RESTORING THE LOST ART
Storytelling, Electronic Media and Fragmented Public Discourse

By JOHN M. STAUDENMAIER

I ONCE HEARD theologian Tom Clarke interpret the biblical understanding of the priestly character by recounting an incident in the life of an extraordinary itinerant clown named Ken Feit. About noon one working day, Ken stood in New York City's Central Park juggling and engaging the passersby in his unique style of evocative word play. Little by little a crowd gathered until one, a three-piece-suit man, went to drop a twenty dollar bill at his feet before returning to work. 'Don't give me twenty dollars!' said Ken, 'Buy us some apples!' Startled, but receptive, the man went and soon returned with a bag full of apples for the group.

Now, at noon in Central Park, a little community had formed—twenty people eating apples surrounding a juggler. Clarke concluded: 'At this point if others came by, the only way the newcomers could be transformed from confused outsiders to members of the group would be if somebody told them "the story of the apples". That is the heart of the priestly role: to tell the story that will include newcomers in the history that created the community's identity'.

I will begin by suggesting evidence for the proposition that narrative is essential for human discourse, in our public and communal lives as well as our private and personal identities. I will then argue that storytelling today approaches the status of a lost art. Using my background in United States technological style, I will sketch a history of the gradual fragmentation, at once ideological and technological, of public discourse in the West. In conclusion, I will propose some few responses to the problem this situation presents to us.

Part I: Storytelling: community and personal identity

The juggler incident reveals key characteristics of storytelling as creating community. Tom Clarke's observation that members of the Central Park apple community could include newcomers by serving as priest-storyteller reminds us that we often experience situations where we can either welcome or exclude others. I sit conversing with two friends at lunch when someone else approaches. If we grow politely silent we exclude, but we can give welcome by telling the newcomer what we have been talking about. Stories bind us together; human community depends on them. This maxim holds for every culture, it seems. Rituals vary from people to people but the act of inclusion that recounts the drama of life shapes every history in every land.

Christians have an especially powerful stake in storytelling because of the central role of narrative in our tradition. While the cyclic rhythms of nature deeply affect us, our vision of God centres in the acts of history. We say: 'Events change reality. Jesus is not just a ritualized myth but a real human being who lived, died and was raised to life; things are different since then'. Little wonder we sometimes call ourselves a 'priestly people'.[1]

Events experienced in common, like Central Park's apples or Christianity's gospel, are one of two kinds of story that form the heart of a community. To be enduring and life-giving, a community also depends on spending time listening to one another's individual journeys. Every member brings a unique history, mysterious and deeply personal, to the common venture. The more such stories are told and heard, the more human the community becomes. Were we to limit our communal consciousness to public events, our lives would intersect only on the surface with the richness of our inner selves left unspoken and inaccessible.

Personal storytelling, however, does more than build the bonds of a community; it is an essential requirement for the shaping of our self-understanding and, indeed, the character of our lives. In the act of remembering and telling our stories we grow to understand our own callings. We live a series of events and by finding words to describe them we weave the fabric of our lives. 'Why did you choose to become a Jesuit?' 'Why did the two of you choose to marry one another?' 'Why did you choose to live where you are living?' The answer to such questions is best rendered in story form rather than as a rational analysis of pros and cons.

Without the story, our life events lack context and remain disconnected happenings.

Then too, we shape our identities when we choose how we recall our past. Some events we celebrate; some we regret; some we ignore. Over the years these rememberings and forgettings texture our lives. Seven years ago, for example, I moved to Detroit. If I celebrate that choice—because I love the struggle to make a University thrive in a racially-torn city—I shape my identity quite differently than if I regret Detroit because, perhaps, I had no better option. On the other hand, the events we habitually ignore shape our personalities as much as those we remember. I might, for example, habitually forget affection offered to me or the unresolved conflicts and violent moments of my past. Here, perhaps more than any other way, I exercise freedom in shaping my character.

Being essential for life does not make storytelling, and its correlative, story-listening, easy. Indeed, some dimensions of contemporary culture inhibit the art. One such has to do with a pattern of fragmentation in our public discourse, in particular as that discourse has been conditioned by the world-view embodied in electronic media technologies.

As I write this article I sit in New York's international terminal, waiting in a bar for my flight to Italy. Near me a family exhibits the pressure our technologies place on storytelling. A middle-aged man reworks his ticket and travel papers, pen in hand. His wife glances about the terminal. Few words pass. Their son shares and does not share their table. Side by side with two Budweiser bottles sits a portable television set. The young man gazes at a tiny screen, two inches across, present and absent in the same act. Why, I ask, do these three invite television on their journey? What price have they paid to bring this fourth traveller along?

Despite their capacity to fragment the storytelling side of us, these media—television and its electronic ancestors the radio and telegraph—themselves have a story to which we now turn. By contemplating our media—their origins and their mode of operation—we take a major step toward consciously including them in our story as citizens of the late twentieth century and we may find some help in deepening our capacity for storytelling itself.

Part 2: Societal pressures against storytelling

We can better understand the cultural values at work in the electronic media by beginning, before their birth (Morse Code,

1844), with one of the nineteenth century's most fashionable forms of literature. About 1830, etiquette books began their remarkable rise to popularity in the United States. They taught those aspiring to the middle class how to avoid misbehaving in public, a skill that historian John Kasson, among others, calls 'impression management'. The manuals taught, for example, how to treat your nose. You don't blow your nose in public if at all possible; you don't fondle your nose, and you certainly don't pick your nose and wipe your hand on your trousers. The books taught avoidance of staring, shouting, singing or humming out loud, in short, the masking of deep emotions.[2] Civilised adults kept unruly passions—sexual feelings, anger, even grief and joy—locked inside. One neither wept nor exulted in the streets.

Impression management rests on the assumption that I walk the city as a stranger subject to constant scrutiny by other strangers. Earlier village life—for all its gossip and long, sometimes unforgiving, memories that such an enclosed society fostered—rooted public identity in storytelling. People were known, not on the basis of the moment's immediate behaviour, but rather according to the cumulative stories that recalled a life-time of events. In the transformation from the village to modern anonymity, etiquette book advice is only one part of a widespread social trend that began to see constant surveillance as the preferred means for social control. Long before George Orwell's omnipresent telescreens ('Big Brother is always watching') many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century policy makers favoured the asylum model to control the behaviour not only of the insane and criminals, but also of students in school, workers in factories and patients in hospitals.[3]

Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' was, perhaps, the most famous of all. Late in the eighteenth century, this British utilitarian philosopher proposed that prisons be constructed with a central surveillance tower looking out in all directions at a surrounding ring of cells. Each cell, with large windows on the outside and inside walls, provided light behind the solitary prisoner and an open view from the tower. Tower observatories, on the other hand, were rendered invisible so that the prisoner would never know when he was under observation.[4]

The asylum model and etiquette's impression management have fostered the first great fragmentation of public discourse. Insofar as we experience others as anonymously judging our external behaviour, we learn to split our life stories into two isolated

domains, public image and inner secrets. Theoretically our *capacity* to tell our personal stories—to intimate friends or at least to ourselves—might remain intact. In fact, however, the etiquette-asylum tradition is only part of a larger shift in cultural values, most powerfully embodied in the electronic media, that deepens the fragmentation of discourse by teaching a habit of inner passivity and even of contempt for the act of storytelling in every form. To understand the social force of these media, however, we must begin with a nineteenth-century development that appears at first glance more involved with etiquette books than with telegraph, radio and television technologies. A dramatic change in acceptable public behaviour after 1840 reflects the same social forces at work in these three electricity-based technologies and provides us with a vivid example of the social change they foster.

Imagine, for example, going to the music hall or theatre about 1840 in New York. All classes of society attended, dressed in their diverse styles. More important, interaction with the performers was expected behaviour. Audiences interrupted the musicians—cheering, shouting and pounding the floor with their feet—sometimes demanding repetition of an especially-liked passage of the music. Patrons booed, hissed, and even threw fruit or eggs at the play's villain. Public discourse, in short, sometimes approached the chaotic. By about 1865, however, we find a new mentality beginning to take hold. Noted conductor Theodore Thomas regularly disciplined his audiences, sometimes turning to stare them into silence before continuing the performance. He and others like him conducted stern lessons in conformity and audience passivity.[5]

Whether or not they were originally related, such education in audience conformity served the needs of the electric media that began to dominate national discourse at precisely the same time. Beginning with Samuel Morse's invention of a telegraphic code in 1844 a new era dawned in human history. Until that year, information travelled no faster than physical bodies, a few miles per hour at best. Electrical signals, travelling at the speed of light, created the possibility for communicating almost instantaneously across enormous distances. By so doing, they revolutionized the ancient human activities of storytelling and reporting the news.

'News from abroad is seldom sooth', the saying went. But even when accurate, accounts arriving after weeks or months in transit lacked the immediacy of contemporary events. Apart from such exotic and outdated fare, the news was reported by town criers or

local newspaper writers who operated within physical reach of their listeners and were subject to much the same interactive intervention found in the theatrical performances of the period. Indeed, their version could well be preempted if another citizen retold the tale from another perspective: 'It wasn't like that at all!'

By the 1870s however, the telegraph-based wire services began to provide local papers with national and even international news one day after the event; it was, to put it mildly, an extraordinary broadening of human consciousness as local readers began to be transformed into citizens of the wide world.[6] Still, the transition carried a high price tag. The audience, no longer able to interact with the now-distant storyteller or to critique the public version of events, had been rendered totally passive.

Live radio news beginning in the 1920s and more recent television coverage took instantaneous news one step farther. Instead of reading about news one day late, the audience could now 'participate' in events as they happened. Despite this dramatic intensification of audience involvement, however, the listeners or viewers gained not one whit of active engagement in public discourse.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of electronic discourse as a social force. The very fact that electronic media permits a single message, broadcast from some central point, to reach innumerable recipients necessarily creates an extraordinary concentration of economic and political power at that broadcast point of origin. A single minute of prime television time costs advertisers hundreds of thousands of dollars and access to media coverage has become the primary tool for wielding political power. As electronic media mature in their technical sophistication they envelop us all in a major social revolution.[7]

Consider several consequences of this development. When children learn the passivity required for television viewing (i.e., talking back to the television is fruitless and frustrating behaviour), they also learn deep-seated ambivalence about their capacity to create talk that matters. Doubting our capacity for meaningful talk is no small matter. Lacking such conviction, we tend to ignore our inner life and to treat our creative potential with contempt.

We see television's diminishment of the personal and intimate in the highly crafted character of television discourse. We have already observed that the broadcast system protects the speaker

from unpredictable audience interventions. This hothouse environment produces television talk that is seldom spontaneous or messy. On the rare occasions when anger or grief catches a newscaster in the act of announcing, many viewers are deeply moved. The veneer of professional competence has been broken and a hint of human passion shows through. Before long, however, the system recovers and we once again witness men and women who, whether they read the news, live out soap opera melodramas, or lure us with the wonders of a brand of toilet paper, always appear in perfect command of themselves.

What does it mean to live in a society whose public voices and stories sound so utterly unlike our own? It is not as if human beings never before longed to present a refined image of themselves! The long history of theatre, oratory, cosmetics and fashion proclaim our desire to dress up for special occasions. Still, we know that our truest story runs much deeper and more mysteriously than our occasional highly-crafted moments can suggest. We live a rhythm of mystery and clarity, of ambivalence and coherence. At our best, we understand that we will not endure without the compassion it takes to embrace the unexpected and ambiguous in ourselves and those with whom we live. Still, the courage, hope and sense of humour needed to tell our true stories often withers in the presence of the media's implacably well-crafted voice.

Advertising, the most important single offspring of mass media, demands special attention. The first three decades of this century saw a revolution in North American advertising style that paralleled and reinforced the patterns we have been considering. Mid-nineteenth-century advertisements tended to take the form of a dialogue that assumed a basic equality between advertiser and reader. With the noteworthy exceptions of patent medicines and carnival-type entertainment, sales were thought to result from a rational description of product qualities or a simple announcement of available merchandise. By the early-twentieth century, gradual changes in strategy began to coalesce in a radically new style focusing, not on the product, but on its benefits. Emotion-laden advertising rhetoric aimed at a consumer who was now presumed to be irrational and inept.[8]

The new style's underlying rationale can best be seen at General Motors. Beginning in 1923 with the arrival of Alfred P. Sloan as president, marketing cars shifted from Ford's approach—stressing the economy and technical competence of an unchanging Model

T—to fostering cyclic dissatisfaction with one's present car, the basis of 'turnover buying'. Continued expansion of the mass-production system required turnover buying; when owners hold on to their cars for too long, the new-car market stagnates.

General Motors combined two related strategies: annual model changes and advertising automobiles less as tools for transportation than as enhancements of sexuality, social-status and individualistic 'freedom of choice'. Taken together, these tactics fostered desire for a new car while severing the bond of affection between owner and present vehicle. The simultaneous messages that 'new means better' (annual model change) and 'the car enhances inadequate sexual and social status' (advertising style) teach an essential lesson for consumerist behaviour. We might put it in the form of a logical argument. 'I am what I own. But what I currently own is inadequate. Therefore, twitch and buy.'[9]

Consumerist advertising, then, marks the epitome of the separation of private and public life. Etiquette books and electronic media taught us to hide our emotions; consumerist advertisers, recognizing perhaps the affective starvation inherent in etiquette rules, search out those same hidden feelings. They do not probe our emotions to restore our access to them, however, but to programme them so that we will behave in an appropriate consumerist fashion. Insofar as consumerist advertising succeeds, my experience of my inner self—with its integrity, passion, sinfulness and nobility—remains inaccessible to me even as it is manipulated by the ads.

Part 3: Conclusion

If the foregoing interpretation is correct, we citizens of the West face a serious challenge. The vitality and depth of our public and personal lives requires men and women with a mature capacity for telling and listening to the stories that constitute the narrative core of life. On the other hand, nearly two centuries of western history have led to an electronic style of public discourse that fragments the ancient bond between speaker and hearer, creating a one-way public discourse marked by system dominance and audience conformity, while at the same time teaching the habits of personal passivity and contempt for the inner life. How, then, might we take steps to recover the art of storytelling? I do not propose to 'solve' this problem but, in the brief space available, let me propose some preliminary suggestions.

In non-capitalist cultures—the West roughly before the seventeenth century and a host of other cultures even to this day—storytelling comes naturally.[10] In our case, however, the habits of speaking and listening on which the art depends have tended to atrophy. We cannot expect, therefore, to achieve maturity in this domain of life without explicit efforts. Awkward as it may at first appear, we must learn to 'make appointments' with one another for times when we deliberately disengage from our electronic context and, just as deliberately, honour the telling of our stories. We might, for example, decide to 'fast from electricity' one night a week as a contemporary form of that ancient Christian discipline. We would commit ourselves to staying home—electronics are unavoidable in the public arena—and disconnect our telephones, radios, televisions, electric lights and computers. Very likely we would discover a time, each week, when the play of storytelling could flourish. Undistracted by competing systems and increasingly unintimidated by doubts that no one wants to hear, we might learn to tell the stories of our week, victories and defeats, delights and griefs. Gradually, the fabric of our communal lives would reveal the subtleties that often escape notice. We would, in short, grow in our capacity for intimacy with those closest to us.

This is an exceedingly modest beginning for addressing a major societal problem, and it is counter-cultural into the bargain. Who can say, however, what such a simple practice might foster in the larger civic arenas of our lives? Schooled in intimacy's virtues, we might find new ways to engage in public discourse, to overcome passive conformity and redefine ourselves as active citizens in the shaping of the public order. For Christians, the incarnate Jesus stands as a model and a hope. Intimately and accessibly human, at the same time Lord of history, Jesus reveals God as committed to a salvation at once personal and societal. Our attempts at storytelling may help us to renew our intimate lives while they teach us the essential virtues of public citizenry.

NOTES

[1] For an overview of recent work in the area see Terrence Tilley, *Story theology* (Wilminton, Delaware, 1985).

[2] John F. Kasson, 'Civility and rudeness: urban etiquette and the bourgeois social order in nineteenth-century America', *Prospects* 9 (1984), pp 143–163 estimates an average of three new etiquette books annually before the Civil War and this rose to an average of five or six per year from 1870 through World War I (p 146). The passage on the nose is found on p 157.

Since I write from my own United States' area of expertise, I must leave it to European readers to judge how closely my interpretation matches their experience.

[3] On the asylum model in the United States see John Kasson, *Civilizing the machine: technology and republican values in America, 1776–1900* (New York, 1976), chapter 1; and Erving Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Garden City, NY, 1961). On the same pattern in France see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, trs. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), pp 195–228.

[4] Far from diminishing over time, scrutiny has become even more subtly pervasive in contemporary society. Thus, Shoshanah Zuboff has documented the use of computers for second-by-second worker observation on the line and in the office, (*In the age of the smart machine*, [New York, 1988]). Fashion magazines such as *Vogue* or *Gentleman's quarterly* continue the etiquette-manual tradition of impression management by training readers in the ever-changing arts of applying makeup and dressing 'for success'. The result of these parallel developments tends to be life in a societal fishbowl.

[5] John F. Kasson, 'Urban audiences and the organization of entertainment in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', *Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village Herald*, 14:1 (1985), pp 3–14.

[6] On the early history of the wire news services see Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American mind: from Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, 1982) chapter 1.

[7] Walter Ong S.J. rightly notes that the much earlier technology of writing initiated the process of separating the source of communication from the recipient. See, for example, 'Writing is a technology that restructures thought', in Gerd Baumann, ed., *The written word: literacy in transition* (Oxford, 1986) pp 37–45. Electronic communication, however, dramatically enhances the process by inserting the disjunction into present-tense discourse. For some of the implications see Neil Postman's *Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business* (New York, 1985) and Joshua Meyrowitz, *No sense of place: the impact of electronic media on social behavior* (New York, 1985).

For simplicity's sake, I will collapse the three electronic technologies from this point on and speak only of the most recent and powerful of them, television.

[8] Roland Marchand describes the basic mentality. 'In viewing the urban masses, advertisers associated consumer lethargy as much with weak-kneed conformity as with cultural backwardness. . . . Emotional appeals succeeded because only by seeking this lowest common human denominator could the advertiser shake the masses from their lethargy without taxing their limited intelligence'. (*Advertising the American dream: making way for modernity, 1920–1940*, [Berkeley, 1985], pp 68–69 and passim.)

[9] The General Motors strategy was, in fact, more complex than we have time to discuss. For a more complete presentation see Emma Rothschild, *Paradise lost: the decline of the auto-industrial age* (New York, 1973), chapter 2.

[10] The argument linking capitalism with our electronic media style is more complicated than I have indicated above. For a more complete presentation see my *Advent for capitalists: grief, joy, and gender in contemporary life* (Regina, Canada, 1987).