



***“Stories . . . are all we have to fight off illness and death.”***  
**— Leslie Marmon Silko\***

Dear Faithful Reader,

My mother told me a story once.

One day the piano tuner came (my memory is that his name was Frank), and tuned the Steinway that sat in the living room by the front window facing out onto our postage stamp of a front lawn. When he was finished, Frank said the tuning would be twenty-five dollars.

“I looked in our checkbook,” my mother said. “We had twenty-six dollars and eighty-seven cents. I wasn’t sure what we would eat that week, but I tore off a check and paid him without a second thought.”

Now, she may have told me this once, or a hundred times, I don’t remember. But it made an impression on me that lasts to this day. Here are a few of the ways that impression shaped me:

Art is more important than survival. Art *is* survival.

Go ahead and do what matters; the money will be there.

To clarify: I did not grow up dirt-poor, but whatever financial cushion we had was thin enough to feel the hard edges behind it. My parents were both teachers. Christmas presents were carefully thought out and prioritized months ahead of time. I had a friend named Chris who live in a huge house with what seemed like an unlimited budget for toys; to me, Chris lived on an alien planet.

There was, in other words, no fluff in our household checkbook. But it was important that the piano, which had come over with my harpsichordist grandmother when she fled from Hitler’s Germany, got tuned. So, tuned it got.

Another story from my mother, this one about my father, who grew up in Germany in the thirties and forties:

One day, when he was in his teens, a Nazi military parade marched through town. Needing to get to school, he tried to slip through the column on his bicycle. The soldiers

trampled both boy and bike. (The boy survived; the bike did not.) Yet my father was the kindest, gentlest, least bitter person I knew.

Two things that story told me: (1) evil exists. And (2) you can pass through it without losing your soul. You may lose your bike, yet still retain your humanity.

These two stories — the piano tuning and the Nazi parade — have become part of who I am. That's what stories do. They shape us, inform us, tell us who we are and, sometimes, *remind* us who we are.

And not only the stories our mothers tell us. Because we can also choose the stories we tell ourselves.

We're telling them all the time anyway, consciously or not, whether the negative ones, the *you're-hopeless, remember-how-you-messed-up-before, you'll-never-succeed-at-this* stories — or the *this-is-what's-important, this-is-what-matters, the you've-got-this* stories.

Most of the narratives that run in our brains are just there, echoing around our crania, retelling themselves without our intention or awareness. But that doesn't have to be the case. Because we can choose. We can take the helm of this ship. We can become our own storytellers.

One of my favorite characters in film is Royal Tenenbaum, played by Gene Hackman in the Wes Anderson masterpiece *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

Royal Tenenbaum was a charming, duplicitous, serial liar and con man who fathered an epically dysfunctional family and then let them down again and again. After conning his way back into the home for a while and then being found yet again to have been lying through his teeth, he comes out with this farewell line in last-ditch effort to gain their sympathy:

“Look, I know I'm going to be the bad guy on this one, but I just want to say the last six days have been the best six days of probably my whole life”

—and then the movie's off-screen narrator says:

“Immediately after making this statement, Royal realized it was true.”

I love that! Without even realizing he was doing it, Royal had made up a new story and changed who he was.

You'll sometimes hear people refer to fiction as “leisure reading,” a luxury, something you indulge in to escape your humdrum reality. Real life, they say, doesn't follow the neat lines and tidy arcs of stories, doesn't line up events in a logical sequence and wrap them up with a bow. Real life, they'll try to tell you, is a lot messier than fiction.

Don't listen to such people; they have utterly lost the plot.

We don't sink into stories in order to *escape* our real lives. We sink into stories to *find* our real lives.

Nobody understands this better than celebrated Native American novelist Leslie Harmon Silko. The quote at the top of this letter appears on page 1 of her magnum opus, *Ceremony*, and here it is in fuller context:

I will tell you something about stories . . .  
They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.  
They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death.

You don't have anything  
if you don't have stories.

Amen.

**My October wish for you: that you take a few moments every day to think back, let your mind drift, and bring up to the surface some of the stories you heard as a child that made an impression on you . . . and then ask yourself: How have they helped shape who you are?**



P.S. Discovering that I could make an actual living telling stories — other people's stories, at first, and now increasingly my own — has been one of the great joys of my life. Thank you, as always and to the skies, for reading!

P.P.S. In the midst of writing about our piano tuner, whose name I vaguely recalled as "Frank," another name bubbled up from the mists of memory: "Dillingham." I just now googled him: sure enough, Frank Dillingham, who I now recall was also a family friend, was a widely respected master keyboard technician — a legend among the pianoscenti.

And now I remember something else: my mother describing how he came to dinner one evening and ate an entire half a roasted chicken, "right down to the bone marrow," she added, "using nothing but a butter knife.

**\* ABOUT THE WRITER**

A poet and novelist of mixed Native American, white American, and Mexican descent, Leslie Marmon Silko has been called the first Native American woman novelist and named one of "the four Native American Literary Masters."

Silko grew up on the edge of the Pueblo Laguna reservation, near Albuquerque, and briefly attended law school, with the goal of pursuing justice for indigenous people, before realizing that her gift for storytelling might have more traction on the page than in the courtroom.

She was right. Her writing won recognition right away, one of her first stories so impressing an editor at Viking Press that he immediately offered her a book deal. The resulting book was *Ceremony* (1977), her most influential work, which helped the author secure a MacArthur “genius” grant in 1981 (the first year the MacArthur awards were offered).

Silko’s writing is lyrical, magical, and ferocious, shot through with what to traditional European sensibilities appears as a mythic otherworldliness. She writes about the clash and uneasy reconciliation of cultures, and the impact of the past, of oral cultures and the old ways, on modern life.

*Ceremony* follows the experiences of several “war heroes” (the ironic quotes are hers) returned to New Mexico after World War II with profound PTSD from their living through the Bataan Death March in the Philippines. Like Kurt Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim, who became “unstuck in time” after witnessing the firebombing of Dresden, Silko’s characters experience time as fluid, malleable, and highly unreliable. Here is a passage from early in the novel:

“He cried at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time.”

In a 1998 interview, Silko said:

“The Pueblo people and the indigenous people of the Americas see time as round, not as a long linear string. If time is round, if time is an ocean, then something that happened 500 years ago may be quite immediate and real, whereas something inconsequential that happened an hour ago could be far away.”

Appearing as it did in 1977, *Ceremony* immediately resonated with a generation of returning Vietnam war veterans, yet its relevance and impact only increases with the passage of time. An unapologetic spokesperson for her own mixed-race ancestry, Silko writes about the disorientations and challenges of cohabitation — of races, sensibilities and cultures, humanity and environment, past and present. And the answers, she shows again and again, are found in the preservation and recreation of stories.

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