

# In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell

William A. Wilson

Of the twenty-seven faculty members who have occupied this podium since the inauguration of this lecture series in 1964, only two have represented the humanities—my fellow folklorist Thomas Cheney in 1967 and Arthur Henry King in 1976. In a world challenged by polluted air, disappearing natural resources, a depleted ozone layer, unchecked diseases, crowded highways and airways, burgeoning crime rates, killing drugs, and rapidly shifting geopolitical borders and alliances, a commitment to the study and advancement of the humanities may seem at times an unaffordable luxury. It is in such a world, seeking desperately for solutions to its problems in improved technology and more effective social orders, that President Bush can, as he did in his recent State of the Union address, sound a clarion call for excellence in education, can demand that by the year 2000 United States children be “first in the world in math and science,” and can pass by in deafening silence a corresponding need for our children to excel in their understanding and appreciation of arts and letters—of the humanities.

A few years ago, when I was teaching at another university, the faculty became embroiled in one of those too-typical wranglings over allocations of resources. One faculty member (or so it was reported to me; I was not at the meeting) addressed his colleagues from the English department with the scornful and, in his judgment, rhetorical question: “You certainly wouldn’t give up a cure for cancer for poetry, would you?” I have always been sorry I was not at that meeting so I could have responded: “For one poem, maybe not; but for poetry—yes.”

And I would have said that as one who has watched his own father and several loved relatives die of cancer and who has suffered two primary cancers himself. One quiet night, in the darkened silence of my hospital room, with the terrifying words of the pathology report swirling again and again through my head—

“well-differentiated carcinoma”—it was not the hope of some miraculous cancer cure looming on the horizon that got me through to morning but rather defiant phrases like those of the poet Dylan Thomas, hurled angrily and repeatedly at approaching and inevitable death and reminding me all the while of my individual and human worth:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.<sup>1</sup>

I would not for a moment belittle or detract from the serious work of any of you in the social and physical sciences as you try to solve problems that bedevil the world. I would simply remind you, and all of us, that it is the humanities—the products of the imperishable human spirit—that teach us your struggles are worth carrying on, that we and this world we occupy are worth saving.

But I do not wish tonight to make yet one more defense of the humanities. I trust that before this audience such a defense is not necessary. I would hope, rather, to broaden our concept of what we call the humanities, and of literature in particular, and to suggest that as we seek evidence of the significance of human life, we turn not just to those canonized masterworks taught in our literature courses but to works of our own invention and to our own capacity to create and appreciate beauty. I would suggest, that is, that we seek courage to face the future by learning to celebrate ourselves.

Many of you are aware of recent attempts to expand the traditional literary canon to include those who have been excluded from it on the bases of race, class, or gender. In our pluralistic society, with its many voices—all different but all American—we have come gradually to understand that if we really cherish the democratic ideals of equal worth of all our citizens, then we must learn to listen to their diverse and endlessly interesting artistic voices, not just to those who happen to be primarily white, male, middle-class Anglo-Saxons. We have in recent years made considerable progress in reaching these democratic ideals as more and more minority, ethnic, and women’s literature has made its way into university literature courses. But one group of people we have continued to neglect—ourselves. We may have studied the novels of white, male William Faulkner or of black, female Toni Morrison, but most of us have neglected the swirl of stories that has surrounded us since we were born—stories we listen to or tell about the events of everyday life and about the worlds we occupy. Of such stories, Neil Postman has written recently:



Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existence. I am not talking here about those specialized stories that we call novels, plays, and epic poems. I am talking about the more profound stories that people, nations, religions, and disciplines unfold in order to make sense out of the world. . . . A story provides a structure for our perceptions; only through stories do facts assume any meaning whatsoever. This is why children everywhere ask, as soon as they have the command of language to do so, "Where did I come from?" and "What will happen when I die?" They require a story to give meaning to their existence. Without air, our cells die. Without a story, our selves die.<sup>2</sup>

Here, too, we have made progress, as personal and autobiographical narratives have gradually become recognized by critics as vital literary genres worthy of serious attention. But most of these efforts have focused on written rather than on oral narratives—a somewhat disconcerting fact since writing is a fairly recent invention and since people were telling stories long before anyone ever put pen to paper, as long, in fact, as we have had people. Indeed, the capacity to tell and enjoy stories may be one of our few cultural universals. It is to these oral personal narratives that I wish to devote my attention tonight.

Though we have been at the game longer than most, folklorists are not the only scholars to pay heed to such stories. In fact, in recent years many people have gotten on the bandwagon. Literary scholars have examined oral narratives to discover how literary texts are constituted, sociologists to catalog customs and life-styles, organizational behaviorists to record the corporate myths that lend cohesiveness to organizations, historians to take the pulse of a particular era, anthropologists to elucidate larger cultural patterns. But in all this the individual—the creator and teller of the stories—gets lost. His or her narratives become means to ends rather than ends themselves. However much the narratives may help us understand the larger societies of which they are constituent parts (and efforts to reach such understanding have also been a principal aim of folklore study), from a humanistic perspective the stories need no further justification for being than their own existence. It is as individual stories of individual, breathing human beings—not as dots on a chart of social norms—that they speak to us of our humanity.

The most essential of these stories may be those we tell about our own experiences and narrate primarily in family contexts. I can't imagine that you will be overly interested in my particular family, but by showing you how such stories have operated there perhaps I can lend you new lenses to look at the ways they operate in your families. But first I must tell you a little of my own personal



narrative. And to do that, I have to begin with the principal storyteller in my family, my mother, Lucile Green Wilson.

My mother is a product of Welsh and English stock. Her mother's Welsh parents were hard-working, loyal to their church, fiery in temperament, and stubborn—especially stubborn. For example, when my mother's grandmother, Jane Morse, was being courted by the man she eventually married, Jonah Evans, her parents opposed the marriage because he was twenty years her senior and already had two wives and a passel of children. Says my mother: "Her parents liked Grandpa all right, but they didn't want her to marry him because she was just a kid and he was old. They'd lock the doors so she couldn't get out, and she'd climb out of her window, out of her bedroom window, to go meet him." One of the children of this union, my mother's Uncle Victor, matched his parents in hardheadedness and, in a rather strange way, characterized the family's persistence to principle:

They said when he baptized Uncle Victor, Uncle Victor didn't want to be baptized—Uncle Victor was always kind of a rebel, and he didn't want to be baptized, and Grandpa baptized him anyway. And every time he would come up out of the water Uncle Victor would swear, and he would duck him in again. And it went on for I don't know how many times before Uncle Victor finally quit swearing and got baptized. [pause] I don't think it ever took.<sup>3</sup>

My mother's English grandfather, Robert Green, a widower the whole time my mother knew him, was a different sort. According to family tradition, he had been given a name and a blessing by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, but that must not have taken either because he was not much of a churchgoer and liked an occasional drink. One day, in his cups, he drove his favorite team of horses, old Cap and Seal, full speed into the farmstead and almost mowed down my mother—an event that stirred to a considerable pitch his daughter-in-law's Welsh temper. But Robert Green was also a soft and gentle man, never speaking harshly to anyone, generous, quick of wit, a lover of books.

From these forebears, then, came my mother, an amalgamation of their characteristics plus others forged by the harshness and poverty of frontier life: intelligent, sensitive, eager to learn, witty, hard-working, proud of her achievements, determined, but shy, and, during her teenage years, embarrassed in the presence of townspeople by her country girl's dress and manners. Out of her inheritance and out of her experiences came also an ability to capture in concrete detail the events of her life and to make them memorable to others—that is, the capacity to tell stories.



I owe my own love of words to my mother. Although my father had many virtues, verbal dexterity was not one of them. My mother, on the other hand, grew up immersed in words, and she immersed me in them. In the homesteading cabin of her youth, her own mother would gather her children around her each night and read from books borrowed from the library. "I can still remember," my mother says, "how fun it was for all of us just to sit around and listen to Mama read." Describing her experiences in elementary school, Mother says, "I remember that one morning when she [her teacher] picked up that book and said, 'Tom, oh Tom,' and I just got goose pimples. I knew we were going to hear another good story. It was *Tom Sawyer*."

During my own formative years, we were fortunate enough to live in a house with no electricity, surrounded by almost no neighbors, and with few means of entertainment besides ourselves. I can still remember those dark winter nights when my mother dressed me and my sister in our pajamas, then, before tucking us in bed, gathered us into the light of the coal-oil lamp, and, like her mother before her, read us magical stories from books.

But my mother also taught me to love words in other ways, by using them well, by bringing to life the world of her past through well-wrought oral narratives. Her family simply lived by the spoken word. Family gatherings at my grandparents' home were, in fact, one long stream of story, with my mother's brothers, railroaders all, regaling each other with accounts of their occupational and heroic exploits—each narrator trying to top the others. My mother did not participate much in these exchanges, though her storytelling ability matched that of her brothers. Hers were more quiet narratives, told in the privacy of our home and bringing to life for me and my sisters the village of her youth, a place called Riddyville, west of McCammon, Idaho, where, following the turn of the century, thirteen families homesteaded neighboring sections of land recently released from the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Through my mother's stories, the excitement, the passion, the sorrow and heartbreak experienced by those Riddyville pioneers became a treasured part of my life.

When I entered Brigham Young University in 1951, I attempted at first to leave behind the experiences of my youth. I majored in political science and began studying Russian—I think I had dreams of one day parachuting into the Soviet Union as a spy and saving our country from that evil empire. But my love of words artfully employed finally proved too strong—I couldn't resist them. I abandoned my dreams of saving the nation and began instead to study English and American literature, rediscovering in



the process much of the magic I had first discovered in the flickering light of a coal-oil lamp under the spell of my mother's voice. By the time I had completed an M.A., however, I had grown weary of the narrow elitism of the "new critical," or formalist, approaches current at the time—approaches that jerked literature from cultural context and tended to look with condescension at the kinds of stories I had learned from the good people of my rural Idaho and Mormon youth.

So I switched and earned a Ph.D. in folklore. My research centered first on the folk culture of the land where I had served my LDS mission, Finland, then switched to the Mormon and western culture that had produced me—focusing for the next twenty years not just on the privileged few whose works had made their way into university courses, but on people like you in this audience and on the richness and artistry of the stories many of you tell.

Through all this, however, I was still collecting, analyzing, and celebrating the stories, the creative efforts, of other people, and still using those stories primarily to elucidate larger cultural patterns. I learned a great deal about Mormon society and, I hope, through my studies helped other people bring that society into a little sharper focus. But all the while, in the back of my mind, haunting my reveries, tugging at me in ways I did not understand, demanding my attention, lurked those stories I had learned from my mother, and the country village they had brought to life—Riddyville. Finally, more to exorcise a nagging spirit than anything else, I plunked my mother in front of a tape recorder and said, "All right, tell me again about Riddyville." And she did. For the next ten years, whenever the possibility allowed, we filled tape after tape, grew closer together throughout the process, and experienced together the short but moving life of Riddyville.

The place itself actually got off to a rather inauspicious start. When the Fort Hall land became available for homesteading, farmers lined up at the Marsh Creek Bridge on Merrill Road near McCammon. Someone shot a gun in the air, and the race was on to file claims at the government land office at Blackfoot. Some took the train; others rode horses, with exchange relays set up along the way to speed up the trip. Still, all managed to arrive in Blackfoot about the same time. As the train pulled into town, one hopeful homesteader, Max Cone, eager to file his claim ahead of the others and thus get the best land, jumped from the still moving train and broke his leg. The rest of the crew arrived safely at the land office, only to find it closed. Not until several days later did they finally manage to file their claims, evidently without much contest, and then return to their new homes. Such was Riddyville's beginning.



Although my grandparents lived on their farm the required time each summer to “prove up” their claim, they did not move the family to Riddyville from their home in Woodruff, Utah, until 1915, when my mother was eight. At that time, they moved into a newly-constructed two-room log cabin, where, for the next twelve years, they lived with their seven children and at times with my grandfather’s unmarried brother, Uncle Jim, who also owned a homestead but took turns living with his relatives. In 1927 my grandfather finally gave up the effort to wrest a living from 160 acres of arid Idaho land, took a job on the railroad, and moved to town. By then my mother was twenty years old, soon to be married, and Riddyville had become a part of her past, living from then on only in her stories.

When I first began collecting these stories, I sought primarily to recount my mother’s history and, to the extent possible, to reconstruct the history of Riddyville. I quickly gave up this attempt as I discovered that while the stories were based on history and occasionally approximated history, they themselves were not history.

This fact was borne home again just the other day. My mother’s brother Ralph recently wrote his account of the family’s Riddyville years and sent a copy to my mother. The next time I saw him, he said, with a chuckle, “Well, I just got a corrected copy of my history back from your mother.” My mother, in turn, explained that she had to correct Ralph’s history because it contained so many errors. As I reflected on their comments, I recalled the words of historian Hayden White: “Historiography has remained prey to the creation of mutually exclusive though equally legitimate, interpretations of the same set of historical events or the same segment of the historical process.”<sup>4</sup>

If my mother and her brother might be called local historiographers, if their equally legitimate stories about the past, derived from equally legitimate perceptions, are based on history, sometimes approximate history, but are not history—that is, are not verifiable accounts of what really happened—then what are they? The answer is: they are fictions—stories created from carefully selected events from their own lives, just as short stories, novels, and epics are created from carefully selected details from the worlds of their authors. And their appeal is not the appeal of history—and don’t misunderstand me; I have nothing against history—but of literature.

In the passage I cited earlier from Neil Postman, he argues that the stories told by ordinary people about the events of their lives are more profound than novels, plays, and epic poems. I think not. I think these stories are important precisely because they have the



power of literature, because, as I shall try to argue, they actually are, or can be, novels or epics. This explains why I have not been able to get my mother's stories out of my head these many years. Like other works of literature I cherish, they have stayed with me because of their artistic power, because of their ability, as Sir Philip Sidney might say, to hold "children from play and old men from the chimney corner."<sup>5</sup>

Reduced to cold print, the stories may not seem to you particularly artful. But if you could have been there during the tellings (and remember that I am talking about *oral* narratives), if you could have seen my mother's gestures and facial expressions, if you could have heard her voice rise in excited exclamation, drop now to a hushed whisper, move to a dry chuckle, break into tears—if you, that is, could have heard these stories in live performance, with a charged and on-going dynamic relation occurring between teller and listeners, you would have understood their power to excite my fancy, engage my sympathies, and move me with joy or terror.

This fact really should have been obvious to me much earlier. One of the advantages of growing up in a family and hearing someone like my mother tell her stories again and again is that one soon learns to separate recurring, structured narratives from regular discourse. This is the reason, by the way, why each of you, rather than an uninformed outsider, should collect the narratives told by the storytellers in your families—you know what they are. Originally, I attempted to collect my mother's life history from beginning to end, but, as noted, with few satisfactory results. Then I sat down one day and made a list—a long list—of the discrete stories I had heard my mother tell many times. From then on, in our sessions before the tape recorder, I tried to ask questions that would lead her into the natural telling of these stories. For example, if I asked about dry fields and struggles over irrigation waters, I knew I would probably learn little about irrigation but that I would in all likelihood get the story about Uncle Jim and Ike Allen fighting over water—a story I'll relate in a moment. Using this method over a ten-year period, I often managed to collect the same story three, four, or five times. And I discovered that different tellings of the same story were remarkably similar in structure and even in phraseology.

For example, not only my mother's unmarried Uncle Jim, but also her grandfather, Robert Green, took turns living with different sons and daughters and thus became close to his grandchildren. My mother, whom Robert Green called Dolly, considered herself one of his favorites. In 1980, she told me:



When Grandpa would stay with Aunt Vira, her house was kinda up on a hill . . . ; he could go out at the back of their lot and look down where we came with the cows. He was always worrying about me, wondering where I was. He wouldn't rest until he could see those cows coming home. Nona [my mother's cousin] used to get so mad. She'd say, "He wouldn't care if I never got home, and he has to go out there [and say], 'I wonder where Dolly is; she ought to be coming by now.'" Said he'd walk out there two or three times.

Three years later Mother embedded the same story in a string of other narratives she was telling:

Nona used to get mad at him. . . . When Bernice and I used to go get the cows, when Grandpa was up living at Aunt Vira's, you could see way down where—part of the way where we had to go after the cows. And Nona said, he used to go out—he'd say, "I wonder if Dolly's home yet?" He didn't worry about Bernice, I guess. He'd go out there and watch two or three times every night, cause we'd fool around, run races on our horses and let the cows mosey on home, and we didn't hurry any, and he'd worry until he'd see us coming, and then he'd settle down. She said, "Ya, he wouldn't worry a bit if it was me, but he always has to see that Dolly gets home all right."

The second narrative is slightly more detailed than the first; otherwise, they are almost exactly the same, though told three years apart. Clearly, then, from the many details she could have talked about, my mother has selected only a few and from them has constructed identifiable, recurring narratives. When she has told these stories over the years, she has not been reciting history—she has been presenting herself to the world and capturing through these artistic forms the values and people she holds dear.

How do my mother's stories work as literature? They work, I would argue, the same way a novel works. In fact, I would call my mother's stories not the family history, but the family novel. Sandra Dolby Stahl calls stories like those my mother tells "single-episode" narratives.<sup>6</sup> But such a characterization misses the mark. My mother's stories do, to be sure, recount single events, but they do not stand alone; they are always related to other stories and background events and can be understood only as they are associated with these—something literary critics call *intertextuality*. It is through this *intertextuality* that characters in the family oral novel emerge into full-blown, three-dimensional individuals, just as well-developed characters emerge gradually from the pages of a written novel—no character is ever fully defined on the first page of a novel. It is also through this *intertextuality* that events in a number of the stories interlink into coherent meaningful wholes,



just as events in a novel unfold and interlink as we push our way through page after page. Really to understand one of these stories, then, we have to have heard them all and have to bring to the telling of a single story the countless associations formed from hearing all the stories.

Unfortunately, you can never fully comprehend my family's novel because you have not lived my life, have not heard the total body of stories I have heard, do not recognize the connections that are obvious to me. But you have heard the novels of your own families, you can make those connections that exist between their various episodes, and you can let the coherent wholes that emerge from the stories play forceful, artistic roles in your lives.

Let me try to demonstrate this intertextuality with an extended example. The dryland homesteads of Riddyville were located on a bench above the valley floor, where ancient Lake Bonneville once made its rush to the sea. The actual farmsteads where the people lived were strung along a winding road below the bench, parallel to Lake Bonneville's dying remnant, Marsh Creek. Both on the bench and in the gardens below, water was always in short supply, especially at my mother's home, where it had to be carried from a neighbor's well, a fact responsible, says my mother, for her long arms. In equally short supply was any money to buy delicacies. With those facts in mind, consider the following brief story:

One time we had—we carried water all summer to water some pumpkins. You never heard of canned pumpkins, and we all liked pumpkin pies. And we carried water all summer, and those pumpkins were so nice. And on Halloween, Ike Allen's kids came and tipped our toilet over and put all of our pumpkins down in it.

A typical rural Halloween prank? Maybe. But in another telling of that same story my mother said, "After he [Allen] got on the rampage, being ornery, that's when their kids . . . tipped our toilet over and put all our pumpkins down the toilet hole." Clearly, when my mother says, "after he got on the rampage," she is depending on my already knowing other, connected stories.

Of the thirteen families that lived in Riddyville, all but one, the Allen family, were related either by blood or marriage and stuck together like glue. Ike Allen was friendly enough at first, until he ran for trustee of the village school. His family voted for him; the other twelve families voted for their family candidate, and Ike's political career came to a quick end. So, too, did his good cheer. "He used to call us the 'Cat Family,' " said my mother; "he hated us"—a fact borne out by the following story:



There was one patch on top of the dugway that belonged to Ike Allen, and we used to always go—there was a little road went right through it into our field—and when he got on the rampage, he fenced our gate shut. And Dad went up there one day and couldn't get through, so he cut the wire, and Ike came after him and was going to hit him over the head with a club.

Now let's move for a moment to my mother's Uncle Jim. A shy, sensitive man, with a perpetually watery eye that made him look less attractive than he actually was, he had been jilted in his youth by his one true love and never again tried to marry. A little slower in wit than his married brothers, with their dry, but quick-paced, frontier humor, Uncle Jim occasionally became the subject of humor himself, though almost always in an affectionate manner. He bought a car but never learned to drive, leaving that task primarily to his nephews. One day two of these trickster nephews took him to Lagoon amusement park, in his own vehicle, and somehow coaxed him onto the roller coaster. When the coaster car arrived at the crest of the first hill and Uncle Jim surveyed the trip that lay ahead, he decided not to take it, and stood up to get out. Only the most strenuous efforts of his nephews kept him in his seat. The following story, which might have come right out of James Thurber, casts in relief not only Uncle Jim but many of the Riddyville characters of which he was a part:

Orville Harris [my mother's cousin] lived just up above us, up the road from us, and he and Hazel had gone some place—Detta [another cousin] was staying there, and she wanted Bernice and me to stay all night with her. And—so we talked—she had been working in Pocatello, and she told us about one night when she was on her way home from work and somebody followed her and how scared she was and how she went up on somebody's steps until this man disappeared, or went away. So we were already in a scary mood, and then there was a hole in the window, and there was a black cat'd keep jumping in through that hole, and we'd put him out, and he'd come right back. We were spooky anyway. But we finally went to sleep, or Bernice and I did. And after while Detta woke us up, and she said there was a man in the house. We told her, "Oh, it's just your imagination," after all this stuff we had been talking about. She said, "No, sir," she saw him on his hands and knees in that bedroom door. So about this time we could hear somebody walking outside—we lit the lamp—had lamps, you know—and started to dress because we weren't—she said we couldn't stay there any more. So we each got ahold of our shoe to defend ourselves, and Clyde Ketchum, her brother-in-law, walked up to that window and laughed. And it's funny we didn't all have heart attacks—we were so scared. And he claimed that he couldn't sleep, so he came up to Orville's—he lived, I imagine, a good mile and a half or more away. But he said he came up to Orville's to see if he could get some of his records he wanted to play. But Detta didn't believe him. She figured he came up there



because he knew she was alone. Anyway we all dressed and decided to go down to our house to spend the rest of the night. Well, in the meantime, Leland Harris, Detta's brother, and Glade Allen had gone to the show. And they had guns, a gun or something with them—they'd been to McCammon to the show. And on the way home, when they got about even to our house, our dog [Sport] went out after em barking, and one of them shot, just to scare the dog. And the dog disappeared. Albert [my mother's brother] and Uncle Jim were sleeping outside. In the summer time, we always put the cot that they slept on outside, and they slept out there. So Albert kept worrying about old Sport, thought maybe those kids really had shot him. And so he finally got Uncle Jim to get up and—of course, there were never cars or anything in Riddyville in the night—he got Uncle Jim to get up and go with him, and they went up the road looking for old Sport just about the time that we were coming down to come to our place to stay all night. And they heard us coming, and they ran—poor old Uncle Jim with his bare feet, just a storming at Albert for doing this. We were already scared, and then we saw these two white things a running down the road. They had their underwear on—of course, we didn't know it was them. But we decided we'd rather face whoever it was than go back up to Orville's house. So we went on home, and when we got there Albert was just in hysterics laughing cause he'd—and Uncle Jim was so mad at him for getting him in such a predicament, and his feet hurting, running on those rocks. Then we all got to laughing about it afterwards.

But Uncle Jim was not just a humorous character—he was a generous and kindly man, much loved by all his family, often using his own money to come to the aid of his more financially strapped brother, my grandfather, Bert Green. When my mother's sister Jessie died, a little girl to whom Uncle Jim had grown very close—she would climb into his lap and call him Gee—Uncle Jim dug into his own pocket to help pay for her casket, at the same time vowing that “he was never going to get that attached to another ‘youngun,’ cause it was too hard.”

We must really know all this and more before we can finally bring Uncle Jim and Ike Allen together in the following story and make it understandable:

The water we had came down Dry Holler—we always called em hollers—and it went past Ike Allen's house. And it was Uncle Jim's turn to have it, but Ike Allen just turned it off his—it was a dry year, I guess—and he turned Uncle Jim's water off and put it on his crop there, whatever he had, and Uncle Jim went up and turned it back, and Ike Allen came out and hit him in the face. And poor old Uncle Jim—he had a tender skin anyway—and when he came home, why, it was just, the skin was just knocked off of his cheek where he had hit him. And I usually didn't hate anybody, but that day I hated Ike Allen, cause I couldn't stand it to have anybody hurt Uncle Jim.



We've come some distance from the pumpkins in the toilet and a little closer, I hope, to understanding the intertextuality that can tie seemingly disparate narratives together, providing texture and unity to the oral novels that circulate in our families.

One of the most interesting things about my mother as a storyteller is that she has absolutely no sense of chronology. "I can't remember," she says, "when all these [different] things happened." And she can't remember not because she lacks the capacity to do so—she has a quick and agile mind—but because she simply has no interest in chronological sequence.

What is true of my mother is probably true of most family storytellers—their narratives will focus primarily on recurrent values and themes. For example, in studying the narratives of a famous Texas storyteller, Ed Bell, Richard Bauman argued that eliciting a life-course history from Bell would not be very productive. He chose instead to examine Bell's "active performance repertoire"—stories that Bell, like my mother, told again and again—to show how Bell's personal narratives were "systemically" related—that is, how they clustered around and illustrated particular themes important to Bell.<sup>7</sup>

Commenting on this tendency of narrators like my mother or Ed Bell to focus on themes, Sharon Kaufman writes:

Though they are not deliberately fashioned, the themes people create [in their stories] are the means by which they interpret and evaluate their life experiences and attempt to integrate these experiences to form a self-concept.

In the description of their lives, people create *themes*—cognitive areas of meaning with symbolic force—which explain, unify, and give substance to their perceptions of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life. . . . [Through the themes drawn from their life experience], individuals know themselves and explain who they are to others.<sup>8</sup>

My attempt in studying my mother's stories—and the approach I recommend to you—has been to discover how the individual narratives through which she explains herself to others are systemically related—that is, linked together into an artistic whole—by clustering around certain themes and individuals important to her. The unity in her family novel lies not in a linear plot leading from event to event toward a logical conclusion, but rather, as in some modern novels, in this clustering of motifs around given themes, with her always at the center. This process is also similar to what one finds in epic traditions where unity is derived from the accretion of narratives around cultural heroes and heroines and around dominant cultural values.



I could spend the next several days elucidating themes in my mother's stories and showing how they relate to her and to her world. But time will permit only a few examples. One of the major themes in her stories is the grinding poverty that characterized her Riddyville youth. Year after year she watched her father watch the skies for clouds that seemed never to bring rain in time to save the crops from ruin, listening to him come in from the fields and say, "Well, it looks like the south forty's beginning to burn." When he would get up in the middle of the night, dress, and pace the roads of Riddyville worrying about the survival of his family, she would lie awake herself worrying about both him and the family. Once he borrowed money to buy a herd of Holstein cows to try to get ahead. My mother explains the results:

They just couldn't make the payments—we had em for quite a long while; it was so nice to have a nice herd of milk cows. Then the bank finally foreclosed. And that day they came over—we didn't know how we were even going to live, cause that's all the money we had was cows. Anyway, I don't know who came from the bank, but they went down the road with our cows, and we all stood on the porch. That was a sad old day; we just stood there and watched them take our living away, all of us crying. . . . We all felt the end of the world was coming. We had no money, no way to live except cream checks. We survived somehow.

When my mother reached high school age and began riding her horse each day to attend school in McCammon, about four miles away, she felt the effects of her family's poverty even more keenly, as she now had to compare herself with the better-to-do and supposedly more sophisticated girls from town:

I made one dress in the fall, sent for some old ugly material and made a dress. . . . And I had to wear that all winter. I had to wear it to school; I had to wear it to church; I had to wear it anyplace I went. . . . A school teacher [who] lived across from us loaned me her dress one night to go to the New Year's Eve dance over to Robin. And, oh, I felt like—I wouldn't have been so stupid and backward if I'd a had some clothes and coulda looked like other people. That night I just felt like a different human being to have that pretty dress on. It was a kelly green—it had a wide belt. I danced a lot and I just felt like I was somebody else. You don't know how that makes you feel to have to look like a dope all your life. They didn't have any—my folks didn't have any money.

Such accounts make my mother's story of finally getting a pretty dress even more poignant:

It was one of the first times for a long while that I had new clothes. I had a new dress. I'd made this dress [at the end of my senior year] in school, and it was really pretty, and Mama had managed somehow



to get me some new shoes and a new hat. And I was so happy to have a whole new outfit. And we were gonna go to [stake] conference in Arimo, and we had to go in the buggy. And I had to run out to the corral to do something before we left, and I didn't want to get my new shoes dirty, so I put on my old horrible ones that I used to milk cows in, had manure and milk and everything else all over em. And I went out, and when I came back, I forgot to put my decent shoes on. We got almost up to Arimo, and I discovered what shoes I'd had on. So then I—it was too late to go back, so the rest of them went to church, and I drove the team down under the hill and sat there all day all by myself waiting for two sessions of conference to end. It was horrible. I was so proud of my new clothes. I thought for once—I never had new clothes. I hadn't had any for ages, and I was so happy to have a whole complete outfit all at once. Then I ruined it. I don't ever remember wearing it any other time—of course, I did, but I can't remember it. All I remember about that dress was that terrible day.

In spite of the poverty, my mother loved Riddyville, loved the horses she rode, the games she played with friends, the visiting among neighbors, the smell of baking in the house when she came home from school—her mother baked eight loaves of bread every other day; she loved the generosity of the people, the kindness of the men, the faith of the village women who gathered en masse at her house, formed a circle around her mother's sickbed, and knelt in prayer. But always there was the ambivalence: "Everybody was just like family; everybody helped each other, and everybody loved each other, and we were just—it was just a nice place to grow up, when you didn't mind not having any money."

But a compensating theme, just as strong as that of poverty, also pervades the narratives—that of never giving up no matter what the odds. I could illustrate this theme with a dozen stories—from Mother's learning how to deal with cows by learning how to swear at them to her bringing run-away horses under control—but I will use just one. Weakened by an earlier case of mumps and by too much hard work for a young girl, my mother first lost thirty-seven pounds and then came down with rheumatic fever while she was in high school. The breakdown occurred something like this:

This one winter day I rode my horse to school, and it was thirty below zero. I was just so cold, and then when I got just about where you turn to go into McCammon, I felt like it was getting warm. I thought, "Gee, that weather's changed; it's warm now." But by the time I got into town where I had to tie the horse up, I knew that it wasn't warm, that I might be trying to freeze. . . .

Anyway, I could hardly tie the reins, and I got up to school; and on the way up there, if I'd had much further to go, I think I'd laid down. That snow looked so soft, and I was so tired. But I got there.



She got there, but that was about all. The doctor who examined her the next day said she wouldn't live six months, that the valves in her heart were gone. Her response to that death sentence rings more strongly in her own words:

I stayed in bed for about six weeks . . . and then I started to get up about eleven and stay up two or three hours, and I kept doing a little more. And one day in February [she had taken ill at Christmas], it was nice and warm—kinda thawing—warm sun was shining on the porch. Mama went to town, and I said, “Go ask that doctor if I can go outside.” When she came back, she said he about had a fit. He said, “Why if I went outside, I'd have pneumonia, and that'd be the end of me.” But I said, “Well, I've been out all day—all afternoon.” I'd bundled up and sat out there. And I kept doing it. And that spring I rode my horse and went back to school.

Not only did she go back to school. Of the thirty students who started with her, fourteen finished—and she graduated second in the class.

From the events of her past, then, my mother has selected details and created a body of stories that place her in the center of and in control of her universe—stories that may not always be historically accurate but that have over time and through repeated tellings become what T. S. Eliot might call “objective correlatives”: artistic representations for what she holds most dear and would most eagerly communicate to others.<sup>9</sup> Though I have been able to give you only a brief glimpse of her stories—I intend eventually to bring them all together—I hope I have demonstrated that through their intertextuality and their systemic unity they form a powerful whole capable of moving us as good literature always moves us. I hope also that I have inspired some of you to seek in your family narratives the novels that may help shape your lives. As Elliott Oring points out, folklorists, while employing the methodologies of other disciplines, have been more willing “to view their own immediate environments and behaviors as material worthy of serious contemplation, analysis, and interpretation.” Such study, he says, can “begin simply as an encounter with objects and behaviors in one's own living room.”<sup>10</sup> If in your living rooms there are storytellers like my mother, I encourage you pick up the tape recorder and get to work.

As you do so, don't be overly concerned with meaning. What do these stories mean to my mother? Since she is here tonight, I suspect I will find out when this lecture ends. But as you seek to understand your family stories, I recommend the words of Paul Ricoeur: “Like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is ‘in suspense.’ It is because it ‘opens up’ new references



and receives fresh relevance from them that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations to decide their meaning.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, stories like my mother’s do not have fixed, determinate meanings, even to the narrator—and having once created the stories, the narrator in future recitations becomes both teller and audience. They serve rather as the means by which, as Annette Kolodny might argue, the storyteller structures her life and presents it to the world.<sup>12</sup> Through such stories, as Sharon Kaufman points out,

the self draws meaning from the past, interpreting and recreating it as a resource for being in the present . . . ; from this perspective, individual identity is revealed by the patterns of symbolic meaning that characterize the individual’s interpretation of experience . . . ; people formulate and reformulate personal and cultural symbols of their past to create a meaningful, coherent sense of self, and in the process they create a viable present. In this way the ageless self emerges: its definition is ongoing, continuous, and creative.<sup>13</sup>

What do the stories mean to me, and what might similar stories from your families mean to you? Even if these narratives did contain fixed meanings, we could never get at them precisely because that symbolic and imperfect system we call language would stand always in the way. But that shouldn’t dishearten us because as we listen to the stories we also are creating a meaningful, coherent sense of self, constructing our own lives in the process. If literary criticism has taught us anything in recent years, it has taught us that meaning lies as much in what we take to a text as in the text itself. What Robert Scholes says of reading can apply equally well to listening to stories:

If a book or a story or any other text is like a little life, and if our reading actually uses up precious time in that other story we think of as our lives, then we should make the most of our reading just as we should make the most of our lives. Reading reminds us that every text ends with a blank page and that what we get from every text is precisely balanced by what we give. Our skill, our learning, and our commitment to the text will determine, for each of us, the kind of experience that text provides. Learning to read . . . is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives.<sup>14</sup>

Scholes’s statement explains why it might be best to call my mother’s narratives both a *family* novel and a *personal* novel. It is family because it belongs to us all—each of us in the family having heard the same stories about the same family members in similar family settings, and each of us having access to many of the associations that make the stories meaningful. It is personal



because it belongs to each of us differently—each of us having filled in the blank page with which the novel ends in an individual way, according to individual need, and each of us having moved from the stories themselves to compose the individual texts of our lives.

For this reason I prefer to speak not of what the novel means to me, in any ultimate sense of meaning, but rather of what it does for me. It can give me a glimpse, as Sandra Dolby Stahl points out, of “a pearl of great price, another person’s soul.”<sup>15</sup> That in itself is enough, but it does still more. On a lazy summer afternoon, with the oblique rays of an Idaho sun flickering through the curtains and highlighting the deep wrinkles in my mother’s face, we have sat before the tape recorder—laughing together, arguing, sometimes crying—as my mother has told her stories still another time and as a young girl from Riddyville has ridden once more through both our imaginations.

As I have listened to my tapes of these sessions, I have heard in the background the steady, constant ticking of my mother’s old grandfather’s clock. Her grandfather, Robert Green, bought the clock for himself and later gave it to my grandparents on their marriage; my mother inherited it from them; and I hope one day to inherit it from her. I have heard the ticking of that clock all my life, just as I have heard my mother’s stories all my life. As I listen to it on the tape, it seems not just to tick away time but to dissolve time, making me one with all those people in Riddyville and placing me in the center of narratives like the one I’ll read now in closing, a narrative about the first owner of the clock, Robert Green, who had fussed over my mother, worried about her, spoiled her—and whom she probably loved above all other people. One time, says my mother,

I went when he was up to Aunt Vira’s when he was real sick, and I went up to see him, and I was going to comfort him, and he wound up comforting me. I just looked at him and started to cry, cause I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to Grandpa. He said, “Now, don’t cry, Dolly; I’ll be all right.”

Because she couldn’t stand it if anything happened to him, Robert Green’s accidentally poisoning his beloved team of horses, old Cap and Seal, proved to be one of the most tragic days in my mother’s young life. Here is the story:

Grandpa thought nobody had horses like his and nobody’s watch told time [like his]. Even the railroad [time], if his was a little different, it was the railroad that was wrong, not his watch. He always said he had the correct time. . . . Anyway, we used to have poisoned oats and put them out around the fields to kill the squirrels in the summer,



because they would eat the crops. And Grandpa always bought his horses oats. He always had oats to feed old Cap and Seal. And this one time, he got in the wrong—he was staying with Uncle Dan then, or the horses were—and he got in the wrong sack of oats and fed them the poisoned oats. And—anyway they got real sick, and I wasn't up there; I wasn't in on this first part—the whole town was there doing everything they could possibly think of to save those horses. And old Cap was Grandpa's favorite. Cap was just a plain bay, and old Seal had a little bit of brown mixed in with him—and he loved them both, but Cap was his favorite. And old Seal died first. And then—they were all still trying to save old Cap—and Grandpa came down to our place—he couldn't stand it anymore to be around them—and he came down to our place and stayed all night. And the next morning Uncle Jim came down and Grandpa went out to the gate to meet him, and he says, "Well, what about it, Jimmy?" And Uncle Jim says, "Well, the old boy's gone." Then, of course, all of us started to cry—Mama and everybody—and we missed Grandpa; we didn't know where he was. And Mama kind of had an idea. So she went out to the old outside toilet, and he was sitting in there crying. . . . And then Uncle Jim—he dragged [old Cap and Seal] down in the hills there, and laid them just straight, so they would be side by side.

A couple of years ago I drove my mother to what once had been Riddyville. She showed me where their home had been, across from the two-room schoolhouse, where Aunt Vira had lived, where Uncle Dan had lived, where she had spent the afternoon in a tree, chased there by a raging bull, where she had jumped her horse across a rock-filled ravine none of her companions dared jump. Nothing remained except one old house that would soon join the others in ruin. I left my mother in the car briefly and walked over to it, startling out a deer taking shade under a decaying roof from the afternoon sun. As I walked back to the car through sagebrush and weeds grown higher than my head, across fields rutted by erosion, I could almost feel all the *life* that had once been there—children playing "Fox and Geese," teenagers racing their horses down the road, men sharing labor during threshing, women scrubbing plank floors until they were white, young homesteading couples tilling their fields and dreaming of independence.

Now only the stories remain. But they do remain. And that family novel developed from those stories, created first by my mother as she shaped her life and then re-created by me as I have shaped mine, persists in my mind as powerful and as artistically moving as the works of literature that line my library shelf.

As I lay in my hospital bed years ago wondering what that well-differentiated carcinoma would finally do to me, it was not just Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" that brought me through the dark; it was also my mother's line: "And



that spring I rode my horse and went back to school." More than that, it was all that vigor, all that passion, all that humor, all that joy and tragedy, all that *life* that had been Riddyville, living in my memory not as historical narrative but as the artistic rendering of significant human experience—that is, as literature, literature that testified to me once again of the indomitable nature of the human spirit and of its divine capacity to create and enjoy beauty.

William Faulkner tells us that it is the poet's duty to write about these things, to lift our hearts by reminding us of the "courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory" of our lives.<sup>16</sup> Too long we have looked for the expressions of this glory only in the canonized works of the received literary tradition. It is time now to realize our democratic ideals by listening finally to all the voices in our great land. Especially is it time to seek in our own family stories the Riddyvilles that have created, expressed, and given direction to our own lives. It is time at last to celebrate ourselves; we all have stories to tell.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 911.

<sup>2</sup>Neil Postman, "Learning by Story," *Atlantic* 265 (December 1989): 122.

<sup>3</sup>All narratives in this paper are taken from tape-recorded interviews which I conducted with Lucile Green Wilson between 1980 and 1989. After being cataloged, the tapes will be on deposit in the Brigham Young University Folklore Archive.

<sup>4</sup>Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 428.

<sup>5</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in Roy Lamson and Hallett Smith, eds., *Renaissance England: Poetry and Prose from the Reformation to the Restoration* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1956), 285.

<sup>6</sup>Sandra Dolby Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Bauman, "Ed Bell, Texas Storyteller: The Framing and Reframing of Life Experience," *Journal of Folklore Research* 24 (1987): 197–221.

<sup>8</sup>Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>9</sup>T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 48.

<sup>10</sup>Elliott Oring, "Rechnitzer Rejects: A Humor of Modern Orthodoxy," in *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 148.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," *New Literary History* 5 (1973): 103.

<sup>12</sup>Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations of the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 1 (1980): 14.

<sup>13</sup>Kaufman, *Ageless Self*, 14.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>15</sup>Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics*, xi.

<sup>16</sup>William Faulkner, "The Writer's Duty," in *Literature of the United States*, ed. Walter Blair et al., 2 vols. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966), 2:1249.