Afterword

Let me tell you a story about why I chose to write about storytelling and especially why I chose to write about different kinds of people telling different kinds of stories.

When I was little, seven or eight and later, and people would ask me what I was (a common question back then; I don't know if it is still routine to ask kids what they are and expect Chinese or Scottish or half-British/half-French for an answer), anyway, when they'd ask I would say, "half-Italian Catholic, half-Hungarian Jew and one hundred percent American."

Neither side of my family considered themselves "American" when I was growing up. Americans were another kind of people categorized by my mother as cold, pleasure-loving, and unwilling to give you enough to eat when you went to their houses. For my father, Americans were hopelessly naive about the nature of the world; that a drinking country had voted in Prohibition always struck him as the last word in inconsistency and self-deception. Americans were also totally devoid of taste and likely to tell you an off-color joke, ask you if you'd ever been to a baseball game, and invite you for Thanksgiving dinner. My father waxed enthusiastic about Yankee ingenuity, however, and loved to be surprised by them acting like people. My mother always seemed rather disappointed that they acted like people. She was basically afraid of and intimidated by them, I think, and preferred them to be cold and unwilling to be truly generous. For my father the epitome of Americans being American was "the fake grandmother": a grandmother who charges her children to babysit for her grandchildren. For my mother what

distinguished Americans from people is that they take vacations and spend money on themselves.

And I claimed to be 100 percent American, whatever that means. I took the melting pot seriously and personally. Here I was, born in the U.S. of two culturally ill-sorted people in an America which really seemed to be the land of possibilities of an otherwise impossible kind. Upward mobility? I'd seen it. My mother worked in the garment district and worked her way up to owning her own shop. She left it all to marry my father, an Intellectual. (It didn't work, but that's another story.) The land of opportunity? Certainly more than Europe at that time (early 1950's). Freedom? Those were the days of McCarthy, who was a real figure to me and dark muttery stories were heard that seemed very frightening and foreboding. But compared to the stories of gas chambers and concentration camps it just didn't seem that bad. Before I was born an American passport had been about the best guarantee of safety there was, and I felt inordinately glad from earliest childhood (three or four) that I was an American and I could get an American passport and cross borders without being afraid.

I knew a lot of Americans, too, of course. I went to a totally American school, meaning that there were no Catholics or Jews in it. It was a private girls school of genteel and Anglican persuasion. We sang "Holy, Holy, Holy," as far as I could see, at the drop of a hat and were expected to jump up from our seats when an adult entered the room and say "good morning Mrs. so and so" in happy unison. There was always some confusion when the janitor came in about whether you were supposed to stand up or not. I knew you weren't supposed to because I knew about those things. It seemed like the richer the girls were, the dumber. When I would go and visit my mother's relatives in New York, the teachers would say that I'd been with the Wop relatives again, but when my father would come to school they always seemed a bit bewildered. He intimidated them and they thought they owned the world. We had no money to speak of at home when I was growing up. My parents were separated and there never seemed to be much to go around. So, my mother took up babysitting. She babysat for the same type of people I went to

school with, but she drew the line at sitting for anyone who actually was at the school. Next door, maybe. I went with her. We would go by taxi to some big empty house somewhere and look after the children. As far as I can remember, the children were all blond with skinny legs and limited intelligence. By the time my mother started sitting I was about ten or eleven, and so most of the children were younger than I was, but stupid. . . they were so incredibly limited that I couldn't believe it. I resented the babysitting because I would run out of books to read and these rich people, as my mother called them, didn't have any books. They always lived out in some wretched suburb, too, where there weren't any libraries. But they did have freezers which could keep ice cream and a TV which could get NBC, both lacking and lamented by my mother and myself in our own home. So we would watch TV and eat ice cream after the kids had been put to bed and wait up until some drunk Americans would come home at two or three o'clock in the morning smelling of alcohol and the outside world, then I'd get my books together and find my homework papers while the man couldn't find his checkbook, and the woman rushed off to bed because she was very tired. And then we'd leave, sometimes in a Mercedes, and sometimes in a filthy taxicab driven usually by Ernie who was a bookie and played the horses and made remarks and was a real person. He may have been Italian or Polish.

So there was all that, and it did not upset me particularly, but it did fascinate me. I never really wondered who was right about anything, they were all so sure that they were right. There was no other way to be or think or see the world my father's every word would say, and likewise my mother's and the school's and the drunken stockbroker's. There was only one world, I could see that, but a thousand views of it. Each view coherent, self-consistent, limiting in some respects, a blessed relief in others. Each existing like a self-satisfied planet revolving around a central star blissfully unaware of who was the center and who the wanderer.

It was a funny way to grow up. Never really socialized, never really a part, never minding not being a part except of course of the best clique at school, taking as truth somehow the best people felt

about themselves and the worst anyone else said. I learned to listen very very hard to what people said and what different people said about the same things and I learned that the same facts, the same incidents, the same world was very very different when talked about by different people. The stories, the myths, the anecdotes were different. There was no truth, ever, in my world. Only stories, talk about the truth.

And yet people talked to each other and groups of similar people told similar stories and seemed to accept the versions of people like themselves without any difficulty. My mother and my teacher might see the same incident and talk about it very very differently. However, my mother and her sisters and the woman upstairs would report the same incident the same way, expressing surprise and outrage and relief at all the right points. And the teacher could talk to the other teachers and the WASP American parents and tell them a story which they understood. And I began to learn about which stories to tell to which people and that when you tell a story it is not the events which matter; it's the point which matters. The point says "hey, you and I know the world is like this and so this behavior, this event means this."

And so this book grows out of this story in lots of ways. First, this is a book about stories and about finding out what people are really talking about in their stories. It is based on the idea that stories are rooted in what you know to be true and that telling a story to someone who does not share your presuppositions about the world as expressed in that story means that he will not really know what you are talking about or care. When you talk to people who can't understand you, your story gets lost and what happens is that the people you are talking to know you are not one of them. They might put you in some sort of category and say that they never understand the stories Jews tell, but, more likely, they just feel bored and confused.

But I am left with the idea of whether there is an American story, since I just told you a story about different groups in the United States all talking at cross purposes and thinking the others were beyond the pale, if not downright immoral. I think that there is a

core of common concerns among Americans, and who should be considered an American involves all those people who consider themselves to be American. Neither of my parents considered themselves American because they knew that they did not share the values of a lot of people whom they categorized as Americans, but those people who consider themselves Americans do share a set of values. Americans would find my father's insistence on taste and understanding the complexities of the political and economic world overly intellectual and elitist, and my mother's constant self-sacrifice at the cost of her own happiness to be far from reasonable, pathetic, maybe, even if in some sense commendable. And I share those values of those people who call themselves Americans. I believe deep down in *choices*, in the *ability* of the *individual* to *control* his own life in many ways, in the *responsibility* of the *individual* to make his own decisions. Furthermore, I can be moved by arguments that something is *not fair*. I think everyone should have *equal opportunities* and that different people have a *right* to *live their lives their own way as long as they don't hurt anybody else* because somehow people are all equal and have the right to choose what they want out of life and shouldn't be stopped from getting it through *accidents of birth* which they can't *control*. As long as an *individual* is competent he has the *right* to do what he thinks best and rise as high as he can rise. And all the rest.

I believe that *individuals* have *rights* and they have the *power* and the *responsibility* to make *decisions* for themselves. Furthermore, I believe that *time* is sequential, that events have *causes* which are to be found in either the *facts* of the natural world or in past events. I believe that it is possible to *understand* something and to *explain* it and I have almost a religious belief in the *power* of language to *facilitate change*. If you can talk about something you feel, then you will feel better. If you can *understand* a *problem*, you can *solve* it.

If you are an American, these may seem so stupidly trite that you would wonder why anyone would put these things down. You may think that you don't really think they are true. Perhaps some aren't for you. But I would bet that when you argue against one of them, it

will be in terms of another. I've never met an American yet who doesn't believe that the individual is the central figure on the stage of the world and even arguments for being unselfish put forward by ten year olds involve being altruistic because even though it helps society, being unselfish makes you feel good and therefore is good for you.

For example, several people I know wrote down their versions of the story "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." In discussing the stories, it turned out that there were differences of opinion about what the story was really about, what the boy had done which meant he had to be punished. One opinion held by a couple of people was that the boy had been irresponsible to his sheep in crying wolf, and, in general, was a bad worker and irresponsible in carrying out his job. I felt that he made the villagers feel like such fools that they were embarrassed to look at each other and so he had disturbed the life of the village in that he disrupted social relations. Though our versions appeared totally odd to each other, there was nothing in the "responsibility" version which I could not understand, though I was surprised at what they thought the story was about (and indeed, in the stories, different aspects of the events and situations were emphasized by different people). They thought it was odd that I should be so concerned with the feelings of the villagers, but that people have feelings and that feelings are important considerations which one can tell a story about was certainly clear to them. That is the level of commonality I think there is among Americans and which defines American culture.

I'm not alone in this belief that American culture exists. It is a *commonsense* widely accepted belief. We can read about it, hear about it on television, talk about it to one another, discuss whether so- and-so is typically American and feel ourselves to be incredibly typical Americans when we go abroad as we find out that the world is inhabited by people who are really much more different from ourselves than we are from each other. Even when we feel more at home in some other country or with some other group we are expressing a rather American idea. Lots of people in all parts of the world are not interested in getting to know how the rest of the world

is and would be appalled at the notion that one could possibly feel "at home" somewhere other than where home "is." In other words, Americans really locate their terms of reference inside themselves as individuals more than many other peoples do. It is not the place nor the others which determine our happiness, but our own experiences of those situations, what we make of them.This Apologia, Afterword, this piece of self-indulgent rhetoric, or whatever, is also American.

Think for a minute about the American psychotherapies which have grown up in the last twenty years or so. What do they emphasize? *Communication*, the *here and now*, the *freeing* of the *individual* from the *past* and from ties with family and loved ones which are not *appropriate* anymore. That *relationships* are transitory and should be *held onto* and *worked* for just as long as they have *meaning* in the *individual's* life, and that life moves in *time* and the *individual changes* as *time* moves by. Even more central to why this writing should be seen as American is that it is a confession of why I am involved with my subject, what it means to me. This usually has no place in academia, in science, in professional life.

Yet, one is always, inescapably, part of one's work. There is no objectivity, no outside, no place to run to hide one's personal, social, and cultural involvement in what one is doing. What reasons one gives will differ enormously depending on what one can count as a reason in one's world. The form in which one gives that answer will also depend on what can count as a way of presenting a reason. I believe in the *individual*, doing work *honestly* according to his own definition of honesty. And so I present a personal, intuitive, subjective account of the wellsprings of my work in the historical and psychological terms which make sense to me to clothe it in. And why? Because I would like to be able to be objective and I am apologizing because my work is not objective. But I hope by being *open* and *honest* about that lack of objectivity, that the work can be judged, not as a work of a traditional science, but as a work of a new science. A science which accepts that the observer is constrained by his system of observing as much as the observed are constrained and

that one cannot understand an observation without understanding in some way what that observation means to the observer. If we do not know that, we do not have enough information about the observations to make them truly interpretable: we will not, therefore, be able to really understand the point of the story being told.