insights. But the story improves in unforeseeable ways when another person listens to it.

What If the Story Didn't Happen to Me?

So far, we have used the example of learning to tell an autobiographical story. The process of learning a folk, historical, or literary story is remarkably similar, with a few significant differences.

Whereas the first step in learning a personal story is to *remember* it, the first step in telling a story that didn't happen to you is to *imagine* it. Occasionally, hearing or reading a story only once is enough to implant the story in your imagination as vividly as if it happened to you. More often, you will need to experience the story in additional ways, such as by outlining it (explored in chapter 8).

Don't be afraid to use the "natural" approach for folk or literary stories, however. When relating a personal experience, you don't wait until you can tell it well; you learn to tell it better by telling it the way you can. Likewise, you can tell several people "about" a literary or other story you are learning, perhaps consulting your sources between tellings. You can "grow" your story with the same easy process used to develop personal reminiscences. In fact, as we will see in chapter 9, this same process yields an efficient way to memorize a story.

7

DISCOVERING THE MEANING

One of the crucial elements to emerge as you tell a story is what the story means to you. Although your job as a storyteller is not usually to impose your interpretation on your listeners, it remains important for you to be *clear* about that interpretation.

If you remain unfocused about the story's primary meaning, the resulting lack of clarity will make your listeners less able to attach their own diverse meanings to the story. When a story is told with clear intention, many meanings can flow out of your one meaning. Because this idea of a "main meaning" is so important to storytelling, I give it a name (and an abbreviation): the Most Important Thing (MIT).

MIT: The Most Important Thing

Your concept of the Most Important Thing in your story may be clear to you before you ever tell the story. Or it may become clear after you tell it once or twice. Or it may only emerge after years of telling the story.

Further, your MIT for the story may remain the same, or it may change over time. You may be unable to articulate it verbally, or you may be able to analyze it eloquently. Once you have articulated it for yourself, you may choose to state it baldly in the story or allow it to remain implicit. However you approach it, your MIT for the story can provide you with an invaluable guide (whether intuited or consciously stated) to the many decisions you must make about telling your story.

WHAT DOES THIS STORY MEAN TO ME?

To experience the process of discovering what a story means to you, try to tell the following simple folktale, "The Stonecutter." This exercise works best when you have a partner to tell the story to. If you have no one who can listen to you right now in person, try telling—not reading—the story over the phone. (You may wish to outline the story before you tell it.)

THE STONECUTTER

Once, a poor stonecutter worked every day, chipping away at huge stones on the mountainside. But he was dissatisfied. He saw a rich man passing by and thought, "I wish I were that rich man." A magical spirit was listening and granted his wish. The stonecutter became the rich man!

As the rich man, the stonecutter felt infinitely powerful. He gave his servants order after order. But one day the sun shone hotly on the rich man. "The sun is more powerful than I. I wish I were the sun!" The magical spirit granted his wish.

Now he was the sun. He shone down on the earth, scorching it mercilessly. But one day a cloud passed in front of him. "The cloud is more powerful than I. I wish to be that cloud!" Again, the magical spirit granted his wish.

As the cloud, he blocked the sun day after day, causing darkness and cold weather. But one day a wind came up and blew the cloud away. "I want to be the wind!" Again, the magical spirit granted his wish.

As the wind, he blew dust storms and hurricanes. Nothing could stand in his way. But one day he came to a mountain and couldn't move it. "The mountain resists me. Let me be the mountain." Once more, the magical spirit granted his wish.

As the mountain, he was immovable. Nothing could budge him. But one day he felt something chipping away at him. It was a poor stonecutter. "The stonecutter is mightiest of all! I wish I were a stonecutter." One last time, the magical spirit granted his wish.

Now that you've told the tale, have your listener ask you, "What is the most important thing for you about this story?" Other ways to phrase the question include, "What do you love about this story?" or "What draws you to this story?"

You will probably answer such questions differently after telling the story aloud rather than after just reading it. The process of telling a story helps you develop its meaning to you; the meaning, in turn, helps you develop how to tell it. Your sense of what the story means will not be a static, "once and for all" answer, but will continue to develop and change.

Please note also that no answer to these questions is "correct" or better than any other answer. You seek only what the story means *to you*. For example, in one storytelling workshop, participants came up with many varied but interesting answers, including these:

1. It's about the futility of seeking power.
2. It's always best to be yourself.
3. You can't be happy being someone else.
4. I like the sense of ritual that repeats with each character.
5. The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.
6. It's predictable after a while; I like the repetition and suspense of waiting for who the next character is.
7. It would be easy to get children acting it out.
8. Everyone looks up to someone.
9. It helps us imagine other people's perspectives and problems.
10. It shows how we are part of an interconnected cycle of nature.

Each of these answers is equally valid. But each will lead to different ways of adapting and telling the story.

Suppose, for example, that what you love about the story (what it means to you) is "the futility of seeking power." When you tell the story, your love of this aspect will come through to the listener. You may use a demanding tone of voice each time a character says, "I wish I were that rich man," or "I wish to be that cloud!" Or you may find yourself (consciously or not) making the wording of these requests more uniform, in order to emphasize their similarity as he seeks power each time. In your telling, then, the climax will be a climax of futility: when the mountain at last becomes a stonecutter, it will be with a sense that all the stonecutter's strivings have left him where he began. In these and many other overt or subtle ways, your chosen meaning will give focus to your telling.

On the other hand, suppose the MIT (Most Important Thing) of the story for you is that "It's always best to be yourself." Now you might find yourself emphasizing each character's complaint about

his current condition, saying perhaps, "I'm *still* not the most powerful! I can't stand it that the sun is more powerful than I." Or you may find yourself changing the words to reflect the characters' dissatisfaction with themselves: "Being a rich man is not that good after all..." Now, your climax will be a climax of realization or return: when the mountain at last becomes a stonecutter, it will be with the sense that being a stonecutter is really the best choice, because it is his real self. Your may even give us the feeling that, at the end, your character has learned to appreciate himself.

Incidentally, subtle differences in your understanding of the story's meaning are not to be dismissed. Consider the third MIT in the workshop list: "You can't be happy being someone else." This is very similar to "It's always best to be yourself," but it may still cause a significant change in your telling. If this third meaning is your MIT, you may put more emphasis on happiness. The stonecutter may start out—and end—with more of a feeling of contentment, while the other characters may be more and more unhappy as they grow more distant from the stonecutter's original self.

In general, it is useful for you to value the uniqueness of your interpretation of a story—rather than to say, "Oh, my idea isn't original; it's just like one of the others on the list." What appear to be minuscule shifts in emphasis may end up changing the feeling of the story in important ways, just as the substitution of one teaspoon of spice can change the overall taste of an entire stew.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS BOSS

Once you establish the primary meaning of a story, you need to honor that meaning above all others. In other words, "the most important thing is the Most Important Thing." Said another way, what deserves to be given priority in your artistic decision making is the aspect of your story that means the most to you. If your MIT is not given pride of place, then your story will not communicate what you most want it to communicate.

Thus, no decision you make about telling or adapting your story should interfere with the effective expression of your MIT. The Most Important Thing may influence your decisions about such diverse elements of your story as participation, characterization,

props, and even whether you stand or sit while telling.

Your MIT may change. It may even change often. But effective presentation demands that you not muddy your telling with lack of clarity about meaning—or by adding elements that obscure the meaning you most care about.

THE *NEXT* MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

You can have other goals in addition to the MIT. You can have even a dozen or more goals within one story. But achieving the second, third, and fourth goals must not interfere with achieving the goal that you choose as most important.

To understand this, consider a decision you might make about the story of the stonecutter: whether to adapt it to a more contemporary setting. Let us suppose that the MIT for you is "It's always best to be yourself." Further, suppose your second goal is to make it clear to your audience that this story is relevant to their contemporary lives.

In your attempts to meet your second goal of contemporary relevance, suppose you consider replacing the stonecutter with a mail clerk who wants to be a mid-level executive. At this point, you might ask yourself whether this change affects your first goal, which is to emphasize "It's always best to be yourself." If you decide that this change does not harm your first goal—or even helps it—you can freely recast the story into the world of the mail clerk.

Suppose, however, that your first goal was "It shows how we are part of an interconnected cycle of nature." Now, when you look at your idea of replacing the stonecutter with a mail clerk, you might decide that your new setting diminishes your emphasis on your first goal, by removing the story from the arena of natural events. In this case, to make the proposed change in the story on the basis of the second goal would be to detract from the goal that is more important to you. To avoid acting at cross-purposes with yourself, therefore, you need to find another way to achieve your second goal—or else change your ranking of goals.

To State or Not to State

Being clear about meaning is not the same as being didactic. It is not necessary that I state my chosen meaning—only that I be clear about why I tell the story. It is not even necessary that I have a conscious understanding of my story's meaning, only that I have an unimpeded connection to it.

CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS CONNECTIONS

If I have not established my connection to a story, my telling will lack some component of its potential power. But I can connect to a story (and thus tell it with maximum power) without being aware of the exact nature of my connection. I can love one meaning of the story without being strictly conscious of that meaning.

For example, I fell in love with the Appalachian folk tale, "Jack and the Bull" (a variant of "One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three-Eyes" in the Grimm collection) the first time I heard it told on tape by Maud Long. In the story, Jack is forced to leave his parents' farm, taking only his pet bull. After Jack finds another farm to live and work on, he is denied food by the farm's owner. At the point of starvation, Jack is saved by his bull, who offers him milk and bread from its horns—but the owner discovers Jack's source of food and threatens to kill the bull. On the bull's advice, Jack leaves the farm with his bull, only to engage in a series of fights that result in the bull's death. Jack obeys the bull's previous instructions by cutting a piece of the bull's hide and using it as a magic defender of his rights whenever he is threatened unjustly.

I knew I loved Jack's relationship with the bull as helper, and that I was moved by Jack's having to cut the bull's dead body in order to obtain the magic hide. I had a focused sense of the story's meaning, but I was not able to articulate the meaning consciously. This was enough, however, for me to tell the story powerfully.

Years later, I began to understand how I identified the bull with my father, who was my great helper. Then I realized how painful it had been for me to "go beyond" my father and use his life-saving gifts to me in the service of my own goals. Thus, the primary meaning of the story for me was the struggle to accept help and then go

beyond the limitations of one's helpers. When I gained conscious awareness of that meaning, I could confirm my artistic judgments about the story and solve some problems I had with it. But even before that, my unconscious knowledge of the story's meaning had been enough for telling the story with emotional power and depth.

A CONTINUUM OF WAYS TO STATE MEANING

Our understanding of a story's meaning can be conscious or unconscious. Yet once we become conscious of our Most Important Thing, we still have many choices about how much of it to state within the story.

Usually, the context of a story provides expectations about whether the meaning should be stated. In many religious settings it is expected that the storyteller (or another commentator) will make an explicit statement of the story's meaning or connection to a theme under discussion.

Among many observant Eastern European Jews, to give another example, only people with low prestige tell stories "for their own sake" or for the sake of entertainment. Everyone may tell stories as part of various social activities, but the educated and privileged only tell stories that relate to religious precepts or to topics under discussion. Indeed, such a storyteller may be offended to be praised for the performance rather than for the application of the story to a moral point being discussed.

In entertainment contexts, on the other hand, a separate statement of the meaning of a story is rare. It would be unusual—and likely unpopular—for a storytelling comedian or theatrical storyteller to state what the story means to the performer.

Yet within the requirements of particular contexts, you still have a spectrum of techniques for expressing meaning. If you choose to make an explicit statement of a story's meaning to you, you can do so within the story, or else before or after it. You make the before and after statements as the storyteller. Within the story, you can make the statement either as the narrator or as a character.

A brief statement before the story is usually unintrusive: "The story I am about to tell you is important to me because it is about the value of telling our own stories." The disadvantage of such a

statement, however, is that it may prevent audience members from opening themselves to the story. If listeners think that personal storytelling is not only unimportant but is self-indulgent twaddle, they may resist your story after such an introduction.

Another alternative is to make a similar statement of meaning after the story. This avoids shutting down your audience before the story begins, but it has risks. People may feel that you tricked them into entering an open, trusting, story-listening state, only to sneak in a moral.

An explicit statement of meaning can also be included within the story itself. This, too, can be accomplished in several ways, depending on which persona is speaking. The narrator can be the persona who states the meaning, saying perhaps, "And that is why it is important to tell your own story." Alternatively, a character can make the statement: "And that's how I learned that it is important for me to tell my own story." In an indirect version of this technique, a character can make a statement from an opposite viewpoint: "I intend to destroy the human species! And I can do it, if I can just keep them from telling their own stories and thus remembering who they really are!" Or the hero's older brother in a fairy tale can say to the hero, "Why are you bothering to tell your story to that old man? That's a waste of time!"

Finally, you can incorporate the meaning into the actions of the story. If the hero tells his story and is then rewarded or succeeds in some way, the importance of storytelling is implicit in the story. This way of communicating allows listeners to reach independent conclusions—probably more meaningful to them than what they merely hear from you. On the other hand, you run a greater risk that people will not come to the same conclusion that you did.

In the end, of course, you must choose for yourself how explicit or implicit you wish to make your understanding of a story's meaning. You must take into account your own requirements, which include your purpose in telling the story, your understanding of the story, and your own tastes and preferences. Then, as always, you must create a balance between your requirements and the various demands of your situation, your listeners, and your story.

8

DISCOVERING THE STRUCTURE

As you begin to tell a story, you will start to discover its meaning to you. Your tellings and your understanding of meaning will both contribute to a sense—conscious or not—of the story's structure. At the same time, your growing knowledge of the story's structure can also help your telling and your understanding of the story's meaning.

Outlining

When repeatedly telling an informal personal story, you develop an unconscious conception of its structure: where the climax (or climaxes) occurs and how each element relates to the others. When struggling with a long or difficult story—or even when learning a short tale—it may make sense to analyze the story more concretely. The simplest way to represent a story's structure is to outline it.

An outline's basic purpose is to show the scenes of a story and their relationship to each other. Any form of "outline" that represents your concept of the story's structure will do.

One simple form is just a list of scenes. "The Stonecutter" (see page 88) might come out like this:

- Stonecutter wishes he were rich man. Spirit grants wish.
- As rich man, feels less powerful than sun; wishes to be sun. Granted.
- As sun, scorches earth until blocked by cloud; wishes to be cloud. Granted.
- As cloud, causes darkness until blown by wind. Wishes to be wind. Granted.
- As wind, blows storms. Blocked by mountain. Wishes to be mountain. Granted.

- As mountain, immovable. But feels stonecutter chipping at him. Wishes to be stonecutter. One last time, wish granted.

This kind of outline makes it clear that the story has six basic scenes, and that a pattern is repeated in each: what he does (scorches earth), what thwarts him (blocked by cloud), what he wishes to be (cloud), and how his wish is granted. A briefer form of this outline might be just as useful:

- Stonecutter wishes he were rich man. Spirit grants wish.
- Feels less powerful than sun.
- Scorches earth until blocked by cloud. Causes darkness until blown by wind. Blows storms. Blocked by mountain.
- Immovable. But feels stonecutter chipping at him.
- Wishes to be stonecutter. One last time, granted.

One function of an outline is as a reference while you tell the story for the first few times. An outline is much easier to glance at than the complete text, and also directs your attention to *scenes* rather than to the actual words of the story.

As a "crib sheet" for a practice telling, a still briefer outline might be the best of all, since it allows you to remind yourself of the essential sequence at a glance:

Stonecutter
Rich man
Sun
Cloud
Wind
Mountain
Stonecutter

A still more graphic outline puts the essential sequence into a diagram (figure 4).

Figure 4: The Stonecutter—Episodes in a Line

Notice again that there is no "correct" way to outline—only a way that makes sense to you and that reflects your interpretation of the story. In fact, each outline can be thought of as representing a theory about the structure, based on your unique understanding of the story's meanings—especially your Most Important Thing.

The diagram just given represents a theory that emphasizes the linear nature of the story. In this theory, we tend to think of the story as a "train track" that leads from one state to another. As a result, this diagram would make sense if you see the story as being primarily about the stonecutter's learning of something particular or his transformation from one state to another (such as from dissatisfaction to contentment).

On the other hand, your understanding of the story may emphasize the stonecutter returning to his original state rather than progressing. In this case, a circular diagram may better express your "theory" of the story (figure 5).

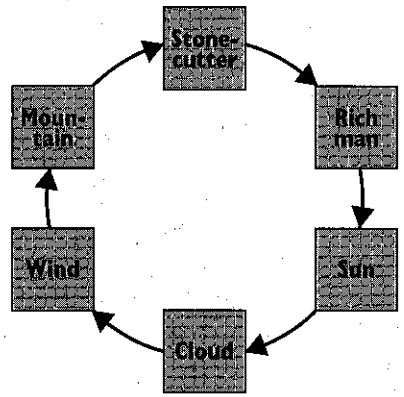

Figure 5: The Stonecutter—Episodes in a Circle

But what if you see the story as a lesson in the futility of seeking power, in which the stonecutter is essentially unchanged at the end, but has learned that the search for power just leads him on a futile digression? In this case, your outline may show the whole progression away from his true identity as a single, multiscene episode (figure 6).

You might be thinking that none of this matters if your Most Important Thing is a less lofty one, such as "It's predictable after a while; I like the repetition and suspense of waiting for who the next

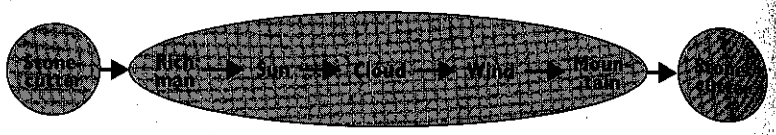

Figure 6: The Stonecutter—Three Episodes

character is." On the contrary, this understanding of the story can also lead you to an appropriate form of outline, perhaps emphasizing the repetition within each scene in this way:

1. Stonecutter cuts stone.
   Happy! Until...
   Sees rich man.
   Wishes to be rich man.
   Magical spirit hears.
   Wish granted.
2. Rich man (feels powerful).
3. Sun (scorches earth).
4. Cloud (blocks sun).
5. Wind (makes storms).
6. Mountain (is immovable).
7. Stonecutter (cuts stone. Happy!)

This outline represents the story as having two essential elements: the "rigmarole" repeated in each scene, and a list of characters (and what they do when happy) to "plug in" to the rigmarole.

Thus, every outline is dependent on your individual understanding of the story. Your MIT helps you create an appropriate outline, and, at the same time, the process of outlining helps you clarify your interpretation of the meaning.

Time-Lines

Another concrete representation of your story's structure is the time-line. In a simple story, a time-line can consist of nothing more than a horizontal line marked with scenes, as in figure 7 (essentially

Figure 7: The Stonecutter—a Time-Line

similar to figure 4: The Stonecutter-Episodes in a Line).

A time-line diagram, however, can also show certain aspects of the story's structure that an outline may not show, such as the overall rise and fall of a story's action, or the simultaneous progressions of several independent themes.

Suppose, for example, that you see the central meaning of "The Stonecutter" as "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." Further, suppose you see the stonecutter as initially calm, then increasingly motivated by the successive "greener pastures" glimpsed as the rich man, the sun, etc. The frenzy of desire for "something better" builds and builds until the very moment that the mountain is transformed back to the stonecutter—at which point the stonecutter, in a moment of understanding, becomes even more calm and satisfied than he was at the start. This rise and fall of frenzy might be graphically represented in a timeline (figure 8).

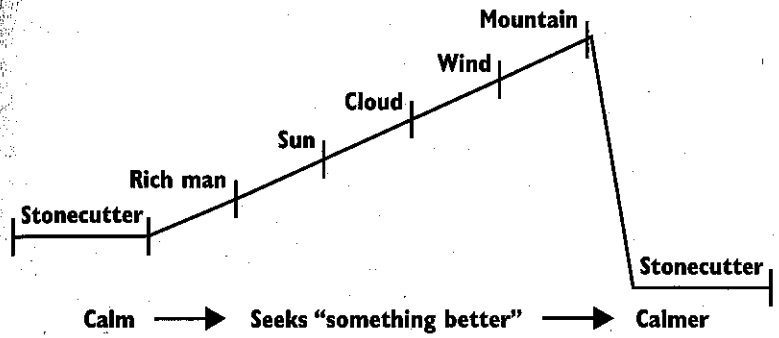

Figure 8: The Stonecutter—Rise and Fall

The great power of time-lines really comes with more complex stories in which several simultaneous developments must be coordinated. Nowhere is this power more helpful than in developing autobiographical or historical pieces—stories requiring the selection of incidents that efficiently develop themes important to you.

Other Tools for Understanding Structure

There can never be a complete book of all the ways to learn stories, because each story must be learned by each storyteller in a unique way. Each example of an outline or a time-line in this chap-

ter is a strategy I created in response to the unique demands of learning a particular story. I don't think you'll succeed if you try to apply these methods mechanically; the results will be mechanical. Instead, think of them as examples to inspire your own methods for coming to terms with each story's structure.

Over the years, I have found outlines and time-lines to be my most useful tools. But often enough I create a new tool for the project at hand:

- I have "conducted" stories as though they were symphonies, imagining them silently while waving my hands to suggest quietude here, then a long build to a climax there.
- I have drawn individual scenes on separate pieces of paper, then arranged and rearranged the papers to "break open" my sense of the order in which the story must be told.
- I have imagined stories as ropes with strands of many colors, each coming to the surface for a while, then burrowing back to the center until later it climbs into visibility again.
- I have audiotaped my telling of a story to a rehearsal partner, then transcribed the tape word for word. Sometimes I have added a column next to the text for a list of the themes that appear in each paragraph. Once I used the extra column for a list of emotionally related images from other parts of the story.
- I have found sensations in my body, and have tried to understand the whole story as a progression from one sensation, posture, or type of movement to another. I have danced my stories, sung my stories, and shaped them out of clay.

I encourage you to use your repertory of story-learning skills and experiences as tools at your command. Use your creativity to respond to the unique demands of learning each story. This moment in your story-learning career will never come again. Be open to it, savor it, and let it lead you where you have never been.

9

MEMORIZING

A thorough understanding of a story's structure is the most solid foundation for any attempts at memorizing. Many beginning storytellers assume that "the way" to tell a story is to memorize it word for word. By now, however, I hope that you see there is a much easier way to learn stories that also leads to more effective storytelling. In most cases, you will have no need to memorize at all.

Sometimes you may have your own valid reasons to memorize parts or all of a story—among them:

- This section of the story only seems to work when I include certain phrases in a certain order. If I don't memorize them, I get them wrong half the time.
- I don't need to memorize the whole story, but the humor in this particular section depends on stating these two sentences very precisely.
- The story's author has created a careful balance between two attitudes. Any other wording (that I can think of) destroys this delicate balance.
- I am presenting a narrative poem and wish to preserve its poetry.
- I am telling a sacred text and am expected to preserve every word.

In some traditional settings, people may indeed expect a particular kind of story to be memorized. For members of the culture, this is certainly a valid reason to memorize. Still, even when traditional tellers claim to tell a story "exactly the same," tape-recording folk-