

**Masturbation or Catharsis****-The Possibilities of the the personal story**  
by Judith Black

Masturbation is when one diddles with themself in the expectation of reaching orgasm. Catharsis is the purging of an audiences emotions through a work of art. Which would you rather do in public?

A story culled from the belly of our experience and offered to listeners with the intimacy and immediacy that accompanies the personal can be one of the most powerful storytelling experiences available. Indeed it can evoke catharsis in the listeners. When, however, 'personal story' is used as a rationale to share anecdotes, idiosyncrasies, or details of ones life that will have no resonance with listeners, it degenerates into an exercise in self-indulgence, alias, masturbation. The task of this critique is to define the difference and outline the directions of responsible storymaking/telling from personal roots.

Our first task is to create a definition. Simple rules, like the ten big ones given to Moses on Sinai, can help clarify what a personal story is and is not, and which paths can best lead you there.

1. Thou shall tell 'Personal Tales' based on their own experience.
2. Thou shall not lift a story from a literary or folkloric source and by telling it in first person claim it is your experience. Like a suit of new clothes, the story might fit well and feel as though it did indeed originate in the teller's experience, but it did not. It is a story that, like the fine suit, has already been woven, cut, and stitched. It might need some alterations to fit the teller, but is not original. All the teller has to do is slip the story on. Thus, stories told in first person are not necessarily personal stories but tales that have been personalized to make their tellings feel more immediate. This is a perfectly legitimate choice, but should be noted in your writing or performance.
3. Thou shall always footnote when another's tale is adapted for thee. Personal is that belonging to a particular person. Respect peoples lives and works. Don't claim them as your own.

4. Thou shall not claim the stories of other family members as thy own. Stories culled from ones family are not necessarily personal stories. These, like any researched and shaped tale, have their primary root in the experience of others. The clan relationship will add intimacy to the material, but the teller is not a main player in the action of these tales.

5. Thou shall not share ridiculous, irrelevant facts about oneself that have no relevance to the tale being told. Because you have captivated them with story, you needn't hold them captives by sharing peculiar idiosyncrasies that have no relevance to the evening's themes or tales. The rather bizarre American cult of personality calls upon us to care about what flavor ice cream Michael Jackson prefers. I hope that our world remains focused on the point of the tale rather than the personal life of the teller.

6. Thou shall not be chained to the complete, unabridged details of a real experience. Just because it happened doesn't make it interesting. Weed out what is irrelevant to your themes and characters. You are not, like Charles Dickens, being paid by the word!

7. Thou shall come to understand why a particular experience or person has touched them. In doing so you turn anecdote into story.

8. Thou shall not claim that a slice of life or snap shot of a person, place or experience is a story. A well phrased picture can give us a porthole into another's world, but cannot do the transporting. Only relating to another's experience will transport us.

9. Thou shall take time to shape the personal. Because you have lived an experience, don't assume your listeners have the same familiarity with it. As with a tale from a literary or folkloric root, take time to draw out characters, environment and plot.

10. Thou shall not engage a public platform for personal therapy. Though creating a personal story is often a therapeutic process, once shaped it should help others discover their feelings rather than serve as an exhibition stand for your open wounds.

A good story, like theater, enables the listener to enter unthreatened into another's world, experience or identify with their journey, and emerge with gained knowledge or new insight. When the story is based on personal experience, the responsibility of the teller is no less, and often more because we must shape what is as common as 'breathing out and breathing in' and make it resonate as a full journey for our listeners. This is a great deal to ask of ourselves, but once done we begin to bind folk arts (originating among the common people) and fine arts (polished or refined) into a weave of great and brilliant textures.\*

Shaping our past into stories is on rare occasions a spontaneous accident. When you listen to National Public Radio commentators retell tidbits of their day, observations of their environment or details of human behavior, it feels like a complete story rolling effortlessly out of their experience. It is not. Bill Harley, a well known storyteller and song writer contributes frequently to NPR. About these commentaries he says:

“It isn't enough for something just to happen. A narrative form that offers more than a story plot is needed. Your experience has to be put in perspective and this sometimes requires a lot of duct tape.”

The duct tape that Bill refers to is the process of contemplating and honing an experience so that it will resonate in the lives of others. How this happens is the 'stuff' of good personal stories.

Resonance is generally an aural term, a sound or tone caused by secondary vibrations. For a personal story to have resonance, a quality that I propose to be desirable, it must generate echoes or resonate in the listener's life. Whether or not the listener can personally relate to the experience is not the point. If we only tell to those who share our experiences we are draining our art form of its major source of power. To be able identify with people, places and circumstances beyond our own lives, is one of the great gifts of stories. Shaping a tale so that it has resonance helps to insure this.

What we almost always begin with is an experience, a memory, a person that touched our lives. Often, in sharing these you have what at first is an anecdote or slice of life. An anecdote is a short narrative concerning a specific incident. A slice of life is an astute description of a time, place, person or feeling. In creating them, one must be a clear observer of details and know how to paint them into a lasting image. We should always feel free

to share these with our friends, relatives, spouse and mother! They, after all, have a vested interest in us, finding (we hope) the most minute details of our lives endlessly fascinating. Further, without these opportunities to tell, retell and consider our experiences, we lack the creative playground necessary for processing them. These in and of themselves however are not stories.

Not long ago I heard a teller on a concert stage share a powerful scene. As the gifted child of very ambitious parents, he was forced to perform endlessly in various settings. He painted the scenes vividly and we could see the child confused and frightened, a circus dog, uncertain what his master required before he could seek rest and affection. The scenes were poignant and striking, but they did not constitute a story. We did not know why he wanted to share these slices of his life. As an audience we were left unsettled with clear images that sat in mid-air and lingered like a scent that can't quite be placed. The job of the storyteller is not merely to artistically recap experience. You must set that experience in a frame that will let us know why it was important to you, and thus important to us. Your friends, the newspapers and television news will re broadcast facts for you daily. We have an obligation not merely to retell, but process what has happened, come to understand how and why it has touched our lives and reshape the experience so that it might do the same for others. This needn't be an endless or onerous task.

As a child I would ask my mother to tell the same story ad nauseam.

"Mommy, tell me what happened when grandma found the prune pits on Yom Kippur (a 24 hour fast for people of the Jewish faith)?" "Oh, she found them behind the couch and I don't know how, but she knew they were mine. I had snuck them on Yom Kippur! She was holding them in her hand when I heard her call my name 'Helen Edith Gruskin!' She only used all three of my names when I was in big trouble."

This was a minute piece of family trivia until I thought about why it was important to me and integrate that reason into the telling.

As a child I would ask my mother to tell the same story ad nauseam. My mother was perfection. You could eat off her floors. My room was a constant mess. Her hair was strand perfect. Mine flew away to the Bahamas. She kept the family books. I still flunked adding in High School. But there was this one story. "Mommy, tell me what happened when grandma found the prune pits on Yom Kippur( a 24 hour fast for people of the Jewish faith)?" "Oh, she found them behind the couch and I don't know how, but she knew they were mine. I had snuck them on Yom Kippur! She was holding them in her hand when I heard her call my name 'Helen Edith Gruskin!' She only used all three of my names when I was in big trouble." So my mom made mistakes too!

I have used this story frequently in parent workshops to point out how life stories humanize us to our children. The anecdote without the frame would not of accomplished the goal. It required a little thinking. Why did I want my mother to repeat this story so frequently? By thinking this through and translating those thoughts into a frame I was able to make a story that spoke to the experiences of others. If indeed we want people to trust their imaginations, intellects and hearts into our caring, if only for an hour, we must prove ourselves responsible for that care. The tale based on personal experience, like any that has evolved through ancient lore and hundreds of years of telling, must offer more than a snapshot of our lives. It must use the personal experience, not only as a hook to draw our listeners into our world, but also to take them on a journey and allow them to emerge with another view or vantage point.

Story can help listeners to stretch their minds and hearts beyond their own frame of reference, or not. Two very painful incidents come to mind immediately in which the tellers were not able to communicate successfully because they did not take the time and effort to draw listeners into their world.

Many years ago a humorist appeared at *Storytellers in Concert*, our series of concerts for adult audiences in Cambridge, Ma. We informed him that this was a rather sophisticated, left leaning audience, but he choose to not alter a program he'd developed in a conservative rural community. Whether they were personal or personalized stories, I never found out, but after referring to women as 'the girls' telling tales about husbands angered because of incorrectly prepared meals, and heading on to jokes about how birth control was achieved by putting your wives' feet in a milk jug..... His audience was dead silent. He was going to tell the jokes and stories he grew up with, despite his audience's predisposition. It was an embarrassing evening for everyone involved and, it didn't have to be. Had our performer taken those jokes, that so much reflected his growing up and culture, and placed them in the milieu they came from, his audience would have appreciated his work. Had he drawn a picture of the world that spawn this humor and invited us to experience it with him, we would have. I imagine his evening beginning: "I grew up in the cold north country where a man's a man, a woman's a woman, a cow's a cow, and we only get confused when it's really cold. When I was a boy...." I imagine the teller sharing some of his world and setting it as

a frame in which his jokes, anecdotes, and stories illuminated that place. As it was, he expected that jokes and behaviors very specific to his views and growing would be shared and laughed at by others. Wrong. This was a huge indulgence on his part, and led to a failed experience. One might think I'd learn something from watching this debacle. NOT! I was asked to tell stories for the Superior Court Justices of Massachusetts after an evening meal and meeting. Had I done my homework, I would have known this was a politically and socially conservative group, used to exerting an enormous amount of influence with little effort. By beginning the evening with a piece of political satire (*The Time the Fanatic Right Independence Group Stole the Devil*), I had alienated my audience that even the heart warming 'wise judge' tales, were barely heard. So offended were they by my politics and social liberalism, they tried to stiff me! (But that's another story.) I had inappropriately assumed a bridge between our views and experience. If I had taken the time to draw them into the world that birthed the experience ("I was the rebellious child of a Richard Nixon Republican and Donna Reed wanna be."), ally them with me ("You know it's like to fight for your beliefs.") and finally invited them to share from my vantage point rather than listen to the idiosyncrasies of a single person, the evening might not have been a complete debacle.

Well shaped personal stories invite people into your world. After a story about my parents in Florida, many people have approached and said "I think we have the same parents." This is gratifying, and we often chat about life in 'Gods Waiting Room (an irreverent reference to South Central Florida) Even more exciting is when someone approaches and says "I have never known people like those, but when my friends talk about their parents, I'll understand a lot more about where they're coming from!" In this case I had created a compelling and realistic world, invited my listeners into it, and helped them to leave with a sense of people and places beyond their experience. The tale must be shaped so the listener doesn't simply observe, but relates to the situation and is able to feel and understand the characters choices along with the teller. This constitutes resonance. By taking time to draw listeners into your world so they can identify with your feelings and responses, you can, despite wide gulfs of real-world sharing (a large audience of petroleum industry promoters!), ensure some resonance. This is the power of a well drawn personal tale.

One major misconception about 'personal stories' is they are auto-

biographies. Just because something happened doesn't make it interesting or accessible to other people. Pure autobiography is good for the analyst's couch, National Enquirer expose's or the film idol's ghost written tombs, but not necessarily the best approach for shaping a story that will resonate in the experience of your listeners. Some things that 'really happened' will simply be irrelevant, boring, or self-indulgent within the story you are creating. My dear friend and writer Sara Wernick would often click her tongue at me upon hearing the first incarnation of a new tale and say, "Just because it happened doesn't mean it belongs in the story." If the details, character or action has no relevance to your reason for telling the story, leave it out. Not long ago I was working on a tale based on dating men, compulsive ice cream eating, and trying to remember what was on the roof of the car before driving off. The piece was called **Teetering on the Edge**. Based on the giggle factor, I knew the themes worked. That is, people laughed when I simply described these three simultaneous actions. My main objective was to show that when one bases their self image on how others view them, they will always teeter on sanity's edge. These external views were formalized into three male characters. One of them was based strictly on a fellow I knew, the other two, created out of a small pool of interesting bachelors that had crossed mine and other women's doorsteps. Each came to represent a very specific type of man in whose eyes the heroine had come to measure herself. The one I knew well was the most difficult to draw consistently! He was a tall, muscled, blue eyed, Don Juan from Brazil. As the story developed it became clear that despite our 96% lack of mutual interests, values, and thinking, his interest in me validated my physical being and gave me confidence. As I played with his story and shared it, other women would tell me their versions of the same scenario. Once after a show a woman came up to me laughing hysterically. "I've got a date with 'the Brazilian' tonight!" She didn't mean 'my' Brazilian, but hers. I knew the material worked. It resonated in the lives of other women. What took time was to pull out the idiosyncrasies that drew people away from identifying with the experience and made it oddly mine. The fact that this particular man had an allergic reaction to wheat, causing us to endlessly search out specific restaurants he could dine at, did not add to his character or the story. The fact that I would spend an inordinate amount of time, finding ingredients and preparing him cookies that would fit into his special diet, did, because it bespoke the hoops I would leap through to maintain his approval. Laura Pershin (storyteller/Michigan) has always said "Don't let the truth get in the way of a good story." All this to say that personal

experience is a perfect starting point. From that point however the teller must come to understand why they want to share this story and begin honing, choosing and setting aside details that will support or distract from this goal.

Is it odd that we should be responsible for our listeners when many authors are called upon to do no more than titillate, terrorize, or tickle a funny bone? Why must we consider and shape our experiences before retelling them to a wider audience? Performers on the comedy stage tell anecdotes from their lives and have us laughing for hours. In therapeutic support groups we can hear peoples' pained life experiences and shake with sympathy and compassion. We can join the Young Republicans and hear real life tabloid tales of exploitation and greed. Why must we demand more of ourselves? Within the realm of personal stories we owe it both to ourselves and our listeners to carry on the finest traditions of the raconteur. Stories from the first have existed to help us unravel the mysteries of our world, laugh at the contortions that living presses us into, and get us closer to understanding the experiences of others. If Hansel and Gretel survived a witch and a woods through their trust in each other and use of their wits, so can we. If the Fisherman and His Wife were finally able to understand the concepts of greed and contentment, then possibly we can follow. If a husband and wife exchanging work roles for the day (Norwegian Folklore) can generate hysterical chaos that breeds a new appreciation for the work of the 'little lady' then possibly we can learn before the milk is spilt. This tradition offers a wide berth for further contributions, but what is added should enhance the tradition. A personal story is not merely an opportunity to gossip, a chance to share a pain, humiliation, or gloriously dysfunctional history. We have the power to make it more. We have become an indulgent lot and need to comb what we share.

Many years ago I began working on a project for a concert, *First Times and Forgotten Toys: The Bittersweet stories of our Childhoods*. Five storytellers had committed themselves to creating original pieces based on our own childhoods. It was a very difficult process. For a long time I forced my self to sit and remember and write down everything that came to mind. The lists and images were endless. The more I remembered, the more there seemed to be! After weeks and weeks of focusing on this process, which I call *peeling the onion*, two things seemed perfectly clear. The first was that a predominant number of family memories revolved around ways I had failing

my mother. An extremely attractive, meticulous, and socially conscious woman, she seemed to have spawned her opposite in me. The resulting relationship was stormy to say the least. The second was that to have merely re-lived the scenes might of evoked sympathy and identification in some listeners, but in and of itself would have been a therapy session, not a story. To remember the episodes in first person was only the beginning of the process.

I wanted that dress in the Newman store window badder than any dress in the whole world. It had long pink sleeves with lace around them, and a trillion ruffles under the skirt. I loved that dress...but my mom said it wasn't right for my "body type." I had to get brown and black stripes, up and down.

School wasn't my best subject. My brother Mickey "Worked Hard." My sister Eileen was "Natural Smart." Me, like the check mark said "Needs Improvement." There were three reading groups in my school. Sherma Feldman was in the Robbins. Mallory Mullin was in the Blue Jays, Me...the Pigeons.

To make a story out of it, I had to view what happened from the third person, the observational stance. In doing so I saw a little girl with many strengths, a mother with many pressures, and I discovered another strain of references emerging from the initial 'onion peeling' process. That strain had to do with the powerful role of fantasy and fairytales in my formative years. When these themes were explored and drawn out, a story emerged of a little girl who was not a victim, but a survivor.

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School wasn't my best subject. My brother Mickey "Worked Hard." My sister Eileen was "Natural Smart." Me, like the check mark said "Needs Improvement." There were three reading groups in my school. Sherma Feldman was in the Robbins. Mallory Mullin was in the Blue Jays, Me...the Pigeons. You know, nobody cared if the Sleeping Beauty was smart. You know why? Cause she had personability. That's the most important thing in the whole world to have. Personability.

Using as resources her imagination, and spunk, qualities we all have, this little girl didn't just survive, she thrived. What could have been fifteen minutes of whining became a contemporary fairytale based on personal experience, capable of striking strong cords of recognition in many listeners.

Finally it would do us all well to remember what Steve Allen the famous comic said. Pain + Time = Comedy Or you might choose the Buddhist version, out of the mud comes the lotus. Not everything is funny, but you can find humor in most things if you are able to stop living in them and take a look at yourself from another perspective. For the past 8 years my son and I have been locked in mortal battle over the issue of guns and violence. He is fascinated and drawn to both. I am repelled and abhorrent of these trends in our society. Our conflict has led us into endless fields of debate, anger, and mutual alienation. In working on a story about this topic I had to rise above my own righteousness and look, not from my perspective, but from a more neutral one.

He was four and there we were, placed by the fickle finger of fate, in the junior fascist racks at Toys R Us. Sandwiched in between the GI Joes, plastic red bazookas, and wild west rifles, the debate of the 20th century took place. He focused his big brown eyes clearly up to where I loomed, and in his most compelling tone said,

“Mommy, I want a gun more than anything in the whole world.”

I knew this territory. My speech and position was well prepared.

“Honey, guns do nothing but hurt human beings.”

“Mommy” he tried gently to insert his voice, but I was just starting to roll.

“Guns are the tools of the enemy. You cannot change this society, make it a better place to be, by using the tools of the enemy.”

“Mommy” He didn't have a change next to my moral, all pervasive logic.

“No,” I continued “If we want to change society, make it a place for humans to relate we must follow in the steps of Gandhi, King...”

His voice rose slightly. “Mommy!”

I did not notice “We must use non violence. We must approach our world with the love and caring that we want to see exhibited in our lives both before and after the reign of a tyrant.”

“Mommy” he was trying to ride over me, but I was not to be stopped.

“I know what you're thinking. What about hunters? Hunters do need guns. They can go out and shot an animal, and like our Native American friends use every part of it...”

“Mommy Mommy....”

“But we live in cities. Our food is provided for us in stores. We have no need...”

“Mommy Mommy Mommy”

Sure of myself I allowed a breath for his input. “Yes Son.”

“Mommy” he got be square in the face with those eyes again, and pulling me down to meet his height explained, “Mommy, it’s only for pretend.”

My son now has a an arsenal that would make the US military blush.

Taking a step back helps us to see the folly in ourselves and in doing so, insert a little humor and shape our experiences to share with others.

We should search our lives for feelings, episodes, details, and relationships that can be used in creating stories that will resonate for listeners. In culling, shaping, and sharing these tales born in personal experience we have a world class opportunity to share our hearts, humor, dreams and knowledge. We can offer catharsis. If we indulge ourselves in telling anecdotes and autobiography that merely enumerates on our life, we are expanding the realm of The National Enquirer. If we recognize that life experiences, understood and shaped can enable people to experience something beyond their own world and be transformed by it, we are taking responsibility for our work and deserve the title ‘artist.’