The Cultural Importance of Storytelling

a lecture at Women's Exchange, Winnetka IL

Toward the end of Barbara Pym's novel *Excellent Women,* Mildred Lathbury meets a friend who has been crying. Mildred settles her friend in an armchair and sets about fixing tea. As she pours the tea on this particular evening, Mildred wonders to herself "if I was to be caught with a teapot in my hand on every dramatic occasion." By this point in the novel, we know that she will be. It's part of what makes Mildred an "excellent woman." She will listen to your stories. She will listen carefully, with real respect and deep affection and great common sense, and she will help you to hear the point of the tale you are struggling to tell.

Mildred is for me a literary incarnation of Sophia, the ancient goddess of wisdom. A wisdom goddess for our own day would be some woman like Mildred, some very ordinary woman with one elbow on a counter at Starbucks and a paper cup of coffee in her hand, listening to another woman tell a story.

Tea is not the ambrosia of the gods, and paper cups are not silver chalices, but the blessing of such moments of sharing does not depend upon such details. Wherever stories are really shared, wherever stories are deeply told and deeply heard, something holy happens, something ancient and powerful and rich with blessing.

We gather here this evening to celebrate that holiness, to recognize and to celebrate the gifts we offer one another in telling and in hearing stories. A few minutes ago, Miriam told us about her experiences in writing stories about her life and in sharing the writing of stories, but most stories are told aloud, not written.

People who really *enjoy* writing are actually something of an oddity. I'm a writer myself, and so I want to insist that except for writing most writers are quite ordinary people. We are just massively out-numbered by non-writers. But none of that matters for storytelling, because most stories are told not written, heard not read.

And yet because most stories are told aloud, they can vanish in the air. I want to offer some reflections this evening upon what cultural importance of storytelling. My goal

here is to help all of us to catch these stories as they whiz past in ordinary conversation. I want to set up a pathway that will keep these stories in our hearts and in our imaginations.

In doing so, of course, I'm taking a risk. It's a risk I can only explain by telling a story. I was at a big family gathering of some sort—a funeral dinner maybe, or maybe a birthday for some elderly relative. I perched on a low footstool with a paper plate balanced on my knees, trying to make polite conversation with the new wife of a first cousin once removed, a pleasant young woman who was sitting there looking a bit bewilder at the mob of new relatives, all of whom looked too much alike and talked to fast.

She's a physical therapist at the Rehab Institute downtown, where she teaches people how to walk again after accidents. But her subspecialty is teaching people how to walk down stairs. By the time she was done explaining her work to me, I was afraid to walk back to the buffet table. I had never realized that walking is so complicated.

So I showed her my double-jointed ankles, an inherited trait that makes orthopedic surgeons flinch. That may have convinced her that marrying into this big Irish clan was definitely not a good idea. She got up to get coffee for both of us. I sat there, admiring my floppy ankles and wondering how I had managed to walk down stairs all these years.

Telling stories is in that way a lot like walking. Yeah, if you look at it closely, then storytelling is amazingly complex stuff. But like walking, we do it quite well on our own, instinctively, without knowing much about the details involved. I want to look a bit these evening at the details of storytelling. But I don't suppose for a moment that I'm going to teach you anything about how to tell a story. You already know how, just as you already know how to walk downstairs.

Storytelling is an innate human activity. Nobody needs to teach us how. We learn on our own, just as we learn to walk on our own, although in both cases it helps if parents and caregivers and siblings admire our efforts and cheer us onward. Tonight I want to appreciate a little more clearly what a wonderful thing this is that we do. It never hurts anyone to stop and give thanks now and then for the ordinary blessings of life.

Let's begin by appreciating how storytelling creates and sustains relationships. Stroytelling creates relationships between hearer and listener. It creates the networks of relationships that we call community. Think, just for a moment, about the stories that has been shared in the community called "Women's Exchange." Think about all the times when one woman has spoken and a roomful of others have listened—listened with great care, with real respect, with something we are not mistaken in calling reverence for the pain and the courage, the laughter and the tears that the story has revealed. Consider the memories that people here have in common as a result. Those shared memories are also shared stories. And when a community gathers to as we are gathered here tonight to savor its own stories, to remember and retell its own memories, everyone goes home feeling better, feeling stronger and happier and more able to cope.

Storytelling sustains all of our relationships, individual as well as communal. To get to know someone new is to hear her stories. In keeping up with our friends, what we are mostly doing is keeping up with the stories they have to tell. In our own spiritual journeys, in our own efforts to understand who we are and to grow ever more faithful to that identity, all of us depend upon good friends who will listen attentively and helpfully to the stories we are trying to tell about our own lives. We figure out who we are by transforming memory into narrative: we take an event and we turn that event into a story that will reveal what the event means for our lives. That's a crucial process. To do it well, we need friends who will listen.

This link between stories and relationships has been studied by a lot of people. Deborah Tannen argues that women sustain social bonds by swapping stories.[1] Carol Gilligan argues that women do our ethical and moral thinking by telling stories about relationships.[2] Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues argue that women assimilate new information and develop skills in critical thinking through the hearing and the telling of stories[3]. Such arguments about women and storytelling underlie the new attention to publishing or re-publishing women's memoirs, to recognizing women's work in the arts, in the humanities, in the sciences, and in various spiritual and religious traditions. The recovery work done by "women's studies" in our lifetimes has been extraordinary.

But there are also major discussions of storytelling going on outside of women's studies. In the last few years there has been some very exciting work defining the major cultural important of the kinds of storytelling that—as it happens—women do all the time. This work is being done in philosophy, in ethics, in religious studies, in theology, in sociology—in all kinds of places.

As far as I can tell, none of these scholars has noticed that, in our culture, such storytelling seems mostly to be "women's work." Men have told stories for millennia, obviously. Storytelling is not a gender-specific trait. It just happens that in our day and in our communities, women seem to do a lot more of it than men do. But so it goes: academia is notoriously parochial that way. And it has always ignored women's contributions.

Nonetheless, I'm pleased to report tonight that the storyteller is now widely recognized as a person of tremendous cultural importance. I'm not talking about writing novels or publishing memoirs. I'm talking about the kinds of stories we tell one another all the time, the kinds of stories we tell our kids and thereby teach them to tell us in turn. There is a deeply influential and growing body of scholarship outlining the authority and the influence of our ordinary, familiar habits of storytelling.

Let me explain that. Here's an analogy. As the formal process called "scientific method" mediates between particular observations and governing paradigms in the search for truth about physical reality, so the story mediates between particular experience and cultural structures in the search for truth about human reality. Sitting swapping stories is hot stuff these days, ladies. It is cutting edge stuff.

I want to point out just two aspects of what we might celebrate about our storytelling. First, we are changing the world. Second, we are changing the past and thereby opening out new possibilities for the future.

And so, first: when we tell a story we create a world. We create a new reality that is a re-vision of the ordinary. This re-vision can help in its own small but real way to change the ordinary world.

Here's how that happens. A story is a narrative of events that constitute a single, complex, coherent action, one that has a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. The events can be exterior events: I lost my job and moved to New York. They can be interior events: I stopped feeling so dependent upon other people's opinions. But something happens. And the telling of the happening of it begins at some reasonable point, goes awhile, and them comes to what feels like a convincing conclusion. Stories have beginnings, middles, and ends.

Life doesn't. Life just starts some day before you remember and flows past day after day after day. Maybe it stops when you die, but maybe not. One way or another, the experience of life is usually without the kinds of obvious thematic coherence we expect in a good story. Real life is usually all too much like those incoherent, boring movies: miscellaneous disconnected events offer no reasonable sense of what's going on or why. Scene after scene muddles past. If life in the ordinary week were a movie, most of us would probably hit "rewind" and decide to go do something else. It's an effort to make coherent sense of our lives. We know it's an effort.

The world of a story, unlike the real world of experience, has a shape because what turns an event into a story is the storyteller's intuitive, ordinary human skill at creating a plot structure. Creating a plot structure is something we do as naturally as walking. And when you weave the moments or the stages of an event into a plot, you create something that literary critics call "dramatic causality." Dramatic causality is the implicit explanation of why things happen as they do in a successful story. It's the "why." And because dramatic causality accounts for the turn of events in the plot of a convincing story, the world of the story has much clearer rules and much clearer meanings than life has. At least at gut level, we understand why things happen as they do in a good story. It's fabulously more difficult to understand why things happen as they do in our real lives. But that's because a story is a far simpler thing than a life. A good story is far less messy, far less equivocal, far less certain than anyone's real life.

Stories have implicit rules or ideas, also called "themes," which hold events together in a single fabric, thereby explaining (at least implicitly) why things happen as they do. The better the story is as a story, the more tightly woven its fabric, the more clearly it will

present its main idea or the better it will subordinate and unify all of the raw and unruly components it selects from the mayhem that is life itself.

Good stories are tightly organized. They are focused and economical and finely coherent. As readers or as listeners we may argue about how to define the ideas or the themes of the story. But we know that a good story makes a certain kind of good sense in a more or less straightforward way.

Life itself, however, is anything but simple and straightforward. And yet most of us do remarkably well at telling stories about our lives. Most of us, most of the time, can organize the uproar and the muddle of our ordinary lives into reasonably coherent stories.

Because I am trained in the literary structure of stories, I know how to listen for and to recognize the economy and the coherence of the stories I hear people telling. And I am regularly amazed by the technical skills with which ordinary, non-literary suburban folks can tell stories.

I suppose my physical therapist first-cousin once-removed-in-law would feel something of the same awe watching us run down the stairs to the laundry room. What a thing it is to be human! I admit that running down the stairs is not dancing with the American Ballet Theater, and telling a story over lunch is not writing a novel. But making sense of our lives is crucial to our happiness and our humanity, and most of us do it with marvelous skill. The gift and the beauty of a good story are present in the every-day form no less than in the various formal narrative arts.

A story makes sense, but life sometimes makes no sense at all. I think we need to acknowledge that real lives, even lives that look fine and wonderful from the outside, are never tightly focused and elegantly coherent. Real lives are always awash in chaos, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Real lives are hip deep in suffering, pain, and fear. That's why we need stories, I suppose: we need to escape the chaos of our lives for a while. More importantly, we need to forge some moral order amidst the chaos of our lives.

In our stories, we can create worlds in which it's clear that at least some people are kind, or that fortitude and hard world at least sometimes pay off, or people at least

sometimes find unexpected sources of strength and courage. Or we can tell stories in which everything is always terrible and our hopes are always disappointed and our needs are never met. I know people who reliably tell such dark stories about their own lives. I bet you do too. It's depressing. They are probably depressed. And that's why we are profoundly blessed by stories that in fact encourage us, and make sense of our lives, and connect us to vital and life-giving traditions.

Alasdair MacIntrye argues that whatever counts as virtue in our lives, whatever counts as true, as noble, as worthwhile, as reliable and as certain—that these values exist in our storytelling or they do not really exist at all.[4] There is no "scientific" proof of the objective value of fidelity or integrity or kindness. There are no double-blind controlled studies statistically proving the value of courtesy or forgiveness or restraint. There are no rigorous philosophic demonstrations, no tough-minded proofs. There are only stories, stories that testify to the dignity and the hope and the humanity of virtuous lives.

It is in telling such stories about our own lives that we discover what our lives mean, and what our values really are, and what differences our virtues make. And it is in sharing stories that we grow in the virtues that provide whatever we know of honor and serenity and hope. The world becomes a kinder place when you tell three other people about someone being kind to you; the world becomes a more honorable place when you tell about honest you made or saw someone make. The world becomes a more courageous and cheerful place when you recount your troubles and how you nonetheless survived with your sense of humor intact.

The world changes in all these ways because when I hear your story about kindness or resilience, I'm encouraged to be kind or resilient myself. I'm encouraged because I have been immersed—just for a while—in the world your story creates. I have been immersed in a created world in which the power of virtue is much clearer than it ever can be in "real life." Sandra Schneiders argues that when we hear a good story we are changed because we have experienced something that ordinary life does not commonly provide.[5] We have come face to face with new possibilities. We are offered new grounds for hope. We come away with new support for the struggle of our own lives. When we leave the world of a story we walk out changed, she says, because now we will see our own lives in a different light.

From what I've heard about Women's Exchange, many of you have come to see your own lives differently because of the stories you have heard here from other women. And that's great. But we need also to realize that this same process is underway in our own households.

If every night at dinner you tell your kids some story—even some small story, some apparently inconsequential anecdote—admiring some small bit of honesty or kindness you have seen that day, or maybe rejoicing in the chance you had to be kind or generous or optimistic, then your kids will grow up to be kinder, and more honest, and more generous or more cheerful. If every night you complain about the evidence you have seen that people are just out for themselves and nobody can be trusted, your kids will grow up suspicious and distant. The glass is half full or the glass is half empty depending upon how you tell the story.

And our kids will look for the kinds of stories they hear from us. They will notice and remember and share the realities that our storytelling presents to them as important and worth noticing and worth sharing. Kid will always tell stories in which they show up as heroes, but we define what counts as "heroism" in the stories told in our own kitchens.

In my kitchen we are very keen on kindness. I remember and recount and praise what I see of kindness in this world—especially kindness manifest as the care and the competence offered by people who are too often taken for granted. As I endeavor never to overlook anyone, I endeavor to teach my children to recognize and honor the kindness of these strangers in their lives too. Such recognition blesses both those who offer it and those who receive it. And the world becomes for that moment a more humane and honorable place.

Stanley Hauerwas argues in passionate scholarly detail that all of us are inescapably vulnerable to the moral power of the stories we hear—from friends, on the news, in the papers, at church or at work or in the grocery store.[6] Our best friends, our most vital friends, are those who tell the kinds of stories about their own lives that proclaim the reality and the power of virtues that we need in our lives too.

I have friends who stories are always courageous, and others whose stories are always generous, and others whose stories are always gentle and forgiving. If you listen closely

to your friends, you can find these qualities too. And we need them. We need them. The difference that stories make are small differences, but they add up over time. I am reliably blessed by the courage or the cheerfulness of my friends, by their struggles to be patient, by their resilience in the face of pain and loss and fear.

"Life is complicated and not for the timid," Garrison Keillor remarks at one point. "It's something that, when it's done, it will take us awhile to get over it." Meanwhile, meanwhile, we swap stories with our friends. And some of us collect in places like churches and synagogues in order to tell and retell the ancient stories of our faith traditions.

So that's the first thing stories do: they change the world by changing our perceptions of the world and our behavior in the world. But stories do more than change the world. Stories also change history. That's the second thing we need to celebrate tonight.

We cannot change the mere facts of the past, of course. I was born in a particular place and to a particular family, and in a particular year, and none of that can be changed. But what we can change—and we do change all the time—are the stories we tell about our past.

For instance, in 1982 I gave birth to twins, an emergency caesarian in the middle of the night. Furthermore, I had very severe mono at the time, an infection that began the week I got pregnant. And I'd injured my back in an accident with a dresser, and as all this added up my asthma had gotten out of control. I was one sick kitten. At home I had a little boy who had just turned two—still in diapers, of course.

I called my department the next morning to let them know that the babies were fine and all three of us were breathing on our own. The chairman told me that I had been denied tenure. I had one of the very best teaching records in the department and major publications—unlike either the two men up for tenure with me, both of whom had been tenured.

I was flabbergasted. So were plenty of other people. That felt, at the time, like the makings of a very unhappy story. And let me tell you, for a while there it was a very

unhappy story. It took years for me to find the right story to tell about that point in my life.

But it's not an unhappy story now. What once felt like loss now looks like liberation. What once felt like catastrophe now feels like an undreamt-of chance to nourish parts of my soul that would have starved to death if I had remained in high-power academia.

And that's an example of the revisionist history that all of us do all the time. Here's the point: when we change our stories about the past, we change our futures too. New stories both create and reveal a new sense of ourselves. My sense of myself has certainly changed over the years! Good heavens, yes.

And with that new sense of self has come a new understanding of the "dramatic causality" that defines the meanings of our lives. Catherine Bateson explains how this happens.[7] As we tell and retell our stories, she says, we remember best those events that prefigured the present, and we tend to forget or at least to gloss over events that don't contribute to the narrative whole we are trying to create or to recognize within the disparate events that make up our lives. A good life-story, she explains, integrates the past in ways that both make sense of today and give us hope for tomorrow. What that means, of course, is that when something new or unexpected comes into your life, any time that grace or grief disrupt your status quo, your stories about your own past will inevitably shift in some way.

Notice, however, that this dynamic operates in either direction. You can also open yourself to change in the present by deliberately and critically reconsidering the stories you commonly tell about your own life.

Such narrative re-visioning of the past can happen in psychotherapy, I suppose, or in a variety of other formal and deliberate ways. But it also happens when we start swapping stories with one another. That happens becaue your story about your life prompts me to look for essentially similar narratives in my own life.

We do this all the time. You tell me about a mishap on your vacation, and I'll respond with a mishap story of my own, or a vacation story of my own. It's a conversational form of duet.

What holds the duet together, however—the one cultural rule of such exchanges—is that contradicting the major theme of the first story is very rude. The range of polite variation is ordinarily quite narrow, such that there are elaborate social formulas to follow when you do want to disagree. And thus it is that we come to understand our lives within the patterns of dramatic causality that are common in our culture or in our community or at least in our circle of friends. That shared set of meanings is what make support groups supportive. It's what sustains the vitality of formal religious and spiritual traditions.

But that can be hazardous. Jill Kerr Conway argues that we are likely to live out our lives uncritically playing our parts within the archetypal "plots" or "story lines" or "mythic patterns" that we have inherited.[8] Maybe at some level we are convinced that all our problems will be solved if we can just marry Prince Charming, because then of course we will live happily ever after. That's how the story always ends, after all, in movies no less than in folklore. So we keep kissing toads and hoping, or we struggle to teach royal decorum to some warty old frog who is just not living up to our "happily ever after" standards.

Or maybe life will be solved once and for all after we slay some dragon. If only we could get rid of sexism or racism or vanquish our disapproving parents, or move to Colorado, or maybe just lose twenty pounds—then, *then* we would live happily ever after.

Or maybe we are on an heroic quest for some achievement or some acquisition that will prove that we are good people or justify our existence. These are our own private versions of the mythic Grail Quest.

For a long time I was convinced that my life would be redeemed if I could write a book and get it published. I did do. Nothing changed.

Instead of giving up, I found myself a new mythic goal. I set out to get the bank statement balanced promptly three months running. That was actually much harder than writing a book. But after years of failure I got a great computer program to help. Alas, balancing bank statements didn't work any better than writing books.

Just recently I realized that my current Grail-quest centers on the dining room table. I know I'd be a much better person, less plagued by self-doubts and self-recriminations, if I could just keep that blessed table clear. Even for a week!

Unless you are watching, that is, unless you are listening critically to your own stories and unless you are telling stories to empathic but thoughtful friends, you can live too much of your life trapped within the same weary old plots, fighting to get to some happy ending that only Hollywood can provide.

My point here is that in telling stories about ourselves we are not just reporting the past. We are creating our own futures. We come into a world chock-full of stories that will, for better for worse, shape the stories we tell about ourselves. And some of the stories we inherit are dangerous, like "women can't do anything right." But lodged within families, within friendships, and within faith traditions can be found stories that are vital and life-giving. So it pays to pay attention. We need to notice what we are doing to ourselves and to other people with the stories we tell. The dramatic causality of a convincing story is among the most powerful forms of causality on earth.

If you will indulge me in a mental exercise, I can show you something about how stories and storytelling can change history.

Remember, if you will, some period of your life, some distinctive era. Don't worry about exactly when it began or how it ended. Just pick some time that has a distinctive flavor somehow. Now pick a memory that is typical of that time. The first thing that comes to mind is probably best. Hang onto it.

When I tried this myself, what came to mind was the first delivery from the diaper service. The guy filled my front hall with white plastic bags of clean diapers. Three hundred eighty five diapers, one week's supply. When he left, I would have burst into tears if I were the kind of person who can do that. A week later, it happened again, because I had in fact gone through all of those diapers.

Now think about your own typical moment. Hang onto your story for a minute while I point out the predicament I've just created for you.

Think about how much would be involved if you were to tell me about this typical event or memory from that era of your life. I'm a stranger here. I don't you. I don't know Winnetka or the New Trier district or the community up here. Not at all. So in telling me your story, you would have to provide the context I need to understand what this event meant in your life at the time, whether you were living around here or maybe off in Connecticut somewhere. But in creating the context I need, in fleshing out your simple memory into a whole story, you have to be very selective or we will be sitting here for the next six months. To tell your story, you have to focus on what really matters.

But *what really matters?* That's a big question. What do you think really matters in your life? Questions don't usually get much bigger than that.

Russell Baker explains that when you are telling a story about yourself, the problem is that you know too much.[9] There are a million things you might tell me. You have to pick. The solution, he says, is to leave out almost everything. A good story is not the whole truth, he argues. It's about one-half of one percent of the whole truth, because that's all that will fit into a good story. In selecting that one-half of one percent, we are deciding what contexts will matter for the story we want to tell.

Do I talk about my not getting tenure in the context of other failures and betrayals? I have a context like that I can use. Everybody does. Or do I talk about my not getting tenure in the context of how lonely and unhappy I was in the academic world? I knew it was time to leave, and I had been praying for months that I would find the courage to leave after I was tenured. *Afterwards.* Because I certainly expected to be tenured, and so did many other people. But I knew it would be hard to walk away. It's inevitably difficult to walk out on a job where you have been really successful, no matter how unhappy you are. And I'd been really successful. Furthermore, we had a big new 18.5% mortgage. And then we discovered that I was carrying twins! So when they fired me, I was relieved and outraged in equal measure. And both reactions were completely valid, no matter how crazy that sounds.

Here's the bottom line: the meaning of an event—the meaning of a memory—depends altogether on the context we select. Our lives are so rich, so fully, our lives are just so

damned complicated that we have plenty of contexts to chose from. We have not just many hats to wear, but a whole closet-full of options.

In fact, we have moral freedom. In fact, we have spiritual growth. We have true responsibility for ourselves and to others. And for most of us, despite our very real suffering and undeniably difficulties, it's a great life. And we have a great set of stories. We may never tell the same story twice, not exactly. But that means we will never run out of tales to tell.

So take the memory you came up with. Find two different contexts, two sharply different ways of telling it, two very different ways of looking at this important moment in our life.

Was the glass half empty or half full? Was the cup overflowing? Was it a grand adventure or an utter fiasco? A loss or a liberation? Did you stand there like a dolt with nothing to say or did you remain silent, self-possessed, and profoundly dignified?

Pair off with someone at your table. In five sentences, tell the negative version of your story. Then tell the positive version. Then it's the other person's turn. Pay attention to what you are feeling both as you speak and as you listen.

And admire, for a moment, what an amazing gift storytelling is. We create worlds and thereby change the world; we rewrite the past and thereby generate new options for understanding both the present and the future.

And thanks, thanks very much, for your kind attention. I'll take questions and comments after you've done this exercise together.

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[1] Deborah Tannen women sustain social bonds by swapping stories

[2] Gilligan, women do our ethical and moral thinking by telling stories

[3] Mary Field Belenky, women assimilate new information and develop skills in critical thinking through the hearing and the telling of stories

[4] Alasdair MacIntrye

[5] Sandra Scheiders

[6] Hauerwas

[7] Catherine Bateson on how we remember events that prefigure.

[8] Conway on living out inherited patterns like happy-ever-after.

[9] Russell Baker on knowing too much.