two modalities: the stories outside myself, and the stories that originate inside myself. Stories of exteriority, if you will, and stories of interiority. Stories of observation and stories of imaginative invention. Do we have any other choices? We choose between the observational and the imaginative. And in creative moments we weave them both together, "seamlessly."

Stories of Exteriority: Outer life is important in its perception, in its seizure, and in the precision of perceived events. The beginning of a commitment to stories of exteriority can start with being accountable to the years. A very interesting exercise is to note on a piece of paper the chronology of years since one's birth. The task is to reconstruct, remember, as many of the outside experiences of family and social life as is possible. To truly garner the images of exteriority is to make a greater commitment to accuracy in the remembered images. My experience has shown that gaps are frequent and obvious. (Recall with me for a moment the presence of memory in tribal consciousness. Remember that it was in the body of the storyteller – without the storyteller, no memory.)

The aspects of the outer story are contained in the condensation of images. Years are emblematically condensed into the sacred spaces of psyche's favorite haunts, whether a church or a front porch. In one analytical case, a young woman remembered a scene from her girlhood in which she pondered a particular stained glass in her house of worship. She recalled that the window was not an expression of her religiosity at all, but rather of the secret ramblings of her own inner life, while at the same time striving to "look like" a member of a very religious family!

The felt sense of life is continuity. The reality of memory is fragmentation. And how many of us are attached to "books of

fragmentation"? These are, of course, photo albums – or presently, photo archives contained in our computers. So important are these collections of images, we never stop to ask ourselves, "Why do *these* images persist out of the welter of outer life's experiences?" The imaginal "islanding" is the beginning point of another story: *that* summer, *that* friend, *that* trip, and on and on and on. Exteriority's greatest gift is the potential "otherness" and "thereness" and "thingness" of life, of the power of what was outside ourselves, but now inside.

Stories of Interiority: Committing to the stories of interiority is to assume full responsibility for the volatility of imagination, for the garnering of inner life's coursing images. The paradoxical self-perception that "I have no story to tell" is too sad to argue. Our interiority is a 24/7 phenomenon, 365 days a year. We imagine, fantasize, daydream, and dream. I worked with a man who was penalized at school for daydreaming. That he was profoundly introverted never occurred to anyone; in fact, his daydreaming was perceived as something to be cured. The interior treasures are those of dream and fancy, those which are easiest to devalue in the terror that life can become.

Holding to the images of the outer life and holding to the images of the inner life, of fashioning story from one and the other, combining them in stories fraught with perilous memories and imaginative transformations, one begins to have a sense of what the storyteller is. The storyteller is memory's voice telling me where I belong, to whom I belong, and, for me most importantly, *who I am*.

You may remember that I began by telling six little stories that happened to me during the preparation of this presentation. Remember:

- [1] "The ancient pain of swallows" –
the pain of the storyteller's voice?
- [2] The corporate man who identified the
"therapeutic power of story?"
- [3] The power of metaphor being worth
"a thousand words?"
- [4] "Haboo" – I know it to be true?
- [5] That colleague who said to me,
"In stories, people come to life?" Haboo.
- [6] Remember that dear man, Dr. Abrahamson who
said to me, "Tell me your story!" I had never been

asked! Haboo. I have come to know well: *The story lived; the story told.*

There were thoughts and events that occurred *after* I finished this presentation that in curious ways continued the surprising chain of events that preceded my preparation. The first was a memory of my mother asking me, “Are you telling a story?” She was implying, or inferring, that I was not telling the truth. The effect of this question had simply lodged somewhere in my consciousness for over seventy years. In truth, I don’t recall anything about what *I* was doing. All I recall is the implication that a story is a “lie.” Following that awareness of my mother’s question, the second memory I recalled was the paradoxical statement a Hasidic storyteller said to me once about story. His name was Reuven Gold, and he said of his stories, “*They are not true, but they are not false.*”

And another memory came back to me about my mother. It was unforeseen event that brought to the two of us an aspect of *story as healing.*

In her late seventies, she had fallen in her home and lay helpless upon the floor for eleven hours before being found. It was at least forty-eight hours before I could be at her bedside in a California hospital. I was met by distraught cousins, and most particularly, my brother. Very apprehensively, I entered her hospital room. What I saw shocked me. I did not see a mother—I saw a hag, a ravaged hag. She barked at me, “Treat me the way you treat all your patients!” I had no choice, and, after a moment, I asked her *to tell me her story.*

What had transpired was something like this: She had lain on the floor for eleven hours, her God had deserted her, and what she experienced terrified her—out-of-body experiences, a tunnel of light, a sense of collapsing. I tried to explain what had happened to her, and as I did, I noticed that her personality began to return. The hag began to retreat, and an energy began to flow into her body. By the time it was over, my mother as I remembered her had returned.

I half wished that she might say *Thank you! You are a wonderful son.* But what she said next was the only appropriate statement she could make. When the story was complete, she said *I’ll have my comb now!* Of course, what was most important was the restoration of her sense of self. This is how story heals.

And the fourth impression that awakened me to this moment was the instant my screen saver came to life in front of me. For years I’ve had this marquee piece as a saver, but the morning of its relevance to this afternoon delighted me. My screen saver reads, “*As incredible as it might seem, my life is based upon a true story.*”

Haboo.

Finally, I want to share with you the image of the Pueblo storyteller that was created during a very dark time of community life, when individuals and the collective had reached their lowest point. You will recall the image: a seated woman with children attached to her body: *the storyteller*.

It was during this dark time that Pueblo women through their ceramic art restored dignity and purpose to the past, enjoining, "Never forget. Never forget." The very earliest images of storytellers sat with *closed eyes*--remembering the past--in short, giving back memory. Some years later, a strange phenomenon occurred: the eyes of the storyteller dolls *opened*! The past had been redeemed; the future now beckons.

Haboo.

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