You walk into a small log cabin and claim one of the 20 folding hardwood chairs arranged in a semi-circle. You are informed that the true story you are about to hear will last an hour and 15 minutes. You wonder if you should run home and grab a cushion, and a few beers... maybe a Gameboy. How will you endure sitting on a wooden chair listening to one person talking uninterrupted for over an hour?

But then Jay O’Callahan, the Dalai Lama of the storytelling world, enters the stage.

With a simple gesture and a few words, he takes you out of your head, out of the Old Crag Cabin, out of Banff and into Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1956. Then he takes you further back in time and space. You are in Eastern Europe, around the turn of the century. You are a 17-year-old girl named Ludvika, saying farewell to your family and homeland, perhaps forever. Now you have fallen in love, and you are marrying Fritz, who works at the steel foundry. Now your children are grown up and you are fearing for their safety as they talk about forming a union. Now you are a grandmother, preparing potato soup for a family gathering and telling this tale.

An hour and 15 minutes has flashed by in a minute, and you are now on your feet with tears in your eyes and clapping your hands in delight, and you feel a profound appreciation for what this storyteller has given you. You now understand the spirit of the labour movement in America. You have glimpsed the history of a steel foundry from the perspective of the mistreated immigrant workers. And you have lived it through the eyes of Ludvika, the Polish American woman who is telling the story to her grandchildren. You felt
the worker's anger and despair as one evening after work, when he and his co-workers were relaxing in the bar, the foreman molested his wife in front of everyone, and they all had to pretend it wasn't happening because they were all afraid of losing their jobs. And you felt Fritz's horror and anguish when he lost three fingers while using a lathe he had never used before, thus bringing to an end the one passion in life - playing the piano. (The racist foreman ordered him to operate the machine, knowing he had never used it.) And you felt the club of the company's hate-face goon squad smashing the faces of those who dared to participate in a strike.

But you also rejoiced in the small victories: with Ludvika when her son won a college scholarship, that precious ticket out of the foundry. You felt the jubilation as the community pulled together and eventually created a union which led to a safer and more egalitarian workplace. You even shared Fritz's sense of pride, his reflection that the steel he and his community helped mold into weapons led to the Allied Force's victory in the Second World War.

And as the roar of that tiny crowd in the Old Crag Cabin fades, you look around and see tear-stained cheeks and delighted, shiny eyes, and you know everyone else was on that journey with you. And you find yourself wondering if maybe you had finally found community in Banff.

If you think storytelling is just for children, talk to anyone who had the good fortune of experiencing Sid Marty and O'Callahan perform at Rolston Hall on May 19. Marty is a talented singer/songwriter, storyteller, author and seasoned par�kie whose penetrating message speaks to the heart of anyone who enjoys the mountain park experience. O'Callahan has produced dozens of recordings of stories for children and grown-ups, and is quite possibly the most popular storyteller in the United States. He is a gentle, sweet human being and he has the power to keep a crowd of thousands riveted to their seats as he takes them on journeys of the imagination that burrow into the core of what it means to be human.

And I cannot help but wonder what our town would be like if, instead of sequestering ourselves in our private living rooms each night to allow television to dull our imaginations, rot our brains and dictate our desires, we were to gather together to entertain each other, tell stories, sing songs and share poems and anecdotes that express our authentic needs, desires and fears to one another in the safety of a supportive community.