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Humanizing History: Applying Media Storytelling to Lived Experiences

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HUMANIZING HISTORY: APPLYING MEDIA STORYTELLING TO LIVED
EXPERIENCES

University Honors Program Creative Project

University of Nebraska Omaha

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ABSTRACT: This creative project explores the tendency of individuals to avoid or alter deemed unfavorable, unflattering, or simply humiliating traits or actions in their written and spoken personal stories. Such choices come from fear and pressure to present oneself in a more perfected state for others to “like” rather than a human state for audiences to relate to and learn from. Through a series of written personal accounts to air on UNO’s college radio station and website *MavRadio.FM*, the project brings attention to habits of human nature more likely to remain unspoken. The goal is to encourage the sharing of more humanizing stories about flaws and needs, rather than simply the stories of success and perfection. Much of the inspiration for the work came from shared accounts in creative nonfiction courses, discussions of primary documents and the perspectives presented by secondary sources in history courses, and the encouragement to humanize voices in journalism courses. Interested audiences can listen to the following stories on *MavRadio.FM* under “Podcasts.”

Keywords: Creative, audio, human nature, perfection

II. Audio Story #1: “Signs of Affirmation”

Introduction

In this episode of *Something to Note*, I wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you. It’s a simple phrase, often human instinct to say, especially depending on how authoritative and Midwestern your parents are. Still, it’s a phrase that we should spend more time thinking about, instead of all the other junk we can find ourselves hyper-fixating over.

To be honest listeners, these last few months have been a bit rough for your beloved host. We can all find ourselves falling into a funk from time to time, and I was definitely feeling out of it—paralyzed by doubts and anxieties to the point of not being able to live the life developing around me. I was scared. I was lost. I was also graduating college.

Then I remembered I was not alone. There were people who I could talk to. There were people who wanted to talk to me. I received help. And I can now say I am feeling better.

It can be scary, drowning in these dark moments likely escalating from the imps and demons in our heads. But a simple lifesaver I have come to understand comes from the little interactions we can have with each other. The simple acts of being included in conversations or receiving compliments can remind us of who we are. And a little unexpected thank you can go a long way.

So, in this episode, I wanted to say thank you to all those who made the simple acts to get me out of my funk—whether they realized it or not. While I would like to thank everyone, I am narrowing it down to exemplify how seemingly small and random these acts of kindness can be.

Plus, it also gives me an opportunity to rant a bit about my problems with astrology, which will make more sense when you hear my story. I don’t actually hate that stuff, but I do think it can be a little annoying feeling like my identity is as easy to read as the Instagram post giving a daily horoscope and *New Girl* quote. Though, I will admit, the crystals you guys buy do look pretty cool.

So, without further ado, here is my thank you note titled “Signs of Affirmation.” Take it away.

Story

Dear Aaron and Jess,

On March 28th, you made me download an astrology app onto my phone. Perhaps forced isn't the right word. Instead, you'd both probably say it's in my Virgo nature to be willing to please and not let anyone down that I handed you my phone during our shift together in our college's tutoring office. I'd like to say I gave it to you because I'm a nice guy just going along with my coworkers. But I don't want to argue. Whatever makes you guys happy.

I don't know if I believe in Zodiac signs. I could quote Ricky Gervais from his show *After Life* and how it doesn't make sense for everyone born in the same month to have the exact same personality. And as a twin with a sister who speaks her mind and is happy to challenge anyone who disagrees with her, I would say that I side with Gervais. But again, I don't want to argue.

No one had made an appointment that afternoon, and we were otherwise in separate corners of our workplace. If it was up to my brain, I would have maintained the silence and continued typing away on my laptop behind my desk—attempting to focus on the growing list of assignments I was behind on. More likely, I would have continued to stare off into space, distracted by the ruminations responsible for my school slump.

Instead, you guys decided this was a perfect opportunity to calculate the celestial body positionings that apparently dictate all our lives—including mine. While thrown off by the conversation starter and the reveal that Zodiac signs don't simply relate to calendar months and trendy coffee shops, I found myself hesitantly joining in on the discussion. I reasoned that being polite and conversational with my coworkers was more important than opening a Word Document. It also led to me texting my sister to figure out the exact time of day of my birth to finalize these apparent formulas of fate. I had a vague idea of when I was born, but I tend to be wishy-washy with the specifics.

My sister was certain it was nine AM.

Now, I don't remember the meanings behind my different moons, star charts, planetary positions, or whatever else that have somehow influenced my identity. Horoscopes would say physical forces from the heavens above molded me into the shy, perfectionist, overthinker I am today. I think I just didn't drink enough water as a kid. Whatever the case, I do find myself looking back on our conversation. It was a conversation not necessarily directed at me, but it was one you encouraged me to join. It was a moment to get me out of my head—to be me.

And I am thankful for that.

I do see the appeal of astrology. For one, it is a nice icebreaker. As someone who gets stuck in his mind with worries of not wanting to bother others, it can be difficult to come up with the right order of questions and stories to get to know my peers. And asking them when their birthday is to then provide a comparable personality chart feels more like a party game than forced small talk.

But while I don't necessarily believe in horoscopes or astrology, I do believe in our shared desire to want some reassurance in our lives—to receive some affirmation outside our often antagonistic and questioning heads. I think, deep down, we all have a sense of what answers we need to tell ourselves. At least, we all have answers to give to those struggling with their own problems. Sometimes I think we need just a friend, family member, or even a horoscope section of a magazine to confirm what we need to hear—to remember who we are.

This last semester, I found myself really struggling with a sense of imposter syndrome. Inner demons kept challenging the face I saw in the mirror, and I struggled to focus on anything but the repetitive, "What ifs?" Combining this with my looming undergrad graduation and enough future uncertainties to make conversations with family on holidays even more awkward, I blinded myself from whom I thought I was and what I wanted to be.

But then you both asked me for my Zodiac sign—taking the time to confirm the different traits of a Virgo you saw in me. Perhaps you were just trying to back up the science aspect of the pseudoscience. Though, it never hurts to hear compliments about your apparent moments of kindness, generosity, and humor—things we can often forget about.

So, I thought I'd return the favor based on my own observations.

Now, I honestly don't remember your Zodiac signs or frankly when your birthdays are. Virgos, I guess, are supposed to have good memories, but I do not live up to that. What I do know is that you both are welcoming and easy to talk to. While you might have your own self-doubts, you both have an assertiveness to say or do what is on your mind. People want to talk to you, get to know you, and joke with you. They want to join your conversations, and you let them—often encouraging the whole office to join in. You both have stories, proud experiences, and moments of humility you are willing to share that make you the impromptu gurus many of us turn to for advice. And I want to emphasize that not everyone will buy a coworker a KitKat for simply doing their job or take the time to walk up to their desk to ask them how their day is going.

And those little gestures do truly matter. Plus, I hadn't eaten breakfast.

Thanks for everything, and I look forward to future conversations—even if they include a deck of tarot cards.

Sincerely,

Ben

III. Audio Story #2: “Farmer Mentality”

Introduction

In this episode of *Something to Note*, I wanted to talk about a more somber topic. A topic that has a sense of taboo but is brought up enough times by peers, coworkers, and traumatic Disney movies starring yellow labs to potentially spark a groan from audiences. At least, it might spark a groan by us seemingly heartless, indifferent kind. In other words, people living their own lives.

My English teacher in the 11th grade told us he was tired of the “dead pet” story. He said everyone had one, and he didn’t want to read about any more cats and dogs making a final trip to the vet. They all felt the same to him. Therefore, he challenged us during the personal essay section of the class to think about how we can write about our experiences uniquely, and I listened. Throughout my high school and college careers, I attempted to write different, individualized stories. Stuff, I hoped, people hadn’t heard before but could relate to.

Then my dog died.

I know, a bit of a downer. Never really a lighthearted way to say that fact. Now, this is not an attempt to get your pity or your undivided attention. Though as a human person who enjoys talking about himself, I can’t say that I wouldn’t complain if you must. But this is an attempt to tackle why pet owners feel drawn to put their grief to the page for an essay prompt—grief so universal it can feel cliché.

So, I am sorry Mr. Catron, but now I must tell my dead pet story. It’s only fair. After all, I’ve always listened to others share theirs. And I didn’t care—it wasn’t my pet anyways. Who cares? But now...I get it. They care about their stories because they cared about their pet. And I cared about mine—even when I struggle to show my emotions.

So, without further ado, here is my story: “Farmer Mentality.” Take it away.

Story

I still struggle with saying Zeetz “was” obese rather than “is” obese. Pets are a key icebreaker in a lot of small-talk moments. And having an overweight, diabetic, one-eyed miniature dachshund with arthritis, cataracts, and an outie belly button (which disqualified him of show dog quality) was kind of the ultimate conversation opener. Other kids had *Old Yeller* or *Marley and Me*. I had *Ripley’s Believe It or Not!* Concerning but adorable, he was my entry pass into the exchanges of cats-in-the-wrong-place photos and stories of dogs eating the one thing they were not supposed to.

For example, Zeetz, who was a little more than ankle height and wide enough to set magazines and plastic cups on like a portable coffee table, once jumped up onto our Thanksgiving dinner spread to begin lapping up the juices of an oven-roasted turkey. Sure, a tabby sleeping in a bathroom sink is cute or a lab catching a bunny is horrific. But a dog defying the limits of little legs, gravity, and veterinarian warnings is, frankly, inspiring.

We got Zeetz when I was in elementary school. With him being our first family dog, it took a lot of convincing by my siblings and me to prove we were responsible enough to take care of him. A combination of trips to the library to research dog breeds and the mistake of our parents looking at a photo of him with his breeder gave us all the evidence we needed to take him home. I say we did a good job, giving him walks around the block and teaching him how to sit and stay. But as we got older, these walks around the block started including shortcuts, and the list of tricks only extended to “shake” and a consistent reminder of what “stay” meant (he just really wanted the food and knew he could get it). We loved Zeetz, especially when he snuggled up with us when watching tv, when we were sick, or whenever we were feeling down. He was a source of comfort for all of us. But I worry that we may have simply gotten too comfortable with

being comfortable. Though, I don't think Zeetz complained about the treats and blankets—especially as he got grayer and grayer.

Zeetz died a little over a year ago at the age of 12. We can't really say it was much of a surprise based on the list of health problems contained in his reverse-hourglass body. If doggy autopsies are a thing, which is probably one of the saddest jobs in the world, I wouldn't blame the veterinary expert for simply marking "all of the above." Still, it didn't make breaking the news any easier. So, on get-to-know-me days in class and work, or during moments of reconnecting with long-time friends, I felt obligated to bring up other talking points and stories to avoid the dilemma of bringing everyone down with my pup who passed away.

Often, my intention for the stories I share is to be funny. One of which I brought up instead of my once go-to Zeetz banter was the apparent "farmer mentality" that runs in my family. Now, this is not another way of saying my parents didn't like Zeetz. While they may have considered posting an ad for adoption a few times whenever he chewed, peeled, or peed on our carpet and furniture, they still developed quite a bond.

For instance, Zeetz's favorite toy was a green rubber ball. Wherever Zeetz went, the ball went—including my parents' bed he slept in with them at night. It was his "teddy bear" and my dad's obstruction to the view of his wife. They loved each other.

Instead, the farmer mentality originates in the generations father up the family tree. Specifically, those who actually worked in agriculture.

My great-grandparents would have scoffed at the idea of sharing a bed with an animal. They were farmers and rented a piece of land for many years. My mom has told stories of playing with dozens of kittens that always ended up on the property one way or the other. Then they would disappear one way or another. My Uncle Matt said my great-grandpa used to stuff

injured and unwanted stray kittens in a bag and then proceed to smack them at “two-by-four o’clock.” My mom said he was exaggerating. Instead, they likely drowned the cats.

I admit, probably not the greatest pickup lines when meeting or reconnecting with people. But there is some sort of “gallows humor” element to these comments from my relatives that made me want to share similarly stunned reactions. They are so horrible and shocking that the absurdity is all you focus on. You may even laugh at their acknowledgment, building a barrier to realities that occurred—the underlying guilt present.

You can avoid it all.

Yet, on the day my great-grandma met Zeetz for the first time, when he gave her a little kiss, she admitted, “He’s pretty cute.”

Zeetz’s ball is now with me. Perhaps I felt the need to keep it as a sort of continued responsibility I once had—a responsibility I feel guilty about failing. It’s the guilt of wondering but really knowing what I could have done more: More walks around the block. More attempts to play with him whenever he wanted. More moments to give him the attention he cried about—sometimes to an annoying degree. He was my dog. I was his owner. I know I loved him. And he loved me. And I know I did enough. But there could have been more. I know it. Others probably would have done more. At least, they might have joked less about his weight and health issues and actually made additional efforts to help him. My parents would probably emphasize the many trips to the vet, optional surgeries, and pet insurance they all paid for—the long life he lived.

But I should have done more.

I can see the ball whenever I want, but I don't really see the need to get it out too often. So, it rests in the covered box on top of my bookshelf where I keep my First Communion rosary and my grandpa's old business card—waiting to be unpacked.

III. Audio Story #3: “Paleontology versus Archaeology”

Introduction

So, in this episode of *Something to Note*, I wanted to try to exemplify “practicing what I preach.” Specifically, the story I wanted to share came from my desire to get a story. I saw the event as an opportunity for something to talk about later...which I guess is now. I feel like a lot of my experiences come from this desire to, again, have a story to share around the dinner table every day. For one, I think it makes me sound sort of smart or wise. At least, I hope that’s how I came off the third graders I told this concept to. Again, things will make sense when I share my story. But essentially, I was a guest speaker at my old elementary school. Which is weird because I don’t really have a career or anything. I graduated college, yes. But am I really “guest speaker” worthy? (We’ll dive into that).

But the other reason I like telling people to try to find stories to tell around the dinner table is that I have a personal fear of not living life “correctly.” I am worried constantly about being boring or wasting my time, which causes me to get stressed and waste more time. But I find moments to try new things. To experience new things. To figure things out. And I think that’s led to the recent truth I have come to realize. And it’s a truth I think all adults can relate to.

So, with that, I now begin my story, “Paleontology versus Archaeology.” Take it away.

Story

Eight-year-olds are terrifying. Standing in front of the entire third-grade class at Wheeler Elementary School, I didn’t expect to get stage fright. But hundreds of eyes all staring at you are still hundreds of eyes staring at you, no matter their height or choice to wear a *Lego Star Wars* t-shirt.

This was my alma mater. Actually, the first time I heard the phrase “alma mater” in reference to me was in the text my past 5th-grade teacher sent me to plan this event. I think this

is funny, especially because I graduated from college a few days before. As a recent college graduate and 22-year-old adult who had the whole world to explore, I found myself back in the school library I spent way too much time in as a kid, checking out dinosaur books instead of chapter books. These were books I definitely read and didn't just look at the cool pictures of Ankylosauruses and Stegosauruses.

I mean, I did become an English major after all.

To the kids though, I was a guest speaker and "expert podcaster." They also thought I was thirty and possibly married, but I just let those comments slide. Mrs. Derichs, my fifth-grade teacher and now current school librarian, invited me to talk to the kids about my experience making audio stories and being part of UNO's college radio station. Apparently, the third graders had worked on their own podcasts during the school year. And apparently, my mom, who is a consistent substitute at the school, couldn't resist sharing with Mrs. Derichs my own podcasts. She thought I could offer some insights to the kids, as well as give them a chance to talk to a former Wheeler Wildcat. And with it being the final week of school, I think she also thought it would be a nice way to fill the time that the kids were otherwise too focused on counting down.

Leading up to my appearance, both my mom and Mrs. Derichs said everything would be pretty casual. I received some guiding questions beforehand, such as, "What do I think about when planning a podcast," or, "What do I do when I make a mistake recording?" In the end, I just decided to wing it, trusting I could come up with enough stories and kid-oriented book and movie references to satisfy all audiences.

But once I was given an opportunity to talk after Mrs. Derichs made the necessary and strategic "sh sh sh sh shhh," I realized I made the mistake of not thinking when planning what to say. Thankfully, Mrs. Derichs guided me along, like she did when I was eleven.

When the floor opened to questions, I learned prepared material wouldn't matter. From questions about my middle school teachers to asking what the difference was between archaeology and paleontology, I had to come up with answers on the spot. They were answers I wasn't always satisfied with, but the kids seemed to find justified. In my eyes, I was just a sleep-deprived guy who enjoyed talking about himself and still looked to his past elementary school teachers and mom in the audience for reassurance that everything I was saying was right...and hopefully kid-appropriate. In the kids' eyes, I was a 30-year-old expert podcaster with enough experience in the field to support my wife and kids.

Of course, looking back at the event, I am pretty happy with what I said. Most of my fears of dumb answers were proven wrong by footage my mom recorded from the back row. Though in the moment, I felt like I was just making stuff up. That I was doing everything wrong. That I was failing both the elementary school teachers of my past and the next generation of podcasters in the present. I'm not an expert. I'm still figuring things out. What am I telling these kids with certainty?

And with that, I think I passed my final test of graduating college: knowing what it's like to be an adult in the real world. In life, we are all just figuring things out, mainly through trial and error. Sure, I can't tell the third graders for certain that their podcasts will become massively popular. But I can share with them the fun that can come from trying something new or the fun that can come from talking with a friend behind a microphone. I can't say for certain how to make *Star Wars*-like sound effects that won't get them sued due to copyright purposes. But I can share with them the joy that comes from trying to come up with their own sound effects or playing around with the different settings to make something uniquely theirs. I can't say for certain where I see myself in 5 or 10 years. But there are many things I want to try.

The teachers, guest speakers, and adults in our lives give us the opportunity to look at different opportunities out there—to consider what different paths life has to offer. In elementary school, my teachers pushed me to stop checking out dinosaur books to start reading chapter books. Now, I am interested in trying my hand at storytelling rather than paleontology. But will see where life takes me. Perhaps I go into archaeology at some point. I do have a minor in anthropology.

At the very least, I know for certain I told the kids the difference between paleontology and archaeology. I'm an expert in that regard.