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Speaker at MCTE Annual Conference

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Finding Your Story, Writing Your Poem

George Ella Lyon

Speaker at MCTE Annual Conference

One of my favorite definitions of a human is “the creature without feathers who tells stories.” I like it because it shows how basic stories are, how necessary to us. “But stories,” you might say, “are just entertainment.” Well, even if that were true, entertainment is pretty important, too. Literally, the word means “to hold between,” and stories do that. They hold us between our own lives and someone else’s, so that we are relieved of our singularity for a moment and can get a different perspective. Stories let us experience the possibilities of Life—cowardice, heroism, love, loss, greed, faithfulness—and glimpse the shape of our own lives. So stories are precious possessions.

“That’s fine,” you may say, “but I don’t have any stories, except what I get from TV or movies.” You do, though. You just haven’t felt the need to pay attention to them. Do you live in a family? That’s a story collection in itself: how your parents got together—whether they’re still together or not; how they wound up living where they do; how they chose (or got pushed into) the work they do, what happened the day you were born. Have you ever moved? There’s a story. Been lost? Gone on a trip? Done something really dumb? All of these experiences contain the seeds of story. And, if you listen to your conversation with friends, you’ll find you tell bits of stories all the time: why I was late to practice, what happened Friday night, how the French teacher got locked in the supply closet.

Okay, but if you have a story, why not write it out in prose? Why bother with line breaks and all the paraphernalia of poetry? For starters, a poem is a very compact way to pass on a story, sort of like the difference between giving someone a wallet on a string and giving them a suitcase on wheels. By the same token, because it’s relatively short and makes maximum use of sound and rhythm, the narrative poem will have a different kind of concentration and intensity than the short story.

There are disadvantages, too, of course. You

have to leave a lot of things out. But choosing can help you see what’s essential about the story, and what’s left in can be thrilling.

So where do you start? One way is to begin with a list of incidents you could write about. Put this in your journal so you can come back to it. Remember the incidents could have happened to somebody besides you. Then pick one that you have an emotional connection to and write it out in whatever way it comes to: a list, a paragraph, a scene. When you’ve finished, look it over. Where could you add details that will wake up the readers’ senses? Is there an image that stands out? Is there a person other than you who could tell this story? What would happen if you began by telling the end and then told the events leading up to it?

These questions, and others you may come up with, will give you different ways to approach the poem. When you’ve reflected on them, look at the words you’ve written so far and listen in your head for a place to start. When something comes to you, don’t second-guess it! Write it down and then take off in whatever direction it calls you. Follow that lead through the story, breaking lines where the voice pauses. When you come to the end, read it over and see what you’ve got. You may love it or may feel it’s not on the right path. You may sort of like it but not know what to do next. In that case, try it out on someone else. Listen to their questions and comments. Check the sound. Don’t be discouraged if the first go-round doesn’t seem right. You haven’t lost anything: the story is still there. Go back and try another approach. You’ll be learning all the way.

You see, writing is like any other discipline—like dancing, say, or playing a sport. To be good, you have to spend a lot of time practicing, learning the moves, gaining strength and agility. You don’t expect to put on leotards or pick up a basketball one day and be in a recital or a tournament the next. Be patient. If you’re really trying, nothing is wasted. Someday, when the crowd’s shouting and you’re at the free-throw line, you’ll be glad you shot a million baskets. And you’ll forget all those blisters on your toes when the house lights go down and it’s time to dance in Swan Lake.

*To receive writing exercises via email, sign up for my newsletter at www.georgeellalyon.com.

**Jacqueline Woodson, keynote speaker at the
Autumn Assembly***

George Ella Lyon, keynote speaker at lunch

Borrowed Children

Counting on the Woods

Don't You Remember

***Where I'm From,
Where Poems Come From***

***MCTE's Autumn Assembly: Friday, October 30, 2009
at the Lansing Sheraton Hotel**