

The Mayborn Tribe – Continued

Last summer's conference featured a live mariachi band, a ballet dancer and surreal portraits of some of our speakers painted by local Latino artists. In every way, our gathering was more playful than pious, more suited to Ira's personality than Shakespeare's. At the Mayborn, we understand that amusing our muses inspires better storytelling, and so does Ira. "I think at a writers conference, or any other kind of serious venue where thoughtful people talk about how to make better work, and how to make work that will have some kind of importance, one of the things that gets left out is the thought of how important it is that you amuse yourself while you're doing it."

Roy Blount Jr.'s lecture, "Getting Physical with Your ABC's," provided plenty of amusement. Roy had several people rolling on the floor of the conference auditorium talking about how the tongue is forced to perform bizarre acrobatics pronouncing multisyllabic words like polyurethane foam and how saying the word "sphincter" constricts the throat. Julia Reed, an author and columnist for Newsweek, cautioned writers not to take themselves or their writing too seriously. "Trust me, you're not that cool," she said.

Despite all the fun, there was nothing frivolous about the topics discussed at last year's conference. The Wall Street Journal's Roger Thurow brought the tribe to their feet with his emotionally charged presentation about his "calling" to cover hunger.

Powerfully, eloquently, he made clear that U.S. farm subsidy programs and policies help growers in America, but have devastated African villages and left millions starving and destitute. And Alma Guillermoprieto, a former dancer and longtime New Yorker contributor, literally pulled a ballet dancer through a series of grueling steps to point out that great storytelling is often painful. "We don't do pretty, we do tough, and we do true," she said.

Striking his soundboard and spinning his tale of the Arabian Nights, Ira, misty eyed, reminded us that Scheherazade saved her life by telling compelling stories each night to her self-appointed executioner, her husband, the king. A thousand and one nights later, her life was spared forever. At a time when we're told these are the Final Days, when newspapers are suffering from declining readership and revenues, Scheherazade's story offers a pathway to our own salvation: tell great tales over and over again.

That was the recurring message resounding across the walls of the auditorium: whether you're a journalist, author, filmmaker, radio host or blogger, your mission is the same – tell stories that illuminate, instruct, provoke, that make us think, make us feel.

Stories are "a backdoor to a very deep place in us," Ira said, "a place where argument and reason don't really hold sway."

Mike Mooney knows that place. Only a year ago, he was a Mayborn graduate student. This year, after claiming a slot in both The Best American Crime Reporting and The Best American Sports Writing anthologies for 2009, he became a Mayborn speaker. "It was kind of emotional being there this year," said Mike, who has attended every conference since our inception in 2005.

It was for me, too. Sitting in the front row of the auditorium, listening to my protégé's talk about infiltrating youthful subcultures, I spent most of Mike's lecture fighting back tears, thinking about his remarkable achievements. When he stepped away from the podium, we hugged and I watched Mike's eyes open wide as a throng of conferees approached him, hoping to glean some insights from Mike that would help them achieve his success as a storyteller.

I smiled at Mike and walked away, leaving the young writer to pass along his storytelling gems to our hungry tribe.