The Bones of Story

BY BETSY HEARNE

"Silence was the older and better part of custom still."

House Made of Dawn, N. Scott Momaday

Long ago there lived, in the classroom where I used to teach storytelling, a skeleton. It was a real skeleton—this is a true story. No one knew where it came from or why it was there, but I assumed it had to do with the adjacent department of speech and hearing. In any case, I lectured to that skeleton extensively on folklore, and in turn it taught me two life-and-death lessons. The first was about bones, and the second was about the space between bones. At first, I applied these lessons to storytelling in a technical sense, but as my concept of story broadened, the lessons have deepened in importance and meaning. The story I am telling here traces that journey of understanding, from the classroom to the wider world. The story also tracks my movement as a folklorist from one theoretical perspective to another—from structural to contextual analysis—and shows yet again how much teachers can learn in the process of teaching.

In the beginning was the word bones, which suggested to me the term bones of story. The bones of a story are its basic elements, as identified informally by the storyteller. Once she has absorbed the bones of a story, she can improvise its details and bring it to life in response to, or rather in partnership with, a variety of listeners on a range of occasions. The formal equivalent of bones in a structural study of folklore would be motifs and tale types—and folktales are a good starting point for a storyteller exactly because their vertebrate structure is so strong. But whether the telling is of a traditional or an original tale, every oral account is an individual re-creation both appropriating and elaborating basic elements, a delicate balance of retention and invention.

Many start-up storytellers labor under the misapprehension that they must memorize stories, an idea sometimes perpetrated in earlier, more formal eras of library education for youth services and unfortunately still prevalent enough to frighten some children’s
librarians away from what is arguably the most important, creative, and gratifying aspect of programming. Rote memorization is the antithesis of oral flexibility, which allows the shaping of stories in a creative intersection of text and context, of story and audience. Struggling to remember someone else’s words often leads to forgetting the story, inhibiting expression, losing the listener, and generating concern about failure. Storytelling is different in this way from performances of memorized music or play scripts, though it does bear some resemblance to improvisational theater.

To teach a course in storytelling is to discover that every person has tales to tell, in one way or another, to a world that waits to hear, in one way or another. The students and I were getting to be ever-better storytellers, but we were also discovering how important the narrative process is, from birth to burial. We could not explore storytelling without going down the garden path of folklore, including personal narratives and oral history. Our stories are as deeply embedded as our bones, and they begin to form with our bones as the fetus is imprinted in utero with the rhythms, tones, and patterns of the mother’s voice. A lifetime later, the strength of our stories outlasts the strength of our elderly bones.

In company of the skeleton, I was clearly enlarging my idea of story, and the students’ exploration of storytelling in their own lives motivated them to realize how important their storytelling would be in future library programs for children—not only folktales, but also family stories and other kinds of lore. The bones of story had by now become an important concept in focusing attention on learning and practicing stories, which is of greatest practical concern to beginners. Therefore my emphasis remained for a long time on the bones, on what was said, on the presence of sound—which is the emphasis of most storytelling guides in print or in person.

Like all good mentors, however, the skeleton had more to convey than a single theory. It was eloquent about the power of silence. Between its bones were spaces that belonged to the skeleton’s shape, as distinguished from the space around or beyond it. Both kinds of space, inside and outside, accrued increasing significance. The first kind of space, between the bones, suggested the spaces within a story, the silence between words. The second kind suggested the space around or beyond the story, which translates as silence between teller and listener. Both kinds of space, or silence, are active rather than passive. The idea of active silence, or silence as a presence rather than an absence, has become increasingly important to my understanding of storytelling.
The first and most apparent space—between the bones, representing the silence between words—is one of the most dynamic aspects of storytelling. This kind of silence has many functions, including dramatic, emphatic, and evocative. Silence can heighten suspense, for instance, or mark pace and rhythm, or determine tone. The silences before and after a story allow us to cross the threshold between one world and another. Because we are accustomed to silence, it is tempting to rush into a story without fully opening the door, to rush through a story without savoring its landscape, and to rush away afterward with questions and comments dispelling the crucial silence that distills the story’s effect. Silence is not a vacuum to fill, but a presence to respect. We have become habituated to nervous *uh* and *um* and other placeholders rather than to pauses between words. Silent pauses allow the teller time to select words and the listener time for those words to resonate. Paradoxically, tellers are also listening, both to the internalized story and to the audience reaction.

The second kind of space, surrounding the skeleton, connects story and audience. Silence on the part of a listening audience does not necessarily imply a separation from the teller, a partitioned division of labor. In oral transmission, listeners tell. Even if listeners are not engaged in interactive sounds, they co-create the story through active silence. Boredom is an active response, believe it or not, and makes the storyteller animate, shorten, and/or speed up a story considerably. Every listener contributes to active silence. Since telling and listening are in perpetual dialogue, the presence of each listener affects the telling. In a given community of listeners, the absence of any member diminishes the story. In a storytelling course, for instance, the listener is so integral that any student who misses class should account for it, not because of a grade but because of its effect on the community.

Storytelling is about building and sustaining community. The context is as important as the text, a fact reflected in folklore studies by the shift of focus from the structural (common story patterns across cultures) to the contextual (story in its cultural environment). It’s of limited value to identify and categorize hundreds of “Cinderella” variants with a common generic structure if the real significance of the story lies in each culturally situated telling. This has been a growing awareness among scholars for decades. Barre Toelken’s book *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1979) stresses the importance of oral narrative as process rather than product; the story cannot be separated from the people and environment from which it comes without losing or changing its meaning. In ethnography,
understanding a person’s or a group’s story involves understanding that person’s or group’s world view.

As early as 1971, the folklorist Dennis Tedlock was exploring new ways of representing contextualized oral performances in print (“On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative,” included in a later collection The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation, 1983). At Tedlock’s website (www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses/tedlock_ethno.html) he suggests that “an ethnopoetic score not only takes account of the words but silences, changes in loudness and tone of voice, the production of sound effects, and the use of gestures and props.” Three decades later, Kimberly J. Lau’s autoethnography, “This Text Which Is Not One: Dialectics of Self and Culture in Experimental Autoethnography,” published in the Journal of Folklore Research in 2002, unfolds in a format of three juxtaposed story segments—one personal, one analytical, and one theoretical. In making us jump from one to the other, she actually does what she discusses, which is expressing the way a person of mixed ethnic origins (she is Japanese-Chinese-American) often falls into the spaces between them. “What I am proposing is an investigation of the disjunctures that exist between these spaces and stories, the disjunctures that exist because of emotional desires for intellectual concepts that we have dismantled, deconstructed, dismissed.”

My own growing awareness of the importance of listeners—and, by extension, their cultures—focused my interest on the act of listening itself. “The simple act of listening,” says the Kiowa preacher John Big Bluff Tosamah in N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn, “is crucial to the concept of language.” Equally, the simple act of silence is crucial to the concept of listening, even in situations where audience response includes structured or spontaneous verbal interaction. Of course, silence has different meanings in different cultures. A French-Canadian student described visiting her husband’s North Dakota relatives, who sat in silence throughout much of the reunion; her own relatives would have interpreted such a silence as hostility, but it was clearly comfortable for a Scandinavian-derived population. My husband often describes the weeks-long silence to which his aunts retreated when their large Irish-American family got on one another’s nerves in a crowded house; silence, in this case, offered a viable alternative to fighting and became a function of emotional survival. I believe that all folklore—including the customary lore in these two examples, the verbal lore involved in the storytelling under discussion, and material lore from baskets to barns—is about survival.
Given the importance of silence to story, teller, listener, and community, it is remarkable how often we neglect it. Although it might seem paradoxical for silence to be absent, we are missing it badly. We may not realize how much we miss it, however, until we experience it. Back in that classroom, the skeleton never talked, so I was forced to experience its silence. Such experiences are rare. One thinks of isolated natural retreats where the main activity is staring out across an interminable ocean from a windless mountaintop. There we realize that the visible manifestation of silence is space.

Silence is to story as space is to image. In a 1998 study about twentieth-century canonical picture books ("Perennial Picture Books: Seeded by the Oral Tradition" in Journal of Youth Services in Libraries) I found that narrative and graphic art often shared structural elements, one of which was verbal and visual space: “White space on a visual plane... parallels the literary space for imagining details the way folktales leave room for individual projection.” One has only to read the spare texts and view the spacious illustrations in The Tale of Peter Rabbit; Millions of Cats; The Story of Ferdinand; Make Way for Ducklings; Harold and the Purple Crayon; The Snowy Day; Swimmy; Where the Wild Things Are; Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?; Frog and Toad Are Friends; Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs; George and Martha; Freight Train; Where's Spot?; Ten, Nine, Eight; Max's Breakfast, and many others to note the way artists—even when they have not authored the narrative—reflect verbal silences with visual spaces in rhythmically paced echoes. On the other hand, sometimes the artist will also use a narrative silence to interject illustrated story elements as complementary. (See James Marshall’s picture of George with a tub thrown on his head after peeking at Martha taking a bath. The text reads only, “He never did that again.”) In either case, whether the artist is reflecting or injecting narrative spaces, the balance between space and object is crucial to every visual composition and also to the child who is inserting him or herself into spaces left by story
and art. Until we experience the difference between cluttered images and spacious images, it's hard to evaluate either, and so it is with silence and sound. The implications of the skeleton's lessons reach beyond storytelling classes, oral lore, and children's books to all literature, all communication, all our lives. What's left out is as important as what's put in. Whole genres, such as poetry and fairy tales, rely on the space of a reader/listener's imagination to fill in details between the bones of statement; both children and adult readers/listeners insert themselves into that space. The Internet teems with stories, but after evolving emoticons to indicate affective responses, we are still trying to figure out how to incorporate pauses and silence into electronic forms of communication such as e-mail and text chat. The awkward delayed-response pauses in video conferencing can cause serious misunderstandings because they are not orally attuned to meaning and are not even naturally rhythmic. This results in speakers seeming to interrupt or talk over each other, on the one hand, and to delay in responding, on the other; both can have negative impact. Business and personal negotiations can gain, lose, or hang on a thread of silence.

Most of us are overwhelmed with communication in all
forms, which amounts to a constant sound, almost like static. Spam complicates our e-mail messages, and flashing advertisements distract us from assembling cohesive knowledge from websites. Electronic communications demand increasingly instant turnaround that affects not only the noise level but also the pace of our lives. In a 1997 lecture at Tufts University, John Unsworth, now dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, described a situation that has only intensified in the intervening years:

I am a member of the English department [at the University of Virginia]: I teach graduate and undergraduate students, I edit a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, I direct a humanities research institute, and I write essays for publication in scholarly journals and books. On the wired side . . . I have five phone numbers; I also have several times that many login accounts on networked computers, plus three or four personal computers (none of which I own). When I go on a trip, I take a laptop, and I check voicemail and e-mail once or twice a day. I read two newspapers a day, watch TV news in the morning and listen to radio news in the evening. I get filtered newsfeeds daily by computer, too. When I’m home, I’m rarely out of touch with these forms of communication for more than six hours at a time: I receive fifty or more e-mail messages a day, probably a dozen phone calls, and one or two faxes. I spend something more than twelve hours a day intermittently interacting with computers. Most of my reading is done from the computer screen, often while doing something else at the same time (meeting, talking on the phone, watching television).

Frankly, I find it difficult to concentrate—and I’m not always sure that’s a bad thing. In fact, I feel a pang of bad faith when I tell my thirteen-year-old son to turn off the rock and roll when he’s doing his homework: in many ways, I feel that the most important skill he could acquire would be the ability to do his homework with the music—and the television, and the radio, and the phone—going at the same time. He’s not growing up in a world where attention can be devoted to one thing at a time.

After a complex discussion of the problems and possibilities of these resources, Unsworth ends his paper with a call for contemplation. Although his may not be a typical example, it is common enough; we don’t have to be information specialists to find ourselves coping with a daily siege of transmissions. It’s not that each of these can’t be a lifesaver but that, in experiencing a flood of them, we need a life raft. In an environment where both adults and children are overstimulated with the noise and demands for attention of electronic media and toys, there seems little time or space for second thoughts. A corporate consultant who was hired to update academic folk on efficiency once explained that it was imperative never to handle a piece of paper twice. Act on it and move on. But if education is not about second thoughts—and
third, unto the thousandth—what is it about? Second thoughts require space, the kind of active silence that revises the ordinary into something extraordinary. Start a project early and your subconscious will do most of the work for you, but your subconscious needs breaks from bombardment in order to process knowledge and create something new. The process of storytelling—whether it is “The Three Little Pigs,” an academic presentation, or a report to the board of directors—involves selection, preparation, visualization, concentration, projection, adaptation, and invention. All these elements depend on quiet time and space to germinate. With cell phones ringing ceaselessly, televisions and radios running habitually, computers humming in the background, and PDAs buzzing to remind us of appointments, we all need a constant renewal of effort to structure silence as well as sound into the day, to pace our time as we would pace a story.

Since all communication is to some extent based on telling a story, the importance of balance between sound and silence can’t be overestimated. From childhood through old age, processing information involves constructing a story of it. Surely good teaching is about storytelling, as both teachers and students listen to one another’s stories and build a community of
learning. Yet students, professionals, or scholars may work hard but still fail to tell their stories effectively. A good factual story not only selects and organizes information into a strong skeletal structure but also opens up space in the listener’s mind for new awareness. A theorist such as Bruno Bettelheim could have offered even more valuable insights than he did in *The Uses of Enchantment* had he constructed his argument with room for other views. Instead, like too many theorists, he limited his ideas by a kind of closed-circuit system of thinking that he imposed on all stories and all children. Closed arguments are a kind of coffin.

On a recent visit to my old classroom, I found that skeleton enclosed in a wooden-framed glass case—think Snow White, entombed upright. This case creates boundaries that did not exist when the skeleton and I began our work together. I was reminded of the difference between my first visit to Stonehenge, years ago, and my most recent visit. Being able to walk between the spaces of those monumental standing stones, once upon a time, was a very different experience from finding it roped off to keep visitors at a distance, as happens now.

In my original I-thou relationship with the skeleton, we freely shared space and silence. Without arguing, the skeleton managed to impart a good deal of information about the nature of storytelling, not only about future children’s librarians learning stories but also about life itself as narrative, and even death. Death is, after all, the great silence; even for those who believe in reincarnation, death represents a pause between iterations of life. From elders approaching death, the most valuable gift we can receive is the stories they tell before entering that silence. Closing elders off into isolated institutions deprives them of an important cultural role and everyone else of valuable knowledge. A recently graduated storytelling student created a model outreach program to a nursing home in which she both told stories and launched the elders into storytelling their lives to her and each other.

Most of us hope that some part of our story outlives us. Yet the skeleton’s story remained unknown. Not all stories, this reticence implies, can or should be told. For those that can, we need to reflect on the balance of telling and listening, of sound and silence.

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