

Listening to Purpose

by Bennett Johnston

Part I: Storytellers

“I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”

—**Alasdair MacIntyre** (as quoted by Robert Fulford)

In the summer of 1926 Walt Sternberg joined his two brothers on a journey he would never forget: a short trip to the jewelry store in Trenton, New Jersey to buy a bracelet for his mother. He was eight years old. Whether the bracelet was in step with the latest fashions was, of course, happily irrelevant. Love, magic and the outer limits of a modest allowance were the arbiters of taste, and the ingredients of a delicious memory. He tells this story simply, rather quickly, stops, pauses puts his hands on the table and with a quiet, joyful gaze, lets the rest of the memory unwind in silence before us. Friends at the table ask a few questions, “What did she think of the gift?” or “How did the three of you get to the jewelry store?” He smiles a little, to let us know that he hears the questions, but his gaze remains unperturbed, and lingers a few moments longer, then he says: “No, that’s it, that’s the story I want to tell.” It is as if he wants to tell us not to weigh his story down with too many details, that the power of a story is in its essence, and that true power comes from knowing what is essential.

Walt and I are part of a group that meets every Thursday afternoon to play a board game that I have been designing for the past two years. At 90, most of the group is more than double my age; and though the size of our group sometimes varies, there is usually at least a half dozen of us. The game is about sharing memories—storytelling is a central element of the game—and it is a tool for memory enhancement. The workings of memory are especially important to our

group—as we age, the inconveniences of forgetting increase, and of course the scourge of Alzheimer’s disease is something to dread. So we play the game to stay sharp, and we have a lot of fun; but the most satisfying part of Thursday afternoons is sharing stories.

Since we started over a year ago, our group has shared hundreds of stories, from ordinary everydays, to extraordinary once-in-a-life-times: Last week, for example, Jim told a story about singing in a choir, about the deep satisfaction of singing with friends; and his momentous decision to join the seminary, the struggle of deciding. Valda told a story about watching a parade of marching soldiers who had just returned home from World War I. She was very young, but the memory of so many young men marching with “empty shirt sleeves and pants legs” has never left her. Eileen sang a popular song from the 1930’s “that has to be part of the soundtrack of my life”. (We all wanted to hear more songs from her “soundtrack”, but she is making us wait.) Caroleen shared a story about her fascinating journey to the remote territories of New Guinea, north of Australia, in the 1960’s, just after the death of her husband. She signed on as a volunteer school teacher there and stayed for two years.

I have often heard that when we get old, we have nothing left but our memories—as if living is over. Indeed, in modern America, what is the purpose of a person retired, at age 90, without family obligations, and fading health? The easy answers that most of us count on are no longer available: there are no job titles to hide behind; few friends are left; and the busy-ness of life that often forms a veneer of purpose is taken away.

So much demands our attention when we are younger, we often don’t bother with questions of purpose—there are countless details vying for our attention; and as the Information Age gives way to the Too Much Information Age, details just keep piling up. Advertising is literally everywhere: newspapers, magazines, twenty-four hour news channels, talk radio, the internet...it seems impossible that America’s founding fathers didn’t even have a daily paper! Computers now give us the ability to generate and process nearly infinite masses of data, with astonishing accuracy and detail; but as anyone who has ever had to cope with mountains of junk mail and spam will tell you, more isn’t necessarily better; and accuracy doesn’t always bring

clarity. Clarity can be described as a *state of being* that allows what is essential and most meaningful to arise. Clarity comes from listening with discernment and patience. Processing data is not the same as listening—we don't listen to data, we interpret and label it like a specimen in a jar.

The only way to know something truly worthwhile about a person is through their stories. If we rely only on personal data—where they live, what they do for work, who their friends are—we may gather some useful information, but we won't learn much more than a census taker or a credit bureau can. Reports analyze and decipher random stuff—stories make sense out of life. Stories capture *essence*. When we share personal stories, we share part of ourselves. When someone listens to our stories they are listening to who we are.

Attention Deficit Disorder has become a pervasive symptom of the Too Much Information Age; both a dilemma and a metaphor of living in a society too busy and too distracted to listen. There is a word for people who don't listen to each other—they are called strangers. Personal stories create inner connections between people and these inner connections are the necessary glue that ultimately holds communities together. Without shared stories we don't have communities; we merely have collections of proximate strangers, unacknowledged and disengaged.

We have vast untapped resources of meaning and understanding in every senior center and nursing home in America. With our increasing tendency to segregate ourselves by age, we have committed ourselves to a course once unthinkable in civilized society: we are attempting to form communities without common legacies, without the bonds and sense of common destiny that the stories of our elders can provide; and we are thereby preparing a new legacy for future generations with a less steady foundation to stand on. The absence of their stories is an absence of essential perspective—and ultimately an absence of grace.

Part II: America the Distracted

“We define ourselves, our lives, and our well being by what we consume....Consumers crave brands...that help provide meaning and order in their lives.”

—Laurence Vincent, marketing executive

Stories are a basic need that emanates from the heart—it is impossible to feel human without them—for life experiences are narrative experiences; and there is no other way to convey who we are as individuals, or collectively as a community and as a nation. So it marked a tremendous change in American life when—with the ascendancy of television, long commutes and general busy-ness—we started becoming story-*consumers*, rather than story-*tellers*. Our story-telling muscles have begun to atrophy; and as our habit of telling stories fades, so to our sense of purpose. This may sound like bad news to most of us, but it has been good news for at least one segment of American society: the advertising industry.

Advertising is now a \$117 billion dollar business in the United States, with international corporate consultants, and experts in every mode of business, psychology, and the arts; all dedicated to get you to fall in love with their products and their brands. The sophistication of the enterprise is breathtaking. A new sub-industry within the advertising industry called neuro-marketing uses some of the most advanced technology in brain science: the magnetic resonance imaging machine known as the MRI. A machine that costs about \$2.5 million dollars, an MRI is able to detect radio signals from chemicals in the brain and can map collections of neurological synapses that fire around a particular thought, or type of thought. This amazing tool allows scientists to identify particular areas of the brain that are dedicated to different types of experiences and memories. For instance, only certain regions of the brain are used to recall mundane, but important memories such as your vocabulary, numbers and the way that words and numbers go together. A different set of synapses are engaged around our personal life experiences. It turns out that the things which are most intimate, personal and meaningful to us—our stories, our

purpose—use unique regions of the brain. When you share a personal story about yourself, you engage this part of your brain; and it is this part of your mind that neuro-marketers are most interested in. They want their stories to be included in your life story.

The new science of advertising is aiming for your personal narrative—the very ground from which purpose grows—which, if not looked after, revered and protected, can be paved over with brand logos, useless information and emptiness. They want you to care so deeply about their products that your inner purpose becomes aligned with theirs—what better way could there be to increase sales?

It is still not completely clear whether these new technologies will work as effectively for advertisers as they hope; and this is not meant as a diatribe against advertising. It is meant instead as a call to awareness. We are constantly exposed to a flood of relatively unimportant information everyday, in the form of advertising, television, radio and other media programming; but we still have the power to choose where our attention goes. Turn down the volume. Use the mute button. Give time and attention to what is important to you and your loved ones. Work with your own stories and the stories of your community, not commercial fabrications. A purposeful life can never be constructed from the themes of our inadequacies that the advertising industry thrives on.

In our Thursday afternoon group, even the simplest questions provoke unforgettable life stories. I asked Trudy to “tell a story about the smell of something cooking.” She sat back in her chair and seemed to focus on something far away. “The smell of lentil soup. February 13, 1945,” she said. “I grew up in Berlin. By that time the war was winding down, and I was sent to Dresden, hoping to be in a safer, more peaceful place. It was such a beautiful city...” She paused for a moment. “The city was fire bombed for two days and nights. Everything was reduced to rubble; tens of thousands of people were killed overnight.” She stopped again, then, “I was alone and when it was finally over, I wandered out into the rubble. The city was quiet. I could smell lentil soup cooking, somewhere. I followed the smell and found a woman cooking. Strangers were gathered around, without saying a word, we ate together. I can smell that soup still.”

Part III: Listening to the Elders

“In order that the court shall understand the frame of mind which leads me to action such as this, it is necessary for me to explain...the factors which influenced me in deciding to act as I did. Many years ago, when I was a boy brought up in my village in the Transkei, I listened to the elders of the tribe telling stories....”

—**Nelson Mandela**, excerpt from his first court statement after his arrest for leading a non-violent stay-at-home strike in 1961.

Sometimes we stumble into purpose when we least expect it. I didn't intend to spend more than a few afternoons at the senior center. I simply wanted to test the game that I had designed on a group of older adults. I certainly had no idea that Thursday afternoons would become one of the most important and jealously guarded times on my weekly schedule. Like everyone else that I know, I felt too busy and over-extended to imagine such a commitment. Even so, I found myself deeply attracted to the elders. What an honor it is to be with them and to listen to their stories!

They have shown me that, like a story, purpose is always meant to be shared; that purpose is brought to life in community. Those of us who are suffering from a sense of purposelessness almost always feel isolated from the inner connections of authentic community. Among the greatest gifts any of us will ever receive is the personal attention and genuine interest of others. After all, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to find your true voice if no one is listening.

Cultivation is a word akin to listening. It implies devotion and caring. Cultivating soil means more than simply growing something in it. A good farmer listens to the land with his eyes, hands, mouth and nose—the smell of soil, its look and feel, even the taste—noticing and knowing these things is part of true listening. Cultivation implies an individual effort, rooted in devotion to a larger ideal, with a long view of things, which is why we speak of cultivating the arts or a person. It is a deep knowing that comes from sustained, loving effort. “Love does not dominate, it cultivates.”¹ And just so, love listens.

I have been learning from the elders to cultivate listening. They have taught me that true listening has the power to reveal purpose and that purpose is not necessarily found in *what* we do, but in *how* we do what we do and *why*. I have learned that any task, no matter how mundane or trivial can be filled with purpose. When you are really listening, everything in your life becomes a part of the story you were born to tell—and every part of that story reveals who you truly are.

In the past I acted as if my own stories didn't matter—that they weren't good enough, or interesting enough, or that they were somehow just too out of place to bother sharing with others. Probably all of us have known the feeling that, “No one is really interested in what I have to say”, or “What I have to share isn't all that important”. This pervasive sense of inadequacy is learned; and it is likely that if you believe it about your own stories, others around you believe it about theirs as well. Our “comfort zone” in America is becoming a place where no one listens, and nothing worthwhile is ever said—where the thoughtless commerce of everyday life seems to take up all of our time and is gradually mistaken for what is genuine and most vital in American culture.

Stories are the true foundation of culture. Societies of purpose are founded on stories of meeting challenges, embracing sacrifices and serving our fellow man. Thankfully, most of these stories are too messy to be packaged for television and corporate advertising which usually rely on mindless entertainment, instant gratification and easy comforts—and encourage us to avoid anything else. The Book of Job, for instance, may have little commercial appeal, but it is an essential story of faith and purpose. The stories of our founding fathers; of Black Elk, Chief Seattle and Crazy Horse; of the civil rights movement and our ancestors who sacrificed everything for our freedom, are among countless stories that orient us as a society of purpose.

The stories our elders share are just as essential. In the sharing of their life experiences, even the simplest story becomes a moment of perfection—it is as if in each story they are saying exactly what needs to be said, in just the right way, at just the right time. These are moments brought to life, opened into fullness and the promise of possibility. These are moments without

dead ends, connected to and a part of a larger story that belongs to all of us.

It is here, in these everyday magical moments, that our little group has found purpose—in stories of real life; in stories that cannot be shrunk to the size of commercial gestures and the thoughtless assumptions of a world stunned by busy-ness. Every time we meet our purpose grows, nourished by our listening, our sharing, and our stories.

I asked Harry to tell a story about a time when he was very cold. He grew up on a farm in Northern Minnesota, so I knew that he would have something to say on the subject. He stooped his shoulders a bit, and crossed his arms, as if to turn his energy inward against the misery of the cold. “I have never been so desperately cold as I was one December night during the Great Depression”, he began. “There was a brutal wind that I will never forget. We didn’t dare go outside; and everything, everywhere was completely frozen. We had a fire, but we needed to stay in bed under a pile of blankets to stay warm.” “Man, that must have been awful,” I said. He looked at me and smiled, “No, not at all, it was one of the best times of my life. My wife and I were together in a lonely little cabin in the middle of nowhere on our honeymoon. I guess we were crazy to be up there so alone in all that cold. We didn’t have any money; but we were in love, and I have never forgotten what I learned then: that nothing is ever as bad as it is good, as long as there is love.”

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¹ Johan Wolfgang von Goethe. (1749-1832). *Wisdom and Experience*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1949, pp. 198.