

The Stories of Our Families

Once upon a time in the hamlet of Columbia in the province of Carolina, South, lived a woman of extraordinary gifts and beauty and her beloved husband of two decades and two years. The couple had two wonderful boys who shared their lives with them along with the family's domesticated animals. The family lived peacefully together, enjoying their lives of travel, friends, and the pleasures from living life so simply. They encouraged one another's passions and shared many as a family as well as having some of their very own. They loved hearing stories borne out of those passions and frequently wove tales that created interest, laughter, and joy from telling and hearing them.

Naturally curious of nature, the beautiful woman created a habitat that exploded with life and flowers and herbs and joy and love outside their simple yellow bungalow. Worms, birds, bats, rabbits, bumble bees, fox, deer, frogs and a 5-foot black snake were some of the animals native to the habitat she helped create; she added two hives of honeybees from the province of Carolina, North, in addition to different vegetables and flowers each year. In addition to the beauty and balance that the habitat provided to her home and family, the woman harvested the fruit from the plants that she put into the earth each spring and summer. This bounty and flowers from the garden blessed the home of the family every year.

Her husband enjoyed the outdoors and athletic endeavors. He helped his wife in her garden and enjoyed preparing the garden with her for the growing seasons. He was a cyclist and often rode his bike for hours on end. He loved the freedom that cycling provided and enjoyed the simplicity of the machines that he rode for such freedom. He hiked and camped with his oldest son, often visiting other provinces for festivals of music and art and dance. He swam with his youngest son in the swimming holes close to their home and enjoyed walking on large boulders in rivers that flowed close by.

The boys lived and learned freely. Their home became the foundation

of their strength and learning and passions and love—it became their stepping stone to the freedom of expression and living and imagination that both boys had created for themselves. From their mother, they received their creativity, their curiosity, and their love of travel. From their father, they received their athleticism, their patience, and their interest in telling stories. From their parents, they received unconditional love and undying support.

I'm fascinated by a good story. I want to read, hear, or see stories that speak of simple truths like love, honor, and doing right in the face of danger or fear. I don't mind complex plots or the twists and turns that can make a story longer as long as the story speaks one of those truths to me. While I also enjoy the sophomoric humor of certain stories as well as the escapism in movies that are more prevalent today than when I was younger, I'm more inclined toward something that encourages thought and further discourse. I'm intrigued by cultures that have and still use storytelling as the means to bring the ways of the elders to those of the younger generation in that particular culture.

Kelly pointed out to me several months ago that Duncan, our youngest son, had been dedicating hours upon hours to storytelling and creating characters and role-playing with his friend, Beau, lately. She mentioned the amount of time both boys had invested outside creating the stories that inspired the characters that sprang from this imaginative play. I watched without appearing watchful and saw that she was right. From my vantage point, the boys not only provided the narrative for their stories, but also collaborated on the characters they were creating to make their story more colorful and interesting. I imagined the same process from the cinematic storytellers who had created some of the movies I had enjoyed so much, which gave me cause to ponder some other things that I'd read recently as well as to recall some memories I carried from what Duncan had said or enjoyed during his younger years.

Daniel Pink, a former speech writer for Al Gore and writer whose work and stories I enjoy immensely, dedicates an entire chapter to storytelling in his book *A Whole New Mind*. He writes that storytelling is one of the essential skills that people will need

to become successful in business in the 21st Century. Storytelling is not limited to songwriters or scriptwriters or cultures, but is open to anyone who wishes to use it to inspire, motivate, or encourage thought and the use of imagination.

I formerly sold drugs “legally” for a living and tried to use stories to communicate the benefits of those drugs that I sold. Our company understood how important storytelling could be in business and created “patient types” that we could draw from to encourage our doctors to explore other options for medications that they could use for specific disease states. Our company was not the only pharmaceutical firm to use storytelling in a business setting, but our managers and executives used stories in their communications to us so we could see how well storytelling worked in the business environment. Doctors have very little time for the “safety-efficacy-side effect” sales tactics that they hear from 11 of 12 pharmaceutical reps who visit them daily; however, when they hear a story that takes them away from their routine, they’re more inclined to use their minds rather than solely depend upon their habits for prescribing medications.

I also enjoyed reading about a real estate agent in the Washington, DC area who used storytelling in her business to help match sellers with buyers of homes. Instead of the same boring “3BR, 2 ½ Bath, 2,500sq ft, Cape Cod home”-type descriptions used to market homes, she created a unique blend of marketing and storytelling to capture the imagination of perspective buyers. One of her descriptions could have gone something like this:

After 25 wonderful years in their Northwest DC home, the Becks are moving west to be closer to their grandchildren. James and Margaret Beck came to the Washington Area and settled into their quaint Colonial home with their two young sons in 1979. Since then, they’ve seen their sons grow into men and begin families of their own. Throughout those years, their home has been both a sanctuary for the family and a wonderful part of their extended families’ holiday parties as well as the site for numerous neighborhood gatherings and festivities. It’s English Garden and backyard pool provided the scenery for the wedding receptions for both of their sons....

What I loved is how this real estate agent subtly described the features of her listings while recounting the memories her clients created in their respective homes. I plan to write the “story” of our home when it comes time to sell.

Story telling has always been meaningful in our family, and my youngest son Duncan has been verbal from a very early age. He’s had the freedom to express himself however he wants, and his command of language and unique choice of words and phrasing are equal parts humor and intelligence. Listening in on him and his unschooling friend, Beau, leads me to believe that they are now making the leap to full-fledged storytellers. Uninhibited, they create their own stories through the use of props, character development, shared life experiences, and connections made through this form of communication.

I think unschooling has nurtured Duncan’s penchant for storytelling. Despite a brief stint in daycare for 2 years, Duncan has enjoyed the wonderful world of the comic book hero since a very young age. He was Batman for most of his two years in daycare. While most children wore matching clothes to daycare, our unique son wore a Batman outfit during most of the days that he went. When friends would call to have Duncan come over, they rarely asked for him by his given name; instead, they referred to him by his character. Duncan believed he was Batman, and we encouraged his belief as well. Batman gave way to a new character—one whose choice of clothing was non-existent and one whom he’d prefer that I limit discussions of in this piece—and others followed.

We further explored the super hero genre through reruns of the old Batman TV show, the series of Batman movies, and frequent visits to comic book stores. Those gave way to Spiderman, Star Wars, and the Lord of the Rings movies; to Yu-Gi-Oh! and Naruto card games and TV shows; and to video games and the numerous characters he’s met in those games. Throw into that mix some real life characters whom we know, and you have enough inspiration to develop stories from for years to come.

But kids who go to school have the same influences, right? They have access to the same things Duncan did, so why then can’t school children become successful storytellers? Our friend, Dr. Gillian Barclay-Smith, the principal of a school for children with learning differences and also a schoolteacher for 13 years, argues that

school children have the same access but can't translate what they get from school into stories. She pointed out that schools aren't designed to encourage the type of imagination and conversation that it takes to develop or tell stories. It's hard for any place to help develop storytellers when the people charged with stimulating young minds are the same people who must maintain quiet and discipline in the classroom. The 50-minute-per-subject classroom limitations could also have something to do with inhibition of creativity as well.

So I decided to think about a way to illustrate the creative process outside of school for myself. I thought about movies or stories or events that I'd shared with Duncan. I thought about how he told me about the things he enjoyed like anime, video games, comic book characters, and games in general. Then Kelly reminded me that she'd been transcribing stories that he'd been writing. That was it: I'd ask permission from him to write down some of his stories. So with great honor, I'm humbled to share some of the stories that Duncan has kept since 2002 in a black leather binder. He allowed me to print some of his stories, sharing only those for which I have permission. It's fascinating to see how much more complex they are as he has aged.

July 2002

I had five good days with Alex. She came and swam all day, then I would go to her house to spend the nights.

I had a good time with Tristram [Alex's brother], too. I'm glad James [Alex's brother] is back from camp.

Signed – Duncan

December 2003

Today, I'm going to see Eddie Murphy in The Haunted Mansion. I hope it's going to be a lot of fun. And I'm going to see it with my dad.

March 2005

I haven't visited you (the journal) in a long time. I've had a good time visiting with Tristram. He offered to duel me. I'm thinking about it.

CJ moved, but we can still see each other at times. I'm doing great – and I might invite CJ over this summer.

June 2006

Today is 2006. I haven't written in over 1 year. It's been a while, but good things have happened.

For one, I got an X-box 360; for two, Tristram gave me his Gravekeeper's Deck. I can't believe he did that.

I've gotten better at swimming. Now I'm 10. For my last birthday, I had a YuGiOh! Party. For my 9th birthday, I went to Disney World and got a new kimono.

My new friends are Beau and Hope and Ebonye and Tene'.

July 2006

Yesterday, I went to Carowinds. They had a lot of things like Nickelodeon, Scooby Doo, and other things. On a water ride, it took forever. Then, when I decided not to wait anymore, then it started again.

The last conference [Live and Learn], I barely went out of my room. This conference has a lot of new anime stuff, so I'm probably going to be out a lot. There's a costume party, and I'm going as Haku from Naruto.

Speaking of Naruto, it's a new TV show. My favorite village is

Village Hidden in the Mist. I found 3 new Mangas I like: Bleach, Nagima, and Mar. Oh, and Ranma $\frac{1}{2}$.

My mom and dad are talking about getting me a cell phone. I just ordered a Village Hidden in the Mist Headband. My dad got a new iPod for Father's Day. I want one!

Just before Christmas in 2006, I was shopping with Duncan, who had been especially busy with his video games and wanted to take a break and get out for a while. After about an hour of shopping, he asked me to take him to Target. We usually go there for his Yu-Gi-Oh! Cards, but on that day he was just interested in looking around. I asked him some questions about his love of video games. We discussed what he appreciated about them as well as his disappointment when he reached the highest levels in the game. We talked some more, and I remembered an article I'd recently read about how some well-respected game makers had joined with several American universities to produce game options for their students. I asked Duncan if he ever thought about creating his own video game. Twenty minutes later, this is what I learned.

Duncan had two heroes in mind—a young male Samurai and female warrior. Ever mindful of his consistent love for all things Japanese, he described in depth the passion, beauty, honor, and duty of these two heroes. Their mission—which described the objective of the game—was for these two heroes to help the spirits of those who'd died violent or painful deaths find peace. We discussed how the heroes would find these spirits, how they could transfer pain into peace, how they'd choose which spirits they would help. After about 15 minutes, I realized how well he'd translated his imagination into a story through the medium of a video game. He'd also created the type of story that I enjoy so much. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of what he told me, the spirituality of his thought process, the way he was able to help me see what was on his mind, and the compassion it took to imagine such a wonderful way to best the game. I realized Duncan was telling me more than a basic "good vs evil" story. He was telling me how "good" helped "evil" to be good again.

Every day that our children are alive is a day that a new story is created. Combine these stories with those of all of their days, and we have the story of their childhood. Whether realized or not, we

are characters in their stories—sometimes more important than we realize, sometimes less. Either way, we contribute to the tapestry of a story woven that can be mediocre or, put simply, outstanding. I believe the best stories are created when all the characters are engaged and present with the other characters in the story. Having Duncan and Cameron home, learning freely and creating at will, we've seen wonderful stories unfold that years spent in school could have never produced. We have been very fortunate. Wonderful boys ... incredible stories... memories that will fill us for several lifetimes.

I thought this morning as I took my morning bike ride how I see the road now. I once thought of it only as how many miles I'd traveled. Now I see the roads ahead as those yet to be traveled. As it is with our children's stories: the future is only more stories to tell and be told.