STORYTELLING
AROUND THE CAMPFIRE AND IN THE PACK

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You will be happy if you aim
to leave this world a little better for your being in it.
One step in this direction,
as a father,
is to make your boy a better man than yourself.
Lord Baden-Powell

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WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

Sharing stories is a way of uniting individuals and creating bonds of friendship and shared values. Our stories help explain who we are and they help others to understand what makes us "tick". The stories we tell can reveal who we are and also what we are.

Stories can also be a form of entertainment — a way to pass time and to cheer spirits. Stories can play with our emotions and tease us. They can make us laugh or cry and they can make us shiver with anticipation or horror. The best stories take us outside our selves as we respond to the unfolding narrative. Each storyteller brings their own personality into the tale and *I* hope to share *my* vision...

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

It has been said that all stories begin and end with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and this is almost true: Some experiences are so basic that they cut across culture and time. They are part of the shared heritage of humanity. A story is good if it speaks to you and you will be successful as a storyteller if you make it speak to others.

For a story told around a Campfire or in the Pack, there are a few general characteristics that you should consider. These are not hard and fast rules, just guidelines:

- The length of the story should be appropriate to the setting and to the audience. Twenty minutes is almost too long while five minutes is almost too short. Consider the attention span of your audience and their ages.

- Consider the audience and adjust your story to their level. Don't terrify the Tigers and don't bore the Scouts.

- What kind of story do you want to tell? I tend to avoid stories that shock or visit horror on random people. I prefer stories with a "scout-like" lesson.

- Keep things simple: You will find that a simple plot with a few characters who are easy to tell apart will hold interest and stick in peoples' memories.

ME A STORYTELLER?

Anyone can be a storyteller, but everyone is not the same storyteller. You will be successful when the story comes from your experience and reveals a part of your self. You should be able to tell the story with your eyes closed and, in fact, your posture, expression, voice, and motions will all be a part of your success.

Don't try to memorize the story word-for-word. Memorize the characters and what happens to them. Here are a few examples:

THE BLACK VELVET BAND: A man marries a woman. She always wears a black ribbon tied around her neck and she never removes it. The man is curious and removes it while she sleeps. Her eyes open and her head comes off as she reproaches him.

LAVENDER: Boys on the way to a party pick up a beautiful hitchhiker — Lavender — and invite her to join them. She wears a lavender dress and is the life of the party. It is cold and one of the boys lends Lavender his jacket. After the party the boys drop her off by her house and continue home. They realize that Lavender still has the jacket and they return to the house in the morning. They

find that Lavender died many years ago and find the folded jacket on her grave.

Either story offers many possibilities. You can adjust the setting and the names of the characters to fit your audience and you can add personal details and descriptions to make the story real.

Here are a few hints to help you along. These are not hard and fast rules, but I find them helpful:

- The first secret to successful storytelling is to know the story and enjoy it. Don't try to tell a story that you are not comfortable with or that you do not like.

- Remember the key points and twists in the plot of the story that you choose. You don't need to memorize the story word-for-word, but you do need to remember where it starts, where it ends, and the important "landmarks" along the way.

- Make the story your own: Feel free to change names, places, and even events to relate the story to yourself and to your listeners.

- Practice the story. Go over it as you drive, prepare a meal, or work around the house. Visualize yourself telling the story and experiment with different techniques. Try telling the story aloud — to your friends, your family, or to the wall.

- Never read from a book or use notes.[1] A text will come between you and your listeners. There are times where a text is appropriate, but storytelling is a distinct art. It is not the same as a recitation or a dramatic reading. Poetry may come close to the

[1] Here is an exception: Sometimes a "letter" can be a useful "prop" for adding authenticity to your story.

depth of storytelling, but it is still something different.[2]

- Rhythm, repetition, changes in voice and inflection of voice help to bring a story alive.

- Work to have several stories ready to be brought out as necessary.

- Allow yourself to become a part of the story. Permit yourself to feel the emotions that you are telling about. Live what you tell.

- We use different parts of our brain for different kinds of speaking. You can be a superb storyteller even if you are shy.

DON'T WORRY

All of us get the "shakes" sometimes and all of us lose our train of thought on occasion. Sometimes that even becomes a part of the story. Adjust your story (and yourself) to your listeners, the setting, and the mood. Ask yourself why you are telling a story. It could be to entertain or it could be to teach a lesson. A story told to make a transition between two parts of a campfire program will be different from one told to set the theme.

IS IT TRUE?

The most effective stories are the ones that might be true. Some stories are obvious fiction, but other stories — even ghost stories — might be true, or true enough to carry a message!

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[2]**But don't be afraid to use poetry or even songs as a springboard to a story. For example: The story of the "Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" makes a fine tale os struggle, brotherhood, and heroism. Using portions of the Gordon Lightfoot song can be a very effective way to draw out the emotions of your listeners.**

- Your listeners want to believe, help them.

- Maintain credibility. If you are telling a "Tall Tale", report the action that happened to someone else. Concede the outrageous, but insist on what you heard.

- Let your listeners decide if a story is true. If they ask you, turn the question around and ask what they think!

WHERE CAN I FIND APPROPRIATE STORIES?

Remember that stories and plots can be adapted and used as a springboard for other, new, stories. There are lots of resources out there, but here are a few concrete suggestions:

a. Trail and Campfire Stories by Julia M. Seton is a nice introduction to the art of telling stories and it has some great stories to choose from. It's available from the BSA.

b. High School and College Anthologies — especially older editions through the 1950s and into the 1960s — often have appropriate stories.

c. *Readers' Digest* (especially those form the 1960s and earlier), *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and related magazines are another good resource.

d. Don't neglect the books of Mark Twain, O. Henry, Bret Harte, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson, Kipling, and the other "greats" of Western Literature — Their Short Stories and Novels can be mined for gold!

e. Thriller or Horror Stories can be mined for settings and situations that you can build into a new tale. W[illiam] W[yman] Jacobs (*The Monkey's Paw*) and H[oward] P[hillips] L[ovecraft] (*In the Vault*) offer

tales that can work very well around a campfire and which — with some adjustment — turn from tales of horror to reminders of wrongs redressed and justice received.

f. The *Bible* and the extra-biblical books called *Apocrypha* are filled with examples of faithfulness, courage, and honor. Likewise, religious stories of morality and wisdom can be used to teach without preaching.

g. Project Gutenberg <<www.gutenberg.org>> is a great resource. It is a repository of thousands of books in plain text or other computer formats. Among others, check out the stories of Ambrose Bierce, and Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner.