

THE DIRECTOR'S VIEW

REMEMBERING TO FORGET

Like many World War II veterans, Charlie has a seemingly endless stock of war stories set during his years in the Pacific theater. His yarns are populated with vivid characters from his war years doing memorable things great and small. Charlie's tour of duty produced a lifetime's stock of anecdotes. Nothing since, I would guess, has ever been quite so vivid for him. A talented writer, Charlie has written down many of these stories. A few of his stories have been published in his company's newspaper. Through his stories, Charlie has made a name for himself. Last year he was given his company's "Man of the Year" award.

It turns out that Charlie is also something of a war hero. A year ago the History Channel tapped him to join a group of veterans returning to the Philippines to film a documentary account of a heretofore untold tale of how his company performed a daring rescue of civilians from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. The funny thing is, for all his storytelling, he never told us about this adventure.

Charlie's stories seem to be driven by a compulsion to relive his war years. His war stories are, by turn, funny, moving, nostalgic, and ironic. But they are never violent. In Charlie's story-war, soldiers don't die or maim or kill. They mainly fool around and somehow survive. One day I got up the courage to ask him about his selective storytelling. "You never talk about the killing," I said. "Didn't you ever have to confront someone at the end of a gun? Didn't anyone

get hurt?" For once, Charlie was at a loss for words. His eyes jumped nervously. With a quick shake of his head and a dismissive wave of his hand, he brushed off my question. I knew better than to pursue the matter and quickly changed the subject. Before I knew it, we were into another amusing tale. Remembering and forgetting can be hard to tell apart. Sometimes, remembering the past is actually a way to forget.

In *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner argues that the narrative mode is the most basic tool of what he calls the human "effort after meaning." Our stories allow us to fit the disturbing anomalies of life into a familiar form, making them a part of the collective as well as individual memory. What Charlie taught me that day, however, was that for some of life's contingencies, making meaning requires as much forgetting as remembering.

This issue highlights the MARIAL Center's research on family narratives. Marshall Duke, Robyn Fivush, and their students have been studying the positive impact that family storytelling seems to have on the psychological resilience of children. The measures they use stress the transmission of family history from parents to children, and the data thus far suggests that knowing one's family history somehow provides kids with a psychological armor that enhances self-esteem and prepares the children to deal effectively with future stressors. Less clear is whether, to be effective, these accounts also have to be true.

Last year, in a riveting MARIAL colloquium, we had a very

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different take on family storytelling. Harald Welzer presented his work on social remembering and forgetting around the German family dinner table. His research focused on three-generation families containing a grandfather who had participated directly in World War II. Looking closely at the often-subtle modulations in language that constituted intergenerational family narratives, Welzer showed how family storytelling can transform reality through creative remembering, in this case by distancing Grandpa from any responsibility for unthinkable actions during the war. In some cases, Opa the soldier was turned into a resistance fighter. And so the family history gets told, and so history is rewritten.

Selective deletion appears to be one important aspect of the human "effort after meaning." The psychological and social needs that underwrite much of our most passionate storytelling often work against full disclosure. Is this kind of idealized memory a good thing or a problem? Kelly Marin's MARIAL research (see The Fellows' Forum, page 6) suggests that parents' well-intentioned

sweetened talk that edits out the unpleasant pieces of our histories may not be helpful for children in the long run. Rather than protecting their kids from the negative consequences of exploring the problematical dimensions of their family's histories by presenting only rose-colored narratives, parents actually may be preventing their children from learning how to deal effectively with the downsides as well as the positive aspects of life.

This strange power of storytelling may account for why so many classic fairytales did not stint on revealing to children the darker side of life. Children often crave scary bedtime stories, told over and over again, but only if recounted in the safety of the nursery and in the comfort of the canonical story forms. Like ritual, mythmaking is a kind of serious play. Stories that do not gloss over the hard edges of life can have the paradoxical power to enact some of our deepest fears and, through the magical protection of their canonical forms, to protect us from them. ■

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