

The S T O R Y

Behind the Story

notes from
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Mom Liked Language, I Liked Trees

As a boy, I liked tree climbing, tag foot ball and listening to the radio. Little did I realize I was absorbing language. Mother loved language. I'd say, "Mom, I'm goin' out." "Going!" Mother's voice would ring out. "You are going. Don't drop your ing's." The boys and girls at the parish school dropped their ing's. And they said "hache" for "h." I found that intriguing. By the fourth grade, some of the boys were saying fiery words that were not said elsewhere. They were "the bad words." How mysterious some words were full of danger.

Playing hide and seek when I was five and six, the word I loved best was "ollieollieinfree" because it had a beautiful sound. As did "Red Rover, Red Rover, send Janet right over." "I hosit" had power, as did "Let's chose up teams. I'll be captain." We'd all freeze hoping we'd be chosen for the team.

When we played tag football we knew exactly what each word meant. We'd argue fiercely about the scrimmage line. The scrimmage line was the line to which the ball had advanced. Every inch was important.

When we huddled to make the next play, we'd use language that was precise as a lawyer's. "I'll center. Russ, you fake left then zigzag right. I'll throw you a bullet."

There were phrases and words that were said only in the family. I might say, "Dad, give me fifty cents." Dad would say, "Get off your feet," which meant he felt the request was ridiculous. Grandmother, who lived on the third floor of our house, would be sitting in her kitchen and say, "I think I'll lie down in my chamber." Not her room, her chamber. And she'd say, "I think I'll give him the Old Harry." Later we figured out the Old Harry may have been the devil.

Mother loved to tell us the latest Jackieism. My uncle Jackie would say, "I got so mad I got in my Cadillac and walked away." Mother would laugh telling about the policeman who said in a rage to Jackie, "Next time, drive around me whether I'm here or not."

There were special languages. For instance, the language of religion. The Latin mass had mysterious sounds and chants. Religion itself introduced me to the mystery of Adam and Eve. I was sure



Who's "the Old Harry" Gram? (Jay and his grandmother Alice O'Callahan)

that Adam and Eve didn't drop their "ing's" or say fiery words. The language of prayer for me was, above all, the Hail Mary and the Our Father. The bible stories introduced me to huge images: the Red Sea parting, the Burning Bush, and Samson getting his hair shorn. I hated Samson losing all of his strength and being crushed. Speaking of Samson, when I was eight, I'd sit in the barber's chair and say to Louis the barber, "Just trim a little off the top." Louis, who looked like a seal, would leave me bald and weak as Samson.

There was the language

of courtesy. I might call across the street to Sally Graham. If Sally didn't hear me she'd call, "Excuse me?" If we disagreed about something

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HIGHLIGHTS

MOM LIKED LANGUAGE

ARTISTS CREATING
COMMUNITY

JOHN LANGSTAFF:
KATISHA AND KO-KO

LAURA O'CALLAHAN,
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Statues

*To make a prairie it takes a
clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.*

-by Emily Dickinson

Statues are a language of sorts. If you walk on the Mall in Washington D.C., you see the Washington Monument and nearby the Jefferson

Memorial and Lincoln Memorial. They speak of struggle and commitment to freedom. Where are the statues of the great poets, writers, storytellers and artists of the country? I'd like to see statues of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, two great voices of our land, in the nation's capital. It's important to honor our political and military leaders, but we

mustn't forget the artists who are the soul of the land.

I'd like to see a statue of Brother Blue and Ruth on the Cambridge Common, and one of John Langstaff, the founder of the Revels, outside Sanders Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And a statue of Ray Hicks and Jackie Torrence in Jonesborough, Tennessee.



Ah, the power of a statue.

Mom Liked Language, continued

Sally would say, "I beg to differ." I thought that howlingly funny, yet secretly I had a deep respect for her being so courteous.

My neighborhood, Pill Hill, was filled with the rhythms of language. Neighbors calling their children in the evening, Mrs. Lawrence talking to her dog and the rhythms of tennis scores being called out.

I loved the rhythms on the radio. The Lone Ranger program would begin with the William Tell Overture. The Shadow began with the dark words, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. The Shadow Knows." This was followed by the strange, dark laughter of The Shadow.

Baseball sportscasters, like Kurt Gowdy, who broadcast for the Red Sox, knew all about rhythms and language. My friend, Peter Wetherbee, loved those rhythms. When we were teenagers, three or four of us would be walking along when Peter would suddenly stop and become Kurt Gowdy. "Williams takes ball three. The crowd is tense. The whole season is coming down

Two Artists Creating Community

*Everybody loves Michael!
Gratia Banta,
Michael Parent,
Linda O'Callahan*



Michael Parent: Coming Together in Lewiston

Michael Parent is a writer, playwright, translator, storyteller, juggler, singer and teacher. He's added another talent, that of director.

Michael recently directed a play called, *Love in Cactus Village* written by Omar Amed, a Somali playwright in Lewiston, Maine. The cast was made up of people from Somalia who recently arrived in Lewiston and others who have been in Lewiston and the U.S. for a few years. A number of Somali refugees were arriving in Lewiston and the mayor, in an open letter said that Lewiston could not support an additional influx of Somalis. The mayor's words were misinterpreted and a hate group began to protest the Somalis presence in Maine.

Michael was asked to direct *Love in Cactus Village* to help bring the community together. The play was supported by and involved people from the local community.



Beth Horner rocks

Beth Horner Rocks

Beth Horner is smart. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Missouri, and got her Masters Degree from the University of Illinois. She was a librarian at Yale. Beth is one of the superb storytellers on the national circuit. She performs at festivals, concert halls and conferences. And she also loves to perform in high schools.

There's nothing like the energy of high school students. The truth is many performers are scared of high schools. Not Beth. Beth will go into a high school auditorium packed with hundreds of students. One of the stories she might tell is *The Pipeline Blues*, Beth's story of people in Columbia, Missouri, being galvanized by a local songwriter into stopping the dumping of partially treated sewage into the Missouri River. Instead, they created an innovative wetland sewage treatment system. The chorus of the song: Columbia's got a sewer to the ocean

Directing is hard enough, but directing when the expectations of one culture are different from another and when the whole enterprise is surrounded by a touchy political situation, is very difficult. But the play went on and was well attended and well received. Michael loves people and language. He used both skills to help bind the community of Lewiston together.

Michael will appear next year in his one man show, "Frog Stuck In The Ice" at the Pontine Theatre in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Michael's e-mail address: miklparent@juno.com

Full of do-do-do-do-do-do.

Beth told *Pipeline Blues* recently and heard one high school student say, "That rocked!" Beth uses language to galvanize and inspire high school students. This takes courage and talent. This is the opposite of Columbine.

Beth will be giving the keynote address for the South Carolina Library Association Annual Conference. Beth's e-mail address: BethHorner@earthlink.net



photo by Weisy MacMillan

"Sing Jay, sing!"

upcoming concert with John Langstaff and John said, "We'll do a duet from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*."

"Oh no, John," I said, "I don't sing. I tell stories."

"You'll sing," John laughed, "you'll be Katisha and I'll be Ko-Ko."

"But John —"

"Katisha is the daughter of the emperor. She is big, elderly, and has a beautiful elbow. I'm Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner. I'm in trouble with the emperor because I haven't been

chopping enough heads off. In this duet, I'm trying to convince you to marry me. Here's the music, let's go."

Will John Langstaff and I sing the duet? Will Ko-Ko marry Katisha? Will I rely on la, la, la? Come see on November 2nd.

See the front of the brochure for the details.

to this pitch. Williams swings. It's a long drive! It's going, going, gone! It's a home run! The Red Sox have won the World Series!" We'd cheer at the fantastic and totally imaginary World Series victory.

The language of baseball summoned up the world of myth. Not Achilles, Ajax and Ulysses, but The Babe, The Kid, and Joltin' Joe DiMaggio. Baseball names themselves, summoned up a changing world, a world which we were rooting for. The world of Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella and Sam Jethro.

As a boy I revolted against anything that smacked of school or learning, but unbeknownst to me, I was absorbing the rhythm, mystery and beauty of language.

La, la, la, la, la, la, la la . . .

I grew up in a neighborhood called Pill Hill. All during my youth I'd go across the street to the Grahams and sing songs. There were Norwegian graduate students living on the third floor, and they'd come down and sing Gilbert and Sullivan, which Dr. Graham loved. I had the habit of singing la, la, la, la, la for all songs. I loved the rhythms so much I never learned the words.

Recently, I was working on my

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

The best way to go to the Metropolitan Opera is to dress up, go to supper with Diane Wolkstein, and then sit back and enjoy Verdi's Nabucco. My wife, Linda, and I, did just that last spring.

And what dinner conversation. Diane told us about the extraordinary book she's been working on for years, *Treasures of the Heart*, holiday stories that reveal the soul of Judaism. I've read one of the stories. It's fascinating. Diane is interweaving little known oral legends into the Biblical text, highlighting the role of feminine characters and introducing Shechinah, the feminine presence of God. The book, published by Schocken (Random House), will be out this fall.

We stayed with Linda's brother and sister-in-law, Jason and Deborah McManus. One night Deborah fixed an elegant meal and Jason and Linda told memories of growing up in Missouri. Wonderful characters emerged. Even better than Verdi!



above: Diane Wolkstein

left: Night at the Opera

Another Language

by Laura O'Callahan, Guest Contributor

At my friend Jeff's house, ringing the doorbell makes the lights flash inside. If you want to get his folks attention, you have to walk to the room they are in and flash the lights or tap them on the shoulder. It is rude to put something large like flowers in the center of the dining room table, and certainly never during dinner. If Jeff is looking down during dinner, it's ok to bang the table to get his attention if he's missing a good joke. Lights out means no whispering in the dark, unless you can talk in each others hands. Jeff and his parents, Jack and Rosalyn, are just like any other family in their Silver Spring, Maryland neighborhood. The only difference is that theirs is a Deaf household where Deaf history, culture, and the language of American Sign Language are used and valued everyday.

I was lucky enough to have wandered into the lives of Deaf people ten years ago. I've been there ever since. During my junior year "abroad" at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, the liberal arts college for the Deaf, I was introduced to Deaf culture and language, and I cherish that experience. At Gallaudet I'd be awakened to fire drills by both very loud alarms and strobe lights. The library maintenance crew vacuumed during study hours and I was the only one who noticed. One night when my



I King Jordan, first Deaf President of Gallaudet, presents Laura her Master's Degree with honors.

roomie was in the middle of a story, I turned the lights off. She snapped them on and said in sign, "Hey, I need lights on to talk."

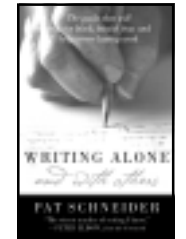
The Deaf community is as intricate, varied and challenging as the hearing community I grew up in. In many ways it's much the same, and in many ways it's very different. Like any cultural minority, Deaf people face prejudice and misunderstanding. It was only forty years ago that the hearing culture agreed Deaf language was a language. Ninety percent of Deaf people are born into a culture that is foreign to them. They are born into a hearing culture, and they don't hear. When these students, who have been isolated, come to Gallaudet, they feel they have come home. They are thrilled to talk with fellow students using sign. And proud to be part of the Deaf culture. I have been humbled by Deaf people again and again. It's challenged me to think about language and culture. I grew up in a family that valued language and community. So did Jeff. We just did it in different ways.

IN BRIEF

Tom Weakley's new CD, Rebels in Vermont! is a gripping story of Confederate soldiers trying to wreck havoc in a small town in Vermont. It's a true story of daring, bank robbery, death and the irony of battle. It's groundbreaking work. It is very moving. Tom's e-mail: tomweakley@adelphia.net



Pat Schneider's new book, Writing Alone & With Others, Oxford Press, July 2003, is full of insights from 25 years of helping others to discover themselves as writers. Peter Elbow, America's primary voice in the writing process movement, says of Pat "the wisest teacher of writing I know." Pat's e-mail: pat@amherstwriters.com



Tim Tingle's book, Walking The Choctaw Road, explores the heart of what it means to be Choctaw. The images in these stories were so gripping, they turned me upside down and let me see anew. The subjects range from the Trail of Tears to Tim's own memories of childhood. Tim's e-mail: timtingle@hotmail.com



One night I sat in my study, turned off the light and listened to Libby Franck's CD, Women of the Sea. It was like the best of old time radio. I was transported to Botany Bay, a penal colony in Australia. Mary Bryant, a convict, led the only successful escape from Botany Bay. It's terrific work. Libby's e-mail: lake@gis.net

CLASSICS

In the past thirty years, a number of storytelling recordings have become classics. Let me know which ones you think are classics.

Doug Lipman's Hopping Freights, A Wild 60s Adventure, is a classic. It's the story of Doug and a friend thumbing from Chicago to New York. Hopping Freights is filled with real and bizarre characters like Papa Mario, who's shooting his pistol as he tells Doug to keep singing Sugar Babe. It brings us into South Bend, Indiana at the time of the race riots. We travel with Doug and his friend, Ed, in a freight car where they come close to death. The music, the humor, the adventure itself capture the 60s. Doug's website: storydynamics.com

