




10-31-2018

Holding the center: Story and community

Emma E. Ewert

Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss>

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Sociology Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ewert, E. E. (2018). Holding the center: Story and community. *Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays*, 3(1). Retrieved from <https://cedar.wwu.edu/s2ss/vol3/iss1/8>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Holding the center: Story and community

Emma E. Ewert, Western Washington University

Abstract

Stories are fundamental to our experience of being human. They help us to make meaning from our lives, and to construct and understand our identities. Although we sometimes struggle to define story in words, we easily recognize when a story is present. This capstone does not present an ultimate definition of story, but rather a series of ideas and patterns that are most commonly found in story. In particular, it says that most stories contain protagonists who overcome a series of obstacles to achieve a final goal and find a meaning or moral behind a series of events. Through examining multiple ways of looking at the same life story, we find that the way our story is being told has a huge impact on the way we see ourselves and the way we interact with others. As we examine our own personal stories, we also look deeply at the messages and beliefs that are internalized and communicated through our words and our actions. Without the power to identify what those stories are, we are unable to choose who we will be. However, our personal stories do not exist in isolation, but interact with and intersect with all the stories and all the identities of those we interact with. Communities can be defined as a group of people who share a set of collective stories. As we begin to look at community narratives and how our own personal stories intersect and interact, we consider those whose stories have not been included, those who do not see their personal stories represented in the cultural narrative. Once we recognize those who have been left out, we can see stories as the powerful resource they are, we can invite others to tell their stories, and we can choose to hear those stories that haven't always been heard.

Keywords: environmental education, storytelling, Identity

Man(sic)...is a storytelling animal. Wherever he goes, he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker buoys and trail signs of stories. He keeps on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. (Swift, 2015, p. 63)

“Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold (Gottschall, 2013, p. 138)” Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*.

Before I begin, I want to honor the stories and lives that have been lived in this place. These are the lands and stories of Coast Salish and Upper Skagit tribes who have lived, hunted, and traded here since time immemorial. I also want to recognize the stories that brought us here into this space tonight, stories of hidden gold, wild rivers domesticated,

and most recently, a park, preserved for future generations. There are the stories that ground us here tonight.

I also want to thank all those who helped me learn to tell my own story - my teachers, mentors, family and friends. Tonight I have my mom, Nancy Ewert here - her ability to tell her own story with grace and eloquence was a huge inspiration as I wrote this capstone. Thank you. I also want to thank my teachers and mentors, Joshua, Nick, Lindsey and Gene - you four have helped me navigate the highs and lows of this program, heard me laugh and cry, taught me to seek the stories of the natural world, and given of yourselves in a way I strive to emulate as an educator. Thank you. And last but certainly not least, I want to thank the cohort I have gone through this program with, C15. Each and every one of you has gotten me through the last two years. You challenge me, keep me motivated and inspired, and your support knows no bounds. Thank you.

This capstone is dedicated to 3 people who couldn't be here tonight. First, I dedicate this to my father, Greg Ewert, who passed away in 2012. His storytelling will be heard in a moment, and I carry his spirit with me always. Second, I dedicate this to Susan Wilson, who passed away in 2016. She was my first mentor, helping me write stories and plays, and unfailingly encouraging and supportive. Lastly, I dedicate this to Dan Drahn, my godfather, who passed away in the summer of 2016. Dan was a story maker, a seeker and a searcher.

And finally, I want to say that this capstone would not have been possible without one moment. The first summer we got here, we did an activity as a graduate cohort. In this activity, we passed a card around and wrote something that described each person in the group. When I got my card back, there was one phrase describing me that stood out. It said "beautiful story seeker". I had not thought of myself in that way, but the idea of being a story-seeker wormed its way in, and eventually, it ended up being this capstone. Tonight I want to begin by sharing one of my favorite stories, as told by my father Greg Ewert.

(Here I played an audio recording of my father telling an original story called Marco The Clown)

Thank you for listening. For me, this story is special not just because it is my father telling it, or that I heard it so often as a child, or that the clown spoken about in the story hung over my bed as a kid. (This is probably one of the reasons I may be the only person I know NOT freaked out by clowns). What makes it special is that through it I am connected to my father, to the feeling of being young, cared for and protected, and I can see a fictionalized version of myself through someone else's eyes. I now invite each of you to think about a story you remember vividly. It could be something that happened to you or someone you know. It could be a story you heard as a child, or one that you read in a book or watched on a screen. As you think of this, please use the blank side of the paper



and the pens provided to come up with a brief sketch of that story - if it helps, you can imagine that a movie of this story is being made - what would the title be? What would the tagline be? What would the poster look like?

We will come back to these stories throughout the presentation. Stories are fundamental to our experience of being human. They are inextricably woven into our beliefs, our faiths, our families, our cultures and our communities. They can be spoken, but they are also heard, seen, created and acted out by us all the time. Jonathan Gottschall (2013) says that “story is for a human as water is for fish – all-encompassing and not quite palpable (p. xiv)”. Stories are a part of our history; they ARE our history. They were present 100,000 years ago, before writing, before spoken language. We have evolved to use story as our primary tool for remembering, interpreting, learning about and experiencing the world (Haven, p. 24-25).

Some of what I talk about this hour is so obvious, so much a part of the human experience, that it can feel unnecessary to examine it. However, this is exactly the reason I think it is important to think about. Without an understanding of how stories shape us and how they underpin our thoughts, our interactions and our cultures, we cannot understand the role they play, we cannot learn to see and examine the stories that make up our lives or the lives of others. It is not until we understand how stories form us, both as individuals and as communities, into who we are today that we can begin the work of harnessing the power of story to become who we want to be.

But before we examine this further, I would like to begin by making sure that when we talk about story, we are all talking about the same thing. What is a story exactly? Let’s begin by looking at a few examples. The activity we are going to do comes from the work of Kendall Haven. NASA hired Haven to answer the question, “Why does no one know what we are doing?”. The result was the book *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. The following list presents a series of actions and interactions that might or might not involve a story. As I read each of the following examples, I invite you to answer the question: “Is there a story being told here?”. You can write yes or no next to each of the statements.

List of items that could involve stories (Haven, 2007, p. 5):

- 1) Uncle Fred perches on a kitchen chair doing his impersonation of the president while he makes up silly policy initiatives
- 2) Your grandmother quietly tells you about eight generations’ worth of family history while she knits
- 3) You tell your spouse about your day
- 4) You tell a joke
- 5) You read an article in *Time* or *Discover* magazine

- 6) You read a stock report or a computer program instruction book
- 7) You read an essay your neighbor wants to submit to the Letters-to-the-editor section of the local paper
- 8) You read a recipe for venison stew
- 9) You read a short story in a collection of classical literature
- 10) You watch a comic video sent to you by a friend

This is what my paper looked like. In general, even if we struggle to define story in words, we easily recognize when a story is present. For me, I know when something is a story immediately, like in the statement “You tell a spouse about your day”. However, for other items I found myself spending some time trying to figure out how it COULD be a story. For example, the recipe for venison stew. I found myself wondering what it was written on. Who wrote it? Why venison? Because this is something a lot of people don’t often eat, who went out and hunted the deer? And yet, the simple statement “You read a recipe for venison stew” doesn’t directly involve a story. **Did other people experience something similar?** This list was originally designed to show that we as humans know what story is without a definition. However, I think it shows something deeper as well. Much like seeing the face of the man on the moon, we want to see story in everything - even when we read about something simple and straightforward like a recipe, a receipt or a how-to book, we want so much to understand the story surrounding it that we start to see it as a story in itself.

So I ask the question again, what is story? The following are some definitions I found as I researched this subject.

(The following quotes were read out loud by members of the audience)

“Stories are holy and nutritious and crucial. Stories change lives; stories save lives. ... They crack open hearts, they open minds. (Wang, 2016)” - Brian Doyle

“Just about any story - comic, tragic, romantic - is about a protagonist’s efforts to secure, usually at some cost, what he or she desires (Gottschall, 2013, p. 52)” - Jonathan Gottschall

“Story is a detailed, character-based narration of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal (Haven, 2007, p. 79)” - Kendall Haven

“Stories tell us not only who we are, but who we have been and who we can be (Rappaport, 1995)” - Julian Rappaport

“(Story) defines people. It tells us what is laudable and what is contemptible. It subtly and constantly encourages us to be decent instead of decadent (Gottschall, 2013, p. 137 - 138)” - Jonathan Gottschall

“Story is the organizing principle for human action (Crossley, 2000)” - Michele Crossley

“What is story? A series of events that are linked together through time which have developments and outcomes, and most importantly, these interconnected events have meaning (for the storyteller) (Morgan, 2002)” - Alice Morgan

“Stories are a form of magical transportation (Notess, 2017)” - Hannah Faith Notess

“The telling of stories, like singing and praying, would seem to be an almost ceremonial act, an ancient and necessary mode of speech that tends the early rootedness of human language (Abram, 2003, p. 163)”

I do not have a solid definition of story for you tonight. All of the definitions read carry something true and important, but none of them encapsulate the entire human experience of story. However, what these quotes do is highlight some important commonalities or universal themes. In general, when we talk about story, we talk about a **narrative** that has a **main character**, a **protagonist** whose **journey** is the through line of the story. This character is **identifiable and relatable**, with flaws and strengths, able to make mistakes. They have **goals** and **motives**. The story itself tends to be about how the protagonist achieves their goal by overcoming a **challenge, obstacle or difficulty**. Finally, the story has a point, a **meaning**, a reason for being told, and a lesson to be learned. This lesson is incredibly important. Stories communicate **morality** - in most of our stories, people who do the culturally moral thing are rewarded, while those who harm are punished, or at the very least, judged by the narrator.

Do people find these patterns in the story they wrote down earlier? It can be hard to see with some stories, so why don't we see how well the model fits in with a story we probably all know. Does anyone have a story suggestion that we might all know? Something like Jack and the Beanstalk?

(Here, we chose and mapped a story with the group)

But we are still missing one very important part of story, that of the teller. How are these stories communicated? Who is the storyteller? Why is a story being told? When I say the word storyteller, many of you might envision someone sitting in a group, like I am tonight, telling a story to those around them. And it is true, stories are often recounted in groups, but today those are often presented on a screen. We gather together to watch movies, to watch TV shows. Maybe you pictured an author, writing alone in their study,

writing a story we will one day read in a newspaper or a book. Our love of books and fiction is a love of story, a fascinating and important one. I urge everyone to seek ways of integrating story, and fiction in particular into their lives.

However, the stories I want to talk about tonight are not these stories. What I want to look at are the stories that subconsciously shape our thought processes, our actions, our friendships, our choices and our communities. These stories are not the polished tales we see and hear in books and movies. They are the padding that protects us from the bumps and scrapes we receive while traveling the road of life. They are the invisible strands that hold our human community together. Stories are our roots. In a forest community, trees cannot exist without creating partnerships with fungal structures in the soil below them. These invisible strands connect a tree to nutrients, water and give them necessary information about their environments and potential threats (Simard, 2014). For us, stories serve a similar purpose. Stories give us strength, they are how we interact with and define our surrounding environments. Stories ground us. Stories sustain us.

But what are these sustaining life stories? What are the stories we tell ourselves? What are the stories we tell about ourselves? As born storytellers, it is inevitable that we see our lives as a story. Our very memories are stories - not fiction, but also not a list of facts and figures. We interpret, add meaning, omit certain events and exaggerate others. We "become" or embody our stories. It is our personal stories and the meaning we make from them that provide us with the feelings and thoughts, the perceived possibilities and obstacles that we encounter every day. Though telling and embodying our stories, we shape our future selves (Bruner). This process is far from static. Stories can be shaped and reshaped, told and retold. They can even be told in many different ways at once. Mary Catherine Bateson talks about "composing a life story", about the incredible power of accessing multiple versions of our life story. She writes about "the stories you make up about your life, the stories you tell first to yourself and then to other people, the stories you use as a lens for interpreting experience as it comes along (210)" adding that "you can play with, compose, multiple versions of a life".

How does this work exactly? Let me use my own personal story as an example. I grew up on the beautiful island of Lopez in the San Juan Islands, in a loving family made up of my parents, Nancy and Greg Ewert and my younger sisters, Lilly and Clara. I was an imaginative child, and even at 5 or 6 years old, I was outlining daily class schedules for my dolls, creating worksheets for them, and then filling them out for and then grading them. (I made sure to make mistakes too). As I grew up, I was exposed to many different forms of alternative education, especially through my dad, who was a teacher himself. These experiences helped me flower as a student and a person. When I was 21, my father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Over the next two years, I managed to graduate from college, and as a family, we pulled together, we took trips to tropical countries, we spent time together crying and laughing. Over the course of his illness, I became acutely aware of the impact a good teacher can have, as countless students wrote to him thanking him for his inspiration and encouragement. Two years after he was diagnosed, we passed away. A few months later, I chaperoned a high school trip to Nicaragua that he had

started. While I was there, I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my life educating young people and getting them to have new and transformative experiences just like my father had done. I spent two years working in the school I had attended as a kid, the school my father had taught at, and two years later, while chaperoning the same trip to Nicaragua once more, I was accepted to this program. The past two years have given me the chance to learn about the experiential education I am passionate about. I go forth today as the educator I have always wanted to be.

The story I just told emphasizes the links between events, and sees the present as a natural result of all the experiences I have had before. The narrative arc is clear and strong. This is what Bateson calls a continuous story. These stories appeal to us, they help us maintain the idea that everything we have done has a purpose, a meaning. These stories align the most closely with the model we developed earlier. They make us feel good. However, when we think about our life in terms of the classic story structure, there is the danger of seeing all the obstacles, all the challenges as in the past. If where we are today is the happy ending, thinking about what comes next can be frightening. We have to deal with the idea that there may be unforeseen events that do not fit into our storyline, and we have the added pressure of fitting every new thing that happens into a preexisting structure.

What if I told you that growing up, what I really wanted to be was an actress? That for most of my childhood, I was adamant that I never wanted to teach? That in high school and college, I wanted to go into medicine, to be a paramedic and then a nurse? That after I moved home to help take care of my father, I was working at the medical clinic in preparation for applying to nursing school? That on that trip to Nicaragua, I was completely surprised by the realization that being there made me happier than what I was doing at the clinic, and that this realization was what ultimately led me to education? What if I even told you that I have a long history of struggling with my siblings and my parents? That for much of my father's illness my youngest sister and I really could not connect, despite the fact that we loved each other? That it was not until years after my dad's death that we were able to have an honest conversation about that time?

By emphasizing the uncomfortable or unexpected events that led me to where I am today, I am telling a story that emphasizes the disconnect and randomness of many events in my life, I am telling a discontinuous version of my story. This version can be more painful and is not a comfortable one, but it also allows me to recognize parts of myself that I do not normally access in my current life. It assures me that I can take opportunities that may seem random today with the confidence that they will eventually lead me somewhere even if I can not see it now. While it is not a narrative I would choose to tell to a stranger, or even to myself every day, it is a helpful one to keep in mind.

Finally, what if I told you a story about one moment, a story about one day? On this day, we were at Paradise Lodge in Mount Rainier State Park celebrating my mom's 60th birthday. I was still in my undergrad years, unsure about what I wanted to do or where I was headed. It had been a hard summer, and I had not been getting along well with my parents or my sisters. Looking back, I can see that I was pretty unhappy, although given

everything to come, I am envious of my innocence, of the simplicity of my problems. On that day, as my mom and I walked behind my dad, looking at the stunning wildflowers in the shadow of the mountain, we noticed a slight shuffle in his walk, a slight droop in his face. These slight symptoms were about to change our lives. The very next day, a CT scan and then an MRI showed that he had developed a brain tumor, and over the following two years, that tumor gradually took his life. The process of losing him ultimately brought our family together in a way that transformed our relationships with each other. And while I did not realize it at first, reading the words of his former students instilled something in me that would eventually lead me to become an educator myself.

By telling my story this way, I am highlighting one moment, one event that changed everything. This story is considered to be a conversion story. Conversion here does not mean literal, religious conversion, but conversion in the sense that in the story, my perspective is forever changed by one event. This story puts a pivotal event front and center, and depending on the event I choose, the story is completely different. For me at least, it becomes a shortcut - a way to describe a long and painful personal transformation without describing every painful detail.

I do not know which version I prefer. They all provide me with different emotions, different motivations, and different ways of seeing myself and my family. But in the end, the choice is unimportant, even dangerous. As humans, with our complex storytelling minds, we have the power and the opportunity to recognize and hold all of these narratives at once. By choosing to tell ourselves a certain version of the story at a certain point in time, we are impacting the choices we make, we are changing the way we live through changing the stories we choose to embody. In a moment when I need comfort, I may choose to remember the first version of this story. Right now, as I move into the unknown, it may be helpful for me to remember the discontinuous version of the story, to relieve the pressure to find the job that fits into the next "slot" in the story of my life. When I am teaching, I may choose the way I present a story to reflect the concerns and needs of my students in that moment.

I feel it is vital that we begin to examine our own personal stories, look deeply at the messages and beliefs that we have internalized, that we communicate through our words and our actions. How can we become conscious of these, become conscientious about what stories we choose to tell, who we want to be? This is crucial. As stories are so fundamental to human nature, so subconscious, we are constantly absorbing and understanding the world through the stories we hear or the stories we tell. Without the power to identify what those stories are and how they are being told, we are unable to critically examine ourselves and our communities, we are unable to choose who we become.

According to Jonathan Gottschall, an author and professor who studies literature and evolution "Story - sacred and profane - is perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life (Gottschall, 2013, p. 138)". As I began to frame and identify my own story, I quickly

realized that it is not mine alone, that it was not solely mine to tell, or mine to know. I am, like all humans, not isolated, and this story is the story of my family, and the story of my community. In fact, no human being has a completely independent story. As humans, we cannot tell a story without each-other, we cannot exist without each-other. Looking at the story you recalled earlier, on that piece of paper, I ask you to recognize the many stories that are there. Who else could tell that story? How would it look similar? How would it look different?

Stories are an intensely interactive experience. Whether we are telling stories to each other, sharing books with stories that thousands or millions of people have read, flocking to movie theaters to watch stories play out in front of us in an audience, stories are something we experience together. Even as we tell ourselves stories and listen to the voices inside our heads, these stories are impacted by the people we share our lives with, by the culture we grow up in, by the place, the role we play, and by so many other factors. Yes, our individual identities and belief systems are stories. But they are stories that are told in dialogue with others.

Again, I come back to the trees. The soil in the forest I described above is interwoven with thousands of miles of fungal strands weaving in and out between the trees and roots (Montgomery, 2016, p. 91). This network allows trees to communicate with each other, pool resources, and to give and receive news of potential dangers (Simard, 2014). Each tree makes its own connections with specific fungi, and provides its own unique blend of nutrients and signals into the fungal web, just as each of us develops our own stories and our own identities. The individual links help define the ultimate form that the network takes, but the final fungal networks is so much more than a sum of its parts. Our stories are the same. We both shape our own stories and contribute to the larger story, and we are constantly and subconsciously shaped by the stories around us. They form the intrinsic, underlying framework of our communities. If a forest community is defined by its fungal network, then our human communities are defined by the stories we tell. As we look at story on a collective level, the incredible power of story becomes even more evident.

Before I move on, I want to shift our definition of story. While most individual stories we hear, think or read fit the definition we developed earlier, collective stories can be different. A collective story does not always have a protagonist, it does not always have a single journey. Instead it gives archetypes, the lines and planes along which we think and act. Mary Ann Bateson described individuals as capable of telling multiple stories about themselves. Communities that share a collective story are equally capable of holding multiple stories about multiple protagonists.

This concept is best defined in the book *Mink River* by Brian Doyle.

...[A]nd so many more stories, all changing by the minute, all swirling and braiding and weaving and spinning and stitching themselves one to another and to the stories of creatures in that place, both the quick sharp-eyed ones and the rooted green ones and the ones underground and the ones too small to see, and to the stories that used to be here, and

still are here in ways that you can sense sometimes if you listen with your belly, and the first green shoots of stories that will be told in years to come - so many stories braided and woven and interstitched and leading one to another like spider strands or synapses or creeks that you could listen patiently for a hundred years and never hardly catch more than shards and shreds of the incalculable ocean on stories just in this one town, not big, not small, bounded by four waters, in the hills, by the coast, end of May, first salmonberries just ripe. But you sure can try to catch a few, yes? (Doyle, 2011, p. 13)

I cannot imagine a better way of describing a collective narrative of place.

If you will allow me, I want to extend the forest metaphor again. The connections that individual trees form with specific fungi ultimately shape the fungal web and the forest above it, just as the combination of our stories shape the collective narrative in which we live. These networks allow us to share and communicate ideas, histories and dreams. However, the web itself defines who is a part of it, who has a say. Similarly, the story we tell as a community defines who is considered to be valuable in that community, and who is excluded. Not every tree in a forest is an equal part of the web, and in our human communities, not every person has an equal part in telling and taking part in the collective story.

Julian Rappaport says that “the ability to tell one’s story, and to have access to and influence over collective stories is a powerful resource (2005)”. As we examine our own collective stories, we must ask ourselves whose voices are helping to shape them? What stories are left out? What stories are repressed, excluded, denied and misrepresented? Much as we can tell our personal story in many ways, the cultural story can be told in an infinite variety of ways depending on who is doing the telling. I want to stress now that I do not think there is ever a definitive story of a community. Even if every voice is included, people will see different things, and find different meanings, values or morals. Just as there is power in having multiple versions of a personal story, there is value in having multiple versions of the community story. But what if certain stories are left out completely, or even worse, negated or denied? What happens if we only have one story?

In her TED Talk called *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie powerfully illustrates the other side of Mary Catherine Bateson’s ideas about composing a life story. Not only are multiple stories powerful, but a single story is incredibly dangerous. She describes the experience of coming to the United States from Nigeria and being shocked at the fact that her roommate did not know that she knew how to use the stove, and that a professor of hers thought her writing was not “authentically African”, simply because her characters drove cars and went to school (Adichie, 2009). She goes on to say that “the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (Adichie, 2009)” When disadvantaged groups do not have access to the collective story they are impacted in two ways. Not only are their voices and images absent from the collective story-making process, but when they are present, they are often presented in one way, as a “single story” which only serves to exacerbate the perception of

difference. Each individual is so much more than one story, and every individual has a different story. To reduce a group of people, a country, or even a continent is to deny their right to an individual story, and to deny their right to participate in the community story.

If a tree cannot connect with its neighbors, it will sicken and often die. It will not grow as tall, and as strong as it others of its type that are connected to each other (Simard, 2014). And while many trees prefer and are more likely to connect with trees of their own kind, Douglas Fir to Douglas Fir, Birch to Birch, they are often also connected across species as well. This makes them stronger and more resilient. In the winter, when their leaves have fallen and they can no longer photosynthesize, Paper Birch trees will receive sugars and other nutrients from the coniferous trees like Douglas Firs around them (Simard, 2014). When a tree isolates itself, or isolates others, it ends up being weaker. As we as individuals or as a society try to isolate ourselves, to exclude and deny the stories of people who look or sound different from us, we too become weaker.

What does the exclusion of certain stories look like in our communities today? I grew up seeing myself represented in the stories I heard, read, and watched. People who looked like me, and talked like me were everywhere, solving mysteries and crimes, going on adventures, babysitting, riding horses, and so many other things I was interested in. It was easy to see myself reflected in almost every potential area of life.

In the documentary released last year, *I Am Not Your Negro*, James Baldwin highlights his experiences of watching movies as a child, and the way he saw the image on the screen reflected in the world around him. He says “Heros, as far as I could see, were white, and not merely because of the movies but because the land in which I lived, of which movies were simply a reflection...It comes as a great shock, around the age of five, or six, or seven to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians when you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you (Peck, 2016)”

As James Baldwin so eloquently describes, the process of internalizing the collective story begins in childhood. While adults also struggle to see themselves in the mainstream media, I want to share with you the results from a survey of children's books published in 2015. Before I read them, I want to recall an important aspect of story that we talked about earlier. In stories, especially ones that help us understand the world, or ones that communicate cultural norms, a protagonist must be relatable. In other words, a protagonist must be someone we can imagine being.

In the United States in 2015, according to federal demographic statistics, about 50% of children were of European descent, about 15% were originally from the African or Caribbean, about 25% were of from Latin American, 5% were Asian or Pacific Islander, about 1% were Native American, and a further 5% identified with multiple ethnicities (“*America’s Children*”). However, the books children can access do not reflect this. That same year, almost 75% of all children's books published in the United States featured white protagonists, and a further 10% or so featured non-human main characters, such as trucks, animals and toys (“*Publishing Statistics*”). That means that only 15% of all

children's books published featured protagonists of any minority, even though they make up about 50% of the youth population in this country. While these results are shocking, they are surprisingly an improvement from the same statistics three years earlier. In 2012, about 95% of all children's books published featured a white or non-human protagonist (*"Publishing Statistics"*).

The statistics I describe above are also reflected in movies, and for other groups of people, including women and members of the L.G.B.T + community. Despite significant improvements in recent years, measures like the Bechdel test, which looks at what women speak about in movies and television shows, and a simple demographic breakdown of protagonists in books or movies continue to show that the collective story in the United States continues to focus primarily on white middle class men.

Personally, I identify as a woman, and thanks to my parents, who went out of their way to create stories in which I was represented, I feel the stories I absorbed still allowed me to see myself as a successful protagonist, as someone who had the right to seek out lofty goals, who was capable of overcoming the obstacles in my way. For almost half the population of this country, this is not the case. For so many people, the story they see about themselves is one of a fool, a sidekick or a villain. How must this affect their own stories, the way they develop their identities, the way they embody those and the choices they make? I cannot begin to understand. Using the words of James Baldwin, "everyone deserves see themselves as hero.(Peck, 2016)" This is not to say that we only need to have more diverse "superheroes", although I would not complain if we did. I only mean that everyone deserves to see themselves as the protagonists of the stories they witness in the world around them.

The greatest gift we can give someone is to hear their story. Not just listen, but to really hear it, to allow it to pour over us, allow it to sink in under our skin, and absorb both the words and the emotions of the storyteller.

This is the greatest gift because on a fundamental level, humans are formed and molded by stories. We ARE story, and when we welcome in someone else's story, we accept them on a deep, fundamental level. When we share our story, we open ourselves up to another human being, we lay ourselves bare before their judgement and their disgust, but we also lay ourselves bare to pure love and acceptance that can come. For this reason, the sharing of stories creates an intense intimacy, one that is deeply fulfilling, yet also terrifying, uncomfortable and scary. Adichie also says: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (Adichie, 2009)"

As humans, we are storytellers, and we can help repair this dignity, we can recognize stories as the powerful resource they are. As an educator, I can tell stories that cast people of all stripes as heroes. I can tell stories that cast communities, countries, or natural environments as protagonists in their own right. We can all do this, and this is a powerful act. But this is not enough. We can invite others to tell their stories, we can choose to hear

those stories that have not always been heard. We can REALLY hear them, we can allow those stories to flow in, and get under our skin, and promise to remember them. But that is still not enough.

Perhaps we can start to tell stories together. We can enter into a dialogue with people whose stories feel alien to us and begin to tell the story that unites us. We can begin to build our community narratives with everyone's stories included. What do we share? What have we experienced together? Two mothers might share stories of having and raising children, of the joy of a smile, or the fear of a missed phone call. Two students might share stories of last minute deadlines, late nights, or new and exciting ideas. As a human community, we all have stories that are linked together, we all have stories that are connected, and by seeking those connections, by hearing those stories, we can understand ourselves, each other and the world we live in.

What gift can you give? Who can you listen to? What stories do you hear? As Brian Doyle so eloquently stated, all stories are "braided and woven and interstitched and leading one to another" (Doyle, 2011, p. 13). As we go forth after this week, I ask that we think about this, that we begin to seek out the stories and people we do not normally see, and we begin to tell stories with them. I invite every reader to share their stories and continue the process of weaving them together with those around them.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The signature is enclosed within a light blue diamond-shaped border.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *The danger of a single story*. Lecture presented at TED Global, Oxford, England.
- America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being (2016). Retrieved March 12, 2017, from <https://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>
- Crossley, M. L. (2000). *Introducing narrative psychology: self, trauma, and the construction of meaning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Doyle, B. (2011). *Mink river: a novel*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.
- Gottschall, J. (2013). *The storytelling animal: how stories make us human*. Boston: Mariner Books.
- Haven, K. F. (2007). *Story proof: the science behind the startling power of story*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Peck, R. (Director). (2016). *I Am Not Your Negro* [Motion picture]. United States: Velvet Film.
- Montgomery, D. R., & Biklé, A. (2016). *The hidden half of nature: The microbial roots of life and health*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Morgan, A. (2002). *What is narrative therapy?: an easy-to-read introduction*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Notess, H. F. (2017, February 05). *Writing What's Vividest: Using Truth, Imagination, and Poetry to Wonder About Big Questions*. Lecture presented at Search For Meaning Festival in Seattle University, Seattle, WA.
- Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators. (n.d.). Retrieved March 12, 2017, from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp#USonly>
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 795-807. doi:10.1007/bf02506992
- Simard, S., PhD. (2014, May 1). *The Science, Art and Meaning of Forest Wisdom*. Lecture presented at 13th Annual International Bioethics Forum in BTC Institute, Madison, WI. Retrieved April 30, 2016, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLU9EPoliwQ>
- Swift, G. (2015). *Waterland*. London: Picador.
- Wang, A. (2016, November 21). Oregon author Brian Doyle has brain tumor. *The Oregonian*. Retrieved from http://www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2016/11/brian_doyle_brain_tumor.html