

Toward a New Story for Schooling

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Two of my daughters attended UNH and both spoke highly of it, so I'm delighted to come see the place for myself. They said the teachers were first rate and the people were friendly and hospitable.

I have to confess that I think the hospitable thing to do would have been to invite me in May or June. The last trip I took was to New Orleans in December at the invitation of Louisiana Voices. They had roses in bloom. That's what I call hospitality.

Of course, I'm from Montana, so I'm no stranger to snow and ice. I talked with a couple who moved to Montana last spring. Lots of people visit Montana in May then pack up and move there. After less than one cycle of the seasons up in Libby in the northwest corner of the state, the man said he was going back to California. "Right after I got here," he said, "We had floods. The bridge to town washed out. Then summer came and it was forest fires." You may have heard about them: thousands of acres burned, towns evacuated, streetlights coming on in broad daylight because of the smoke.

"Now today," he said, "I hear a notice on the radio from the city council that if we want fire protection, we need to go out and dig our fire hydrants out from under the snow piles the plows left. Flood, fire, and ice," he said. "All that's left is famine and pestilence and I don't think I can handle it."

We're a little proud of what we handle, we denizens of the north country, aren't we? The climate and the landscape are woven through the stories we tell one another. I'm sure each of you has a story about enduring some wintry emergency—a broken furnace or a frozen pipe or an unplanned.

Those stories form what we might think of as a narrative environment, the realm of memory and meaning through which we live. Though schools deal mostly with explanations, people understand themselves mostly through stories. If you ask someone to tell you the most important thing she ever learned, she will tell you a story. If you wonder what students are learning in school, linger in the hallways and listen to them. As soon as the bell rings, they rush out of our classrooms, find one another, and begin telling stories. And the stories they tell become their most vivid memories of school. We remember, love, plan, regret and learn in story. Human reality itself has a narrative structure, and humans are uniquely designed to encode and decode what they need to know in narrative form.

My topic is "Toward a New Story for Schooling," but I'm really telling an old story: we can't separate education from community and we can't understand communities without understanding them as a web of stories. To improve our schools, we need to pay attention to the stories our communities tell themselves about what they face, what is worth wanting, and where to go next. A new story can suddenly change us—as individuals, communities, or nations.

In 1849 Kit Carson set off in pursuit of a band of Apaches who had captured a white woman. The anecdote, related by Carson himself, sounds like the beginning of a movie.

However, Carson had to ride his sweating horse not through the West of some scriptwriter's imagination, but through a world more like the one we experience every day. A world where we lose the trail, move too slowly, lose our nerve, take the wrong turn, arrive too late or in the wrong place. By the time Carson caught up with the Indians, the woman was dead.

In the abandoned Apache camp he found something else though. A book about a largely fictional character named "Kit Carson" who was a great Indian-slaying hero. It was a shock to him. According to historian Richard White¹, "Carson's reaction to finding the book . . . was to lament his failure to live up to his fictional reputation." The actual Kit Carson was something less than god-like. He couldn't tuck his pants into a pair of colorful boots, swoop into the scene amid a glittering whirl of rhinestones and leather fringe to perform six-gun magic against the doomed forces of evil. Compared to pulp fiction, real life seemed a bit dismal. And so "the fictional Carson became the standard for the real Carson."

His life began trying to imitate the story. And who can blame him? We all have within us the heroic impulse. We want lives of meaning, of purpose, of significance and so do our students. If our schools don't allow young people to feel themselves heroically engaged in something that matters, if we don't organize them into stories that capture their imagination, filling them with visions of how they want to be, they will fall easy prey to other storytellers, which are all around us.

It has always been that way. There are stories and images loose in the world that capture us and drive our destiny. Such stories rival geography and economics as forces that shape the history both of individuals and nations.

The trouble in schools today can best be understood as a crisis in the narrative environment. The stories that shape our educational institutions and practices no longer work. Student disengagement is epidemic. Abundant research indicates that over half of secondary students in this country make no consistent effort to learn anything. In school.

They do not understand the story of their lives as having any meaningful connection with what Ken Macrorie has called "schoolishness." There are two stories, closely interwoven, that have come to dominate our schools because they have come to dominate our world. I'll call them "life is a market economy" and "my tribe is better than your tribe."

We've all experienced schools that take the lessons of the market economy as the chief lessons of life. You know the metaphors well: schools as factories, students as units of production, and classes analyzed in terms of pennies per student/hour of literature learning.

But far worse than schools adopting ill-suited business methods of management has been their teaching of the profit motive as the primary way of judging value. Our schools through most of the last century taught that winning the economic competition is the meaning of life and the meaning of school. Ask any kid, even a first grader, why school matters and you'll probably hear, "So I can get a good job." In a nutshell, this is the story we tell our kids: you need to do your homework and be pleasant to the teacher so that you will get good grades. You need good grades to get into a good college. You need to get into a good college so you can get a good job. You need a good job because without it you will be nobody and have nothing. You will be a loser.

And by believing the story, we make it true. Our schools are full of losers. Competition only motivates those who think they might win. People who are making lots of money tend to develop a loyalty to the machinery of wealth, but most people are not making lots of money.

Instead, they are seeing that the new economy does not need them, and they know what happens to people who are not needed.

So as market capitalism dislocates and dissolves traditional communities, people seek shelter in all manner of religious, ethnic and racial identities. They become susceptible to the second story—the tribal zealotry story, which is just as simple as the market zealotry one. The “my tribe is better than your tribe” story re-gains ground around the world as people cluster around visions of themselves as holy warriors: I.R.A. soldiers, Serbian militiamen, Palestinian terrorists, Zionist militarists, Zulu tribesmen, and on and on. In our schools, many young people huddle together in enclaves of racial or religious pride, or join the goths, skinheads, crips, anarchists or other groups that provide the refuge of a group identity.

Unfortunately, neither story leads to any profound interest in learning. As learning is more and more directly associated with financial success, all those subjects that don’t lead to money in the most direct way possible come to be seen as frills. Music, philosophy, history, the arts, the humanities—best understood perhaps as the opposite of the brutalities— are abandoned.

And those who don’t think they will win the grades and money competition pretend to take no interest in the game, or they begin to hate it. Go ahead. Threaten them with a tougher test.

Those who believe the route to feeling good about oneself is a matter of being part of the “good” group dismiss the authority of education itself. No one outside the group is granted much authority. This includes not only teachers but most of the voices in a good library. Extremists of the right and left both tend to be hostile to school authorities who, they feel, are hostile to their essential identity. This cuts them off from the Great Conversation, all but ensuring they will miss or misunderstand the new stories that teach what they need to learn to avoid being bypassed by history.

Our schools are full of young people who need, the way a drowning person needs a life preserver, better stories than we are telling. They need to understand their own lives as woven into larger patterns that satisfy their hunger for purpose and meaning.

Instead, they find themselves surrounded by enormous bureaucracies designed to treat everyone the same—that is, without care. Whatever other messages large schools organized around rationalized policies and procedures send, this one is unmistakable to any alienated kid who feels at odds with the way things are: we love our system more than we love you.

The education news in recent years has been filled with findings that small schools seem to work better than large schools. What underlies these findings is simply that adolescents, busy with forming personal identity, demand to be dealt with personally—they are starved for relationship, for people who take their hopes and dreams as the real stuff of life.

School reformers and researchers looking for a magic bullet that will inspire and motivate young people won’t find it in a new technique that can be implemented as a policy. They’ll find it in communities that take young people seriously, treating them as friends and as members. The key is not getting students to submit to a new policy but inviting them to join a living community.

Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan, states that the greatest educational need of young people from about age twelve to age twenty or so is learning that focuses on community². Adolescents are at the developmental stage where they are learning to form and join communities.

Teachers, parents, employers, coaches, church leaders, policemen, neighbors, and civic leaders all want, more than anything, for them to develop the level of consciousness we refer to as “being a good citizen.” Kegan suggests that “an integrating vision” for American schooling “may be found in an unrecognized curriculum: the culture’s widespread demand for a common transformation of mind during adolescence.”

That common transformation amounts to this: that students learn to see their families, teams, classrooms, and neighborhoods not just as an environment in which they pursue their individual desires, but as communities of which they are members.

But community itself is not a simple concept. Our communities are formed of smaller communities, with divergent aims and playing contradictory games. Can we still find common ground?

It may be helpful to think about what religion professor James P. Carse has called “the infinite game.”³ He says “a finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the game.” Football is a finite game. Gardening is an infinite game. A political campaign is a finite game. A family is an infinite game.

In a finite game winners exclude losers. In an infinite game, winners teach losers better plays.

In a finite game, the winner takes all. In an infinite game, winning is widely shared.

In a finite game, rules are fixed in advance to guarantee a single winner. In an infinite game, rules are changed along the way by agreement.

In a finite game, energy is focused in decisive contests. In an infinite game, energy is invested in the long term.

Finite games focus on how they end. Infinite games focus on how they continue.

Good schools, like good communities, good economies and good families, are playing an infinite game. They may include finite games within them, but they ensure that these games don’t displace the larger play or corrupt it.

Carse ends his book with a statement that bears further reflection: there is but one infinite game.

The story of that one infinite game is the right story for schools to organize their practices around.

I would suggest that the basic ground rule for the infinite game is the pursuit of wisdom. Pursuing money or power or victory inevitably pits us against one another. Only pursuing truth brings us together.

But the old stories with their finite games—life is a market economy, my tribe is better than your tribe—have tremendous vigor. In the long run, stories that make us happier, by leading us to practices that increase our power, our wealth, our safety, and our relatedness win out over weaker stories. The stories that dominate schooling today are powerful because they contain a lot of truth about the world we live in. Experience brings most of us to admit that prosperity really is better than poverty so we had best do something that enriches us, and most of us learn that bonds of kinship and tradition really do bring joy and provide us resources to meet life’s challenges. The old stories have survived a Darwinian competition, and they are going to be around a while longer.

Nonetheless, they are limited and limiting stories and we can do better, if we remember that the only way to beat a limited and limiting story is with a better story. Since one way to

think of a community is as a shared narrative, when we talk about constructing or identifying better stories, we are talking about building better communities.

Is it fair to say some stories, some communities, are better than others?

John Dewey wrestled with this. He was casting about for criteria by which to judge which communities were good or bad because he had noted that when we look at our actual communities we find “men banded together in a criminal conspiracy, business aggregations that prey upon the public while serving it, political machines held together by the interest of plunder.” But even in the worst of these we still find characteristics we want to say we are looking for, such as “loyalty” and “common purpose⁴.”

“There is honor among thieves,” he said, “and a band of robbers has a common interest as respects its members. Gangs are marked by fraternal feeling, and narrow cliques by intense loyalty to their own codes.”

Dewey decided that thinking about “the amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups” might serve as a criterion. The number of other organizations that criminal groups communicate with freely is quite limited, and the number of things individual gang members have in common with one another is often not much more than a shared desire to plunder. In other words, he thought more relationship was better.

This seems precisely right. It is the criterion of life itself. Life *is* developing relationships, elaborating higher and higher states of order by establishing more and more complex webs of communication. Despite the fear some biologists have of any hint at teleological explanation, it remains the case that this planet was in the distant past a far simpler place than it is now—a few single-celled organisms swimming in a relatively featureless soup. Ecosystems move from a few pioneering plants to the enormously complicated systems within systems within systems of a mature forest, and as they do the amount of information that is moving between and within organisms, species, and communities continues increasing.

I would suggest that stories are better in a Darwinian sense when they support more relatedness. When we look at history on a vast scale, I believe that optimism is in order. Today’s world is organized around maybe nine major civilizations, and all of them are less cruel and brutal than they were in their own pasts. I don’t want to overstate this, since cruelty and brutality remain abundant, but as societies move forward in time, those that adopt certain understandings eventually supplant those that do not. For example, the rule of law works better than the whim of tyrants.

I would suggest that, looked at from a great enough distance, we can see in history a slow progression toward more societies that support more relationships. In brief, we move from government by fear, to government by law, to government by love.

The crudest of human societies are those governed by fear. Alliances form based on mutual self-interest. Oaths of allegiance are common. The virtues of cunning, strength, and loyalty are taught. These societies tell stories that teach fear, that teach people to act out of personal passion, getting what they want because they can get it, without much regard for those they don’t need or fear. The Texas Seven who made the news last month with their short-lived escape from prison and flight to Colorado may be an example of such a society. History is full of others.

But fear provokes a desire for justice, for laws. Stable laws allow us to organize on a larger scale, supporting more relationship. Among many benefits, the establishment of stable

laws reduces the cost of doing business. Merchants do well in law-based societies, where they excel at arranging things so that both they and their trading partners win. They learn that cooperation creates more wealth than force.

The rule of law, which is none other than the rule of reason, makes room for a middle class. Middle class folks in cultures around the world share certain virtues: dependability, rationality, flexibility, industry, intelligence, and pleasantness. Those who practice these virtues tend to supplant those who don't.

However, becoming a good middle class bureaucrat may not be the end of human development. Living with laws, many of us come to see that we all have something to fear from justice. Since we live by trespassing and being trespassed, and since being wronged is the human condition, we come to appreciate the virtues of tolerance and forgiveness. We reach the limits of law and justice, and see we simply can't live as we want to live without also learning mercy and maybe even love. Stories that help us understand peace tend to illustrate the power of compassion, altruism, gentleness and hope.

And so we grow, in this story, from fear into law, and from law toward love.

It's important to remember though that a nation, or a family, or a person can also move down this continuum, and will in fact tend to do so without conscious work to avoid it. Maintaining complex human orders, like keeping the house clean, requires our steady effort, and much of the work involves paying close and critical attention to the narrative environment.

Thinking this way has led me to be more interested in the daily narration that goes on without pause in our schools—in the hallways, in the teachers' lounge, on the buses—than I am in policies debated at board meetings. When I was principal, mid-term reports were due in my office on Wednesday. On Friday, when one teacher had still not turned his in, I went to find him. He was in the teachers lounge working on the reports and bellyaching without any irony I could detect as he sorted through student grades: "Missing work, late, work," he grumbled. "What on earth would it take to teach kids to get their work in on time?"

What on earth indeed? Our young really do learn what we really do teach, though not necessarily what we espouse. When we use shabby politics to push through school policies to mandate the teaching of civic discourse, we set back the cause of civic discourse. If you want to know what schools are really teaching, hang out in the teachers lounge and listen to the daily narrating that goes on without pause. There you'll find out what teachers love, what they hate, what they strive toward, what they avoid, and how they make sense of the world. Kids these days, raised on Saturday Night Live, see through inauthenticity in a heartbeat. They know who we really are.

When we love learning and organize our lives around it, telling stories of our adventures in scholarship and inviting our kids to join us in our quests, they are drawn to the romance of it all. They want to join us.

Our schools today are organized for the most part at the level of law, but signs are everywhere—metal detectors, zero tolerance policies, speech codes, gang colors—that we are slipping back to more fundamental methods of order.

Fortunately, there are simultaneous signs everywhere that we are also breaking through to more enlightened orders. A grass roots revolution is sweeping the country, going by many names—service learning, civic education, place-based instruction, community-centered teaching—that is driven by a desire to strengthen our relationships with one another.

Such contradictory trends are typical of times of crisis, that is, times of change. As I said earlier, we are in the midst of an environmental crisis, and the environment that's in turmoil is the narrative environment.

But if my overall reading of history is right, we know where the story goes from here. Better stories supplant weaker stories, though not easily or quickly and not without crushing setbacks. The force Machiavelli called fortune and St. Paul called providence and I have been calling history will ensure that, in the long run, tales that lead us to delight at caring for our families will supplant stories that encourage us to look out only for ourselves, and stories that tempt us to care for the welfare of the whole tribe will outlive others that suggest our obligations end with our own families, and that stories that show us how to feel compassion for all of humanity will out-manuever those that lead us to think of outsiders as enemies, and, we have grounds to hope, stories that instill a reverence for all of creation and an understanding of how to build and sustain a world-wide, peaceful order will spread and take root, choking out lesser tales.

If this happens, education in the new millennium will become increasingly personal, increasingly caring and will involve inviting students to join communities of purpose ordered around larger goals than individual career success or identity politics.

Communities of purpose. But what purpose?

Millennia ago, a great Library was built in Egypt at the intersection of three continents. Though the Library was destroyed centuries ago, it was the chief glory of the ancient world, and it has not been forgotten. The story of a universal library, having come into the world, has never left.

What was most important about the lost Library of Alexandria was the community that gathered there around the pursuit of knowledge. The gathering together of 700,000 books in a single collection in a world where books were hand-copied and rare was not a simple event. Rather, it was a project that brought thousands of people into collaboration over centuries. Every good library lives through its community of scholars. The Library at Alexandria was a community made up of people of all ethnic and religious groups, drawn together in a great conversation about great subjects aimed at removing error and adding detail to our knowledge of nature and history.

Alexandria became one of the principal cities of the world, a vast metropolis of marble. The streets were filled with people from all over the world: Macedonian soldiers, Africans, Babylonians, Syrians, Persians, Italians, and Gauls.

In its halls and theaters and lecture rooms, it became possible for the first time to engage in systematic study. New disciplines came into existence. Knowledge began to multiply itself. Humankind took a significant step forward, forever.

This is one of the great world stories, spanning a thousand years. Of course, up close things were always difficult. There were other stories competing for allegiance. There always are. The city suffered from nearly regular riots throughout its history, one triggered when a soldier killed a slave in an argument over who had the better sandals. Possessions, trade, bickering, political strategizing, and war occupied the minds of many people, then as now.

Local riots and larger wars linked to the rise and fall of empires swept through Alexandria frequently. The Library persisted through the comings and goings of Greek, Roman, Christian, and Muslim empires. The important story may not be that the Library was eventually destroyed by bigotry and war. The important story may be that in a greedy, ignorant, and violent

world, it was built at all. It was built because there were always people who wanted knowledge more than profit, understanding more than honor, and clarity more than power. In short, there were people intent on building not a profit-centered community and not a pride-centered community, but an education-centered community.

As I said, my new story for schooling is not new but very old.

What is new is that today, through digital technologies, something like the Library at Alexandria is coming within reach of everyone who lives on earth. We have for the first time the technical means to put the power of knowledge within reach of all the earth's peoples, which means we have a chance to revisit all our old stories.

People as flooded with information as we tend to be can become disoriented, forgetting that knowledge is as compelling a human need as food and water. The peasants crowded into cathedrals in the middle ages, praying for deliverance from the bubonic plague that was killing millions, killing so many they could not be buried, so that dogs ran through city streets carrying human heads in their mouths, were suffering from a lack of knowledge. They did not know what was happening or what they should do. They were oblivious to the fleas leaping among them, carrying the disease from person to person.

We can provide knowledge of medicine, agriculture, politics, religion, literature, art, science and everything else to all the peoples on earth, if understanding ourselves as part of that story is what we desire. It's an intelligent desire. Dewey also commented that intelligent desire was the highest goal of education.

Since a fiat from on high will not be forthcoming unless we the people insist upon it, if we are to do more with our new communication technologies than build the world's largest shopping mall and spy on one another, which we will do in any case, we need to teach the generation now in school that the great unfinished project of humanity is the great project of human knowledge, and that by joining their efforts together, they can take the Library at Alexandria to a new level.

We need to teach the generation now in school that they are not mere recipients of the great project of human knowledge, but active participants. We need to teach the generation now in school that to build a truly universal library, every neighborhood and town and school will need to help. Most of the world's knowledge is not in the Library of Congress or the Center for Disease Control. It's spread throughout the planet, in the hearts and minds of ordinary people. We all know that digital publishing makes the local library an outlet for the world's knowledge, but equally important, *it invites each local library to become an input point for the world's knowledge about the particular locality where that library is situated.*

I'm not speaking theoretically now, but as a practitioner. When we tell young people that it is urgent that they learn the skills needed to convert ignorance to knowledge, and that they need to learn them by interviewing their elders, collecting scientific data at local ponds and woods, gathering and preserving family stories, investigating occupational cultures, writing the histories of local organizations and clubs, they believe us. They believe that it matters.

Young people today want leaders they can believe in because they want to believe in themselves.

They can see that building this universal library is a heroic work, worthy of our best efforts. When we invite our youth to join this work, believing they can do it, we invite them to join a community of purpose, like the old communal efforts at barn raising or helping flood

victims. They head for the edge of what is known so new contributions can be made.

After all, at the local level, the frontiers of human knowledge are near at hand and it isn't as intimidating as it might sound. Even fifth-graders can do it. My wife Valerie's class of fifth graders were approached by the local cattlemen's association. The association wanted histories written of the long existing brands in the valley. Could the kids help?

Of course they could. The first step was to provide the kids with books that gave them basic knowledge. The most popular of these was a guide to "reading" brands. Kids like codes anyway, and soon many of them were talking about "lazy J's" and "hanging R's." The community had been predominantly an agricultural community two generations before but it was no longer, so few of the kids lived on working farms or ranches, but nearly all their grandparents and quite a few of their parents had.

A world that students had been unaware of began coming into view. They began to notice huge brands painted on barns, small brands imprinted on the bug deflectors on the hoods of pickup trucks. They weren't finding a cure for cancer, yet, but they were learning the desire to convert ignorance to knowledge and the techniques for doing so.

One youngster came to school with a glove he had found along the road. It was marked with a brand. He rushed to the reference book on the back shelf that listed registered brands in the state, found the name and address of the ranch associated with the brand, contacted the owner of the glove and returned it. It's one of the small steps out which communities are built.

The necessity for annual branding created lively traditions within families and communities. Groups of families moved from one ranch to the next throughout the spring, everyone showing up to get the branding done. The shared work led to shared pleasure: good food, good conversation, good community.

In getting a history of local brands done, students, parents, community members worked together to get work done that none could do alone, getting to know and enjoy each other in the process. Since community members were an important part of the project, they were invited to the publication party at school when the work was done. Adults examined the books and the quilt featuring valley brands that were made, and students read their histories to the audience. The published materials were made a permanent part of the library, filling in details of the history of branding in Montana that had not yet been a part of the published record.

Everywhere we look, histories remain unwritten.

A ranch woman on the northern Great Plains near Chester, Montana, asked English teacher Renee Rasmussen if her class might be interested in finding the story behind an old house, abandoned maybe seventy years before. The ranch owner didn't know who built it or where they went.

Students visited the site with Renee, and began forming questions. Forming questions may be the most important step in the learning process. Until we have a question, it's hard to learn anything. The name we give for information we weren't looking for is noise, which how students often perceive our carefully developed curricula.

The house was made of thick mud bricks, formed on site. A call to the state historic preservation office led to all sorts of information about adobe brick construction.

A title search at the courthouse led them to a family of Estonian immigrants. A trip to the museum archives began filling in blanks. What on earth led immigrants from Russia to empty prairies of northern Montana? Soon, students were discovering the Russian Revolution, and

finding Estonian descendants in the community, still in possession of stories and heirlooms from the old country.

But why Montana? More research led them to the Homestead Act, and the incredible stories of hope, hardship and failure that characterized the homestead period in Montana.

As they documented the building, drawing site maps and floor plans, photographing construction techniques, new questions arose. Why had the people worked so hard and built with such quality, only to leave after three years. This led them to the punishing drought that drove homesteaders from Montana early in the twentieth century.

Students put their research together in presentations for the community. They had learned how a small town on the Great Plains was a part of the great narrative of world history, and they made personal connections to events far away in time and space. They also made the story accessible to others in the community and to researchers in the future. They did research on Estonian foodways, clothing, and religion. They tracked down the grandchildren of the people who had built the house. And their work was placed in the permanent collections of the Liberty County Museum and well as the state historical society. This year, classes are making digital versions of the information for the web.

A group of students from Corvallis decided to write the history of a ghost town, Rochester. No standing structures remained of what had once been a bustling mining town—only foundations and litter and privy holes in the sagebrush. They pursued leads and were able to identify through archival records two people buried in graves in the cemetery under headstones that said simply “unknown.” They spent weekends collecting and cataloguing objects with help from the Bureau of Land Management, recreating the social class of various neighborhoods through clues such as the quality of foundation stones that remained, they collected old photographs showing the town at various stages in its history, and they interviewed anyone who might be able to shed light on the town’s history.

As they did so, they transformed themselves into the world’s leading authorities on Rochester, and they knew it. This is incredibly motivational, but students anywhere can become the world’s leading authorities on the histories of specific buildings, city parks, community organizations and agencies, clubs, businesses, and occupations.

And always, other things are happening. I sat in on an interview student Karista James was conducting with an eighty-year-old man, Junior, who had spent his early years at Rochester.

Junior was a lifelong bachelor in his eighties and quite crippled, and he had been spending his days getting ready for the interview by sorting through boxes and boxes of hundreds of old photographs he had been putting in order. As I contemplated what his life had come down to, I confess I wondered, “Who cares? Really? Who cares about all this stuff?”

Junior vaguely mentioned a fire that burned out the business district in Rochester, and said a little sadly, “After that, nothing was the same.”

Karista interrupted him, “Do you mean the Hardesty Hotel fire of 1934?”

Junior paused and looked at her in a new way. Something clicked, and I had my answer. Who cared? Karista cared.

Knowledge takes effort, and Karista cared enough to know.

Old people need to reflect on their experiences just as surely as toddlers need to gather experiences. They need to come to meaning about their lives, and this is hard to do without telling the stories, and it’s hard to tell the stories if no one comes to listen.

It's a great solace for each older person to realize that the legacy he or she has that will be of greatest worth to the future is precisely what every person values most: the story of his or her own life.

Stories of what individual persons faced, what they were given, what they could not find, what they lost, what they kept, what they attempted, what happened, how they came to think about it, in all the specificity of the times and places they lived, become more not less valuable with the passage of time. What would we give to have a narrative of everyday life of an Egyptian farmer or an ordinary mother in ancient Greece?

A sophomore in Corvallis created a video segment on "adversity" to play at the community Heritage Evening in the spring, when students presented their findings to the community. She researched a fire that had destroyed the Corvallis school on January 15, 1930. "In a matter of minutes it forced two hundred grammar students and ninety-six high school students out into the bitter snow, where fifteen below zero winds were blowing. It was one of the coldest days that winter." As 200 community members listened, Kate told some of their stories back to them, reminding them that they had gotten through hard times in the past by being a community rather than trying to go it alone.

On the screen, Mabel Popham, now elderly, described the fire: "I had gotten a new coat for Christmas—that was in 1929 and the beginning of the depression—and I couldn't stop to pick up my coat. Everybody just got out. That was the main thing, to escape the fire. And everybody did get out, everyone was safe, but everybody lost their coats that they got for Christmas, which was kind of traumatic at that time because it was the beginning of the Depression."

Kate studied how the community responded. "Buildings such as the Masonic Temple, a school in a neighboring town, and various churches were offered to house school children in need of a warm place to learn. Many people freely gave time, talents and money to help out wherever and whenever they were needed. The network of support that developed because of a community disaster became vital as the Depression worsened," she said.

A few months after Heritage Evening, the town's middle school caught fire and was destroyed. People seemed to know instantly how they should react.

There is not one elder in any town whose life story is not worth recording and contemplating, and we will fall short of realizing our humanity until we have made a systematic effort to do just that. Students in Bigfork collect life histories and make portraits of all the elders in the community's rest home.

Any community that gathers and preserves its own stories is contributing, in the most fundamental way possible, to the world's educational value, and students are learning how the world works, how things come into existence and how they pass away. The sense of historical inevitability so common in textbooks—that things turned out as they had to or as they were supposed to—is replaced by an understanding of the freedom of characters to act and react. They learn better how much our destiny is in our hands, which is, after all, why education matters.

Students in Libby began studying logging, which led them to organize, catalogue, and file historical photographs of logging for the local museum, doing extensive research to write accurate captions. As word of their project spread, people brought them more photographs. They now have over 3,000 historical photographs, together with detailed information.

Howard Gardner has asked the question, what would it be like if instead of enrolling our students in school, we enrolled them in museum? Libby is one of several schools in Montana

that is finding out. This year, their history class no longer meets at the school. It meets at the local museum where students can work as cognitive apprentices alongside heritage professionals.

Such opportunities are limited only by the imaginations of community members, inside and outside the school. Museums, libraries, parks, wildlife refuges, as well as many government offices and businesses have research that would benefit them to undertake, if they only had the staff.

And there are more personal benefits too. After years of research, Peter Drucker concluded that what adults most need today are three things they are not finding in jobs: they need communities, they need effective citizenship, and they need to volunteer. We need to feel our independence by acting outside the rule-bound institutions where many of us work, and we need to feel our lives are making a difference. Obviously, these adult needs are congruent with what our young people are looking for.

Working together in collaborative research projects, both young people and adults grow by practicing the scholarly virtues: a commitment to forming questions in ways that they can be answered by research, respect for evidence and the rules of evidence developed by the various academic disciplines, readiness to examine situations from various perspectives and to withhold judgment while developing understanding, and honesty.

As students begin doing real work, they become protagonists in their own learning, characters immersed in time, motivated by desires, meeting obstacles, encountering serendipity, making things happen. Every good scholar knows that research is an adventure in the form of a story.

Communities, education, and stories are inextricably bound together. Yale anthropologist Keith H. Basso quotes Nick Thompson, an Apache elder, who explains something of the way stories operate in his community:

"This is what we know about our stories. They go to work on your mind and make you think about your life. Maybe you've not been acting right. Maybe you've been stingy. Maybe you've been chasing after women. Maybe you've been trying to act like a Whiteman. People don't like it! So someone goes hunting for you—maybe your grandmother, your grandfather, your uncle. It doesn't matter. Anyone can do it.

"So someone stalks you and tells a story about what happened long ago. It doesn't matter if other people are around—you're going to know he's aiming that story at you. All of a sudden it hits you! It's like an arrow, they say . . . Then you feel weak, real weak, like you are sick. You don't want to eat or talk to anyone. That story is working on you now. You keep thinking about it. That story is changing now, making you want to live right. That story is making you want to replace yourself.

"It's hard to keep living right. Many things jump up at you and block your way. But you won't forget that story."⁵

Of course, it isn't just Apaches who surround their young with webs of stories. All cultures do the same thing. When we invite our youth to help us study our neighborhoods and families, they learn that they don't need to just do busy work that matters only because of a hypothetical future. They can do work that is real and important right now.

School assignments needn't be ephemera, tossed away as soon as they are finished. They can be worth preserving, forever.

And they do this work within a web of personal relationships, personal expectations,

personal praise, personal disapproval. Young people need personal teaching, not just from one adult isolated among a two dozen children, but from a whole community, including scientists, grandmothers, farmers, artists, house builders, nurses, cowboys, foresters, ministers, bankers, scholars, and politicians—anyone who is an expert on some aspect of what it takes to build and sustain a community—which is to say, everyone.

It's only a story. But a story already coming true.

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3. Carse, James P. *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, New York: Random House, 1986.

4. Dewey, John. *Education and Democracy*

5. *Antaeus* 57, Autumn 1986 p. 112