

Tom McCabe's Tribute To Brother Blue

Tell Stories!

Every so often a young performer will nervously approach me and ask me a most interesting question, a question so many of us has asked, "How do I become a storyteller?" When asked that question I always tell the same story.

It was 1977 and I had a dream of being a storyteller.

"Why?" my mother asked again and again and again. I couldn't put words to it. I simply felt in my heart that being a spinner of tales had to be the coolest thing you could do with a life.

But how do I become a storyteller? Where does one begin? Is there some test, a guild, a path to follow? I was without even a clue. I had heard of only one man who was called Storyteller: Brother Blue. The Real Paper, a Boston arts weekly, listed Brother Blue as performing weekly in downtown Boston. I believe it was at the Emanuel Church. I know it was off of Boylston Street near the Common.

So, I took the Orange Line in town one Sunday evening not knowing what to expect. The performance space was a small chapel with about half a dozen people sitting in the pews. In the first pew to the right was a man wearing lots of colors. I figured he must be the show. Sitting beside him, saying not a word, was a woman quietly knitting, Ruth.

I don't think Blue looked at his watch. He simply stood as if this single moment was the perfect time to begin. He stood before us festooned with balloons and streamers and began to snap his fingers. The rhythm moved up his arms into his shoulders and down through his body. The painted butterflies on his cheeks and palms danced before us. I had seen a lot of theatre up to that point but nothing compared to Blue. He snapped as if in search a cosmic rhythm - aligning himself with some unseen force. As the rhythm built words flowed, then gestures, and his dance began.

Blue told us of "peek-a-boo," as, behind his butterfly etched palms, his face vanished and reappeared. He told us that our very souls hide, only revealing themselves just every so often. As he talked I felt my soul rising to join him. Our trust in him now complete he transported us through tale after tale.

I had never seen such a performance, yet I felt no urge to copy or mimic. This man was unique. It would be pointless, a folly, to imitate him. However, I was inspired.

But I still had my question. I went to see him three weeks in a row, always sitting in the back, always too nervous to approach him. On the third week I summoned up all of my nerve. I got there early and sat right in the front. Blue and Ruth were there but they said nothing. Blue's head was down and Ruth continued knitting. When Blue stood, she put aside her knitting. Somehow Ruth was Blue's anchor, when his dreams were spun she was the link to draw him back earthward.

I turned around. There was no one else there. I was the audience, an audience of one. Blue took no notice. He stood directly in front of me, looked me in the eyes and he began his finger snapping search for the cosmic pulse. I raised my hand. He stopped looking a little confused.

I said, "It's okay. I'm the only one here. This is pointless. I'll come back next week."

He smiled and said, "Did you come here to hear a story?"

I nodded.

Blue resumed his snapping, "Then I'm going to tell you a story..."

That's how it began. That night he told Othello which he boldly pronounced "O-Tell-Oh." To this day when I hear someone mentioned the title of the play I always wanted to correct them using Blue's pronunciation. I remember he also told the Ugly Duckling. Blue began the fairy tale by looking skyward and offering a formal apology to Hans Christian Andersen. He then told me that, as a boy, he WAS the Ugly Duckling. I imagined a young Blue as a poor neglected little mallard. He showed me how fairy tales can actually be

personal stories. That performance was more than 20 years ago and I still remember his telling with vivid clarity.

Then the performance was done. The dream was complete and we were back in the chapel. As he packed to leave, I waited, summoning up courage. Finally, I asked my most important question. "Blue, how do I become a storyteller?"

He stepped back and grew large. In a gesture that included all the world he grandly said, "Tell Stories!"

I smiled and nodded. I was sure I was being dismissed with such a pat answer. So, I said, "I know, tell stories. Rehearse a lot! But then what? What do I do to become a storyteller?"

With the exact same sweep of his arm, with that same grand inflection he repeated, "Tell stories!"

He would say no more. I was frustrated but, having no other advice to draw on, I took his advice. I began to tell stories. That was twenty-one years ago; I've lived that advice ever since.

So when, every once in while, a young performer shyly approaches and asks, "How do I become a storyteller?" I retell my tale of my meeting with Brother Blue, ending with a feeble copy of his gesture and his two word bit of advice, "Tell stories!"

Most often the young performer looks confused. I see myself then. And when they ask me to embellish my statement, I repeat the gesture and say, "Tell stories!"

For those two words represent the best and only advice that a young teller needs.
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