

## The 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Storytelling Festival, and “Bless your Heart”

The 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Storytelling event was a masterpiece of beautiful words, patched together in a variety of shapes...and then stitched together in a beautiful quilt of the English language. The coordination of the event was obviously the beneficiary of decades of experience! Spotless tents, adequate porta-potties, trash cans everywhere, superb sound for ancient ears like mine, traffic control, etc. Downtown “felt” different, in a good way. It was more open, pedestrian friendly, and much less noisy.

When I first heard the idea of making a portion of downtown a walking mall and car free zone, I was skeptical. The concern was that way too much traffic would route itself into residential areas. We just didn’t see that occur this past long weekend. I must say that strolling down Main St during Storytelling sort of felt like (the old) Disneyland Main St USA! What a splendid job many merchants did creating colorful Fall displays, and “photo stops”. Somehow our Main St looked so much more pleasing from the middle of the street! So, shut it down. Maybe we try it out for weekends in the Summertime? A food truck or two, vendor tents with some crafts being made on site-who knows? The busy contractors and commuters can hop on alternate paths which is where they should be anyway if they are in a hurry. Anyway, I’ve reversed my mind-set on keeping Main open to traffic. At least for a two block stretch, maybe it’s time to kick the tires off Main?

Possibly our local downtown merchants would have benefitted from some more “free time” between Storytelling sets. The proprietors would get mobbed as people rushed from one tent to another, and then it was like a ghost town 15 minutes later. The only time I saw people wandering the streets in masse was on Sunday after the last event. However, many stores were closed by then...a shame. The tragic loss of the Barrel House was reduced a bit by some creative entrepreneurship! A “new” BBQ opportunity opened up, and good for Texas Burritos, The Lollipop Shop, and others...they took their “show” outside the door to take advantage of hungry...but very rushed consumers. We should remember that many out-of-town guests never have shopped a downtown with doors...so, open your doors and make things bright! Overall, our transplanted family enjoyed our first Festival, and we really liked volunteering for a part of a day.

Almost every “Story” heard was a delightful bouquet of words, artfully assembled to be entertaining, and sometimes hilarious. There was always a theme, or message that one could take away. Bill Lepp thrilled us at every turn, weaving message into entertainment...and good into promise. I’ll always be naming my oversized squash “bored gourds,” and his one closing line of “They lived adequately ever after” just might be our rallying cry for the hard days ahead!

Only one of the stories we heard was delivered with the obvious goal of having the audience leave saddened, demoralized, and shamed. People were gasping in shock as the story unfolded. As we left the tent, I felt myself getting upset. I had heard a beautiful and artful expert in the English language weave a story of personal triumph over hate. What was missing was the societal positive of the story; the hope and promise of a land of fundamentally good and benevolent people trying to be better, but never perfect. Instead, the guilt and shame encouraged by the Teller dripped from the tent like molasses. As we exited, heads were bowed, and the masses shuffled off to the next venue. My brief internal triumph

of fun over sadness, hope over anger, and beauty triumphing over the incessant mainstream media messages of “You’re **bad**” ...was temporarily squashed.

So, off we went to another “Tell.” Teller Motoko did not use her voice to guilt me about the shame of forced Japanese American internment camps during WWII. Instead, she used her incredible dialect to deliver the story of the child encountering an imposing Buddhist Priest who subsequently crossed over his religious lines to help a child celebrate Christmas. Teller Motoko delivered the verbal finale just as any musical composer would strive to do... “The best way to believe in Santa Claus...is to **be** Santa Claus.”

So, still processing the previous story I had heard of guilt and shame...I was wondering how to get centered again in the fun and beauty of the festival. After all, we had only one poor experience out of 8...so get real Dana and quit being so serious! I looked up the Teller on the web who had jolted me so much. Turns out the Teller takes pride in the process of jolting, and proudly exclaims that “**I speak my truth.**” OK, I got it now...I think to myself. And so, my angst disappeared, and a smile graced my normally stern features. I ask myself “what would be a good ‘Jonesborough way’ of managing the emotion I am feeling”? Like a ray of sunshine, I was warmed by a saying that I have embraced as a Southern cure-all. Yep... “**Bless their Heart.**” The saying washed over me like a cool salty wave on a blistering day.

So, we all hear what we believe. Of course, we can all change, and that is another lesson from Storytelling. By hearing the laughter of a tall tale, or the wisdom of a lesson learned by others with different experiences, we enjoy life and grow in the process. Especially now, children need to hear uplifting stories of your own struggles, and the humorous ways we learned a lesson. Telling stories that allow us to laugh at ourselves and reflect, are usually more insightful than stories of guilt and shame. A relevant story speaks to all of us, in diverse ways. When Teller Bill Lepp spoke of the kids being chided by their grandpa for making the ocean recede by damming up a nearby brook (rather than explaining tidal flow and moon correlation), I was tickled. I could imagine many of my “green” pals were hearing how we all negatively influence and contaminate the Earth...while what I heard is “We aren’t in charge of EVERYTHING.”

So, when Teller Dolores Hydock retold in her beautiful way the story of the Pied Piper, and how the Piper freed the children from the ungrateful town...I was wondering what the message was for the rainbow striped leotard, blue-haired audience member sitting in front of me? Of course, it was her right to be expressive in her appearance, just as it was my right to proudly wear my “COS” (Convention of States-look it up) sweatshirt. I wondered...in her mind was the Pied Piper the Federal Government, and therefore a vastly more qualified and judicious “parent” than what God created as good and natural? I just really do not know how she/her/I felt. I would never desire to cancel her speech or thoughts; I know what that feels like. Personally? All I could imagine was that Pied Piper gathering up, and then leading a parade of millions of little babies away from this evil world...a place where they could be held in reverence and allowed to grow up...and then maybe return to save us all.

So, there is the beautiful link between the Storytelling Festival and our new “hometown” of Jonesborough. We welcome the world with open arms, and we listen and enjoy while visitors explain why “this place” has drawn them for 50 years. It’s good to hear that, and it might make the current national train-wreck easier to bear. Our Jonesborough “story” is still being written, a quilt made of many diverse and well-meaning people...all with faults. It occurs to me that the Jonesborough way of telling our story is what America longs to hear. A delightful story has many nuances, winding around a common

message like a fragile thread. Mistakes, followed by corrections...injustice followed by goodness. And then, like magic the fabric pieces come together as both a bit flawed...but still an outrageously and beautiful quilt named Jonesborough.

That is why America needs to be like Jonesborough. We listen here, we change slowly, and we honor our past. We allow others to shout, and their alternate views forwarded. That's the polite thing to do. However, please do not view our lack of responding volume as weakness, or capitulation. You see, at some point in time we will have the opportunity to look our elected officials straight in the eye, open the door labeled "EXIT" and say...

**"Bless your Heart."**