



Cross-Cultural Communication: A Storyteller's Job

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'You know, I'm still mad at your country.'

This came from a Kindergartener sitting in the front row of the auditorium where my storytelling assembly had just started. It was early August, 2005. I was in Tennessee, working as a Teller-in-Residence for the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough. They sent me to an elementary school, open year round, in a nearby city to do an outreach program. I was there to do a 45 minute performance for about 200 students, Kindergarten through 4th grade.

I came on stage in my kimono the way I always do, bowed to my audience, and said brightly, "Konnichiwa! My name is Motoko and I am from Japan!" Then this little blond boy right in the front row declared, his high-pitched voice loud enough to reach me and most of his classmates, "You know, I'm still mad at your country."

My first thought was, what do you mean, you're only 6! But before I could say a thing, his teacher rushed over and took him away. She made him sit way at the back of the auditorium, so I could not ask him what he meant. So I proceeded with my program, entertaining them with humorous Japanese folktales with lots of audience participation.

But while I was telling my stories, my mind was on the boy. I was aware that the 60th anniversary of V-Day was coming up. The media was filled with stories about the WWII. The boy may have seen something on TV about Pearl Harbor. Maybe some adults told him Japan was an enemy. Maybe his own great grandfather was killed in the Battle of Okinawa. I thought about my own grandfather, whom I had never met, for he was killed during one of the American bombings of Osaka in 1945...

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I have made Massachusetts my home since mid-80s. I have been sharing traditional Japanese tales and original stories across the U.S. for 25 years. As a bilingual and bicultural teller I draw heavily from Japanese folklore, literature, media, and scholarly and journalistic materials, both traditional and contemporary. I love languages, and strive to translate inherently Japanese ideas and idioms (especially humor) and make them accessible to, and enjoyable for, English-speaking audiences. My goal is to create stories whose characters my audience can identify and empathize with, immediately and intimately. I work at crafting my words to share vivid imagery in order to transport my audience in time and place.

As a teaching artist I aim to raise young people's understanding of Japanese culture by working in classrooms. Using folktales, songs, and art activities I teach about Japanese children's lives today while providing a sense of history. Through my stories I try to share with American children values that form the spiritual foundation of Japanese people: to appreciate nature, to honor one's ancestors, and to respect family and community. This in turn helps the children appreciate their own cultural heritages, and fosters their sense of identity as the citizens of the world.

As I travel around the U.S., I am always struck by the great diversity of my audiences. At the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, there are many devout and conservative elders. At a youth center in Atlanta, about 60 African American teens enjoyed my ghost stories. I love performing in Utah, where even 4 and 5 year olds are a perfectly well-behaved audience, a result of growing up in the Mormon Church. In Ojai, California, I regaled a hip and liberal crowd with 'naughty' adult tales from Old Japan. Wherever I go, I am constantly asking myself, how can I best serve this particular audience? What stories should they hear? Do they get my jokes? Would they see themselves in my stories?

This challenge I realize, however, is not uniquely my own. In fact, all storytellers face every day, especially in the current social and political climate of divisiveness



and disharmony, the task of bridging the gaps, translating between different world views, and being a guiding light in building community.

This is particularly pertinent to American storytellers who consider themselves 'white.' We all realize that 'whiteness' is the original 'alternative fact', a social construct formed solely to support racism. The notion of 'whiteness' blinds us to the rich variety of cultures that has always existed within European American communities. Once freed from being 'white', a storyteller would be in a better position to see the dominant culture for what it is, and her relationship to it. As storytellers we are each given an opportunity to become and share our authentic selves, delving deeply into our own heritages, identities, and hopes for the future. Only then are we able to see 'the others' as humans, and imagine ourselves as their friends and allies.

These ideas occurred to me when I attended a discussion session titled The Future of Storytelling at the National Storytelling Network's annual conference this summer. Questions were raised about our own open-mindedness: Are we as welcoming as we claim to be? How do we work with people whose political views we do not share? How do we reconcile our different outlooks on history? Are we serving our audiences well by emphasizing personal stories, or should we focus more on traditional tales? How do we appreciate the MOTH-style story slams in their own right and learn from them?

None of these questions offer easy answers. As an artist, each of us is constantly exploring what we have in common with our audiences and what makes us unique. Only one thing is clear. Our job is to serve the particular audience in front of us each and every time. Our job is to connect and give joy, not to blame or accuse. By truly affirming and engaging each group, and by offering and inviting them to entertain a new idea or a different view, we encourage them to recognize their own humanity in our tales.

If our commitment is to create a community where everyone's voice is heard, we must challenge dichotomies that divide us. Storytelling is both a means to that



end, and an end itself. We must listen. We must tell. We must choose and craft our stories so they will become part of the world we want to build.

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My performance was finished. The students were leaving the auditorium. I rushed over to catch the Kindergartener who had made the comment.

“Did you enjoy my stories?” I asked simply.

“Yeah, it was fun!” the boy grinned, and left.