

Story Corps:

A Review by Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner

The Oral History Review, Volume 32, No. 2

Published by the University of California Press for the Oral History Association

Since 2003, ordinary people equipped with nothing else than their open hearts and ears for each other and the occasional list of questions, have been interviewing each other in a sound proof "Story-Booth" in the midst of New York's busy Grand Central Station. Story Corps is a brainchild of radio documentary artist David Isay and "attempts to instruct and inspire people to record each other's stories in sound".

Soon a second Story Booth will open in Manhattan at Ground Zero, collecting memories of September 11. Also, two mobile busses will start out from Washington D.C. travelling all over the United States during the next few years. They will stop in hundreds of cities and towns, documenting everyday stories and history from grassroots America for years to come. Anyone is invited to participate. All it needs is an appointment with Story Corps, a family member, a friend or acquaintance to serve as the interviewer or interviewee. For a nominal fee of \$10, a facilitator will help you through the interview process in just 40 minutes. At the end, people walk away with a broadcast quality recording of their interaction, burned on a CD.

Story Corps was created in partnership with the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and receives funding support from several major foundations and corporations, from individual sponsors.

National Public Radio, which supports the project, from time to time broadcasts interview excerpts in 70-second sound bites, go on the air locally and nationwide. With the permission of participants, a copy of each interview is placed into the Oral History Archives at the Library of Congress. The ultimate goal: "Nothing less than an oral history of America", potentially the largest oral history collection in size so far. One press release sets a goal for up to 250,000 interviews, recorded over the next ten years.

Anyone interested can sign up for an appointment either by phone or online. Some first time interviewers might find the interactive online sample questionnaire useful; others might feel overwhelmed by all the options and topics to choose from.

At the Story Booth a friendly facilitator welcomes you and your interview partner and efficiently takes care of all technical aspects of the recording. When someone arrives

without an interview partner, facilitators will also take on the role of the interviewer. Participants are free to choose the stories they want to share with each other.

I have to admit, sitting inside the tiny soundproof booth at Grand Central, I had a hard time forgetting that I am a professional oral history interviewer. The endless stream of hurried commuters outside the window and some faces of those who peeked in were somewhat distracting. As I am used to conducting "professional" and open-ended life story interviews, I was not happy about the time restriction that limits the recording time to 45 minutes. It brought my memories back to the times when I worked in news broadcasting. Notwithstanding, it was refreshing to find myself in the chair of the interviewee and not to worry about the technical aspects of interviewing.

Maybe some of the more research oriented oral historians among us wonder about the randomness and lack of defined focus of this national wide project and might question the average quality of such interviews. I was not given an opportunity to listen to an entire interview of other Story Corps participants, but some of the one-minute interview excerpts available on the Story Corps website are real gems, brilliantly chosen and edited.

Among the multitude of Story Corps interviews, inevitably there will be many conducted by individuals who cannot tell the difference between an open-ended and a leading question. Some first time interviewers probably are very nervous, clumsy, too talkative or outright insensitive. Some interviews may hardly resemble a "professional" oral history interview conducted for an academic research project or for a historic exhibition. Probably not very different from other projects, where hundreds or even thousands of interviews are collected by newly trained volunteers: Many will be just right, but a certain number of interviews will be and remain interesting only to those personally involved.

On the other hand: Is there a guarantee that an interview conducted by professional oral historian or an experienced interviewer always translates into high standard quality? What is high standard quality?

Maybe, decades from now, researchers using new computer systems will navigate with the blink of an eye through those electronic mounds of voices and data and will be able to use them as a prime source of insight and information about everyday history in the United States at the beginning of the third millennium. If technology succeeds to preserve all those voices, I like to think of all the researchers who will be interested in areas unimaginable to us today. They will rejoice in this almost random pool of material and choose from it those segments and aspects interesting to them, at that point in time.

Maybe the topics fascinating to us today will seem very outdated later on, other areas we overlook today will be important then.

If we are deeply and broadly interested in our fellow human beings and have a patient ear to what is important to the teller of the story -- and not only to us -- hopefully much of the material we record today will interest future generations of historians, folklorists, psychologist, sociologists, linguists, and others. These random stories, often on the sidelines of our personal agenda, will emerge as patterns and obvious characteristics of our current lives and times we overlook today.

What fascinates me about oral history, in all its various manifestations, is the focus and attention to (life) stories that tend to be overlooked. The memories of "average" people broaden and deepen my understanding of time periods and events and make me aware of social, political and cultural developments. They teach me about the world and the human spirit. Secondly, I am interested at least as much in the interview process and the effects an interview can have on the individuals involved directly and indirectly, as I am fascinated by the ever growing variations of how these recorded memories are basis of research, presented to an audience, and stored for future generations.

I like to compare our interactive work with the weaving of colorful rag-rugs: Together the interviewee and the interviewer pick and choose the threads of memory. Some are colorful, some are precious, others are torn and un-attractive, others are very dark and scratchy, some glitter in their lasting beauty. Often threads end up woven into to each other seemingly by chance. Unexpected patterns emerge. In the process of an oral history interview we are attentive to the inevitable knots and to the holes and gaps in the pattern of the stories. The results are often surprising, sometimes puzzling, but never un-interesting or dull.

In our electronic times, how often do people still sit down together, ask daring questions and deeply listen to each other's stories? A project like Story Corps, just by its sheer size and openness, its wide range of participants' backgrounds, and the nationwide public attention, might encourage people, inside the Story Booths and out, to ask deeper questions about each other, to listen to each other often and more carefully, if only for that one hour. Some might even realize in the process, that sharing life stories, memories and experiences with each other can be a most enjoyable, rewarding experience. People might surprise themselves as they discover that they are good listeners and/or good tellers of stories. Not only in front of a microphone but also in their everyday lives.

I tend to think, that it does not matter so much, if a project like Story Corps is “good oral history”, or “oral history” at all. When TV came to the average household, some feared that end of radio had arrived; when bloggers started to raise their “unofficial” voices from varied platforms on the internet, many journalists and writers felt threatened. It is a characteristic (still?) of our times, that more individuals than ever before in history can have access to multimedia tools and raise their voices as they wish. Like never before people are given opportunities to express their thoughts and their creativity in words, in music, in art.

The creation of oral histories to is me similar to the process of creating a work of art: the most human of all arts, because careful interaction of human beings is required. Like all art it can be taught only to a degree. Like all art it is encouraged and enhanced by the attention of its audience. Like all art it will be criticized, applauded or dismissed, depending on taste.

Projects like Story Corps and others of similar intent will keep emerging. They will do their part to capture our realities and memories. Not as a competition to oral historians and their art, but as an opportunity for everyone.

© Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, independent oral historian, New York City

www.oralhistory-productions.org