

Stop Me If You've Heard this .....

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## The Title

The **title** of this paper, "**stop me if you've heard this....**", is a thin disguise for an essay about stories.

Today we communicate using cell phones, FaceBook, Twitter, text messaging, LinkedIn, Skype and more. These tools connect lots of people who could be separated by great distances, and do it almost instantaneously. They help us share information like; I am here, with whom, doing what, and I have this to say. Among these, Twitter is unique, enabling a person to connect with a limitless number of followers using just 140 characters per message, usually to "spout off". (these 140 characters can get a person in a heap of trouble if you choose the wrong ones.)

Compare this to the mid19th century, when a simple story we told to someone we were actually looking at was the only way for most people to share. Stories at that time were said to have competed for attention with the likes of sermons, trials, and elections. According to a Lincoln biographer "[Stories entertained], passed the news, brought in company, and held the darkness at bay".

A story has always been different from simply sharing information . Your story has a character of its own; and you tell it your way. It has been said, "Everybody has a story to tell, and every listener can be a teller". These stories have always been, and will continue to be an important part of our social interaction. Stories help us recall the past, *and* satisfy the basic human need to be heard. The person *with* a story is usually ready to tell it if the time is right, and if it's a *favorite*, it won't be for the first time. ....but for the listener, once is usually enough. hence the title, Stop me if you have heard this.....

### **First A Wifely Reminder**

*The relevance of this title was emphasized the other day when two friends joined Barbara and me for lunch. At the table one of them started t tell a story about*

*his very successful nephew. He began, "My nephew is a really successful guy who started at Lilly and moved to Minneapolis as president of uh, uh, the company had a name like a charity in Memphis" (St. Jude I said). He continued "His company made uh, uh (Heart valves I said) It should have been obvious to him that I knew the story well enough to tell it myself. I had already heard it four times. Undaunted our friend continued and I heard the story a fifth time.*

*Returning to our apartment my wife advice to me was, "If you are with a friend you have known longer than six months, and you are contemplating telling a favorite story, think twice, you've probably told it before".*

### **The Definition of a story and the importance of the audience**

A **story** is: a narrative that is either true or fictitious. It can be in prose or verse, and is intended to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader. Stories come in many forms ranging from a quip of a few words to a novel of one hundred thousand words or more. The stories I am talking about are those *told* by a storyteller speaking to an audience. This may be a single person or a group as large as several hundred. When hearing a story, this audience is important because it actually connects with the teller. Each listener responds to the story, whether he intends to or not, in a way that can have an effect on how the story is told. A story can be a fleeting event for the hearer or it may remain for a lifetime. Story telling in front of an audience can be captured on video, but it isn't the same. With video the audience is a voyeur who watches and listens but has no influence on the teller or the telling. Telling a story without an audience is like hitting tennis balls fed by a ball machine. Telling a story to an audience is like having an opponent across the net who reacts in ways that demand a response.

### **Importance of the setting for the story and the emotion of the teller**

*About fifteen years ago I was summoned on short notice, actually the next day, to New York by ORBIS, an NGO I had volunteered with for nearly 15 years. I was told the purpose of this "hurry up" visit was to meet with the New York staff, and to help prepare a grant application to the Gates Foundation. I arrived at the conference room at 42nd and 8th Ave, and saw a dozen familiar colleagues and a few people I didn't recognize. The meeting had already started. As soon as I sat down, a man I didn't know said "I'm glad you're here. Tell us your story of what it means to be an ORBIS volunteer?" From the heart, and with adrenalin flowing I told my story to the group explaining how much it meant to be an ORBIS volunteer, working on the world's only flying eye hospital teaching doctors in the developing world new skills so they could better serve their patient's after we left. When I finished, he said, "That's good, would you tell it again for the camera?" If there could ever be a better example of letting the air out of the balloon, I can't think of it. My effort for the camera was a dud!*

### **My Favorite Storyteller**

Mark Twain was a master at telling a story and he was equally accomplished at writing it down. His first book was actually a collection of short stories titled "The Celebrated Jumping Frog". This title came from the story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calavares County", that he wrote in 1865. The book was published in 1867 with 27 other stories. At first, Twain considered the frog story to be original. Then he found evidence that it had appeared in ancient Greek literature leading him to say ".....to wit, that no occurrence is sole and solitary, but merely a reiteration of a thing that has happened before". Then he learned that his story had been used by a professor of ancient Greek as a theme for his students to write their own version of the story in Greek. This revelation may have

emboldened Twain to later make the claim that he had "invented" a way for an unemployed man to get a job for pay by first agreeing to work for no pay. We will hear more about that later.

### **Story Tellers are performers**

Experienced storytellers, some of whom are actually professionals, may write a story down at some point, to more or less perfect it. But, for the most part, the story remains in the teller's head. The final form of each story is created at the moment of the telling as the story teller becomes a performer playing himself while delivering his own lines. This sets the story teller apart from an actor who is playing a part while reciting someone else's lines, or playing someone else while delivering his own lines. A performer may *record* someone else's story, as with books on tape, or may recite lines he has memorized especially with poetry. All of these performers are acting, with each employing a slightly different set of skills.

Somewhere between reading someone else's lines and telling your own story is re-telling a story that has been written or told by someone else. A professional story teller told me he could easily paraphrase some authors as he did with Washington Irving's "The "Headless Horseman". He could tell the story, covering all the points, in twenty minutes compared to the hour and a half it would take to read it as Irving had written it.. However the storyteller said each time he told the story at Conner Prairie it was a little different depending on the reaction of the audience. In contrast he said he found it impossible to paraphrase the elegant prose of Edgar Allen Poe. Somewhere between is Mark Twain, who I have attempted to paraphrase as you will hear lagter

A story has a new life each time it is told. This new life is created using voice inflection, gestures, and timing to guide the flow of words. With each telling the story teller "reads" his audience, hoping this time he will get his story just right. The audience for the storyteller is like the canvas for the artist. The artist's work comes to life in a way you can see and it persists exactly as it was painted. A story is encoded in the brain of the listener depending on "how" it is heard. It lingers as a memory in company with every other conscious thought that is available for recall.

A longer version of just about any story may be written down and published as a "short story" in the literary sense. These short stories are usually from 1,500 to 30,000 words. The story that launched Mark Twain's career and was the anchor of his first book in 1867 is 3,000 words in the printed version. Twain made his early living performing and telling stories like this. I expect the version he told on the stage was shorter. This tradition was continued with actors like Hal Holbrook, who I saw perform in 1952, telling Mark Twain's stories in costume and dialect.

Something interesting about stories is this: Any time you are hearing a story, that version of the story is being told for the *first* time, and if you think about it, the *last* time. The effect that an audience can have on the teller each time a story is told, makes each hearer part author at least in a small way.

### **A special kind of story, the anecdote**

A special kind of story, is called an **anecdote**. An anecdote is defined as a short, usually amusing account of an incident that is personal or biographical. The most important part of an anecdote, is that it is true and that it deals with a single event. Like any story, an anecdote should be appropriate for the audience. You have already heard two.

The three anecdotes I will relate now will take about a minute each.

*A few summers back at the Harbor Springs City Dock, a visiting boat pulled in to the slip next to ours. As I helped our new neighbor tie up, he commented on our dogs. They were two six pound toy poodles, one white and one black. They looked like twins except for their color. While exchanging pleasantries, mostly about the dogs, I explained that the black dog, Jenny, was a "rescue dog". The boater replied "Oh".*

*After a few days when it was time for them to move on, our boat neighbor approached me and said, "my wife and I have talked about this ever since we've been here and for the life of us we can't figure out who you little black poodle Jenny rescues! I had a good chuckle to myself and explained Jenny doesn't rescue anything, we rescued her! My neighbor, chagrined, again said Oh!*

I can recall this happening to me, not once but twice.

*Driving on Fall Creek Parkway for 10 years to and from the Medical Center I passed under a railroad bridge with a sign painted in large white letters that to me said "MORON RAILROAD". Funny name, I thought. I kept this to myself counting it as one of life's conundrums, and I was glad I had when I heard someone many years later refer to the new "MONON" trail. Ugh, that was one on me. The good thing is that I never got around to asking about this funny name.*

There's more.

*In 1963 I had been drafted as a physician and assigned to an Armed Forces Examining Station. My job was to do pre-induction physicals. The final step in the process was to assign each one a physical and psychological profile. The*

*men were graded on their physical status, while their psychological status was pass or fail. A psychological evaluation done in 30 seconds, talking to a naked man seated across the desk, was neither scientific nor valid. I just did the best I could. Since a man needed only to say he wet the bed or was 'Gay' to be disqualified. I had to be careful to avoid being hoodwinked. One day a strapping Minnesota boy told me he was a transvestite. Seeing 200 men a day and somewhat in a fog I said, "we don't disqualify on the basis of religion". "Sir" he responded, "I like to dress up like a girl". Did I think he said Mennonite? I immediately recorded S 4- disqualified . I didn't tell the boy, he would hear about it from the draft board. Hard to believe, I got to be 30 years old and had never heard that word. Big Ugh for me!!*

### **The Joke**

A joke is totally different from an anecdote. A joke tells a story that the hearer can relate to, and the teller hopes the listener thinks is funny. A joke is never biographical. If it were, it would be called an anecdote. A joke teller should anticipate the response to his joke and select his audience carefully. Jokes can be offensive, and some people just don't "get it".

I at a bar at 11:30 AM. I served food served food and I ordered a cup of coffee. The bartender who had only one other customer served the coffee, and started talking about the weather. After a few more comments while sizing me up, he said the words that start almost every joke "have you heard the one about the..... In this case he finished with "the three legged pig?"

I said no, and he proceeded with the following:

*"A fellow (in our days he would have been a travelling salesman) was walking across the farm yard with a crusty old farmer when he saw a pig that had*



*only three legs. "That's a remarkable pig", said the man, "how come he has only three legs? The farmer said, "boy, that is a truly remarkable pig, a hero even. We had a fire in the house a few months back and the pig bolted out of his pen, ran in the house, woke us all up, and led us out of the house safely. He even went back to save our cat". "This pig is remarkable, that's for sure, and that's quite a story", the man said, "but you still haven't told me why he has only three legs? "Sir", the farmer said, "when you have a pig that good, you just don't eat him all at once!*

This joke is a stand-alone. It needs no moral or relevance just some "gottcha". With this story the response is most likely a groan because you just heard what would be classified as a "sick" joke. With a joke, the audience need only be a single person, or it could be more. The only provocation is that the teller feels like telling a joke, the audience looks like someone who won't be offended, and the answer to the question, "have you heard the one about.....is NO!

### **An Anecdote Can Become A Story**

With the proper embellishment and more or less adhering to form, an anecdote can become a **story** that is told or that is written as a short story in the literary sense. Let's start with an anecdote about a mishap with a holding tank on a boat. This is an anecdote that might be told when a group of friends are sharing experiences recounting the most disastrous "non fatal" event of their life.

*One Sunday morning getting ready for the eight hour trip from Harbor Springs to Holland Michigan, I decided to pump out the holding tank of our boat. Facilities at the two closest marinas were unavailable so we motored across the bay to the Petoskey City Dock. When I twisted the cap of the deck fitting to start the process, an ominous hiss was followed by a geyser of sewage from the boat's toilet rising above me. In seconds the mess fell back down right on my head. I was in deep do-do. Jumping immediately into the water, I swam around the boat to rinse off. The attendant, undoubtedly thankful it was me and not him hosed down the dock and side of the boat. My wife and daughters, stood out of harm's way in shocked disbelief sprinkled with nervous laughter. With me still dripping wet, our family started the trip down the west coast of Michigan toward Lake Macatawa. After about an hour of mostly silence, my wife said to me, "I think the worst part was seeing the toilet paper stuck in your eyebrows".*

This anecdote took just over a minute to tell. Could it be a story? Let's find out. Here are some important things to consider before you try to make this a story that could take 10 minutes to tell or be written as a short story with as many as 3,000 words:

1. **Know your audience.** If this anecdote were being related to a group of boaters it could easily be expanded into a story that they might enjoy hearing but anything longer than the anecdote would have been boring to a general audience.
2. **Set the stage by describing the location, the time, and their significance.** Anyone who has done any boating on the Great Lakes will know about this harbor, either first hand or by reputation. Dozens of elegant yachts are docked within sight of the gas dock and pump out facility. Across Little

Traverse Bay the Petoskey City Dock is not so fancy. Not "blue collar" but down a peg.

3. **Provide important detail:** *Our boat* was a 35 foot Chris Craft aft cabin cruiser, a make and model familiar to any cruising boater. Having four women on board for a week is a key point. A boater will get this
4. **The warning not heeded:** I should have been thinking that four people, all women, and one not a boater would give the holding tank of our boat a pretty good work out. Even without a warning light, I should have known the tank must be full.
5. **Trouble on the horizon:** This was the first time I would do a pump for this boat, that was new to us, and it looked like the attendant was hung over and wouldn't be much help.
6. **Disaster strikes:** The hiss of escaping air foretold a series of dire events I had no power to stop. I was drenched with septic contents and at the same time dropped the holding tank cap in the water
7. **Reaction on the dock:** The expression on the face of the dock attendant, hadn't changed but mine had. My family responded with the expected shock and nervous laughter. After all they were expecting me to be their captain
8. **Cleaning up the act:** My jumping in the water was reflexive and effective, even though I wasn't a great swimmer.
9. **Back in business:** After a trying five minutes, we all got back on the boat. I was wet but not much the worse for wear. Nobody said anything at the time
10. **Epilogue:** One hour into the trip along Michigan's western shore, my wife no longer able to contain herself said, "Gene, the most unforgettable sight for me was you standing there with used toilet paper in your eyebrows."

11. Some teaching points for boaters: 1. Light or no light, **No holding tank is big enough** for any kind of crew on the boat for a week 2. **Boats have safeguards** to avoid battery drain so be wary, y our boat may have a separate switch to activate the warning light system.
3. **This boating experience** and a few other mishaps confirms this quip that applies to our family: **It's a good thing boating and not flying is our hobby or we'd all be dead!**

### Someone Else's Story

#### **This is my favorite Mark Twain story**

In '62, Higbie and I were working a claim in Missouri breaking a lot of rock but not finding silver when our money ran out. We were living in a cloth lean to just big enough for the two of us and a stove that did a poor job of keeping us warm especially when the temperature went down close to both sides of the 50s. I was able to get a job in a quartz quarry for 10 dollars a week and board. The best part was the board. This included stewed dried apples not just on Sundays, but every day of the week.

My job was to wield a long handled shovel, and sling dirt through a screen. Based on my florid incompetence the boss came by to fire me, but that was exactly when I decided to resign.

With neither of us working, Higbie and I were in dire straits. Especially Higbie who found idleness hard to endure. He asked if I knew any of the foremen and could I put in a good word. I told him I didn't. Instead I said, "Higbie if you want a job I guarantee you will get one but only if

you do exactly what I say. An overjoyed Higbie said absolutely, he would do exactly what I told him.

Here is what I told Higbie. “Higbie you go to the foreman of the best operation you can find and tell him you love to work, feel awful when aren’t working, and you are so bothered by this you will work for nothing”. Then when he puts to you work, do anything he asks and never ask for any wages. I promise that if you do this you will have a real job. I told him most bosses could only last for two or three days, some maybe a week, but I doubt there would be any who last a fortnight. Even if they do, the other bosses will hear about you and will definitely offer a job for half pay.

When Higbie went off the next day I was anxious. As the day went on and there was no Higbie I started to feel more confident. After 12 hours Higbie came home and reported that work went well and the boss was happy. In a few days, as I predicted, other foreman came by to offer Higbie wages. To keep this hardworking employee, his boss put him on wages and Higbie was not just happy working, but happy working, making money and receiving board. My scheme worked! This paraphrased story is 448 words compared to more than 3,500 words the story is printed in "Marks Twain's autobiography" Volume I

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*I would like to finish with something very personal.*

*In a gathering I doubt there is anyone who hasn't either been a mentor, had a mentor or most likely both, and that includes me. I would like to finish this evening with a story, that has been in my head for sixty years, one that has been told many times.*

*It was the fall of 1952, I sat in an 11 o'clock lecture for my History 101 class in Angell Hall at the University of Michigan. I was seventeen years old and a clueless*

*freshman. It was the fourth week of class, and our first "blue book" was being passed back to us. While this was going on, Professor Dunham stood on a low stage at the front of the class behind a lectern. He wore a grey suit with his vest fully buttoned. His tie was a little too long and was sticking out from the bottom. Waiting for all of us to get our tests, Prof Dunham said that after this lecture he would go across the street to the Union Building, have lunch with some faculty friends, shoot a game of pool, and enjoy a cigar. Professor Dunham had already told us that we would all be "graduating" together. He was retiring in four years with the class of '56 "*

*When my blue book came to me I saw that my grade was a C+. Not a very good start for a pre med. I had wanted to take political science, which was all the rage then, but the Hs had rotated to the end of the registration cycle, so I took history as the best option left. Maybe with this disappointment I didn't have my heart in this course*

*After the tests were distributed, Professor Dunham told the class that he was disappointed with some of the grades and that he was sure we could do better. As he said these words he was looking directly at me. It seemed like he was reading my mind. That's impossible, I thought, he couldn't be looking just at me. . I looked around and then back at him and he was indeed directing his remarks right at me. The hair stood up on the back of my neck, and I thought, how does he even know who I am out of these 200 students in the lecture hall.*

*After this unsettling experience I decided to take action. That afternoon I found the department secretary, and made an appointment to meet with Professor Dunham. This was the first time I had ever asked to meet with a teacher other than perhaps immediately after class to ask a brief question or make a quick*

*comment. A few days later I was in Prof Dunham's office. He greeted me, and from his reaction it became clear that he didn't know me at all. I was convinced there was no way he was talking to me any more than anyone else in the lecture hall. He invited me to sit, and for the next quarter hour we had a very pleasant talk. After he learned about me, and there wasn't much to tell, he told me he had come to Ann Arbor thirty years ago. This disappointed his family who wondered why someone from Harvard would choose to go to the "wilderness". He said that he was glad he did, but that he was also looking forward to retirement. He seemed like a nice man.*

*Things got better with my test grades that semester, and I received an A for my final grade. When the next semester came, I found another more advanced course that Professor Dunham was teaching and enrolled. I continued to visit with him in his office once or twice each semester. I didn't always have a reason, and this didn't seem to matter. During my four undergraduate years I took every courses Prof Dunham taught. In my last semester this was "The Industrial Revolution in France 1815 - 1848. I turned out to be a pre-med history major with a special interest in French history. I received an A grade in all of my history courses, including those I took with other teachers. No I didn't graduate cum laude, it took these good grades in history to bring my average up to get into medical school and without any room to spare at that.*

*When it came time for my last set of final exams I had already been accepted to medical school and the pressure was off. Our final examination schedule was posted each semester in the Michigan Daily. It was the responsibility of the student to find out the time and the place for each final exam. For the only time in four years I missed a final because I read the schedule wrong. Worst of all, it was Professor Dunham's class. When I discovered this I called him and he said that it would be no problem. I could come to his house that evening about seven o'clock.*

*He explained I should let myself in through the side door and go to his study, take the test and then leave it on the desk. He said he was not feeling well, would be retiring early, and I wouldn't see him. I went to his house and completed the test. Then as was the custom, I left a self addressed post card alongside my test so I could receive my grade earlier than the usual two weeks it took the University to inform us. I also wrote a note thanking Professor Dunham for all he had done for me.*

*In a few days I received the post card with an A grade and this note written at the bottom "Your note is deeply appreciated, you have always been an excellent student, keen and loyal, and that is a teacher's great reward".*

*That postcard and the book written by Professor Dunham, which was the text for the course, have never been out of my immediate possession for 60 years. I believe what happened to me that October morning in Angell Hall in 1952 put in motion events that changed my life.*

*I met a teacher who by his very presence, gave me, a clueless freshman, a sense of connection, and belonging at a school where the student body was as big as a lot of cities. Arthur Louis Dunham was the University of Michigan for me. I missed taking the course I wanted because the Hs were the last group to select. I selected Professor Dunham's course only to fulfill a requirement. In this course I reached out to and connected with a man who influenced me more than any teacher I met during all my years of formal education. Professor Dunham didn't teach anatomy, or physiology or chemistry or any of the medical disciplines, but he is the teacher most responsible for me becoming a doctor. I was at best a work in progress when we first met. But something his friendship provided me in those four undergraduate years gave me confidence, and by the time the "real doctoring"*



*courses arrived, in the junior and senior years of medical school, my grades were more like they had been in my history classes.*

*In 1956 Professor Dunham returned to the east and I never saw him or communicated again. My life got busy and maybe a bit selfish. I never took the time to thank him, and that is a great regret for me. I hope somehow he knew what he meant to me. (5.180 words*

Thank you