

Story Crossroads: more than Mother Goose in a bonnet

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Story Crossroads is an artistic juncture of professional narrators and even novices who come to the Salt Lake Valley for a yearly storytelling event. It is a meeting place for experienced yarn-spinners and newcomers to voice unique tales. It's a performance for anyone to show up and hear. The stories are interesting, hilarious, intense and diverse — exaggerations or reality? That part is for listeners to decide.

Children, teachers and community members sat together under pavilions at Murray City Park on May 23 to hear a portion of the multi-day storytelling event. The audience couldn't help but have listener's zeal. The gathering was a compelling "crossroads" in and of itself. It was an intersection of spectators and storytellers both that had deeper significance beyond entertainment.

This year there were tales about notable historic characters such Sojourner Truth and Abraham Lincoln. The stories are told with plain sailing, mingled with believe-it-or-not details. It is an impressive

showing of practiced talent. Each teller brought a very personal enactment and performance style. Many fables are based on real research. The orators have a knack for delving deep into historic elements. They somehow find the most remarkable points and interweave those details with creative approach.

“This storytelling festival is a new festival, but it’s quickly growing in reputation because it’s really about the community,” professional teller Brian “Fox” Ellis said. “And I love that they get the kids on stage. They get community members from senior centers. There’s a pretty elaborate network of encouraging people to find their voice and to celebrate their story.”

As a skillful teller at this event, Ellis also modeled how to do it, for those newer to the craft.

“Like a lot of kids, I used to get in trouble for talking too much, and now I get paid for it,” Ellis said, recounting how he got his start. “As a job in college, I worked at summer camps. My favorite part of summer camp was telling stories around the campfire. I’m like, ‘I want to make this my career.’ Little did I know that was even possible at the time. But I started touring the country. I called myself The Eternal Camp Counselor. Basically, I coordinated the children’s program at weekend festivals and conferences, and quickly figured out they paid me more for one hour of entertaining adults than for 48 hours of taking care of kids.”

Then Ellis described his moment of self-actualization that many of us who also work, wait, watch and hope for. “I got invited to the National Storytelling Festival, and I saw people on stage doing what I’d been doing for 10 years, and I went ‘Oh, so that’s who I am,’ and I never looked back,” he said. “I’ve been doing full-time storytelling for 38 years now.”

Telling stories is one way we get to know each other’s backstory. It is a way we can try to understand one another. How well do we attempt to really listen and get to know people around us? According to the professionals, stories are a productive and positive way to teach and communicate—to even help solve cultural misunderstanding and differences.

Denise Valentine, also a professional teller, praised Story Crossroads.,

“The folks in this area should be really proud and tickled that you have one of the better storytelling festivals in the country, with Timpanogos in the fall and this in the spring,” she said. “There’s a lot of opportunity to hear great stories, to participate in workshops, to find your own voice and celebrate your story.”

Valentine brought some of her diverse repertoire. “I tell traditional African folk tales,” she said. “I tell love stories. I started out telling love stories since my name is Valentine—it just seemed to work.”

Her stories sound eclectic and exciting. “All kinds of love—family love, community love, love for mother earth and father sky—how I started out,” Valentine said. “Then I branched out into traditional folk tales. Occasionally, I tell personal stories, but my specialty is historical narratives, since I’m from the birthplace of America, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.. Every place I visit, I always try to seek out the missing stories, the stories that have been buried and omitted—the people who have been marginalized. I’m really delighted to be performing with Brian ‘Fox’ Ellis,” Valentine said.

A “crossroads” has been defined in English language as a time when crucial decisions must be made — decisions that can have significant consequences. But, could a “crossroads” offer a lighter, less stressful opportunity? Can it simply be a meeting place? A point where totally different paths come together to talk and listen. The title of this event is thoughtful and jam-packed with significance.

Tell your perspective, respectfully. Listen to others tell their version. Educate, enrich and enjoy the fantastical details. Don’t let a crucial, comical or unusual time in your history fall silent. At your next reunion, picnic or party... think about including a story. Hear one, and bring one.

For more information on this event or even how to volunteer, visit: <https://storycrossroads.com/>