

From The Storyteller's Mouth

a conversation with Jill Johnson by Kim Pearson

Jill Johnson has performed and given workshops in Washington, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and overseas. A National Storytelling Competition finalist in Hillsboro, Ohio, Jill has been a featured performer with Humanities Washington and recently visited Africa, performing and giving workshops in Cameroon and South Africa. Her one woman show, "Little, But Oh My!" depicts the life of Berte Olson, the first woman ferry boat captain on Puget Sound.



When did you start storytelling?

"I started in a deliberate way in 1996 when I moved to Jonesborough, Tennessee, the home of the National Storytelling Festival. Storytelling is a big deal there, so I got interested and joined the Jonesborough Storytelling Guild, probably one of the most active guilds in the country. They met and performed regularly, usually once a week at a restaurant downtown, plus other events in churches and for groups. Because they provided so much practice, support and encouragement, they had some mighty good tellers.

The first time I told a story in Jonesborough, I tell you, I was scared out of my head – my knees were like jelly, my mouth full of cotton. This despite the fact that I had majored in theatre in college and was used to performing, plus I'd had a career as a teacher and trainer. But I hadn't been involved in the arts for years, and storytelling was new to me.

It would make a good story if I could say that this first attempt was a triumph, but the truth was that although I didn't bomb totally, I almost did. I got sort of a lukewarm response. That's because I didn't know one of the basics of good storytelling – you have to "get" your audience. Don't tell city stories to a group of farmers, in other words. It took me a long time to "get" the Jonesborough audience."

What helped you become the storyteller you are today?

"The Jonesborough Guild taught me the best way to learn how to be a storyteller – by doing it. And doing it again. Even if you think you're going to bomb. A support team, such as a guild, is so important. You'll receive hints and guidance, as well sympathy and encouragement. You can learn in a safe place. That's what I want the Seattle Storytellers Guild to be for all the tellers in our area – a place to get that all-important support.

Another thing I learned, from my mentor Elizabeth Ellis, was the importance of having a foundation in traditional folktales. Elizabeth told me to read every folk tale I could get my hands on, and learn the traditional ways of storytelling, from as many cultures as I could. These tales already have a structure; they've been honed and re-honed for hundreds of years, so they have that framework that you desperately need as a beginning storyteller."

Do you have favorite stories?

"I don't think I have favorite stories. I tend to tell stories on the serious side – I love funny stories, but I've accepted that's just not my forte. I tell historical stories, stories about strong women, or about the environment – stories that make you think. I guess I would say my favorite story is whichever one I happen to be working on at the moment. That's the one that I'm excited about, involved in, even wallowing in."

What are your storytelling goals?

"I want my stories to entertain, teach, inspire, reveal, and especially connect. I want my audiences to not only hear my story, but at the same time discover their own."

What's one of your best storytelling memories?

"I remember the very first performance of *Little But Oh My*. In the audience that evening were 20 members of Berte Olson's family, including her only surviving son, Ivan. At the end of the performance, I brought them all on stage with me to take a bow, and be introduced to the audience. After the applause had died down, I turned to Ivan and said, "So Ivan, how'd you like the show?" And he said, "Oh, I don't know how you did it – you made my mother come alive again!"

Now it just doesn't get any better than that."