Here we are, forty something years down the road.

Steve Sanfield wrote a poem many years ago about where the storytelling phenomenon would be at the present moment: (I am paraphrasing because I can’t find it – but it went something like this)

Three days out - two flat tires.

Busted oil pan, broken axle

So far, so good

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could close this conference all agreeing on the five things we should do to help storytellers and storytelling in this culture. And actually, if we could do that, it would be amazing, and we probably would have an impact.

But, alas… all of us here are problem children. We will have to agree on some things, disagree on others, and head off with a plan to just do the best we can.

One of the inconvenient truths about the storytelling “event” – this forty year experiment that has brought us here, is that storytelling is really not about the romantic notion of the storyteller or storytelling as a concept, but rather about flesh and blood people who call themselves storytellers, and they are, almost by definition, anarchists. Lone wolves. They spend entirely too much time by themselves. They stand on stage alone, they write alone, they often practice alone, and they sit in airplanes and in the car alone. And after everyone else in the theater has left, they go home alone. And if they don’t, they probably should.

This approach to life makes it inherently difficult for us to be organized and think, as a group, about what is best for the promotion of storytelling. If we didn’t think we were the one to say it best, all by our lonesome, we would have found something else to do.

This makes it hard for us to act as one. Well, we don’t have to act as one, but it would be nice if we spent more time being aware of what each other is doing. Which is why we are here. That, we can do.

Furthermore, we all are mongrels. None of us is pure. We are refugees – refugees from theater, from the world of oral tradition, refugees from libraries and schools of education. From the world of music and dance and academia and welfare and the corporate world. None of us here are pure. We are all all mixed up.

For my part, my influences include Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Tom Paxton, Arlo Guthrie, Steve Goodman, Jean Shepherd, Bill Cosby, Lily Tomlin, Jay O’Callahan, Donald Davis, Willy Claflin, Kevin Kling, Len Cabral, Spalding Gray, Whoopi
Goldberg, Bruce Springsteen, Michel Parent, Tony Montanaro and Benny Reehl, Utah Phillips, Rosalie Sorrels, Jackson Browne, James Thurber, Carl Sandburg, Jorge Luis Borges, Del Close and Charna Halpern, Shel Silverstein, Roald Dahl, Duncan Williamson, Bessie Jones and Ben Botkin.

And of course, a lot of you here in this room. An eclectic group, and that’s just for starters.

We were mongrels when we started, making it up as we went along, and we are mongrels today. And despite those of us who fear the Other, mongrelization is generally a good idea. Any good wildlife biologist will tell you that all the interesting things happen at the edges – on the borders. Our mixing and matching of different strains, different approaches, different kinds of story, makes us unique and promising and hopeful, and presents the possibility of something more. Any attempts at purity, of absolute definition, are bound to run into problems. But let me, for the sake of seeing clearly, set up some distinction so I can narrow the focus of what I am saying.

Let us take a back and see what we’re talking about – what storytelling is.

This storytelling that I’m talking about is one person talking for longer than four minutes. You may do other things. You may sing or hop around, or dress in a tutu, or have a screen behind you showing the eruption of Vesuvius, but all this is window-dressing to the talking.

For longer than four minutes – and by that I mean you have to talk long enough for there to be a narrative thread – my sense is that if you talk longer than four minutes, what you are saying has to go somewhere – it has to be a journey. (not to say a story can’t be told in three, but so can a poem, or something that captures only one moment…) Storytelling is about what happens next, which is what we’re really interested in as humans. We want to be here now, but then we want to know where we’re going to be next, ignoring that we’re all headed to the same place. Talkers must talk in narrative if it’s longer than four minutes. Unless you’re a politician or tenured professor.

And it’s not reading. It’s talking – with nothing between the speaker and the listener but the words offered to the air.

And for the sake of argument, for the time being, let us set aside the disembodied voice, making its way out of speakers – so forget radio or recordings. This is very important and part of what we do, but for the moment, let us forget that, because it is not where storytelling starts.

So it has to be in front of someone – there has to be a physical body there to listen.

Notice what this leaves out. Television, radio talk shows, movies, digital storytelling, power point presentations with the words on the screen that the speaker is saying,
theater pieces with characters talking to each other, instant messaging, and facebook posts.

I am not going to talk about any of those things. And when we talk about the survival of growth and storytelling, I will look askance at any one who offers up these as solutions. Especially Facebook.

For us to move forward, I think we need to keep this definition, or something like it, before us as a reminder of our work. When we get sidetracked, thinking the internet can promote storytelling as effectively as our real presence in front of a real audience, we have lost what power we have.

But let’s get back to what happened to us— all these different mongrel strains started coming together about thirty five or forty years ago. It was a perfect storm waiting to happen. Or if not a storm, well, an occluded front. All of us coming from different backgrounds, but looking for a place to try it out.

Early on in my life as a storyteller I wrote to myself that I viewed my work as an intimate response to an impersonal culture. I still believe this.

And I will be quite honest with you and tell you that storytelling was all my idea.

When I came up with the idea, I didn’t know anyone that was doing it. I hatched the plot in Syracuse New York and went to the school system with a proposal that they should hire me as a storyteller. I had no idea what I was doing. I had a guitar to help, and I was sifting through old folktale books. I was making stories up. I was strange— like I had three heads – nobody in the school department had seen anyone like me and I was shown the door with a pat on the back. I was not hired. I ran into a woman who said she was a storyteller and she recited Tiki Tiki Tembo verbatim. I had something a little wilder in mind. I was going to be a storyteller.

At the time, unbeknownst to me, there were already several hundred other people who had stolen my idea, even several years before I had thought of it. And without speaking too much for them, my experience as I met them was that everybody else was trying to do the same thing – give an intimate response to an impersonal culture.

And here, I will pause for a moment to notice traditional tellers who were working in their small corners of the world, shaking their heads at our idiocy. We bow in your general direction and ask your forgiveness. We will have to do this on a regular basis – it is a good practice in the world.

And so, something happened.

You could not all it an explosion I guess, but at least maybe a bottle rocket.

Storytelling – a bottle rocket pops onto the cultural landscape.
I moved to Providence and found someone named Len Cabral was telling stories in pre-schools. And Marc Levitt was telling stories as part of a medicine show – a New Vaudeville enterprise. Milbre Burch had just moved to Providence. And Lee Ellen Marvin was producing storytellers on public radio in Boston – Judith Black, and Doug Lipman and Elizabeth Dunham – and I drove up to Marshfield and met a guy named Jay O’Callahan who I figured was a millionaire because he was on the radio and fifteen years older than me. “Wonderful” he said, “go forth”

And then I went to Jonesborough and watched Gamble and Gayle and Elizabeth and Donald and Michael and Connie and Barbara and Laura in front of five hundred people and knew this was what I wanted to do. In my own way.

We cannot escape Jonesborough. At least, as part of our past. In either a fit of genius or hubris, it was called the National Storytelling Festival, and we responded – we needed a home, and it became our home by default. We made it the National Storytelling Festival, not in name but in practice. And in line with the folk aspects of storytelling, it seemed fitting that it ended up in a place that was much closer to the oral traditional world. The Carter family and Jimmy Rogers recorded in Johnson City. Ray Hicks was over the mountain. We were in Appalachia, which seemed authentic to us.

And we were all hungry and this looked like the thing to do. Festivals sprouting up. Artists getting paid hundreds of dollars. We didn’t worry about money at first – we wanted attention, and well, I didn’t have kids, and my wife had health insurance. We wanted an audience.

They were grasping years. And very heady and exciting.

And we blew it. It’s only now I see that we blew it - it didn’t feel like we were blowing it, but we were blowing it. Others this weekend have outlined some of what happened and I don’t want to spend too much time on that history. But in order to think about where we are going, we do need to look at what we’ve done.

It was only natural that we blew it – festivals were sprouting up, and there seemed to be more and more work for storytellers. But in the long run, the festival model has given us a narrow spectrum of what storytelling is and might be.

Why?

A couple of reasons:

Not all good storytelling belongs in a thousand seat tent. Duh! But I say this as someone who learned to perform in a thousand seat tent and can do it – but it does not mean I’m a better storyteller than someone who can’t, it means I’m a better performer in a tent with a thousand people, which is a useful thing.

I remember thinking this in 1986 when I first saw Duncan Williamson at the National Festival. There were not as many big tents, and Duncan was performing in
smaller tents, which is where he belonged. I followed Duncan around – I knew right away that there was something there. He was not big in style, and while funny, he was not gut-spilling funny. His skill had been learned around fires, and in kitchens and pubs. It was designed to be intimate. Same with Pete Boyer – a French Canadian teller from Missouri. Pete was the real deal and he died on the vine at Jonesborough – some people knew, but in that context, it was hard to see what was being offered.

Kathryn Wyndham stands out as the one person who seemed to have been able to make that transition – and I’m not sure why. She was craftier than she looked. And she was telling in the South.

Which leads me to another problem with the festival model – it is generally a conservative endeavor – and by that I don’t mean right wing Republican – although there is some of that in there, I guess – but I mean the audience just doesn’t want its feathers ruffled too much. It is entertainment as a conserving activity. The storytelling at festivals today is more about affirmation of a world than it is a challenging of the world – it affirms your life and doesn’t take you outside of it. We knew that – most of us would like to stir things up a little, but we’re not stupid. Even if you’re a rabble-rouser, you understand that you can only push an audience so far. Ed Stivender’s little monologue at Jonesborough the fall before the Iraq war got him pilloried – but he was only speaking the truth – we were marching blindly off to war. The audience didn’t want to hear that. I sat at the side of the stage (as radical as the next guy, I would march the next weekend in NYC with a million people against the oncoming war) and thought “They’re gonna eat him alive”. They did, although it happened very slowly. Nibbled alive, perhaps. Ed apologized.

And those of you who know the history of the festival know that Laura Simms curated a very broad-minded festival with tellers from around the world. The audience wasn’t ready for it – it’s like a minister too far ahead of his or her congregation – they might speak the truth, but the seats will empty the following week. And a good part of the audience just probably wasn’t ready for the New York neuroticism of Spalding Gray.

And then, sitting in a folding chair in fifty degree weather may just not be the best way to hear someone work – especially when you’re a long way away from them.

So even as storytelling audiences grew, it was, it seems to me, narrowing.

We were not giving many storytellers a chance to do their best work, or to challenge themselves. Constrained by time limits, by sound and light capabilities, by the kind of audiences festivals were drawing. And some of us adapted to that model. I’ll tell you, there’s nothing like fifteen hundred people applauding and yelling – it’s a drug that’s hard to give up. And it’s not an empty form either – I’m not saying that, either. It’s a great form, and there is art in it. The National Festival today is still a great festival. And I won’t say that I was selling myself out – or that any of us were. I wasn’t saying something that wasn’t in my heart – I was just aware of where my
heart and the audiences and the setting might best meet. That is a never-ending challenge for an artist.

But the truth is, this model never really translated very well beyond two or three other places, and those successes have their own cultural backdrop to explain it – like the Timpanogos festival in Utah. Most of them were, and are, labors of love, carried on by individuals who had a vision and were trying to make it work.

And it did, and has on some level, but not on the level some had hoped. Hoping that if the festival was done right, there would be thousands of people coming wherever the festivals were held. This was, I think, never right.

I will go back to what I wrote to myself thirty years ago – storytelling is an intimate response to an impersonal culture. That does not promise a storyteller could fill the Hollywood Bowl. It argues against it.

Jonesborough let storytellers and storytelling down. And I don’t want to get into the economics of it, but the truth is, at a certain point, the main thing the festival had to do was get people in the seats to fund the organizations that fed off of it. That is a sure way to lose a sense of mission. And our failure, I guess, was in continuing to believe it was one thing, or could be, when it was really another. It was presented as the heart of storytelling when really, it was just one expression of it. We made attempts at trying to change it. Many of us had conversations and sent letters. Many storytellers served on the board and tried to right the ship. NSN split away from ISC. But they didn’t let us down because of the kind of festival they ran, in the end – their job was to get people in the seats and not get people upset. But we kept thinking it was a national festival, and really, at the present moment, it is a very well run, large southern regional festival, and Susan O’Connor is doing her best to do the best festival she can, given the parameters that are handed to her (to keep the festival going and the Center, such as it is, alive)– what is missing, I believe is a clear vision of what it should or could be

No – where the Storytelling Center let us down was in saying it was a national festival when it wasn’t, and in saying they were the international center for storytelling when they weren’t. It doesn’t represent the face of America, its depth or its breadth. Many of us have known for years that the festival is really about Jonesborough – and it’s always been the leadership’s main interest. What was missing was a vision of what it means to be national. Or international.

But we wanted a home. We had a home. We met there. We got together there every year. And the storytelling there is good- you don’t get there if you aren’t good. But good in a particular way.

Another big failing of the storytelling center, and for a long while, most of us, was that they were doing nothing to encourage others to see us as a true art form or to expand the boundaries of the storytelling world beyond Jonesborough. Not that so millions would come, but that so people who had an influence in the world and in
our culture would see our value and take storytelling as something worthwhile to be considered.

But we hung onto festivals because they were just so much fun. When individual storytellers (or even groups) tried to address issues of mission or diversity, or pay, we got a smile and a nod, as if we were being considered.

In the end, we weren't.

Maybe we should have just stopped right there and organized. But it's not that easy.

We did not all agree on all of this (this is my take on what happened), and we were trying to make a living. Art will always be a hustle. Artists do not make much money, as a rule. And I do believe, as Laura said the other day, that being as good as we can be at our art is our first priority.

For this, and several other reasons, I do not think that we reached critical mass to sustain storytelling as a significant cultural presence. I believe storytelling missed a cultural moment it might have had in the mid-nineties - we might have gotten the art and cultural world's attention, and been taken seriously as an art form that other forms need to pay attention to - we missed our moment because of what was going on in our community; those who could have made a case for our being taken seriously were busy doing other things.

It's what happened.

So, we're more of a backwater than we think we should be. Great, we get to feel slighted, just like the rest of the human race.

But let's not blame all of this on one festival or our inattention. There were other forces at work, too. Some of this is not our doing, and has nothing to do with storytelling.

In regards to making a living as a performing storyteller, the huge shifts in media technology have affected us very deeply.

We are some of the victims of the digital revolution – entertainment has redefined itself over the past thirty years and live performance is not the form of entertainment many people choose. Beyond that, being a storytelling audience is hard work – rewarding, but not easy – it requires attention and concentration. Our world, with all its increased input and the chimera of the possibility of multi-tasking, works against the attention needed. It is easier to watch images than it is to listen to words. And storytellers are not spending thousands of hours a week (as Facebook and Google are) to try and figure out how to keep people tuned in for another five or ten minutes of their day. As a group, we have lost audience in the marketplace.
But more than that, the guys who designed the digital revolution (unsure themselves to this day where it is heading) lied to us – and probably to themselves. These platforms promised us wider access to audience, but they didn’t mention that their technology was what they were really promoting, not our content. They don’t really care about content. Marshall McLuhan’s edict that “the medium is the message” has never been truer. We spend more time ‘chatting’ (now, there is a value-laden verb they have given us to use in our communication) about storytelling today to people we barely know than we do telling stories to people in front of us.

And the digital revolution’s promise that we could sell more products was a lie, too. We sell less and less. People who control the platforms aren’t interested in selling your stuff – they are interested in using your stuff to bring people to their platform. It might be that a million people will see our seven minute youtube performance, but this does not necessarily translate to income – or even work. Tomorrow, there will be someone else. The Internet discourages long-term memory, which is what we trade on. Utah Phillips said – “The most radical thing in America today is a long-term memory.”) Facebook and Google would like you to offer yourself for free and promise you a wider audience. A note from Walter Lippman in the late 1950’s, commenting on the quiz show scandals – “the devil doesn’t come asking you to sell your soul. He comes offering a wider audience.”) And thanks to Google and Facebook and Napster and Amazon’s deep discounting (another aspect of the evil mothership) people now believe that content should be free. The digital revolution is the death of content providers and the rise of platforms. How can an artist make a living as an artist if they can’t sell what they produce?

The result of this shift in media and entertainment has had a serious effect on the development of new storytellers. Storytelling (and I mean my definition of it) is not a lingua franca for young people - live performance is not a lingua franca - youtube is a lingua franca. Tweeting is a lingua franca. Thirty years ago there weren’t a lot of us, but there were a good number of young intelligent people who were exploring storytelling – now we have some brilliant young people here with us today, but there is not a large enough group of them in our community that interact with each other and influence each other in a meaningful way. I think. Correct me if I’m wrong.

We’ve also suffered from the destruction of the public person. We are not public creatures anymore, we are private (or act like we are, when in fact we are only privatized - Facebook has more information about us than the government or our next door neighbor), and much of the performing arts, and a great deal of storytelling has depended on public funding. I for one believe this is the way it should be – we can do things together we cannot do apart and just because an endeavor is not sustainable in the market place doesn’t mean it shouldn’t exist. This is one function of government - to support worthwhile things that the marketplace cannot support– maybe its most important function – and this country is turning away from that. Because we don’t want to pay taxes, our public institutions are
failing us – our schools are starving, and the first thing to suffer in a school budget is the arts. How many people in this room have seen a drop off in their work in education? Are we under the illusion that cutting taxes will increase the arts? Do we believe that art is a commodity that can survive in the marketplace? We simply cannot afford it, some say, if it can’t pay its own way. As if everything of worth is measured in dollar signs. But we could support these things, if we had the will, and understood that those who promise a bright digital future where people can make millions of dollars as artists are talking about a very small percentage of people.

The changes in media and defunding and destruction of public institutions are very large forces that are difficult for us to fight. We can make individual and group choices about how we approach these issues, but they are social forces that are difficult to address.

And, and, and, But, but, but.. If, if, if Shoulda, woulda coulda Shoulda woulda coulda…..

In some ways, things are not much different than they were thirty-five years ago– perhaps they are only more so. The things we were concerned about then are still our concerns today. We are still, at root, an intimate response to an impersonal culture – even though the impersonal culture has learned to disguise itself with “personal” web pages and address books and news feeds. But an algorithm is not a personal thing.

Corporations will never turn to storytelling and storytellers to make money - they may use us to tell their stories, but we are not marketable on a wide scale – we can not be franchised or digitized or commodified or monetized on any great scale, and therefore, we are economically irrelevant.

What to do?

There is much we can do, if we understand who we are and what our work is.

First we must remind ourselves that storytelling is a small thing. I did not say not important. I said small. I did not say it cannot have an impact, I said small. Let us be, like Bil Lepps’ character, the king of small things. When we try to make it a big thing, (television specials, Hollywood bowl performances…) we will probably get ourselves in trouble. Storytelling, by its very nature, is intimate and does not translate to large venues. Nor television very well, except for short bits. While a platform may bring attention to our work, the work itself will stay centered in a small setting – the success of the Moth, or of TED talks, the two most visible expressions of storytelling in the media, is that they capture, to some effect, those smaller settings in which someone has something to say.
Also, let us try and remember that storytelling’s success depends not on spreading the word about the concept of storytelling; no, it is about individuals who tell stories very well. This is a hard concept to grasp, but storytelling as a performance art cannot be promoted theoretically, it has to be promoted by the excellence of the individual teller. Our success – as individuals and as a group – will be merit-based, dependent on the individual’s excellence.

I would like to propose to you that storytelling is a different kind of art – one that is a basis for other arts – a seminal art – or a seed art – one from which other arts spring. This is its strength and its weakness. It is absolutely essential to theater, and fiction, and narrative film and teaching and journalism, but is not easily recognized on its own because it is so elemental. As a building block for these other arts, it is not capable of being spectacle – it can’t survive over-reaching and pomp and pretense. Seed arts have their aficionados (that would be us), but will not, as a general rule, fill the Meadowlands Stadium. Bruce Springsteen telling a great story, backed by a ten piece band, will, but not even Bruce sitting on a stool talking can entertain 70,000 for an hour.

I think we should spend time thinking about what it means to be a seed art. When I think of other seed arts, I think of, for instance, drawing – the basis of all visual art, or some form of simple group dance, in which the body first learns to move in an elegant way, in accord with others. Seed arts do not garner large amounts of attention, or money, because they are not flashy and they lack in spectacle, but they are basic to human expression, the building blocks on which other arts are built. And as storytellers, we understand the importance of nurturing them. The seed arts are something that artists of all stripes come back to again and again for renewal. And people who teach the seed arts, and demonstrate them in their own work, are essential to the well-being of all artists and the culture.

Seed arts are skills that have crossed over some barrier towards something else – they are skills that have gathered attention. One person telling another story is not art. Neither is recounting an embarrassing experience to two other workmates while standing around the coffee pot. But when someone does something that other people are doing and does it better, and it begins to attract attention (not just because of voyeurism but because of some talent, some resonance), then it seems to me that we are beginning to enter into the realm of it as an art.

When this shift happens, it’s often because of an attention to form. Everyone doodles. What’s the difference between doodling and sketching? And sketching and drawing? Between a child’s picture of a house and sun and clouds and Picasso’s of a hand holding flowers? Or between flailing around a dance floor to a techno beat, and a beginning swing dancer, and riverdance or one of Liz Lerman’s community pieces? A skill that attracts attention through the introduction of form and structure. David Pye, a woodworker in Britain, noted that craft (or in his terminology, workmanship),
involves three things - judgement, dexterity, and care. When these three things are applied to a skill - something happens.

The truth is, many other art forms would be enhanced by understanding our work. I recently presented at a workshop for writers, on the connection between the oral and written word. It was a fruitful and deep conversation. As a storyteller, I had something to offer – something they needed to hear. And of course, I learned from them.

What can we do?

I’m going to make some suggestions, and I would like to acknowledge that some of these things are happening, and some are probably happening without my knowledge – so to those of you who will say “I already knew that – we’re doing it” – take this as an affirmation of your work. And a lot of my suggestions are aimed at performing storytelling in particular, since it’s what I mostly do.

First, we must work towards a deeper understanding of what storytelling is - what its characteristics are, and what points towards good storytelling - we need an honest and direct language. Now, there is a wide spectrum of good storytelling, and we can talk about this for a long time, but if storytelling is going to be taken seriously we need to begin to have a vocabulary so that we can talk about it not in terms of whether you “liked” it or you “hated” it, but what aspects point towards its excellence. Of course it’s subjective, but arts can be discussed with some objectivity – visual art has form and content and color and balance and design and composition. We can talk about a painting or a photograph intelligently and we can understand on looking at a piece why it has value. Filmmakers have ways of speaking with each other. I’ve talked about this before in other places, but we need to develop this language, so we can talk among ourselves in order do our work better. Understanding why something does or doesn’t work is a step towards excellence. We certainly can find an intelligent way to talk about the nature of story, and story structure, and the development of the human voice, and a performer’s relationship with the audience. In fact, we must develop this, openly and honestly, if we are going to move forward.

Because, I believe we have to be better at what we do – we are not good enough yet. I don’t want to start picking and choosing who’s good and who isn’t, but I truly believe if there were three hundred storytellers in this country who could really blow people away with their work in the proper venues, we would have a critical mass of artists that would attract attention and legitimacy to the art form. One way to head towards this critical mass is to develop a critical language and find forums in which we can explore each other’s work. We are not challenging ourselves enough. Believe me, I know I need more work, too. Few are exempt. My charge to you is to work on your skills – this requires a certain fierceness and relentlessness and honesty. I am still learning how to work – this should never end. Picasso said when
art critics get together they talk about art and when artists get together, they talk about turpentine. We really need to learn how to talk about turpentine.

Here, I would say that I’ve come to realize that being a good storyteller has a very large skill set. I believe that while everyone can tell a story, to approach excellence one must have a very quick and active mind, and a breadth of knowledge, and a great command and love of language, and a very good understanding of narrative structure and timing, and good physical tools – a command of voice and body - and a deep insight into the human condition. That is a lot of stuff – most of us have two or three of those things at most. It is hard to be a very good storyteller.

And then, if you get to be one, you still have to figure out how to eat.

We need to reach out and form more alliances with like-minded folks. I give a nod to NSN’s work here. We are now addressing issues we should have addressed twenty years ago – we badly need a place at the table with other art forms. And there are allies in the theater world and world of literature who can help us. Mark Luttwack here in Cincinnati at the Playhouse in the Park is only one example.

We need several new, or redesigned, major spoken word festivals around the country – places where there is a critical mass of artists that can interact with each other and an interested public, perhaps working with each other in the sharing of resources and ideas – a network of festivals, maybe. I say festival because I am thinking of a period of time in which artists are together and can interact. – and I think in order to make them successful, we will need to broaden our definition of storytelling and make it a bigger tent, making sure we bring the wisdom of the past forty years to bear on the tone of these festivals, but also exploring other forms. We should do this so we can begin to have a conversation with other art forms.– a spoken word festival should incorporate slam poetry and solo theater and musicians who contextualize their work by talking a lot and maybe even novelists and essayists who read well. We could teach them a thing or two. It should include panels and talkbacks on the spoken word. Artists from other disciplines should somehow be incorporated. They should be in metropolitan centers- places where there is some intellectual ferment - and should include whatever form young people are gravitating towards.

Because we need to serve the young.

Which brings me to the next point, and maybe the hardest – we, as a group, are too old to carry this movement on our own to the next stage. As much as I would like to be cutting edge, I will not be cutting edge. Maybe I was once and didn’t notice it. I hope I had a good time.... But we need new voices, and it will not people who are over fifty. We can be mentors, and examples, and encouragers, and still, very, very good performers, continuing to grow. But we need to pass the mantle on to younger people, who will try things we will never try, and find venues we had not thought of,
and carry the tradition – however we want in a new way, and make it theirs – different from what we think they should do, and very much their own.

In the past weeks, thinking about this talk, I have been imagining something else – a school of storytelling. The school of storytelling would be weird, and illegitimate. It would not be affiliated with a university that offered credit. There is a problem in the academy today – people work towards certification of their talent. A degree gives certification of time spent, but does not give talent or excellence. We need a small unaccredited school– say, starting a month long with a half dozen teachers and only twenty-five students – The teachers need to be very accomplished in their craft – the very best we can find – learned in the shaping of story, the use of voice and body, the art of performance, the understanding of venue, the connection with the past and with the future. The teachers need to be very, very smart. Students must apply and are accepted for their promise, or are approached and invited. Students would come not to be certified as official storytellers, but to learn their craft – because they really, really want to and are recognize for their potential. They would leave with no degree, but a deeper understanding of story and the performance of it, and their use of it might spread out to different areas – theater, and film and education, but they would be grounded as storytellers, versed in this elemental seed art. And we can hope that some would say their job is to be storytellers. Both students and faculty would benefit from this kind of laboratory. It needs to be a place of nurturance and growth. And the food needs to be good.

Beyond storytelling as a performance art, there is similar work of outreach and advocacy to be done. I would like to mention one other area I think we should concentrate, and speak in general terms because it’s a big topic- I think we need to make our case more forcefully for the role of storytelling in teaching and learning. . Both teachers and students need to understand the nature of storytelling I know that Sherry Norfolk and Jane Stenson, and Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss and Karen Chase and Judy Sima and well, many of you, are doing important work in this area – but I think, just as we need to establish contacts with leaders in other arts disciplines, we need to make connections with those on the forefront of learning and schooling. And I don’t mean Arne Duncan or Bill Gates, whose latest grant hands out electronic bracelets to students so their galvanic response to teaching can be measured. I mean people like Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch, and the Coalition for Essential Schools, and Alfie Kohn and Maryanne Wolf whose book “Proust and the Squid” talks about the brain and literacy. With every passing month, more and more research emerges on the nature of the human mind, and almost all of it points towards a deepening understanding about the role of spoken narrative in human life. We need to find a place at that table, too.

And I would be more explicit in this – I believe that rather than showing how storytelling fits into the ever narrowing definition of educational objectives and methods, storytellers should speak up for the rejection of these standards as any measure of a good education. Put simply, the people who offer this kind of educational reform are not our friends, they are our enemies, and while we may
have to work with the enemy, we should not agree to their worldview. Storytelling is not a reductionist program that teaches the fifteen analytical strategies for understanding a text, and by trying to show how it is, we belittle our work and do a disservice to everyone. I believe that there is a strategy to defund public education in this country (and both political parties are participating, though one is worse) and the only way this dismantling of the American school system will stop is when people involved in it start saying no, and show there is another way. Storytelling is part of that other way. We must choose our battles, but let’s please be sure we choose them and not go along to get along. How many studies have we done that shows that arts are essential to learning? When do we get to stop fighting that battle, with a smaller piece of the pie after every encounter.

I may be in a privileged position on this – I don’t know – but I do know that when I say these things out loud there is applause and relief on the part of the educators I am speaking to. Someone needs to speak these words, and if storytelling is, in the end, about naming things, then the idiocy that is occurring in American education should be named by us. Okay – wait until after you get your performance check.

And there is still work in the broader community to do. For storytelling, as music, is in the end an expression of community. We need to help people to find a way to tell their story so we can tell our story as a people. What stories hold us together? How about these: All people are created equal. We are a nation of immigrants. We care for the least. What stories do we want to tell about ourselves? And here, of course, a nod to Sue O’Halloran and others doing similar work. I have in mind the work of Myles Horton at Highlander School, and Paulo Freire in his comunidades del baso – people telling their own stories so they can find what they have in common. This is, of course, applied storytelling – but people who are master tellers understand what a good story is and how to find it.

Those are some ideas – but there is also something about how we approach our work. I say to teachers that we often misperceive the structure of learning, confusing it with the structure of contemporary education. The people in charge of school systems would like you to believe the structure of learning is the superintendent and below them the principals and below them the teachers and below them the teacher’s aides. But the structure of learning is really very horizontal on a present day level, and very personal in terms of the passing on of tradition. Horizontally, teaching is about the support and advice of peers – learning from those around you how to be a better teacher, and depending on their support. And vertically, or in time – what it’s really about - is the teacher that made you want to be at teacher, and the person that made them want to be a teacher, on back for thousands of years. And of course, the one you touch that decides to be a teacher themselves. That is a deeper structure and more long lasting. It will be here long after Race to the Top dies its own sweet, welcome natural death.

And so, we need an awareness of this same structure in storytelling – a group of peers supporting each other, and urging each other to do their best work. Not with
“I really like that”, though we all want to hear that, but with, “the story loses focus halfway through,” Or “Tell me about your choice of language at the climax.” And then, vertically, in time a nod back to the person that touched you and made you want to tell stories, and the person ahead of you that you’ll touch. We move forward with an eye towards the tradition – however we want to define it – that brought us here, and an eye towards those who are interested in our craft.

Whatever happens with the festival (and I still have hope for its survival and renewal), our main job lies elsewhere. Even for those of us who have considered Jonesborough our storytelling home. In fact, it has always lain elsewhere – in the everyday work we do. But now, let us do it with a clearer vision of where we want to go, and some thought about how we might get there. The few suggestions I offer are just my ideas, and I plan on acting on some of them. But to get back to my earliest point, storytelling is made of storytellers – of individuals, and there are individuals in this room that will help to define the course of storytelling in the next ten or fifteen years. Do not wait for a leader – it is you. No one else will do the work you do. Let us be conscious about what we are doing – let us choose a thoughtful and heart-felt path, and walk along it as best we know how, knowing that our work is important – personal and intimate, in a very wounded and confused and distracted world.