

Why Record?

I have heard arguments both pro and con. Recording is so impersonal, no eye contact, no sense of community. Tapes are marketing tools and create an additional revenue stream. These arguments have merit. But are there other, artistic, possibly even spiritual reasons to record? Yes.

Recordings Preserve Your Work. I don't care how good your memory is, over time, stories will mysteriously dribble out your ear and vanish. After twenty years of telling, I have hours of material stored in my head. It used to be a source of pride that I never forgot anything. As years passed I retired a number of stories. They were in my head. When I called one up, there it was. One day a teacher asked me to tell my leprechaun story. I told her she must have me confused with another teller. I don't have a leprechaun story. She insisted. I'd told her class many years ago. She even remembered the character's name: Malachi. I almost cried. Malachi was my very first original tale. I had told for years. Now I had no recollection of it.

Recordings allow closure. Stories wear out. We all know that once a tale reaches the point of recitation it should be retired. As a story develops, I work every moment, every voice, every character, until every facet works. I'm left with nothing to work on. I could recite it rote in the vortex of a tornado. The tale is ready for retirement. My fear has been that retired tales would be lost. With recordings, I can go back to any tale and find in the very condition I left it.

Recordings Document You and Set You in Time. I have always hoped to live forever. To embrace this delusion, I had to believe that I don't age. Yet the hands working on the keyboard before me are living proof of my mortality. The prominent veins, the wrinkles, I am proud of these hands but they have changed. The same can be said for your voice, your style of telling and your view of the world. Every tale we tell is in some small way a portrait of ourselves as we see the world today. Our tales, our interests, our values and beliefs, these patterns change over time.

My early work focused on individuals going off alone and exploring the world. These are the stories of a young teller. I am now more inclined toward tales of community. The early stories are good, they merit being saved, but they have little resonance for me. Furthermore, like my hands, our voices change, mature. It's fun to look back and see where we have been.

Tapes will allow our work to live on long after we have gone. Our lives will end, hopefully not soon, but soon enough. Your recordings and your unique way of telling will remain to delight family, friend and descendants.

During a recent parent workshop I exhorted the audience to go home and record their elderly loved ones. With a snort, a parent retorted, "Tapes are not the same thing as the real thing."

I thought back to my mother's death and said, "Trust me, the time will come when they are gone and you will give anything to have the tiniest sample of their voice or a video. It isn't the same but it's better than nothing."

Finally, Tapes can go places you might never go. My phone rang, the voice asked how many tapes I had. With visions of a windfall, I said I could get as many copies as she wanted. She laughed. "No, how many different types of tapes do you have," she asked.

As I took her order for my second tape (T.N.T. Tom's New Tape), she told me this story. She works in a collaborative center for handicapped children. Her most challenging patient, a 15 year old boy with a profound case of Cerebral Palsy, at least once weekly, screams throughout the day. The staff tried massage, music, anything. His doctor could find nothing wrong. He simply screamed.

One day this staffer brought in my tape for the children. Brian was having a terrible spell. The tape started and Brian stopped; his body relaxed; he smiled. When the tape ended, he screamed and screamed. So it went. Every "bad day" she played the tape. It always worked. The downside? At a staff meeting, She and her coworkers agreed that if they listened to that tape one more time, THEY would start screaming.

I have since met Brian. The collaborative children all came to a performance at the Wilbraham Public Library. We were introduced. Brian's attendant explained who I was. I did my show. Brian was interested at all. He liked the tape. He had no idea who I was.

When my mother died of cancer, my father searched for a proactive way to address his grief. During her treatments she faced hours in an MRI machine. She hated it. The MRI is a long tube and you have to lay perfectly still as it scans. She had intense claustrophobia. My father learned that there were prism glasses that bend your vision so that you see down the tube through your feet and out into the world. Following the funeral, dad donated glasses to all the MRI machines in the Boston area. I joined in and donated a tape of my tape of stories for the children.

Along with lots of positive feedback, and a letter from a friend (An MRI Operator who I had not seen since the seventh grade), I received the following story.

An operating room nurse heard about the tape. She was scheduled to assist on a very delicate eye operation which was to be performed on a very lively child. This operation required that the child be both conscious and perfectly still. Stillness was imperative. The nurse borrowed the tape and put the child on head-sets during the operation. He lay there mesmerized. As the operation approached completion, the surgeon, marveling at his patient's stillness, inquired about the tape. When the nurse explained that he was listening to stories, the surgeon asked that they be piped into the operating room. The nurse laughed when she told me that as the surgeon completed his procedure, he was doing little audie moments, I had relentlessly struggled to make every day productive. Now, on bad days, I remind myself that somewhere out there a child is merrily listening to a tape. I can almost hear the giggles.

Your stories contain your unique view of our world. Setting them down on tape may not help you live forever, but it will guarantee that a small part of you will be available to your descendants and the larger community for the coming generations. Please, document your work. Preserve it. Record!