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Responsibility of a Storyteller: Diversity

In my first blog, I referred to older times when sitting around a fireside sharing stories was an evening's entertainment, and probably good entertainment at that. In putting my own pen to paper to write a new short story, I thought about those times and realized something really important. Any storyteller – no matter the time, place or format – has a responsibility to the audience to convey a story that is interesting, dramatic, and visual. In my next few blogs, I'm going to talk about these three responsibilities.

First, let's focus on how to make a story interesting. One way to create interest is to add diversity. In my "Effective Storytelling with Final Cut Pro X" course on Lynda.com, I talk about creating story diversity by combining different voices or perspectives into one project. The footage in that course was from the documentary, Delicious Peace Grows in a Ugandan Coffee Bean, which tells the story of how Christian, Muslim, and Jewish coffee growers came together to grow premium coffee beans. That's one level of diversity. But then the documentary shows how American coffee importers partnered with them to sell their coffee. And the story just kept getting more and more interesting.

So what adds interest? Diversity! If there isn't any diversity in the story, or how you're telling a story, your audience will lose interest and won't want to make the journey with you. And how do you bring interest and diversity into your story or project? Ask yourself, do your characters experience or view life from different perspectives? Do they come from different geographical regions? Are they on opposing sides of a political debate? Do they have different ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds? Remember, there's a reason the old cartoon characters, Mutt and Jeff, was so popular. It's because they were so different.

I recently had the opportunity of seeing the old John Houston film, "The African Queen," on the big screen. I'd seen it many times before on video and DVD, but I'd never seen a 35mm projected film print. It was fabulous. For most of the film, there were just two characters portrayed by Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. At the beginning of the story, it was clear these two characters had nothing in common. They lived in two separate worlds and had two very different realities.

Storyteller and filmmaker John Houston used the diversity of the characters as his starting point in the story. His two main characters and their different worlds bumped and collided with each other throughout the film until they finally came together in the end. (In my next blog, I'll talk about your responsibility to bring drama into your story.) This is a great example of how interesting a story can be if you paint your characters for fiction, or position them in non-fiction, so your audience can see and experience a wider range of emotions.

So take a closer look at some of your favorite stories, movies, photos, or songs, and ask yourself what holds your interest. Then look for the interest and diversity in your own project. Remember, you don't have to have an army of characters in your story, but you are responsible for drawing the characters you do have with distinct enough differences to make things interesting.