



My love of story was nurtured in the backyard of my childhood home, where I listened for hours on end to my father, perched in his faux-redwood lawn chair with a floral-patterned cushion. He loved to tell stories about his own upbringing on a Wisconsin dairy farm or his naval career, which spanned from World War II to the Vietnam War. As the sun descended over our modest home, the electronic mosquito zapper furnished both the light and the soundtrack for our discussions.

Some of my father's stories were self-deprecating, but others were boastful. Some were so fantastic that they seemed like fables. He never spoke directly about combat, but he talked about the other parts of his life on an aircraft carrier. Most of his stories contained some sort of lesson. He thought of himself as a teacher, and he taught me through his stories.

Law is also taught through stories. Some of these stories are staples of the first-year curriculum, and the shared experience of learning these stories is one of the things that distinguishes lawyers as a profession. *Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co.* (fireworks on a railroad platform), *R. v. Dudley and Stephens* (cannibalism at sea), *Pierson v. Post* (fox hunting on a beach), *Hawkins v. McGee* (the hairy hand case), and *Marbury v. Madison* (Madison does not deliver a judicial commission to Marbury)—these cases and stories are memorable and powerful teaching tools.

Recognizing the emotional power of stories, we launched LawReads, a book-of-the-semester project, during my welcome address to the Class of 2020. This project is an opportunity for our students and other members of our community to engage with the law on an emotional level. Our primary goal is to motivate deeper reflection on the role of law in human affairs, and over the past two years we have read a variety of books: *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America* by Gilbert King; *The Last Days of Night* by Graham Moore; *Black Edge: Inside Information, Dirty Money, and the Quest to Bring Down the Most Wanted Man on Wall Street* by Sheelah Kolhatkar; and *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein.

Although we have enjoyed reading these stories about law, we also want our students to tell their own stories. As our alumni can attest, stories are important to every type of law practice. Professor Kif Augustine-Adams recently encouraged our students in a law forum on storytelling: “Develop storytelling skills by preparing yourself to be a good listener. This will allow you to take in the information and construct a story that the law requires.” As we have considered the power of story, the LawReads project has become part of a larger LawStories initiative through which we teach storytelling as a lawyering skill.

This past semester we inaugurated Proximate Cause, a storytelling competition for our students. Motivated by Bryan Stevenson's admonition to “get proximate” with real problems and real people, Proximate Cause invites our students to tell true stories that are close to their hearts and imbue their legal education with meaning and purpose. In the current semester, we are expanding our efforts nationally by introducing BYU LawStories on the Mainstage, a program that will bring law students from across the country to BYU to tell their stories about life and the law.

As we move forward with LawStories, I have begun to appreciate more fully the connections between storytelling and leadership. Storytelling expert Esther Choy has observed, “At the heart of leadership lies persuasion. At the heart of persuasion lies storytelling.”¹

More recently, I realized that there is something even more profound in storytelling. The stories we tell about others frame how we think about the world. The stories we tell about ourselves describe our place in that world. Stories have been crucial to my own professional and personal identity formation, and I wonder if the most important consequence of our LawStories initiative is not that we will create better lawyers but that we will create better people. I hope that we will help our students better understand themselves and the world.

It's hard to imagine a more important work.



NOTE

¹ Esther K. Choy, *Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success* (New York: AMACOM, 2017), xix.

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