

Stories by Madelyn Rohrer

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In The Spotlight:

The Accidental Storyteller

Telling Stories for Fun, Fact, and Fiction



At the suggestion of my new publisher, Koehler Books, I have entered the world of blogs! I am including my first one here, but future blogs will not be a part of my author newsletter. They will

reside on my website and Author Facebook page.

The subject of a first blog is supposed to tell you who I am and why I am blogging (other than my publisher told me to!), so I hope you enjoy “The Accidental Storyteller!”



Welcome to the first blog of “The Accidental Storyteller.” Why such a strange name? Because I never intended to be a storyteller. It just evolved...in spite of me.

There were several times during my formative years when things happened in school – things that convinced me I never wanted to stand in front of an audience or be the center of attention again. The first incident was in fourth grade. Our class was doing an art project and we all had little pointed tools that we were using to carve a pattern in a piece of rubberlike tile. The teacher stressed that when we

were creating our designs, we should always have that little tool pointing away from us. I obviously did not pay attention. While I was engrossed in the project and pushing the etching tool around with my right hand, it slipped and made a large gash in the palm of my left hand. When the teacher saw it, she pulled my hand up in the air and, with blood running down my arm, showed everyone what happens when they don’t follow instructions. The other kids were staring at me and my hand in horror. I was too embarrassed to even feel the pain!

A few years later, during an English exercise, we were taking turns reading paragraphs from a book out loud. When it was my turn to read, I mispronounced a word. The teacher literally hollered out, “Who said that?” and promptly corrected me in front of the whole class. Once again, I was the center of attention in an embarrassing way.

Twice in high school I froze in front of an audience – once playing my accordion on stage in a talent contest, and another time leading a meeting of the Future Business Leaders of America, of which I had just been elected president. Both times I was distracted by what felt like a thousand eyes staring back at me. Graduating from high school was a release from all of that – I would never have to stand in front of an audience or be the center of attention again! If anyone would have told me that someday I would be in the middle of a spotlight on stage telling stories to an audience, I would have laughed and probably told them they were out of their ever-lovin’ minds! Uh, uh. Not going to happen! No way!

So here I am, a 20-year veteran storyteller, very comfortable on stage with a microphone and spotlight, in front of any size audience. What changed?

It was my perspective. What I failed to realize through those early years, but have since come to appreciate, is that none of those things that happened to me were about me. They were about the audience and what *the audience* needed or expected to hear, see, or learn. I had to put myself in their shoes. Now I can truthfully tell you that an audience WANTS you to do a good job! Whether you are talking, playing an instrument, singing, or whatever, people want you to do well. They want to hear what you have to say; to know what you know; to be entertained. So hopefully, by sharing what I have gleaned through experience and time, I may be of help to others who have stories to tell but don't feel comfortable about being the center of attention. Or maybe you don't feel that you have the expertise to put your stories in writing. It's okay, because you are not alone. All you need are two things – confidence that comes from knowing what you are talking about, whether personal or learned (researched), and a genuine desire to share it for the benefit of others. Whether oral or written, stories don't have to be historical or informative to be meaningful...they can be just plain entertaining – humorous or feel-good tales that touch hearts.

My personal journey of emerging from this self-conscious pit of dread started during my business life as an administrative assistant in a large corporation. It was a time of advancing new technology, progressing from electric typewriters to new machines with green screens called word processors and then to computers. It was a learning process for everyone, including members of management. Because I worked for management, I was often one of the first to be introduced to the new technologies and charged with instructing others. I became a quasi-teacher. It was satisfying to know I was helping others learn. The nugget that I took away from this time of my life was that there is no better way to learn something than to have to teach it. You have to do your homework, know what you are talking about, and be prepared to answer questions. That simple truism stays with me to this day.

After 28 years of working for the company I loved, they decided to downsize and offered eligible employees an early buy-out. I was eligible. It was a tough decision, but I found myself fully retired before age 50. Now what? I started my own

company, of course – an office project management company. I was the only employee, but it made no difference; it was all mine. For the next few years, I had an enriching and enjoyable time signing on with numerous small and large companies to do one-time office projects that would have otherwise caused them to take their regular employees away from their work. I interfaced with people at all levels and was involved in meetings as a presenter as well as a listener.

It was also a time to finally think about moving away from The Northeast to a milder climate. We moved to Jonesborough, Tennessee, the state's oldest town and the home of international storytelling. The word "storytelling" didn't mean much to me then; it was just the name of an activity in the area. We kept busy for a year building a house but, being new and not knowing many people, it was lonely. The solution was obvious – get back to *a real job* and meet more people! I signed on as a tour guide and learned the facts and legends of Historic Jonesborough. My first solo tour was as a bus step-on guide for a group of visitors from New York on their way to do some gambling at southern casinos. I learned quickly how to keep my balance while talking on the intercom and standing on the top step of the stairwell as the bus was moving. As we wound our way through the streets and I pointed out places of interest, a couple people expressed surprise at my non-southern accent. They were anticipating a problem understanding a southern tour guide and whether or not I would be able to understand their northern accents if they had questions. It had not occurred to me that accents from different areas or even other countries would be an issue. This one wasn't a problem because I was also a northerner, but it made me aware of the possibility and the importance of speaking clearly and perhaps slowly if necessary.



Being a tour guide in an historic town was fun! We dressed in costume much of the time, learned to be flexible if groups arrived early or late, tended to the needs of our visitors, and had “a good time.” A good time...those were key words stressed by the owner of our tour company. “Be yourself when you are conducting a tour,” she said. “If you are having a good time, our guests will also. No matter what happens, stay calm, be gracious, be yourself!” Those were wise words of advice that I eventually carried to the stage.



So how did I get from the street to the stage? The tour company owner and a couple of her seasoned tour guides who were also storytellers said to me on several occasions, “You should be a storyteller!” They were encouragers for sure, but my old ingrained fears kept resurfacing with “no, no, I don’t want to do that.” As time went by, however, and I told the stories of Jonesborough to groups in restaurants, parking lots, under tents, and from the porch of the International Storytelling Center, being a storyteller started feeling natural – or at least less intimidating. It was enjoyable sharing what I knew with an audience who really wanted to hear what they came for – to be entertained and learn about Jonesborough. Our goal was to welcome people to

our town, tell them our unique stories, and give them good memories to take back home. We did that. Even though my costumed image is probably in a lot of scrapbooks or on phones, none of it was about me.

After a little more prodding, I finally did go through the steps to become an official storyteller with the Jonesborough Storytellers Guild. The training included polishing one’s stage presence, the finer points of effective story delivery, and the importance of bringing a story back around for a wrap-up. I also learned that you never “arrive” at being a storyteller. It is not an ending to be attained, but rather a continuous journey...and there is always more to learn along the way.

In my next blog, I will talk about stage presence – what is important and what is not. I hope you will join me next time! If you have comments or questions, you can contact me through my website and I will answer within a few days. Just click on the “Contact” tab. Here is the link:

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Madelyn Rohrer

Madelyn’s Musings

Even though St. Patrick’s Day has come and gone for 2023, the Irish are Irish all year long, and some are very creative! Here is a story you might enjoy from the wonderful world of celebrating our Irish heritage.

Coloring the Chicago River Green

(Information from multiple on-line sources)

More than a hundred years ago, the Chicago River was both a blessing and a hindrance for the people of Chicago. It was their main source of drinking water, but also a source of pollution. As the city grew, businesses and factories sprang up on the banks of the river and it became a convenient place to dump their wastewater. The more polluted it became, the more the problems grew. It started affecting Lake Michigan, which drew the attention

of the Canadian government as well as the US and Illinois governments. So Chicago did something unique that they thought would alleviate the problem. In 1900, they changed the course of the river and made it flow backwards. They put in a series of canals and made the river flow west and then Southwest and empty into the Illinois River instead of Lake Michigan. That made the Canadian government happy. Success. Now the Chicago River was being fed by the nice fresh clean waters of Lake Michigan. However, the water was still being polluted by Chicago's businesses as it passed through, and the contaminants were flowing the other way – to St. Louis and down to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. The problem had not been solved; people in the Southwest were upset. Attention turned to the businesses. Pollution mitigation and prevention policies went into effect. It was a slow process and it took some policing effort, but it was working.

It was in December of 1961 when Irishman Steve Bailey was having a meeting with another Irishman, Dan Lydon, to discuss plans for the next year's St. Patrick's Day Parade. Steve was the chairman in charge of the parade; Dan was his assistant. They were interrupted by Steve's secretary to say that a plumber was there to see him. Steve was also the business manager of the local plumbers' union and the plumbers' union sponsored the parade. But when the plumber walked into his office, Steve literally leapt out of his chair at the splotches of green all over the plumber's white overalls... Kelly green.

Where have you been? What have you been doing? Steve asked the surprised plumber. He replied that the green was from the dye the plumbers were using to detect illegal pollution of the river. They had found quite a few buildings still dumping waste into the water. The green dye highlighted those outlets and turned them green.

"Well, the river sure could use it," Steve said. "Wouldn't it be great if the whole river was that color!" But as he said it, an idea was born. "Dan, who do we have to talk with to get permission to dye the whole river green?" Minutes later, they were on the phone with the Port Authority, asking if they could have permission to dye the Chicago River green for St. Patrick's Day.

"I don't know why you can't," was the reply from their contact. "If the fire boats can shoot colored water into the air which goes down into the water, I don't know why you couldn't just put the color directly into the water."

They were off and running! Never had they had such an exciting idea for St. Patrick's Day. But how much do they use? A quart? A carload? There were no recipes for dyeing a river. The supplier suggested they start with 100 pounds of the dye, but when it was delivered, Steve thought they had been bamboozled. The powder was orange. They were assured however that it would turn green when mixed with water. They tested it and, sure enough, it turned a beautiful green.

Second challenge – how could they mix it into the river up once they added it? They decided on motorboats – a whole bunch of motorboats. Would it work? There was only one way to find out.

Publicity brought a lot of people down to the river's edge that year to watch what they considered to be a bunch of crazy Irishman trying to dye the Chicago River green. But it was spectacular... all those boats racing around, churning up the water. Then the crowning glory appeared – a beautiful carpet of green that would make any Irishman smile. It looked like you could walk on it.

The environmentalists were not impressed. Eyebrows furled when the river stayed green for a week. The next year they tried 50 pounds of dye, and the river stayed green for only four days. The next year they did 25 pounds and it stayed green for a day. Perfect!

However, the environmentalists were still skeptical about the effects on plant and animal life in the river in general because they had determined it was an oil-based dye. It made Steve laugh – if 50 years of contamination hadn't harmed the living things in the river, surely a little dye wasn't going to hurt them! But they agreed to find something else.

They tested and tested and finally came up with a formula using vegetable-based dye that still gave them the beautiful green color...plus a few more ingredients. The formula was entrusted to only a handful of people and has been protected for over

60 years. Absolutely no one has been allowed to divulge the secret formula, not even to the EPA. They pointed to Coca-Cola's privilege of protecting their formula as their own right to not divulge their secret. It was not even shared with Dublin, Ireland when they asked for the formula so they could dye the River Liffey green. The Chicago plumbers replied that they would be glad to come to Ireland and do it for them, but they would bring in their own team of people. The formula is top secret with no exceptions.

When Steve Bailey was asked back in the 1960s what effect he thought the dye had on the water and where it went, he replied: "It travels to Ireland, of course. The Chicago River will dye the Illinois River, which will dye the Mississippi River, which will dye the Gulf of Mexico, which will send green dye up the Gulf Stream, across the North Atlantic and into the Irish Sea, and a sea of green will surround the land as a greeting to all Irishman of the Emerald Isle from the men of Erin in Chicago Land USA."

So the conclusion is that even though Ireland may have a little bit more green than our country, we do have just as much blarney! You've gotta love those Irishmen!

First Harbingers of Spring

As I write this newsletter, the official day of spring is almost here. In the United States and the rest of the Northern Hemisphere, it is either March 20 or 21. It is the day of the year when the sun crosses the celestial equator moving northward. It is called the Vernal Equinox.

Not many people pay attention to that description, however. They are more apt to embrace spring by other standards. My father-in-law in Upstate New York used to say that it wasn't spring until it snowed on the crocus. He didn't need a scientific explanation; it was just fact...and it was true. Because their corms are small, they are not planted as deeply as many other spring flowers. A little sunshine, a few warm days, and voila – they are ready to be out of the ground! They don't care about a little snow, either. They just keep reaching for the sun!



Another indicator of spring are frogs and toads – they are on the roads. They embark on a journey in the spring to get back home to their ancestral ponds to breed. Yes, they know the way, even if it is more than a mile. They cross roads, yards, and fields, sometimes in large numbers, and usually at dusk or later at night. In areas where there are unusually large numbers of these warty amphibians, there are toad patrols who go out at night with lights to help them get across the roads safely.



So there you are – two sure signs of spring! If it snows some more and you are tired of all that white stuff, look to the ground – not the sky. Take heart knowing that there are pretty purple and yellow flowers under the snow somewhere, reaching for the sun. If you are driving, watch out for toad patrols who are helping to move hordes of toads and frogs that are just trying to get back home.

Happy Spring everyone!

Madelyn Rohrer

If you would like past issues of my newsletters, they are on my website:

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