How Storytelling Could Revitalize U.S. History Scores

Whatever I teach, I teach storytelling because it is an expression of human creativity that provides perspective. Stories help us understand our world by showing us that random events surrounding our lives only *seem* random, but are in fact connected. Stories enable us to perceive a higher level of meaning. Fiction such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Alex Haley's *Roots* explore the role of cultural storytelling in personal formation. Aesop uses "The Tortoise and the Hare" to explain the virtue of diligence, and Ernest Hemingway critiques modernist conventions of storytelling in "Snows of Kilimanjaro."

Science needs its own storytellers. I doubt that modern astronomy could exist had the night skies not been mapped with gods, goddesses, and heroes. Ray Bradbury, author of *The Martian Chronicles* and *Fahrenheit 451*, said in an interview that "the history of mankind is all science fiction" because "you dream a thing first, that's science fiction… Then you build it and it is science fact, but the science fact comes after. You can't claim a thing as science fact: you have to do the dreaming first."[1] Walt Disney understood Bradbury's argument when he produced such educational films as "Mars and Beyond," "Our Friend the Atom," "Seal Island," and "The Vanishing Prairie." Disney would say, "We're not scientists, we're storytellers," and then hand off the reigns to an expert. But using the tools of cinematic storytelling, Disney educated millions of American schoolchildren on science and conservation.

Stories convey wisdom about ourselves, our culture, and human nature. The existence of Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman is

more believable than the existence of a civilized people who have no need of *scops* or sages.[2] Unfortunately, our educational system does not often stimulate the imaginations of our students. In the public schools, I'm told students are not required to take their assigned reading home with them outside of class. Most reading is done in the classroom, and rarely in the comfort of home or on vacation spots.

Too often those who shape and administer our educational policies forget that stories help us learn information that society deems important. Here I will not present research that fits into an Excel Spreadsheet or a White Paper template. Instead I have an argument that illustrates how stories matter to students. My argument is a story, and it is my own.

A Way of Learning

Before the 1991-1992 school year began, I was assigned to Mrs. Pauline Akers' eighth grade U.S. History class, and I remember most of the middle-schoolers moaning that she was "hard." To me these students were tiresome whines who masked their fear of being thought stupid with an irksome nonchalance. (Now I see through such student subterfuge more clearly, I feel for them.) Still, during those early weeks of school, I do not recall going to Mrs. Akers' class with enthusiasm or expectation. For one, she hardly fit the stereotype I had of the dynamic teacher which was youthful, vivacious, lax on discipline, and inexperienced. By that time Mrs. Akers had taught history for almost twenty years; her hairstyle was a high-raised 1960s bouffant style, and she often wore bell bottoms and other dated clothing. Secondly, while I had shown promise earlier in my schooling, I was scholastically adrift by that point—neither failing nor excelling in the classroom. I maintained my love for stories that dealt with enchanted characters and other worlds, but there was no connection between them and the state curriculum. I did not expect U.S. History to change my outlook.

After the first nine weeks I noticed that my overall grade was about eight to ten points higher than the grades I usually earned. Furthermore, as I listened to Mrs. Akers talk about American history, I often forgot I was hearing a classroom lesson. These were stories! As far as I remember, Mrs. Akers never moved from her stool and podium, but the events she described and the people involved came alive in her narrative: this was opaque to some in the classroom, but I could feel the space come alive with the sounds and smells of frontier war, wagons going westward, explorers in uncharted seas, leaders rallying people with words that conveyed the aspirations of generations past and present. To this day, I can see and hear Mrs. Akers telling us about the Battle of Fort Duquesne in 1758, and describing a conversation between a young George Washington and his superior commander, a British general, who told the young future president that their forces would either sleep that evening in the enemy fortress or they "would sleep in hell." In that moment, Mrs. Akers did more than *sound* like a stubborn British general: for a moment, she *became* this character in history.

Mrs. Akers also talked about history in a humorous way. For example, she often used narrative asides and parenthetical remarks to express witty commentary about the subject matter she was teaching. When some of the unimpressed boys complained that they didn't see why all the foreign courtiers made such a fuss over Queen Elizabeth I considering the lack of glamour in her royal portrait—to say nothing of the fact that she supposedly took only a couple baths a year—Mrs. Akers merely responded with, "Tut-tut, there would be a lot to gain for you, and besides, once the lights go out they all look the same."

Because I was able to connect my love of storytelling with the content of Mrs. Akers' class, I began to do very well. Suddenly, I was in the unusual position of having my coevals wanting to sit beside me, asking me for my secret, and so on.

A few students tried cheating off of me, and one student asked me to pass along the answers, but Mrs. Akers protected me from that sort of trouble.

Before spring break, the school announced the dates for the subject area tests for those students who wanted to compete for the awards. I had never taken the exams before because those students were usually on the honor roll every nine weeks; their older brothers and sisters were National Merit Scholars, their moms and dads were doctors and lawyers, and so forth. And yet, Mrs. Akers told me that I had the highest average in fifth period class. When I asked if I should take the U.S. History test, Mrs. Akers said simply that I should “definitely consider it,” but did not overly push me. I dithered for a couple more days, but I eventually registered at the school office. To prepare, I opened the old history textbook and spent more time combing over its musty pages than the previous eleven students whose names appeared behind the cover. While the prose could be dry and plain, the stories Mrs. Akers told helped to enliven the other episodes in American history that I needed to study.

The exams for the academic subjects were held in the school cafeteria. I entered and looked around to see all the students who normally won the awards. They were already seated and none of them looked up at me, but poured over their notes in those final moments. I wondered again what I was doing there. In sixth grade I bailed on a science fair even though I thought my project was good; those competitive overachievers daunted me. This time I drew from those stories of bravery and vision from American history that I had studied. I did not consider myself a hero, but I knew those historical characters sometimes had to see things through.

After a month I had largely put the whole ordeal out of my mind when my name was called at the school awards ceremony. I was on the stage with the middle school band so it wasn’t until I made my way to the front that I saw my mom and

grandparents in the audience: the school had sent them invitations weeks before, but had asked them to keep it a secret. I had surpassed countless honor roll students to win the eighth grade award for U.S. History.

Requiem or Reverie?

Mom and dad have a photograph of me with the middle school principal (whose name was Dr. Pepper if you can believe it): we are on a stage, and he is handing me the award (which today is framed together with the picture). The image is uninteresting unless you like my vintage 1992 sports shirt with its patterns of topical fish. However, the story behind the image means more than the PhD diploma or the Exemplary Teaching Award hanging in my office.

In retrospect, the eighth grade was when I began to understand the value of storytelling. I understood that I was a better learner when the course material was in narrative form. When Mrs. Akers told stories of Ben Franklin's coming of age, or Benedict Arnold's treachery, or Alvin York's cleverness and simple faith, or William Penn's humility, I was able to understand the meaning behind the stories, and this helped me remember the subject material on quizzes and tests. Learning American history from a storyteller began an odyssey for me that was less academic and more formative: I did not win honors or academic awards in high school, but I began to better navigate the limitations of an educational system that was poorly constructed (then and now) for creative students.

If I had become who the public school system wanted me to become (Mrs. Akers and a couple others excluded, of course), I wouldn't be writing to you now. But the power of storytelling permeated the boundaries of that system and gave me a vision of other possibilities. The award experience helped me realize that by unearthing the latent stories beneath the many duties and tasks given to me, I could create a space for me that was

independent of an organizational algorithm. I could develop an individual vision of a good life.

When I became a professor, I wanted to do the same for my students. Whatever I teach, I teach storytelling.

[1] "The Optimistic Futurist: An Interview with Ray Bradbury." *Tomorrowland* (Walt Disney Treasures). Interview with Leonard Maltin. Disney DVD, 2004.

[2] Scops were poets and performers in Anglo-Saxon culture.

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