

Once, before a performance at a school, I was warned by teachers that one of the students that would be attending the assembly had extreme ADD, was very shy, and was often a “challenge,” and I was reassured that if at any point he became a disturbance, he would be removed. The boy was brought in, sullen and edgy, and seated at the fringe of the group, monitored closely by school staff. The hour of stories flew by, and not once did the boy take his eyes off me. When the time came for questions, he raised his hand, and proceeded to ask me more questions than the rest of the group combined. What struck me most about this incident was not the boy’s attention to the stories, but rather the disbelief and amazement the teachers expressed as his attention and articulation. I believe the reaction of this young man, his quiet focus and active response, are examples of some of the most important effects that storytelling offers in today’s increasingly technological world.

We live in a culture where reality is no longer shaped by tradition, but by television. As storytellers in that world, I believe that the effects of this medium on our audiences, especially young audiences, are significant, and worthy of investigation. Noted communications professor Dr. George Gerbner, who has spent his career studying both the content and effects of the mass media, specifically TV, calls television “the electronic storyteller.” In his essay, “TV as Storyteller”, he writes,

*“The television revolution re-tribalized storytelling.[...]Most people grow up in, and participate in a television culture. What does this mean? Consider that for the first time in human history a child is born into a home in which television is on an average of about seven hours a day. And for the first time in human history most stories are told not by the parent, not by the school, not by the church, not by the tribes or community, and in many places not even by the native country, but by a relatively small group of conglomerates who have something to sell.”*

The shift away from face-to-face communication - active relationships between audience and storyteller - and towards messages that have as their source a distant and elite few, has major implications for today’s audiences, and for the future of storytelling. No longer does the listener participate in the story process, nor is there a natural, self-preserving device for transition, as in the past, from listener to teller. This means then that valued stories are more likely to be pushed aside, their place taken by younger, thinner, paler versions, and perhaps more importantly, the role of teller is not being replenished in newer generations. This latter fact has become glaringly obvious in the storytelling community, and for myself in particular - as a participant in storytelling events I sometimes think one can be considered a “youth teller” until the age of forty. Now potentially, I could happen to be the only young person in New England with a talent for storytelling, but this is not likely. I offer instead the fact that I *am* probably one of the few that was raised without a television, outside the “television culture”, and that the modes of entertainment this defaulted me to are those kinds which allow for a richer cultural background, and awareness of possibility and one’s identity and abilities within that setting.

Gerbner states, “Culture is the set of stories that tell us about the nature of the universe, how it is created and run, and the right and wrong modes of conduct within a

particular time, place, and society.” If we live in a culture dominated by television, then the most immediate and visceral of entertainment – literature, music, art, stories, poetry – are shifted to a peripheral position in our society, and the important stories they often teach are lost to the relatively new visual medium of TV. Furthermore, it can be seen that both the medium and the message offered via this “electronic storyteller” are contrived, and consistently promulgate a fractured reality, where mediocre is mainstream, the ugly is invisible, and the “happily ever after” is only a Pepsi away. The negative effects of these television values are measurable, and result in a distracted and disillusioned audience, comfortable with a artificial “storyteller” that encourages the lowest denominator, and demands nothing beyond ones disposable income.

While this might seem an overly grim portrait, I do not believe it to be far from the truth, and venture the proposal that our role as real storytellers in this new millennium will be to offer an alternative to this distorted view of the world, and of each other. Our stories, in both content and presentation, must acknowledge and challenge the false view of humanity that television has created. This task, while not simple, has rewards which are both immediate and hopefully, necessarily, pervasive. Every storyteller who has ever stood in a busy room, with just a few gathered to listen, and observed, as you begin to speak, the voices fade, and the faces of both children and adults turn to listen, knows that our stories are needed, desired, essential. Not only to entertain, but also to illuminate the reality of potential, and draw forth the wonder that lies only just beneath the skin of young and old alike - this is what storytellers must both know they are capable of, and never tire from attempting. The young boy, labeled ADD for his short attention span, doesn't move for an hour. A 18-year old high-schooler, scowling and sarcastic, who according to his teacher, “never speaks in class,” asks me how I got started, was I ever afraid, tell us another. A small girl raises her hand, and asks sincerely, “Are you a mermaid?” Every storyteller has these moments, and in these the importance of what we do is evidenced. As storytellers we must hold fast these moments and the hope that they signify.

And so I leave you with another quote. These words describe the storytellers that we are, the people we must be, to recapture the minds of a world.

*“The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the sky...”*

*- Jack Kerouac  
Novelist*

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Katie captivates her audiences with her poise, vivaciousness, and sense of humor. She looks for unique stories that capture the style, wit, and individuality of the human person.

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