Why Stories Matter
by Paul Tritschler

I’m sitting at the window of a cafe in Notting Hill Gate in London, looking out at the passing machines and global signage. A man across the street dips into a rubbish bin, rescues an unopened plastic bottle of milk from deep inside and squeezes it into one of four over-full plastic bags, before pushing on to the next bin at a steady clip.

The bins hold valuable assets to the cognoscenti, but they have to be quick to get the good stuff that people outside the circle absently throw away: a packet of cigarettes from someone who made the snap decision to quit, perhaps, a bag of blueberry muffins past their sell-by date, or an unfinished can of beer.

Between Pizza Express and Prontaprint the same man excavates a second bin, extending the full length of his arm to the bottom and lifting something out. I’m eager to know what it is. There’s a discerning look in his eye as he weighs in his mind whether or not it’s collectable, before deciding to let gravity reclaim the mystery object. Perhaps someone further along will assess its market value differently.

Soon afterwards, a woman of indeterminate age determinedly tries her luck in the first rubbish bin, and then quickly moves along to the second. She picks out a bunch of withered flowers tied together with a ribbon—evidently something the first bin-searcher considered worthless—and cradles them in the crook of her arm, before walking on a little more slowly than before, perhaps plunged in thought with her petals or simply keeping a safe distance from her predecessor. Bin scavenging must be fraught with such dangers and demands.

Just like most other jobs, time is the enemy. Those on the hunt are in competition with each other, but they’re also racing against the clock to beat the men in yellow jackets from the local council whose job it is to empty the bins into the mouths of their guzzling trucks. Scavengers are caught in a unity of opposites, simultaneously inside and outside the mainstream world: subjected to regular routes and routines but only in order to sustain life in a sleeping bag.

How did they get here? Relieved of wages and possessions, anyone can join their club. Admission is not restricted to addicts or the mentally ill. In times of economic austerity and insecurity the distance from the cliff’s edge to the bottom may be large even for those on an average salary, but the descent can be rapid.

The woman with dead flowers in her arms wasn't born on the street, I assume. Perhaps the sun was shining brightly for her as she sang her lungs out in class, a beam of sunlight on her desk, with pens and pencils inside along with a jotter with her name on it, a skipping rope, and a treasured note from an early love interest. I see her running around the yard with other children at playtime, using up some of that excess energy, laughing

and giggling, hearing other children call to her. Now she has her head in a rubbish bin near Prontaprint and is all-but invisible.

What about the man who walked past my café window? Obviously at some point his life had changed. Maybe it was sudden, but it could have been gradual, losing his grip finger by finger until he was unable to cling to the ledge any longer, and was forced to fall. People don't give up the fight easily though. I once met a family in Walsall in the English Midlands who were pulling up the floorboards in their upstairs bedroom to burn for fuel, so I helped them to break up the floor of their life raft. That night I had been standing on the street opposite their house in relentless rain, trying to hitch a lift back to the motorway. They called me over and invited me in to dry off and warm up by a roaring fire, and for the next few hours husband and wife cheerfully competed to tell me stories of better times, while their son was the colour of death.

I met them on a miserable trip that started and finished in freezing rain. Almost as soon as I arrived in London I turned around and headed home to Scotland, unsure of why I had set out in the first place. On my way back the day started off bad and steadily got worse. It was dim from dawn, and lifts from motorists were few and far between. Somewhere on the bleak A1 I found myself stranded, numb with cold and wet. At one point the situation was so bad that I stood in the middle of the road to stop a car, but the driver only took me for half a mile. Back on the verge a man who looked like a tramp emerged from behind me wearing several coats and a beaming smile—an instantly friendly and overwhelmingly sociable Glaswegian. My heart sank.

To my eternal shame, I didn't want to be burdened with someone who might reduce my chances of a motorist stopping even further. But the ice broke, and we walked on together for a fair stretch of road. I got so caught up in conversation with him that until he asked me, I had quite forgotten that I was hungry. Starving in fact, I told him, and immediately he produced some foil-wrapped sandwiches from out of the deep pockets of one of his overcoats.

Being a vegetarian, I gave him back the contents of the sandwiches and just ate the buttered white bread. His face darkened; I didn't know real hunger, he said. But in less than a minute he was back to his cheerful self, giving me advice on everything from the Scottish history they don't tell you in school to how to find out if a rabbit's at home using a twig, and the best way to find a sandwich: look for the back door of a hospital kitchen, since the people who work there are always willing to help.

After an hour or two I reminded myself that my companion was a hitch-hiker's hindrance and declared that we should go our separate ways in order to increase the chances of a lift. He thought I considered him beneath me; I could read him reading me, and I suppose he was right, but he resumed his smile and emphasized that we should stay together. If it came to it, he said, he knew ways of surviving a bad run on the motorway, but I was emphatic, and quickly walked ahead.

In the hour that followed, darkness descended and with it despair. I couldn't see where I was walking along the grass verge, and frequently slipped. The rain fell more heavily, and I was soaked through, shivering and weak. Then hope in the form of some distant car headlights shone through the pelting rain, and I stuck out my thumb from the edge of the road. The car sprayed me as it passed and showed no signs of stopping, but then quite suddenly it pulled into the verge ahead and I ran towards the lights as fast as I could.

I pulled open the door and climbed into the front seat, thanking the driver profusely for

saving my life. He turned the wheel to pull back on to the road. “No need to thank me,” he said, “it was this guy who insisted I stop,” indicating the tramp with his thumb, who, with a big smile on his face, was already sitting in the back seat of the car.

Ok, so what’s point of this story, you might ask? The brain is wired for metaphor. It provides a quick route to comprehension, but also a trigger to the brain's sensory areas—an action that helps to deepen our understanding through feeling. Storytelling, recognised in every society as a way of making sense of cultural roots or social reality, is an elaborate form of metaphor, and memoir is its masterpiece: life stories enable us to share insights and enhance mutual understanding in a social, political, psychological and spiritual sense. Memoir is revolutionary precisely because, when shared, it’s a way towards the truth.

We don’t become any less by sharing. Stories are part of the fabric of who we are, but only in sharing our life experiences do we develop a sense of self. After all, individuals are necessarily social. In my story, the man I met on the motorway had little when seen from the perspective of materialistic culture, but he had gifts to give and gave them gladly despite my selfish disregard: empathy, altruism, joy and sacrifice—all the stuff that makes us human. He may also have saved my life. Stories cultivate the frequently forgotten yet uniquely human traits that are crucial in building solidarity.

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