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Speaker 2: Welcome to The Window.

Nick Colangelo: Peter Aguero was born in Delanco, New Jersey, the southern part of Jersey. And basically raised and then moved to New York City. Peter has been a Moth StorySLAM host. He's a Moth GrandSLAM champion. And he also is an instructor for MothSHOP Community Education Outreach. He has a solo travelling show called Daddy Issues, and it's just wonderful to have Peter here. Hopefully, he begins to see Iowa City as a second home. So Peter, welcome.

Peter Aguero: Yeah. So, I'm 20 years old, and I'm sitting on a couch in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and it's a dingy old couch. The kind of couch that you find in every college apartment. It was found on the curb somewhere and brought in surreptitiously, I guess ignoring where it used to be. And I'm sitting on this couch at my friend Laura's house. We're at a party. At that time in my life, I was kind of like the party marines. I was the first in, first drunk, last to leave. That's the way that I kind of ran my life at that time. We had just finished doing a sketch comedy show on campus, and it went really well. We had one more show left. So I'd just gotten the last beer from the keg. I had a couple sips of whiskey left in my flask. I figured I was good to go for about another 20 minutes. And I'm sitting on this couch, and all of a sudden, she walks in. So I look up. I say, "Hey there, Dr. Fine. Why don't you come over here and sit on my lap?"

This was a woman named Sarah. Beautiful, beautiful girl. About two years before, I did my first play in college. We did Six Degrees of Separation. She played a character named Dr. Fine. And so I kept calling her that. That was her nickname, and it suited her very well. She was on the crew team, very beautiful. Crew team, strong shoulders. I like strong shoulders. So we were very much started a friendship. But she had a boyfriend who was going to Johns Hopkins. It was her high school sweetheart. He was labelled exactly what all mothers would call a catch. Now, I wasn't necessarily a catch. I wore a lot of Hawaiian shirts at that time. And take from that what you will. Anything you think what that meant, it's all true.

So she did come over. She sat on my lap, and she was followed by her assistant director from the show. This kid Brian, who was on the ultimate Frisbee team. He looked a little bit like a frog. And he sat across from us on this other beat up

dirty couch. So we're sitting there and we're talking, and we're talking about classes and school and the show and all this other stuff. And I kind of look up at her, and I say, "Hey there, Dr. Fine. I think you should come home with me tonight." And she just kind of looked at me.

Now, when I was growing up, I didn't have much confidence. I didn't have a lot of what is called, I suppose, game. I was no good at talking to women at all. I was afraid of women. I also grew up afraid of men, too, so I was afraid of everybody. So earlier in the semester, I decided that at 20 years old, and it wasn't ever really working out for me to ask women out on a date, so instead, what I decided to do was to ask them if they would be interested in going out with me sometime. "Would it be okay if I asked you out for dinner at some point?" And that caused just enough confusion that usually they would say yes, and then we would go out on a terrible first date. And so I went on a lot of terrible first dates. But it was going okay, all things considered. But what it really taught me was if there was something that I was really trying to accomplish in life, just try it. What's the worst that could happen? Somebody says no and then you try again.

So this was an attempt at that. So, I say to her, "Dr. Fine, you really should come home with me tonight." And she just kind of looks at me askance and says, "Well, I have to wake up really early for crew practise tomorrow morning." And I say, "Well, I have two alarm clocks." And then she kind of looked at me again. She said, "Okay. Well, I get really cold at night, when I'm sleeping." I was like, "Well, my mom sent me to college with a down comforter. I'm also ... I give off a lot of heat, and I'm a cuddler. So I think we'll be okay." And then she kind of looked at me again. She says, "Okay. Well, my roommate listens to music while we're sleeping, so I'm used to listening to music in bed." I said, "Well, I got a ..." This was 1997. "I have a five-CD changer. I have John Coltrane and Miles Davis. I think we'll be okay."

So she just kind of looks at me again and smiles and she says, "Excuse me," and she gets up to go to the bathroom. When she walks away, Brian's sitting across the way, and he's agog. He says, "You know she has a boyfriend, right?" I was like, "Yeah. I don't care." And then he says, "Well, does this normally work?" I'd never done it before, so I just kind of winked at him. I had no response to that. So a couple minutes later she comes back and she sits right back down on my lap again, and I'm going for broke. I push all my chips in the middle of the table. I said, "Dr. Fine, you really should come home with me this evening. I promise you you'll have a good time. I can call and get references. These are people that stay up late." And she just kind of laughed once more, and she just kissed me on the cheek and she said, "Good night."

So I guess what I really wanted that night was to go home alone, because that's what I did, and I stopped on the way home and got a bunch of chicken wings. And then I ate the chicken wings. I woke up in the morning in a panic. When you wake up in the morning in a panic and the first thing you have to do is you can't breathe because your foot is jammed into your mouth. So I wake up in the

morning and pull my foot out of my mouth and realise that oh, we have one more show today. I gotta go. What did I do? And that young college kid regret.

So I get up. I go through my day. I head over to the hall where we're doing the show, and I get back in there. And I'm sitting up at the front of the room on the lip of the stage, and then all of a sudden, she comes in, in the back of the room. She walks in. And I'm hoping she doesn't see me, but it's impossible, because I'm the size of a teenage hippopotamus, and also, I'm wearing a Hawaiian shirt. So there's no hiding. So she comes walking down the aisle straight toward me, and I'm like, "Oh, hey, Sarah. How you doing, Sarah? How are you?" And she's just kind of ... I was like, "How was crew practise? How was your day?" And she says, "You know, Peter, you got me to thinking last night." I was like, "Oh, okay there, Dr. Fine. I was wondering would it be okay if I asked you out sometime?" And she got a confused look on her face and she said, "Okay."

And a couple weeks later, we did go on a first date. And it was a good one. It was a really good one. It happened to snow for the first time of the season, and we got to kiss under the snow, and it was beautiful, and I'll never forget it. Now, that was 20 years ago, and life takes so many turns. There's left turns and right turns and so many things that happen. There's a lot of people in your life that they're kind of costars in the movie of your life, and there's a lot of people that just make cameos. Some people are supporting actors. Some people, they go away and they come back. You never know who's gonna be a part of your life and for how long, and what kind of importance they take until years later.

So I'm here today in Iowa City. I'm really happy to be here. This is a place that I've been to a bunch so far, and there's a lot of love in this town. That's really nice. But I am looking forward to going home tomorrow. I know when I ... I'm here, and she could be anywhere right now. She could be with friends, or she could be on a train somewhere, or at work. I don't even know. But I do know that when I land at LaGuardia tomorrow night and I get home, I take a cab back to our apartment in Queens, and she'll be on the couch there waiting for me, so, thank you very much.

Nick Colangelo: You just heard from Peter Aguero, storyteller, and Peter is our guest today on The Window. My name is Nick Colangelo. I'm your host for The Window, and The Window is sponsored by the Belin-Blank Centre for Gifted Education and the College of Education at the University of Iowa. We're broadcasting live here today from the College of Education in the Lindquist Building. Peter, welcome here.

Peter Aguero: Thank you very much, Nick. I appreciate it.

Nick Colangelo: Peter, what is a Moth?

Peter Aguero: Well, I don't have a biology degree, so I can't really tell you exactly that, but I know what you're asking is the storytelling organisation I've been working for is

called The Moth. This year is actually The Moth's 20th anniversary. It was started by a guy named George Dawes Green, who's a novelist. He is from ... He did a lot of his growing up in Georgia on St. Simons Island in Georgia, one of those little islands off the coast of Savannah. And George spent a lot of time with a woman named Wanda Bullard, who was a schoolteacher in Georgia, and she was an amazing, generous spirit. And Wanda would host these evenings on her front porch in the very Southern style where people would just sit on the screened-in front porch all night and drink whiskey and tell stories. And the apocryphal story is that there were holes in the screen door and moths would come in and they'd flit around the light, so everyone would start calling themselves The Moths when they would meet up.

So, when George moved to New York City because he was a fancy novelist, he noticed when he would go to parties that nobody was really listening to each other. They just were waiting for their turn to talk. So he wanted to kind of try to recreate those nights of listening, so he started, in his apartment, a thing called The Moth. He was trying to recreate this. So he invited some authors and some storytellers and people, raconteurs is a word that George loves to use. And they started telling stories in his apartment. And from what I've heard, it wasn't that great. It didn't go that well. But George is nothing if not resilient, so he kept going. It started to get popular, and then they started to have to do it in the backroom of a bar. And then it started to get popular, they'd have to move to theatres. Started to get popular, became a nonprofit.

Eventually, I got into The Moth it'll be 10 years ago this month. It was October of 2007 I started to go. And now there's a bunch of different arms of The Moth. There's the StorySLAM programme where all around the country, and all around the world, actually, in the US and in Ireland and in England and in Australia, there are weekly or monthly shows where people can just put their name in a hat and get pulled at random and tell a five-minute story. It's an open stage for anyone. That's how I got started, going to those in the Village. There's also a main stage programme where there are longer curated stories, and there's a community programme and an education programme where a Moth has committed to bring storytelling to underserved communities in the five boroughs of New York and then also throughout the country, now, and throughout the world. There's been a lot of programmes with women's groups in Africa. There's been a lot of programmes I mean all over the world. Just amazing stories.

And so it's grown from an idea that someone had in their apartment to now a worldwide storytelling arts organisation. And I'm very fortunate to have been there for half of the life of the organisation, and I've seen it grow exponentially. It's an amazing organisation. I've heard stories from people from all over the world, and it's a great organisation. There's a good podcast you can listen to, and The Moth Radio Hour is one of the best radio shows you're gonna hear. And I guess that's The Moth, I suppose.

Nick Colangelo:

It's great that you're doing outreach to people around-

Peter Aguero: Yeah.

Nick Colangelo: Also in your biography is you're a Moth GrandSLAM champion. What's that, Peter?

Peter Aguero: Well, with the StorySLAM programme, that's 10 stories pulled at random from a hat and there are somehow judges. People somehow ... It's really difficult in New York City to find people willing to judge other people, but we're somehow able to do that. And so at the end of the night, someone wins. These judges listen to these personal life experiences and then apply a somewhat arbitrary number score to the people's personal experiences. Somebody wins, and then they take 10 StorySLAM winners and they do a GrandSLAM where it's 10 winners in a bigger room. It's a more broad theme, and you get a chance to bring whatever your best story is. And The Moth directors are there to help you craft your story. It's a great opportunity to really craft something really interesting, and I happened ... I won one of those in it must have been 2009, I think, at the Highline Ballroom.

The best part of that was my wife's father came to that show, and he's always been on the fence about what ... He wanted Sarah to marry a crew guy. A big, tall, handsome guy named Chad who had a future. So instead, she fell in love with me. But it was really nice for me to have ... For him to see my win a big thing in a big room. I didn't tell him that there's no prize and there was nothing after that. But that's, yeah, so I won that in about 2009 and I've been coasting on those laurels ever since.

Nick Colangelo: Peter, what do you see as the value of storytelling? I mean, I know you get our attention, but what does it do for you to tell stories?

Peter Aguero: Well, I think it does a lot of things. I've noticed a lot of benefits. First off, I got into it because I've been a performer now for about 20 years doing all sorts of different things. Improv and comedy and stage acting and a million different things. And I found this thing that seemed very pure. There was no boundary between the performer and the audience. It kind of broke down the idea of someone even presenting someone. It was more of a conversation. And it really struck with me. I wasn't ... If you were telling a story, you're not doing it through the veil of a character. You're not speaking someone else's words. It's all you. It's all you. So that grabbed by right away.

As I started to go through ... First, you start to tell all your big, crazy stories. The crazy stuff that happened to you, because you think those are the most interesting. And generally, you're wrong. Once you burn through those stories, you start to have to dig deeper into your life and take a look at the things that really change you, because that's what our stories are really about. They're not about the thing that happened to us. They're about how we've changed and how we've grown. That's what makes a story. That's narrative arc. It's how are you different from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. And I started to get a chance to look at my life through that spectrum of what kind of

choices have I made? How have they changed me? How am I different than I used to be?

And that was a great benefit because then you get a greater understanding of your life. And when you do that, all of your memories and all your experiences are inside your head, and a lot of times, we don't want to think about those things because they hurt too much. Because we all have regret and we all have shame. We all have pain.

If there's anything, that's the universal human experience is pain and suffering. I'm not trying to be negative about it. That's just the truth and it's okay. Once you start looking at those experiences in your life, because you spent all that time trying to shove them behind things and hide them from yourself because you don't want to think about them. Once you start to shine a light on those things, you see that they're harmless. That they can't hurt you anymore, and you can start to own them instead of them owning you. So you get a real sense of personal strength. You get to see that no matter what we've all done, no matter what missteps we've taken, in the end, we're all undefeated. As bad as things can be, in the end, you made it. And that was one of the biggest things that grabbed me.

And the next step was I would tell a story about something that happened to me that I thought I was the only person that's happened to. And I'd tell the story and I look out in the audience and I'd see people nodding their head, because they're ... It made me realise that they went through something similar, and I wasn't alone. And for that person listening, they might have thought they were the only person that went through something like that. But then hearing someone being able to verbalise it gave them a sense that they weren't alone. So it's the oldest form of communication, and it ends up forming communities immediately, because there's no boundary between us.

And I guess finally, another benefit of it is that I believe fully half of storytelling is listening. If you're gonna be a storyteller, you have to listen to stories. If you're gonna tell the story, there has to be people there listening to it. And to get the full benefit of the power of our own narratives, listening has to be involved. And that is at a real ... It's in short supply, as we go through our world today. Not just today. I mean, it's been happening for years. People don't listen the way that they used to. They're not interested in listening to anything that doesn't reinforce their own beliefs. And if you're able to present something, you can get an immediate sense of community, and empathy, and it opens your mind up to how ... It doesn't matter what your absolute non-changeable beliefs are in your life, you also have been scared. You also have been hurt. You also have had triumphs. And it shows us that we're all not that much different.

So, yeah. That's the laundry list of benefits on why I've been doing this for 10 years.

Nick Colangelo: And I have listened to several of your stories, and that's exactly ... They resonate. You can be funny, but there's always a sensitivity there. There's always a vulnerability that you get across. So Peter, what would you say to someone who would say, "I don't think I have a story to tell," or even if they did, "I wouldn't know how to tell it,"?

Peter Aguero: Well, I believe everyone has stories to tell. Your life is made up of almost an infinite amount of stories. Right now, you have maybe a dozen threads of stories happening in your life right now. Different choices you made. You could tell the story of how you woke up this morning to how you got here, and there are choices you made there that are illustrative of who you are as a person, and there are reasons why you chose to wear these shoes, or drink this coffee, or say hello to this person, that might have to do with a choice you made 20 years ago. All of our stories are these complicated webs that are happening concurrently all the time in our lives. So whether or not someone believes that they don't have a story to tell, that's wrong. Everyone does. And we're kind of told that what we think and what we believe isn't necessarily important to the greater scheme of things, for whatever reason. Someone tells you that it's not important. So we start to believe that. You believe something you were told when you were seven years old, and you hold onto those beliefs.

How do you do it? I don't want to be glib, but it's very simple. You just start at the beginning and you tell the truth. It's not even necessarily about trying to be interesting. It's not about trying to be entertaining. Your job isn't ... My job as a storyteller isn't to make you feel good. My job as a storyteller isn't to try to teach you anything. My job as a storyteller is simply to be a vessel for the story, because the story already exists. So we already have those. So if I realise that it's not my job to do anything for you, as the listener, my job is only to be true to the story, then it takes all the pressure off. So it's just all you gotta do is be vulnerable, which is very difficult. You gotta speak in front of people, which is very difficult. You have to be as honest with yourself and honest with the story as possible, which is very difficult. But what in life that isn't difficult is worth it? So you do it.

And people get scared. There are very legitimate fears to doing this stuff. And they ask me all the time, "Well, how do you stop being afraid? How do you stop being afraid?" And you don't. I'm afraid all the time. But there's a courage in being vulnerable in front of strangers. There's a courage in being vulnerable to yourself. And so the secret isn't to stop being afraid, because courage wouldn't exist without fear. It's the hold onto your fear and add courage to it and do it anyway. So I think that's the thing that keeps people from telling their stories the most is a fear that they don't matter and a fear that people don't care. So just get rid of that. Put your courage on top of it and do it anyway. And that's the advice I give to everyone.

Nick Colangelo: You've been kind of hinting around this, and I've heard you say this before, that the truth is more important than the facts when you tell a story.

Peter Aguero: Yeah.

Nick Colangelo: Can you just elaborate a bit on that?

Peter Aguero: Sure. I mean, I think that the truth ... Facts are something that you can prove. There's empirical proof of this happened or this didn't happen, right? It's temperature, it's wind, it's things that are measurable. Those are facts. This person said this or they didn't, that's a fact. Truth is flexible. I feel like truth lies in the emotions. It's the thing we remember after many years. You might remember your 13th birthday. You don't remember what happened, the facts of what happened. You remember how you felt. That's where the truth is.

So you can have two people that went through the exact same experience tell a story about that experience and they'll be what seem to be contradicting accounts. But to each person, the stories are still true, because we see our lives through the filter of time, our own experience, our own emotions, and our own I guess prejudices and what we believe and what we don't believe. That's what we see our life through. So that opens up the possibility of the truth being flexible. A story can be ... An audience can always tell when a story isn't true, because it doesn't resonate. It just doesn't resonate. And the things that they never pick up on are the non-factual things, because you can lie about that stuff. You can take a story that took over the course of two weeks and make it happen over the course of two days. I argue that the story is still true. It might not be factual, but the emotions behind the story are still true.

But people, they can hear when a story isn't emotionally true, when someone's trying to get something over on them with their emotions. If you're not talking about your vulnerability as openly as you can, people stop listening. They want to be connected, so they want to hear truth. We all have a detector in our head to know when something is true or not. So I mean, we know how difficult it is to tell if something's factual. I mean, that's become such a huge thing in the world, right? How do you prove something? But you can't really prove truth. It's a feeling, I think, whether or not something's real that way, emotionally. So it comes in the delivery system of emotion. So as long as you're being honest with yourself with your emotions, your story is then true. That's the theory I have, anyway.

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If somebody listening to this podcast says, "I'm convinced. I want to try telling a story that is truthful for me," but somehow, the delivery of it just bombs, what do you want to say to that person? And maybe in your own background.



Peter Aguero:

Well, you can't ... the story can't be this precious little nugget that you gotta protect. You have to let it get beat up, right, because you've been beat up in your life, so you're not a precious little nugget. So if the story is a representation of yourself at an earlier time in your life, you have to be honest to that person. So if I'm telling story from when I was nine years old, I'm telling it in the voice of that nine-year-old kid. And that nine-year-old kid didn't know a lot. So I've gotta be as honest as I can to that.

What does it mean when a story bombs? We are the worst judge of our own material in our lives, right? Even if you think what you present to the world is terrible, you're wrong. If you think what you present to the world is the greatest thing in the world, you're wrong. You're just presenting. That's it. That's it. So a value judgement does no good. First of all, you try to get rid of the value judgement, whether or not it's good or bad. I've heard people say that. "Oh, it's a terrible story." It's not a terrible story, you're just ... Somebody told you something you did was terrible 30 years ago and you still believe them. It's just easier to believe that statement because now you're telling yourself in your own voice instead of that terrible teacher or that terrible parent or whatever, that bully in your neighbourhood. So you just ... When we believe that the things that we're presenting to the world have no value, it's because we are lying to ourselves through the voice of people that try to keep us down.

So I would say you have to remember that the time you tell the story isn't the only time you're gonna tell the story. That the existence of that story does not rely on you telling it, because the story exists already. Time is a human construct in our memories in the past, the story you could make the argument, is still happening somewhere in the existence of the world. So the story already exists. Your job is to merely relay it. So you can tell the story once and it doesn't really get to the heart of it. You tell it again and you get a little closer, and you tell it again and you get a little closer. You're not perfect. No one is. So why would you hold a story to higher standards than you can possibly hold for yourself? You can't write a novel without writing a terrible first draught. So why do people think that they have to go out and tell a perfect story the first time out? You don't have to.

I make pottery, and I spend most of my days in Queens at a studio making mugs, and you see a lot of students, and I was guilty of this when I first started, they get so mad at themselves because they can't make a beautiful vase the first time they get behind a wheel. It takes years to do it. You have to be kind to the piece and you have to be kind to yourself before you can make anything at all. You have to just be kind to your experiences. You have to be kind to yourself recounting them. It does no good to criticise yourself and make a value judgement whether something was good or bad. It was just the next step.

And look, man, I'm not trying to say that I'm above that. I suffer from it myself. There are times where I'm afraid of going out and telling a new story because it's not gonna be as good as I want it to be. But it's never gonna be as good as I

want it to be until I tell it 10 times, terribly. And you just have to let go of your ego the best you can and just let it be.

Nick Colangelo: Good. It's an important, great message, Peter, that you're giving. This room has educators in it, and it's got some people who are working towards a degree in education. What role do you see for schools for the classroom in terms of storytelling?

Peter Aguero: I think stories are very important in education. I believe that some of the best breakthroughs I've gotten when I've taught, and I've taught improv and I've taught acting and I've taught storytelling, and I've taught a lot of things over the years. I was briefly a high school teacher. I dropped out of college, so you figure that math out. I'm not sure how that happened, but it was. The best breakthroughs I've had were never when I was trying to tell people what they should learn. It was when I would tell people what I've learned, and let them take from that and learn from that as they can, which means as someone who is teaching, you have to, again, kind of get rid of your own ego and take yourself out of the equation. It's not your responsibility to tell people how to learn and what to learn.

I think, this has been my experience, and it maybe doesn't translate to everyone here in the room and their goals, but the best breakthroughs I've made when I was teaching have just been to say, "Hey, man, this is what happened to me. This is what I did, and this is how I'm different because of that." And then they can cherry pick from that, the students, the people receiving that can cherry pick from that what works for them. And hopefully, by ... It's the difference between telling and showing. If you show someone how you've learned, then they might get something from it, rather than telling them what they should learn. I try to always stay away from morals of a story in my stories. I don't ever want to tell people, "And in the end, I realised and we all should," because I'm not we. I'm me. I can only say what I've learned and what I'm able to do.

I think storytelling has a huge place in the world of education because it's an instinctual facet of who we are as human beings. Just like animals come out of the womb knowing how to nurse, humans come out of the womb knowing how to listen and tell stories. Oldest form of communication, cave paintings. Little kids coming home and they want to tell you a story. They want to do that. So I think as an educator, if you can lock into narrative and you can take any idea you're trying to get across and apply it to an actual narrative structure, people will be able to compartmentalise it and figure it out on their own. I fully believe that. So I think it's ... I call it applied narrative. Trying to take an idea that you're trying to get across, and then how does it fit in a narrative structure, because everything does. So just I think it's a real good way to get the people you're trying to teach to quickly understand the concepts.

Nick Colangelo: When you tell a story, including what you're doing now, basically, you don't have a lot of gizmos around you.

Peter Aguero: Yeah.

Nick Colangelo: Okay. So I just want to know from you, Peter, given that so-called devices play such a role, and technology, can that enhance storytelling? Or does that begin to break away at the heart of storytelling because we're so device-oriented?

Peter Aguero: I figure it depends on your process as you're telling the story. If you start with stripping everything away and to get a real, true idea and a true understanding of your narrative, then other things you add to it can enhance it, right? But isn't it more powerful to ... I believe it's more powerful and almost entrancing if I were to describe to you my childhood bedroom as if I'm sitting there experiencing it in that narrative emotional truth that I have. I think you get a better understanding of that than if I just show a slide of a picture of my childhood bedroom. That's a flat, two-dimensional image that is just a room. Could be any room in any house anywhere in the world, versus my personal connection to it. I think people do rely on technology. They're tools, just like a hammer is a tool, and there is a benefit to it.

I think you should use, especially with narrative, you should use the technology to enhance your story, rather than tell it. If you find yourself using slides or a PowerPoint presentation to tell your story, use that to do the heavy lifting, then where is your connection to the people listening? You're allowing an inanimate object to try to forge a connection where that's your job. It's supposed to be with human beings, hearts and souls to hearts and souls. Not hearts to a cell phone, to another person's cell phone, to their heart and soul. That's too many bridges between a connection. And again, I'm not ... This is the world we live in, and technology is a tool and you can use it, but just it shouldn't do all the heavy lifting.

Nick Colangelo: I hear you.

Peter's willing to take some questions from the audience, so please use the microphone.

Peter Aguero: And it's totally cool. We could just sit here quietly.

Nick Colangelo: Yeah, yeah.

Peter Aguero: I'm totally fine with that. It's very early.

Speaker 4: Hi. Thanks for coming. What if you're afraid of the truth?

Peter Aguero: What if you're afraid of the truth? How do you mean? What ...

Speaker 4: You feel like you have stories inside of you, but you feel like the truth might not be well-received?

Peter Aguero: By whom?

Speaker 4: You might hurt someone by telling your story?

Peter Aguero: Okay. All right. I mean, all right. So that's a fine line that you have to walk when you're working in autobiographical narrative, first-person autobiographical narrative. There's a whole storytelling tradition all throughout the world of family history stories, stuff like that. Myths. But when you're talking about first-person autobiographical narrative, there are chances that the other people that were involved in your stories might not want that stuff out in the world? Well, they shouldn't have done it in the first place. That's my I'm from New Jersey answer.

But, okay, you're talking about two different things. There's what if you're afraid of the truth? You shouldn't be afraid of the truth, because that's reality, so it does no good to be afraid of reality. Then you're not living in reality, and you're not allowing yourself to fully experience and immerse yourself in life if you're too afraid of what's actually happening around you. So that's one thing.

But in relation to storytelling, it's a matter of making sure you're ... And you have every right to your story. Every right. That's every right. But what defines a story that you own? What defines that? It's about your choices, your motivations, and your emotions. You can't ascribe emotions and motivations to the other people in your story. I got this show that I'd talk about my relationship with and without my father growing up. At no point in that show do I try to ascribe any motivation on his part of things that he chose to say or do, because I don't know what his motivations were. All I can do is say that this is what happened. This is how I felt about it. This is what I did about it. And I defy anyone in the world to tell me that that's not my right, to talk about what I saw happen, what I felt happen, and what I did about it.

So if you make sure that you're not trying to tell someone else's story. If you make sure you're not trying to get in anyone else's head, which is a good thing to do in life is stay out of everybody else's head because it's a mess in there. So you have no idea what it really is. If you are able to stick to that, then you have nothing to be afraid of. Because your truth of your experience is yours to tell. You own it. It's yours. But remember, it's about this is what I saw, this is what I felt, this is what I did about it. Not about what other people were trying to do to you, because you have no idea what their motivations are.

I'm also acknowledging that it's very difficult. I've been travelling around telling the story about growing up, like I said, with and without my dad. My dad and I, we haven't spoken in many years, and we aren't going to. And that's just ... That's the way it is. Did telling these stories have something to do with that? Maybe. But that might have just been the convenient excuse for two people that shouldn't be around each other. So it's okay. You never want to try to hurt someone. You never want to ..

What is it that would hurt someone if you told your story? If you're trying to tell their secrets, if you're trying to say that they were ... Again, trying to tell what their motivations are, that's what would hurt. But if you're not trying to do that, then what's the real harm, other than showing as much of it as you can. Showing your vulnerability. It's about you, always. Your goal as a storyteller is to kind of cut yourself open and let everybody see inside. And that's very difficult already. So that's ... Remember, they're staring at you. They're looking at you and your heart and your organs, not someone else's. So don't talk about someone else's heart when yours is already flayed open. That's what you're talking about.

So to that end, and it might just be just the approach is most important. Is just remember that it's about your story and what your experience. I hope that answers your question.

Nick Colangelo: I thought it was a good question because you wonder, should you get permission before you let out some story, but the way you're presenting it, it's clearly about your heart and that makes good sense.

Peter Aguero: That being said, it does make some people uncomfortable.

Nick Colangelo: Sure.

Peter Aguero: Some people do get a little wary of that, and I understand that, too. But as long as you present it with honour and you present it with purpose and intent. Sometimes, it's gonna ruffle some people's feathers. But that's okay. You know what? If you're upset about something, you've been upset before. You'll be upset again. That's life. It's okay. It's all right.

Nick Colangelo: I hear you.

Speaker 5: I spent over 35 years as a psychologist, and I heard thousands of stories. So my question is, if I can form it, I have it in my head, but I'm not sure it's gonna come out right. How should a psychologist respond differently to these stories than someone just in an audience?

Peter Aguero: Well, that's an interesting question. I guess, I mean, think about your purpose as a psychologist or a counsellor or a therapist. Your purpose is to try to get as much information about this person as you can and help them live their life in the fullest possible way, trying to make sure that they don't let the obstacles that they've created and have been created for them, to try not to let those things stop them from living their full life. So I would think as someone in a therapy situation, you would listen to those stories and they're evidentiary pieces. They're evidence in the case that you're building with this person on how and why they should live their best life.

So if a story is about a really significant, painful experience, if a story is ... And then sometimes, as a therapist, you might hear that story a year later and it might be different because the person might have a different understanding of their own experience from before. That happens all the time. You have, then, the tools to say, "Well, remember what you thought this was before? And now you see what it is now? Which one is true?" It's being able to use those stories as, like I said, the case you're building against the person they don't want to be. And to help them show that there is truth and honour in the person that they are and that they want to be. There's a person that we are. There's the person that we want to be. And then there in middle is the person that we actually can accomplish being in life.

So our experiences, our life is ... We are the sum of our experiences, so as a therapist, I'm sure it'd be ... You could put them all in the Rolodex as different pieces to help the person see how they made ... See how you were presented with this situation and how you chose to deal with it? How would you choose to deal with it now? Because it's not about ... Our stories are not about the time our house caught on fire. The stories are about what did we grab first. That's what our stories are about. So especially someone in a therapy situation, if you're dealing with stories about trauma, you have evidence there of what was your choice then, and you could kind of see what choice would make now. Why did you make that choice? You help them understand that, and then you could say, "Well, what choice would you make now? Is it the same or is it different, and why?" Then you can understand growth, I think. I think that'd be a big benefit in therapy.

That being said, I was seeing a very good therapist in New York for four years, and we just are taking a small vacation from each other now, after four years. I feel like I graduated. We decided to take off the training wheels so I can go see if this baby bird can fly. I feel like I'm doing all right. It's been two months. It's something. But, yeah. I hope that answers your question.

Nick Colangelo: Good. Anyone else?

Peter, maybe then as a final question, because-

Peter Aguero: Sure.

Nick Colangelo: ... I've heard you talk about that, especially talking about yourself as a little kid, that there were a lot of things you didn't understand that didn't sit well, that the idea of storytelling gives a voice to something you could not articulate. So the final message, anything along those lines, what does it mean for either young kids listening to this podcast or people, that a story can give voice, can light a room that was pretty dark in your own head?

Peter Aguero: Yeah. That's something that's also ... It's very important to me. When I was growing up, it wasn't ... It was very chaotic in my home. It was very ... Like

everywhere else, I guess, it was a strange place to grow up, because every place is strange. I felt like, and I grew up thinking and knowing that my biggest fear in life was not being heard and not being understood. I remember saying that to people multiple times over the years, and I remember in social situations and other situations of trying so hard to get my point across clearly so I could be understood, because I always felt like I wasn't. I always felt like I wasn't understood. I didn't think I was able to get my thoughts across. And really, what was happening was my anxieties and coping mechanisms were getting in the way of me being able to communicate first with myself and then with the people around me.

As I've gotten older, and I was lucky enough to get into this line of work and this art form and form of expression, I have been able to go back and let 11-year-old Peter say what he felt. I've been able to let 15-year-old Peter say what he felt. 35-year-old Peter has gotten a chance to say what he felt. And those earlier versions of myself are now kind of ... They're not sitting in a waiting room. They're free to go about their business now. It has been such a profound experience to be able to let that go. You hold onto these experiences where you were somehow slighted or hurt, and they end up being these unhealing bruises inside your body. By allowing and giving voice to the version of myself that wasn't heard by my father, by my mother, by maybe teachers, by friends, by myself, not being honest with myself.

I'm being honest with myself now and finally listening to that version of myself. It's freed me up so I can have better relationships with other people, and better relations with myself. I'm allowed to be ... I've allowed myself a tremendous amount of kindness that can be pointed toward myself, toward the people in my life, toward strangers, because I'm not holding on to a certain amount of pain. Once that pain is released, it's still there, and I'm still sad about it, but it's not on a daily basis wringing my heart out like a dishrag. Instead, my heart can do the job it's supposed to do, and that is to connect with other people as best I can. I'm still learning every day. I have difficulty with that, still, but I'm getting better, and that's the victory.

So it's been just a tremendously profound experience to be able to kind of go back in time and say the things that I never had a chance to say before. And it's very difficult. It's not easy. I'm not trying to say it's something easy, but what in life that is worth it isn't difficult? So if you just try to do something and you nail it on the first try, it just meant you knew how to do it already. So the real skill is to be able to take a thing that you failed at multiple times and keep getting up and trying it again. So I tried to be heard. I tried to be heard. And now, I feel like I've been able to be heard, so that's ... I mean, my life has forever changed because of that.

Nick Colangelo:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And I say this from the heart, Peter, I really believe that your truthfulness, your courage, is going to give courage for others to somehow be heard and that's gotta be a good feeling [crosstalk 00:55:13].

Peter Aguero: Yeah, for sure. Yeah.

Nick Colangelo: Thank you very much for being on The Window.

Peter Aguero: It's my pleasure.

Nick Colangelo: It's been really wonderful.

Peter Aguero: Thank you very much. Thank you.

Nick Colangelo: The Window is presented by the Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Centre for Gifted Education and Talent Development, part of the College of Education at the University of Iowa. The Belin-Blank Centre is directed by Dr. Susan Assouline. The Window is produced by David Gould and Joshua Jacobs. Music for The Window was composed and performed by Daniel [Gaglione 00:55:57] and [John Rapson 00:55:59]. Opinions expressed by guests on The Window are their own, and not necessarily those of the Belin-Blank Centre, the College of Education, or the University of Iowa.