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AUGUST
HOUSE

American Storytelling
FROM AUGUST HOUSE

Improving Your Storytelling

Beyond the Basics
for All Who Tell Stories
in Worker Play

DOUG LIPMAN

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ORAL LANGUAGE

Stories use the medium of oral language. To be a truly effective storyteller, you need to capitalize on oral language's strengths—and compensate for its weaknesses.

Many storytellers are less effective than they could be, simply because they try to apply written-language concepts to the oral language of storytelling. This chapter contrasts oral and written language—not to demean written language (one of the great achievements of human civilization), but to provide concepts that highlight the nature of *oral* language. (And much of this applies to manual languages, such as American Sign Language.)

Look at the written language in this book. What elements does it use to convey meaning? First, it uses the letters that form words. Second, it uses punctuation. Third, it uses various typographical devices, such as typetaces, font sizes, italics, indentations, etc. Fourth, it uses pictures—graphical elements such as diagrams. Fifth, it communicates through the materials of the book itself: the size, thickness, color, and other qualities of the paper and the binding.

All the magic of writing is conveyed with those five kinds of elements. All the passion, logic, impetuosity, inevitability, and humor of written language is shaped, like sculpture, from the simple clay of words, punctuation, typography, pictures, and materials.

What about oral language? The only element it has in common with written language is words.

But oral language has many additional elements, such as tone of voice, gestures, posture, facial expression, eye behaviors, and several other forms of expression.

My schooling focused exclusively on written language.

Inadvertently, it left me feeling that only written language was “real” language. It ignored the rich complexities of the language I had used even before I entered kindergarten. My schooling not only neglected oral language; it encouraged me to overlook it as something potentially worthy of attention and capable of improvement.

Written language is, of course, invaluable. Nothing I have learned about oral language takes away from the value of the written word.

But since becoming a storyteller, I have also discovered the workings of oral language. I have learned that the elements of oral language allow different kinds of expression—and place different demands on me—than those of written language. Knowing the nature of oral language is, for a storyteller, like knowing the exact nature of paint for a portrait artist. To be sure, our knowledge of oral language is mostly unconscious, but our print orientation can make us ignore what we actually know how to do.

Oral language offers many elements that can communicate a given meaning. Also, it can simultaneously communicate more than one meaning. And time passes during an oral story in a strict way that is foreign to the reading experience. I call these qualities the variety of expression, the multidimensionality, and the time-based nature of oral language. These qualities underlie the unique expressiveness available to the storyteller.

The Variety of Expression

Oral language uses only one element of written language: words. All too often, oral language is unconsciously taken to consist of words and little else. This causes us to neglect the expressive possibilities of its varied elements, which form the building blocks of how stories are told.

The key expressive tools of oral language include tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, eye behaviors, and orientation in space. They each allow the storyteller to convey meanings that, in written language, might need to be expressed primarily in words.

TONE OF VOICE

By “tone of voice” I mean a combination of vocal timbre, inflection, loudness, and perhaps other aural properties of a spoken

voice. Taken together, they convey much of the meaning of the spoken word.

Imagine overhearing a conversation between two people in the next room. You can hear the voices, but can’t really make out the words. What do you understand? Just from their tones of voice, you probably understand a lot about how both people are feeling. You may also know a lot about their relationship. For example, is one of them expecting the other to behave differently? Is one trying to wheedle something from the other? Is one guarded, while the other is trying to put the first at ease?

Here’s an exercise. Alone or with a partner, you might experiment with showing intention through tone of voice. Decide what you want from your partner (or from an imagined other person), then try to express it through tone of voice alone, without meaningful words. Use “blah, blah, blah,” repeat a single word you like (“umbrella, umbrella, umbrella”), or make up gibberish as you go. When you are done, it might be instructive to hear your partner’s perception of what you wanted.

In the case of the conversation overheard in the next room, there may be a whole story told through tone of voice. From the changes in the speakers’ tones of voice, you probably know the shape of their conversation. Did it start tentatively, proceed to eager sharing, and end with hope? Or did it begin casually but turn heated, only to end icily?

As an experiment, you might try telling a story that has no words. Try to “tell your story” only through changes of tone of voice. With what tone of voice will you start? End?

Tone of voice communicates to unborn babies. Much of the time, it also communicates across cultures—even across species.

With a partner (and an audience, if you like) you can play a theater game known as Gibberish. One person acts as the Storyteller, the other as the Translator. Without any planning, the Storyteller tells a story, one “sentence” at a time, in gibberish (the more expressive the tone of voice, the better). The Translator, who has no idea what the storyteller is talking about, creates an impromptu “translation” into English (or whatever language the audience speaks). The fun comes, first, from comparing and contrasting the tones of voice

(and other oral language elements such as facial expression and posture) of the two players, and, second, from comparing and contrasting the tone of voice of the Storyteller with the words of the Translator.

Tone of voice is so strong that whenever it conflicts with word meanings, it always prevails. This primacy of tone over words makes sarcasm possible. It is also what makes it unsatisfying when a loved one says, "I will always love you" with a hesitant tone. It is what makes it fun to say to your dog in a loving tone of voice, "You are the most worthless bag of fleas in the whole world!" and watch her wag her tail as though receiving the highest praise.

Try the classic acting exercise of saying a single word with different tones of voice. For example, say the word "yes" joyfully. Then try it sadly, resignedly, seductively, hesitantly, or nervously. Try saying "yes" in a way that means "maybe"—or in a way that means "no."

Tone of voice conveys a wide spectrum of meanings. Part of the reason that we use a more limited vocabulary when talking than when writing is that we don't *need* as many words. Instead, we use tone of voice (and other elements of oral language) to distinguish the more specific meanings.

When my storytelling falters, my first thought is often, "Did I use the wrong words?" Since tone of voice is even more meaningful, I might better ask, "Did I use the wrong tone of voice?" For example, I coached an experienced storyteller who was new to middle-school audiences. She tried many new stories, only to be greeted with indifference by her pre-adolescent listeners. As soon as I heard her performance by her pre-adolescent listeners. She was using a tone of voice that suggested condescension. Although her preschool audiences had tolerated her tone well, these older children could not hear beyond it to appreciate the meanings carried by her well-chosen words.

FACIAL EXPRESSION, GESTURES, AND POSTURE

Three effective carriers of meaning involve the expressive motions of our face, limbs, and torso, respectively. As the arts of dance and mime prove, they can carry a world of meanings.

Jackie Torrence is proof of the expressive power of facial expressions. She does not walk around or use large movements of her

limbs. But she puts the same amount of expressiveness into the changing expressions on her face that other tellers would put into their whole bodies. As a result, we scarcely notice that she sits down as she tells. Her face does the dancing.

Gesture can carry great meaning, too. Jay O'Callahan tells an hour-long story about Richard Wheeler's 1500-mile kayak journey, "The Spirit of the Great Auk." Sitting in a chair, he paddles with an imaginary kayak paddle as he tells Richard's story. When he narrates Richard's memories or forays onto the land, he stops the paddling gesture. Whenever Richard returns to the kayak, Jay begins the gesture again. The tension in Jay's arms increases as the paddling becomes more difficult or when Wheeler is upset. This rhythmic gesture runs through the entire story like a thread, connecting the entire tale and orienting us silently but unmistakably to Wheeler's moods as well as his entries and exits from the kayak.

The tools of facial expression, gestures, and posture influence each other. A smiling facial expression, for example, when combined with a proud posture may communicate welcoming and happiness. The same smiling expression combined with a slouching posture, however, may communicate a submissive desire to please.

Similarly, these three tools change the meanings of spoken words. "I welcome you" (even if said with a truly inviting tone of voice) seems less like a genuine offer when spoken with a closed posture (arms folded, shoulders forward) than with an open posture of invitation.

Many unspoken cultural norms regulate the use of these tools of oral expression. Because we are usually unaware of both the norms and the tools, we make unconscious judgments of people based on their "body language." In a situation where large gestures are tolerated and even expected (for example, in a Southern Italian family or on the stage of a theater), the person who "sits on his hands" as he talks may be perceived as shy, weak, or unexpressive. In a situation where large gestures are unaccustomed or frowned on (e.g., a formal dinner at Buckingham Palace or a television talk show on a public broadcasting station in the United States), the person who "gesticulates wildly" may be seen as rude, aggressive, or "unbalanced."

Some gestures or facial expressions have widely understood

meanings in only one group of cultures, regardless of the language spoken. For example, some African-derived cultures regard “sucking your teeth” as an expression of insolence, whereas other cultures take it to be a sign of hesitancy—or else a personal idiosyncrasy with little communicative content.

In different situations, the same gesture will have different meanings. But in all circumstances, we rely on people’s facial expression, gestures, and posture for important information about their intention and their emotional attitude toward us and toward what they are saying. As storytellers, we can use these silent elements of oral language to make clear, efficient statements of our intention toward the audience and of our characters’ intentions toward each other.

EYE BEHAVIOR

The direction of our gaze communicates many things. Looking into our listener’s eyes, for instance, suggests paying close attention to our listener—which may be welcome or not, depending on the culture and circumstances.

Storyteller Pam McGrath has learned to use eye contact to underline humor:

I say something funny and get a small laugh. Then I pause and make prolonged, smiling eye contact with an individual, as if to say, ‘Did you get that?’ At that point, everyone laughs again, usually louder than before. The first time, they laughed at my joke. The second time, the audience and I were buddies, laughing together at what the storyteller just did.

Looking up and to one side as we pause in our speech usually suggests that we are searching our memory or thoughts in preparation for speaking. Looking straight down as we speak suggests submission, embarrassment, or absorption in our private thoughts or feelings. Our listeners understand (unconsciously) what these eye movements mean, and even expect us to alternate among them. To the extent that eye movements show we are imagining the events and images of our story, they often help our listeners do the same—even helping them picture the exact size or location of what we are describing. Individual cultures also develop “eye gestures” with par-

ticular meanings—such as “rolling the eyes” to indicate impatience or incredulity.

In general, most people use eye behaviors unconsciously, and with great flexibility and effectiveness. It is possible, I believe, to learn to use eye behavior consciously—but it is very difficult and seldom worth the effort. Most people who attempt to use eye behavior consciously only succeed in conveying a sense of stiffness or insincerity. They fall afoul of the variety of expression of oral language, which implies that oral language is too complex to be easily faked. While you focus on counterfeiting one element of oral language, another unconsciously gives you away.

Usually, the most effective way to “use” eye behaviors is to forget about them. Instead, focus on your relationship to your audience and what you want to share or communicate with them. Then give yourself permission to use whatever eye behaviors seem to carry your storytelling forward. This will free you to make eye contact at some moments and avert your eyes at others—as appropriate to what you are saying and to whom you are saying it.

A caution. This unselfconscious approach may fail when there are obstacles preventing your flexible use of eye movements—or when you and your listeners have different expectations about the meaning of eye contact.

One such obstacle is fear. People who are afraid or humiliated tend to avert their eyes—or to make aggressive eye contact in self-defense. If you are feeling afraid in a situation where you are not actually in danger, it is usually more helpful to deal directly with the fear than to attempt to change your eye behaviors. The common directions given by instructors to anxious storytellers (such as “Make eye contact at least three times with everyone in the room!” or “Look at a spot twelve inches over your listeners’ heads!”) usually just compound the problem. Instead of scared storytellers averting their eyes, you end up with scared storytellers making unsatisfying, mechanical “contact” in a way that further confuses the audience.

Other obstacles involve mismatched expectations between storyteller and listeners. What is considered “appropriate” eye contact depends in part on the social status of speaker and listener. For example, a young adult in many cultures would avert eyes from a

respected elder, but make sustained eye contact with a child. As a result, any misunderstanding about the social standing of your audience may lead you to eye behavior that they consider puzzling or inappropriate.

Similar misunderstandings occur between people of different cultural backgrounds. In many African cultures (and much of African-American culture) the speaker is expected to look into the eyes of the listener, while the listener is expected to look down. In some Native American cultures, on the other hand, the speaker is the one who is expected to look away. In other cultures, such as that of the Maori of New Zealand, both speaker and listener are expected to avert eyes. And in most Northern European-derived cultures, speaker and listener are expected to sustain eye contact for a culturally specified length of time. In each of these groups, the same behavior (looking at the eyes of the other) sends a very different message. What is a sign of respect in one culture may be a sign of disrespect in another.

In these cases, just doing “what comes naturally” is not likely to be effective. Instead, it may help to view eye behavior (as well as bodily orientation, distance from your listener, and many other elements of oral expression) as part of the vocabulary of a new language, with which you must experiment cautiously but determinedly.

ORIENTATION IN SPACE

One of the most concrete elements of oral language is the storyteller’s spatial relationship to the listeners. Our position relative to our listeners conveys meaning about our relationship and intentions. Saying “hello” from across the room is different from saying it nose-to-nose. Moving away as we speak suggests “distancing” (we use that term as a physical metaphor to describe the emotional reality), whereas moving closer may suggest focus, intimacy, or menace.

In almost every culture, speaking from above suggests authority; from below, submission. (Hence the judge’s bench, the preacher’s pulpit, and the kneeling of the supplicant.) Even at the same level, facing toward someone as we speak gives a different meaning from that given by turning our backs or facing to the side.

For storytellers, orientation in space is a primary tool—like eye

behavior—in relating to our listeners. It can also be used as a dramatic tool to suggest the relationship between a character and the objects or people with which the character interacts.

Facing our listeners directly, for example, is a typical way that we let them know we are speaking to them, and facing away can show that we are momentarily off duty (as when we take a sip of water). Combined with other cues, it can also suggest that a character is speaking or is feeling lost, determined, or disgusted. In dialogue, the exact direction we face can show how a conversation passes from one character to another. Similarly, changing our height or distance from our listeners can serve to intensify or relax the impact of what we say.

I’ll never forget my reaction the first time I saw Jay O’Callahan perform a Japanese folk tale, “Hiro the Gambler.” I perceived the conversation between the small but cheeky gambler and the enormous god as occurring between two characters of vastly different heights. In retrospect, I was sure that Jay must have portrayed the god by standing on a chair and the gambler by kneeling on the floor. Then I saw the story again. To my amazement, Jay remained standing at stage level throughout the story. But when Hiro spoke to the god, he looked almost straight up. Answering, the god looked almost straight down. Jay had used this element of oral language to create a vivid image of different-sized characters.

Multidimensionality

The variety of expressive elements of oral language gives us a wealth of ways to convey any particular idea or feeling. The complexity of oral language goes beyond this variety, however, because several of these expressive elements can be used at once.

Oral language can simultaneously present a word, a tone of voice, a facial expression, a gesture, a posture, an eye direction, and an orientation in space. Each of these elements represents a dimension of communication, and the various dimensions can reinforce each other to produce something more powerful than that of words alone. For example, if I declare my love for you in a passionate tone of voice while looking you in the eye, moving close, taking your hand with one of mine, and placing my other hand over my heart, the dimensions add up to a strong statement of love.

On the other hand, the dimensions of oral language can conflict with each other. My statement of passion may be made with a tone of voice that suggests boredom, thus canceling much of the words' effect. Or my words may suggest love, my tone of voice a lifeless recitation, my posture hopelessness, and my eyes a glimmer of hope that you will reciprocate. The most successful storytellers—as well as actors and public speakers—draw on this complex world of simultaneous expressive possibilities.

CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH CLUSTERS

Characterization (the portraying of a person's particular characteristics) can be done easily and directly in oral language. Whereas written language may require an author to use metaphor or extensive description to indicate how a person stands, moves, and talks, oral language allows a storyteller to use simple imitation.

A character can be portrayed (orally or in writing) through the words he or she speaks, including any distinctive choice of words or sentence structure. In oral language, a character also can be suggested with nonverbal expression, such as a quality of voice, a distinctive posture, or a habitual gesture.

Further, the user of oral language can create a simultaneous cluster of expressive elements that portrays a character clearly and suddenly. Perhaps the giant hulks, booms, and crudely wipes her mouth with her forearm. Or the nervous young child might speak in one-word sentences, use a high-pitched voice, and tug at his clothing distractedly. After introducing such a cluster once, the storyteller can use it later to invoke the same character quickly and easily—perhaps without saying a word.

HUMOR THROUGH CONTRASTS

A certain kind of humor depends on the juxtaposition of two contrasting ideas or feelings. Because of the multidimensionality of oral language, a storyteller can convey such contrasting ideas and feelings *simultaneously* with different elements of oral expression.

Imagine a humorous story about parachute jumping. If a character says, "Yes, I'm ready to jump," while walking backwards away from the supposed jump-door, he is expressing a willingness to per-

form a scary action through one dimension of oral language (words), and unwilling fear through another (movement).

Or suppose a character is on the phone with her mother, whom she does not want to visit. As she says with a pained tone, "I am so sorry I can't come to see you," she wipes her brow in an exaggerated gesture of relief. The strong, simultaneous expression of these two contrasting attitudes creates a humorous effect.

TRANSITIONS

To understand the possibilities for transitions in oral language, compare it to film and video—another multidimensional art form. In film, two of the basic elements are audio and video—sound and sight. Since they happen simultaneously, they can either reinforce each other or they can add complexity by clashing.

Take the case of the L-cut, a common film device used to enhance the drama of a scene change. Normally, when a scene shifts in a film, the sound and visuals both change at the same instant. An L-cut, however, changes one element first, then the other. At the end of a scene in which we watch our hero studying quietly at home, we may suddenly hear the cacophony of street sounds even as we still see her sitting at her desk. A moment later, the visual scene catches up to the audio by shifting to the street, where we see our hero jostling other pedestrians through traffic, trying to reach school on time. The L-cut creates a momentum for the scene change, using the audio to jar us out of one scene and draw us into the next.

In the same way, the user of oral language can change some dimensions before changing the others. Imagine that you tell "Jack and the Beanstalk" using a characterization cluster for the giant: when the giant speaks, you snarl up your face and use a hulking posture and deep voice.

Suppose now that you narrate Jack's ascent up the beanstalk with your normal facial expression, posture, and voice. Since you are narrating, your eyes face the audience directly, and your words are in the third person: "Jack entered the giant's house..."

At this point, you keep your words in the third person and your eye direction and facial expression as they were, but you change to the *giant's* posture and voice as you narrate his approach: "Then

Jack heard someone coming..."

Finally, when the giant actually speaks, you shift the words to first person, let your eyes look down as though seeking Jack, and you snarl as you say, "The giant said 'fee, fie, fo, fum.'"

How did you achieve this gradual transition? Even though your words were those of the narrator until the "fee, fie, fo, fum," you switched two of your elements (posture and voice) into the giant's "scene" even before the giant began to talk. Later, you also changed the other elements (words, eye direction, and facial expression) when the giant actually began speaking. By changing some of the communicative elements before the others, you created an anticipation of the next character and the next scene.

Time-Based Language

Written language is linear, in the sense that one word follows another. In reading a book, however, the reader can escape the linear sequence at will by rereading, pausing, or looking ahead.

Oral language is also linear. Each word, gesture, and movement follows the one before. But unlike written language, oral language is based *strictly* on time. The listener cannot go back or ahead, but receives information only when the speaker transmits it.

If the storyteller stops speaking, the listener must wait; if the storyteller speeds ahead, the listener must try to keep up. If the storyteller introduces too many characters, the listener will become confused about who is speaking, and has no way to review missed information. On the other hand, the listener may become entranced by the rhythms and repetitions of the storyteller's speech, and be affected in ways possible only during an in-person event.

The time-based aspects of oral language make it tricky to translate a story from written to oral form. They also give powerful tools that increase the storyteller's ability to engage, entrance, and inspire.

NONREVERSIBLE TIME

Because oral language happens in time, it shares some of the qualities of time. First and foremost, time is nonreversible. We cannot go backward in time.

Similarly, the listener cannot go backward in an oral story. This

puts some restrictions on the storyteller.

In a book, the reader who forgets whether the story began in a specified year can, at worst, turn to the opening pages and reread them. A story listener, however, has no way to "rewind" except in her memory. In this age of print and other permanent records, furthermore, the listener's memory may be less developed than in the days when history and religion were passed on orally and when bards recited epics.

As a result, an oral story must work within the limits of the listener's memory. No oral story can have more characters than listeners can remember and keep straight. If a reader might have forgotten the meaning of a term or the name of a character, a writer always has the options of providing a glossary and expecting the reader to use it, of using chapter titles that keep the term or name in the reader's view, or of putting the information in an easy-to-find prologue. But the oral storyteller *must* remind the listeners whenever the term or character is mentioned. The listener has no second chance to hear what was said previously.

The need to remind the listener of previously given information has led to various devices in oral storytelling, such as the Homeric epithet (e.g., "Achilles, fleet of foot" and "wide-ruling Agamemnon"), helping us remember which character is associated with a particular name. Other devices include: prologues which, like Shakespeare's, summarize the story to come; songs which recapitulate information that the listeners have already heard; and statements of fact which are dramatic enough that they are likely to be remembered.

Sometimes, storytellers will present a story that appeared originally in written form. Depending on how the story was written, such a story—although easy enough to follow in print—may become very challenging for the listener.

Consider a single detail. Suppose the written story you are telling is about four sisters, Wendy, Mary, Carolyn, and Toni. They may get confused in your listener's mind, since a list of four can be difficult to absorb aurally. To translate such a written story into a successful oral story, you might reduce the number of sisters or find a way to make the list memorable. Perhaps you will add a rhythm or rhyme to make the list stand out: "Wendy was the oldest, Mary the bold-

est, Carolyn was bony and Toni was... just Toni." Or you might create epithets for each: "Wendy, the bright and ready; the tiger-bold Mary; Carolyn, who walked like uncooked spaghetti; and Toni, who might go off like firecrackers." Or you might use nonverbal cues to make the characters memorable, such as a distinctive gesture, posture, or tone of voice to match each sister's personality.

To translate a story from written to oral form, the storyteller needs to overcome the limitations of oral language as well as to call on its rich expressiveness.

PAUSES

The pause is essential to the told story. Just as the page you are reading consists of both black ink and the white paper around it, so oral language requires sound *and* silence, movement *and* stillness.

A common mistake is to believe that a story consists only of words, and therefore that a pause is the absence of story. This implies that pauses are "dead time" during which nothing happens.

In fact, many things happen during pauses. The pause allows the storyteller time to imagine and react. Simultaneously, it allows the listener to think ahead in the story or absorb what has already happened. A pause can be used to create anticipation: "She turned the corner and saw her car (pause) driving away without her." A pause can also call attention to what has just been said; such a pause is particularly effective after a phrase that has multiple meanings.

The pause can help the transition between stories, episodes, characters, and even thoughts. The absence of a pause when one is expected is also powerful. It can create humor or a sense of urgency or confusion.

The pause can help develop the relationship between teller and listeners. During a pause, the storyteller is more *like* a listener. This is the time when both are listening, when the storyteller can notice the quality of the audience's listening, and when he or she may cease communicating the story proper and focus purely on communicating attitude, intention, and relationship.

In normal conversation, a pause can be a signal that the speaker is finished and others are invited to contribute. This is why we say "uh" to show we are pausing but not finished. In a formal story-

telling performance, however, a pause does not usually indicate that an audience response is expected. Instead, it creates a powerful silence that may elicit eagerness, dread, or laughter. Since the storyteller does not "lose her turn" by pausing, the teller gains an absolute power over the pause. If the storyteller takes a long pause, so does the listener. Because oral language is strictly time-based, the listener cannot continue the story until the teller begins again.

While one or more elements of oral language pause, others can continue. Viewers of Hal Holbrook's "Mark Twain Tonight" know how much anticipation is created when he stops talking while continuing to walk and puff on his cigar. (George Burns and Groucho Marx used their cigars for similar effect.) Comedian Jack Benny would stop talking while his posture continued to communicate. He would fold one arm across his waist, put the palm of the other against his cheek, then roll his eyes.

A simultaneous pause in many elements of oral language can call attention to a single element that does not pause. If you stop speaking and gesturing, your listeners will be better able to focus on your facial expression as it changes from dismay to joy. Conversely, pausing just one element can draw attention to it. Imagine a Charlie Chaplin-like character listening to a lecture on animal behavior. He is puzzled, so he scratches his head. Just then, the lecturer says, "Of course, many of *our* behaviors are ape-like, such as head-scratching." At this moment, the character suddenly freezes the hand that was scratching his head. The sudden pause of that action calls our attention to the fact that he *was* scratching.

Once, I coached a beginning storyteller who had a clear, confident command of word and image. Yet I found myself unable to form strong images of her story; my mind seemed to skim over it without being able to enter. Listening to her tell a portion of her story a second time, I realized the problem: she wasn't pausing. Fearful that her listeners were not really interested, she propelled herself forward just at the moments when she and her audience needed a natural pause in order to imagine.

Storyteller Jay O'Callahan tells beginners, "Dare to pause!" In fact, the confident pause is an earmark of the accomplished teller. The courage to stop the flow of words is an act of trust in the power

of your presence, your nonverbal communication, and your relationship to your listeners.

RHYTHM AND TEMPO

Written language has rhythm and tempo, not only of words but also of whole sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters. In great writing, in fact, rhythm and tempo can add nearly as much to the whole as they do in a great work of music. Yet the rhythm and tempo of written language is subject to interpretation by the reader.

Oral language, on the other hand, gives the storyteller complete control of the speed of (and emphasis on) each word, sentence, and scene. The rhythms of a storyteller's speech may be marked or subtle. The storyteller may use frequent repetition or parallelism, widely varying speeds, alternations of strong and weak rhythms, or an infinite variety of other devices. Consciously or not, the storyteller shapes the rhythm and speed of each unit of a story.

Words that might look uninteresting or repetitive on the page can take on compelling rhythms when spoken. Conversely, vital spoken language may not read well. Working in a time-based medium, the storyteller has the opportunity to become an artist in shaping the rhythm and tempo of oral language.

Donald Davis tells "The Southern Bells," a story about the first party line telephone coming to a small town. Imitating the phone conversations of two sisters, Davis talks quickly for a minute or two, then suddenly returns to his normal, slow pace to continue his narrative. The humorous slowing of tempo calls attention to the rapid pace we have just experienced, which conveyed the excited mood of the characters and their sense of connection with each other.

REPETITION

In oral language, words and phrases are more likely to be repeated than in written language. Repetition serves several functions, two of which have already been discussed: to reinforce information and to contribute to rhythm and tempo.

Repetition can also hold an entire story together. A repeated line, sung or spoken, can be like a colored string woven throughout a story. Jay O'Callahan's "The Herring Shed" tells of one summer in

the life of a teenage girl in Nova Scotia during World War II. The tragic and comic events are strung together by the repeated rhythm of her work preparing herring to dry: "Thumb in the gill, open the mouth, we go on with the work in the herring shed..."

Bobby Norfolk repeats a humorous characterization in his version of "Willey and the Hairy Man." When the Hairy Man appears, Bobby suddenly stops his normally high level of body movement to face the audience squarely. Then he opens his eyes wide, dons a peculiar smile, and turns ninety degrees. Finally he raises his shoulders and mimes running, saying "boogedy, boogedy, boogedy." This portrayal of a frightening but outlandishly comical Hairy Man is repeated exactly each time. Consequently, the Hairy Man becomes progressively funnier as the audience enjoys the precision, silliness, and scariness of the character and anticipates his return.

Repetition can have a function in oral language that can scarcely be duplicated in written language. Like the return of a melody in a musical composition, the return of a theme, scene, image, or phrase in a story can, in itself, add depth, meaning, and emotion. Bits of oral language, when repeated, can become like beats of a drum that stir us into a dance of images, emotions, and thoughts.

Try reading the following sentences silently:

The meaning of an oral phrase can be intensified through repetition.

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Now try reading those same three statements aloud. Did you notice a tendency toward intensification caused by the oral repetition?

In oral language, repetition can even create a sense of timelessness. Though reading the same words twice may be boring or even confusing, hearing the same paragraph twice can create a sense of ritual, of eternity. Much actual ritual includes a timeless kind of repetition, whether of the words of a holiday service, of traditional wedding vows, or of an oath of office.

In many traditional folktales, entire episodes are repeated with only small changes: "Then the second brother came to the old woman at the crossroads, and..." While this episode is being

repeated, the listener may have an experience similar to hearing the words of an actual ritual.

Written versions of folktales seldom include the full text of such repetitions, either summarizing or recasting them to be less repetitions: "Then it was the second brother's turn to do what the first had attempted so unsuccessfully. Like his brother before him, he met the same old woman at the crossroads..." These changes improve readability, but can obscure the oral tale's original sense of timelessness.

Since the phenomenon of ritual repetition is not evident in written language, it is especially important that a storyteller understand repetition's power to create a space in which the forward rush of time seems to stop.

THE UNCROWDED STAGE

A surprising implication of the time-based nature of oral language limits the number of characters who can actually participate in a scene at once.

In written fiction or history, it is relatively easy to portray discussions among four, five, six, or even more characters. In oral language, on the other hand, it becomes awkward to portray a scene with more than two or three characters. This characteristic of oral language genres is so common that it became known among early twentieth-century folklorists as the "Law of Two to a Scene."

I don't understand exactly why this law should be true, but my experience as a storyteller and coach supports it. In order to describe or enact a discussion or interaction among more than two characters, the single storyteller usually needs some stratagem to overcome this limit.

For example, I had problems telling a traditional story in which a new owner of an estate is touring his land, accompanied by the estate's steward. I found no difficulty in portraying their conversation until the point at which they meet another character, a Jewish peasant, and begin talking with him.

At this point, the story turned awkward in my mouth. I tripped over phrases like "he said to the steward," or "then the peasant spoke," which are natural and easy in written language—even when they occur frequently. I also found myself struggling to maintain the

emotional progression of the conversation, which had to show the balance among three different relationships.

First, I tried the usual solution, which was to break the scene down into a series of two-way conversations. Since this particular scene depended on the steward frequently interrupting the other two characters as they talked, this proved difficult. At last, I hit upon another stratagem: I told the story from the first-person point of view of the steward, who then had only the two other characters to describe.

When retelling an oral story, the storyteller will be unlikely to run afoul of this law. When creating a new story or adapting a written story, however, the storyteller may need to change the plot. Characters may need to be eliminated, or scenes with multiple characters may be divided into several subscenes which feature only two or three characters at once.

When struggling to present an unwieldy scene, the storyteller will be helped by understanding that oral language is time-based and therefore cannot easily present many characters at once. Just as written language must compensate for its inability to directly render tone of voice or gesture, oral language must compensate for its inability to let listeners review information.

LEARNING TO LEARN STORIES

Learning a story is a process that itself resembles a story. In the beginning of this “story’s story” I am going merrily about my life when one day I encounter a story. In the end, it may “get away” from me, or it may become part of me.

In between, I encounter obstacles. I find helpers. I may believe I have succeeded, only to experience failure once again. Overcoming one obstacle, I may discover another, larger one. I may be led into new worlds, or deep into the underworld of my self.

The process of learning each story is necessarily different, since each time I learn a new story, I am changed by learning it. There is a saying, “You cannot put your foot in the same river twice.” As a storyteller, I am like a constantly changing river that cannot be the same when the next story enters my being.

Learning a story changes me in a way that makes it easier for me to learn the next story. In many ways it will be less difficult to learn my fiftieth story than it was to learn my first story—because I will have already learned forty-nine ways that stories can be learned.

On the other hand, a new story will often offer a challenge. The process of forging a relationship to a new story can involve me in change, growth, struggle, and frustration.

Naturally, I hope to avoid such painful processes in the future. Time and again, I find myself thinking, “Learning that last story was difficult and surprising, but surely I won’t have such a hard time with the next one. Now I have learned how to learn stories easily, once and for all.”

Paradoxically, this determination to avoid difficulties is actually a *source* of difficulties, because it closes me to the actual requirements of the current story.

The easiest way to learn a new story, I have found, is not to try to learn it the way I learned the last one. Instead, it is more efficient for me to approach a new story with complete openness, vulnerability, and even humility. Such an attitude allows me to respond to the unique demands of each story, while avoiding wasted effort that is intended to protect me from change and surprise.

5 WHAT IS A STORY?

Before I can form a relationship with a particular story, I must first recognize it as a story. Further, when I learn a story from someone who has a *different* idea of what a story is, I will usually change the story to “make it into a story” or to “make it better.” Thus, my conception of what a story is will influence my relationship to every story I learn.

We all carry unconscious expectations about what constitutes a story. These expectations vary with the context; a satisfying story to tell to friends, for example, may not qualify as a “story” to perform in a theater—and vice versa. These expectations also vary with the audience. A well-received theatrical story based on a personal experience may not seem like a “story” to an audience expecting a traditional myth, epic, or folktale.

These unconscious expectations are, in fact, culturally based. A study of school children in the United States found that European-American children who were asked to tell a story to a large group of their classmates tended to tell stories which centered around a single climactic episode. African-American children in the same classrooms, however, tended to tell stories which strung together several independent episodes around a common theme. Both kinds of stories were often entertaining and satisfying—but the children’s European-American teachers saw only the first kind of story as a *real story*.

In the United States and Europe, most people expect that the events of a story will be related in the order in which they occurred. In Java and Bali, on the other hand, even this expectation is not part of the cultural definition of “story.”

The Esthetic Expectations behind the Fairy Tale

Here's another example of how our esthetic expectations of stories can differ. The literary fiction of recent centuries in European-based traditions has emphasized character development. We have come to value characters who, like real people, have depth and complexity. We value the internal experience of our literary characters, often as expressed in their complex relationships with other characters. We also expect that a story will have at least one major character who will change in some way by the story's end. To say that a story has "flat characters" is to imply that the story is not fully developed.

Traditional fairy tales, however, are based on a different set of esthetic choices. They emphasize *actions* between flat characters with almost no depiction of internal states. They prefer the vast scope that includes beggars and queens, the completely good and the utterly evil, but they make no direct attempt to describe the experience of any of them. A central character may be transformed socially (the cinder-girl becomes a princess) or physically (the maiden without hands is magically healed)—but never internally (Snow White doesn't learn not to take apples from strangers, nor does she resolve a troubling, ambivalent relationship with her helping dwarfs). Are fairy tales "inferior" to modern literary fiction? On the one hand, liking one kind of story better than others is positive: it can be the stimulus for enjoying and even creating stories. On the other hand, the idea that one concept of story is "best" and that others are "primitive" is a limiting idea which goes against the spirit of art—treasuring diversity. Cultural creations such as genres of literature, I believe, can be understood in their own terms and then appreciated for their particular ways of illuminating what it is to be human.

Expectations About Story Attributes

As we have just seen, our idea of what constitutes a story is based on a larger cultural context. If that context changes, then the expectations of any particular story may also change.

Even within the same cultural context, the storyteller and the listeners may have different concepts of what a story should be. Some of these concepts are the mutually coexisting concepts that we

apply to different genres of stories. Others are based on personal preferences, sometimes conscious and explicit, other times unspoken. They include a whole range of expectations about:

- the believability of the plot
 - ...a well-developed, believable plot
 - ...a well-developed, patently impossible plot (e.g., a tall tale)
 - ...a skeletal plot—whether believable or implausible—that serves as a vehicle for songs, comedy, or social commentary
 - certain kinds of actions in the plot, such as
 - ...violent, scary actions in the plot
 - ...absence of violent, scary actions in the plot
 - kinds of characters
 - ...familiar, realistic, common characters (e.g., "the boy next door")
 - ...familiar, realistic, uncommon characters (e.g., kings and queens, or historical heroes)
 - ...stylized, imaginary characters (e.g., dragons or space commanders)
 - character development
 - ...three-dimensional characters
 - ...flat, stereotyped characters
 - ...stereotyped characters who are not flat but express internal emotions and ambivalence (e.g., characters in soap operas)
 - ending lines
 - ...a punch line
 - ...a gentle, lyrical ending
 - ...a formulaic ending
 - moral clarity
 - ...clearly defined moral choices and actions
 - ...morally ambiguous choices and actions
 - commentary
 - ...clearly stated moral or practical deductions
 - ...the absence of explicit commentary
- Every* aspect of a story, in fact, can be subject to different audience expectations.

Responding to Divergent Expectations

In those situations where you and your audience have different expectations about what makes a story—or what makes a *good* story—you will need to take a broader view than you might when no such conflicting expectations occur. When I have been surprised by such situations, it has usually taken me two or more stories to realize that the hostile or uncomprehending reaction of my audience is not caused by the particular story I chose or by the way I am telling it, but by a fundamental difference in expectations.

Even so, my audience may have to speak up before I recognize the problem. More than once, children have listened politely to one of my stories, then said, “Do you know any *stories*? You know, about ghosts and things.” Sometimes, such a request can simply be an indication that the speaker prefers a particular type of story. But other times, it can indicate that my audience has well-developed expectations—that I am failing to meet—about what a story is.

To succeed in the situation where my audience expects a story to be something different from what I expect, I must either change to fit their expectations or else form a bridge that will allow them to find delight in what I have to offer. Many years ago, I was hired to tell an afternoon of stories with songs to a family audience at a Jewish community center. When I arrived, I discovered that—contrary to the organizer’s expectations—there were no children present. Instead, the audience consisted almost entirely of residents of a local senior-housing center who had been bused to the performance. As it happened, not only was I unprepared to tell Jewish stories to 200 adults that day, I had *never* told Jewish stories to adults—except informally. (Since that day, I have learned to negotiate with the organizer before standing up to the microphone in such a situation, but then I let myself be pushed onto the stage without any clear idea how to proceed.)

I immediately ruled out performing the Jewish preschool songs and stories I had prepared. (Later, I learned that my audience of seniors might actually have enjoyed them.) My first thought was to try to tell adult-audience stories that I knew—but those stories were not Jewish. Therefore, I tried to make a transition between what

they expected (Jewish stories for adults) and what I knew (non-Jewish stories for adults). I introduced an Irish story by speaking of how the Irish, like the Jews, had found their culture under attack and had responded by preserving their folktales. Two or three minutes into this story, people began shouting out from the audience, “Don’t you know any Jewish stories?” and “Sing, ‘Tumbalaika!’ [a Yiddish folk song]!” As the unrest grew, I saw that the gap in expectations was too great. I ended my story abruptly, saying, “But what became of Rory O’Donahue is for another day. Here’s a Jewish folktale.”

The audience sat back a little, giving me a chance to do better. My problem was that I didn’t have a Jewish folktale ready! I remembered, though, that I had once come across a reference to a Jewish version of a Japanese folktale I knew about a poor student who is sued for consuming the *smell* of someone else’s food. (The clever judge grants the suit, but insists that the fine be paid with the *sound* of the student’s money.) I began to improvise a Jewish “version” of this story, substituting Jewish equivalents for the Japanese characters and foods in the story I knew.

At the end of this brief story, my still unsatisfied audience tried to instruct me in how to do better. “Don’t you know any stories from the Torah [Hebrew Scripture]?” “How about a story from Israel?” Frantically, I tried to understand what was wrong with the “Jewish” story I had just told. Suddenly it dawned on me. What these people wanted was a story with an aspect of the familiar—a story that affirmed Jewish culture as they knew it. For them, affirming a familiar aspect of Jewish culture was part of the definition of a Jewish story.

I knew even fewer Torah stories than I knew Jewish folktales, as it turned out. But pursuing this new understanding of what they wanted, I could at least try to fake something they would like (as opposed to the Japanese/Jewish stopgap that they didn’t like). Remembering a Hasidic story I had heard at a story-sharing group (and that I had repeated to my house-mates over dinner), I said, “I am going to tell you a story of the Baal Shem Tov [the legendary founder of the Hasidic movement]. Long ago, in a little shtetl [Jewish village] in eastern Europe...” Some listeners still looked

skeptical; some relaxed at the mention of a familiar Jewish character (although a few others tensed, apparently in fear that they were being propagandized about this still controversial Jewish sect); still others relaxed at the mention of the familiar shirel setting. I told my story poorly; the audience listened attentively. They were willing to forgive a poor telling, it appeared, but not my failure to meet their fundamental expectations about what constitutes an acceptable story.

6

LEARNING THE STORY

In some ways, learning a story is very easy—as easy as repeating a humorous family episode or recounting a favorite moment from a film or sporting event. Yet learning a story can also be difficult. Though a few seem to be mine from the moment I first hear them, most stories that I learn represent a large investment of my thought, energy, emotion, and time—from several weeks to many years.

The easy stories instruct us in the essential nature of the process, described in this chapter. The more difficult ones instruct us in the obstacles (whether emotional or conceptual) that must be overcome to allow this easy process to take place. Emotional obstacles are treated later, in chapter 16: Performance Anxiety. Some tools for dealing with the conceptual obstacles are described in the next four chapters.

Beginning a Natural Process

Think about a personal experience you have recounted informally several times. Perhaps you have told about meeting your mate, using salt instead of sugar in a pie recipe, or the time you met a celebrity.

What was your process in learning that story? Since you probably developed the story unconsciously, let's try to reconstruct a typical process. Here's an episode from real life: A few years ago, my wife and I went canoe-camping on a large lake in rural Maine. One day, paddling our heavily loaded canoe in a high wind, we became grounded on a submerged rock about fifty feet from shore. The wind and waves pushed us onto the rock more forcefully than we