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Storytelling content, contexts, and controversies

A conscionable calculus

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The performance of autoethnographic storytelling can amplify the voices of those who are often unheard, silenced, or marginalized. Moreover, personal storytelling in appropriate contexts can provide a forum for sharing the previously unspoken or unspeakable that, when shared, can begin to heal the teller and promote social justice and societal change. Yet, not all contexts are are appropriate and not all stories are safe to share. Thus, telling autoethnographic stories can present ethical concerns for which there are no pat answers or one-size-fits-all solutions. This article discusses a few of these concerns.

1 Storytelling content, contexts, and controversies

The following discussion touches upon themes and dilemmas, reflected in the poems (see Mages in this issue), that tellers, educators, and researchers may want to consider as they strive to give voice to a diversity of true human experiences through the performance of autobiographical stories.

The crafting and performance of true personal stories, or oral memoirs, has become increasingly popular. This may be due, at least in part, to the prominence of The Moth (n.d.-a), an organization that hosts live storytelling shows in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia and disseminates the best of the stories told during the live performances in radio broadcasts, podcasts, online videos, and books (Burns, 2013, 2017; The Moth, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). The success of The Moth, as well as the success of smaller shows that present autobiographical storytelling (e.g., Dicks & Dicks, n.d.; Gomez, 2019; Penn Nursing, n.d.; Replay Storytelling, 2021; The Story Collider, n.d.; Whitehair, n.d.), highlights the entertainment value inherent in listening to people share their stories; true tales of temptations, trysts, tribulations, and triumphs can be compelling and engaging.

Moreover, autoethnographic storytelling can amplify the voices of those who are often unheard, silenced, or marginalized. Storytelling in appropriate contexts can provide a forum for sharing the previously unspoken or unspeakable that, when shared, can begin to heal the teller and promote social justice and societal change. In addition, storytelling can help develop a sense of community among participants (Maguire, 1998) and can help participants feel more comfortable sharing who they are and what they believe. Although the power of personal

storytelling to engage listeners may be salient, telling true personal stories can present a variety of ethical concerns for which there are no pat answers or one-size-fits-all solutions.

1.1 Tell scars, not wounds

Creating a context where participants are able to safely share deeply personal stories in public performances, or in smaller more informal settings, has the potential to foster personal growth and promote awareness of a variety of psychological, social, and societal issues. Yet, simply stating that a storytelling space is safe, or striving to create a safe storytelling space, does not make it safe (see Cañas, 2015). Depending on the storyteller, the content of the story, and the context of the performance, telling a private or painful tale in public may not be a psychologically healthy or wise choice for the teller. For some people telling about a traumatic experience may be therapeutic, for others it may be triggering or retraumatizing.

The literature provides some guidance to help tellers determine whether a story is emotionally or psychologically safe to share in public. Leitman (2015) suggests, “Let time pass between the event and talking about the event” (p. 119). Similarly, Burns (2014), the Artistic Director of The Moth, writes, “Tell stories from your scars, not from your wounds” (also see The Moth, 2014). Although sharing or performing personal stories may give agency to the teller to determine what is safe to share, even experienced tellers may not be able to fully determine when they are psychologically prepared to tell a traumatic tale in a public forum (Dicks, 2018). Furthermore, when a story is part of a larger program or production, even the well-intentioned desire of directors, producers, and tellers to present an aesthetically powerful or dramatically compelling show may encourage tellers to present more story content than they feel comfortable sharing or to divulge details of a story they are psychologically unprepared to reveal in public. Sensitive to this issue, Burns (2014) notes, “One of the great challenges our directors [at The Moth] face is figuring out if someone is really ready to tell their story… It takes time to gain insight into painful experiences.” Burns (2014) also cautions, “When a story is too raw, the audience can be left feeling awkward, or worse, unsafe.”

Even in circumstances where telling a personal story feels emotionally safe for the teller and the audience, the teller may be unaware that sharing the story can have concomitant social, societal, or legal repercussions. For example, in the United States, educators of minors are *mandated reporters* and “are required to report any stories of ongoing abuse, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts to authorities” (The Moth, 2014). Thus, once the story is shared, an educator may not be legally or ethically permitted to keep the content of the story confidential. In addition to personal repercussions for the teller, some stories might have repercussions for others. Stories that reveal a teller is an undocumented immigrant, for instance, may also reveal the immigration status of the teller’s family members. Thus, a careful consideration of

what is safe to tell is essential to the quality of the process and the product of storytelling performances.

1.2 A rose by any other name

Another issue discussed in the storytelling literature is whether or not to use names or pseudonyms for the people mentioned in a story, or even whether altering a name or other characteristic is sufficient to protect someone's identity.

Lemott (2012) avers, "You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should've behaved better." Leitman (2015), in contrast, unambiguously advocates for protecting the identity of those mentioned in stories. Dicks (2018) takes a more nuanced approach. He believes "in naming the villains in our lives" (p. 306). So, in some instances, he follows Lemott's advice and names those who behaved badly in his life. Yet, he acknowledges that "changing the names of people to protect their anonymity is perfectly reasonable" (p. 305) and he does so when he feels it is warranted. He goes on to note,

> Sometimes we just don't tell certain stories. Speaking them aloud may irreparably damage relationships with loved ones. You may expose someone else's secret. You may put your job or your company in jeopardy. Sometimes it's just not worth the story. (p. 306)

It is worth noting that, when staging a storytelling show within a school community, The Moth Education team (The Moth, 2014) suggests that tellers seek the permission of all those mentioned or implicated in a story. Even when a performance is not told within an educational context, some tellers choose to seek the permission of the people in their stories.

1.3 A conscionable calculus

Simply changing the names or personal characteristics of people in stories may not sufficiently conceal who they are. Whether heroes, accomplices, perpetrators, victims, or bystanders, people in stories may be identifiable. Yet, some tellers are willing to risk the consequences of telling a difficult tale or naming names in order to right wrongs, protect others, or advocate for change. Thus, the choice of whether and/or how to conceal the true identity of the people who populate stories and decisions about which stories are safe to tell require a conscionable calculus, a careful and conscientious analysis, or calculation, of the risks and benefits to all those who may be positively or negatively affected by the content of the story. This conscionable calculus can be more complex than those new to the performance of autoethnographic stories may fully comprehend.

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