

There is a storyteller in all of us. Stories have been told since the beginning of humanity and it remains one of the most effective learning tools as we progress into a future driven by mass production, new technologies and greater access to knowledge. The art of storytelling has evolved over the years, arising first from cave-drawings to oral tradition, epic poetry, manuscripts, books, and music. Though the way our stories are told have changed over time, the themes and morals in our stories haven't changed. Folk music originated as music of the lower classes before evolving into a popular form of the 20th century.¹ These songs survived for centuries, and with them, the history of the common man. This correlation between storytelling, music, and human evolution has allowed us to document history, while simultaneously pushing us to look within and discover the "stories we tell ourselves."²

We tell ourselves stories to better understand who we are and how we relate to the world around us. The way we communicate through pictures and language evolved from this desire to be a part of something, to connect with other humans. We achieved this by telling stories. Over the course of history, our brains have developed a keen sense for patterns that emerge in stories.³ Certain parts of the brain used for hearing or seeing patterns also allow us to detect patterns in stories and make connections. The auditory cortex and visual cortex work together and help detect stories; and according to many experiments, we have an overwhelming tendency to find patterns, sometimes, that aren't even there.⁴ For example, in a 1944 study, 34 participants were shown a short film consisting of "two triangles and a circle moving across a two-dimensional surface." The only other object on screen was a stationary rectangle, partially open on one side." Only one participant declared the film to show "geometric shapes moving across a plane," and the rest created elaborate stories that related the shapes to a tangible situation.⁵ This study confirms the need we have to make connections between who we are and what we see and experience around us. The art of storytelling has enabled us to learn from other's mistakes and learn from each other. The ability to tell someone a story, and have them make connections is a vital part of our survival. For example, if a person tells her friend she saw a snake by the river, her friend would take extra caution when approaching the river. This understanding helps foster communities that learn from each other; they develop relationships among each other, because ultimately, humans strive to feel connected to something.

What is a story? A story can be anything, but a good story contains essential "building blocks."⁶ According to Ira Glass, a good story must contain an anecdote or a "sequence of

¹ "Folk Music." Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 22 April 2012. Web. 20 April 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_music>

² Kapur, Shekar. "We are the Stories we Tell Ourselves." TED. Mar. 2010. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.ted.com/talks/shekhar_kapur_we_are_the_stories_we_tell_ourselves.html>.

³ Shermer, Michael. "Patternicity: Finding Meaningful Patterns in Meaningless Noise." *Scientific American*. N.p., 28 Nov. 2008. Web. 29 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns>>.

⁴ Luo, Huan, Zuxiang Liu, and David Poeppel. "Auditory Cortex Tracks Both Auditory and Visual Stimulus Dynamics Using Low-Frequency Neuronal Phase Modulation." *http://www.plosbiology.org*. N.p., Aug. 2010. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.1000445>>

⁵ Rose, Frank. "The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?." *wired.com*. N.p., 8 Mar. 2011. Web. 23 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/all/1>>.

⁶ "Ira Glass on Storytelling Pt 1-4". Youtube.com. 18 August 2009. Current TV. Web. 18 April 2012. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loxJ3FtCJJA>>

actions” and a moment of reflection. He goes on to say that, to keep a listener engaged, the storyteller must constantly raise questions. These questions keep the listener with the feeling that something is about to happen, and the process of asking and answering these questions helps a story gain momentum. The harmony between questioning and answering ultimately leads to the second building block: the moment of reflection. This essentially tells the listener what the point of the story is, and reveals the “bigger something that we’re driving at.” In some ways, storytelling is similar to music. A good song is like a good story. Music relies almost entirely on the delicate balances in harmony, melody, and narrative...just like a story. It is no wonder that the two are so closely related in our history as a species. Music has been around for thousands of years, and remains one of the earliest forms of storytelling. Homer himself was said to recite “The Odyssey” and “The Iliad” with a lyre in hand. These ancient stories are reinvented and then told again in new ways in modern music. The term “folk music” was used to describe the music of the common people passed down through oral tradition. Before recent inventions, listening to recorded music was impossible. When workers had to perform repetitive tasks, singing helped pass the time and synchronize their movements. In the home, it emerged as a form of entertainment and history telling.⁷

Twentieth century folk music told the stories of a culture with a strong narrative voice and emotion that captivated generations. Folk music originated as a way of passing down stories from generation to generation when illiteracy was common among the working classes. In this way, folk music encompasses the story of a group of people. Folk melodies and lyrics were easy to memorize, and songs were constantly changing and evolving as they spread through different communities. In my own life, I can remember my mom tucking me in at night and singing Pete Seeger’s “Where have all the flowers gone,” and her telling me about how her mother used to sing that song. When I grew older, she told me more about the meaning of the song and the Vietnam War. It is one of my earliest memories, and I can remember all the lyrics, just as my mother sang them to me. The power of music as a way to tell the stories of our past remains a powerful tool that will hopefully continue to withstand the test of time.

Legends such as Pete Seeger, Woodie Guthrie, and Bob Dylan paved the way for the folk music revival. During the 1960’s, icons such as these popularized contemporary folk music. Folk music has become an important way for Americans to gain a voice and return back to a simpler time. Listening to the stories in traditional and contemporary folk songs allow the listener to see historical patterns, empathize with another person, and ultimately relate to something bigger than ourselves.

I wrote my own song to capture the spirit and tradition of folk music and its narrative roots. A common theme that emerged in earlier works was religious in nature and usually provided the listener with a moral truth. One of the first stories emerged from Bible class as a young child. I was initially inspired by a parable in the Bible called “The Prodigal Son.”⁸ The story is about a

⁷ “Folk Music: Origins” Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.. 22 April 2012. Web. 20 April 2012 < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_music#Origins >

⁸ *The Holy Bible, The New International Version*. International Bible Society. Grand Rapids, 2004. Print. (Luke 13:11-32)

boy who takes his portion of the family estate and sets out to face the world. He ends up squandering his money and resorts to eating with the pigs to survive until, humbled, he returns to his father in hopes of living as a servant to his family. To his surprise, he is received with tears of joy and a celebration from his father. I didn't exactly retell the story, but took it as an inspiration for a story that relates more to my culture and life in the present day. I know many friends who have struggled with relationships with their parents, and sometimes it takes a difficult experience for them to realize how they care and love for each other.

*I think that I'm getting older,
And I don't care what that means.
I'm learning that I can hold onto the things that I believe.
They told me I would never understand,
And I'm a fool if I ever think I can.*

*I don't know where this road will go,
But divinity showed me the way,
I saw his eyes in the white of the night,
I heard his voice calling on my name,
And I knew I shouldn't be afraid.*

*You left your Bible in the hands of your past,
Your mother sleeping in mid-morning mass,
You left your father a thief in his head
They told you that you would never understand,
You're a fool if you think that makes you a man.*

*I don't know where this road will go,
But divinity showed me the way,
I saw his eyes in the white of the night,
I heard his voice calling on my name,
And I knew I shouldn't be afraid.*

This song parallels the theme of running away from something, specifically one's home or family. However, I view this in a slightly more optimistic way. In our current age I think it is necessary for teenagers to pursue what they love in life, even though it might not work out exactly as planned. I used the word "divinity" in these lyrics to bring attention to my belief that there is a path that God has planned for you. Whether or not you follow his plan, or choose your own way, growing up is about learning, gaining experience, failing, and realizing that failure isn't always a bad thing. I think that is a prevalent theme that can be found in the story of the prodigal son as well as my song. I also incorporated fear of failure and the lack of support in pursuing a passion. The fear of failure is prevalent in all of us; we need to learn to embrace it, rather than avoid it. I see my generation pursue careers and schools that satisfy what others think is best for them, but in the end, we should follow the path of our choosing and not someone else's.

Through the ages, the art of storytelling has taught us more about ourselves than we could have imagined. It remains one of the most important factors in our evolution and development as a species. At the same time, it allows us to relate to each other, and the world around us on an emotional level, immeasurable by scientific standards. Stories laid the foundation of our history and paved the way of the future. Music saved the stories of the common people, allowing ancient traditions to flourish hundreds of years later. The persistence of storytelling transcends the boundaries of time, harmonizing the past, present, and future into a seamless melody of our ancestors.

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