

Standing on the Brink of Wisdom: The Storyteller's Perch
Thoughts from a keynote offered at the fourth annual
Granite State Storytelling Swap
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To give a keynote at a storytelling gathering is much like being asked to write a piece for "This I Believe" on NPR, or contributing to "My Turn" on the back page of Newsweek. What an honor and an incredible challenge to condense a lifetime of thinking and passion into a page or an hour of accrued wisdom. But I am a storyteller, and life's important messages are always being compressed into a metaphor, an image, or a couple of carefully placed words. For the gathering at GSSS, that particular message that asked to be told came framed in the form of a photograph, a song, a thought, and of course, stories. I now reduce that hour of sharing into a few minutes of writing for you.

A photograph:

I open the album and turn to the faded black and white square photo. Forty five years are erased as my five year old self looks out into my future from a moment frozen in time. As I stare back now into the innocent eyes of the child that was me, I think to myself, "She has no idea." No idea of the hurts, challenges, loves, heartaches and joys of life that await her. But then I realize, all the experiences and **wisdom** that separate me from her can be measured and conveyed in stories.

A song:

Sitting in a coffee house in Maine, I have driven over an hour to hear a favorite recording artist. Sitting impatiently through the warm up act of Emma's Revolution, I am unexpectedly swept up by their lyrics, and I don't want this song to end. Leaving that evening with their CD in hand, I listen to "Swimming to the Other Side" all the way home, trying to make sense of the underlying messages and why they captivate me so deeply. One particular line haunts me: *I am balanced at the brink of wisdom.* And I ask myself, "When am I there?"

A thought:

Visiting a fellow storyteller for the weekend, I am drawn to her bookshelf to investigate her storytelling stash. Opening Joseph Bruchac's, The Roots of Survival: Native American Storytelling and the Sacred I read, "... a Mohegan

elder explained it (life) to me as a circle divided into four parts symbolizing the stages of life and the process of gaining **wisdom**. *Listen. Observe. Remember. Share.*” And I thought to myself, these are the tools for accruing wisdom. These are the tools of the storyteller. How do they all come together?

Observe:

We see things not as they are but as we are. What we see depends not only on our context and assumptions, but mostly on all the earlier stories we have integrated that provide our current filters for interpreting new stories and making meaning out of them. The storyteller’s first tool for acquiring wisdom is presence, mindfulness, awareness; exploring moments frozen in time for the hidden meanings and wisdom that fill the space between then and now.

Listen:

I observe the exterior details, and then I look deeper. I listen within for the thoughts and feelings that this image, person or experience evokes. What does it mean to me, and why is that important? Listening involves using all the senses, while suspending judgment and assumptions so that we might hear the universal message our story wants to tell.

Remember:

Each time I delve into a story and listen for its message to me, I understand a little bit more, put things together a little differently. I re-member it. When we take the time to consciously choose how we are going to make meaning of this experience before responding or sharing, then we truly inhabit the storyteller’s perch, “balanced on the brink of wisdom”.

Share:

Sharing involves reciprocity, giving and taking, listening as well as speaking. When we are fully present to observe, listen deeply, and bring meaning to what we see and hear, we are ready to participate in the circle dance of story, bringing our wisdom to elicit the story’s wisdom that we might tap the listener’s wisdom. Within all this, the stories are the jewels. Our job is to give them away as freely as we receive them.

Photograph caption: Here is where you are in this moment frozen in time. Take stock. Look back to all the stories (wisdom) that you carry within you between a first photo ever taken and this one now. And know that this is just one more moment frozen in time-for there are so many more stories yet to unfold as you continue to open to your wisdom through observing, listening, remembering and sharing.