Tales out of turn: On (mis)telling other people's stories

by Richard A. Kauffman in the June 29, 2010 issue

The challenge of telling other people's stories is an occupational hazard for journalists, historians, memoirists, conflict mediators and even preachers. Getting the facts accurate is only part of the challenge. Storytellers have to grapple with the most effective way to tell the story and what perspective to take or interpretive remarks to include.

Storytelling is not just a matter of craft; it's also a moral problem—because to a large extent we are our stories. If our stories are violated, so are we.

It is often said that in telling someone else's story, you should imagine that other person being in the room. Would she find your version of her story accurate and fair?

The challenge to be fair gets more complicated when the other's story is entwined with your own—especially if the shared history is complicated and contentious. In that case, you really can tell only your own version of the story—and yet the other person is inevitably wrap ped up in it. Can you tell the story at all without violating the other person?

And what if the other person is in denial about aspects of his story? Do you play the role of enabler by going along with his denial for the sake of not violating his sense of the story?

What do you do with family secrets—your own family's or someone else's—or with the darker aspects of someone's life? Do you have the right to make them part of the story? Would it be right to tell the story of an abusive priest and leave out any mention of the abuse? How do we speak the hard but sometimes necessary truths with love and without bearing false witness?

I struggled with such questions in writing a book about Iran (*An American in Persia*: *A Pilgrimage to Iran*, published by Cascadia). I wanted to tell Iranian stories that are not likely to be heard in the U.S. Yet there are probably as many different ways of

being Iranian as there are ways of being American. To which stories do I give privileged position? And how do I tell them?

One chapter in the book was centered on an American who married an Iranian woman and made his home in Iran. Several people who read the manuscript, including the publisher, suggested that I share that chapter with the subject. I'm glad I complied with that advice. The man gave me feedback that spared me some embarrassment. If I ever see him again—which I hope to—I won't have to justify my version of his story to him.

The stories that pastors tell can get them into trouble. A friend of mine was preaching in a neighboring state, several hundred miles from home, so he thought he could safely tell tales from his home community. In his sermon he told a story about a businessman back home who engaged in a questionable business transaction. After the service, while greeting people at the back of the sanctuary, the preacher was confronted by the very businessman whose ethics had been scrutinized in the sermon. The preacher's story didn't pass the "in the same room" test.

I know some pastors who won't tell a story involving a person within the congregation without clearing it with that person. What about a preacher telling stories about people and situations in congregations that they've previously served?

I heard Thomas Lynch and Rhoda Janzen speak recently about their experience in writing memoirs, which in evitably involves telling other people's stories. Lynch said he abides by the principle that it's easier to get permission than forgiveness. If he can't get permission to include someone else's story, then he finds ways of making that person unidentifiable in his story.

Janzen said that before publishing her book she shared her memoir only with her mother and sister. After publication, she learned that a sister-in-law was offended at the way she was portrayed.

Janzen's memoir, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, illustrates another complexity of telling stories. The memoir is about Janzen's return to a rather closed Menno nite community after her husband left her for a man and she was recovering from an injury in a serious auto accident. Writing for a largely non-Mennonite audience, Janzen felt the need to explain who the Mennonites are. But having done so, it is no longer just her story: it becomes, for some readers, the story of an entire group.

Janzen said she meant the memoir to be an appreciative portrayal of Menno nites—but some Mennonites didn't see it that way. "She just went for the laughs," one Mennonite writer said to me.

As a Mennonite myself, I can partly understand the in-group criticism. Yet I take Janzen's memoir for what it is: not the story of all Mennonites, but one woman's idiosyncratic story, one that is often hilarious, sometimes poignant.

Telling the stories of groups locked in conflict is even more challenging. For in stance, the Middle East Study Commit tee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) re cently released a document on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The document, to be taken up at the PCUSA's General Assembly in July, is already generating controversy. Some Jewish and Christian critics say, with justification, that the document's history section is so biased in favor of the Palestinians that it is an expression of ideology, not history.

But is it possible to tell one story about the Middle East conflict that would be regarded as fair and accurate by both sides? There are at least two stories to tell, an Israeli one and an Arab one. There are also Jewish, Christian and Muslim stories. If only one story could be told, there probably wouldn't be a conflict in the first place.

For nearly two millennia Christians have been telling the Jewish story in isolation from Jews. As Archbishop of Canter bury Rowan Williams has put it, we Christians conscripted the Jewish story to fit our story: up to the time of Christ, the Jewish story serves as prologue to our story; after the time of Christ, the Jewish story functions largely as an antitype to our idealized story. Jews have been portrayed as hypocritical and legalistic or worse. There is a problem when Jews don't recognize their story in our telling of it.

As the Presbyterian document illustrates by its flaws, Christians who care about justice for Palestinians are called to tell the Palestinian story of injustice without repeating false stories about the Jews.

In the end, we have to try to follow two biblical guidelines for storytelling, hard as they are to apply: don't bear false witness and speak the truth in love.