February 1st, 2012

What's A Narrative?

Last week in Los Angeles, the Getty Museum hosted an event that brought three artists into conversation on the topic of "Storytelling and Photography." I was just dotting the I's and crossing the T's on my storytelling course, " Effective Storytelling with Final Cut Pro X " for Lynda.com (available Feb 1, 2012), so any valuable discourse around the topic of storytelling catches my attention. And recently, I've begun to exhibit my own photographic art , so what a treat to listen to artists talk about two of my favorite subjects. I was there with bells and whistles.

Two of the artists were photographers Carrie Mae Weems and Eileen Cowin , whose work was part of the Getty's " Narrative Intervention in Photography " exhibit. The focus of the exhibit was to explore the notion of a narrative within each photographer's work. The third artist was Anna Deavere Smith , playright, actress and educator, who moderated, guided, and stimulated the conversation into deep, reflective waters. The conversation between the women was thoughtful, honest and intelligent – and thoroughly enjoyable.

Going to this event forced me to look at something I've wanted to question for some time. Just what the heck is a narrative anyway? Now some of you may be saying, "Silly girl, it's a story." And you would be right of course. But I work in the film and television industry where the term 'narrative' is often used to describe a particular writing genre, such as dramatic or narrative writing, typically a script about a fictional story or account of a person or event. So when someone says to me, "I'm a filmmaker," my next question to them is typically, "What type of films do you make? Documentaries? Comedies? Narrative?" See what I mean? Words ain't always easy, are they? Listen to Diana's blog

Having used the term 'narrative' in this way for so many years, I wanted to take a step back and allow a broader and perhaps more precise meaning to reform in my mind. First, I drew from the Getty exhibit, where the definition of narrative was painted on an exhibit wall for all to see: "Narrative is defined as a spoken, written or visual account of a sequence of events." 'Hmm,' I thought, as I read the words to myself. 'That broadens things quite a bit.'

Later, I searched Wikipedia's offering on the subject: "A narrative is a constructive format (as a work of speech, writing, song, film, television, video games, photography or theatre) that describes a sequence of non-fictional or fictional events." Then I found the word's origin. Narrative derives from the Latin verb narrare, 'to recount,' and is related to the adjective gnarus, which means 'knowing' or 'skilled.' Maybe another definition for storyteller could simply be 'a person who skillfully recounts an event.'

If I close my eyes, I can mentally transport myself to another time and place where sitting around the fire under a starry sky and sharing stories, one person after another, was common practice, a way of recounting the day. And the storytellers must've been pretty good at it because, like anything, the more you do it the more skillful you become. Unfortunately, storytelling today can too often happen to us as we sit passively in front of our big screen TVs. But what of our own stories? Don't they need telling? Don't they merit recounting and sharing? And if so, why not endeavor to do it with some skill?

In digging further, I found that my initial use and understanding of what's a narrative, at least according to Wikipedia , wasn't too far off: "More narrowly defined, it is the fiction-writing mode whereby the narrator communicates directly to the reader." While the definition I've been using isn't actually wrong, it's simply not broad enough to have the kind of discussion I'd like to start with you – my readers, students, cohorts, and creative partners. It’s my belief that becoming more confident as storytellers could lead to other ways we might express our art and creativity and perhaps even improve our world.

So here's the deal. I DON'T CARE if you want to communicate your story through photography, video, songs, film, stick figure animation or play-doh. And I DON'T CARE whether you use Final Cut, Avid or Premiere to edit your video story or film; Photoshop or Aperture to tweak your images. You hear me? Don't care. They're just tools, the medium you choose to express yourself. But I DO CARE that you tell your story and express your artistic creativity in whatever way you can. Speak your story out loud. Submit it to The Moth . Watch your words collide on your computer screen into a script, essay, or memoir. Juxtapose images that reflect the simplicity of a smile or the complexity of a deep love. Go write a song of protest or hope.

So if you're feeling the urge, as I am, to find, craft, and develop your own narrative, I invite you to join me as I dive deeper into the fascinating and endless subject of storytelling. For video enthusiasts, my storytelling course on Lynda.com can help you along your journey. Your comments and thoughts here will help me along mine. And hopefully, we may all find ourselves one night preferring to light a fire, or perhaps just a candle, and ask our friends and mates, "Hey, tell me a story of what happened in your world today?" rather than "What's on TV tonight?"

As the poet Maya Angelou says, "Life is pure adventure. And the sooner we realize that, the quicker we will be able to treat life as art." Let's get crackin'!