

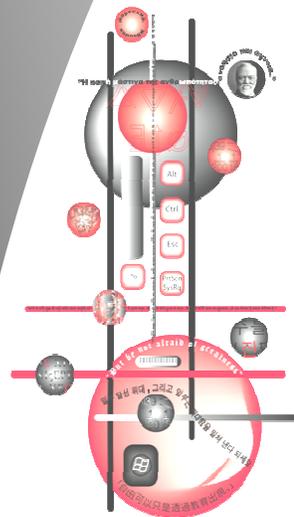
Storytelling can Shape your Life

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When I opened the envelope coming from the office of President Keizs, after reading the letter announcing that I had been designated as the 2012-2013 Convocation Professor, Georgina Herrera's interrogative eyes immediately came to me, as always happens in situations like this. Herrera, the great Cuban poet, was staying in my apartment during one of her professional visits to New York about fifteen years ago, and at the end of a long and intimate conversation she asked me: "Sonia, and how did you manage to earn a Ph.D. and become a

writer and a college professor"? "By a miracle," was my immediate reply. "Better yet, by a series of miracles ... and a lot of work."

However, reflecting on my answer some hours later, I realized that it wasn't fair to omit the importance that stories had in shaping my view of the world and instilling in me an unquenchable thirst for knowledge at a very early age. And that mention was important because my parents' devotion to storytelling redeems them, in my feelings, from many unquestionable faults in my upbringing.

Jonathan Gottschall, in his recent book *The Story Telling Animal*, says: "Imagine that [in the mists of prehistory] there are just two human tribes living side by side in some African valley. They are competing for the same finite resources: one tribe will gradually die of, and the other will inherit the earth. One tribe is called the Practical People and one is called the Story People. The tribes are equal in every way, except in the ways indicated by their names." The passage goes on and Gottschall ends it stating: "Of course, we know how

this story ends. The Story People prevail. The Story People are us." I don't know how true this statement sounds to you. I am positive that my family came, directly, from the Story People's lineage.

Each family has certain mottoes that function as guides through life for their children. Each one of you once in a while, or even every day, thinks or says: "As my mother, or my father or my grandmother, used to say"... and repeat those phrases you grew up with. These mottoes say a lot about a family's philosophy since they reflect life experiences and expectations for the younger generations. In the case of Pablo Picasso, for instance, his mother, according to the famous quote, used to tell him. "If you become a soldier you'll be a general, if you become a priest you'll get to be the Pope." Growing up under that augur, the words that Picasso as an adult added to his mother's were a logical consequence of hers. He used to say: "Instead of [a soldier or a priest] I decided to be a painter and became Picasso."

My father also had his augurs for me, and two of them were insistently repeated. The first declared: "The only true career for a woman is marriage," and the second one: "The perfect wife should be like a geisha." I just listened to him without reply, but my mother, who was so far from behaving and thinking as a geisha, and hated the comparison, immediately riposted: "Nobody knows her destiny until the day she dies," meaning that her life could, at any unex-

pected moment, make a turning point. Besides, both of them were devoted admirers of José Martí, and each of them had made their own Martí's phrase "The word does not exist to conceal the truth but to say it." Based on that adage they said whatever they felt like saying, which very frequently expressed opposing views.

Growing up with a father who thought like me about women's role in society, and a mother who hated not only being a geisha but also cooking and waking up early in the morning, especially when it was raining, to send me to school, certainly did not look like the most propitious environment to develop a girl's intellectual and creative abilities. But it is said that God writes straight on crooked lines, and my grandmother on my father's side, the only one that I knew, taught me how to read when in one of her month-long stays in my house she realized that I was already six years old and had never been in school. I learned, and very soon I was reading, or trying to read, it did not matter if I understood what I read or not, any readable thing with letters on it that I could find in my house, and there was a lot.

I do not remember any reaction on my parents' side, either positive or negative, to my recently acquired semi-literacy. Grandma taught me how to read but not how to write. I guess my mother was happy about the hours I spent every day sitting by my grandma.

My father was a cigar maker and cigar factories in Cuba had, and still have in some places, a person who reads to the workers

while they hand roll the cigars. This "lector" (reader), used to read newspapers in the morning and classic or well-known novels in the afternoon. When the reader finished the book, he sold the book to the workers for a very low price. We had a lot of those books at home, and I guess my father got others at the bookstores since we possessed so many books, including a *Larousse* dictionary that I read assiduously.

One Friday, the day that my father received his weekly salary, he came home with a book that he bought especially for me: *Corazón*, in Spanish, *Heart*, in English, *Cuore* in Italian, written by Edmondo De Amicis. The book not only captivated me, but it took me to another dimension. Reading it, I felt that by getting involved in those characters' problems I could forget mine for a while. Edmondo De Amicis' book was the first one I read in which the protagonist was a child. Reading *Heart*, I realized that I was not the only child in the world who suffered because of economic and family problems and that was of great consolation.

I didn't learn how to write until by chance, in one of our frequent changes of residence, we met a neighbor who had a school in her living room. She instructed, by herself, ten or twelve students from different elementary grades. Since she charged only fifty cents a week, and the school was two blocks from our house, my mother began to send me with certain regularity.

We moved again, and one of those rainy days in which she

didn't wake me up for school, living in a tenement house in Old Havana, some few months after I had learned how to write, I wrote my first short story. I wrote it on some shiny sheets of paper that my mother kept in a drawer. I still don't know what that paper was for, but I remember how difficult it was writing on its slippery surface. My story ... let's say it was a "recreation," since I ignored that something called plagiarism existed, of my dearest fairy tale. Because that same mother who didn't send me to school regularly, and was unable to cook the salted codfish stew that I begged her to make, prepared in a thick sauce of tomatoes, olive oil, olives and capers, that mother was an excellent and talented storyteller, a very creative one who remade the endings of the Charles Perrault's book she had read to give me inspirational stories where girls and women always ended up alive and well. Unless it was one of her really bad days, my mother was willing to pull out a story of her ample repertoire and performed a tale for me every time I asked her to do it.

My first short story was an adaptation of "The Fairy," one of Perrault's folktales, to my Havana's environment. Many years later, when I read the original story I couldn't believe how politically incorrect it is from almost every angle you take it. It is a seriously misogynist story, but in my childhood, what I heard and I took from it was the only positive value it contains: If you behave unselfishly life will reward you. That

was what my private performer, my mother, emphasized and made relevant every time she told me the story.

I wrote my remaking of "The Fairy" at the beginning of the summer of 1945. I was almost eight years old. From then on I began to register, by myself, in the closest public school that I found in any new address we had, until we moved to Santa Fe, a town forty minutes from Old Havana on the north coast of the province.

In order to register in Santa Fe's only public school, I said to the teacher who interviewed me that I was in fourth grade, and they accepted me because of my excellent reading skills. That was the first time that I went to school for a complete year and the first time in my life that I took exams.

At the end of the year I won the prize the Cuban schools confer to the student who obtained the highest GPA. For that honor, I was designated to carry the school banner on the parade to celebrate José Martí's birthday. I showed up early that day. However, when the teachers looked at my shoes, they didn't let me carry the banner because black leather shoes were a requirement, and I was wearing the only shoes I had: some tennis shoes. I marched with the rest of the students. I didn't want to cry, but I cried during the three hours the parade lasted.

Decades later I wrote a short story about that incident, "El beso de la patria," (The Kiss of Homeland). The story was published in one anthology, then in another. Now it is in *Album*, an

anthology that the Department of Education adopted as a textbook for the Advanced Placement in high school, and it is used in many colleges in this country, including our college.

When I was sixteen years old I had read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Gorky, Turgenev, Balzac, Flaubert. I was fanatic about Daphne Du Maurier, Emily Bronte, Somerset Maughan and Oscar Wilde. I had read Charlotte Brontë, Curzio Malaparte, Henri Barbusse, Louise May Alcott, etc. etc. I knew at that time most of the famous Latin American women poets, especially those whose poetry advocated for women's freedom, like Alfonsina Storni, Juana de Ibarbouru and Delmira Agustini. Their poems, in my mother's voice, were my lullabies.

I liked all of my mother's stories, however, my best loved was her own life story, but in rare occasions she felt inclined to tell me about that. My mother never knew who her parents were; she was left in an orphanage when she was two years old. A sixty-eight year old Asturian man took her to his house when she was six years old. He never adopted her legally, that is why she kept the last name they gave her in the orphanage, Valdés, and she lived with him until he died. She was eighteen years old by then and went to live with my father. And my father, who left his house when he was thirteen years old, due to problems with his father, began to work as a cigar maker, he proudly affirmed that since that age, not only had he always had a woman with him, but he al-

ways was able to support her.

I didn't learn anything in kindergarten because I never went, but I have learned that some things that my parents said and did were wrong, and others right. My father was wrong in his predictions for women. There are many true careers for a woman, besides marriage, and she doesn't have to be like a geisha to be a good wife, she doesn't even have to be a wife. My mother was right when she said that a person's life could have a turning point, at any unexpected moment. This doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does. I am the living proof, and my mother herself also, but I'll leave that part of the story for another occasion.

My parents' avidity for reading and storytelling, their insatiable desire for knowledge and their strong personalities, in conjunction with many other factors developed the three principles that guide my life as a writer, as a teacher and as a human being: I try to be true to myself, and notice that I say, I try. I try to do what I decide to do with passion, and I never forget that others exist, even if I have never seen them. Antonio Machado has a *copla* that says:

“El ojo que ves no es ojo porque tú lo veas; es ojo porque te ve.” The eye you see is not an eye because you see it; it is an eye because it sees you.” Others exist. And the energy that my students often say that I put in my classes and I transmit to them comes from these three principles. And because I live with them and through them, besides to instruct them, and accomplish the objectives stated in a syllabus, I attempt to educate them as whole human beings. I do not mind what subject I am teaching, I try to make my students aware, for instance, that in the world not only there are almost one billion illiterate people, there are children who don't know what is a book for. I have known them. And while some people in this society are expecting to be frozen after death, waiting for immortality, millions of children in this world are striving just to have enough food to be able to grow up.

And what is my goal making my students think about these unpleasant realities? I like them to be mindful. I don't like them to say at the end of a documentary that shows a terrible situation, “I have to count my bless-

ings for not being there”, and then go get a beer or a glass of wine, and speak about football, or even worse, about the phone they got that day, and not make one single comment on the documentary they saw thirty minutes ago. We have to count our blessings, surely we have to be grateful for every good thing that life gives us, but our existence is like a tapestry that is embroidered between us and life. We are constantly working on that tapestry and each act of your existence is a stitch you are adding to the tapestry. And your stitches can contribute to make the tapestry's pattern richer and more beautiful or, working inadvertently, you can be destroying some good design that other people or nature made.

I have a dream. I dream that my students, when they are in any position in which they have the capacity to make decisions that will have repercussions on other people, follow the great law of the Iroquois Confederacy. It stipulated that in every deliberation they considered the impact of their decision on the next 7 generations.

Thank you all for your attention and for being here today.

Dr. Rivera-Valdés holds a Ph.D. in Spanish from the Graduate Center (CUNY) and began to teach at York in 1978. Since 1996 she has served as a full-time faculty member in her department. She has worked for over thirty years promoting Caribbean and Latin American Culture in the United States, as well as establishing cultural links between Latin America, the Hispanic Caribbean countries and the United States.



In 1997, Dr. Rivera-Valdés won the Casa de las Américas prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in Latin America, with *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* (The Forbidden Stories of Martha Veneranda). The book has been published in several countries and languages. In 2003, she published *Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas* and its English version appeared the same year: *Stories of Little Women and Grown Up Girls*. In 2011, her novel *Rosas de abolengo* was published in New York and it will be presented at the Book Fair of Havana in February 2013. Dr. Rivera-Valdés is the president and a founder of Latino Artists Round Table (LART). In 2000, the Daily News Magazine selected her as one of the New York Grassroots Latino Influentials. In 2004, she was selected as a Distinguished Honoree Latino by the Comptroller of the City of New York and Hispanic National Bar Association (New York Region). In recognition of her literary work York College awarded her the 2009 Presidential Award for Scholarship.