

*A Moment in Time-Online*  
November 1, 2013

## **The Art of Storytelling** **An Interview with Don Forsberg**

*I met with the multi-talented, Don Forsberg to discuss the art of storytelling and how it might differ with story writing. We are approaching the season which contains our most important and sacred stories, and Don is a master at the craft. A copy of the News Letter can be obtained at the Northfield Senior Center.*

Steven James Beto (sjb): When I told a story to someone and the next day I showed her the written version of the story, she said that she preferred it when I told her. Why is that?

Don Forsberg (DF): Here are some of the reasons, and I don't know what her reasons were. When you tell a story orally, you are using many different instruments. You have the instrument of your voice, for example, intonation, speech, pace....

Sjb: Kinesics, body language...

DF: You're facial expressions are powerful so that you have the use of all these instruments which on the page are missing. When we start writing so often we feel that these words have got to be correct. When I'm telling a story, sometimes I'm just sort of rapping. It's spontaneity; it's a lack of fear or concern often. We kind of get out of our own way and we allow what eloquence we have to glow. Plus, we get to see the reaction of the listener as well. I've told my students for years that they have a natural eloquence and that it is more important to get out of its way and let it flow than just about anything else.

Sjb: What is story? Does it have a form—a beginning, a middle, and end?

DF: Really hard to say. You can go back to Aristotle's Poetics to find a good definition of what makes a good story. Nowadays, most people agree that there's a good catchy beginning, character development, detail, description, and then there's the control of the plot and a satisfying conclusion, but the most important part of the story is conflict. Conflict is the most important thing if you want people to listen to your story. Now, If I'm just trying to tell you about an experience I had on a picnic with a pretty girl and we had a wonderful time, I'm not going to find conflict there, and the story is going to be more of an anecdote.

Sjb: That's just exposition.

DF: That's right, but if I go on that picnic and suddenly we are invaded by ants and they just won't leave us alone, I could make a story out of that because there's conflict between my desire for the party and the desire of the ants. I could make a pretty good story out of that now that I think about it. Story must always have conflict, and of course, that's what Aristotle said.

Sjb: It was put to me once that the different kinds of conflict include: man against himself, man against man, man against woman, man against nature, man against God.....that's about it, isn't it?

DF: I think there may be more than that, or there are subcategories. Sometimes conflict is in the form of suspense, what is going to happen next.

Sjb: What's the purpose of story?

DF: It's multi-purpose. It could be to educate; it could be to frighten or confuse.

Sjb: Like ghost stories at a campout are meant to keep children in their tent at night.

DF: That's right. Poorly told, obsessive and repetitious story telling is one form of mental illness.

Sjb: Mental illness?

DF: Yes. When the stories that we tell to ourselves get to be: "I'll never succeed." "I can't do anything right," stories that are focused on a mantra of despair or unhappiness. What talk therapy tries to get us to do is to get us to tell ourselves a different kind of story.

Sjb: Story telling was perhaps the first form of education and entertainment.

DF: And, and art form as well.

Sjb: To what extent is storytelling still a part of our daily lives?

DF: Sad to say, our need for story in our lives is now being filled primarily by television and movies. The art and the pleasure of telling stories, which used to take place on the front porch, they are now watching T.V. together.

Sjb: But, that's not interactive. They're not talking with each other. They're not interacting.

DF: They're not interacting at all, they're watching T.V., and it's not their stories it's not about themselves and their family, it's some script writer's story that has been reduced and diminished sadly, but why is there a need for story? Because, we tend to organize our lives and our perception of ourselves in the form of stories.

Sjb: That is where our identity comes from.

DF: That is where our identity really comes from, and then when we want to reveal ourselves to others we tell our stories and listen to others, but it needs to be practiced. You have to sit together and listen to each other. It used to be that the telling of stories was the only means of

education and telling the myths was a way of binding themselves together and accepted a common history and a common attitude about life.

Sjb: So, stories can become ritualized.

DF: They certainly can. To me, the most important stories are the true stories that come from our own lives. Those are the most vital.

Sjb: It's also important to know who your audience is.

DF: Oh, I'll tell you a story about that. I was performing in front of a live audience and I had a few witticisms that just came out of me, and they laughed! I realized that this audience wanted to laugh, so I played the story from that moment on to get as many laughs as I could.

Sjb: So, it was interactive in the sense that you sensed their need and responded to it.

DF: Very much. Still the same story, but you shift the focus and change it to humor. When I prepare a story, I sit in a chair and I think, what is this story about? The story should be about something and you should make the listener understand it, but once you get started, things can sometimes take an unexpected twist.

Sjb: Do you have a story in mind that you would like to tell?

DF: Sure. My father was active and alert and intelligent at the age of 86, and he had a heart attack. It came out of nowhere. He was living in Brainerd, Minnesota, at the time and I was living in Anoka. I got the call late night from my mother. My wife and I and my son drove up there along with a number of relatives, drove all the way up to Brainerd and no sooner did we get there than we were told that we had to go back down to Abbott Northwestern hospital in Minneapolis because things were critical and there wasn't the proper equipment in Brainerd.

My father was frightened; I had never seen my father frightened before, and he wanted me to ride down in the ambulance with him, but they didn't allow me to do it. I said, I'll be right behind. I'll follow right behind.

When we got down to the hospital, my father was whisked off for some various tests and so forth and finally he was brought back to his bed. By this time, it was mid-morning. The room was full of people—relatives. We could see that was confusing him so what we did was people moved away from the bed. There was one chair next to the bed and we took turns in the chair engaging my father as much as he could be engaged.

I was sitting there when the meal came in. He was—he wanted to eat, but he couldn't manage it on his own. My sister said to me, "Donnie," my family calls me Donnie. "You'll have to feed him." I didn't want to. I felt squeamish about it for some reason, I don't know why. I didn't want to, but I had to. I couldn't say I didn't want to; I couldn't get out of it. So, I did. As soon as I began, the squeamishness went away and it was fine. As a matter of fact, if you've ever fed a child, you've had to scrape bits of food from their lip with a spoon and see that it gets home

where it belongs. When I did that, some great circle closed itself. He had fed me, and I was now feeding him. As a child, I had been frightened, and now so was he. He died several hours later, but I'm really glad that I fed him. I'm really glad that I fed him his last meal.

Sjb: Thank you for your time, sir.

### **Faithful to the Remembered and Those We Love**

With a strong heart we can remember those who have passed,  
A strong heart to always endure the pain in our essence.

With ultimate love we will always miss our loved ones that are gone,  
And forever and ever always share that love with others that are amongst us.

With an everlasting faith in the fate of our lives, we will always  
Remember that those we love will always live happily and live on after life.

*John R. Fredrickson*