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Living with Stories

William Schneider

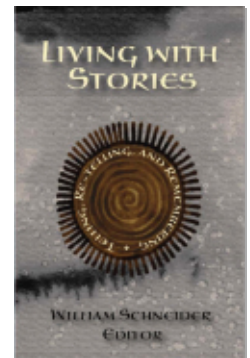
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Afterword

William Schneider

Yogi Berra, baseball star and colorful ex-manager of the New York Yankees and New York Mets, is credited with saying, “It ain’t over till it’s over.” It is as true for stories as it is for baseball and life in general. Our understanding of a story is never complete, because each time we hear the story told it may speak to us in a different way. Telling and hearing stories, one to another, is a creative act. The range of possibilities is endless, expanding each time the story is told and discussed. As Finnegan (1998) reminds us, the oral narrative, unlike the written account, is retold a new each time and within a new context. It ain’t over till people stop telling it . . . but then is it really over? What happens when someone dusts off the recording on the shelf and tries to reconstruct meaning, tries to retell the story?

For both the living traditions where we can engage the teller to discuss meaning and the recordings of those who have passed on, the approach and questions are similar. We want to know how the group of people use(d) the story to convey meaning. We recognize that all stories are told within a context and tradition bearers must understand their audiences as well as their stories, and they must tailor their retellings to communicate effectively to their cultural group. In some cases, there are very strict protocols on how stories can be told, such as in Northwest Coast Indian clan stories, or the Navajo stories about places described by Klara Kelley in this volume, where there are very strict rules on who can tell the story and how it can be used. In other cases, stories are open to a wider range of interpretation and use, as in the story of “The Giant Footprints” described by Holly Cusack-McVeigh in her paper. When we know some of the rules for how stories can be used, it helps us reconstruct some of the parameters of expression and intended meaning. Individuals who grow up in the tradition and know the storytellers are guides to our understanding of how narrative is used.

Consider, for instance, the reception Kirin Narayan received when she brought back the recording of the women's wedding song and how her friends responded by adding verses to a familiar theme, a point elaborated on by Barre Toelken in his discussion of the dynamics operating in song recall.

In this series of essays, we have emphasized that our most fundamental guide is our experience listening to the story over multiple tellings and by different tellers, living with the story, the people who tell it, and the records they leave behind. This means finding out how people used the story in the past, documenting how they use it today, and recognizing how we incorporate and use the story in our own life as well. The author's relationship with the storyteller and the experiences they share are critical to our understanding of how the story told on a particular occasion connects to the cultural tradition. For instance, Holly Cusack-McVeigh's essay on Yup'ik oral tradition is based on her personal experiences with Yup'ik friends who told her the story of the Giant Footprints because they thought she needed to learn the lessons it could teach. Her personal experiences with her friends created the context and need for the telling and the lesson. Barbara Babcock and Joanne Mulcahy echo the connection between the intimacy of a telling and the tradition from which it springs. They lament how often the relationship between storytellers and writers and the basis of their sharing goes unexplored in publications. Similarly, in his discussion of Kirin Narayan's work with Indian women's marriage songs, Barre Toelken finds a strong analogy between the intimacy of women sharing a traditional wedding song and the men in his family sharing a seafaring ballad from their ancestor's whaling days. In each case the personal relationships, experiences shared, and recollections of how the story or song has been told in the past add layers of meaning to the present recollection and retelling.

Elsewhere I have drawn a distinction between oral tradition and oral history (1995:189–202, 2002: 53–66). I claimed that oral tradition consists of the stories that a group of people know, that they consider important enough to retell, and that they actually do retell and pass on to others. I still think this is true but now I also recognize, even for stories no longer told by a group, that if the record of past tellings is complete enough we should be able to reconstruct how, why, and when a story was told. And we may be able to speculate with a fair degree of assurance the intended meaning understood by those who shared in the tradition. If oral tradition is bound to a group that

in some ways shares common understandings, then what is oral history? Oral history is the act of recording and creating a record of the narrative exchange. Of course, stories need not be bound to a particular tradition. We can and do learn and use stories outside of our particular traditions. This is the point of Lorraine McConaghy's and Karen Utz's work. But in these cases, our understanding is limited by our lack of experience with how the story has been used and the tradition in which the story derives its meaning. For instance, I am richer because of Joanne Mulcahy's description of Eva Castellanoz and how she uses the metaphor of "healing the root," but how much more I could understand if I knew Eva, was steeped in Mexican American culture, and could sense the response of the young people in the audience as she tells them that life is like a tree: if the roots aren't healthy, the tree won't survive. Part of our challenge then in oral history is to preserve as much of the social and cultural setting along with the words recorded on the machine. We need those clues to explain how the story is used over time and the reasons for differences in emphasis and content. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, stories can be illusive. They evolve over time as the storyteller seeks ways to add perspective to the present with knowledge from the past. In Sherna Gluck's essay on the story of the woman's role in the first Palestinian *intifada*, the story becomes layered with new interpretation as time and circumstances call for a particular emphasis. Sometimes it is a matter of opportunity to tell one's story. For instance, in Aron Crowell and Estelle Oozevaseuk's discussion of the St. Lawrence Island famine, the clan story emerges at the Smithsonian and provides a counter-narrative to the published accounts. James Clifford, commenting on the paper, sees this emergence as a reflection of the need all people have to place their versions of history in the record, versions that reflect their interpretations, perspectives, and values. The setting provided an opening for the story to be told.

These dynamics also operate at the personal level with stories that become important to us individually but aren't part of the cultural tradition, the stories that we choose to tell based on our own experience, witness to a devastating flood, an experience at war, or a wilderness trek. We shape and retell these stories because we think they are important. What guidelines do we have to understand what they mean? Our beacon here, as with oral tradition, is the retelling, the record of their tellings, and our experiences with the narrator and the historical record. Our focus is both back in time to the era when the event took place, so we understand the conditions at

that time, and to the present when the story is being told so we can appreciate why it is being retold. As with oral tradition, the more we listen to how the story is told and understood by others the more we appreciate its range of meaning and how it is used. This is particularly true of “signature stories.” These are personal stories that reflect a life-shaping experience that become, for the teller, a lesson or way to look at the current situations that he or she faces. As the term suggests, signature stories become identified with the individuals who tell them and the way they use them. For my parents’ generation, the Great Depression became a signature story to remind their children of hard times and the importance of saving.

I grew up hearing Depression stories at the Sunday dinner table. They conveyed lessons my elders had learned through personal experience and now felt compelled to pass on. In this case, the meaning of the stories is closely tied to their experiences and may have little meaning for my daughter and other youth, two generations removed from the event. Howard Luke, an Athabaskan Indian who lives near me in Fairbanks, grew up during the Depression. His Depression story is tied to the theme of self-sufficiency. He says, when the tough times come, “my dollar will be worth more than yours.” This is his way of emphasizing how important it is to learn to live on the land and have the skills to survive without much money. In both stories, (the ones I grew up with and the one I have heard several times from Howard), my understanding comes from knowing the individuals very well and hearing their story told many times. In fact, the individuals and how I know them is so much a part of my understanding of what they mean that it is hard for me to sort out the words from the person. And that is the nature of this work; we are challenged to get beyond words to meaning, our personal understanding of the story and the storyteller. Familiarity between teller and listener breeds both understanding and confidence and allows us to see how the story is used over time. As we saw, Sherna Gluck’s understanding of how her interviewees described the women’s role in the Palestinian *Intifada* evolved as they responded to the politics of the time, refusing to be reduced to a single description for all time. And in her work with the woman representing the garment worker’s union, she found that a fuller story was forthcoming only after a second visit, when the person better understood and trusted her intent.

As oral historians, we are called upon to reconstruct the social and cultural meanings of each story, not seeking boundaries and

reconciliation of positions but instead seeing the opportunities where tellers engaged their audience with explanation, personal perspective, and cultural insight. But as Aron Crowell and Estelle Oozevaseuk caution us in their article, we need to look beyond the fit of the evidence to the cultural and personal interpretations and the settings where the story re-emerges. How easy and misguided it would have been to place one account against the other in an attempt to reconcile discrepancies. As oral historians we are compelled to explore the convergences and the divergences and preserve the various articulations of the story for this and future generations (Kline 1996:9–39). We owe it to future generations of oral historians who will be called upon to retell the story. By creating opportunities for the story to be retold, we preserve a fuller oral history record. And as Lorraine McConaghy and Karen Utz point out, oral historians have a responsibility to engage the public with stories of those who came before, particularly those whose historical voice has not been heard. They argue that retelling is a way of preserving the story, a way to create a contact between a person whose story sits on the shelf and a museum visitor who is invited to be that character and share their experience for a little while. Their work is testimony to how reading narratives aloud or experiencing a reenactment can trigger a reader or listener's imagination and discovery of meaning even when they are new to a subject.

In the end, it is our contact with the teller (real in the case of those we interview and imagined in the case of those whose recordings we hear or whose transcripts we are called to read) that allows us to see ourselves in the experience described, to live with the story, and perhaps, at the right moment in our own lives when we find meaning in the experience recalled, when the analogy with the present is compelling, when there is a point to be made, a lesson to be learned, we will choose to retell the story. The essays in this volume represent more than a record of events; like all good stories, they are lessons to live by, reminders of how to treat animals, the land, each other. That is why they are important and will continue to be retold. It ain't really ever over, nor should it be!

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