

# Oral tradition

Jesus told parables, and ministers give sermons. Now secular storytellers are drawing the crowds.

BY ANNE BOKMA

**D**an Yashinsky has heard thousands of stories since he founded Toronto's popular 1,001 Friday Nights of Storytelling almost 30 years ago. But one in particular stands out. When Yashinsky, a storyteller-in-residence at Toronto's Baycrest Health Sciences, prompted elderly depressed patients to share their memories of places where they had felt at peace, one man tentatively spoke up to talk about a time when he was sitting outdoors at his farm and invited a monarch butterfly to land on him. Twice, the monarch ignored the man's entreaty, but the third time it alighted on his right knee.

Years later, this singular memory still brought the man comfort. And it left a deep impression on Yashinsky and the others in the group. "It was the most he had spoken since coming in for treatment," he says. "With stories like his, we learn that wisdom can come from unexpected places — that even a butterfly can have something to teach us."

Such is the power of personal oral storytelling, an art form as ancient as prehistoric people grunting tales around the fire, and as modern as *The Moth*, a Peabody Award-winning U.S. public radio show and weekly podcast launched in 1997 that's credited with the popularity of confessional-style storytelling. Named by founder George Dawes Green after the moths drawn to the porch lights of his native Georgia where he and his friends would gather to share stories, it has ignited thousands of storytelling events across North America, including Toronto's *Raconteurs*, Vancouver's *The Flame* and the annual Canadian Storytelling Night on Nov. 5 in more than a dozen cities in Canada. In my hometown of Hamilton alone, there are monthly *Steel City Stories* and *Speak!* events, as well as a storytelling group at the local synagogue. I host an annual 6-Minute Memoir storytelling night at the local Unitarian church, where 300 people show up to listen to writers spin tales on topics ranging from "My First Time" to "Leaps of Faith."

Storytelling is ascending while church attendance continues to dive, but the two have much in common: people banding together, focusing on a speaker, hungry for a message and some insight. Like a worship service, a storytelling event is "one of the few places in the public sphere where we can feel connected to each other in a meaningful way," says Yashinsky, who notes that one way it differs "is that you hear a diversity of voices and not just the one authorized story from scripture."

Sometimes there's even an exorcism involved. That happens when people share a story that's haunted them throughout their lives, says Tracey Erin Smith, artistic director of Toronto's award-winning Soulo Theatre, which offers a \$565 10-session workshop to help people hone the triumphs and tragedies of their lives into compelling 10-minute performance pieces, a process she describes as "transformational." She's seen how releasing secrets via storytelling can be cathartic — as in the case of the mid-life mom who had an affair that ended badly and was thereafter shunned in her Christian community. "She managed to find humour in the experience; she titled her story 'Not Everyone on Plenty of Fish is a Magic Dolphin.'"

"Two of the most important things to humans are community and meaning, and storytelling provides both," says Smith. "If I were to reinvent religion, I'd make it about storytelling — not constantly revisiting the same old Bible stories . . . but instead listening to the real-life experiences of people dealing with things like divorce or a cancer diagnosis. These stories allow us to see our own selves in our own time reflected back to us."

As her Soulo associate producer, actor Terrence Bryant, puts it, storytelling helps us see "there's a little bit of us in each other."

*Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.*



George Dawes Green, founder of *The Moth*, performs in New York City in 2009