

Biographical, poetic, and academic storytelling

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Abstract: What makes a personal story worth remembering, worth telling, even worth bringing into a seminar room? Why should everyone collect and use their stories? And could these stories make academic life less boring—and more truthful to life?

In November 2025, Wolfram Aichinger offered two workshops on academic storytelling at the University of Tirana in Albania. On that occasion, he discussed some of the concerns of storytellers with Anxhela Lepuri. University teaching, he argues, cannot do without the great traditions of storytelling. But it should also draw on the small myths preserved in family picture books and on the tales told by taxi drivers on the road from Durrës to Tirana.

Keywords: storytelling, stylish academic writing, creative writing



In November 2025, Wolfram Aichinger offered two workshops on academic storytelling at the University of Tirana in Albania. On the occasion, an interview was carried out by Anxhela Lepuri and published in Albanian language in the journal *ExLibris*.¹ This is the English version:

Anxhela Lepuri: *Storytelling is often described as an art form that unites mind and emotion, theory and experience. In the academic and cultural context, narrative is not merely a way to tell events, but also a way to understand the world and to structure our inner reality. How would you define this concept?*

Wolfram Aichinger: Mind, emotion, experience, understanding the world, structuring inner realities: Not to get lost in these concepts, I will start with one of *my* stories (following the advice of Isaac B. Singer, one of the great story-tellers of the 20th century: “Write about what you *know*!”). It goes as follows:

When my great-grandfather was very ill and on his deathbed, my mother paid him a last visit. She was very attached to him. She then also attended his funeral knowing however that these acts would infuriate her own father, her grandfather’s son-in-law. Grandfather and father (from my mother’s point of view) had fallen out some years before. They had cut all contact and did not speak to each other anymore. That was no easy endeavour because their houses were only separated by a small brook... Thus, when visiting her grandfather, my mother put the love for her grandfather over loyalty to her father whom she also felt very close to. What put her in a strong position was the fact that she was about to have her first baby. She knew that her father would not dare making a scene with his pregnant daughter.

Maybe at some point I will turn this into a short story, with the title: *An Antigone from Upper Austria*. Why could such a story be useful for academia? – Because it deals with a moment of crisis in the life of a family, a moment where their attitudes and values are at stake, where something beyond the surface of everyday life is revealed and up for debate: What do you owe to your father as a loving daughter? What do you owe to your grandfather? – We all know such stories – my son brings them home from primary school when referring the dramas of friendship, loyalty and betrayal unfolding in the school courtyard. And we could use them both to make teaching for entertaining and to make content stick in our students’ memories for a much longer time.

David Phillips (YouTube: The Magical Science of Storytelling) suggests that we could collect and index our stories and that we should use them for functional storytelling.

¹ “Rrëfimtaria biografike, poetike dhe akademike” appeared in *ExLibris* Nr. 361, Tirana 2025. The English version was edited by John Wright.



Josef and Maria Schneiderbauer with children and a niece. Small farmers, grocers and shoemakers in rural Upper Austria, around 1926
(Foto: Gertraud Aichinger)

Anxhela L.: *I find it fascinating how some stories remain in the collective memory for decades, while others are forgotten almost instantly. In my opinion, this depends not only on the content but also on how we connect emotionally with them. What, in your view, makes a good story stay in the listener's or reader's mind for a long time?*

Wolfram A.: We all live through these series of events that make up everyday life and most of them are not worth being retold. And there are these *nodal points* (I take the term from Solzhenitsyn), moments in which life acquires a kind of mythical dimension because we are confronted with a paradox, a dilemma, with difficult decisions that will have long-lasting effects. Returning to my example the dilemma, the controlling idea (Robert McKee) when telling the story would be: Honouring the memory of your grandfather can mean betrayal of your father.

Aristotle invites poets to select those actions where a father stands against his son, a mother against her daughter, a brother against his brother... Because these are the stories capable of triggering strong responses and of remaining in the memory for a long time. What heightens the effect are reversals of fortune and scenes of recognition (anagnorisis) ("It is true, I am your father!"). You will find these motifs and elements in

numberless films and series of our times, just take *Star Wars* or *Fargo* or *Mad Men* (“I am Don Draper” – “No, you are not!”) or *Big Little Lies*. And there is a fascinating passage on the historical evolution of storytelling in Aristotle. That is the one where he states, that in former time poets told a great number of family stories but eventually limited themselves to those that were most effective, those that deal with strong and painful human relations: Agamemnon and Iphigenia, Oedipus and Iocaste, Antigone and Creon... . So strangely there seems to be a process that goes from a greater to a smaller variety of stories worth being told, from what is closer to experience but less engaging to the more general, emotionally overwhelming and archetypal. I wonder what the more realistic stories told by poets previous to Sophocles and Aeschylus were all about? (Jerome Bruner, in his great book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* tackles the question of why the myriad possible stories converge towards a few essential ones, that are told again and again in different disguises, from a psychological and cognitive perspective.)

Anxhela L.: *People often say, “he/she knows how to tell a story beautifully,” as if storytelling were a natural gift. On the other hand, many scholars emphasize that storytelling is a process that can be learned and refined. How do you see it yourself: is storytelling an innate talent or a craft that can be cultivated through practice and reflection?*

Wolfram A.: Again, Aristotle already seems to get it right: what makes a great poet is the gift for manufacturing representations of reality, together with a strong imagination and, interestingly, a sense of rhythm. There are sensitivity and observation (a capacity of perceiving the world from peculiar, yet intriguing angle), there is phantasy and fiction, and there has got to be *music*, or pleasure of form, if you like.

Some time ago, at a family meeting, my uncle Horst told a story from his childhood, when his village conspired against newly arrived gendarmes who had started fining farmers for not having lights that worked on their tractors. Eventually these constables got beaten up in a darkened room of the local inn at a wedding celebration... My uncle, who had not attended high school showed a marvellous gift for dragging everybody into his account, for “zooming into the moment” (Philipp Humm). Through the use of dialogue, by showing a vivid sense of time and location, and, most of all: by a masterful modulation of his voice.

If you pay attention to what great writers have to say about their beginnings, you will often find the memory of the voice of some relative or other important figure of their childhood. Many times, these are female voices, an aunt, a grandmother, a mother. The great Spanish novelist Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, for example, tells in an interview, that he was deeply impressed by the female talk and gossip he listened to in the kitchen of his childhood home.

Gabriel García Márquez is probably the most famous example: He could only get the novel that was to become *A Hundred Years of Solitude* going, when he adopted the voice of his maternal grandmother, a haughty, authoritarian woman, always dressed in black

who told the wildest events with a poker-face, without any display of emotion.

What I know from my own experience, is: students get much more interested in literary theory, even understand its relevancy, when they try out basic concepts themselves: by inventing metaphors, by telling stories from different perspectives... And yes, get them acquainted with Raymon Queneau's wonderful *Exercices de style*.

Anxhela L.: *I've always been intrigued by how the same story, told differently, can evoke completely opposite emotions. Do you think that the way a narrative is constructed – its rhythm, point of view, or sequence of events – directly affects how the audience experiences it?*

Wolfram A.: Much depends on where you begin and where you end: Calderón's lighter comedies such as *La dama duende* or *El secreto a voces* all end in marriage, a tragic play like *El pintor de su deshonra* deals with married life that is troubled by the return of the former lover. – Style, voices, perspectives matter and all the great stories of, say, Ovid, have been turned into farces and presented as parodies. Think of the staging of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The *fabula*, however, remains untouched and nobody would doubt, that the real thing is the tragic version. So, there is an *engine* (Alan Watt) that drives great stories, a core dramatic tension. You can probably destroy a good story through bad writing but you cannot prop up a story that has no strong heart with clever tricks and devices.

Anxhela L.: *Today, with social media and content consumed in seconds, the way stories are told seems to have changed radically. From daily Instagram stories to interactive media narratives, audiences seek more immediate and visual experiences. How do you see this transformation, and how does this visual presence influence the way we tell and experience stories? Does it strengthen the message, or does it sometimes weaken our imagination?*

Wolfram A.: „Brevity is the soul of wit“ (Polonius in Hamlet): I cannot see why short or very, very short stories should be of less value. Oral communication has always cherished this faculty, and it is a disgrace that schools train pupils to blow up their texts with meaningless words and unnecessary blabla. There is a most venerable tradition of very short tales (Aesop), jokes, proverbs, epigrams... Why shouldn't these forms be cultivated in new media, if it is done in an intelligent way.

Anxhela L.: *I believe that a well-told story can have a greater impact than a theoretical lecture. From this perspective, how can storytelling be used as a pedagogical tool to encourage critical thinking, empathy, or a deeper understanding of themes in the classroom?*

Wolfram A.: Could my story about my mother and her grandfather's death promote a better understanding of rural Upper Austria in the middle of the 20th century? Yes, it could. If you use it in a lecture that deals with, say, family structures you could introduce the concepts of patrilocal or matrilocal marriage: it was my grandfather's "misfortune" that he moved into the household of his wife when marrying her... Of course, this step from the particular to the general is always a risky one and has to be taken with utmost

caution.

However, I am pretty sure that my story could trigger similar stories from listeners, everybody knows the trouble that can spring sharing a house, a flat, a farm, a garden, trouble within a core family, between generations, between a maternal and paternal family line. This would be especially interesting when different cultural backgrounds come together in a seminar room.

So yes, stories should be truthful and honest representations of experience, but the *events* are not the *story*. Mark Travis, master of autobiographical storytelling, reminds us of this important distinction. What fuels my story is the *core value* – loyalty and expressions of loyalty in a family – at stake. Or, as Ricardo Piglia says: Every great story tells *two* stories. Or, as Jerome Bruner holds, there is a double landscape, first the landscape of events, second, the ways people perceive and judge these events – the landscape of interpretation.

As for emotions, I am convinced – and Aristotle was – that the pleasure lies in the process. Stories represent human action in time; they unfold in the moments of being told and listened to. It's the act of telling, that is important, and the process of sharing the story, with their time and attention, listeners or readers or invited to. Often your stories will trigger stories and be responded to by similar stories. At the end, there is catharsis, that is: not a simple message but a feeling of compassion, connection and of having acquired a profounder understanding of what it is like to live in this world as a human being. Robert McKee makes a strong case for stories being metaphors of live (YouTube: *Screenwriting legend Robert McKee on Great Storytelling*). I would add that this process of understanding is a never-ending one. Stories with a cheap message, with facile political slogans and simple instructions for how to act correctly feel shallow and leave a bad taste.

Anxhela L.: *Even though it may sound simple to say “tell a story”, in practice teachers and educators face lack of time, overloaded curricula, or students with different expectations. What are the biggest challenges that hinder the use of storytelling in education, and how can they be overcome?*

Wolfram A.: My teaching of Spanish culture and history has certainly improved since I consciously use stories. Of course, this takes time and thinking, and it is not always successful.

But if you find the appropriate story it will then always be much easier to follow up, to subsequently introduce your ideas and concepts. While you select your story you are obliged to think about what is the core of your lecture, what it is you really want to convey beyond disjointed facts and data.

Do justice to the fact that life changes and that people change: somebody born a slave can end up a powerful person at the court of a king, to put an extreme example. An unmarried young girl may be subjected to the will of her father, mother or siblings, but

the same human being can become a widow who rules over a palace and a family clan. Stories are a strong vaccine against over-abstractation, over-simplification, and over-generalization, against the risk of taking concepts for life, abstractions and models for experience, statistical categories for flesh- and-blood people.

As for administration of time in class-rooms, when all is said and done, stories save time because they synthesize, because they contain images, because they introduce elements that are connected to each other, they show the world in movement and transformation, they deal with living people and their passions and sorrows. So, they can be easier remembered and easier retrieved. The note Antigone, Oedipus, Iphigenia or Cinderella suffices to take these stories to your classroom.

I am very pleased with the fashion of storytelling in different social spheres and that teachers become more aware of their enormous didactic value.

Every teacher might benefit from David Phillips three-steps-program towards functional story-telling, presented in his lecture *The Magical Science of Storytelling*, available on YouTube: First, trust in the value of your personal stories. Second, collect these stories in a (digital) notebook. Third, index your stories and use them according to the emotions you want to spark in your audience. Why not, if these are honest, truthful stories?

Anxhela L.: *Stories have the power to inspire, but also to manipulate. In a time when narratives are used for marketing, politics, or propaganda, how can we preserve the authenticity of a story without turning it into an instrument?*

Wolfram A.: Well, in a sense it has always been an instrument. No child can be raised without those elementary stories that introduce her or him into a culture. When we share our most personal stories with somebody it always becomes a powerful “instrument” of bonding. I care for you and I trust you that is why I invite you to listen to my story.

So, I insist, everybody is a great storyteller when they truthfully bring up their strongest personal memories. (And I will not go into the problem of compulsive liars who are sometimes great storytellers here). Storytelling techniques and the possibility of manipulation certainly come in when storytelling gets removed and abstracted from real-life-occasions and from personal experience. “Stories are never innocent”, Robert McKee holds, because stories always provide models for how to deal with life. But as chefs are capable of distinguishing more tastes than ordinary people, and musicians can discern nuances of orchestration that others cannot hear, people interested in literature refine their sense for good stories, and while children (often? mostly?) long for stories where the bad guy is nothing but bad and the good one always good advanced readers should move on from stereotyped stories to more complex, richer and more nuanced ones, from *Winnetou* to *Once Upon a Time in the West* to *Blood Meridian* by Cormack McCarthy.

Anxhela L.: *Storytelling requires empathy, observation, and reflection. What advice would you give to students who want to develop this skill – not only as a communication technique but as a way to understand and share the world?*

Wolfram A.: Avoid clichés and slogans, do not adhere to short-lived political agendas, learn from the best, do not despise the classics, refine your senses, cultivate your dreams, find those stories that correspond with your sensibility and place in the world and stick to them, bear in mind that life is always new and unforeseeable, above all: join in the mission that unites writers from all times: the search for a precise and expressive language. – Listen to your mother's and your grandmother's stories, and to the ones told by taxi drivers.