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My Storytelling Trifecta: 3 Roads, 3 Stories, 3 Chetters

How history, folktales, and personal stories helped shape me

AN ARTICLE AS ONE OF THE STORY CROSSROADS MEMBERSHIP MONTHLY BENEFITS

"THOSE SUNDAY DRIVES DIDN'T JUST PASS THE TIME — THEY PLANTED THE SEEDS FOR A LIFELONG LOVE OF STORYTELLING."

My family has a saying: *Where there's a will, there is a Galloway!* That's been my mantra throughout my twenty-five-year storytelling journey. From the beginning, I found a way to "Galloway" through any obstacle, because telling stories isn't just something I do — it's my calling.

One of the first places I ever heard stories was at our family reunions. From the first gathering I attended in 1986 to the most recent one in 2023, we've kept alive the stories and traditions of our ancestors, elders, and kinfolk. My father saw the need to revive our reunions in the mid-1980s, and thanks to his vision, that tradition lives on today. He was the storyteller in our family. After church on Sundays, we would pile into the Galloway Family Limousine — a 1972 green Fleetwood Cadillac so long you'd swear it stretched the length of a football field.

I would sit in the backseat between my two sisters, perched on the armrest, listening intently as my father enthralled us. Whether he spoke of learning to swim in North Carolina ponds, serving in World War II, or gossip from the barbershop, we could never get enough.

Every now and then, he'd weave in a folktale. His favorite was "The Talking Skull," an eerie West African story that still has a place in my repertoire today — though my version is nothing like his. I can still see him describing that rolling skull, with big red eyes and a knife and fork in hand, declaring: "*Mouth brought me here and gonna bring you here too!*" Those Sunday drives didn't just pass the time — they planted the seeds for a lifelong love of storytelling.

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Chetter M. Galloway in front of the Galloway Family Limousine, a 1972 green Fleetwood Cadillac

Historical Stories: ROUTE 1

Not to know is bad, but not to want to know is even worse.
– African Proverb

After graduating from Virginia Tech with a history degree, I was interested in a few career options, such as teaching, being a historian, an archivist, or a historical tour guide. I chose the latter route and began working as a living history reenactor at Jamestown Settlement and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

At Jamestown, I mainly demonstrated trades and crafts while conducting tours. However, at Colonial Williamsburg, I found a niche in telling stories — specifically, the lives of the free and enslaved Africans who lived there during the 18th century.

I was there in October 1994 when Colonial Williamsburg made national news for presenting a program that recreated an estate sale involving the selling of African Americans — which, in today's climate, would be incendiary, to say the least. However, even then, people did not understand what the museum was trying to accomplish. It was not to glorify slavery but, to the contrary, to show the pain and suffering inflicted upon families who were torn apart. At that same presentation, there was even an instance where a free person of color purchased his enslaved wife so they could be together again.

Colonial Williamsburg is where I first heard another African American interpreter use the African proverb above in one of her presentations to make a point with an upset visitor. As you might imagine, telling these stories evoked a range of emotions — anger, sadness, confusion, and hurt — which let us know the impact our stories had on the visitors. That was our goal.

While at Colonial Williamsburg, I also discovered another version of The Talking Skull with a similar theme, called How Nehemiah Got His Freedom, which would become the foundation for my repertoire of African American folktales. It is a story about how an enslaved man outsmarts his oppressor, using his wits and creativity to obtain his freedom. We would tell this story to show how enslaved people resisted their condition — some actively, others passively.

Governor's Palace at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia

Freedom Lessons Through Folktales

I witnessed fellow interpreters integrating African folktales into their presentations to illustrate points or convey messages more effectively than historical records or documents ever could. These stories helped bridge gaps, allowing us to connect with visitors in ways we otherwise wouldn't.

One such story I heard from a fellow interpreter, which helps convey the message of freedom versus enslavement, is The Jackal and The Dog. It has become my favorite "anytime, anywhere" story because it applies to many real-life situations — whether professional, personal, or family-related. Initially, it was told to enslaved masses to help them decide if they wanted to be free or remain in bondage. However, I have expanded its morals, encouraging people to determine whether they are willing to be jackals — exploring freedom and independence despite losing amenities — or remain dog-enslaved within their comfort zones.

Soundtrack of My Storytelling Career

Now, if ever there was a theme song to my storytelling journey, *Life Is a Highway* by Rascal Flatts would be the one — because I have been driving with stories all night long and enjoyed every minute of this cross-country drive! My dad would say, "If you get started, you've got to do something!" My storytelling superhighway has taken me on many routes, back roads, detours, and side trips to get where I needed to go.

One of my best side trips was attending East Tennessee State University (ETSU) from 2003–2004, where I earned my master's degree in storytelling. You see, in May 2002, some devastating news hit me: my job at GE Capital was outsourced, and we were given a 14-month layoff notice. While I was upset, I took the opportunity to explore some career options — and more importantly, I decided to enroll in graduate school. GE Capital said they would give us financial assistance if the classes would help us in our chosen profession. So naturally, I found a way to *GALLOWAY* — to justify how storytelling would help me in my future business endeavors. GE paid for my storytelling books and gave us a hefty severance package, which I used to support myself during graduate school.

" MY STORYTELLING SUPERHIGHWAY HAS TAKEN ME ON MANY ROUTES, BACK ROADS, DETOURS, AND SIDE TRIPS TO GET WHERE I NEEDED TO GO."

Top: Chetter M. Galloway

Bottom: NABS Conference in New Orleans, LA with front row Mama Linda Goss NABS Co-Founder and Brenda White-Wright and standing are Chetter M. Galloway and Thelma Ruffin Thomas

Kuumba Storytellers of GA Annual Kwanzaa Program - Chetter journeyed from being a member to serving two terms as President - Kuumba celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2025

Fuel for the Storytelling Journey

In hindsight, it was one of the best decisions — a perfect side trip on my storytelling journey — and to this day, I still reap the benefits! For starters, we learned about specific genres, story motifs, and how to put together the right material for school assembly programs — and then went to schools to test them out! These teachings helped me later when I became a roster artist for Young Audiences. Another perk was being an ETSU Tent Monitor at the National Storytelling Festival, which allowed me to listen to a variety of tellers for free and helped improve my storytelling education.

At ETSU, I also attended my first National Association of Black Storytellers (NABS) Conference and Festival in New Orleans, LA. The best way I can describe it? It was like attending a tent revival, family reunion, and house party all rolled into one — with an unbelievable variety of African and African American storytelling! Colleagues had told me about the NABS festival, and when I finally attended, it did not disappoint. However, it wasn't just the storytelling — it was also the educational workshops and the camaraderie of like minds that made me feel right at home. I've been attending ever since.

Folktales: ROUTE 2

Jackie Torrence, an ancestor of the storytelling community and beyond

Wisdom from the Elders

- *Make the story fit you and not anyone else.*
- *To be a good storyteller, you must be a good listener.*
- *Make people visualize the story.*
- *Know your audience and prepare your story accordingly.*
- *NEVER TELL A STORY YOU DON'T LIKE!*

May 1997 was a significant turning point in my storytelling journey. I had the opportunity to sit and learn at the feet of a Master Storyteller who is now an ancestor — Jackie Torrence! She left such an impression on me that I still have my workshop notes. However, I almost missed this opportunity because of my own arrogance. I thought I knew enough about storytelling, having worked as a historical interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg, telling stories. It would have been a mistake because, within five minutes of the workshop, Jackie had mesmerized me with one of her infamous "JUMP" tales that delivered right on cue!

The most important takeaway from that workshop was this: never tell a story you don't like, because every story is not for you — no matter how noble or perfect it seems for a given occasion. Following that rule, I have had a 99.9% success rate. However, whenever I go rogue, it has been a disaster. Then, I find myself saying, "I should have followed Jackie's advice!"

So, what kind of stories do I like? I am a jokester at heart, so naturally, I am drawn to trickster tales. I enjoy making people laugh and using humor to break the tension among us. You can also see similarities and personality traits between yourself and the central character in the right story. Whether it's Anansi the Spider, Brer Rabbit, or High John the Conqueror, trickster tales always involve a character considered smaller, weaker, or less intelligent than their adversary — yet who finds a way to outsmart them.

Ms. Lulabelle: The Devil and the Sunday Church Hat by Lorraine Johnson Coleman is one of the funniest trickster folktales I've ever heard that didn't involve animals. In this case, the trickster is Ms. Lulabelle, a nosy busybody and troublemaker who makes a deal with the devil to break up a married couple he couldn't — all so she can get a Sunday church hat.

I enjoyed it so much that not only did I purchase her cassette tape, but with her permission, I adapted it and made a version of my own. As I attended more storytelling events across the Southeast, I heard similar incarnations of Lorraine's story—same motif, different elements—which made each version interesting. In mine, the devil tries to break up my parents' 50-year marriage. The setting is their hometown, and they attend a church with the local busybody who's always in everyone's business. Her name? Etta Mae — which is what I titled my story. It was a huge hit at our family reunion! And yes, Etta Mae gets a full Sunday outfit, crown to toe, as her reward from the Devil!

Personal Tales: ROUTE 3

Don't put all your business in the streets!
– Common saying

In the Black community, many of us use this statement when referring to one's personal affairs. It had been my mantra for years when it came to personal stories. I never dared venture into this genre because I had little experience. More importantly, I didn't think anyone would be interested in hearing about my boring life or outrageous antics.

However, in 2014, I moved to Portland, Oregon, amid a midlife crisis. I had considered quitting storytelling altogether for at least a year because I was just burnt out with my career and felt out of creative material. My storytelling had gotten — what I consider — routine and predictable.

Now, even though I wanted to leave storytelling behind, I couldn't help but find not one, but two storytelling organizations in case I ever had the itch to tell stories again. I found two: the Portland Storytellers Guild and the Portland Story Theater. I am still a member of the Portland Storytellers Guild and have consistently performed with them via Zoom since the pandemic.

Chetter M. Galloway telling stories to be transparent, vulnerable, and relatable

Telling the Stories I Never Thought I Would Share

Part of the reason I wouldn't tell any personal stories is because when I started performing over two decades ago, LGBTQIA+ stories were taboo. Being a member of the community, I felt neither brave enough nor comfortable sharing these stories. There were simply no safe places to tell them. So, for many years, I "hid in plain sight," and kept my experiences to myself. It was frustrating and soul crushing at times because I knew there was an audience who needed to hear these stories, but I just could not get in front of them. However, all of that changed when I told my first personal narrative with the Portland Story Theater.

Crafting personal narratives with them was unique, labor-intensive, and challenging — taking me far outside my comfort zone. However, the process was well worth it because telling personal stories helped revitalize and save my career. They allowed me to be more transparent, vulnerable, and relatable. Regardless of the consequences or backlash, I have opened up to discuss subjects I never thought possible.

I shared a story about a friend who passed away due to complications with HIV and could not believe the reaction it received. Many people found his story relatable or had one similar to that of a family member or friend. This connection gave me the confidence to sign up again for a second session with Portland Story Theater to craft another personal narrative. I told my second piece — another LGBTQIA+ story about spending a night in jail — at the 2023 National Storytelling Festival's Story Slam and placed second.

Every Mile Tells A Story

Now, speaking of personal stories, I'd be remiss if I didn't share my passion for running. When I told a friend that, at age forty-two, I was going to run my first 10K — The Peachtree Road Race — she said, "You're too old to run The Peachtree Road Race." I replied, "I'll see you at the finish line!" Since then, I have crossed the finish line of countless 10Ks, 13 Half Marathons, and 5 Full Marathons.

I also became affiliated with Black Men Run, which, coincidentally, launched its first chapter in Atlanta, GA, in 2013 — the same year I started running. Their mission is to promote a healthy lifestyle among African American males through participation in recreational running activities. In 2023, chapters from across the country came together in Atlanta to celebrate 10 years of supporting health and wellness for Black men through running.

Amidst all this, I overcame an Achilles heel tear that sidelined me for an entire year. But that didn't slow me down. It only motivated me to do more, and now I'm on a mission to run a half marathon in every state. When I'm running, I'm creating stories; I'm thinking about the characters' beginnings, middles, and endings — imagining where I want them to be in the next phase of the story. By the time I finish running, I usually have a good idea of where things will go. After running, my creativity peaks thanks to the runner's high, and my thoughts flow seamlessly onto paper or into an audio recorder!

Chetter M. Galloway racing at the 2025 Asheville, NC Marathon

Conclusion

Finding your authentic self and voice is key to a long and prosperous career, no matter what genre of stories you share or who your audience is. And when I say prosperous, yes, on one hand, I mean financially; however, on the other, prosperity has a broader definition that includes stories, connections, relationships, and opportunities!

Riddle me this: What is the shortest story yet also the longest story? The answer is simple — your name, your life, your existence. Because we are "living history," we create stories daily, every hour, every minute, every second. And no matter how long or short they may be, make sure they're extraordinary stories!

Now, as storyteller Jackie Torrence would say, "And that's the end of that!"

Reflection

Family Journey (Route One: Historical Stories)
How can your family's traditions, stories, or cultural history influence the way you approach storytelling?

Professional Journey (Route Two: Folktales)
How might you incorporate themes of resistance, resilience, or personal empowerment inspired by folktales and folklore?

Personal Journey (Route Three: Personal Stories)
How can sharing personal experiences or vulnerabilities enhance your storytelling and help you connect with others on a deeper level?

Reach Out to Me

Feel free to email me about your thoughts on this article. What resonated the most with you?

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ABOUT OUR AUTHOR

Chetter Galloway is a native of Suffolk, Virginia, who now resides in Atlanta, Georgia. He is the youngest of eleven children and grew up immersed in stories. He holds a bachelor's degree in history from Virginia Tech and is a graduate of East Tennessee State University's Master of Arts in Storytelling. From coast to coast and all parts unknown, he shares everything from folktales to personal narratives and all genres in between. He loves putting his special touch on stories, or what he calls "Chetterizing" them.

He has performed at venues such as the Smithsonian, the National Association of Black Storytellers Festival, the National Park Service, *RISK!*, The Moth, and has worked with schools through Young Audiences. Chetter has recorded two storytelling albums: *Evil Knows Where Evil Sleeps* and *Fresh Squeezed Carrot Juice: Tales of Brer Rabbit*.

Chetter serves as President of Kuumba Storytellers of Georgia. He is a board member for the Georgia Storytelling Network and the National Association of Black Storytellers, and he is a member of Toastmasters International. One of his favorite proverbs is "A stumble is not a fall." Engaging and entertaining, he invites you to feel the rhythm and live the story.

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