

## SELLING STORIES

I remember the moment I realized I was not a journalist but a sales and marketing man. This was in Boston, many years ago. It was March, the muddiest month. At the time I worked for an excellent Catholic university, hammering away at stories for the alumni magazine, and I thought of myself as a writer, a collector of tales, a portraitist in prose, something of a minor inky artist, but one slushy afternoon, as I thrummed my keyboard, it suddenly came to me that I was in advertising – that I was promoting a product, soliciting attention for it so as to recruit purchase, inviting investment, establishing brand identity and affiliation, doing my utmost to lure cash into the coffers of the corporation.

I stopped typing and sat there gaping. For twenty years, since I'd been a boy of ten aping my newspaperman father and learning to type fast while cracking wise, I had dreamed of being a journalist, working for a magazine, walking in the footsteps of E.B. White and A.J. Liebling and H.L. Mencken and S.L. Clemens, smelling and shaping stories, offhandedly gathering my essays into ballyhooed books, wandering the highways and byways of this bruised and blessed land, charming and chaffing testy editors, singing and celebrating the grace and humor and idiocies of the Americans, such a glorious and foolish race; but there I was, on a sleeting afternoon on the edge of the city, a salesman. I had so wanted to be William Faulkner, and at age thirty I was Willy Loman.

And yet, and yet, I began to think, what *was* the product? Wasn't it epiphany and opportunity, opening and elevation? Wasn't I selling an ocean of new chances, or at least the chance at those chances? Wasn't it a village of stunning ideas and shivering moments? Wasn't it the electricity of an awakened mind and a startled soul? Wasn't I, in fact, selling, to young men and women and the parents who loved those children with all their humming hearts, the possibility of finding a riveting self they have never even imagined?

And the product itself, I realized, was delightfully ephemeral, it could not be touched or tasted, boxed or regulated, it was a verb of a product, remarkably different for each consumer, an experience, an emotional country; it was not a shoe, a truck, a plastic disk stamped with labyrinthine code, it was not even a service, a tour, an expedition complete with guides and goblets. It was, simply, An Education, something some would explore to the deepest caverns of their souls and others would breeze through beerily, and no one could dictate its shape for each student.

This cheered me up wonderfully, and I began to realize too that I was a crucial actor in the play, a critical cog, for if no one told stories of what it was like to be educated there, of the salt and spice of that intellectual and cultural and spiritual and social village, soon no one would enter it, and it would wither and die, reduced to shreds of memory and acres of archives, yet another college that used to be, alive only in anecdote, not in the tumultuous hearts of teenagers, those furnaces of the future. The stories there swam in the air by the millions, every student and professor and staffer and alumnus and alumna and parent and neighbor and donor had a hundred, and without story farmers like me to cull and harvest them, to mill them into meals for the curious world, there was, in a sense, no college at all, for if we have no stories we have nothing; that being the cruelty of diseases that rob memories and leave only the fruitless body yearning for its salty spirit.

Twenty years later I still sell stories, though long ago I have graduated to a Holy Cross university, from which glorious and unconquerable height I tease my Jesuit friends about their admirable order being banned by the Vatican for forty years. But all the rest of my days I will remember that moment when I first saw what I was, and what it meant; and I have been singing that song ever since.

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*Brian Doyle, Editor*

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