**An Appalachian Storyteller on Place, Identity, and Resilience**

*Transcribed from an Interview*

|  | Octavia Sexton grew up in the Appalachian tradition of storytelling. With English, Irish and Cherokee ancestors, her stories reflect the melding of these culturally different oral traditions. A talented writer, she has published several short stories and a book of Jack Tales. Along with a degree in history education and years of teaching and performing experience, Octavia presents a variety of educational programs. [www.octaviasexton.com](http://www.octaviasexton.com/) |
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My husband's people came to Appalachia in the 1600s. And mine came in the very early 1700s from Ireland, Scotland, and England. They came and made their way up into these mountains in Appalachia. And they stayed. And being from Appalachia means we have a very rich closeness to one another and to the land, to this place. We have our family cemeteries; we have our stories, and you can look at the stones and see the names in those stories. A lot of these cemeteries aren’t town cemeteries; these are family. So you can see your lineage in these stones that go all the way back. Some are wore off; they don't have names on but if it’s your family lot, you know they belong to you. In Appalachia, our story is not just made up by one person. It’s in the trees that grow. It's in the plants. It's in the when you get up and the when you see the sun come up, or the fog that rises up from the creek or the lake. I mean, this is you, you live it, you breathe it, and you are just stopping on part of the earth. I mean, I'm here and I want to go back into it. This is where I want to go, I want to be here. You can burn me; scatter my ashes. I don't have to be buried in the ground. I just want to be here, like all my people before me. Here we are, and we stay a part of it. And there's beauty in that. This place is me and mine. I am that tree. I am that sunset. It’s not about ownership; it’s about belonging.

But the stereotypes about us. I can't stand them. Why are they still prevalent? A few years ago, there was horrible flooding in Clay County, and it made national news. The reporter, who wasn’t from here, interviewed a man from Clay County. Now who did they find? They found an old man with high bib overalls, no teeth with tobacco in his mouth, and in the background behind him was a fallen down building. They had to look hard to find this man. That's what they look for.

What’s been pushed on us too is that you can only be somebody if you leave here. When I was growing up, that’s how you proved your worth. I got that message, but the men got it even more. They needed to go north to get some kind of factory job, but that's the perfect way to destroy a culture. You move people away from their families, their community, their history, and then you can control them more easily, I think.

I've always been a rebel and I always loved it here. Always loved it, even in the poverty. I wanted to have something better, yes, of course. But after the basic things you need, like shelter and food, then I’m good. I know how scary it is when you lose the basics. I've been there, you know, no heat in winter, hungry. But I didn't think well, I'm going to go find it somewhere. Nope, not going. I tell the kids, I say, you know, you live in the most beautiful area of the world. And you can preserve this and take care of it and be proud of where you are. Because there's people coming in and buying up our land. And they don't appreciate it, or they appreciate it, but they don’t belong to it like the young kids whose ancestors came here do. I want those kids to feel pride in that belonging because they belong to something beautiful.

Fifty to sixty years ago, Appalachian music was about the resilience of the people here through all kinds of adversity. If you listen to the old-time Appalachian music, you hear lyrics that curse the police and talk about making moonshine and outrunning the law to support one’s family when there are no other jobs. So there's always been a rugged individualism and a history of not needing anybody's approval. You can hear a lot of parallels in that old time music to contemporary Black rap. It’s a long-shared narrative of love and survival under difficult circumstances.

I’ve seen people humiliated for their struggle.

And I'm like, why do we do this?

When I was in high school, I was made fun of for buying my clothes at a secondhand store. It surprised me, so I made a point of letting people know that I chose to buy my clothes second hand. In a regular store that same item costs 10 times more, and I was too smart to waste my money. My poverty might have meant less money, but it didn’t mean that I was less valuable as a person. In fact, it gave me good sense about what was worth spending my money on.

So now, when I'm in schools, I share these stories because I want students to recognize that they are doing this to one another. Even in Appalachia, you'll have some families who have more work and more money. And they often belittle the ones who have less. They try to uncover each other’s weakness by asking, “where'd you get that at?” So I tell students that everything I wear is “never new.” And that helps change the dynamic a bit because they see me as a professional of value. I intentionally use my power that way.

Recently, when I asked students to get into groups, I noticed one girl was left out. I pointed her out to one of the groups and said, “We need to work together,” and was disappointed to hear the students say, “Well, she wears old clothes….” And so I said, “Well, I'm creating my own group and I want you [the excluded girl] to be in my group.” So we started working and one of the girls from another group said, “I like your outfit.” And I said, “Okay, let's look at the shirt. I paid $1.99 for it.” And I start pointing out my stuff, my earrings, etc and saying how little I paid for each item with pride. Well, wouldn’t you know it, one of the students who excluded the girl from her group, raised her hand and said, “I get some of my stuff at the Goodwill.” And I said, “Well, you're a smart shopper.” And so, all of a sudden, everybody started talking about buying used clothes and taking pride in that. And that's what I want them to do. I want them to have the pride that I do in my identity as someone who lives in rural Appalachia. I don't care if you're poor or speak in a dialect that isn’t “proper” -- be proud of it. I always brag on my dialect, even if I'm in a city school. And I brag on students’ dialect. I say, “Oh, you know, we have such a rich language wherever you go. I want to hear some of your words because there's a lot that I don't know.”

And I want students to see how their dialect is part of a rich storytelling tradition across cultures. In Appalachia, the Jack tales are an important piece. These tales go all the way back, I swear, to the Odyssey, you will see the connections. To be called Jack tells us he’s a common person. These tales started in Europe, in England, where the peasants saw there was no way to rise up. You were poor; you will stay poor. If you passed a field, and you didn't know who that was working there, you would say, “Hey, Jack, how's it going?” His name might be Roger, but Jack was a common name for the common man. And so this character Jack belonged to the poor people. With no special abilities or anything, Jack would see a problem, try to help, and always succeed. I mean, it'd be fantastic adventures. These stories were ways of acknowledging that the social structure that kept some people down and others up was entirely bogus. The Jack tales made you feel good because they said you weren’t poor because you were less than. In fact, the point of those stories was to tell you that often enough you were more than the aristocracy. Bugs Bunny is a more recent example of the Jack character, but we can find it in lots of places. Wherever one group in power tries to tell another group that they don’t deserve to have that same power, some version of Jack pops up. So to retell those stories is to honor the resilience of people who’ve been living in unjust systems and knowing their own worth despite what those systems told them.

I actually invite students to create their own Jack tale, using their personalities to inform who Jack is. So they are Jack; Jack is them. “I like apple pie.” “I like four-wheeling.” Those become Jack’s likes. “Where do you live? That’s the setting of your Jack tale.”

“I” becomes “Jack.” And then they create this great, awesome story. And he wins. He never ends up rich. He’s never super smart or super anything, and yet in the end he works this entire problem out. Sometimes we do group Jack tales but then I usually find that kids come up to me and say, “can I email you a story I wrote?” And I really believe in the power of this story frame, of what it can do for kids to acknowledge adversity but also their value. Years and years later, these students will get in touch with me and I learn that they’re doing good work and have families. One of those students is a director now and he told me that telling his Jack tale – the bragging and how he used his body movement and his voice – was the first time he realized he was a storyteller and that he never felt so good about himself.

We’ve lost so much. I mean, I know how to live off the land, but even though we've raised our grandsons, they don't know. I've got real seeds preserved, that are not Monsanto or, you know, messed with, and my grandsons know where they're at. This is important to me. I tell them, these are the basics that you can start with right here if it comes to this. And sometimes I make fun of them. Because like, you know, in the wintertime when the ice comes and knocks down the power grid, I’m not rattled but my grandsons are bereft without electricity. I let them know, “Well, you're not going to take a shower, but you can wash in a wash pan.” I’ve got an oil light. Don’t tell me electricity is better because now it’s gone, so what? And then there are the stories about these things. I’ve got a story about how daddy got this oil lamp. And that story is part of my identity. When I get into the schools in Appalachia, places like Floyd County, Perry County, and start talking about this, all of a sudden, they light up because I created a space that shows what they’ve been told is trash is treasure. And it's like they can’t stop talking about these things.

But there are some hard truths. Around here, too many kids come home to take care of drug addicted parents and babysit their younger siblings. And -- I’m not interested in talking trauma-- this is about acknowledging reality and celebrating these kids’ resilience and letting them know that they are from a long line of resilient people. It’s obviously unfair that these kids have to do this. But it’s important to talk about because it shouldn’t be a private shame to them. You can look at it in a very different way as kids trying to heal a broken community.

The opioid epidemic is why we raised our grandsons. And so many are dying, I mean every week, because we're close knit, I hear about someone else. Because of this epidemic, there are very few kids in a classroom in Eastern Kentucky, very few, who are being raised by a biological mother and father. That's just not the norm anymore. They may live with the mom, they may live with the dad, they may live with grandparents foster homes, but it's very different. From the very beginning with my grandsons, I let them know that there was no shame in this. And when I got into a classroom, I bring that out right in the open, because I know too many of them have some private shame that should be out in the open. So I just say, “Listen. I've got grandsons I'm raising because their mother has an addiction problem.” And I just create space. Before you know it, someone says, “My daddy died.” And I'm like, “really?” And “my mommy is in rehab.” “I live with my grandma/grandpa.” “I live in a foster home.” And it just seems like it's important that they let me know. That they can say it in a way that’s simple and they're not ashamed.

I know this is important to these kids because I’ve lived it with my grandkids. Too many parents are ashamed of their kids because of their addiction and communicate that to their grandkids. Instead, I want them to understand that, “Look, this is what it is. My daughter was a fighter. You know, she was a fighter for 20 some years but it got to a point where she was a thief. And I didn't want the kids to grow up seeing this. But she finally went long term to over two years in a facility and she's been clean for three years now. We lost time but she survived.” She's in her forties now. All these deaths that come out in the paper. And one time, they interviewed the police chief and he blamed it on parents letting their kids listen to certain music. I'm like, “Are you kidding me?” Again, with the personal shame, the pressure on parents and not on the society that created this epidemic. I mean these drug companies handed out Oxycontin at the coal mining places like candy. That’s how it started here. No. Don’t hurt these families any more than they’ve already been. Don’t lie to them about why this happened. A preacher's wife once told me and my husband that we must have committed horrible sins to have two kids addicted to drugs. And I was just like, “are you kidding me? This is complex.” We need to get together to celebrate the goodness and strength that’s gotten us all through this.

And that brings me back to the storytelling tradition that’s such an integral part of Appalachian culture. People talk about two kinds of stories: stories of contamination and stories of resilience. And so if you say that you let the music contaminate your kids then it's a story of shame. And if you're contaminated, then you have to quarantine, right, like emotionally quarantine, apart from others. But what you need most right then when you are in pain is connection. You need stories of resilience where bad things happen that can’t always be controlled but people survive anyway. Not without suffering, but they can survive and help others. And so everything I do comes down to individuals and empowering more individuals to get their voice out here. My son was a drug addict but music – heavy metal, the kind that sheriff would have described as polluting him -- brought him through it. He continued to play his music and that gave him strength. He’s been clean for 12 years.

These kids need to know that they are survivors. Story is an art form. And being able to create a story reminds these kids that we are works of art. I tell them, “you are a piece of art. Celebrate it!” This is all a part of your life, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And it makes us unique. Don’t run from it. Embrace it.