The Story Revolution: How Telling Our Stories Transforms the World

By Arlene Goldbard

Note: This essay is adapted from a talk delivered at the Ukiah Players Theatre, Ukiah, CA, on 30 November 2004, as part of a meeting of people interested in making Ukiah a center for local stories through theater, digital storytelling and other community cultural development practices. Learn more about the Ukiah Players at http://ukiahplayerstheatre.org. The examples cited below are drawn from the anthology "Community, Culture and Globalization," edited by Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard and published in 2002 by the Rockefeller Foundation. Readers may obtain free copies from the Rockefeller Foundation by following this link.

In "Community, Culture, and Globalization," dancer and choreographer (and MacArthur "genius" award-winner) Liz Lerman talks about a technique she uses in her art work. It’s called "big story, little story," and she describes it as looking "for our own personal stories inside the larger fabric of history."

On the particular occasion Lerman recounts in her chapter of the anthology, her company was creating a performance about the Underground Railway, the hidden network of people who helped escaped slaves flee to the north of the United States before slavery was overturned by the Civil War of the 1860s. Instead of trying to recreate the period in a sort of historical pageant, they looked for the underlying themes. That connected them to ideas such as running away from oppression, "aiding refugees, the comfort of the known and the fear of the unknown." In the finished dance, each dancer had a solo that told a contemporary, personal story that revealed something about these questions, and those were interspersed with larger-group sections such as stories taken from narratives of escaped slaves.

My plan is to tell some little stories and link them to some big stories. If I succeed, it will all fall together into a pattern that will help us understand the important work people here at the Ukiah Players Theatre have been doing with the community’s stories, and why it matters.

Liz Lerman’s way of working is just one of the ways that pairing big and little stories exposes a deep truth. It’s often easy to feel you know something about major events from the big story alone: a history book that offers details of battles, troop movements, proclamations, policies and death tolls can make you feel that you understand World War II, for example. But it’s not until your heart and your head are fully engaged by someone’s little story, a first-person human story — as in the Ukiah Players’ "Good War Project," which surfaced the stories of people who lived through that time— that you begin to approach real understanding.

The reason this is so is expressed in another pair of phrases I like. These were coined by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. He calls the big, obvious stuff of human events the "clear layer," because in scale and outline it is easy to see. The clear layer, he writes, is "an upper, public, illuminated, easily noticed, clearly describable surface from which similarities are capable of being profitably abstracted and condensed into laws." Beneath it lies the much thicker "dark layer," which is a name for the aggregate of our

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little stories. Berlin describes the dark layer as being made up of "less and less obvious yet more and more intimate and pervasive characteristics, too closely mixed with feelings and activities to be easily distinguishable from them."

You can generalize effortlessly based on the clear layer: That’s where social and historical theories are propounded, and they keep on being propounded in hindsight, even though they seldom give us much foresight into future human events, which often surprise us. But if you really want to understand something, you have to be willing to spend time in the dark layer, with its multitude of little stories.

Think about what I am saying in terms of your own direct experience. Let’s say you have a good friend, someone you’ve known and observed and loved for years. Now let’s bring a total stranger to mind — a psychologist. Let’s say the psychologist could be given all the clear-layer information about your friend: the circumstances of her birth, family, childhood, school transcripts, work record — all the “upper, public, illuminated, easily noticed, clearly describable surface.” The stark truth is that no matter how much data was supplied to a trained professional, even a psychologist who had thousands of cold, hard facts could never foretell the behavior of a stranger with greater accuracy than could a close friend with no psychological training at all. Of course, the friend would get it wrong a good deal of the time, because people are unpredictable. But the stranger equipped with clear-layer data would get it wrong much more often.

Let me move from there to a really big story — some people say it is the one story that contains all others — the Bible. My custom is to follow the Hebrew calendar, which assigns Torah readings — portions from the first five books of the Old Testament and from the prophetic writings — to each week and each holiday of the year. It’s an instructive practice, because we go through exactly the same cycle of stories every year, yet each year they reveal new meanings, stimulating new insights and learning.

When UCLA Players Executive Director Kate Magruder and I first talked about this event back in September, I happened to be studying the portion known in Hebrew as "Ki Tavo," Deuteronomy 26.1-29.8. Deuteronomy is the last book of the Torah, the main purpose of which is to retell the story that is laid out in much more detail in the previous four books.

At the end of this reading, Moses reminds the people of what they have experienced.

Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: You have seen all that the Lord did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: the wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

Now, this is a puzzle. Moses plainly says that he is describing events people have already seen with their own eyes. So why, until that day, did they not truly see, hear or understand?

I told Kate that I interpreted this to mean that our lives with all their miracles and wonders are merely a discontinuous string of incidents — until we create the narrative that gives them meaning, Our lives with all their miracles and wonders are
until we write the story in our own minds or in any concrete form. We can't have true sight; we can't draw true understanding from our experiences until we choose to give them a coherent shape.

This hunger for stories is part of what makes us human. Every child wants to know the story of his or her birth, not to prove it happened — being alive to ask the question is proof enough — but because weaving our experience into a story lifts us out of ordinary time and meaning into the godlike realm of creativity, where the story serves us.

I must have asked my mother to tell my birth story on a dozen occasions, and I think she obliged me every time. I can remember the way she told it, in words and images that have helped to shape the underlying themes of my life.

First, her story always started a generation back, with my maternal grandparents' voyage to this country. That told me that we are part of a chain of being, that we are links and not islands.

My grandfather was drafted into the Czar's army, which was a death sentence for Jews. Overnight, he and my grandmother packed their belongings and said goodbye to their families, whom they would never see again. Traveling first overland and then by ship, they set out from Vitebsk, which is now in Belarus, bound for New York. My grandmother was very beautiful, they told me, with red hair that she wore in braids wound over her ears, like Princess Leia from "Star Wars." She was also pregnant with my mother, so the cramped, stuffy quarters in steerage made her feel especially ill. Seeking fresh air on a higher deck, she met the ship's captain, who was so taken by her beauty that he fell in love with her and wanted her to stay with him. But Grandma was loyal to her young husband, so she got off the boat, bought a pushcart and started the life of toil that was to be her lot in America.

Now, I knew how the story came out. (It did not have a happy ending, and the middle wasn't much to brag about either.) So it was clear to me that I would have preferred the other plotline, the one where Grandma runs off with a sea captain. This taught me that as a virtue loyalty is overrated and that I had better think hard about the consequences of my choices before making them.

I'll skip over a few decades to get to the part of the story where I come in. I was born nearly six weeks premature. The way my mother told it, her waters broke but she had no contractions. She called the doctor and was told to pack a bag and come to the hospital. She felt fine, so she took her time: she washed her hair, ironed her clothes and called my father to come home from work and give her a ride. At the hospital, she was registered and rushed to a room where preparations for delivery began. "This is silly," she kept telling the nurse, "I'm not due for ages. You're just going to have to do all this again six weeks from now." A few hours later, I was delivered by cesarean section.

This part of the story taught me that the world might not always be ready to welcome me when I was ready to make my presence felt.

My parents were married for many years before I was born. Partly, World War II got in the way, but I suspect they had other reasons for waiting. When I finally came into this world, my grandmother — whose acquaintance with Christian doctrine was limited to occasional viewings of "Miracle on 34th Street" — joked that I ought to be nicknamed "Baby Jesus." I never got this joke until I was old enough to understand that she had somehow
conflicted the idea of the virgin birth (children without sex) with my parents’ reluctance to conceive (sex without children), thus deciding that my birth was a miracle.

This part of the story taught me a great many things, but the one I will mention now is that there are countless ways of understanding the world, and their underlying stories don’t always translate between cultures.

Having waited so long to be born, it seems I also postponed having anything to say about it. When I was a child, that fact tended to provide the last chapter of the long story that emerged whenever I begged, “Mommy, tell me about when I was born.” My father was worried by my silence. He used to look at me and ask, “When will she talk? When will she talk?” You can probably guess the punch line yourselves: It wasn’t long after I finally started talking that he reversed his question to ask this instead: “When will she shut up?”

The answer appears to be never, not so long as I am privileged to draw breath. My work in the world is speaking and writing. Sometimes I even get paid by the word. So even though it pinched a little, that story taught me who I would be: I would dream my dreams, and tell them when I was good and ready, but I would have to accept that not everyone would want to hear them.

Every person has a reservoir of stories — ancestor stories, origin stories, stories from childhood — that, whether any particular individual knows it or not, shape the defining narrative of his or her life. If you’re carrying around a version of your story that doesn’t serve you, all you have to do is turn it a little, and another facet comes into view. At a low point in my life, my inner story made me very sad: I felt sure that the pains and obstacles I had suffered were punishments, but I did not know why I was being punished, what I had done to deserve it. One day, mired in misery, I read something that suggested an alternate way of looking at life. What if the experiences I’d seen as punishments had instead been a form of training, preparations for the unique tasks I was to fulfill? I felt as if my personal narrative were a deck of cards, and all in an instant, the deck was reshuffled, dealing me a whole new hand.

So how we choose to frame our stories makes a huge difference. If all of us, as individuals, could find a way to reshuffle our decks from time to time, refreshing the meaning of our lives as they unfold, that would be a good thing. Everyone would be a little more awake, a little more conscious in making use of the time we have on earth, and that would be an antidote to the trancelike state it is easy to fall into when meaning takes a back seat to distraction and consumption.

But transforming the world is more than the intersection of individual choices. I agree with Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who famously said that “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?” A revolution of the heart is a paradigm shift in which our collective deck, our model of the world, gets reshuffled, changing the story for everyone. In a revolution...
of the heart, those who have put themselves to sleep awaken, and healing begins to emerge where there has been harm. Such a revolution infuses the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times, so that even people who are unaware of precisely what is happening are able to sense that something new and important is going on.

How then do we link up our individual abilities to shape our own defining narratives, so that they form something larger than the sum of its parts, a revolution of the heart?

In "Community, Culture and Globalization," muralist Judy Baca relates a wonderful tale that shows how the transformative power of art can magnify the meaning of a little story into something very big indeed. She tells the back-story of "The Great Wall of Los Angeles," the world's largest mural, painted by crews drawn from youth gangs. It portrays the buried history of California and its people, the dark layer that seldom makes the history books:

The site was a concrete flood-control channel built by the Army Corps of Engineers. Once an arroyo (a dirt ravine cut by river water), the Tujunga Wash flood-control channel was an ugly concrete dividing line within the community with a belt of arid dirt running along either side. The Wash is in Studio City, a few miles north of Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley....

The concreted rivers divided the land and left ugly eyesores, carrying the water too swiftly to the ocean, bearing pollution from city streets, affecting Santa Monica Bay and depriving the aquifer of water replenishment through normal ground seepage. In a sense the concreting of the river represented the hardening of the arteries of the land. If the river overflowing its banks regularly destroyed opportunities for the real-estate expansion that fast became the chief commodity of the fledgling city of the 1920s, then the river would simply have to be tamed. These first decisions about the river made it easier to displace historic indigenous and Mexican communities in the name of city development....

The concreted river invaded my dreams, its significance becoming clearer to me as the correlation between the scars on a human body and those on the land took shape in my mind. Fernando, a charismatic leader from the original Las Vistas Nuevas team, was brutally stabbed in his own neighborhood's local store the summer of the painting of "Mi Abuelita." He suffered 13 wounds to his torso and one to his face. We were devastated by the attack, but Fernando recovered and returned for the dedication ceremony, continuing his work against violence through the murals for many years until he was killed in his neighborhood park in the 1980s, 12 years after he had abandoned "the life." I asked him after he had healed how he was doing with the psychological scars left by such an attack and he responded, "The worst thing is that every time I remove my shirt my body is a map of violence." It was for this reason that I proposed and designed a series of tattooed images to cover and transform the scars on his body. -Artist Judy Baca

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Standing at the river on that first day, dreaming of what it could become, I saw the concrete as a scar where the river once ran and
our work in the channel producing the narrative mural, as a tattoo on the scar. The defining metaphor of what came to be known as the "Great Wall of Los Angeles" ... became "a tattoo on the scar where the river once ran."

There is no single way to join our little stories, of course. It takes many different answers to speak to each heart in its own language. But all the answers have something in common: they rely on our greatest resource and ally, that stupendously wonderful human invention, culture.

Culture is an elastic idea, accommodating everything we human beings create. If you want to define culture in the most generous way, just open your eyes. Look around you, skipping over everything that comes under the heading of "nature" — the November sky, the trees with their red and yellow leaves, the rushing streams. Anything you see or hear that doesn't fit under the heading of nature is culture. Culture is the sum-total of human creativity and invention: language, signs and symbols, systems of belief, customs, clothes, cooking, tools, toys and adornments, everything we build and everything we use to fill it up — and by the way, art.

Culture is a collective creation. It is animated by our desire to communicate and connect, to see and be seen, to know and be known. It exists wherever people have emerged from the isolation to which our spirits are prey, and entered into community. As Dorothy Day put it so beautifully, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."

As does culture. Consider for a second how many stories have been written and chanted and whispered and drawn and danced and imagined since the earliest humans. Close your eyes for a second and try to give those stories form. If each story were a butterfly, every surface and vista on earth would by now be a perpetual-motion panorama of brilliant iridescence. If each story were a particle of energy, our entire planet would be encased in a story field, a web or matrix of tales that binds and sustains our collective existence.

In truth, all of us are living in the midst of the story field, but none of us can see and grasp all the stories simultaneously. It's just too much, too far beyond our human ken. So we search for meta-stories, the grand narratives that transcend the clutter and incident of our lives and make it all fall into place, helping us to see we are part of something much larger than ourselves.

That's a good thing, the human desire to make sense. But it carries a risk: it makes us susceptible to people who are peddling readymade narratives that don't serve the revolution of the heart. We've seen many times in history when one group of people succumbs to a narrative that aggrandizes their own position at others' expense. The "white man's burden" was one such narrative, asserting that those with paler skin were higher forms of humanity, so it fell to them to "civilize" everyone else by destroying their institutions, suppressing their spiritual practices and, if all else failed, taking their lives. Change the labels and you've got the "Rape of Nanking," the massacre of Chinese people by Japanese troops in World War II; or the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire — or, unfortunately, others too heartbreakingly numerous to count.

Much of the time, those who hold power attempt to create or impose a dominant narrative that...

"We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." — Organizer Dorothy Day
keeps them on top. Like the stories my mother told me, these big stories almost always start with history, positioning the present as the inevitable result of a specific version of the past, as destiny.

Perhaps you've heard the phrase "the Great Man Theory of History," which characterizes one common form such imposed narratives take. In the Great Man Theory, history is made by extraordinary individuals of great ability and power, who through the force of personality shape the course of events. In the Great Man Theory, for instance, Lincoln freed the slaves, while the generations who labored so long and hard to escape, subvert and oppose slavery were merely his supporting cast. A more general version of this approach has often been enshrined in museums and "Masterpiece Theatre" specials: that all that is worthy and good in our heritage derives from possessors of wealth and privilege, so that the words and images and costumes and furniture and decorations of such people should be preserved and exhibited for the edification of future generations. In this model, a society has one true culture, and whatever doesn't belong to IT is subculture or folk culture or in some other way second-rate. The rest of us have a role in this big story, to be sure, but it is mostly to be an appreciative audience.

The story revolution, the one that is transforming our world this very minute, is fueled by a democratic counter-assertion: that everyone contributes to culture; that the knowledge sorely needed by future generations must come from every ethnic group and region and social class, from men and women of infinite variety; and that everyone has something to teach and something to learn.

I have seen many people introduced to this idea, and it almost always resounds with the force of truth. It makes common sense that everyone ought to be cherished equally as a member of the human community; just as it seems crazy to imagine that the problems of our world can be resolved while most of humanity is viewed by those in power as raw material for industry or market segments, nuisances or cannon-fodder. In my experience, most people grasp immediately that their own stories and the stories of their communities do matter, that these little stories need to be told and heard, and that in their giving and receiving, the possibility of healing is born.

This idea is already out and about, a billion butterflies already unleashed into the atmosphere. It's why even in the clear layer, some things have already begun to change: The museums can't get away anymore with exhibiting only the art of white men or the artifacts of the wealthy. PBS runs programs about civil-rights movements, Latino histories, Asian cultures, and countless little stories are featured side-by-side with "Masterpiece Theatre." In progressive education, the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has had a tremendous influence with his observation that the key to liberating education is to learn to speak one's own words in one's own voice. The market for what is called "world music" is burgeoning; even multiplexes show independent films; first-person memoirs and oral histories fill bookstore shelves; and the Ukiah Players is by no means the only
theatre to open its stage to the little stories, the dark layer of its community.

It isn't always easy to know precisely what is happening when we read the paper or watch news coverage of conflict around the world. It isn't always clear which side to root for, if any. But this much can be seen beneath the surface of so many public troubles: on one side of most struggles is entrenched power, saying "I speak for everyone, I think for everyone, what benefits me is good for everyone," and on the other side are thousands upon thousands of people saying, as Freire has put it, that they are Subjects in history, and not its passive objects. They create culture. They have the right to think for themselves, to tell their stories for themselves, and to be received with the same expectation of dignity and respect that people in power accord themselves.

Educators and artists are putting these rights into action around the world, every day. This requires them to navigate complicated questions and face complex challenges, four of which I want to describe to you.

One of them has to do with the question of truth. Alessandro Portelli of the University of Rome La Sapienza is a pioneer in engaged oral history — oral history is another name for the first-person story of a life. In November 2003, I took part in a conference in Italy sponsored by the Center for Rural Strategies, where Portelli pointed out that, "Many of the most important stories are true but not accurate." In memory, he says, facts are reshaped to serve the present:

Memory is not just a record, memory is a process that goes on. What you get in the [oral history] interview is the relationship between now and then and all the time in between. What you get is a work of interpretation. I find myself sometimes in the position of disrupting the narrative that has been going on, which I see as a contribution to the community's understanding of itself... Sometimes an outsider's perspective is as useful as an insider's.

So the second thing to be said about the work of unearthing and making use of our little stories is that it involves a relationship between teller and listener, in which the listener is not just an empty vessel. The listener can pose questions in a way that helps to reshuffle the deck of the teller's self-understanding to reveal more agency, more creative power, than the teller may ever have imagined. When the listener is an artist who can help to shape these little stories into a narrative that carries big-story power, the relationship is even more important.

In "Community, Culture and Globalization," Maribel Legarda, the former artistic director of the Philippines Educational Theatre Association, describes her company's work with a group of women in Ifugao Province, helping them form Teatro Kabbule, creating work on the theme of abuse of women and children:

Kabbule is a local indigenous term for ghost or monster. It is also a traditional chant (like a children's rhyme) used by participants in the workshop as a group dynamics game. Traditionally, this chant is used to scare children about ghosts and monsters to make them sleepy and go to bed early. The chant talks about roaming ghosts moving from one house to the other. The idea of using the game as a
metaphor for the group's presentation came out of initial brainstorming during the workshop and eventually became the title of their own informational performance, and later the name of their own theater group.

In Ifugao Province, the [first] problem was how to evoke from the community an assessment of a situation that was clearly traumatic and deemed taboo by indigenous society and culture. How does one surface stories that are deeply repressed by the culture? And how does one translate frameworks of feminism and empowerment while remaining equally sensitive to highly regarded customs and traditions? Artistically, how does one tap into the rich performance traditions often undervalued by the participants themselves out of a desire to please what they perceive as artist-teachers' urban sensibilities? Organizationally, how does one ensure that the experience doesn't become a one-shot deal?

Using the chant as the organizing structure, the group was able to come up with a 30-minute play depicting actual cases of abuse of women and children in their community. The play was performed before local government officials and to several towns in Ifugao in a bid to raise public awareness, advocate and lobby for local mechanisms (e.g., laws, social services, welfare programs for women, etc.) and establish institutions such as a women's desk and crisis center in their own community.

The play narrates three true stories of family violence in Ifugao, touching on physical abuse of children, incestuous abuse and wife-battering, woven together and using the Kabbule character as an image and metaphor mirroring the acts of the perpetrators of this violence. The chant became the basis for a discussion of fear and aggression. With the sensitive guidance of the artist-teachers, the young women gradually put a face to the monster: that of the grandfather who continually abused his own granddaughter, the drunken father who burned his own child in a fit of fury, the enraged husband who banged his wife's head on the housepost.

Toward the end of the play, the Kabbule character says:

In our lives, there are ghosts and monsters created by our minds and there are also real ghosts and monsters that actually exist. They are people we know, people we love. They are near to us, and we often live with them. And we must be able to know and deal with these ghosts in our lives.

The third point I want to make about this enterprise of collecting, shaping and using stories is that it entails ethical challenges. People's stories may contain information that carries risk, as with a story that exposes a violation of the law or reveals a secret. The educators and artists who work with stories must be aware of these risks, and respectful of people's right to balance considerations of truth and the desire to be seen, on the one hand, with considerations of privacy and the desire to avoid doing harm. Clarity of purpose is essential, because if people see that a strongly positive aim can be advanced by telling their stories, they will be much more likely to share them.

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For example, oral historian Mary Marshall Clark writes in "Community,
Culture and Globalization" about what is called "theater of witness."

Inspired by the use of testimony in Latin America and developed through work with Chileans in refugee communities in New York, the group Theater Arts Against Political Violence brought artists and survivors of political torture together to explore dramatic uses of testimony. Oral histories were conducted with torture survivors as a way for others to enter into the experiences of remembered torture, but in a broader landscape than one-to-one therapy (or oral history) could provide.

The actors modeled the experience of torture through their bodies, symbolically transferring the words into a lived experience that would be "witnessed" by the public to break down the conspiracy of silence that often confines the survivor in a world of isolation. According to Karen Maipede, who helped direct the project ... the project developed in close collaboration with those who lived through political torture? The project included three testimony sessions held in a group setting to avoid recreating isolation. In between, the theater company met to develop and rehearse scenes from the stories. The goal of the production was to give the torture survivors the ability to stand outside their own experiences and to "witness" the transformation of their suffering on stage in the company of friends and fellow survivors. The survivors became the critics, and ultimately the authors, of the transformation.

My fourth point is that it is essential to ensure the uses to which stories are put are congruent with the intention of helping to bring about a revolution of the heart. Two core values of the story revolution are that people must take part in shaping how their stories are shared, and that the overarching aims should always be to illuminate, learn and heal. We have only to turn on our TV sets and tune into "Jerry Springer" to see the opposite: people's stories exploited as pieces in a big-story mosaic that does nothing to heal the world. Look at these people pouring out their hearts, the producers want us to say, aren't they awful, rude, primitive, violent, pathetic? Doesn't comparing yourselves to them make you feel superior? Now, stay tuned for this commercial and buy something that will make you feel even better!

In "Community, Culture and Globalization," Norm Horton and Sarah Moynihan of the Australian group Feral Arts describe their work with indigenous aboriginal communities near Dajjarra, in remote northwestern Queensland. They have created software they call Placeworks, which is helping them build an online archive of the Dajjarra community's culture. The community has been disrupted by displacement, as people have been repeatedly pushed out of their ancestral lands to make room for roadways, mining and other forms of commercial development.

A significant body of oral- and community-history material has been generated through the community cultural development program in Dajjarra. This material includes photos, videos, songs, interviews, paintings, t-shirts, digital images and documents, all of which belong to the Dajjarra community. Typically this material might provide the research basis for a documentary video, a photographic exhibit or a publication, as had been in the case in some of our earlier work. But in partnership with the Dajjarra community we have started looking beyond a research-production-exhibition-distribution model to engage with some other questions. How should this material be managed and utilized to be of the greatest community benefit now and into the future? Where should it be kept? How might it be used and by whom? Who are the audiences for the works produced? What can be shared with other places and people and what needs to remain as family or
community access only? What cultural and community protocols need to be considered?

One of the main uses of the current Placeworks prototype is to scan and catalogue personal and family photographs. Photos are valuable commodities and are greatly treasured. Copying photos is expensive and the CCD program provides community access to digital scanning and printing equipment through a small media studio located in a converted storeroom in the community hall. Through this process people can get copies of their photos, learn new skills and if they choose, contribute images to the Placeworks database. Another current project, Placestories, involves school children using scanners and digital cameras to work with community elders to involve them in contributing material to the Placeworks database. The project has been designed to combine young people’s computer skills with the knowledge and experiences of older members of the community....

The Placeworks software initiative continues to throw up a wide range of technical and cultural challenges. The software concentrates on putting control and management of this material firmly in the hands of the local community. Access to material is managed by a system of passwords so that personal material can be either shared or kept private, as required. One of the features being built into the software is the capacity for images of and references to particular individuals to be “masked” or removed from the database at any time to meet with cultural protocols.

There are many important questions to be engaged: There is much to study, document and invent in order to nurture and develop the story revolution. The people who’ve done such good work here in Ukiah in their many story-based projects have countless colleagues around the globe who understand how ordinary people’s little stories can transform the world. What doesn’t exist is a center for this movement, a community whose own little story is closely tied to the larger narrative of the story revolution, a community that can provide a home and haven for much-needed learning and exchange.

What has already been accomplished here in rural Northern California is remarkable. You know that I don’t believe in the Great Man Theory of history, so I would never suggest that a single individual is responsible. But sometimes the little story of an individual’s life is wired in such a way that it plugs directly into a huge power source, energizing everyone who comes in contact with it. When I say that you are lucky that the story of someone with such enormous heart and vision has unfolded right here in this community, then you will know I am speaking of the Ukiah Players’ Executive Director, Kate Magruder.

In proposing that Ukiah become a center of the story revolution, Kate has an idea that is ripe and ready. If this development is as well planned and as widely supported as I would expect, there will be many practical benefits. It’s very likely that grants and contracts can come to this area to support such a center. It’s very likely it will provide opportunities for young people who might otherwise feel there is no future for them here. Once established, it will attract attention and visitors who will respect local culture and tread lightly on the land. It will be an unparalleled resource for
education and social services. I can imagine that enlightened businesses will see it as a resource too: Visualize wine growers commissioning a rich, multi-layered project that preserves the stories of their journey in this rich agricultural valley, from workers’ as well as owners’ viewpoints. Visualize the people who’ve created alternative energy and conservation enterprises here collectively commissioning the story of their great counter-cultural journey, and why they embarked on it. All this potential is splendid, significant, exciting.

But the most important reason to put Kate’s idea into practice is that you have the opportunity to create something here that will add force and passion to a movement that is everyday stating the case for human resilience, diversity and connection at a time when that is what the world most needs. Why not do it here first? As the Spanish poet Antonio Machado said, “Traveler, there is no road. We make the road by walking.”

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