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We Are the Stories We Tell

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Presidential Address

We Are the Stories We Tell

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(What follows is a slightly revised version of the presidential address that Bonnie Irwin delivered on Saturday, October 22, 2011, at the annual NCHC conference in Phoenix, Arizona.)

*wa'adraka shahrazaad ~S-SabaaH fasakatat `an ~l-kalaam ~l-mubaaH.
"But morning overtook Scheherazade, and she lapsed into silence."*

As I approach my last hour of the presidency of NCHC, my voice will fade; it will become less prominent in the discourse of honors and our organization, and a new day will bring new stories into our midst. Yet my stories of our organization and our meeting in Phoenix will endure as I return to my campus, tired but enlightened, inspired to apply what I have learned and experienced over these four days. You each will do the same, returning home and telling your stories; by doing so, you will tell the story of NCHC.

I study storytelling and the living, breathing, changing stories that constitute who we are as individuals and communities. NCHC can be defined by our numbers: we have more members than ever before, and our endowment has surpassed the one-million mark. NCHC can be defined by our accomplishments: we have successful conferences and institutes, provocative and enlightening publications, and a thriving support network for our members. I believe that NCHC is also, maybe even primarily, the stories we tell as individual members, and that NCHC is the totality of these stories.

Year after year, our members report that the most valuable component of the conference is the opportunity to network with others, to share our stories and hear those of others, and I wager that, like me, you will return home with a host of stories. My husband will hear stories of good meals, good friends, long nights and early mornings; my friend and associate dean will hear stories of contentious yet productive meetings, of what I might have done differently or what more I might have done over this past year as NCHC president; my provost, as always, will hear stories of student experiences, successful programs on other campuses, and a fine glass of wine.

We are the stories we tell. Over the last year, I have been thinking of those no longer with us, like John Portz and John Grady and a host of others whose stories became the foundations of our dreams and our vision of what we could become. I have been listening to the stories of those among you who have been active in this organization since the days when I still thought I was going to be an international lawyer, stories that have shaped events like this conference and

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have informed the committees that allow us to build for future generations of students and faculty. I have been thinking about the stories of our staff in Lincoln and how quickly those stories have become part of our organizational fabric. And I have been smiling as I contemplate the stories of thousands of students who have joined us at our meetings over the years and the thousands more who have participated in our honors activities and classes; the struggles and accomplishments of these students are at the heart of our story.

Our stories define us; they also sustain us. The *1001 Nights* tells the story of Scheherazade, who must tell a compelling story every night so that her tyrannical husband will not execute her in the morning. The legend has it that she tells these stories for a thousand and one nights, an infinite number in Arabic lore, but what the book is really about is the power of story.

My charge to NCHC members is to reflect on the story you want to tell. If we are to fulfill our mission of advocating honors, we have to not only tell our current story but also dare to dream into the future and imagine what that story will be.

What will our story be? Will we be able to channel the hundreds of stories we tell within our organization into a coherent narrative that can help shape the future of higher education, ensuring that future generations of students receive the same quality of education and experience as those with us in Phoenix? How we tell our stories and to whom will, in large part, determine the future of NCHC. We do not want our stories to dissipate within the cacophony of the dominant higher education narrative today, which argues that students are adrift, professors care only about research, and administrators care only about numbers. Our story is much more meaningful, characterized by bright and compassionate students, talented faculty dedicated to student success, and staff who work tirelessly to support the accomplishments of our students and faculty.

The pressures on honors education are increasing dramatically. Legislators and citizens seem more interested in job training and scientific research than in the fabric of our culture and our democracy. We must continue to tell the compelling stories of our successes and work to expand our audiences. One of the reasons I so admire Scheherazade is that she possesses two qualities I continually try to nurture in myself: creativity and bravery. As an organization, we need to apply the creativity we bring to teaching and learning to communicating our stories in new and better ways. We need to be brave enough to tell our stories even to those we fear may not listen; a compelling story can capture the attention of even the most stubborn audiences.

I always keep two books within reach both at home and at school: one, as you might have guessed by now, is the *1001 Nights*. The other is *Don Quixote*, the story of a man who read so many fanciful stories that he went mad and created his own reality, based on his aspirations and not the stark world that surrounded him. I do not want to suggest that we ignore the stark realities. Indeed, I think we need to be well-informed about the threats to high-quality higher

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education. But I think we can, through our stories, begin to change these realities. We are the stories we tell. We control what that story will be, and, if we are creative and brave, our story will be a compelling one.

“But morning overtook Scheherazade, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said, “What a strange and entertaining story!’ Scheherazade replied, ‘What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me live!’”

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