

Sound Off: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow's Tales of an Artist

Brytelle Walton
Penn State University – Berks

Telling Stories

Storytelling has allowed me to discover much about others, myself, and the complex ideologies of life. I have developed these concepts in a space of academia, professionalism, and social justice, all the while conscious of being a voice for people that have been muted through generations for one unjust reason or another. My voice as a writer and storyteller continues to gain range as I continue in this craft.

There are genuine simplicities in the art of storytelling. I became aware of these well before I was aware of the complex power this form of art has in continuing cultures, traditions, and communities. Before I learned of the authenticity in voice or the justice in socializing and sharing, my ears listened while my mind painted pictures as individuals shared with me times before my own. When I was a child, my great-grandmother told stories of growing up in Mississippi. She was a young black girl during the 1930s, a time when the world did not see her the way the world sees me today. To have a conversation with her now, almost twenty years after she first started sharing her stories with me, some of my stories may change her perceptions. Though, there are moments when she would feel just the same. Storytelling is what connects yesterday to today and today to tomorrow.

For African Americans, many moments in our history were told only to be forgotten, eras that others wanted us to wash away. Yet we continue traditions rooted in stories that tell of struggle that turned to strength. Sharing stories is what kept people like my great-grandmother uplifted, even when she was being broken down, silenced by oppressors and tyrants who did not understand how rich we were as a people. Our stories made us wealthy, our tales golden, and that was what made us rich.

Simpler moments were shared with my father, a former sailor for the U.S. Navy. He harbored stories in souvenirs brought home from traveling the waters of Asia and Europe. My brother and I would rummage through my grandmother's house, where pictures told of the boy before he became the sailor. Listening to family and friends on a Saturday afternoon cookout, I listened as my mother chimed in on their earlier days as a couple. Everywhere I listened, I heard booming voices bellowing out about yesteryears. Even on a quiet Sunday, when my grandmother's café was closed, my cousins and I practiced absorbing customer tales over ice-cold colas.

In elementary school, my generation of storytellers began making a way of our own. I admired friends telling tales of worlds unknown to one another. Many of our home lives were different. All of us had our own separate cultures and traditions. But at school, we were one collective while still bringing a sense of uniqueness to the group. We were an urban nonfiction compilation of diverse individuals. Linear themes like family and friendships weaved through the stories we shared. Growing up in Reading, Pennsylvania, everyone came from different communities, but we were always one city. The narratives told daily were in the language of natives. Dialects of power and triumph to struggle and tragedy were well understood by one another.

Today, my story is set in the chapter of a professional academic and scholar. I have sharpened my storytelling skills through working with students in traditional academic and residential education environments. Though the students were primarily focused on their studies, there was always time for interactive conversations. Impromptu scenarios and situations were frequently turned into a space where I shared my own experiences with the students. That the children were from Reading and other inner-city communities gave me the advantage of being able to draw from the very experiences many of these students were currently dealing with. Something as simple as having an authentic understanding of all that encompassed them as an individual has always been very crucial in the building of trust exchanged between the students and me. Most of my professional experience thus far has been in residential settings, where my role was more personable than professional. Taking on roles of parent and/or guardian for these students, many in new and unfamiliar environments, meant I had to create a safety net for these young people. These interactions paralleled the very experiences I had with my great-grandmother when I was young.

Author Loretta J. Ross, who wrote the essay “SisterSong and Voices of Feminism Project,” notes, “We weaved together the threads of our collective experiences to create quilts of iconic stories of triumphs, of failures, of dreams, and of realities. Most of all, the stories were about possibilities” (2008). Ross was being recognized by a women’s history collective for her strides in women’s reproductive health. While she was receptive to the recognition, she found that women who were just like her, phenomenal women of color in the reproductive health profession, were not—but needed to be—recognized just as much as she did. When I work with inner-city youth, I have a similar consciousness of my role and how it can affect their lives. While my students were not all females with stories of pain and violation in the same way as in the SisterSong project, they were young people with struggles and hardships. Being able to build communities amongst each other, despite being from different and sometimes battling parts of the city, meant more than any rivaling reputation could. Every opportunity in which I am able to provide a platform for these students to tell their stories is as necessary as it is to tell my own.

Working with students in the Reading School District consistently reminded me of the years I spent as a student in these familiar buildings and hallways, partaking in similar times under the Friday night lights of a Red Knight football game, or inside the Geigle gymnasium watching the basketball team drive hard in the paint with bleachers overflowing with fans. We held together a sense of pride—proud of where we came from, the communities we were a part of and the ones we built together. Through sharing and storytelling, the students were able to find out what I’d found out in similar ways: that we are not just whatever bad things we go through.

Narrate for the Native

When I enrolled in the English 472 course “Current Theories of Writing and Reading,” I was unaware of how personal things were about to get. What I loved most about storytelling was the unrestricted possibility in the use of my imagination and creativity. I could escape reality and create what I believed was and could be real. Even as a nonfiction writer, creatively I have the ability to shine scenarios or situations that are used to being tarnished and tainted. A bright young girl who comes from a dark part of the neighborhood holds no less light than any other girl in the world. Being born and raised in a city like Reading, such was necessary. While we as a community had some dusty and dark corners, there were windows all around us that gave sight and light to just what was really here. Unfortunately, not everyone saw what I have seen over the

last two decades as a proud resident. Unless you were there, you are not aware of what is here. You do not understand the pride in “bleeding Red and Black” on a Friday night and the excitement of a summer carnival starting on the last day of school. Words like happiness and home aren’t used until you are used to seeing these things.

Instead my home has been connected to words like “poverty” and “devastated” on a more regular basis in articles from *The New York Times*, *NPR.org*, and the local newspaper, *The Reading Eagle*, which contribute to the influenced views of outsiders. In the late 2000s, Reading was among the top ten impoverished cities in the country and in 2010 held the number one spot. Our city was once known for attractions like our Vanity Fair Outlets or the heavy industrial boom companies like Carpenter and the Dana Corporation brought to the city. These articles were very much about distinguishing Reading’s past from its present, not only about poverty but about the people who live here. Thus, my classmates would begin a crash course on the dominant public narratives of Reading that paint a very different picture than my view of the place I called home.

When we read the introduction to a book by Kretzmann and McKnight, I began to understand my professor’s motives for assigning these articles that demean my home. As Kretzmann and McKnight note, popular narratives of “devastated” cities evoke “images of crime and violence, joblessness and welfare dependency, of gangs and drugs and homelessness, of vacant and abandoned land and buildings” (1993). This is what the authors describe as a deficiencies approach to improving impoverished communities: the negativity will always outweigh what positive potential it is striving for. They aim to switch the deficiencies approach to a capacities approach for cities that have positive and productive resources to draw from. Reading has many assets from which to build: cultural organizations, churches and clergy groups, schools, and the very residents within these communities. Outsiders should look to these assets in order to make things right.

The storytelling project in English 472 was called “Neighborhood Narratives.” The goal was for students to conduct story circles with Reading residents to give the native and active residents of Reading a voice. Media outlets played on stories that bypassed what *else* is going on in Reading, most importantly the positive things. I became inspired by this project to authenticate the voices of different communities that collectively make up the city of Reading. Our neighborhood narrative project would tell the stories of community residents and organizations throughout the city that have and are continuing to make a difference for the people of Reading.

Yet, I found an unfortunate reservation about my role in this project. How would we, collectively, be able to properly narrate the stories of these natives with an authentic voice if there was nothing truly authentic about the voices telling stories of the city my classmates were soon going to embark into. I faced a few more than your average college course struggles taking on this project. I needed to find a balance beyond being a professional scholar who was proud to be from this “notoriously devastated” city. As a resident and scholar, I needed to find an authenticity that was lacking in this space, presenting fuller truths of my community and myself.

Birth of an Artist

Through sharing experiences of the course and project with classmates, family, and friends about the positive attention this would provide for the city, I was able to conceive a new form of my professional self. This project would birth the *artist* in me. Kayhan Irani, one of the

editors for *Telling Stories to Change the World*, notes, “As an activist my life is dedicated to presenting the arts as a channel—for artist or audience—to engage with social justice issues,” (2008). This term comes from her, though it was a role I had been living for quite some time. The name “activist” provided a direction, one that I am embracing with each opportunity to artistically fight for social justice, not just for myself as an African American woman, but for others like me, and unlike me, that are in need of a voice.

Well before my English 472 course began, I was an activist; as a professional in the education field, I took on duties working with emotional-support and behavioral students that were given up on academically by the very individuals tasked to get them to succeed. From my very first experience working with students, their faces were all too familiar to the girl I once knew. I then made it a mission to give these students the same support I was given growing up and, perhaps more importantly, the support I did *not* get. It became my duty in everything I did as an educator to advocate for those young people that did not have a voice.

I am in a new space as an activist. Combining my passion for arts such as writing and storytelling with my duty to advocate for and with underprivileged and silenced youth has become my career goal that I unconsciously knew I was to fulfill. Through projects like storytelling, performance studies, and the various artistic outlets so many of these students possess, they put words to their good as well as their bad. It has become about being heard, no matter which way they say it. Whether through paintings, dance, or writing, they are finding ways to survive, to live, and to show others they are alive. These youth channel their inner light to unapologetically shine bright, when others want it to dim, or even go out. As an activist, I will be a guide for those lights, as I in return can allow them to continue to guide my path so they will one day begin on their own.

My path most recently took a positive turn when I was successfully able to co-author a narrative essay with a classmate who was unfamiliar with much of the dynamics of the Reading community and its contributing individuals. Moments shared between this community collective and me, being able to relate solely because of our mutual residence within these city limits, was what made the project that much more meaningful to me. Working with the members of the Reading Classic Schwinn Club, we were able to give a voice to this collective and its impact.

This group of Reading residents is not just about restoring old bikes. It is rooted in restoring the community. When members aren’t out recruiting young people to do something productive and positive, they are working together to provide for their families as well as themselves. They provide foundations that their children can continue in their own life journeys. Reading Classic Schwinn Club Member Julian Galindo¹ tells of how the club does all it has the resources to do to help the Reading community. During the back-to-school rush, the club members gather and donate backpacks and school supplies for students in their local neighborhoods.

As an insider who often has an ear to the outside, it was hard to hear what I did through media articles and those who only know what they’ve been told. It is my duty to provide the real voices to be heard, including the stories of young people, subjects of pain and poverty that turn around and create positive and productivity out of their situations. I have made it my mission to paint the portraits of what we in the community of Reading see: The smiles of students socializing on after school walks, the smells of culture cooking amidst the city evening skyline,

¹ Portion was taken from the neighborhood narrative essay on the Reading Classic Schwinn Bike Club in which Julian Galindo consented to participating in.

and most of all, what is never seen, but is always there—a city that is proud with residents that continue to tell their stories with pride. When outsiders cannot or do not understand why, we know the value of each and every inch of this city. Through the stories of the community that have been and still must be told, we will voice the narrative of Reading, Pennsylvania the only way it can be properly presented. Over my final two semesters in college, I will continue this initiative, maximizing at great volumes the voices of our community. Homage will be paid by way of the due justice that will come of the future storytelling projects within the Reading community.

The true advantage in my authenticity as a Reading native was not relevant prior to beginning this project. My voice was lost underneath the negative stories that were overtaking the value of the place I call home. This was the injustice my role would take on. I had known the benefits of storytelling and being a storyteller in the realms of culture and tradition. It was not until I was able to utilize my craft as a storyteller this past semester that I discovered the great power it harbored. There is justice to be served, through our stories, through every form of each other's words. The art of storytelling has the capability to change the world, one line at a time.

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