

# The S T O R Y

## Behind the Story

notes from  
Jay O'Callahan  
Fall 2006

PO Box 1054  
Marshfield, MA 02050  
800-626-5356  
e-mail: jay@ocallahan.com  
www.ocallahan.com

## Making Muddy River Playhouse Come Alive

How a new Pill Hill story went from blah to whoopee and then onto CD

What went wrong last night at the theater? They didn't laugh at my Aunt Hilda character in my new Pill Hill story *Muddy River Playhouse*. Awful. Maybe they were tired. Tonight they'll laugh.

But they didn't. Two nights in a row at the Gloucester Stage the audience was quiet for Aunt Hilda and *Muddy River Playhouse*. All year audiences have laughed and enjoyed the story and now what's wrong?

The story recalls being in an amateur play with my dad in high school. The character of the director, Aunt Hilda, was inspired by my dramatic and wonderful Aunt Virginia. When I was a boy the whole Johnson family would sweep into our house like a thunderstorm; the children, the dog, Uncle Eric with a cooler filled with oysters, Virginia with arms wide open, the walls reverberating with laughter and greetings. Aunt Virginia did not hold back.

Ah, I thought. That's it!

I've been holding back with the Aunt Hilda character. I need to leap into the character and the story.

So after the show I paced about, being Aunt Hilda. Chest out, shoulders back, I imagined Hilda's red cape swirling as she directs, shouting, "Passion! We need passion in this play!" I felt bigger and bigger bellowing to the walls. In the morning I took a walk calling out "Passion!" to the Gloucester seagulls. When I got to the theater that Sunday, the stage man-

ager gave me a hand drawn card as a good bye present. It was her image of Aunt Hilda shouting, "Passion!"

That Sunday at Gloucester Stage, the Aunt Hilda character came alive and the audience laughed and applauded. Hilda was back. Liv Ullmann was in the audience and gave me a hug after the show and left a lovely note.

The very next day I went to the studio to record the story while Aunt Hilda was still filled with "Passion!"



Aunt Hilda directs. Illustration by Deborah Linehan



"Duck" and his parrot from "Muddy River Playhouse." Illustration by Devera Ehrenberg

### Jane Alexander on Muddy River Playhouse

I sent the CD of *Muddy River Playhouse* to Jane Alexander who grew up on Pill Hill and went on to become one of the finest actors of our time. Jane was kind enough to listen and said, "It brought back my own youth on Pill Hill and my adventures on the Muddy River playing Kick the Can until the sun went down on summer nights. You weave a magical spell for all to hear."

## Laura O'Callahan's World



Jay performs Peer Gynt with Laura interpreting at Boston Symphony Hall. Photo by Chris Bernstein.

In April I performed *Peer Gynt* with my daughter, Laura, at Boston Symphony Hall. Laura interpreted for the Deaf and Steven Karidoyanes conducted the New England Youth Conservatory Orchestra. Laura left me a note say-

ing, "You bring me to the nicest places."

*Peer Gynt* is a passionate story that builds to the music of Edvard Grieg's *Hall of the Mountain King*, where Peer is nearly torn apart by the trolls. Laura moves with amazing grace interpreting the story.

Laura's professional world is varied. She interpreted at the Massachusetts Democratic convention and said Deval Patrick, who is running for governor, was the first politician who impressed her. Next she went on to UPS

shipping headquarters in Chelmsford, Massachusetts where hundreds of thousands of packages are handled in a day. There were miles and miles of tracks on which packages whizzed by—a whirlwind of controlled chaos. If you've ever listened to my story of *The Gouda* you know why the UPS job was very special for Laura.

On to Logan Airport where Laura was interpreting for a Deaf mechanic at a United Airlines hanger when the supervisor came in carrying a birthday cake for her. Then to Fenway Park to interpret at a Red Sox game. She gets around.

At left: Laura and Ted at an earlier birthday party.



## World Adventurer Ted O'Callahan at Columbia School of Journalism

Ted O'Callahan has led mountain and kayak expeditions in Alaska, Chile, Patagonia, Nepal, Mexico and in the United States. He's studied in Spain, been published as a poet and travel writer, gotten a master's in creative writing, taken courses in painting, sculpture and film and is now at the Columbia School of Journalism. He hopes to finish in May and keep writing up a storm.

When I made up *The Gouda* for Ted and Laura I thought I was taking them far afield. Little did I realize Ted would make the earth his neighborhood.

Above: Ted O'Callahan on Nef Glacier in Patagonia.



### *Herman the Wormin' is Daft About Elenore DeYoung*



Elenore DeYoung wrote, "I have almost worn out my CD of *Earth Stories*, which at 87 years old I use as my bedtime story—always hoping I will fall asleep before I hear the croaking of the frogs."

Illustration by Laura O'Callahan

## Who is the Gouda? Ah, Sweet Mystery

I recently received a wonderful e-mail from Meredith Iszlai, “I’m a 21 year old student at Massachusetts College of Art and I have listened to your story of *The Gouda* ever since I was twelve years old and have always been captivated by his life and times...I sincerely thank you for being one of the inspiring artists in my life.”

If you’re going on a long car ride with the family, bring *The Gouda* CD along. I made it up years ago for my children and their cousin, Meave, as we walked around my town of Marshfield, Massachusetts, home of that great statesman, Daniel Webster. How could Daniel Webster’s law office become part of a wild chase that leads all the way to New Orleans? Has *The Gouda* come up your walk and you didn’t know it? Wouldn’t it be ironic if UPS delivered the CD to you? All very mysterious, but then again so is *The Gouda*.



Illustration by Meredith Iszlai.

## Magical John Langstaff

John Langstaff, famed baritone, teacher, author of 25 books including Caldecott winner *Frog Went a Courting*, and founder of the Revels died December 13, 2005. John’s greatest gift was celebrating life. In 1971 John founded the Revels, which has spread to eight cities. The Revels is a pageant, really a festival of traditional music, song, dance, rituals and stories of different cultures.

Shaking hands with Jack, as many of us called him, was shaking hands with lightning; suddenly you were tingling with life. He’d look you in the eye and laugh and make you feel you too knew that life was full of mystery and spirit. In time shaking hands was replaced by a mighty hug.

Jack was a lover of stories and storytelling. He told me once of driving in Tennessee with Richard Chase, who collected the Jack tales. They drove by a field where some farmers were plowing. Chase stopped the car and called, “Want to learn to Morris dance?”

“What’s that?” they asked.

“We’ll show you.” For the next hour they taught the Morris dance.

Jack was a presenter at the National Storytelling Conference at Washington College in Jonesborough Tennessee. Washington College was on lean times; I showed Jack his room. His window was broken, his cot



sagged, the walls were cracked, and there was nowhere to hang his clothes. Jack looked out the window; “Cows!” he said, “Great! And right by my window. Great!” That night after telling us stories he had us turn out the lights in the auditorium and he led us in *Wild Mountain Thyme*; it was so moving that no one there will ever forget it.

Jack knew how to celebrate the moment. After a Sea Revels at the Emerson Theater in Boston, my wife, Linda, and my daughter, Laura, were out on the sidewalk talking with the cast. Jack heard

Linda say it was Laura’s birthday. Immediately he sparkled and said, “Let’s go have an ice cream sundae!” He led us across Boston Common to an ice cream shop, laughing and asking Laura all about her life. From that moment they became friends of the heart.

When Jack finally retired from Revels we planned a concert together. I sing in the key of free but Jack was not worried. “We’ll do some Gilbert and Sullivan,” Jack said.

“Oh I couldn’t,” I said.

“Oh you’ll love it. Let’s get started.”

Jack, George Emlen, music director for Revels and Sue Ladr, Revels’ graphic designer, would drive down to my house in Marshfield and we’d work. George would play piano, Sue would encourage and Jack and I would sing and laugh and plot our costumes. The concert was the high point of my year. I’m happy and proud that the CD, *Stories and Sea Songs*, is a live recording of Act I of that concert. At the end of the show we donned Japanese robes and sang songs from *The Mikado*. Ah, what a joy to be with Jack! He had plenty of something and that something was magic for us.

Above: John Langstaff.  
Photo by Chris Bernstein.

## Awards

### CONNIE REGAN-BLAKE RECEIVES LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Connie Regan-Blake received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Storytelling Network this past July. In college Connie majored in mathematics and everyone agrees with this equation: Connie Regan-Blake = Master Storyteller.

Back in the 1970's Connie got a roaring storytelling start. Connie and her cousin Barbara Freeman left their jobs as librarians and toured the country in a Datsun pickup, they called it D'Dup, telling stories. They were a smash hit and in the 90's decided to go solo. Connie's achievements are so numerous you should go to her website: [www.storywindow.com](http://www.storywindow.com)

Connie takes the stage with a grace that invites people to be themselves. And as I said at her wedding years back, if a rose could talk it would have her voice. Connie is a dear friend and in my house when anything goes very right or very wrong we call Connie which brings me to another equation: Connie Regan-Blake = wonderful human being.

### CIRCLE OF EXCELLENCE AWARDS FOR GWENDA LEDBETTER AND CHARLOTTE BLAKE ALSTON

Gwenda Ledbetter and Charlotte Blake Alston were awarded the Circle of Excellence Award by the National Storytelling Network in 2006. Gwenda Ledbetter is a storyteller, writer, poet, birdwatcher and mystic. Gwenda herself has always been a circle of excellence, but it's nice to have it said by NSN.

Charlotte Blake Alston is funny, fiery, deep and powerful. At the Taos Storytelling Festival, New Mexico, I saw Charlotte move an audience to tears then rouse them to laughter and a standing ovation. She's a wondrous performer.

## Meister Eckhart Workshop

I'm thinking of giving a workshop on paradox, spirituality and Meister Eckhart. Would anyone be interested?

## IN BRIEF

**Jill Johnson's** *Little, but Oh My!* CD is a live recording of her story of Berte Olsen, Puget's Sound's first female ferryboat captain. Berte Olson had the spunk to take on the Washington State legislature to save her ferry business. Johnson brings the world of Norwegians in America alive. The performance also features Norwegian folk and maritime music. A star is born. Bravo Jill Johnson. Jill's e-mail: [story@whidbey.com](mailto:story@whidbey.com)

**Lucy Moore's** beautifully written, award winning memoir, *Seven Years in Navajo Country*, is now on CD with Lucy reading. Moore's voice is rich and her use of understatement is a marvel. The story is of six years spent after college in the middle of Navajo country in the 1960's and 70's. The characters are so clearly drawn I laugh and weep and cheer for Lucy as she takes on the most unexpected roles. Lucy's e-mail: [lucymoore@nets.com](mailto:lucymoore@nets.com)

**Judith Black's** CD *Esau My Son*, is vintage Judith Black. It's funny, musical and it builds like a very good play. It is the story of a pacifist Jewish mother hoping her baby Solomon will someday go to Harvard and become a brain surgeon. Solomon "loved to learn until he hit school." Black has a way of making us laugh at the absurdities of life and then suddenly we're so moved we can't speak. I saw Wendy Wasserstein's play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, recently and loved it. *Esau My Son* moved me even more. Judith's e-mail: [jb@storiesalive.com](mailto:jb@storiesalive.com)

**Julia DuPrey's** CD, *Cycle of Life* features Julia singing six of her poems accompanied by pianist and composer F. R. C. Clarke. Her singing is ethereal. Memories, she sings "return to haunt, to tease, to gladden or torment." Her singing also haunts and gladdens and awakens the mystery within us. Julia's email: [jbduprey@hotmail.com](mailto:jbduprey@hotmail.com)

**Laura Simms'** international peace works is a marvel. Her book, *A Key to the Heart*, is beautiful. It's a collection of six stories adapted from Afghan folktales. The illustrations by American and Afghan children add a beauty that makes the pages sing. It would make a wonderful present. The proceeds from the sale of this book go to School of Hope a non-profit organization dedicated to providing opportunities for children in Afghanistan. Visit [www.laurasimms.com](http://www.laurasimms.com)

