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Personal Agency and Community Empowerment: Moth Style Engagement

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8

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Introduction

The Moth is a storytelling organization based in New York City that hosts events and workshops in which everyday people are invited to narrate their stories in front of an audience.[1] Moth-style stories are a genre of personal narrative where people tell stories about the events of their own lives. The stories are generally planned but not scripted, memorized or aided by notes. A story, like a memory, is revised and made anew at each telling. The way a story changes in the process of remembering can help us make sense of not just the past but also the present. Narrative storytelling is relatively accessible through open mikes and community group workshops. It requires lived experience, of course, but also willingness to examine that experience and share it with others. As with many acting techniques, improvisation asks the performer to be fully present physically and mentally. It also opens the possibility for gaining insight in the moment of telling and seeing the story anew as it is evoked onstage. The Moth offers narratives that we label as true but it is the empowerment of voicing individual experience and the larger resonances of these stories with our human condition that gives them theatrical power. It is in these moments of revelation and vulnerability that the art of personal narrative, popularized through the Moth, can be a transformative social force.

Novelist and Moth founder George Dawes Green hosted the first Moth event in his home in 1997. He was inspired to recreate the nights of his youth spent telling stories on a porch in Georgia. He explains, 'I just loved the idea of a community of people that would be able to gather and tell stories. Life for everybody in that group was richer' (Ziv, 2015). After refining a few aspects of hosting a live show that included imposing strict time limits on storytellers, the show moved from his home into public venues such as bars and coffee shops. Since then, the Moth has produced over 2,000 live shows on six continents, two books of Moth stories, multiple CD volumes, and a weekly show on National Public Radio. The podcast has 30 million downloads per year. The Moth runs the Justice Project that offers storytelling workshops to people affected by the criminal justice system and has an initiative for storytelling in spaces that support gender-based equality. They run a Teacher Institute to train educators to bring Moth-style storytelling into their classrooms. The popularity of the Moth has spawned many other storytelling groups including Porchlight in San Francisco. The name of the Moth comes from Green's nights sitting on a porch in Georgia telling stories while moths fluttered toward the light. San Francisco's Porchlight makes a direct connection to the Moth in both name and the general structure of their events.

The Moth hosts StorySLAMs, GrandSLAMs and Mainstage events. At a StorySLAM audience members willing to tell a story put their name in a hat. Names are drawn at random and the people are invited up to the stage to tell their story. There is no script and no audition. The set is minimal and the costumes are street clothes. An emcee introduces the storyteller by their name and the title of their story. There is a musician onstage who serves as timekeeper. After five minutes, the musician will make a gentle sound as a sign that the time is up. If the storyteller goes a full minute overtime, the musician plays a note or a chord more aggressively. Before the show starts groups in the audience volunteer to judge the stories. Points are tracked for each story and the winner goes on to tell a new story at a Moth GrandSLAM event. While the StorySLAM is open to any member of the audience lucky enough to have their name pulled from the hat that night, a GrandSLAM presents storytellers who have previously won a StorySLAM. Mainstage shows are carefully

curated by an artistic director and held in performance venues such as theatres and concert halls. Narratives included in the Moth podcast have been selected from multiple Moth events. There are events monthly in multiple cities across the country and around the world. The ones that make it onto the podcast have been chosen from hundreds, if not thousands, of stories.

A Moth show is fun, inspiring and moving but it also has a social purpose. Moth StorySLAMs make a space for individual voices to tell their story and their experiences even when these stories differ from commonly held beliefs, ideas or shared narratives of historical events. In this way, Moth stories have the power to speak against official narratives and, through their telling, can shift dominant ideas to reflect the experiences of those who live these stories. We see this in many Moth stories including two discussed below: Kimberley Reed's *Life Flight* and Robert Zellner's *Poitier and Brando, Mississippi, 1964*.[2] The thrill of Moth storytelling comes not just from the content and delivery of the story, but also from the act of voicing a distinctive perspective. It is a means to claim the ways our individual experiences do not fit expectations, rules and established images. Moth storytelling creates a space of connection where representations are malleable and where storytellers are making anew their past for how it can illuminate and change the present.

Crafting a Narrative

Crafting a narrative to tell live onstage is a personal journey that involves the interior work of reflecting on the experiences of our lives. When Catherine Burns, artist director of the Moth, is drawing out a story from someone to perform on stage, she starts by asking, 'Tell me about yourself. Tell me how you became *you*' (2013: 2). To find a narrative requires figuring out how certain experiences and moments have shaped us. On a personal level, we know that a particular story is significant or meaningful. As storytellers, we need to find ways to tell our story to an audience so that it transmits the significance and meaning of these events. This is where the work of crafting a narrative begins. While the improvisational quality of the stories might make it seem as though the storyteller is just

speaking from memory, most often Moth narratives have been carefully developed with the help and feedback of peers, other storytellers or a director. Devising a story draws on both writing and acting techniques but at its core requires examining the experiences that have shaped our lives.

Burns works with storytellers through the personal journey of developing a story for the stage. Burns describes this journey as a willingness on the part of the storyteller to be vulnerable, to examine their failures, regrets and weaknesses. This point of view requires the perspective of time or personal change to see how we are shaped by past actions and events. In looking for narratives for the Moth, she explains:

> We ask people to share the biggest moments of their lives — the moments that changed them for the better (or worse). And while many of our favorite stories are about moments of triumph, stories about our *mistakes* can often be more revelatory. The number one quality of a great storyteller is their willingness to be vulnerable, their ability to tell on themselves.
>
> (2013: 2)

The risks that storytellers take onstage is part of what makes a Moth show dynamic and thrilling. Due to these risks and the personal work of storytelling, preparing a narrative for the stage requires a supportive atmosphere.

When I teach, I aim to create a space for our best narratives to be revealed. On the first night of class, we get in a circle. I ask students to introduce themselves by telling us how they came to study at this university. Each student takes a turn talking briefly about how they chose Dominican University or ended up at this institution through a series of events. I also share my personal narrative. After everyone has spoken, I point out that they have now each told a story. This highlights how creating a narrative is part of our everyday lives and something that we each practise regularly. Generally, in creative writing classes we read all works submitted to the class as fiction. While we might guess that the narrative within a written story reflects the personal experience of the author, we discuss the work as though it were imagined. This provides for a degree of separation between the writer and their work that we do not have in the

storytelling classroom. For this reason and others, it is important that the classroom emphasizes respect, empathy and support for each member of the class. One way to establish this atmosphere is for me to be open and supportive. As a group, we agree that we will not share the stories people tell in class with people outside the class. This provides for security in trying out stories and sharing personal stories. Doing this on the first day of class also establishes the classroom as a place to take risks. I ask students to offer any other ideas or requests for ground rules. This helps the group cohere and gives students the agency to shape the parameters of our class experience. Once the ground rules are established, I remind the class of our agreed upon parameters and occasionally ask if anyone wants to add to them or revise them.

Over the course of the semester, the length of narratives increases from a two-minute story to a five-minute story to a ten-minute story. In class, students work in small groups and take turns 'drafting' their narrative by telling the story to this small group (two to four students). This sets up a benchmark due-date on creating a story that does not necessarily have a written or audio-recorded version. It provides an opportunity for the storyteller to practise performing to a small audience and to receive individual feedback. They can also tell a revised version the next week to a new classmate who has not yet heard it. When we have a class sharing night where students perform, most of the audience is hearing these stories for the first time. This structure allows students to practise and revise a narrative and at the same time preserves the energy of a storytelling session where students share work that is largely new to the audience.

As discussed earlier, the material of these narratives are the experiences of our lives, which means we each already have more material than we could ever use. However, developing memories into a compelling narrative requires reflection and an active process of going back into the details, images, sights, smells and feelings of the memory. To keep an open and exploratory mind in searching for a story, it helps to develop multiple options of possible stories to tell. At our first class meeting, I ask students to come to the next class with three ideas for stories to tell. They brainstorm each story in rough notes in a journal. We take bits of memories and the reflections on events and develop a narrative structure.

Educational guidelines from the Moth instruct, 'Stakes are essential in live storytelling. What do you stand to gain or lose? Why is what is happening in the story important to you' (Storytelling Tips & Tricks)? For the audience to invest in the narrative, there needs to be something to risk or lose. Another part of structuring a story is to emphasize a theme or repeated motif that can bring the narrative together and reveal its significance.

Once the material for a story has been remembered by the storyteller, a creative process of how best to evoke the experiences of the storyteller in ways that can be imagined and accessed by the audience begins. In our personal experience, the stakes of what we stand to gain or lose might come near the end of the story but to engage an audience, the narrative needs to offer the risks of the story near the beginning. We often remember events in sequence but the story does not need to be bound to a particular chronology. I ask students to consider what will establish the stakes of a narrative early on. Should the story start at a moment of realization, at a low point or at the end? Perhaps the story is best started in the middle of things. This requires switching from telling a lived experience in the order of events as they happened to telling a lived experience through how it best reveals a revelation or lesson learned for an audience.

At the Moth, the stories gain authority through the concept of the personal narratives as true, lived experience. Foregrounding these performances as true stories diminishes the audience's awareness of the ways that they are constructed. In general, the performers are not professional actors or trained theatre artists. However, actors and writers are attracted to the form and it is not unusual for a StorySLAM winner to have pursuits as a screen writer, novelist or stand-up comedian. In learning how to develop a Moth-style story, the activity of engaging in a narrative analysis (breaking down a story through chronological events, themes, repeated motifs) helps to reveal the art of creating a performance. Kimberley Reed's story *Life Flight* offers an example of setting stakes, shifting expectations, establishing characters and settings, and employing a repeated motif.

At the beginning of *Life Flight*, Reed sets the parameters of the tale and imparts the information needed for the audience to connect with the significance of the story. Writers often call this the contract; it sets

the expectations of the story that the storyteller agrees to fulfil. Reed's story begins with an urgent call from her mother with news that her father is being airlifted to a hospital for an emergency organ transplant. Her mother offers reassurance that everything will be fine. Reed, in a gesture that establishes the distance between spoken words and their implied meaning, describes her mother as 'perennially optimistic' and tells the audience that the situation is urgent (2011). This sets the frame for her story: her father is at death's door. She establishes a *what's at stake* through the question of whether or not she can get to his bedside before he dies.

As the narrative unfolds, the frames shift suddenly. The next sentence reveals that the father has passed away. With the first hook resolved, we risk losing interest in the story. But just as quickly, Reed introduces new, more complex stakes. The narrative goes on to focus on Reed's return to her hometown for the funeral, which is complicated because she left home as a son and is returning as a daughter. Now the story is about a pressing need to return to a place she planned never to go back to and whether or not a family member, neighbours and old friends will accept her.

A storyteller needs to choose how to most effectively and efficiently evoke the key aspects of the story. Green describes this as 'condense and tweak and reshape and condense some more' (Green, 2013: xx). Characters and settings are communicated through providing specific details. In Reed's story, she efficiently creates vivid moments through well-chosen bits of information. Reed describes her brother Mark as conservative and short-tempered. They are estranged not because they had a falling out but because our narrator has not found the courage or opportunity to tell her brother about her transition. She explains, 'I just kept putting it off'. She creates an image of her brother with information that builds on what is revealed elsewhere in the story: growing up in a small town in Montana with a professional, hardworking father and a caring mother (2011). The narrative is revealed through descriptions of precise details and specific moments of Reed's return to her hometown and meeting her brother after their father's death.

As the family gathered in the hours after her father's death, she described going to Applebee's with her mother and siblings to celebrate

what would been her father's sixty-fifth birthday. They order apple pie with a candle in it. Reed focuses her narrative on her brother Mark and the expression on his face while he blows out the candle. In this moment Mark is coming to realize that their father has died and at the same time gaining perspective into why his sibling, our narrator, has been out of touch. She reflects on his facial expression: 'He was trying to process my father's passing. He was figuring out why it had been so long that the two of us hadn't talked ... and it was just all kind of coming together' (2011). Reed's story establishes layers of conflict and shares them through carefully chosen images and details.

A narrative needs a theme, a transformation or a repeated motif. The stakes of a story often connect to the theme. For Reed, her theme functions as a repeated motif around the idea that her father was someone who worked in the background fixing things. She describes how he grew up on a farm and became an eye doctor, pointing out that he can fix both farm equipment and eye problems. She stresses that he was modest about these skills and his ability to fix problems, saying, 'he was always doing it behind the scenes' (2011). At an early point in the story, Reed realizes that she and her mother will now have go to through this difficult situation without his assistance. By the end of the story, Reed's estrangement with her brother and her exile from her hometown have both been resolved. This narrative conclusion is paired with a formal device of again evoking the repeated motif of the loving father, even after his death, fixing problems from behind the scenes. Reed quotes her mother saying, 'You know, Dad was always fixing things, and it looks like he fixed this too' (2011).

Moth performances are revealed as personal truth in the first person. However, there are two points of view, the storyteller in the present speaking onstage, and an earlier, younger self, naïve to the events that unfold. This creates two perspectives. While there are no set rules other than the guidelines of a true story told live, the Moth website and educational materials set out some parameters. One of their storytelling tips instructs, 'stories have a *change*. The main character (you!) has to change in some way from beginning to end' (Tips for Storytelling, Safety and Best Practice). This change creates the two points of view in the story. The events of the story or the reflection on these events function as a

catalyst for insight and growth. In the guides for educators, a similar catchphrase is used with students: scars not wounds. They ask students to tell a story that they have distance from rather than a story about an ongoing conflict or issue. In part, this is so that the storytelling event does not become fuel for ongoing conflicts within the school. But more importantly, working with a story of the past gives students the tool of perspective in developing and sharing the story. The storyteller is performing the self and also reconstructing an earlier self through narrative. The art of evolving the narrative involves actively working with the material of memory and reflection.

Remembering Onstage

One common assumption about memory is that it works as a recording with an archive of events stored away within our minds that, when called up, emerge as unchanged records of experience. If this were the case, remembering would be a straightforward process. However, as scholars in psychology and philosophy explain, we remember events based on our prior experience and our needs in the present. In *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, Daniel Schacter writes: 'many of us still see our memories as a series of family pictures stored in a photo album of our minds. Yet it is now clear that we do not store judgment-free snapshots of our past experiences but rather hold onto the meaning, sense, and emotions these experiences provided us' (1996: 5). Our emotional experience of an event shapes how we remember that event. At the same time, our present situation also shapes how we remember events of the past. Scholar Sue Campbell explains that memory is generated in two phases. The first phase is 'encoding experience as memory' and the second phase is 'retrieving the memory from storage' (2014: 13–14). Campbell points out that the needs of our present shape how we remember the events of our past. The process of remembering involves an ongoing shifting and improvising with our earlier experiences that we have encoded as memories.

Moth performances are true to the storyteller's memory; in this way they stress emotional truth over what some might label factual or

journalistic truth. Campbell disputes concepts of accuracy in memory and puts forward a concept of *good remembering*:

> good remembering often involves getting something right about the significance of the past as judged from the standpoint of the present. In remembering, we often care that we are appropriately guided by our experience of the past, and this concern reflects the nature of memory as the set of capacities through which we learn by experience.
>
> (2014: 14)

Here, Campbell's concept of good remembering connects with the elements that make for a riveting Moth story: a narrative that reflects on the significance of past events in terms of how these events shaped the storyteller in the present.

We live in social spaces with values and expectations that are shaped by powerful forces such as the government, educational institutions, family units and the media. Campbell writes about the power of remembering in structuring and controlling groups: 'political projects of nation building and destroying are infused with attempts to shape and control the significance of the past in order to legitimate and serve a future vision' (2014: 91). At the Moth, these power structures are disrupted for a few minutes or a few hours. Storytellers and audience members can feel the shift in this power as individual memory and experience that does not conform to dominant narratives is voiced and validated onstage. One Moth event with the theme *American Myths: Stories of US* directly addresses the dissonance between images and ideas of American experience and the reality of a US lived experience. This Moth event, held on 23 October 2002 in New York City, asked personal narrators to address myths held about the United States. In the video recording of that night, Zellner talks about his work as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in his story, *Poitier and Brando, Mississippi 1964*.

Zellner's narrative focuses on Freedom Summer, a civil rights mobilization in 1964 that aimed to increase voter registration among African Americans in Mississippi. This effort built on a growing civil rights movement and earlier voter registration efforts that were frequently met with violence. Zellner explains: 'people were getting killed because they were

black and wanted to vote. Many of our organizers were shot, some of them were killed' (2002). His narrative stresses the difference between how history is remembered in the public imagination and his first-hand experiences. He points out how some representations of those events such as the film *Mississippi Burning* present a view of the US government at that time that conflicts with events as Zellner lived them.

In planning Freedom Summer, Zellner and others believed the federal government would offer some degree of support or protection for civil rights workers. As a movement committed to non-violence they needed this support (Umoja, 2003: 202). They found out otherwise when J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, made public a statement on 10 July 1964 saying: 'we most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers ... protection is in the hands of local authorities'. This statement was most likely welcomed by segregationists in Mississippi (Umoja, 2003: 209). In Zellner's telling, the murder of three young men, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, is directly connected to the public statement from the US government that it would not protect the civil rights workers. Weeks later, the young men were found dead, buried in an earthen dam.

Zellner points out that the film *Mississippi Burning* positions the FBI as heroes of the civil rights movement. Zellner's first-person history, however, disputes the representations of *Freedom Summer* in a major motion picture. Zellner says, 'they participated in the mythic misrepresentation of American history when they made the FBI the heroes of the civil rights movement' (2002). Zellner aims to reveal complicity on the part of the US government in segregation, oppression, violence and murder in the south in 1964. This central thrust is carried along by endearing and humorous antidotes. He describes joining the civil rights movement after meeting Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and 'they got me started on a life of crime' (2002). Zellner makes himself vulnerable to the audience. He performs his story in an open, unguarded way. He speaks to the collective memory of the summer of 1964 as mythic and points out ways that the federal government's complicity in the violence and brutality of that time has been ignored, glossed over or diminished. He is challenging mythic presentations of US history and allows the audience to contemplate it from a different perspective.

The risk and aesthetic power of Moth narratives have many sources, but one we see time and again in the stories of Reed, Zellner and others is the authority of first-person experience to speak against dominant narratives. This is one of the ways that the formal structure of the Moth creates change and greater agency for the storyteller and the audience. The practice of telling these narratives makes a space for people to talk frankly about their experiences in ways that are personal. They voice feelings of shame, regret or failure. At the same time, the stories, our stories, are connected to larger social issues.

Author and Moth storyteller Adam Gopnik roots the dynamic power of Moth in the transmission of the storyteller's first-person narrative to the audience and their connection with the narrative. He writes: 'If "I'll never feel the same" is the moral of every good story, "We're all in this together" is the moral of every Moth occasion' (2013:XV). He goes on to explain that the audience connects to the performer through the first-person narrative: 'You can stand up and tell a story that is entirely, embarrassingly, of "I's" and a listening audience somehow turns each "I" into a "me"'(2013: XV). Gopnik sees the ways that the audience enters into someone else's first-person narrative as grounded in the vulnerability of the storyteller and supported by the audience. Remembering is a social activity. How we remember is shaped and supported by interactive listeners. Scholars describe the process of remembering as a socially constructed practice. Paula Reavey and Steven D. Brown explain that it 'transcends a neat opposition between the individual and the social since personal "memories" maybe co-constructed and elaborated by others' (2006: 180). In this way, the audience is an important component of storytelling not as passive receivers, but as active responders through laughing, sighing, clapping and voting for stories. This role is even stronger in a workshop setting when people draft personal narratives or work with a director. Improvising a story about a memory aligns the formal aspects of an improvised performance with the process of remembering in retrieving, reviving and revising. We construct memories for the present and the people who guide our stories as listeners and responders have an active role in the process of remembering.

The text of a Moth performance is not set. The words, body gestures, vocal tones and timing are improvised. This is central to the art of the Moth. The delivery relies on the storyteller to evoke again the source of the narrative

with their mind and body. The improvisational aspects reflect how we store and recall memories. Rather than a fixed archive of established information, memory changes through our work of remembering. Each time we recall or call up a memory, we interpret it again through our current point of view in the present. This in turn changes how we remember a particular incident or event. The act of remembering relies on the pressures and concerns of the present, and Campbell would add the future, to shape how we remember. An improvised story without a concrete plan of what words to say, how to hold the body, and how to shape the tone of voice, allows the storyteller to dynamically interact with that past memory in the present. It allows the performer to find new meaning in the story at the exact moment of delivery and to inscribe a new understanding onto the story informed by the present situation. A script might offer greater eloquence and precision; however, at the Moth a manicured script and rehearsed performance is traded for the risk, concentration and dynamic energy of improvisation.

From its inception in 1997, Moth has continued to grow. Their website lists upcoming events by region and many National Public Radio stations air the 'Moth Radio Hour'. There is a pitch line that people can call to leave a recorded message of their story idea. Sometimes these recordings are included in the Moth podcast. Some stories from the pitch line are developed through guidance from the Moth's artistic director and later performed onstage. Burns, as artistic director, offers feedback and support during the development process of these performances and knows full well that the performer will walk onto the stage alone passing from her hands to the waiting audience. She describes this moment as a 'high-wire act' and, like Gopnik, attributes the energy of a Moth performance to the dynamics between the performer and the audience. This energy is fuelled by the risks of telling the story and the support the audience gives to the performer in being heard. 'The audience's faith in the storytellers becomes a safety net that allows them to explore the most intense moments of their lives onstage in front of a room full of strangers' (Burns, 2013: 2). At the Moth, everyday people share the stories of their lives and the larger issues of which they are a part. Reed and Zellner share their vulnerabilities with us as a way of asking us to connect with them, to invite us into their story. This asks us to form a community with them. And as listeners and audience members, we do.

Discussion Questions

1. Listen to Zellner or Reed perform their Moth story. As you listen, investigate how they employ the narrative building blocks of establishing character, setting, theme/motif, risk and change. What key images and details do they use as building blocks? Trace the chronology of the story. Where does the order of events as presented in the story depart from the chronology of events in the life of the storyteller? Why does the storyteller structure their narrative in this way?
2. Has a narrative ever changed your way of thinking? Give an example of a meaningful story that has stayed with you.
3. If you were asked to perform your own narrative onstage, what would you tell?

Websites

The Moth, True Stories Told Live: https://themoth.org/
Video of Bob Zellner performing *Poitier and Brando, Mississippi, 1964*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB7HLJCDF6o
Recording of Kimberley Reed performing *Life Flight*: https://themoth.org/stories/life-flight

Notes

1. Author note: Thanks to Arline Klatte and Beth Lisick who taught me storytelling in a Porchlight workshop at Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco in 2011. Also thanks to Scott Whitehair of Chicago's Story Lab for guidance on the range of storytelling groups in the USA and internationally.
2. Key aspects of these stories will be revealed in this chapter. Readers may wish to listen to these stories online as preparation for reading this chapter.

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