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On Traveling, Teaching, and Storytelling: Some Thoughts on Research

I've been a professor here at the College for almost two decades now. That means I've been around long enough to meet up with a fair number of ex-students, catch up with their news and see how their lives have been unfolding. Just in the past few weeks, I've met up with two students. One, who's now doing a PhD at the University of London, is just about to set off do his dissertation research in India, actually in the state of Rajasthan, where I've done most of my research. That warms my heart. I've also run into a student and her mother, who told me that taking one of my courses inspired her daughter to join the Peace Corps: she served three years in Kazakhstan and is now on her way to Egypt, Kenya and Uganda. I was told the family has "blamed" me for all of this, but I took solace in the smile that accompanied the news.

All of us professors here at the College have such stories - stories of students reporting their stories and giving us some sense that the stories we have told them have had some kind of impact. True, our job has its frustrations and drawbacks, but it is a wonderful one: it assures us all a life through which many stories flow. Academia is in many ways like the Kathasaritsagara, the Ocean of Streams, a collection of ancient Indian stories that serves as the central metaphor for Salman Rushdie's wonderful novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. There are so many stories here among us. All one has to do is glance at the Web pages of faculty to see how their stories flow out of the College during breaks and stream throughout the world as they venture forth - whether to conferences or research sites - and as they return home to share new episodes with one another and students. Add to these stories the stories of new and returning students eager to tell their stories while learning new stories, and one sees how, as in Rushdie's novel, myriad streams or currents converge, admix and make new stories, so that the ocean is continually renewed and refreshed by the multiple voices.

Today I'd like to talk just a little a bit about my own experience as a research-storyteller who travels for material. But, first, I'd like to take on what I think is a misperception about us academics. Often, I hear people - not academics but, typically, friends, neighbors, sometimes even students - bemoaning the lot of professors, who have to do research to keep their teaching jobs. One hears how we have to do research so as to publish and not perish, that is to say, fail to get tenure. There is, of course, an element of truth in this: It's hard to imagine that a professor could earn tenure these days without publishing some research. But the notion that research is a kind of secondary thing we do, something we have to do to keep our jobs, strikes me as being as erroneous as it is pervasive.

There's another troublesome aspect of the presumption that research is simply the key to tenure. Since I've had tenure, which has been a while now, I've heard (and I know many tenured colleagues have heard) how great it must be to have summers off. When I hear comments like this I'm always taken aback. For me, and I know for so many of my colleagues, research is the icing on the cake - it's what one gets to do once one takes up dissertation research with hopes of one day getting to be a professor, so one can continue to research the subjects that one loves best and then tell people about them.

Doing research allows a religious studies professor, for example, to travel to fascinating places and ask nose-y, personal questions that people will actually answer because I'm an academic. They know that I want to know what they know and to gain from their experience. In doing ethnographic work, I pursue knowledge and hope to gain some wisdom. To be able to do this is a great privilege and an enormous responsibility. It's the responsibility of any storyteller, who must somehow express some vision of truth and some conviction of authenticity as he or she represents through words the perspectives and interests of others. This is true whether those perspectives and interests belong to field informants or to academic colleagues.

Being a professor who seeks out stories and tells stories allows me to be a perpetual student. It allows me to learn from people as I gather their stories and to interpret people's stories according to the multiple and shifting frames afforded by my past experience and the matrix of ideas in my mind. Moreover, being a professor positions me to tell the story of the stories I've learned, to students, whether they are the undergraduate, graduate or postgraduate students of religion who read my books or listen to me pontificate at professional meetings, or students in my classes here at the College.

And this leads to my next point: though the College awards the King and Rash prizes, one for teaching and the other for research, I think that both awards are awards for storytelling. I think of Marc Zimmer, who has won the King Award - and just today received the Rash award - holding up a picture of day-glo mice on the cover of the most recent CC: magazine and I think to myself, now there's a story! And I think of Tristan Borer, who won the King award last year and who has worked in South Africa. I have heard from students that she's a terrific storyteller.

From my own experience as a professor, I know what I teach is heavily inspired, framed and informed by the stories I have learned or composed by doing research in the library and online but also and, most importantly, in the field - whether in Trinidad, the United States or India.

And so, my point here is that research by professors is not just a requirement with which we are burdened. It is precious element in our own streams of stories or unwritten biographies, so much so that often we find ourselves unable to stop talking about our research experiences and telling our research stories once we begin - that is to say, once we have an audience.

I have an audience here in this hall and so, for the remaining few minutes, I'd like to mention, if not tell you, a few of my stories, to illustrate how intimate research has been for me and how very much it has shaped me as an academic storyteller. They're stories about isolated moments from my academic life, stories that intimate, I think, the pleasure I have felt as a learner who is a teacher. I've told all of them to students at times when I thought they might be instructive.

I'm tempted to begin with the story of how I first discovered the excitement of the life of

the mind and the joys of learning and telling stories while I was in high school, but that would require telling you about the world's scariest history teacher and my high school guidance counselor, who said to me and my parents one fateful day junior year: "Let's face it: Lindsey is not college material." But that would be embarrassing, so instead, I'll tell the story about the day a monkey stole my underwear.

It's the story of my first day ever in India, where I have now spent about three years of my life. And it's a story I sometimes tell students if they are having trouble getting started on a research project. It's a basic "when you're down, there's no place to go but up" sort of story. Anyway, here it is: In June of 1979, I traveled from Boston to Frankfurt to Delhi to beautiful Bangalore, which then showed no hint of the cosmopolitan technology hub it has become. Exhausted from the journey and sweaty from the summer heat, I checked into the girl's dormitory of the United Theological Seminary, which was to be my home base as I visited South Indian pilgrimage places over the course of the next few months. Wanting to wash up, I opened my suitcase on the cot in my tiny, cinderblock room, grabbed a facecloth and toothbrush and headed down to hall to the communal bathroom.

When I returned to my room, I found an enormous monkey sitting on my bed and rifling through my belongings. Half hiding behind the door, I tried to shoo it away. It looked me in the eye for a moment, then selected a pair of little flowered underwear to take as a souvenir before moseying out the window and onto the branch of an adjacent tree.

Mortified, I flew down the dorm staircase and gave chase to the simian now scampering off through the school's central courtyard, where it displayed to passing seminarians my unmentionables, clearly identifiable as mine even if I had not been giving chase, because the Bangalore markets at that time sold only white readymade underwear. Eventually, the monkey tossed my undies into a flowerbed.

By supertime, and my first meal with students, I was already well known as the monkey-chasing foreigner with flowered panties. Entering the dining room, I was greeted with gaiety and informed that new students had to stand on a chair and sing. The students assured me it was completely customary. I said that I wasn't a student but, rather, merely a visitor, which was true. And I pleaded shyness and then tone-deafness, both also true. But the students would not be dissuaded. And so I ended up singing, in a fashion, Mary Had a Little Lamb, and as I did so, I inadvertently brushed a few stray hairs from my face with my hand, which was covered with spicy sambar sauce. A few moments later my right eye began to tear, then swell. Within a short time I looked like the victim of a horrible beating. The school nurse was sent for, and I was sent back to my room with an ice pack but not before receiving a scolding. Silly person, what was I thinking? I don't remember what I was thinking, but I'm guessing it was something about wanting to go home.

The next day I saw Bangalore and fell in love with India. And what a funny thing memory is. Over the years the events of that first day have made that day one reason that I fell in love with India.

I wish I had time to tell you many stories from my various research stints in Rajasthan, where I worked in Udaipur, the little town in India well known for its beauty and history, but also for being the setting for the horrendously Orientalist Bond film, "Octopussy." How I'd love to tell you about the shishmahal, "hall of mirrors" in a Rajasthani palace I visited fleetingly: as I made my way from my car to the palace, village children assured me that if you look at yourself just the right way in the palace mirrors you can see yourself naked. I said I'd keep this in mind, but I can tell you that I hope everyone with me when I visited the shishmahal saw what I saw in those mirrors. And then how I'd love to tell you more stories about India: about people, especially dear friends, who told me their stories including stories about gods, about saints, about heroes, about each other, and ultimately about myself. But I don't have time now to tell you my stories about India, stories about the stories people tell ...

And I wish I could tell you about Trinidad, where I have been working for the past few years. I'd love to tell you about the look on Gene Gallagher's face when we were served at a shrine one morning not wine, but Chivas Regal. And I'd like to tell you about the amazing conversations Gene and I had with our friend Baba Sam, who as a child hopped a boat to Manhattan, got a job playing the drums in the Broadway musical Showboat and hung for many years with Lena Horne and Malcolm X in Harlem. But I don't have time for those stories either. No, there's no time now, but very soon I'll get to tell these stories to my students. And as I assign my students research projects and struggle to get them to formulate proposals, develop hypotheses and organize their arguments, I hope that they will soon have some good stories to tell me. I hope that for them, as for us faculty, research will seem not something they have to do but something they get to do. I hope that for them research will be, as it is for me, the icing on the cake.