

# The S T O R Y

## Behind the Story

notes from  
Jay O'Callahan  
Spring 2005

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

## Remembering Jackie Torrence

I was going down to Carnegie Hall on December 16th to get a sense of the stage because Jackie Torrence and I wanted to do a concert there in the spring. Then Karen Dietz from National Storytelling Network called and said that Jackie had died.

On Saturday during this past National Storytelling Festival, a car pulled up outside the church on Main Street. Jackie Torrence waved and was helped out onto the sidewalk to her wheelchair. People flocked around and Jackie said to me, "When are we going to do Carnegie Hall, Jay?" So I got busy trying to arrange it.

In 1988, a businessman produced a concert at Lincoln Center for Jackie and me. I arrived early at Lincoln Center that day and did my sound check. That same morning Jackie was in Seattle, Washington waiting for a plane. Her plane was cancelled and no other plane was going to get her to New York on time. Jackie started talking to the man next to her and said she was going to miss her chance to perform at Lincoln Center. He was charmed by Jackie and said, "I have my own business and

my own plane. I'll fly you to New York." Jackie got to Lincoln Center.

I remember seeing Jackie for the first time at a storytelling conference at Washington College in Jonesborough, Tennessee. I walked into the gracious old building and saw a group of people sitting enthralled around a woman. It was Jackie Torrence telling stories. During the weekend I'd be walking or sitting with Jackie as she'd be telling stories. She'd tell about an antique shop, about a little girl she saw crying down the road, stories about her mother. She was always telling stories. My friend, Ann Hayden, in Marshfield, Massachusetts, told me about a weekend storytelling workshop at Lake Mory in Vermont. Jackie and twelve workshop members were in a restaurant having breakfast and as they got up to leave there were a dozen men at a large table and one of them asked what they were all doing there. Someone said, "We're here for a storytelling workshop." The men laughed derisively. Jackie's eyes flashed and she said to the dozen men, "I'm going to tell you a story." She began and in



Jackie Torrence

moments they were open mouthed and in awe. They were in the presence of greatness.

As I was trying to arrange the Carnegie Hall concert, I had to call Jackie to check on details and Jackie just wanted to tell stories. One day she said, "My mother had a chicken called Queen Victoria," and Jackie proceeded to tell the story of the chicken. The story was enlivened by her wonderful laugh. Two days later I called to check on something and Jackie said it wasn't one of her good days, but there was the laugh. The next day Jackie had a heart attack and died. She was one of the great storytellers of the world. When she told some

mysterious force came forth, opened its invisible arms and drew you in. And once drawn, you didn't leave. Jackie's timing was perfection, her sense of humor so sharp it even made Jackie laugh. Her stories moved you like an inner earthquake. And now she's got the angels listening real close.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 THE GENIUS OF LINDA
- 2 PILGRIMAGE TO ASSISI
- 3 BIG BOSE AND THE LITTLE DRAGON

## The Genius of Linda

Readers of this newsletter asked me to write about my wife, Linda. They've called the office in the afternoon and found her delightful to talk to.

Linda has been the director of the YWCA in Marshfield, Massachusetts for over thirty years. In the afternoon she handles the financial side of my office. Linda went to Oberlin College in Ohio then got her masters in education at Harvard and began teaching in Newton, Massachusetts. We met in 1968 and three months later were engaged. I was the Dean of the Wyndham School in Boston. Two people, two jobs. We were secure. Then Linda gave birth to our son, Ted, and decided to leave teaching for a while. In one explosive moment I decided to leave Wyndham and create stories. Fortunately, I found work as a caretaker for a YWCA on a saltwater marsh in Marshfield and Linda was hired as the part time director. I was given a rent-free cottage for my services and Linda was paid \$4,000 a year so our adventure began. Our children, Ted and Laura, were brought up on that saltwater marsh and I think its tidal rhythms affected them deeply.

Linda is still the director of the YWCA where women (and men) learn, laugh, and grow. The YWCA summer camp is a magical place and everyone knows it so there's always a long waiting list. Linda's work at the YWCA has enriched the lives of thousands.

A friend, Barbara Wall, said recently, "You know Linda is a genius, don't you?" How can I explain Linda's genius? She lives in the moment. I've read many books about mindfulness; Linda just does it. People sense she's paying attention to them so they are immediately at ease with her.

Linda said to me recently, "I got the fish man to smile. He never smiles and I was determined to get him to smile. A lady was giving him a hard time, so when it was my turn I said to the fish man 'You can't please everybody, can you?' He began talking and soon I got him smiling." This triumph begins to explain Linda's genius. If you get her on the office phone ask her how she got that fish man to smile.



Linda O'Callahan

## The Latest on Laura O'Callahan

Laura was twelve when she first came with me to the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. There were thousands there but Laura wandered freely about, saw all the other tellers and has gone back every year since. At last year's festival Laura and I got to work together. I told *Herman and Marguerite* and she signed the story. It was doubly fun because Laura had illustrated the book, *Herman and Marguerite* for Peachtree Publishers as well as the *Earth Stories* CD cover for me.

Laura's busy now interpreting for Deaf in Massachusetts while training for the Boston Marathon and continuing her artwork.

Laura has another business called Organization and Design by Laura. I hired her to redesign my study and it's a marvel. She has an extraordinary sense of color and space and knows how to bring order and beauty into a room and a house. If you need someone to bring that beauty or order to your home or apartment, email Laura at [lauraeocallahan@2way.net](mailto:lauraeocallahan@2way.net).



Jay and Laura

## Ted & Molly at the Strait of Magellan



Molly and Ted. Adventure makes them smile.

My son, Ted, has spent the year leading NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) expeditions with Molly Graham of Washington D.C. in Patagonia. They spent the fall kayaking near the Strait of Magellan. Get your map out and look down at the tip of Chile and Argentina and you'll find that the Strait of Magellan curves like a great snake. There's nothing of a straight line about the lives of Ted and Molly. They follow the winds of adventure all over the world.

## Timing Is Everything

The very last telling at the 2004 National Storytelling Festival didn't feel quite right to me this year. The story I told didn't fit the mood. I was trying to get people to laugh and so were several of the storytellers and something was off kilter. What was hap-

pening was that the Festival was coming to a close so there was a sense of sadness in the air. The Festival is like a great train that starts Friday morning and steams ahead all weekend, and then suddenly it's two o'clock on Sunday and the train is slowing down. It will be over in

two hours. Unconsciously, I think the audience is hankering after something poignant and moving. Donald Davis told a story about his dad. It was a quiet story that fit the mood so we could all face the fact that the festival train was coming to a halt. Timing is everything.

# A Pilgrimage to Assisi

Last year, in April, I felt drawn to make a pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy. Assisi is the town of Francesco Bernadone who later became St. Francis, a man of joy. He loved the earth and the creatures of the earth. He was a singer and a poet. I was in search of some of his joy.

As a young man Francis let go of the things we find important: money, position and power. His father, a successful merchant, expected Francis to go into his business, but Francis had a change of heart. Alone in a broken down church, he heard a cross speaking, "Francis, mend my church." Francis began rebuilding the broken down stone church by himself. He took some of his father's bales of cloth and gave them away. In a rage his father brought Francis before the bishop and the people in the town square and demanded that he be repaid. Francis took off his clothes, gave them to his father and began a new life naked.

Assisi is set on slopes of Mount Subasio. Early each morning I would walk up the steep hills into the stone city. If you took the Italian cars away you would think you were back in the twelfth century. There are ancient stonewalls, stone buildings, stone arches, stone sidewalks, stone streets, stone churches and stone houses. Everything except

stone pasta. Assisi imprints itself on your heart but strangely I found no joy.

A storytelling friend, Bernie Libster, said that walking up to The Hermitage on Mount Subasio, where Francis retreated for silence and prayer, had changed Bernie's life. Early one morning with my backpack stuffed with sandwiches and water, I started the two-mile walk up to The Hermitage. Most tourists go by bus or car. I arrived sweating, walked around, meditated in a silent chapel and started down unchanged. Halfway down I passed a lovely Japanese woman of about nineteen. She smiled and bowed as a courtesy. "How much further," she said. "A mile," I replied. Her face fell. I said, "Maybe only half a mile." Her face fell further. "Maybe only a quarter mile," I said. She said, "Did you walk up to the top?" "Yes," I answered. She beamed as if I were Roger Bannister. A moment later we parted. Suddenly my heart was light and I was singing. I felt full of thanks. Her courtesy reminded me of Francis. When Francis was to have his eye cauterized without anesthetic, he said, "Brother Fire, God made you beautiful and strong and useful; I pray you to be courteous with me."

Two nights later, I walked in the rain to my favorite restaurant, LaPolotta. An American



Assisi

woman was sitting beside me and we talked of home, of books, and of Assisi, which did not feel like home to me. We also talked of Florence. The next morning I headed down to the train station and bought a ticket to Florence.

Florence was a city I'd loved in my twenties and thought I'd never see again. A short walk from the train station, there was Giotto's Bell Tower. The tower is a building of remarkable grace and elegance; the structure lightens and lengthens as it rises becoming complex with marble insets and fine tracery. It's so full of color and it made my heart sing. Suddenly I burst out of myself and was part of a joyous world. And how appropriate, because Francis was like a bell tower ringing with joy. Buongiorno!

## Remembering Dennis Frederick

by Nan Kammann

**D**ennis Frederick was a quiet, funny, creative man who wrote songs and stories of love so beautiful, you knew he lived them and knew of what he wrote and sang. He was the gentle half of the Storyweavers, and Lucinda Flodin, his wife and the love of his life, was the fiery side. Together they made you laugh, they made you cry, and most of all, they made you wonder how sweet the love must be they shared.

The Storyweavers had other jobs but their storytelling and storywriting and storysing was their real work and joy. It was the place their creativity, love for sharing, and generosity of spirit intersected as a couple who loved to spend time sharing their gifts with the rest of the world when they could.

During the summer of 2004, Dennis was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer with not much chance of survival. It was then, those who knew them were witness to one of the finest hero's journeys ever taken. With bravery, dignity, humor and grace, Dennis walked the path he was given. Lucinda was there every step of the way. Both Lucinda and Dennis were our teachers showing us a new way to negotiate this part of life: how to live it fully and completely until you no longer can.

Dennis and Lucinda accepted the love and support of the storytelling community, their friends, co-workers, and family. Nearer the end, when it was clear there wasn't much more time, the circle became smaller; the time became quieter; and Dennis began to go deeper into the experience of letting go. Lucinda, the boys, other family never left his side.

While we feel a great loss of Dennis, we feel gratitude for the generous way he shared until the end and for all Lucinda and Dennis taught us as they lived each moment until his death on January 22, 2005. We'll carry his songs and stories forward in memory of him.

## Big Bose and the Little Dragon

Last January I spent seven intense days doing a film shoot for Bose, the international sound company. The shoot was centered around a short version of my story, *The Little Dragon*, a story about a girl drawing the fire out of a shy little dragon. What fun it was to work with other artists. It was fascinating to work with Wendy Morton of California and her puppet troupe, The Shadow Makers. We were also working with five musicians and a huge sound and camera crew. The purpose of this was for Bose to demonstrate their new high-definition, surround-sound system.

The shoot was held at the Waltham Museum of Industry on the Charles River in Waltham, Massachusetts. It's a huge brick building, which in the early 1800s was filled with the sound of cloth making machines and the activity of hundreds of young farm girls.

I would arrive in the early darkness, walk over a snow covered wooden bridge and pause to look at the icy Charles River flowing beneath me, then into the building to work. The set was like that of a movie. There were cameras everywhere. The soundmen and cameramen were dressed in black. The musicians would be warming up. The puppe-

teers were also dressed in black and arranging their lights behind a great white screen. The puppeteers were never seen but around in front you would see the shadow puppet of a little dragon and a shadow puppet mountain and king. I would narrate, the musicians would play, and the puppeteers would move their puppets. It was all a complicated, fascinating dance. After several days of working we had children come in to provide a live audience. That added excitement and the children were wonderfully responsive and intrigued by the story and the work of the puppeteers.



Jay and Wendy  
[www.theshadowmakers.com](http://www.theshadowmakers.com)

In my story a character named Monsieur LaFlute, plays a simple tune on his flute. Steve Ruggere of Bose, took that tune and composed rich and memorable music. Often when I was leaving at night I would hear cameramen whistling the music.

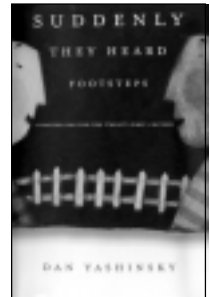
It was a rare time and when it was done, Bob Petrucci, who supervised the whole production, sent an email to everybody saying, "That was soooooo amazing! What a privilege and a gas it was to hit new heights with you guys. There was so much love in the room. Grateful and transformed."

## IN BRIEF

**Gratia Banta**, artist, youth services consultant and workshop leader, is also the Chair of the Caldecott Committee, 2006. What an extraordinary honor. Gratia was selected to exhibit 23 pastels and paintings at the Falmouth Memorial Library. Gratia's artwork is stunning and I suggest you go to her website, [www.gratiaarts.com](http://www.gratiaarts.com). Her art cards are the best I've ever seen.



**Dan Yashinsky's** book, *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps* (Alfred Knopf, Canada), describes his rich and moving journey as a storyteller. The book is funny, wise and full of wonder. Dan tells us that "The red thread is a German phrase for the inner life of story." He leads us to our own red thread. Dan's email: [dan\\_yashinsky@hotmail.com](mailto:dan_yashinsky@hotmail.com)



**Dolores Hydock's** one-woman show, *Silence*, is stunning. *Silence* is set in the 12th century and on stage with Dolores and three musicians playing medieval instruments. The show is full of humor but I left tingling with questions about my identity. The show is electrically contemporary. Dolores' website: [www.storypower.org](http://www.storypower.org)

**Regi Carpenter's** CD, *Diving and Emerging*, is wonderful. Her voice is intimate and the perfect instrument to bring you to her childhood on the St. Lawrence River, where Regi has underwater tea parties, went fishing with Wonder Bread bait, and watched a mother running down to the river after her son has drowned. These stories touch the mystery of life. Regi's email: [SOARINGSTORIES@aol.com](mailto:SOARINGSTORIES@aol.com)

