The Transom Review
Volume 14/Issue 1

Catherine Burns
January 2014

(Edited by Sydney Lewis)

Moth founder, George Dawes Green on stage at The Players. Photo by Denise Ofelia Mangen
Intro from Jay Allison

One of the pleasures of producing The Moth Radio Hour is working with the Women of The Moth. They can take an incipient story and make it rise up. They can get the storyteller out on the high wire with just the right balance of fear and confidence. Their skill is hidden away, but it’s what makes The Moth special. Catherine Burns leads the artistic team, and in her Transom Manifesto she has generously illuminated some of her secret tricks for us. She talks about what makes a Moth story work, and, more particularly, what makes it work (or not) across different media, with fascinating examples. Catherine is a self-confessed story nerd, and she’s willing to hang out on Transom to chat with you about beats, stakes, pov, tense – whatever microelement of narrative intrigues you.

You Talkin’ to Me: How Stories Work at The Moth

From day one, The Moth has been about the simplest thing: a true story well told in front of a live audience. At the end of 2013, there will have been more than 10,000 stories told at The Moth since George Dawes Green started it in 1997. And tens of thousands more have been told at the storytelling events that have sprung up around the world.

Storytelling is an ancient art form, but, as George likes to say, this modern movement is new in the sense that these nights of raw personal stories — dinner table stories — have for the first time come out of the kitchen and onto the stage. It’s a craft, even though our great Moth raconteurs make it look easy. Our directors spend hours working with the storytellers, helping them turn the true events of their lives into art onstage.

The question we get asked most is a simple one: how do you know when you’ve heard something that can be turned into a great story? When Transom asked me to write a “Moth Manifesto” I jumped at the chance to discuss this with a forum of people who care as much about telling great stories as we do. Our team is always trying to figure out the rules (and how best to break them at times). And the rules have shifted as The Moth has moved through different media: what works in audio doesn’t always work on the page or in video or print.

So let’s talk about what makes a great story, and how the delivery system can sometimes affect how you put that story together.
From Bar Story to Moth Story

When I’m trying to figure out what story someone might tell for us, I often ask the person what story they can’t wait to tell a new friend, or what stories their friends ask to hear repeated at dinner (“the one about the time you flipped your car on the way to take the SAT” or “how everything went wrong at your rehearsal dinner,” etc.) You know what I mean; we all have them. Often these stories are anecdotal, but if you dig, there’s usually some deeper meaning, which is why they are important to you and get repeated. (You were subconsciously sabotaging your SAT score because you didn’t want to go to the fancy college your parents had picked out for you; the disastrous dinner bonded the two very different families, etc.)

Ellie Lee was a friend of mine, so I knew that when she was in college, her father’s grocery store — the largest Asian market in New England — had burned to the ground. There were a lot of crazy details that made it a great cocktail party story: the city of Boston had done work in the area a week before and had forgotten to turn back on the hydrants, so there was no water to stop the fire; the fire spread to a building filled with illegally-stored fireworks that suddenly went off.

But when we talked about how to make it about something more, Ellie revealed that up to that point she had seen her father as a little ridiculous (in the way our teenaged selves all think our parents are silly). Over the course of the fire, she saw what her father had built for himself, her family and his Chinatown community. The final piece, “A Kind of Wisdom” maintains the humor of the cocktail party story, but with a rich wrap around.


Another example is the writer Nathan Englander. Nathan had told me a hilarious story about being on a train in Europe, and waking up to find that the car he and his fellow American backpackers were in had been unhitched from the rest of the train at some point during the night, leaving the car just sitting there — by itself — on the track in the middle of nowhere (they didn’t even know what country they were in).

But in digging through the story with Nathan, it turned out that this happened in Eastern Europe just months after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nathan had a very conservative Jewish upbringing. In his words, “I had been raised on a full-on diet of the Holocaust.” So when he finds himself in a lone train car on the wrong side of the iron curtain, he has a full-blown panic attack.
Says Nathan in this story, “This is a part of the world that swallows Jews. [. . .] That wall came down in a day; it could go back up in a day. Half the world was trapped behind it for all those years.”

What began as a funny story about backpacking became a piece about deep fears bubbling up while traveling through post-holocaust Europe.


Sometimes the Greatest Triumphs Have Shaky Starts

Someone who has told half a dozen A-plus Moth stories is New Yorker staff writer Adam Gopnik. He’s a huge crowd favorite, and we love working with him. But he likes to bring up his first Moth story, which was about disagreements among different generations of couples in his family. He was reluctant to rehearse with us, and has always been very vocally critical of his first effort.

Adam Gopnik: Oh my goodness, I came to The Moth telling the worst story ever — I never heard of the goddamned Moth, and I had no interest in the goddamned Moth, and I was lassoed into doing a Moth story by my dear friend, and I was utterly contemptuous of the process and completely uninterested in the effect, and I told a horrible story and that was that!

He’s being way too harsh. The original story is very funny, but because he doesn’t hit the story’s crises hard enough, it feels more like a comic essay than a fully realized Moth story. You can hear it here:

Many years and *Moth* stories later, Adam and I decided to have another go at the story. We worked it through, trying to punch up the emotional arc and bring more Adam into it. I pushed him to find a moment that demonstrated the heart of his disagreement with his wife. I asked him if there was ever an incident that brought him to a breaking point? He remembered a night when he was cooking for his wife and children, and they refused to eat what he’d made. This brought the issues of the story to a head, and gave it a real moment of crisis. Here is the new version, recorded nearly ten years later in 2011, that has appeared on both the podcast and *The Moth Radio Hour* ([www.prx.org/themoth](http://www.prx.org/themoth)):


Another storyteller who had a second go at her story is the astrophysicist Janna Levin. In addition to studying the stars, Janna is a poet and writer. Back in 2005 she told the story of how she met, then lost, the love of her life, Warren. It was a beautiful story, but she used such poetic language that it was easy to miss some of the important beats of her story. At the end, having broken up with Warren on another continent over a year before, she improbably bumps into him again, and the language is so complicated that it’s hard to grasp the facts of what’s happening.

Here is a little excerpt of the moment where she bumps into Warren again:

> Janna Levin: And so I daydreamed this: that the universe had had a big bang and it was born and it was small. And it expanded and it became vast, but it was finite. And it was like the whole Earth had wrapped back onto itself. And so if I drifted away from the Earth I could drift into days, across weeks and maybe years and eventually I would come back to where I started. I would see the Earth approach again and I’d be back where I had begun. I’d bump into Warren in front of our place in San Francisco where we watched our stuff evaporate.

In 2011 we decided to have her tell the story again. We loved the results so much that we used it on our radio show and podcast, and even made it the opening story in our first book.

Here is that same scene from above, taken from the new version. It’s longer, but so much clearer:
Janna Levin: I go back to California, and I take these beautiful walks in the city. San Francisco is so beautiful. And I find myself, despite myself — because I tell myself not to do it — walking past my old neighborhood. I end up going past my old coffee shop, and I’m going like three miles an hour, you know, there are like five thousand feet in a mile, and there’s like three thousand, six hundred seconds in an hour, so I’m going about four-and-a-half feet, I figure, per second. It takes me about two seconds to go past this coffee shop window.

In that time, because I’m looking at my building, my old apartment, full of sentiment, what I don’t realize is that on the other side of that window, inside the coffee shop, is Warren, who, after I left him in the London bus terminal, went back to California, came back to London, went to France, came back to London, and just recently returned to San Francisco, and got a job in the coffee shop, where he regaled the patrons with stories about his travels. He was so uprooted. But the light was back on in his eyes. And as he’s turning around to deliver a coffee, he lifts his head to see me, in those two seconds, walk past the frame of the window. And he shouts, “It’s self-service!”

He stumbles out of the coffee shop. People are grabbing muffins and coffees; they’re like, “Warren! What’s up?!?” And he’s trying to get out of the coffee shop, trying to grab on to the handle of the door. He keeps banging his head. It’s like a bird trying to get out the window. And all of the sudden, the door swings open and deposits Warren in front of me.

When I recently asked Janna about this, she said, “I was writing less the second time I suppose. I was more invested in the phrasing and impact of the spoken word.” If you’d like to listen, here is the second version in audio:


And here is the original (until now un-released) version from back in the day, which is fun to listen through once you’ve heard the new version:

Tell Stories from Your Scars, Not from Your Wounds

Recently on the excellent public radio show *On Being* (http://www.onbeing.org/), Krista Tippett interviewed the trailblazing Lutheran Minister Nadia Bolz-Weber (http://www.nadiabolzweber.com/), who said she always tries to preach from her scars and not her wounds. If you tell a story before you’ve emotionally processed it, it can feel less like art and more like therapy for the audience.

You can find the interview here: (http://www.onbeing.org/program/nadia-bolz-weber-on-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace/5896)

*The Moth* has a YouTube Channel (http://www.youtube.com/user/mothstories), and our most watched video of all time is from the comedian Anthony Griffith. His brilliant, but devastating, story charts three appearances he made on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson, which coincided with the illness and eventual death of Anthony’s three-year-old daughter. Part of why the video works so well is because when you watch Anthony, you can see that he’s in complete control of the story, even though he’s very emotional. The audio is actually much harder to listen to because you can’t see his face, and so it’s less clear how in the driver’s seat he really is. We ultimately chose to put the audio on the radio show, but video is still my favorite medium for the story (the audio is also challenging because Anthony’s voice has a little shake to it that’s caused by his Parkinson’s, and that shake can make it sound as if he’s crying throughout the entire story).

Our former Executive and Creative Director Lea Thau (now of Strangers fame (http://www.storycentral.org/)), who worked with Anthony, felt he was ready to tell the story in part because it had been years since his daughter had died so he’d had time to process his loss.

Anthony insisted that he wanted to tell this story because he wanted his fellow comedians to know what he’d been through. It was something he’d never spoken about to anyone in the comedy world.

When a story is too raw, the audience can be left feeling awkward, or worse, unsafe. But Anthony is a consummate professional, and he was able to tell the story in a way that made the audience feel comfortable because he had clearly processed the events and was in control. Even though he was telling a heart-breaking story, he was able to take care of his listeners.

If you have time, start by listening to a few minutes of the audio here:

Then switch over to the video and I think you’ll see what I mean: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdBj1X33rXM)

One of the great challenges our directors face is figuring out if someone is really ready to tell their story. We joke that it needs to be at least ten years after a death and five after a divorce, and we’re only half kidding. It takes time to gain insight into painful experiences. One test is whether the storyteller can find a place to land the story. It may not be all wrapped up in a bow at the end (life rarely is), but is there some “aha” moment that helps create a platform on which the storyteller can land. If their feelings about what happened are still all over the place, they may not be ready.

A recent exception to the “let-some-time-pass-before-you-take-on-a-story-about-a-traumatic-life-event” rule is the comedian Tig Notaro, who rose to national fame after walking onstage at a Los Angeles comedy club and telling the story of being diagnosed with breast cancer just a few hours after she got the news. When Tig told a follow-up story at The Moth a few months later, I was listening to a draft of the story with Tig and Moth director Sarah Austin Jenness. It was in late November, and Tig referred to something that happened on Thanksgiving, and I was like, “Thanksgiving — you mean as in LAST WEEK?!” She did. She told the story a few weeks later in early December, and it was a huge hit, but, trust me, Tig is the exception. It would take most people ten years to get there.


**Between the Covers: The Nuances of the Human Voice**

In 2011, Hyperion asked us to gather a number of our favorite stories for publication in a book. We were at first reluctant to do so. We were concerned that putting the stories on the page was a little at odds with what we were known for, which is stories told and recorded live, with no notes (no paper involved, ever).

But as we began to transcribe the stories, we were amazed by how well many of them worked on the page — how you could really “hear” the voices as you read. They felt alive, even in two-dimensional black and white.
Reading the stories gave them a new, previously unexplored texture. One of the nicest things about reading the stories, as opposed to listening, was that it allowed you to pause mid-story. If a moment made you think of something that happened in your own life, you could stop and reflect on that for a minute (without missing the next three minutes of the story).

Many aspects of the editing process surprised me. For years I’d told storytellers that they had to be clearer about their intentions in an oral piece because unlike with a book, the listener can’t just go back and re-read if they miss something. I would ask them to literally slow down the sentences of the big moments so no one could miss them. To that end, I thought some stories that didn’t work as well in audio might work better on the page where the reader could slowly read and process.

But just the opposite was true. On the page, unless the storyteller stated very clearly the big moments of transition (which we often refer to as “tent pole sentences”), the piece often felt muddy and unformed. The relative looseness of transcribed dialogue (v. a sharply written piece) combined with vague or fuzzy transitions was death on the page.

Here is a link to the website for the book (http://themothbook.org/), which allows you to read a few full stories for free.

Some of our all-time favorite stories just didn’t work on the page. And with the permission of those storytellers, I’ll give you two examples. Our second most watched YouTube story is told by Steve Burns, who spent years as the host of the hit children’s series Blue Clues. His story — about trying to break out of his nerdy shell to fulfill his teenaged dream of going on a date with a bikini model — is closing in on a million views, and rightfully so. But when I read the transcription, the charm didn’t quite translate for me. When you listen to Steve’s kind, decent voice (and better yet see him), his self-deprecation and sweet charm really come through. But on the page, his desire to go on a date with a babe seems a little shallow, whereas in the video, you feel his desperation to be cool (or to fulfill his junior high idea of what cool is.) His vulnerability is obvious. But when I gave the transcript to our editor at Hyperion (who had never seen the video or heard the audio), she didn’t connect with it, which is pretty much the exact opposite reaction that he gets when he tells it.

See Steve Burns video here: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwmtkFPYXsg)
Our podcast host Dan Kennedy told another favorite that didn’t quite land on the page. Dan has been a *Moth* regular for over a decade. He’s hosted hundreds of shows, and has told half a dozen favorite stories, including one about arriving at therapy to find his long-time therapist, Milton, lying dead at his desk. Ultimately the changes Milton helped Dan bring about in himself give Dan the capacity and courage to handle the situation.

Dan has a truly original voice, and he’s also great on the page (the proof is in his two best-selling humor memoirs: [http://www.amazon.com/Dan-Kennedy/e/B000APT7RW/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1385036765&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.com/Dan-Kennedy/e/B000APT7RW/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1385036765&sr=1-2-ent)).

But he has a live storytelling style that’s self-deprecating and extremely roundabout. He can appear almost dumbfounded, seeming to stumble and bumble his way into moments of enlightenment. As *Moth* director Jenifer Hixson says, “Dan Kennedy manages to clue you into the open manhole ahead just so you can enjoy watching him accidentally fall in. He convinces you that he’s blundering his way through things, but by the end of his stories, you realize he was driving the bus with great precision.” But that style, which works so well in audio and live, seems a little disjointed and messy on the page. See what you think.


I recently asked Dan about the differences between his live and written voices.

Dan: “I still get so nervous when I go onstage, and I think that’s where the down-tempo thing comes from when I’m telling a story or hosting. The truth is, I’m stumbling, but I’m focused. I’m basically a stammering laser beam; I know exactly where I’m going to end up and what beats I’m going to hit, it’s just that I get there by falling on my face in slow motion — but there’s a plan. I basically do a drunken ballet without ever taking a drink. And if I try to write it, it just reads like I’m having a stroke. What I do in books and *McSweeney’s*, and what I do onstage at *The Moth* are just two really different things. I don’t know if I’ll ever get the live thing, that weird rhythm, down on the page.”
But Then Again, the Reverse Can Also Be True

A problem we encounter regularly is the difficulty writers have when transitioning from writing their stories down to saying them out loud. We struggle to get writers to not write their stories down first, but to work off an outline and just tell them. They often sound stiff and written early on. Our director Meg Bowles has a great trick where she makes the storyteller tell her the entire story using words they’ve never used before. It always breaks them out of their patterns and makes the piece feel fresh again.

Another challenge we face, especially when working on a piece that started out on the page (as, say, a moment in a memoir or an essay in a magazine) is that the storyteller has often forgotten anything that happened in the story that they didn’t write about. The story becomes the way they told it, with all the details that aren’t on the page pushed to the back of their mind. In cases like that, I try to get the storyteller to make a list of 10 things that happened that day that aren’t in the story. They don’t need to necessarily include them, but forcing themselves to remember — to go back there in their minds — brings a freshness to the story, even if all the words are the same. (I stole this trick from Lea Thau, who used it when directing me in a story long ago.)

I interviewed Adam Gopnik a while back for the radio show, and he talked about how telling stories helped him keep his writing fresh.

Adam: “I sensed in myself that I had become, in some ways (and doubtless still am in every way) an unduly fancy writer. That is, that the sort of curly-cues and ornamentations of erudition had begun to drown out my ability to simply tell a tale about what had happened.”

He went on to say,

“But I think writing is a business of perfection. You want every sentence to be as perfectly polished as you can possibly make it. You want every sentence to sort of glow and shine, and have its own little balance and structure and charm. A story’s not like that. A story can tolerate a lot of rough stuff in the course of its being relayed, as long as what’s being related is significant. You can’t write that way. Readers are not forgiving of imperfection. But don’t you think listeners are totally unforgiving of insincerity?”

Certainly all of us Moths would say so. We have the most open, warm-hearted audience in the world. You can feel it in the room: the audience wants the storytellers to do well and is rooting for them. But the one thing that will make an audience turn on storytellers is if they seem to be performing or disconnecting emotionally in some way. The audience can sense their dishonesty.
You Talkin’ to (just) Me?

But when a storyteller walks onstage and speaks from the heart, the audience is extremely supportive. The number one quality of great storytellers is their willingness to let us into their biggest struggles and show their vulnerability. An example of someone who did that brilliantly is Dori Bonner, who called our pitchline several years ago (the pitchline allows anyone to call and leave us a two-minute pitch for a story they would like to tell).

Dori’s story tracked her family’s escape from Afghanistan to India, where her father eventually paid a smuggler to take Dori and her brother to the United States. The smuggler stole the money their parents had sent along and abandoned the children at a Thai airport. It was a huge story, and at the time, Dori hadn’t spent a lot of time speaking in front of a crowd. But we were encouraged by her infectious enthusiasm and heart. We felt confident that the audience would want to hear what she had to say. Said Maggie Cino who worked with Dori, “When she walked onstage she was so nervous, but as soon as she started to talk her passion took over. A crowd of six hundred people gave her a standing ovation after her story was done, and she just sat there and cried.”

Dori may have looked nervous, but if you hear her story on The Moth Radio Hour next spring, she doesn’t sound nervous, which is part of the magic of experiencing the stories through your ears alone. When we first made the stories available in audio, we discovered that there was a new intimacy to listening to the stories without the visual. The storyteller was there, in your head, just you and the teller. When The Moth worked live, ideally every audience member felt like the storyteller was talking just to them. But in audio, that was literally true.

So even though these stories are born onstage, they live on, invisibly.

I am a big story nerd, and could go on all day, though I’m going to wrap this up for now. But I’d like to invite anyone who wants to continue micro analyzing the techniques of story weaving to post questions and comments here, and I’ll do my best to respond so we can keep the conversation going.
About Catherine Burns

Catherine Burns is The Moth’s long-time Artistic Director and a frequent host of the Peabody Award-winning The Moth Radio Hour. (http://themoth.org/radio). Prior to The Moth, she directed and produced independent films and television, interviewing such diverse talent as Ozzy Osbourne, Martha Stewart and Howard Stern. In the fall of 2012 she directed her first solo show, Helen & Edgar, which was called, “utterly absorbing and unexpectedly moving” by Ben Brantley of The New York Times. Born and raised in a small town in Alabama, she now lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three-year-old son.

Catherine Burns. Photo by Flash Rosenberg

Selected Comments on You Talkin’ to Me: How Stories Work at The Moth

Catherine says:

Thank you for sharing! Do you have any recommendations for resources to dig into on the subject of storytelling? It’s a growing interest of mine; I’d love to read more on it.

Catherine Burns says:

There is increasingly a lot out there. I haven’t personally read it yet (it’s on my nightstand!) but I know a lot of people who I respect loved The Storytelling Animal by Jonathan Gottschall. There’s also a really fun comic book on how to put together a radio show that was a collaboration between Ira Glass and the cartoonist Jessica Abel that I loved. If others have recommendations, I’d love to hear about them.
Catherine says:

Thanks so much! I’m in a big season of listening and absorbing, mainly by way of podcasts and books when I have opportunity to read, so I look forward to creating time and checking these out.

Eli says:

Check out Telling True Stories. It’s a collection of essays about writing nonfiction from the talented Nielsen Storyboard. Really helped me with my own story arcs and themes.

Catherine Burns says:

Thank you, I just ordered Telling True Stories. I love the Nielsen Storyboard. If you’re listening, one of the podcasts I recommend is Lea Thau’s Strangers podcast. It’s on iTunes. She was our Executive and Creative Director for ten years, and this is her new project. I obviously know her personally and so am prejudiced, but I think it’s absolutely brilliant…I listen whenever it hits my iTunes list.

Catherine says:

Thanks for the leads – adding those books to my list and uploading Strangers episodes now! If you don’t mind sharing, what lead you to your role as Artistic Director? I read your short bio at the end of the article about your background in directing and producing: I’m just always curious as to how people come into their professions and passions. I currently stay at home with our 14mo son who has developmental delays, so our days are pretty monotonous with his therapies. I’m often listening to stories and podcasts as an outlet and opportunity to learn and care for myself. It’s a sweet season in many ways, very transformative. But I’m always fantasizing about what I’ll do on the other end, whenever I do work outside the home again, and I feel like one way to prepare for that is to hear from those whose jobs and career paths sound intriguing and exciting. What’s the reality? Any advice on how to nurture and utilize one’s affinity for stories? Sorry if this is too off-topic or personal…

Catherine Burns says:

… (As the Artistic Director of The Moth, nothing is too personal for me!) I had a kind of funny path. I started out wanting to direct films, but discovered that I didn’t really enjoy being on sets or in editing suites that much, which was obviously a problem.
I switched to being a segment producer for TV, interviewing people and producing short 5-minute segments (I was able to make the job switch after a friend from college recommended me). I loved the job. I got to meet tons of interesting people, and telling different stories all the time (v. a feature film where you work on one story for 2-3 years). I was eventually offered a job at MTV and was about to take it when 9/11 happened. The show I was supposed to work for was canceled.

I’d been volunteering for The Moth for about nine months at the time, helping out with The MothSHOP community program and handing out programs at shows. When the then Artistic Director quit, I applied to work there (one of two employees at the time). It was a big pay cut, and the hours were brutal, but it was the best decision I ever made because I was passionate about what I was doing. If you’re having trouble finding a job, volunteering at the place where you want to work can be a great in. It allows people at the company to get to know you, and for you to get to know the culture and see if it’s what you really want. We have a staff of 18, and all but 3 started out as interns or volunteers (including me!) I hope this helps. Good luck!

Catherine says:

This is very encouraging! Thank you! I have a background in non-profit volunteer coordination so I feel silly for not having given volunteerism more credit. I actually served in that position through AmeriCorps, which is to say that I essentially volunteered as a volunteer coordinator, and what you said for The Moth interns/volunteers-turned-employees was true for my organization too. Had I not stopped working to have my son and stay at home with him, I believe I would have found my way into a staff position there. I do actually continue to volunteer as a resume writer on a limited basis but it’s not where I eventually want to end up professionally so, in heeding your advice, I’ll plan to explore other volunteer opportunities as well. One more question: I have a small educational award from my time with AmeriCorps that I’m trying to discern how to best use. Do you believe experience or more formal education is more valuable in the work you do now? Just curious as to whether there’s a type of class or degree you’d recommend or whether you believe it would be more beneficial to just study what I enjoy, which would likely be a creative writing class.

Catherine Burns says:

In general (and this is very personal) I tend to look at experience over classes. I will say though, that I’ve heard absolutely amazing things about Transom’s workshops (and I swear I’m not just saying that because I’m writing on their site!) A number of members of our team have taken them and loved them. But depending on what you want to ultimately do, hands-on experience is so valuable.
My college internship was worth more than most of the classes I took in film school as it showed me how things work in the real world. My summer job writing for my hometown newspaper in Alabama taught me more about finding stories and storytelling than my intro to creative writing class at Boston University.

Eli says:

When working with tellers, how do you *force* introspection? I assume they need maturity and perspective to be able to tell a personal story. As another person, how do you trigger these things to people who may be a bit superficial?

Catherine Burns says:

You know, it’s always tricky. We try to never force the introspection because it never really works (You can lead a horse to water, but . . .) We do push people to try to find the deeper personal meaning in their stories, but sometimes it’s either not there or else they are not ready to go there. In that case, the people end up kind of self-selecting out rather than moving forward. There’s a certain kind of person who wants to tell a story at a place like The Moth, and so we try to focus on the people who do want to really open themselves up.

Our open mic storySLAMs are a place where someone can tell something without digging quite as deep because you don’t need as big of an arc to sustain a 5-minute story (v. the 10-12 minute mainstage stories). So if someone has a story that’s falling on the side of anecdotal, we might suggest they tell it at a slam.

We also find that it sometimes just takes time. You may have the first conversation with someone and not get to the right place, but continue the conversation (sometimes over years) in the hopes that the time will come when they are ready. I have a few stories that have been sitting on the back burner for many years in the hopes that one day the person will want to tell it.

Eli says:

…. Do you ever feel like the “aha moment” is a bit contrived? It’s almost a cliché, that storytellers say, “and that’s when I realized” in their stories. Is there a fear that tellers must learn from every story they tell? (A recent YouTube upload had approximately 12 “that’s when I realized”s. It seemed a bit inauthentic.
Catherine Burns says:

….As for the “aha” moment feeling contrived, this is absolutely a problem! It’s something our founder, George Dawes Green, and I have been discussing a lot lately. I think for a story to be a story, there does need to be some sort of change involved, but there are ways to do it where you present the change in a subtle way, without having to say, “and then I realized.” You can just be in the new space at the end, without pointing it out in a meta way. We never want stories to feel like afterschool specials. I think in the past we sometimes have put too much emphasis on a pat ending, but we’ve really strived to get away from that in the last four or five years. In recent years, I’ve frequently said to a storyteller, “You don’t have to wrap the whole thing up in a bow at the end.” Because of course life rarely is that neat. Subtle endings can be just as powerful because they feel honest and real: they ring true.
About Transom

What We're Trying To Do

Transom.org channels new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and discusses that work, and encourages more. Transom is a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to pass the baton of mission and good practice in public media.

We invite Guests to come write about their work here to 1) keep the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) let us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) foster a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing. Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over.

We accept submissions for featured audio pieces and for "Sidebar" entries.
- Submitted audio can be stories, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere--by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio. We're looking for things that are less heard, different angles, new voices, new ways of telling, and any other good pieces that haven't found another way onto public radio. Editors evaluate material more by what it does than what it is. Some questions they'll consider:
  · On the air, would it keep you by your radio until it's over?
  · Is the maker someone of talent who should be encouraged?
  · Does it push the boundary of conventional radio in an exciting way?
  · Will it provoke fruitful discussion online?

Staff

Producer/Editor – Jay Allison
Project and Design Manager – Samantha Broun
Web Wonk – Barrett Golding
Web Consultants – Holly North, Simon Baumer
Editors – Sydney Lewis, Viki Merrick
Tools Column – Jeff Towne
Emeritus Web Directors – Robert DeBenedictis, Jared Benedict
Emeritus Site Designer – Joshua Barlow
Emeritus Web Developers - Josef Verbanac, Barrett Golding

Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts that has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM has been the creative force behind projects like the Public Radio Exchange (prx.org), The Moth Radio Hour, This I Believe, and others. APM is the founding group for WCAI, the public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Transom.org receives funding from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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