

Storyteller

The thing about story telling is that you're either born to it or you're not. You can't go to a school to learn it. It's either in your genes or it isn't. If your natural inclination is to give a straight answer when asked a question, you'll be much happier as a banker. Bankers have to study hard in school, but they get to play with real money later. Storytellers play with themselves, so to speak. They often skip school and never learn anything.

Not knowing much can be helpful when spinning tales. Your creative juices get pressed into service when the only thing you can talk about is what you're going to make up. I've had many pleasant conversations where I knew nothing and learned nothing, while I busied myself creating one fact after another. People walked away shaking their heads, but I was satisfied. Had they really believed I was Roy Orbison's lost son, it wouldn't have been half the fun.

My career as a raconteur began when I was quite young, about the time I started school. I remember dreaming up incredible stories about horses romping in the cellar and little people cavorting in the back yard. I would relate these happenings to my grandmother, who always stopped to listen to me. I knew she didn't believe any of it, but her feigned astonishment always tickled me. My mother, on the other hand, mostly ignored my wacky internal world, except to prevent me from telling whoppers to the neighbors.

She was embarrassed when I told Mrs. Gambino about writing to the Pope, and that he planned to visit our neighborhood at his next opportunity. Hoping to reassure the woman, my mother said, "He's not allowed to have stamps since the letter to the editor." "That boy should see someone!" said Mrs. Gambino. "The boy sees who he wants to see," replied my mother, getting testy.

"I haven't seen anyone," I said. "Except for the Blessed Mother last week."

"David!"

"I meant at the picture show, Mom."

"He saw the Miracle at Fatima movie," my mother explained.

"She was buying popcorn," I said.

Father Malarky would always recognize my voice when I went to confession.

"Hi, Dave! What's the story? Hahahaha!"

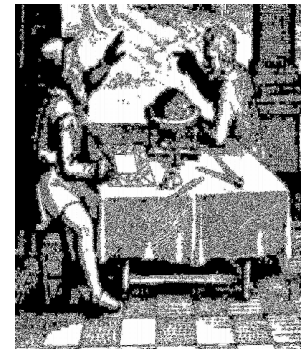
(At the onset of puberty, I began to confess elsewhere.)

After ticking off my sins of disobedience and the occasional swear word, we reached "Thou shall not tell a lie." I would take a big breath, ready to recount them all.

"Let's skip the details," the priest would say. "Lies are believable. Your stories aren't."

Many kids were browbeaten by their confessors. I was critiqued.

In school, I pretty much kept a lid on it. The nuns could be ferocious if they discovered you were fibbing. In their minds, lying and adultery occupied the same niche, and for all I knew, the punishment was identical for each - a week of after-school detention.



That didn't stop me from concocting tall tales for my friends. I convinced Charlie Baltz I had come from the planet Magbutt. Born on a baby-bush that resembled a huge Hydrangea, I had cut myself free (an umbilicectomy) and made my way to earth on a tramp starship that stood just outside the earth's atmosphere. There, its captain waited for me to finish high school and my senior Latin syllabus. I would go back to teach Latin to my fellow Magbuttocks, who were quite taken with Julius Caesar. That made sense to Charlie. He was a French major.

As I grew older, my stories turned from simple amusing tales to excuses made up to avoid the realities of life. The young woman I dated in high school was a long suffering Irish lass, so my efforts to blow fairy dust in her ear didn't particularly faze the girl.

"You should do your homework," she said.

"No time," I said. "There are people to see, places to go, music to play." *

“By the way,” I continued, “I can’t take you to the dance Friday. I’m going down to the Coast Guard Recruiter to enlist.”
“You’re only sixteen, Dave, they won’t take you.”
“I surely look 18, maybe more.”
“No, you look sixteen, and you act like you’re twelve.”
“It’s time to join up,” I said. “Our coast needs to be guarded from the Canadians.”
“Why don’t you study for the biology test, instead of trying to avoid it.”
“Women never understand a man’s need to ... to ...”
“Run away?”

When I met my wife some years later, I had made a bit of progress toward growing up, but now my tales attempted to manipulate others.

On the Friday afternoon before our wedding, in the midst of that day-before craziness preceding the nuptial carnival, I sighed and said,
“I think we should put off the wedding. I can’t get married tomorrow.”
“But why?” she said, stunned.
“I can’t find my wedding socks.”
“Don’t be ridiculous, David.”
“I’m serious,” I said. “I bought them especially for my wedding and I’m not going to walk down the aisle in just any old socks.”
“Wear any socks!” she cried.
“OK, but all I have is the white pair with little bells on them that the guys gave me at the bachelor party.”

She whisked us off to a men’s store, and I had her all to myself for an hour on the day before our wedding. She never forgot that incident. Neither did her mother.

You might think my wife would have tried to reform me, but she has always let me live in my head, as long as I come out when I’m needed. And she listens to my stories, with or without comment.

Kids are more critical, and sometimes smarter.
“Are you aware that I know everything about everything?” I said to my seven year old daughter one morning.
“No, you don’t.”
“Yes, I do. You can ask me any question about anything in the whole wide world.”
We had played this game since she was a little tyke. I was pretty good at it, making up incredible answers on the fly.

“You don’t know EVERYTHING, Dad.”
“Sure, I do. Go ahead, ask me anything.”

She thought for a moment.
“What’s the atomic number of hydrogen?”
I was shocked to find kids learning particle physics in the second grade! I took a wild guess.
“Forty million,” I said.
“No-o-o. It’s One!”
“One? Right! I was only kidding. So go ahead, ask me another question.”
“OK. Why do you tell so many stories?”
“Uh, some things in life are a mystery. To me, at least.” I’ve never had the slightest idea why I make things up.

“I know why you always tell stories,” she said.
“Why, honey?”
“Because you’re full of baloney, Dad.”

So there you have it. All those years of wondering about myself, and a seven year old figures me out in less than a minute.

These days, my stories are not quite as crazy as when I was younger. And I write serious stuff, too. I describe my work as a mixture of truth and the truth set free. If you’re not sure what that means, neither am I. But when I’m writing a truthful story, you’ll know it. When I’m not well, you’ll probably guess what I’m up to.

I just love writing all this stuff down on paper. Not because I think it’s that important, but I have noticed that when stories are set in type and wrapped up in a book with a flashy cover, readers tend to believe them more. Or at least they don’t argue as much.

So, don’t argue with me ... have a few slices of my homemade baloney.

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**from "Gotta Lotta Living to Do" in the 1960
Broadway Show, Bye Bye Birdie*

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