

White Shoes and Worship Bands: Celebrity Culture

12 Celebrity Pastors

- a. Stu's description of General Council in 1971: leisure suits, white patent leather shoes, bouffant hair, etc.

Pentecostalism as it is known today emerged in the early 20th century. At the same time, Hollywood was making inroads into the American imagination and soon television would dominate the scene. In spite of aggressive stands against the assumptions of secular popular culture, the movement participated in the broader culture's tendency to honor experts, authorities or merely charismatic individuals as celebrities. The decentralized nature of the church organization and the tendency to live from event to event increased the likelihood that celebrities would develop. Summer camp programs, revivals, conventions and the biannual General Council provided platforms for celebrity preachers and musicians to perform in a continuous circuit of "ministry opportunities."

Emphasis on "the call" developed some interesting negative and positive consequences. One negative consequence was the potential for the vainglorious to feed their particular sin. Another was the potential that some would miss a far richer calling to pursue the narrow confines of the call to full-time ministry. The positive consequences, however, included an underlying global emphasis on service to the local church, and through it to national and international communities of believers. For me, the pursuit of a calling increased my sensitivity to and eventual acceptance of anointing in a very different environment from traditional church ministry.

Celebrating high-profile pastors and ministries increased the potential for vain glory to appear as a good rather than an evil. In the absence of a collection of well-vetted saints to venerate and emulate, preachers, evangelists, missionaries, and musicians became our role models. At the national level, C. M. Ward, Thomas Zimmerman, and other celebrated leaders and speakers of

substance rightly earned our veneration and emulation. By the mid-1970s, however, the talent pool had increased considerably and the opportunities for performance and exaltation overtook us. In our unreflective way, in an eagerness to join the culture rather than shun it any longer, the movement embraced celebrity worship and spectatorship.

In my family, celebrity worship of all kinds—sacred or secular—was squelched immediately. So while my friends at school planned weddings with Bobby Sherman or David Cassidy and my friends at church accumulated 8-track tapes and cassettes of the Imperials, the 2nd Chapter of Acts and Amy Grant, I was required to keep a skeptical distance, to stand outside the celebrity worship and consider its transient rather than tranquilizing nature.

Eventually, the culture of vain glory and hero worship developed stress fractures. The cracks gaped and bared some ugly undersides in the 1980s when superstar televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart exposed their human failings to the world. The fall of these men was earthshattering to many believers who had come to faith under their ministries or relied on their preaching and programming for spiritual food. But no one I knew was particularly surprised. It was easy to comprehend that the dual lives of such men were part and parcel of the television celebrity lifestyle. For me, a far more tragic failure occurred in the mis-steps of a lesser-known pastor named Marvin Gorman. Although implicated in Swaggart's public disgrace, Brother Gorman, as I had known him, was a minor star in the televangelism galaxy but a much more telling indicator to me of the dangers of the celebrity culture we had been cultivating.

Gorman and my father had developed a friendship through district-level events—they had both served as youth directors, they had toured a district speaking to pastors together. In my teens, my father had invited Brother Gorman to speak at our family camps in Kansas. The year I was sixteen, Gorman brought his own family to our camp with him. As the superintendent's daughters, my sister and I were responsible for welcoming his two sons and daughter to Kansas. Smart, funny, and talented, the Gorman family was easy to accept, befriend and entertain.

On other occasions, Gorman was welcomed into our district and even our home when he came through the state to speak for special events. At national meetings, we began to develop the habit of getting together at least for a meal or coffee to “catch up.” At one point, just before I entered college, Gorman suggested I skip college and work for him as a secretary instead. The Gormans were part of our social fabric in the Assemblies of God—part of the cultural landscape that shaped our identity.

I had always taken to Gorman. His daughter Beverly and I were the same age, and he seemed comfortable talking to me as a kind of surrogate daughter when he was away from home. And I responded to him with ease. His personality was a little larger than life. He looked a lot like my father, with his wavy hair parted deeply on one side and combed back from his face. They shared the weathered look of men who had grown up in poverty, working hard in the sun before following a call to ministry and the more comfortable life of the Pentecostal pastor. He was loud, out-spoken, jovial, and up-beat. My dad was a quieter, somewhat more thoughtful version of the type. I accounted for the differences based on geography. Dad grew up in the self-effacing Midwest, while Gorman had been raised in the more flamboyant South before settling in New Orleans.

One year at General Council, a few years before the thundering crash of Bakker and Swaggart, my family and I were eating dinner in a restaurant filled with Council attendees. Gorman came by in his easy way and sat down to talk to my dad, who sat at the end of the table. I happened to be across from them. Although Gorman’s conversation seemed the same as always to me, I noticed a coolness in dad’s response to him. He lacked his normal quickness of humor and engaging warmth. He responded vaguely to Gorman’s offer to get the family together for our traditional “catch up” at Council. The conversation did not last long. When Gorman left I asked my dad what the deal was. “Why were you so cold to him? Why didn’t you make plans to have dinner?” His answer? “People change, Diane.” My dad was rarely taken in by celebrity. He looked for authenticity not only of message but of life. A lesson I had yet to learn. My dad took the approach

that it is far easier to live above reproach than to live in constant fear of being “found out.” It was nearly two years after that conversation before the rest of us would know what my dad sensed about the changes in this once-great man’s life.

But it does not take a tear-stained face on a spectacular television apology to demonstrate the pervasiveness of a celebrity culture in Pentecostalism. I notice it in the tendency of leaders to insert themselves into church services in other ways—ribbing from the pulpit about favorite sports teams, calls to sing a particular chorus because it is “my” favorite, even unnecessary personal stories told between the announcements and the offering.

One of the most remarkable things to me about attending a liturgical service for the first time was the way in which every element of the service was directed toward the Word and toward contemplation of Christ. The liturgy leaves no room for one particular person to be more elevated in the attention of the congregation than another. It offers no space (unless the sermon goes horribly wrong) for an individual to insert personal preferences or self-aggrandizement into the experience. The solemnity of worship is preserved by the demands of the scripted service. After spending a year with the Catholics and then returning to a Pentecostal service, I was particularly struck by how easily I lost focus on my purpose for being there. I was quickly absorbed by the personalities on the stage and my attention often wandered to the people sitting around me. *“Who is that woman over there in the red coat? I like her hair. I wonder if that man’s son ever got his life straightened out? Now, that would have been a real miracle! Didn’t I hear that the couple two aisles over got a divorce? Why are they sitting in church together?”*

I realize that the tendency toward celebrity worship exists even in liturgical traditions. The incredible power wielded by a priest in a parish community is evidence of that. The hesitance reported by those in the Catholic church who were aware of abuses can be attributed to the great respect commanded by the priesthood. The importance of a priestly figure in a sacerdotal system cannot be overestimated. But these excesses occur within the administration of the community, not

within the service itself. The liturgy provides a protection against the intrusion of an individual personality into the service of worship. Sermons are the only place where an individual speaks his own words to the congregation.

At one Episcopal church I attended, the priest taught the congregation that the reason they recite the Nicene Creed directly after the sermon is so that if the sermon misses the mark in some way, the congregation is redirected to the foundations of the faith. It provides another stay against the potential confusion that can occur when individuals impose themselves into the worship experience, distracting believers from their purpose—love and contemplation of God through hearing the Word, confessing their sins, praying for others, and receiving communion. Pentecostals should consider adopting this practice!

1568

White Shoes and Worship Bands: Celebrity Culture

13 Defining “The Call”

Evidence of celebrity worship in Pentecostal churches also emerged in the emphasis placed on full-time ministry. Growing up and thinking about what I would do with my life, the constant message I got from church camp, Sunday school, and other venues was that real Christians enter full-time ministry. Receiving “the call” was absolute evidence of a person’s devotion. The pastor was the most important and celebrated person in the church. As youth groups developed in the 1970s, the youth pastor also achieved hero status. Even today, in the theology department of the university where I teach, professors report that the number one ambition of those entering their department is to become a youth pastor. Unfortunately, some Bible schools have responded to this ambition by offering youth ministry majors, feeding the short-sightedness of young people who come from youth programs led by charismatic figures. How will such an education serve young men and women when they grow too old to organize lock ins and be dropped into a dunk tank at harvest festival? Why would the special insights of leading a youth group take more than a weekend seminar or at best a 2-credit semester-long class to teach to those who are truly called to full-time ministry? But I’m straying from the point.

Fortunately for the students at our university, the biblical studies curriculum is rigorous and thoughtful enough to remove naive notions and replace them with a more robust understanding of calling. The skewed view we have traditionally held concerning the “special” status of the clergy has been absorbed from the star-struck, celebrity obsessed culture and not from the principles taught in Scripture and developed by the church over the centuries.

I saw this issue differently than others, possibly, because although my parents were Bible-schooled, credentialed ministers in the traditional sense, we spent only five years of my life in a pastoral position actually “preaching the Gospel” in the local church. The rest of my growing up years, my parents were administrators at the state level in the church hierarchy. Instead of

pastoring one flock, my father pastored the pastors and the 150-plus A/G congregations in Kansas. The work mom and dad did everyday looked more like business than ministry. They went to the district office and answered phone calls, planned events like summer camps, conventions, retreats, and sectional meetings for ministers. They worried over budgets and legal threats, property needs and credentialing processes. Their work was not confined to the traditional notion of full-time pastoral or pulpit ministry.

My father was a consummate administrator with a quick eye and a keen ear for what was really happening behind the scenes in a local board meeting. He developed a quirky sense of humor to deflect tension in a room before it reached dangerous levels. After one particularly thorny board meeting, he came home, dropping his briefcase at the door, flopping on the couch, and cracking jokes about church business meetings. When I asked him why he thought it was all so funny (as in, *“why don’t you take this more seriously, my very important father?”*), he said, “sometimes the problems are so deep that if you don’t learn to laugh at them they will rip you up inside.” His wit and charm were a defense against those who took themselves and their work too seriously.

To some who held the prevailing Pentecostal view of calling, my mother’s weekly teaching of Sunday school at our local church looked more like “ministry” than what my dad churned out by his work exclusively with pastors and church leadership. Most people did not see the discipline, the training, the prayer, the love that went into “equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12 NASB) to which he was committed. Sure, he preached almost every Sunday in a different church, but his purpose was generally to install a pastor into a new position or help dedicate a new building or promote some other district-level undertaking. Most specifically, he was “building the Kingdom” rather than “winning the lost.”

I learned from my parents that ministry is mostly made up of service rather than proclamation. The Pentecostal tradition from its beginning fixated on exhortation, instantaneous

salvation, dramatic transformative experience. [put in a short history of Pentecostal missions—
from Marty Mittelstadt?]

I was raised on the quiet, disciplined work of building up, holding together, and staking claim to the territory that had been won in the early days by the more dramatic work of tent meetings and wrong-side-of-the-tracks holy-roller experiences. In watching my parents' ministry—in working alongside my parents by cleaning camp restrooms, sweeping the tabernacle floor, serving in the food line, counting concession stand money, preparing deposit slips for tithes and offerings, learning to run complicated machinery to print, fold, address, and stamp print mailings in the pre-digital age—I learned the value and necessity of all levels of service to the family of God and the world. And such service is a full-time call, hardly a chance at celebrity.

In addition to the local service opportunities that were a regular part of our very existence, the Pentecostal tradition included many opportunities to hear about global opportunities for service. And this global worldview resulted in positive consequences for many in my generation. One bit of evidence of the global sweep of our daily lives rested on the walls of our living room when I was child. On New Years' Day, 1970, my family returned home to our small parsonage to discover that our house had been robbed and vandalized. I was nine years old, but I still remember the stench of rotten eggs which the intruders had apparently flung at each other from the kitchen into the living room and back. Glass panes in the back door had been shattered and the curtains covering the door and back windows had been pushed back, knocking over an enormous, plastic plant that stood in the corner. All the cabinet doors in the kitchen were opened and all the drawers in our dressers rifled and dumped. In spite of the disturbing mess and choking stench, the robbers had managed to leave with only about \$60 in cash. My sister's and my savings banks were emptied and broken, some cash from a desk drawer was gone, but my grandfather's collection of silver quarters and half dollars (hiding in the kitchen behind seldom-used appliances) were undisturbed. The police said they were probably local hoodlums looking for an easy score of cash and guns.

The police were relieved, then, that the thieves had somehow missed a pair of African spears leaning innocently against the living room wall next to the picture-window drapes. “I wouldn’t have liked to see these get out on the secondary market!” exclaimed one officer as he took visual inventory of the contents remaining in the room. The spears, about six feet long with a wooden shaft and a sharp, metal knife affixed to the end, were a gift to my father from a missionary to then Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso. Such missionary offerings were so common to us, that by the time my parents retired in the late 1990s, they decorated their home with wood sculptures of elephants (African and Asian), caribou, giraffe, lions, and busts of indigenous peoples from a variety of cultures around the world. My parents had visited so many Kansas missionaries and other ministry friends that the artwork on their walls was almost entirely my father’s photography from around the globe.

My first memory of being “called to the mission field” occurred during my first year of kids’ camp. As any good Pentecostal knows, the four nights of church camp follow a pattern—the first night is a call to salvation, in case any kid has come only because his parents thought it would be good for him. If the “bad boys” got saved the first night, it spared the staff a lot of grief from their acting up the rest of the week! Get them saved the first night, then get them filled with the Spirit on night two. Pentecostal baptism was always a central goal of church camp services. Induction into the distinctive physical manifestation of God’s presence—speaking in tongues—ensured a child’s connection to the movement and the local church. Nights three and four were a toss-up. The topics were fixed—divine healing or call to ministry—but the order in which these topics were presented was generally up to the visiting evangelist.

On a Thursday night at Kid’s Camp in June in 1968 or 1969, I responded to the altar call—focused on “giving my all” to Jesus. Being only 8 or 9 years old, I was as yet unsure how this altar call/prayer service worked. I knelt at the rustic wooden-bench altar, closed my eyes, and began to pray, repeating what I heard around me, and trying to connect what was going on in my mind with

my mouth. I had heard the preacher's message on the urgency of the need to spread the Gospel to "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Underlying such a message lay the assumption that those who love Jesus the most would respond to such a call. Being young, being sensitive to doing what was right for my God, my church, and my family, my emotions began to get the better of me. What would it really take for me to "give my all" to Jesus? What would my life be like on the mission field? The missionary stories of personal sacrifice, danger, and deprivation merged in my child's mind with the clear pleasure and pride I believed my family would take in finding that I had been "called" to such a commitment, such evidence of my surrender to God. Tears streamed down my face, and according to the practice of my church, I cried out to God aloud, offering myself in any way he chose to use me. "Africa" kept coming to mind. Maybe it was the spears from our living room. Maybe it was the missionary's bias that night. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit, but the "end of the earth" to me, apparently, was Africa. Skin color, clothes, animals, climate, food—all the most different from my own as I could imagine. So I kept saying it amidst the sobbing, "Africa." "Africa."

At some point, my dad came along to pray with me. By this time, the urgency of my emotion had caught the attention of my friends who were holding up my hands and sobbing with me, caught up in the move of the Holy Spirit across the front of the tabernacle, but not really sure what God might be doing in me. My dad's face came in close to mine. Never one to encourage tears, he cut across the emotionalism to ask me what I was praying about. "Africa," I choked out. My friend chimed in, "Jesus wants her to go to Africa!" Daddy's familiar grin spread across his face as he backed a little away from me. "Is that so?" he smiled. And that was it. He was gone. No fanfare. No exuberant prayer on my behalf. No shouting from the rooftops that he should have a daughter so righteous as to be chosen by God for a special mission on the "dark continent." What? Was I wrong about God's voice? My father's unemotional response to what I thought was "God's call" is one of my most precious memories of him. I have long been thankful that he did not mistake a child's first

emotional encounter with calling for a life-long commitment to a specific goal. He understood immediately what I took many years to learn. God was looking for my commitment to Him and His plan—not to a specific field or people group.

Many people get caught up in the necessity of having a specific “call” to full time ministry. They develop a desire to follow God in a certain mission field or other church ministry. However, when the opportunity does not open up to them or the means to achieve the goal do not materialize, when a marriage partner pursues a career other than the one in which they started life together, or a child develops a serious illness that makes staying in a foreign country a threat to her life, many of my Pentecostal acquaintances have labored under a life of guilt for not having stuck to the original plan.

Understood rightly, however, the concentration on global missions that has long driven Pentecostal practice created not only a lot of guilt but also a lot of good. Because of these early altar experiences in which I listened intently to what the Spirit might be saying to me personally, I became sensitive to the moving of the Spirit in other environments and other conditions. A much-repeated story at our university, attributed **to the first president, Klaude Kendrick**, says that when asked how he could leave full-time ministry to become an educator, he replied that he had not left the ministry. Rather, the shape of his pulpit had changed from the clerical desk on a platform to the academic desk in the classroom. The anointing, the mission, the call were the same—to live the life of Christ wherever he found himself.

2267

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14 A Personal Call

Emphasizing full-time ministry as a calling helped me look for meaningful service and work beyond the stage we so reverently called a “platform.” I learned that it’s good to be “called” to something but watching my parents’ work in administrative ministry left open for me the possibilities for what that “something” might be. But the years of reverently waiting for the Holy Spirit to direct me meant that I recognized an anointing—the call, if you will—when it came in an unlikely place during an inauspicious time of my life.

Three weeks before 9/11, my husband and I had packed up three generations’ worth of books, china, furniture and toys and hurtled 1,400 miles across the country from our home in Lawrence, Kansas, to what seemed to us the Oz-like Emerald City: Burlington, Vermont. Green mountains, blue lake, yellow trees. The colors, the sights, the sounds and smells were all new and intensified. In comparison, Kansas was a flattened, black-and-white version of reality. But in spite of the grandness of its beauty, the kindness of its people, the quaintness of its scale, and the depth of its history, Vermont wasn’t home. And there’s no place like home.

I peered into the bottom of a dishpak, rummaging among the wads of paper. No more valuables in this box. What I really needed to find wasn’t there, anyway. It was probably lost in transit, somewhere between home and this dilapidated, 1960s ranch house perched on the sloping side of a dead-end street in South Burlington, Vermont. My new residence.

With each box I opened, I looked for something familiar, something connected to my past, something more than the books, clothes, figurines and toys we had packed up the last two weeks and loaded on the moving van. I was looking for myself, and I feared I hadn’t survived the move.

I went to college for 13 years, spent a year hunched over a computer writing a doctoral dissertation, led students and faculty at a respected private university, and sweated through the start-up of my own publishing business for this? Staying home all day long with an eighteen-month-old in a

vinyl-clad, three-bedroom, electric-baseboard-heated cracker-box in a cookie-cutter suburb? No job, no family, no friends, no church and, for the first time in our five-year marriage, no self-employed husband to share the day with. Just a houseful of unopened boxes, “Blue’s Clues” and a New England winter to look forward to.

Nothing in my Pentecostal upbringing or my liberal university education had prepared me to face this moment, I thought. The trajectory of my life’s story had come to an abrupt standstill.

Two months later, we watched out the front bedroom window as a short man in dark green overalls dropped from the side of the recycling truck, trudged over to the stacks of corrugated packing boxes and began piling them into the jaws of the crusher. My breath caught and tears stung, but I didn’t want to betray emotion to the toddler on a chair next to me, watching with big eyes.

Soon she saw that the man was loading the boxes. *Our* boxes. “*My* box!” she suddenly wailed. “*My* box!” She thrust a slobbery finger toward the window. Yes. They had been her boxes too. Her tunnels, houses, and step-stools while I slowly unpacked their contents. In her baby mind they were *her* boxes, and the man was taking them away. I couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. “Yes, honey. Those are our boxes.” We stood by the window silently crying, holding each other as we watched the symbol of our escape disappear into the big green truck.

As long as that huge mound of boxes continued to grow in the basement garage, I could pretend that we still had a means of escape, that getting home wouldn’t cost as much as moving away, since we still had all the boxes. The stroke of luck, the wizardry, the *miracle* that would restore our home, our lost business, our broken network of friends would cause those boxes to come to life, to repack themselves and to find their way into orderly rows on a great big truck. Once the boxes were gone, we were really here.

For two years I floundered. My first friend moved away nine months after we met. Our finances could barely keep up with the increased cost of living. We church hopped for a whole year. Meanwhile, I frantically applied for jobs that never came, tentatively working at housekeeping that

never changed. Finally, one resume brought a return: An adjunct teaching job at a local Catholic liberal arts college. As the semester unfolded, so did a dramatic shift in my relationship to the texts I had previously approached with professional distance.

I had been asked to teach American literature and Introduction to Literary Studies. As the steady progression of stories marched through my study—*Huckleberry Finn*, “A & P,” “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” “Barn Burning,” *Hamlet* and more—I felt a spiritual stirring. These stories carried more than political or historical representations of their eras. They offered more than aesthetic pleasure.

One afternoon leading the discussion on Jean Toomer’s “Blood-Burning Moon” and Zora Neale Hurston’s “Gilded Six-Pence,” I found myself transported beyond the race, sex and politics of the stories. As I waved the pungent blue marker in the air, drawing diagrams and connections on the white-board, I heard myself declare that the stories were about love. The protagonists of each story show opposing examples of how to love. One loves selfishly and lustfully; chaos ensues. The other bears profound personal betrayal yet eventually reaches a place of forgiveness and reconciliation. As the blue marker came to rest in the white-board tray and I turned back to face the class, I heard myself utter a challenge to the students to heed their own responses to love, betrayal and forgiveness. My voice fell silent.

For a suspended moment I faced a horseshoe of still faces. The atmosphere in the room felt like prayer. The best language I can borrow to describe it is the Holy Spirit present in a room full of secular-minded college students, being led by a stumbling, stunted, spiritually broken, middle-aged housewife who took this job for personal and professional reasons. In this moment, the task was spiritual.

Henry Adams wrote that “everyone must bear his own universe and most persons are moderately interested in learning how their neighbors have managed to carry theirs.” Although the student evaluations indicated that Adams was a least favorite reading, his concept reappeared in

their papers, presentations and discussions. This story or that essay, again and again, provided us an example of how or how not to bear our universe. Maybe we will never be a traveling salesman lost in the backwoods of a Eudora Welty story, but we can watch for signs of our own inurement from the simplicity of love because we saw such a man through her eyes. Maybe we will never park our 18-wheeler in the backyard of our trailer house and dream of building a log cabin as a substitute for working on our marriage as Leroy does in Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh," but we will be ever more aware of our complicity in our own failures from having read it.

Trained as a scholar, surprised by motherhood, stripped of the familiar, flattened by isolation, I slowly discovered—or rediscovered—not only myself, but more importantly, my call through the transformative power of stories not my own. Biblical stories. Classical stories. Modern stories. Spiritual stories. They restored my spiritual and intellectual roots and produced in me an expansion I cannot explain by circumstances or scholarship.

The unexpected return to reading, studying, and teaching stories produced radical changes in the universe I had to bear, particularly the one I found myself in after that cross-country move occasioned by a devastating loss of home, business and personal context, and with it a complete shredding of my identity, my support network and very nearly my faith. My former topics of scholarly inquiry challenged images of myself: No longer was Hamlet a specimen of impartial psychological analysis; he was a mirror image of me—a person paralyzed by the changes brought about by loss, feeling put upon by God, squeezed between conflicting desires and loyalties. Lear's arrogance revealed *my* blindness to my own self-importance; Othello's lack of faith mirrored *my* lack of faith—in myself and in my God. Other stories revealed God's character to me. Mrs. Turpin's revelation in Flannery O'Connor's story by the same name unveiled a biblical hierarchy that upsets our earthly ones; Joyce Carol Oates' "Where are you Going? Where have you Been?" provided a peek into the consequences of unredeemed behavior. Reading these stories through the filter of my own

disrupted story gave me the courage to re-read my life and transform my attitude toward it. Slowly I moved from desolation to consolation, from passionate resistance to holy indifference.

I came to see that God entered history as a person, a character with motivation and personality. He chose a specific time and place in history and performed certain actions within a particular setting. His story contains conflict, irony, symbols and paradox. I can't settle the chicken-or-egg conundrum of whether God chose to participate in the human story because stories are so important to people or whether people value stories because they are, whether we realize it or not, one of God's primary vehicles for communicating himself to us. Either way, the message emerges: God is personal. He enters history through his own human narrative. He participates in the human condition, and we can be changed by reading his story. Like other means of grace, then, stories are a channel through which we can see God's face, hear God's voice and discover our own calling within God's community, whether at a desk, a pulpit, a workbench, or a computer. 1600

Chesterton: Story means story-teller; call means caller?