

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor  
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As a child, I grew up in the same summer place on the Connecticut shore as did my mother and her ten siblings. From her many stories, I learned what life was like at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when she was an adolescent through her teenage years. As the ninth child, she was generous with accounts about her elder siblings. Our summer vacation place had changed only slightly since her youth so it was easy to visualize the incidents she described. One story concerned the carriage horse that bolted as my mother rounded a curve, detaching a wheel and throwing her into a large privet hedge that cushioned her fall and may have saved her life. In those days, carriage mishaps were responsible for maiming and deaths much like today's automobile accidents. The hedge still stands and my children and grandchildren all know its story. This month's letter is about stories and the role they play in all our lives.

Family stories are enduring, especially when they are heard by a child whose mind is still uncluttered. They help to establish one's own identity. This transfer of lore is threatened today by our frenetic existence; there is virtually no quiet time to tell children tales of life before they were born. Many families often do not dine together. Prior to literacy and widespread printing, oral transmission of knowledge and culture was paramount. Examples abound in the Norse sagas and the medieval minstrals. And in the Near East the "people of the book" arose—the sons and daughters of Abraham/Avram/Ibrahim heard, rather than read, the stories of "our father Abraham." Further east among Hindus, the Ramayana was told to describe the exploits of Rama—a deified heroic incarnation of Vishnu. Needless to say, before printing, the deeds and adventures of the ancient semi-mythical heroes varied with each generation of raconteurs. These modifications seldom changed the gist of the story, but details undoubtedly varied. The license to embellish enjoyed by the story teller of cultural epics vanished abruptly with the printed versions, with the result that today the deeds of Odysseus, Siegfried, Rama, *et al* are passed down with relative uniformity. However, even when printed, the meaning of words may be interpreted by the reader within relatively broad limits; these limits are narrowed when the listener can react not only to the tonal variations, but also the facial expressions of the story teller.

Thus many of us tend to remember narrative stories better than written ones. This human brain characteristic is often exploited by lawyers who present their case to jurors in a narrative form. A good story teller easily knows when the listener is paying attention. The courtroom is not the only venue where stories are useful. As Assistant Secretary for Science, I appeared before the Smithsonian's Congressional subcommittees each year to defend our federal science budget, and I soon learned that even busy Congressmen enjoy a relevant tale. The chair of our House subcommittee for many years was the late Sidney Yates of Chicago, an urbane and witty man, sympathetic to the

Institution, but scientifically disadvantaged. When he told me during one exchange at a hearing that he would be in Florida during a forthcoming Congressional break, I sought to lure him to our then new facility at Fort Pierce by telling him a short story about sipunculids. These fascinating marine worms live in all the oceans of the world and the pinhead-sized larvae swim by moving the cilia that encircle their bodies. A distinguished specialist in these creatures, Mary Rice, worked at the Fort Pierce laboratory. As different species of adult worms live in sand or mud or even in coral, she sought to learn how the free-swimming larvae of each species knew when to metamorphose into a worm and drop on the appropriate substrate where it could grow and live for the rest of its life. After years of research, Mary Rice found the answer. The adults release a chemical into the water column and when the swimming larvae are touched by one molecule of the released substance, they drop to the substrate of their “parents,” lose their cilia and change into worms all in a matter of a few minutes. Mr. Yates’ curiosity was kindled and he visited Mary Rice’s laboratory and watched through a microscope the metamorphosis of the larvae into a worm. He was so struck by what he saw and by Mary Rice’s research that for the next few years, every time I went to the appropriations hearings to answer science budget questions, he would always start by asking “Say, Dave, how are those sipunculids doing?” In retrospect, I am quite certain he was the only member of Congress who knew what a sipunculid is.

The story of the original Smokey the Bear was powerful enough to affect our nation’s forest fire policy. In 1950, after a large fire in New Mexico’s Lincoln National Forest, rangers recovered an orphaned black bear cub and named him Smokey. The cub came to the National Zoo where it lived until 1976. As a symbol of forest fire prevention, he was popular with visitors and his legacy lives on, despite our change in fire policy. It became evident that without periodic forest fires, combustible detritus—needles, dead trees and branches—could build up to a dangerous level making future forest fires even more fiery and thus more difficult to control. Today’s policy limits fuel accumulation by carefully controlled, purposely set fires.

Just as Smokey the Bear’s story altered our fire policy, so did Felix Salten’s Bambi change our attitude towards white-tailed deer. In his book published in Austria in 1928 (translated from German to English in 1929 by Whittaker Chambers!), Salten’s Bambi was a European roe deer. The full effect of the story was not realized until Disney released his animated cartoon version during the war in 1942. Those of us old enough to have seen the original film will doubtless recall hoards of crying children devastated at the death of Bambi’s mother. Disney had clearly modified Salten’s original tale, but that is the fate of stories over time—even written ones.

The effect of stories on social behavior as illustrated by those of Smokey the Bear and Bambi pale by comparison with the politico-religious consequences from the perpetuation of stories of heroic battles. Consider the long-lasting effect of the Battle of the Boyne on the politico-religious divide in Northern Ireland. The battle itself was between the Jacobite armies of the Catholic James II of England and his Protestant son-in-law William III of Orange. James’ defeat and subsequent exile to France in July 1690

was considered a Protestant triumph and celebrated by parades and fireworks in Ulster (Northern Ireland). Only this year does it seem that the seething hostility between the two Irish factions has abated sufficiently to form a joint government in Ulster. Ten years ago no one would have considered such a favorable event possible.

No such peaceful agreement seems imminent in the politico-religious split between Islam's Sunni majority and the minority Shia who consider themselves "the party of Ali," husband of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed. The murder of Ali in 661 AD triggered the great schism between Shia and Sunni that still exists. Ali's son, Hussein, and his followers were massacred in a battle in 680 AD near Karbala (about 60 mi. south of Baghdad). Shia reflect the cult of martyrdom, and devout Shia anticipate the arrival of the "hidden Imam" who will begin the reign of divine justice. The death of Hussein is as vivid for Shia today as it was 1,300 years ago.

Every culture and nation has its own stories, which help define the character and nature of its members. When I was growing up, the tale of Horatio Alger flourished and upheld the tradition that with hard work and good luck, one could triumph economically and still have the respect of one's peers. Maybe I have lived too long, but the pride I once relished in American ideals of fair play and open competition have diminished in a welter of doping scandals in professional sports, abrogation of our respect for the dignity of man, and especially the presumption of innocence as manifest in Guantanamo and Abu Graib. Finally, the lawless behavior of today's selfish, greedy tycoons makes mockery of the ideals of the Hardy Boys and other fictional heroes of my youth. All is not lost, however, for among us are many heroic but unsung people who still work in "the vineyard" of the world, trying during their relatively brief lifetimes to make our planet a better place on which to live. Let us salute them—perhaps one day their stories will circulate among the story tellers and be passed on to future generations; consider Superman and Spiderman part of our movie heritage and surely part of America's "stories." We are indeed a story telling species, for it is an essential characteristic of all humans.

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