

## Drawn to Story

### CATHERINE BURNS

#### Artistic Director, *The Moth*

On hot summer nights on a screened porch in Georgia, a group of friends passed the time telling stories. They dubbed themselves “The Moths” after the insects that were drawn to the porch light. Today, some 15 years later, the New York-based *Moth* storytelling series has featured storytelling greats Malcolm Gladwell and Annie Proulx, as well as a hot dog eating champion and a pickpocket. In 30 sold-out shows each year, storytellers have 10 minutes each to tell their story on a theme—onstage, without notes, to a live audience. *The Moth* has spawned an open mic storytelling competition, a Peabody Award-winning radio show, and a community education program that teaches storytelling as a means of providing a voice to the disenfranchised. After attending her first *Moth* show 12 years ago, Catherine Burns signed on as a volunteer, and hasn’t looked back.



#### Smitten with story

After getting my bachelor’s degree in broadcasting and film from Boston University, I directed and produced a number of independent feature films before moving to New York, where a friend took me to *The Moth*. I was smitten. I loved that the stories were so complex even though each storyteller only had 10 minutes to speak. They were sometimes hilarious and other times heartbreaking. I also loved the variety of storytellers. That first show featured a prison guard from *Sing Sing*. Where else could you hear that perspective?

I volunteered to help teach their *MothSHOP* Community Education Program and ended up joining the staff—which at the time consisted of only one other person—to help them out for a few months.

Now, as artistic director, I weigh in on the creative aspects of *The Moth* programs. One of my primary roles is to help produce our public radio show, which features some of our favorite stories and is carried by over 250 stations nationwide. I put together the lineup, approve the scripts, and host some of the shows. I also help program our podcasts.

#### The value of storytelling

We live in a world where people interact in person less and less. Communication takes place through the computer and over cell phones. As human beings, we have a fundamental need to connect, to listen to

each other and to hear what has happened in another person’s life from their point of view. Storytelling gives you that. It provides a very basic human connection.

Good storytellers have to be vulnerable, to be willing to share with an audience something that matters deeply to them. The listener is much more likely to care if the storyteller cares. The best storytellers—even if they’re just telling you about some crazy thing that happened—are able to convey what the meaning of an event was for them.

#### Success story

Almost all great stories involve some big change in the storyteller. One of my favorite storytellers, Alan Rabinowitz, is a big cat expert who negotiates with developing countries to protect big cats from extinction. Alan told a story about establishing the first jaguar preserve in Belize. He had to go before parliament to convince them—and this was long before ecotourism—to preserve the cats’ habitat and to bring tourists in. That’s a pretty compelling story, but it’s much more compelling if you know that Alan had a stutter so debilitating that he didn’t speak a full sentence until he was 22 years old.

Alan related to animals because he saw that, like him, they had no voice. He promised his pets that if he ever found his voice, he would speak for them. So there’s Alan, in front of the government of Belize, and the stakes go through the roof: If he stutters, they’re probably not going to take him seriously. Can he do it? He does, and the triumph is so much bigger when you know his personal story.

Stories can connect us to important issues and help us begin to have conversations about things that otherwise seem overwhelming. That tigers could go extinct in my lifetime or my son’s lifetime feels overwhelming to me, but listening to Alan’s very personal story gives me a way in to think about the problem.

#### On finding the story

People call us with story ideas, and we also seek out storytellers. We have a team of talented and compassionate directors who interview potential storytellers. Recently, we worked with Damien Echols, one of the “West Memphis Three,” the teens who were wrongly accused of a triple murder in 1993. He had just been

released from prison, and his book publisher approached us. We knew that Damien was going to talk about being wrongfully imprisoned at age 18. His challenge was to tell his 19-year story in 10 minutes, onstage, in a way that would be meaningful for him and the audience. He worked tirelessly with one of our directors to find a way to tell the story within the time frame, and it turned out beautifully.

In some cases, we might not yet know what the story will be. A mutual friend suggested Alan, the big cat guy, to us. The first time I got on the phone with Alan, I didn't know what story he might tell. I asked him a million questions about his life, and the stuttering story came up.



### Storycraft

Once the storyteller and The Moth have agreed on a story, we send them an outline of it. Having someone parrot back to them what they said and putting it together with a beginning, middle, and end helps organize the story. Then they'll tell a rough draft of the story, in person or by phone, just to start saying it in order. We provide notes, and they practice some more. It could be one or two times, or more. My record is 17 hours with the recently exonerated prisoner. He was, understandably, very angry. He would forget to say that he was let out of jail. I would say, "Wait, back up a minute. You have to tell the part where you're released and found not guilty."

The official rehearsal takes place at The Moth office. The storytellers tell their story in front of our entire production team, who then provide them with feedback. It's a chance to tell it not in front of a big crowd, but in front of a new crowd. After I've heard a story

many times, I may not realize something's missing, but if a member of our team is confused, then somebody in the audience will be.

### Advice for young storytellers

We have storySLAM competitions where anyone can tell their story on the evening's theme, and we're about to launch a Teen storySLAM to encourage teens to tell their own stories.

I regret that in my own teen years, I didn't write down enough of what was happening to me. It would be wonderful to have that material now. I'd be surprised if there was anyone who wouldn't go back and use material they generated as a teen as a basis for work they'll produce later in life. Teens should write about what moves them and what happens to them in the day-to-day. At The Moth, we believe that everybody—no matter how young—has a story. **i**