The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them.
– Anton Chekov

I’m honored to be Theme Scholar for the College of Fine Arts and Communication for 2017-2018. To frame for you how the many talented artists and faculty of COFAC are celebrating our theme “What’s Your Story?” in our events and performances this season is a gift; I’ve been at Towson long enough now to discover my colleagues are amazing. Yet when I got down to work, I panicked. How could I, in just my voice, appropriately represent such a diverse group with its unique talents and all our special events? I’m a comedy writer by training – what can I say about an event like Noontime Jazz in the Library other than its really cool and I hope we worked out the ‘don’t make noise in a library’ part in advance.

It is a challenge to unify behind a singular voice when COFAC is so varied in our disciplines. In no order of preference there’s: Music, Art, Theatre, Dance, Mass Communication, Communication Studies, and my own department, Electronic Media & Film. We even have specializations within those disciplines like our Asian Arts and Culture Center, Community Arts Center, and Community Dance Center. Even with my deep appreciation for the arts, I don’t profess to be able to teach in those departments, nor do the experts in those teach in mine. And no, that time I showed my niece how to do the Macarena does not make me a dance teacher.

So I humbly speak in one voice, buoyed by the fact that artists speak in distinctive voices. We all speak the same human story, yet with as many one-of-a-kind permutations as there are communicators. And you won’t see any two COFAC performances, concerts or events that are identical this semester. Even if you come back the next day, there will be something different – a more intense solo, a longer pause, the different perspective you bring because the weather’s nice or someone didn’t cut you off in traffic.

WHAT’S YOUR STORY?

Dying is easy, comedy is hard.
– Edmund Kean

As I teach storytelling, explicitly screenwriting, our theme “What’s Your Story?” is in my backyard. In the four paragraphs we’ve known each other, did I tell you that before I became a professor I used to write material for the late, great comic Jerry Lewis. Well… only for a day; he fired the whole writing staff. At the time it felt awful, but it has since made a fantastic icebreaker at parties.

I respect you can contextualize humor, so some shtick I’ll let slip. But I’ll keep it at a minimum. Which is easy in these times. I imagine you saw the white supremacists recently marching across the University of Virginia campus. Not funny. Didn’t we beat the Nazis in 1945? And just a few months ago, a congressperson was shot just because of their party affiliation. Do we really think all those who disagree with our political views have evil in their hearts? What happened to tolerance? Do you, like me, think most of those in opposition to your views have good intentions but just poorer approaches? After all, the only way any political party could ever get 100% support is to lower taxes and give away free ice cream to all. Even then some Joker would want their taxes raised plus gelato.

It’s actually the opening line from my favorite story that gets me through the daily news cycle after I reach for the antacid. The line goes: “I believe in America.” And I do. I believe we will keep moving toward a more fair and equitable society, which has been the trend since our inception. I truly believe Lincoln’s “better angels of our nature” will prevail. But you can bet there’s going to be a lot of conflict along the way. Any sincere study of storytelling, which is an exploration of the human condition, will tell you that. After all, that positive message about America comes from a film with Marlon Brando playing a mafia don. I won’t even mention the horsehead in the bed.
You read something which you thought had only happened to you, and you discover it happened 100 years ago to Dostoevsky. This is a great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone. This is why art is important. – James Baldwin

On the first day of my screenwriting classes, we discuss our storytelling tradition. It doesn’t take class long to figure out stories go back to those first cave people. We call them by modern standards, but when one simply told the other a story, it was about a toaster. Hmm… We highlight drama from the first time someone thought of a toaster, not a person. “Dolphins?” they ask. “Professor, but what if my toaster could communicate? Hmm…” We consider. Did someone actually tell a story about a toaster? Hmm…

“The Brave Little Toaster” in your own inimitable ways. The Department of Music is highlighting our college theme with the Live music is healthy. – John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten)

HATE TO TELL YOU THIS, WE’RE ALL DIFFERENT

My mother wanted us to understand the tragedies of your life one day have the potential to be the comic stories the next. – Nora Ephron

Once my class makes the discovery about how similar all people are, we actually start to feel good. That feeling of our lonely place in the Universe falls away a bit and life seems just to make a little more sense. We’re all in this together. Then our next big idea is about a toaster, not a person. Hmm…

Our world can seem so divided sometimes, but stories highlight our commonalities. We all love, hate, hope, fear. All people know what it’s like to have wants and to strive to achieve them, to have them meet with obstacles, and to fail or succeed. Our theatrical tradition references our common experience in the two masks of the human condition: happy and sad. Thousands of years later The ABC Wide World of Sports coined a phrase: “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” Look, just because they covered demolition derby and jai alai doesn’t make it a less valid take.

That’s why I love stories. They communicate our human experience to each other. You don’t have to be human to be a part of this. In the first place, the room stops again. We consider. “Professor, but what if my toaster actually sells insurance?” Oh, that was a bad example. Still, the point should be clear. Though we are all the same, we are also different. No two human beings are exactly alike, but think more deeply about what makes a story. A hand rises. Again, it’s the same student. “Professor, but what if my toaster could communicate?”

While stories utilize human commonalities to be relatable, they do expressly focus on contrast. The most obvious difference of course is that no two characters are exactly alike, but think more deeply about what makes a story. A story is never a singular moment, it has to be comprised of two or more points on the curve. There is always some sequencing. This, then. That. Before and after. First, then last. On a deeper level stories are always about collision. Because being human is full of collision. If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? - William Shakespeare

Our class considers oral histories, hieroglyphics, the written word and every human form of communication we can think of. We highlight drama from the first time someone on a stage pretended to be someone else to what we’re currently watching on Netflix. (It’s still Stranger Things.) We note how the invention of the printing press led to the rise of serialization! But we quickly recognize that all humans, past and present, have told stories regardless of potentially deep divisions like technological advancement, religion, or professional baseball team alliance.

And as we move through our first day, the class considers whether there are any other species that communicate through story. A hand will inevitably rise from one student hoping to find an exception. “Dolphins?” they suggest with a smile. The room comes to a complete stop. We all consider. Dolphins are smart, aren’t they? Hmm… Ultimately we resolve that while dolphins are highly intelligent beings whom could probably do something that would blow our minds given the chance, they are not storytellers as we define it. Dolphins communicate. Humans are the only species that tell stories. Stories are for people, by people, and about people. A hand rises again from the same student. “Professor, not all stories are about people. I saw a movie called The Brave Little Toaster. It was about a toaster, not a person.”

The room stops again. We consider. Well, that’s true, it is about a toaster. Hmm… Ultimately we resolve that to give the toaster courage in the first place is to personify it and it does indeed follow that all stories are about the human.

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