

“Telling Tales”: The Teaching of American History through Storytelling

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The late novelist Walker Percy once argued that literature, especially fictional stories, has portrayed a clearer and far more cohesive picture of the human condition than any of the social sciences, including history.¹ His ideas hint at the possibility of conceptualizing the American experience as the story that it is and as a way of organizing historical information in a more holistic manner in the teacher’s mind. Viewing history as a story and teaching the subject as storytelling are metaphors that he believes offer stronger possibilities for bringing overall coherence and interest to history instruction. A number of educational scholars have also advocated the use of storytelling as a means of teaching. D. Common noted the organizing power of using the metaphor of storytelling in teaching:

Stories are narrative units. Because they are units, they speak forcefully to those who plan for teaching. Stories have particular, clear beginnings and particular, clear ends. It is their unity of wholeness and circumscription that distinguishes stories from other types of narratives.²

Egan adds that:

The story does not deal with anything except the problem set up in the beginning once it is under way. *Everything* in the story is focused on that central task.... Stories, then, have clear means of determining what should be

included and excluded. We recognize as bad stories those that include things that do not take the story forward.³

Interestingly, voices on the right and left in social education have called for the presentation of history as storytelling. Conservatives including Diane Ravitch, William Bennett, and Chester Finn have argued for a shift to what they term the traditional social studies, which involves primarily the “simple” telling of our nation’s story.⁴ Similarly, the radical Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci also argued for the same shift, having said that history taught through storytelling:

...provides a basis for the subsequent development of an historical, dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all the past generations, which projects itself into the future.⁵

It would seem strange at first glance that a socialist reformer and the more order-seeking conservatives in social studies both see the teaching of history as the key to achieving their opposite agendas. However, the strangeness dissipates when one considers that the sto-

ries and dramas of history can clearly convey the paradoxical need that cultures have for creating both order and change, as well as show how this might be accomplished. A conventional lecture that simply renders straight historical facts could never carry these paradoxes in the same way.

In my judgment, historically everyone has a story worth being told.⁶ That story portrays an individual’s (or group’s) character in relation to a situation that has active consequences. Sometimes, these consequences are important not only for the individual who experiences them, but for the entire nation.

A story is essentially driven by characters and their actions. Conflict within characters or between characters shapes and generates the story’s plot. Consequently, the basic theme of a story is usually about (1) conflict and resolution to one degree or another; and (2) psychological/personal changes that may occur with the characters by the time of resolution. Note further that such resolution need not necessarily be an unqualified victory. The changes that may occur in a character’s personal life because of decisions the character makes regarding the conflict often carry relevant personal/psychological truths for the listener/reader.⁷

The other feature found in a story’s essential makeup, social conflict and its resolution, may carry important cultural information for the listener/reader. Citizenship education—the major goal

Original manuscripts and rare books are displayed in the exhibit "Riot and the Rule of Law," at the Boston Public Library on Wednesday, January 26, 2005. John Adams is already known as a lawyer, president, founding father and patriot. Now, another side of Adams is being brought to light—that of a defender of British soldiers charged with murdering American colonists at the Boston Massacre.



of social studies education—is especially concerned with this latter area, for it is value-laden. Storytelling has the power of educating for character, an essential component of citizenship. The values of historical heroes can transcend time and thus be perfectly relevant today.⁸

An essential difference between real life and a story which reflects social truths or values is that the conflicts and resolutions presented in story form are compressed and emphasized (sometimes indirectly), making the action much more dramatic (and interesting) than real life. This can help to bring issues to the forefront. When such issues are presented in this way, the notions of history and story become one and the same and are better understood. Specifically, what was the *real* political issue behind the Boston Massacre that prompted patriot John Adams to represent nine British soldiers against a charge of murdering colonists? What is the *true*

story of Eleanor Roosevelt's complete restructuring of the role of First Lady? What are the *precise* trials and tribulations endured by Jackie Robinson as he broke the color barrier of major league baseball? These examples are exciting stories that reveal individual values of character that, despite their age, are relevant today. One must note, however, that they are rarely found in a conventional textbook.

Of our first three presidents, John Adams has received less attention than George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. However, his life, like that of his wife Abigail Adams, offers fascinating insights into early U.S. history for teachers interested in the use of storytelling in the history classroom.

John Adams and The Boston Massacre

Twenty-six years before he attained the presidency as the heir-apparent to the immensely popular George Washington, John Adams experienced

the defining moment of his career. It was an episode that could have easily destroyed a lesser man, but instead established the young lawyer-patriot's reputation as a man of integrity and successfully launched a political career that coincided with the birth of the republic.

The atmosphere in Boston in 1770 was decidedly tense. British troops had been quartered in the city in order to establish a royal presence and keep order amidst a rising tide of colonial resistance to the Crown. Although the troops had been ordered not to fire upon colonists without the expressed permission of the royal governor, there had already been a number of incidences in which several colonists had been shot. The mood of the city was antagonistic on the evening of March 5 when a group of Bostonians began to pelt a small detachment of soldiers with snowballs and garbage, allegedly in response to the soldiers' harassment of a colonist. Prodded by the crowd's

refusal to disperse, seven soldiers under the command of Captain John Preston were ordered to fire upon the unarmed crowd. Three colonists were immediately killed, two more were mortally wounded and would die shortly, and six additional colonists were wounded. Among the fatalities was a man of mixed race named Crispus Attucks, whose death elevated him to a high status as a minority casualty in the patriot cause.

This was the story told to John Adams the next day when he was approached about defending eight soldiers and their captain. Although he was regarded as a leading patriot for the cause of independence, he was also reputed to be the finest lawyer in Massachusetts. At the same time, Adams's cousin, Samuel Adams, along with James Otis, and Paul Revere (whose famous engraving of the incident, now dubbed the Boston Massacre, further infuriated colonists) were inciting hatred and hostility in the colonial press.

Adams pondered the request. Dare he take the case? To do so would surely turn his fellow-patriots against him, brand him a traitor, and destroy his political future. Knowing that the soldiers could not possibly get a fair trial considering the colonial mood, and despite the agony he knew would be forthcoming, Adams nevertheless accepted the case. He based his decision on one simple principle: equal justice before the law was the consideration a lawyer must put above all others. He had no doubt that this course of action was the right one. The most important trial in colonial history was about to take place and John Adams would be defending the enemy.

His first move was to postpone the trial for seven months in hopes that the hostile atmosphere might subside and also allow him ample time to gather evidence for a proper defense. He knew he could not claim the incident was an accident. Seven soldiers had inflicted 11 casualties, meaning that several of them had fired and then reloaded to fire again. Yet he was perplexed at Captain

Preston's adamant claim that he had never given an order to fire, a claim widely refuted. The reaction in the press to the postponement was expectedly bitter, claiming it was a blatant attempt to avoid justice. Tellingly, however, there was not the slightest mention of John Adams directly, though the defense was accused of conspiring to save the soldiers from their just due.

As the evidence mounted from numerous witnesses gathered during that tumultuous summer, Adams began piecing together an emerging story quite different from the one promoted in the press and by the prosecution. When the trial opened that October, Adams had been enduring unrelenting threats from his fellow-Bostonians. Only the support of his wife and equal partner Abigail and his own sense of righteousness kept him going. Daily threats against his life were unnerving but he remained steadfast in his convictions to secure a fair trial for his clients. Remaining above it all, Adams began his defense by unveiling the true events of the Boston Massacre.

Early on the evening of March 5, a young apprentice barber followed a British officer to the main barracks, calling him insulting names for not paying the barber for services rendered. A large crowd immediately gathered as the sentry on duty swung at the youth with his musket but missed. As the boy slipped and fell to the ground, the crowd began to pelt the sentry with snowballs and garbage and then closed in on him. Unable to escape, the sentry shouted for help and Captain Preston and seven soldiers came racing from the barracks.

Refusing to disperse, the crowd continued to close in and to pelt the soldiers while shouting threats to kill them. They proceeded to knock down one soldier while another had to wrestle several colonists who were trying to grab his musket. Refuting the prosecution's claim that Preston had given the order to fire, in the ensuing struggle a shot was fired and the rest followed. Defense witnesses then tes-

tified that the soldiers were actually being attacked by two crowds, a larger one attempting to move on the barracks while carrying clubs. None of the witnesses heard a command to fire. In addition, Adams established that one of the fatalities was a gang member and known trouble-maker who had been part of an assault on some soldiers just days before the massacre, and that another had been involved in several brawls with soldiers.

But perhaps his best witness was a dead man. One of the mortally wounded colonists had told his doctor shortly before his death that he was convinced the soldiers had acted in self-defense, that he had never seen such abuse as that heaped upon those eight soldiers. This was the basis of Adams's defense. He maintained that British law justified killing in self-defense, be it by soldiers or civilians. The eight soldiers had been attacked by a mob and because their lives were in eminent danger they had the right to defend themselves. A mob—colonial or otherwise—had provoked a justifiable action of self-defense.

The colonial jury acquitted Captain Preston. Two of the soldiers were convicted of manslaughter and subsequently branded on the thumb. The remaining six soldiers were found not guilty. Adams had won his case but more importantly had remained true to his convictions. He now prepared for the repercussions, but they never came. The press denounced the verdicts and claimed travesty. But Adams himself was never criticized. The leading patriots of the time knew him for what he truly was and his fellow-colonists finally understood that a dedicated patriot had done the right thing, despite the fact that he had represented the hated British. For John Adams, a new era of respect had begun, for his character was above reproach.⁹

Abigail Adams and James Prince

The story of John Adams and his role in the Boston Massacre provides an interesting strategy that attracts learner

attention but more importantly has a value base which encodes the basic dynamics of character that students can identify with in their contemporary lives. Though history abounds with such stories, the perfect complement to the John Adams story is the following tale concerning his wife, which will provide an opportunity for educators

and partner Abigail was to become the First Lady the following March, when John was to be officially sworn in. Abby, as John affectionately called her, knew there was much to be done in preparation for their presidential home in Philadelphia, and John was not shy in letting her know how desperately he needed her help in set-

long periods of time and had handled tough political opponents and situations without her being constantly at his side. Certainly he could manage to choose a house and a few furnishings. Besides, Abby was quite adamant in her belief that Congress should be responsible for procuring and furnishing a home for the newly-elected leader of the country; and she was not shy about expressing that opinion, much to John's amusement and regret (the newly-planned White House would not be officially ready for occupancy until his last year in office). Abby had more important responsibilities caring for their properties and she could not be bothered with Philadelphia just yet. There were plenty things yet to be done before the big move. She knew from past experience of running the farm that the main issues in Quincy were problems with laborers.

James Prince was a reliable indentured servant to John and Abby. He was the youngest of their servants and Abby felt a special fondness for him. She had been sufficiently impressed with James when she had met him in Philadelphia a few years earlier that she offered him a position on the Adams farm. As an educated woman in her own right, she strongly believed in people having at least the right to an education, especially women and minorities. Though this was a most revolutionary stance, to this end she had taught James and several other servants to read and write. Abby was most pleased and surprised when James approached her for permission to formally continue his education at a local school offering night classes for apprentices. James wanted to attend even though he would have to pay for it. He had learned from Abby that education was the key to opportunity, and as an indentured servant he would be free from obligation some day. Thus, education would greatly help him to earn a respectable living. After receiving Abby's blessing, he began school; Abby turned her attention back to the issues of the tenant farmers and preparing to move to Philadelphia.

(AP Photo)



Abigail Adams, shown here in this 1776 Benjamin Blythe painting from the Massachusetts Historical Society, may have been a revolutionary era feminist according to some historians. In March of 1776, she told her husband, John, who would become second president of the U.S., "Remember the ladies."

not only to relate a story not found in the conventional textbook but also to illustrate her character in action and the importance of standing up for what one believes. In an age when women were clearly second-class citizens and dominated by the chauvinism of the times, Abigail Adams was not one to stand on tradition. Outspoken, independent in spirit, and college-educated, she was ahead of her time in demanding gender equality and social justice.

In November 1796, John Adams had been elected the second president of the United States. His wife

ting up their future household. As a lawyer and much-traveled politician, the future president had little practical knowledge and experience in setting up and caring for a home. This had been but one area where Adams had always and completely relied upon his wife, as he readily admitted that this task was beyond the scope of his talents. Still, Abby decided that her first priority was at their Quincy, Massachusetts, home; and so she left the housing decisions to John until she had completed her work and could join him. After all, Abby mused, John had lived abroad for

Shortly afterwards Abby had a visit from a neighbor who asked to speak with her on what he described as a most delicate matter. Abby was surprised yet curious, as she was not accustomed to having neighbors simply stop by without serious cause. After exchanging pleasantries, the neighbor, quite aware of Mrs. Adams's personality and the strength of her convictions, stated that he had come to discuss James. This immediately piqued her curiosity, as she knew James to be a fine, respectable young man and faithful servant. The neighbor requested that Abby have James stop attending school. He went on to say that if James continued, the school would have to close. Abby, perplexed, wanted to know why on Earth the school would close because of him. From all indications, James was doing as least as well as the other students and was progressing as expected. Had James done something inappropriate, she asked? The neighbor replied that it was not a matter of misbehavior. Then the true nature of the visit became clear: it was because James was black. The neighbor proceeded to explain that the other boys attending the school, who also paid tuition, were uncomfortable having to sit in the same classroom with a black person, and therefore he should not be allowed to attend.

Abby was inwardly enraged but tactfully maintained her composure. While the culture of the time dictated that blacks (and women, for that matter) were innately inferior, she understood from experience that education was an equalizer. Thus a decision to deny James the opportunity of education as a result of his race would be similar to denying opportunity based upon gender as well. On this subject she refused to remain passive. She turned to her formidable logic and fairness to make her point. Abby asked her neighbor if the boys objected to sitting in the same church as James (knowing of course that they didn't) and the neighbor conceded that they didn't. She continued this line of questioning by asking if he

had also seen these same boys at local dances, when James routinely played his fiddle. Once again the man agreed that the boys in question had attended the dances. Abby then stated that "the boy is a freeman as much as any of the young men, and merely because his face is black, is he to be denied instruction?"¹⁰ The man had no reply. Abby was not about to stop. "How is he to be qualified to procure a livelihood? Is it the Christian principle of doing unto others as would have others do to us?"¹¹ She then further defended James's right to attend school as "... attacking the principle of liberty and equality upon the only grounds which it ought to be supported, an equality of rights."¹² Abby then politely requested that the boys attending the school come to visit her so she might discuss the issue directly with them. The neighbor thanked her for her time and excused himself. Confident that the issue was resolved, her parting words to her neighbor were, "Tell them ... I hope we shall all go to Heaven together."¹³

Abby, ever vigilant in her correspondence with John (their profuse correspondence would make their marriage the most documented in our history) to keep him updated regarding the family and the farm, related this event in a letter. She was pleased to report that not another word was ever said about James Prince attending school. It remained open and all of the students continued to attend.

Conclusion

By applying the metaphor of history as storytelling, the social studies teacher can relate to students the excitement, paradox, and importance of the adventure story that constitutes American history. Storytelling as a strategy is an art, but one that has a huge payoff if done properly and consistently. The process, however, requires a knowledgeable educator who risks going outside of the claustrophobic textbook. To support this approach, trade books by notable authors are excellent and balanced sources, value-laden and heroic,

needing only a context-based examination and promotion of qualities deemed essential for the perpetuation of effective citizenship. Storytelling makes the content of American history more meaningful and interesting; and it offers students profound insights into the nature and challenges of life in the past. 📖

Notes

- 1 Walker Percy, "Interview," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 10, 1989): A3-A5.
- 2 D. Common, "Stories, Teaching, and the Social Studies Curriculum," *Theory and Research in Social Studies Education* XV, 1 (1987): 41.
- 3 K. Egan, *Teaching As Storytelling* (Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1986): 24.
- 4 R. Evans, "Diane Ravitch and the Revival of History: A Critique," *The Social Studies* 80 (1989): 85-88.
- 5 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1983): 34-35.
- 6 Tony Sanchez, "It's Time Again for Heroes," *The Social Studies* 91, no.2 (March/April, 2000): 58-62.
- 7 J. Henderson, *Ancient Myths and Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).
- 8 Sanchez, "Heroes, Values, and Transcending Time: Using Trade Books to Teach Values," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 13, no. 1 (September/October, 2000): 27-30.
- 9 David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
- 10 McCullough, op. cit.
- 11 Ibid., 480.
- 12 Withey, 246.
- 13 McCullough, 480; Withey, 246.

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