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On Unearthing Our Stories — Week 7 Feature

"The carousel of tales we were exposed to opened our eyes to hidden stories, and emphasized the importance of actively seeking them out."

By Yi Lin Peh

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story | Ng Yi Ming, Mathias Ooi, Dion Lim, Contributing Reporters

photo | Peh Yi Lin, Contributing Photographer

By a stroke of chance, in a quiet corner of the Centre for International & Professional Experience (CIPE) office, Yi Ming chanced upon two slim books dedicated to two of our very own Yale-NUS forefathers: *Barney's Book of Memory*, a memoir of collected stories of the late John Bernard Bate, former Professor of Anthropology, and a faculty newsletter dedicated to Charles Bailyn, our inaugural Dean of Faculty, who has since returned to Yale University. It was an especially exciting find, considering that we, along with the rest of our Week 7 Learning across boundaries—*Stories of Ourselves*, were in the midst of preparing for the annual Week 7 symposium, compiling and re-telling the stories of the people across Singapore that we had come across all week. Naturally, we were inspired to translate our newfound appreciation for stories into a reflection on our college's narrative, past and present.

The Power of Stories

This emotionally-charged Week 7 project, although short, had a profound impact on many of the participants. The uncensored, first-hand stories we gleaned — through our interactions with people ranging from a dementia day-care centre manager to a transgender former sex-worker to ex- political detainees — not only shed light on narratives we were unaware of; they fascinated, moved and at times disturbed us in ways that no textbook or early-morning lecture ever could.

Marielle Lee '21 a fellow participant, said that, "stories make you feel the impact of something. To relate to something, there must be an emotional aspect to it. It's hard to relate to something that is purely factual". She, like many of us, was awestruck and moved by the sheer gravity of our sharing session with Vincent Cheng, a former church worker who was, for three years, detained and abused in an unknown location during the infamous 1987 Operation Spectrum. Mr. Cheng said that "history is right in front of you." In that moment, it felt like it was.

Oftentimes, it is through stories that we understand the true nature of people and practices, especially when they are subtle, censored or misrepresented. Fellow participant Jay Ong '21 said that "stories are one of the best vehicles for us to start conversations and to [understand other] people on a deeper level. It allows for deeper friendships to be forged, giving life more meaning."

Lee added that stories reminded her of her own humanity, that as a human being we are a unit of a collective, even in this age which promotes the individual. Stories form a nexus between the world and herself, as her identity is built upon the myriad of narratives around her. Through stories, we understand past efforts, hopes, and dreams; we discover how much we have in common with fellow humans, dead and alive.

Stories are hence the transmissions of memories, the mental amalgamation of experiences shaped by circumstances, rationale, feelings and dreams. They serve as a store of knowledge, and are also a powerful medium to pass knowledge onto others in a way that sticks with them. Stories are windows into the human world, into the people around us, into ourselves.

Indeed, we came away from the project with a newfound determination to cease taking stories we think we know — whether through first impressions, word-of-mouth or recorded texts — at surface value. We learnt that it is basic to take the initiative to really get to know people, in and out of Yale-NUS; our subconscious need to categorise and pass snap judgements must be suppressed.

Likewise, discovering anecdotes of Prof. Bates' and Prof. Bailyn's time here — stories that we as "*frosh*" had no idea about — sparked a new curiosity within us to learn more about our college and community. We began to ask the questions: What exactly defines our Yale-NUS identity? And what are we doing to preserve our stories?

The Yale-NUS Story

Yale-NUS is a young college that is still in the process of defining its identity. We are "a community of learning", but what exactly makes a community of learning? What's more, many of the pioneer core of faculty, staff, and our inaugural class have left us, leaving behind a widening disconnect between the spirit of the old and the new.

Amidst the chaotic chatter of the outside world who attempt to enforce their perceptions on us, the identity of our college has become blurred at times. As Ong said, "my current perception of the identity of Yale-NUS is one of experimentation and healthy skepticism. Everyone is skeptical about us, and I feel that we are skeptical about ourselves as well." This is where stories of the college come in handy — for us, it came in the form of the two books, where we saw what our founding visionaries stood for.

Mr. Bate was a Professor of Anthropology until he passed on peacefully while on sabbatical back in the United States. According to the memoir, his booming voice and hearty chuckles once echoed through the hallways of the college, and his generosity touched the hearts of many students and colleagues, shaping and stretching the limits of what a college community could be.

Similarly, as described in his farewell tribute, Prof. Charles Bailyn was our former Dean of Faculty whose "galactic imagination", "supernova energy", and belief for an polymathic education that fused the sciences and the arts. These traits of his fueled much of the initial faculty hiring and enabled the development of the now-iconic Yale-NUS Common Curriculum. Mr. Bailyn epitomised the intellectual fever of the faculty and students. Wu Shuin Jian '18 recalled with a chuckle how, even on a weekday evening, a Scientific Inquiry lecture conducted by Professor Bailyn was so well-received that it filled up an entire lecture theater.

In *Barney's Book of Memory* lies one particularly striking personal story. Noah Bate, Mr. Bate's son, shared how he came to see the beauty in the Yale-NUS project — building a learning community not defined along ethnic, cultural or socio-economical lines, but united by a shared intellectual commitment towards a "pluralistic future for humanity". Bate believed that one way his father shaped the community was "through his insistence that intellectual pursuits are fully compatible with, and even require, happiness, silliness, joy."

Bate concluded with a request for the college his father left behind:

"I ask that as you continue to build your citadel of knowledge, not to forget what Dad brought here: Not his intellect, which was indeed formidable, but his insistence that learning should be a sublime experience, an act of joy that connects you to a vast and magnificent world."

Amazing as they were, Mr Bates and Mr Bailyn only make up a part of our Yale-NUS narrative. It is through stories that we can connect with our fellow classmates, professors and friends, and also discover the greater role we should play in society at large. It is therefore imperative to unearth, preserve, and share the myriad of stories of the people around us, to halt the erosion of these invaluable sentiments with time.

Ongoing efforts to preserve the stories of Yale-NUS include YNCyclopedia, an online archive of the college's history that encompasses both the formal (syllabus material, how-tos, etc.) and the informal (key shenanigans, confessions, scandals), as well as the Mocktant, a repository of satirical narratives that immortalize the nuances of college life as lived by the students past and present. These are just some ways in which our experiences can be recorded; stories that seem insignificant in the present may one day become precious windows into our past.

And perhaps, in yet another serendipitous stroke of chance, a future batch of *Stories of Ourselves* participants will stumble upon this article and be inspired to re-define their Yale-NUS story.

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