Your Story and You:

A Defense of Storytelling and Humanity

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Shout Out For Humanities Contest

There are natural writers and then there are those who approach storytelling with pocketfuls of apprehension, who still feel the disapproving glares of old grammar teachers in their nightmares. What hinders these people is perspective. Aristotle mused that poetry is greater than history because poetry is universal, not particular, and while history tells what has happened, poetry tells "the other kind of things that can happen" (Moore, p. 8). Did you catch that last part? The stuff of poetry rewrites history. Your story was never supposed to snuff itself out in the face of fear. You *can* and arguably you *should* be a natural storyteller. The following makes a case for the psychological and social importance of you. Your writing. Your speaking. Your listening.

Storytelling at its simplest is communication at its most ingenious. It has served as a conduit for political criticism, as when Mozart wrote *The Marriage of Figaro* to decry the noble system. It has reintroduced children to the magic of reading, most recently accomplished through one boy wizard with serious bedhead. And in this age that you live in, storytelling can adopt any medium you choose. You are not limited to paper. This is reflected in Steven Moore's book. He writes:

> Coming up with a definition that encompasses all these works is beyond me; I'd rather let authors show me what a novel can be than to impose a definition on them. Henry James famously described certain novels as 'large loose baggy monsters,' and if the movies have taught us anything it's that monsters come in all shapes and sizes, many unimaginable until they burst onto the screen. (p. 34)

What is your monster? Are you hiding it? Or, as Henry James suggests, are you exposing your narratives in all their shapes and sizes and accepting the marvelous literary freedom offered to

you? When you exchange your story with another, you help that new mind "work out its own questions – about psychology, society, politics, [and] morals" (*The High School Journal*). Miss Sadie Jenkins, a student at the Greensboro College for Women validated this notion almost prophetically in a 1919 essay. She wrote that, "...however important the knowledge, laws, and benefits of the scientific side of life may be to our civilization, we must not fortify our minds against the appreciation of the beautiful, nor fail in the response to the aesthetic." Her call to action was directed towards teachers, inviting them to "ennoble the men and women of tomorrow" through writing by "[showing] them the panorama of life that is stretched before them...the opportunities for doing good." The "highest possible" kind of "American citizenship" (*The High School Journal*) was, to Jenkins, preparing students for a life of self-awareness.

Jenkins continued, charging English teachers to "work for harmony between the contending forces" (*The High School Journal*). Storytelling is an equalizer unafraid of confronting contending forces. Almost 100 years later, Loyce Caruthers, in the *Journal of Negro Education* conducted a study integrating this very truth. The study, entitled "Using Storytelling to Break the Silence That Binds Us to Sameness in Our Schools" was conducted to "...explore storytelling as a staff development strategy for getting administrators, teachers, and community members to break the silence surrounding race/ethnicity, class, and gender; and to draw implications from qualitative data regarding the use of storytelling as a reculturing tool for schools and communities" (p. 662). How does storytelling work in conjunction with reculturing? And what is reculturing, anyway?

Although the term is typically education specific, it applies to you too. Kent D. Peterson explains school culture as a "set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona of the school." When this culture is operating healthily, a

positive environment is established, but when a school has "toxic" norms and values that hinder growth and learning there is a breakdown in progress and collaboration (Peterson, p.1), hence the need to readjust the presiding culture. It's a rebranding of sorts. In a society that is grossly incapable of debate and seems more uncivilized by the day, reculturing is a concept that can merge with storytelling to alter communities and restore relationships. For Loyce Caruthers, stories were the data that "[spoke] to the phenomenon of making meaning." Caruthers found that narratives provided more pathways for research because she was able to enter into a social world within the schools she targeted. A total of fourteen stories were used to gather information about reculturing and assess assumptions regarding diversity. These stories were submitted by two black females, a white female, and two white males, and then shared by the program coordinator with students and administrators to "probe for details" and "discuss issues" (Caruthers, p. 665). The results of Caruthers' study confirmed that:

> [S]torytelling, if combined with opportunities for dialogue and inquiry, may help to break the paradigm of sameness that perpetuates the silence surrounding cultural differences in schools. Deconstructed stories were replete with historical ideologies that have guided the development of American education; ideas about individualism, merit, equality, and abundance of economic opportunity, cultural superiority, [and] the role of women. (p. 666)

Furthermore, Caruthers' data suggested that "the suppression of personal experiences within schools...often contributes to the absence of reflective practices, relationships, and overall caring" (p. 665). Stories make a mockery of hatred. They take discord and disunity and envelop them into an overarching theme of community. If you were to reculture and challenge the long ignored paradigms of sameness in your world, who would be your audience? Which neighbor

terrifies you with their differences? Who do you find yourself judging most often at work? Are you prepared to use your personal history to explain why it is you remain suspicious of others? If you've grown from that anxious person into someone who is peace-filled and whole, are you equally as prepared to explain how you got there?

With these considerations, a storytelling truth surfaces: releasing a story into the open and entrusting it into another's hands is healthy. It is healthy for your thought life, but it is also healthy for your body. Dr. Pauline Chen recently reported on a new storytelling trial on patients with high blood pressure, and found that personal narratives presented to patients were just as effective at managing high blood pressure as increased medication ("When Patients Share"). Correlating stories with catharsis is not a surprising plot twist. Demand for accessible stories will continue to grow so long as you are processing an imperfect world alongside everyone else. The association between storytelling and healing does charge you with a responsibility though, and it is one you may not have asked for. Suppose additional research confirms that stories can eliminate the need for certain prescriptions? In a sense, you are bound, by science and your own motivations for social good, to share your story. If those with high blood pressure find release in listening, imagine the repercussions for illnesses like autism, cancer, ADHD?

This is not to say that storytelling is *the* cure but it could in fact be *a* cure: a cure for certain symptoms and a pathway to hope for those who have shut down emotionally and mentally. Perhaps you remain unconvinced. After all, storytelling is remarkably qualitative and science asks for the quantitative. Dr. Thomas Houston has conducted further research that grounds the legitimacy of storytelling in the medical. Narratives can help patients who wrestle with denial and resistance to treatment. When a patient identifies with a narrator or character – or both – that patient is walking a mile in a pair of shoes entirely his or her own. By the end of the

narrative, the denial is lesser and the shoes are more fitted to the feet inhabiting them. Houston believes this relatedness is essential. A story's capacity to draw readers into relationship with its characters is part of the magic. That magic, argues Houston, can't be bottled and sold.

The innovation of the narrative as a healing tool is enabling doctors to do more for their patients ("When Patients Share"), and Houston even supports one prototype that follows the dating site method. He sees the value in building a website for medical organizations where patients introduce themselves and their stories through online videos. Like a medical eHarmony, this site would pair patients with the same disease together, giving them the opportunity to face illness as allies. This immediacy of contact redirects resistance to illness, instead making it resistance to defeat. By combining technology and storytelling, patients can view the Web as an outlet for fostering relationships and being heard. The illness narrative gives people resilience and strength by positioning storytelling as "a catalyst to recovery" (Drumm).

You may be wondering how you as an average individual with relatively good health can offer emotional sustenance to a sick stranger. Or you may be sick yourself and think it impossible to inspire anyone else. John Green would challenge that mentality. Catapulting to the top of the NY Times Best Sellers List, Green made teen cancer a family conversation topic with his recent novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. As one headline appropriately said, the novel is not just "a bullshit cancer book." It is raw and captures the philosophic, slightly irrational musings of teenagers who find themselves on the cusp of something great but cruelly hindered by sickness. As main character Augustus says, "'That's the thing about pain...It demands to be felt" (Green, p. 110). Green has never had cancer, but he has felt pain. He felt it as a student chaplain for a children's hospital and he felt it again when he met Esther Earl, a very real fan who died in 2010 from thyroid cancer.

The novel, inspired by Esther and now a successful film, has that trademark Green wit, but it is more than a tale of teenage angst. In an interview, Green stated that other cancer narratives felt "oversimplified" with a tendency to dehumanize. He says the world generally imagines the ill to be "fundamentally other" and that he "wanted to argue for their...complete humanity" (Rosen). Thus *The Fault in Our Stars* is a terribly lovely depiction of high school students battling cancer and finding romance amid the pithy advice of support groups. Some cancer patients and survivors elect to disapprove of Green's work, but a majority of the feedback from oncologists and patients alike is positive. Allison Cisz was just a high school senior when she learned of a tumor in her brain. Cisz was quoted in a recent article sharing that Green "was spot on" with his depictions of isolation and loneliness (Mapes). What depictions are you going to offer? Whether or not young adult fiction is your method of choice, John Green's immense accomplishment should encourage you to try. Look for gaps in a broader narrative. Where is the world letting you down and misrepresenting you? Fill those gaps with your words and you may be astounded at how many Allisons step forward, thanking you for your bravery.

From the initial downbeat of your life, that extraordinary moment when your heart first flutters into motion, you are breathing a story. Your wide-eyed entrance into this world comes with a series of blank pages, a book contract between you and the universe, and you are charged with the responsibility of making meaning. After all, mankind's great commission has always been to create in order that others may create. You may be plagued by self-doubt and fear, perpetually worried that you fit awkwardly into your narrative, but story-telling was never reserved solely for the Homers or Hemingways. Story-telling is an empowered space in which you fulfill your role as a creator and reconcile yourself with the unexpected. Storytelling is where you heal.