

INTERVIEW WITH

# Jay O'Callahan

BY DON COHEN

Jay O'Callahan is one of the world's best-known storytellers. He has performed at Lincoln Center, at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and other theatres around the world, at the Olympics, and with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His work appears regularly on National Public Radio. In addition to creating and performing stories, he leads workshops on storytelling and writing. Don Cohen talked to him at his home in Marshfield, Massachusetts.

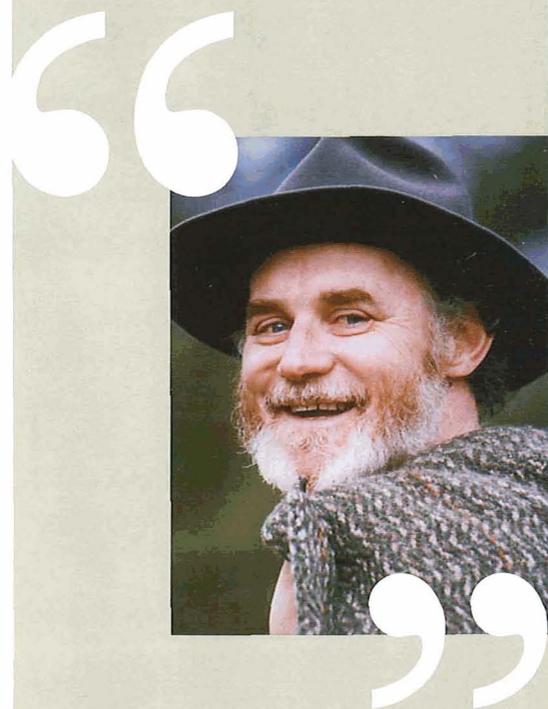
**COHEN:** At NASA, we've been talking about the value of storytelling for knowledge sharing. Why are stories important? What do we get from them?

**O'CALLAHAN:** Stories draw you into the experience and imagination of the storyteller. Reading one of your *ASK* interviews, I was intrigued with astronaut Eileen Collins saying that in space she looked down and thought, "The earth is round." Then she said, "Of course I knew that, but I was seeing it with my own eyes!" Eileen's words were so simple and direct; I could feel her excitement in the

simplicity of her words. Her excitement was such that I imagined that if Einstein and a kindergartener were with Eileen Collins, they might have all shouted, "The earth is round."

Storytelling knits images together and those images touch on something deeper than themselves. They touch on mystery. Think of the image of the Statue of Liberty.

The job of the storyteller is to invite the listener into the world of the story. The storyteller uses events and images to capture beauty, fun, struggle, characters—all in an accessible way.



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**COHEN:** When we think about stories, we usually think about events more than images, about how a character deals with a problem or a challenge. Isn't wondering about what's going to happen an important part of stories?

**O'CALLAHAN:** Astronaut Gene Cernan, speaking at Acton High School in Massachusetts, said walking on the moon was like dreaming or like hearing a story before bedtime. I think he meant the experience was full of mystery. Only a word like dream could communicate how unusual the experience was. The deepest stories, like *Moby Dick*, touch on mystery, and there is something mysterious, bravely wild, and joyous about exploring the universe.

A friend of mine, Gail Gutradt, is writing a work in progress about her volunteer work with children who have AIDS in Cambodia. Gail was speaking to a seventeen-year-old boy, Samorn, who hopes to be a doctor. He asked Gail if it were true men had walked on the moon.

She said yes, and he asked if they'd been to the sun. "Too hot," Gail said. Samorn mused then brightened, saying, "Maybe they could fly in a rocket made of ice." It's Samorn's journey, too.

Astronaut John Young said after he commanded the *Columbia* shuttle, "We're really not too far, the human race, from going to the stars." We humans are sticking our big toe into the universe.

**COHEN:** There's a good bit of danger and uncertainty in that adventure. I think those things are often part of compelling stories.

**O'CALLAHAN:** Usually stories have elements of risk, trouble, challenge, adventure. These elements are universal because they're part of life. A story gets exciting when someone takes a risk. With risk there's tension and with tension there's energy, and the energy draws us into the story. NASA's work involves great risk. Sometimes, as with *Challenger* and *Columbia*, the result is tragedy.

**COHEN:** It's interesting that the Apollo missions to the moon, which were extremely risky, were presented to the public in dull language, almost as if they were routine.

**O'CALLAHAN:** I lived through that time. I had a sense the astronauts were invulnerable. They were so well trained, and the engineers behind them were superb. Nothing was going to go wrong. That's one of the reasons the *Challenger* crew's death moved people so deeply. Christa McAuliffe was not an engineer; she was a teacher and she died, and the whole space enterprise became very human. The *Challenger* lifted off and in seventy-three seconds the Space Shuttle disintegrated. Seventy-three seconds. That's a day I'll remember, like the day of Kennedy's death. The danger was there, but we were lulled into thinking the space flight was routine.

**COHEN:** You also experienced the Sputnik era. Sputnik went up almost exactly fifty years ago. What impression did that make on you?

**O'CALLAHAN:** Sputnik made a huge impression on my high school, the country, and me. People were frightened that the Russians were getting ahead of us. The Cold War was oppressive in high school. There was no sense of wonder in our chemistry class. It was all: Sputnik! Learn! We had a math teacher who said, "X! Why can't you find X!? The Russians have Sputnik. They're watching us. Find X or we'll all be speaking Russian!"

**COHEN:** Can people be taught how to tell stories?

**O'CALLAHAN:** In workshops I draw stories out of people. Everyone is filled with stories. Flannery O'Connor says if you get through childhood you have enough stories for a lifetime.

I use simple suggestions that I call "sparks" to elicit stories. I might say, "Can you recall a moment in your life when a shoe was important?" Then I give people a couple of minutes to tell their memory to a partner, after which I have the partner appreciate what was alive in the story. The appreciations are information which the storyteller builds on. The appreciations can be about language, character, detail, expressions, sound of the voice, gesture, and emotion—anything that's alive.

There was a doctor in one of my workshops who talked about having marvelous handmade shoes when he was a freshman at the University of Chicago. He often noticed a pretty girl he wanted to ask out and finally got the courage. On the third or fourth date he asked, "Why did you say yes when I asked you out?" She said, "I thought anybody who would wear shoes like that must be very interesting." They've been married thirty years. His story was fresh and told with great warmth.

**COHEN:** The emotion comes from the fascinating detail, rather than, say, training in vocal expression?

**O'CALLAHAN:** The emotion comes from a hundred places. There is a universe within each of us: family characters, friends, enemies, and fictional characters. And so many moments. It's the job of the workshop leader to bring the moments

out so the storyteller is more aware of the gold mine within and aware of his or her strengths. By strengths I mean a sense of humor, enthusiasm, a presence, a way of using language, a sense of beauty. I've found most people are not aware of their strengths. That's why appreciations are important.

Professor Talbot Page, an environmental economics professor who's just retired from Brown University, took my workshops in order to find new ways to stimulate his students. Professor Page began using this method of appreciations and found his students responded well and wrote better papers.

**COHEN:** So if you did a storytelling workshop for NASA project managers and engineers, you'd listen for the interesting details?

**O'CALLAHAN:** I would start with little things, like the shoe spark, just to be playful and build up trust. Then I would ask: what are some wonderful moments in your work? What are some hard moments?

**COHEN:** I think you've had the experience of creating stories about the history of a place or an organization. What is that process like?

**O'CALLAHAN:** I was commissioned to create a story about the steel-making community of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. *Pouring the Sun*, the story, took three years to create. Steel-making was not my world. I was compiling what I call the "compost heap," talking to salesmen, steel workers, foremen, community people, managers, historians, and union representatives.

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The information I gathered became the compost pile. It heated up, and the story came alive. As I gathered the information, it was important to be in the city of Bethlehem, to be in the steel plant, to know the place. I've learned that place is very important.

**COHEN:** Why?

**O'CALLAHAN:** Place becomes a character in every story. It's so obvious, it's invisible to us, but place shapes us. A lot of my stories are about growing up in a place called Pill Hill, a predominately wealthy neighborhood in Brookline, Massachusetts. Pill Hill shaped me. The trees there, the neighbors, the political and religious conflicts that were going on which seemed electric to me as a boy.

When I'm commissioned to do a story, I need to be part of the place. I need to talk to the people who live and work there. I need to walk the streets. In the city of Bethlehem, I met one family, the Waldonys, and I centered the whole Bethlehem Steel story on Ludvika Waldony. Ludvika was eighteen when she came from Poland on a ship by herself in 1907 with very little education and almost no money. The story is told through her eyes. I hope Ludvika's story captures the experience of hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came from all over the world to work in the steel-making city of Bethlehem.

**COHEN:** If you were telling a story about NASA, do you have a sense of what it might be about?

**O'CALLAHAN:** My first job would be to talk with NASA people—scientists, engineers, astronauts. I'm sure that underneath the whole NASA enterprise there is a sense of wonder. Perhaps science and myth are coming together in NASA. The myths of old were often stories about the sun, the stars, and the moon. Now with NASA, we're going out there. NASA is turning our eyes heavenward just as the ancients did.

**COHEN:** I remember the excitement of the first moon landing, and Walter Cronkite presenting it as a world-changing event, but then the world didn't seem to change all that much. I think many people were disappointed.

**O'CALLAHAN:** Rather than disappointed, I think people are distracted. They are almost too busy to focus on anything, but space exploration is so extraordinary I think our imaginations can catch fire again. After millions of years we're able to leave this earth and explore what's beyond. That's amazing. If people can take this in they'll realize how astonishing it is. There are rovers on Mars and now we're headed toward sending a manned spacecraft to Mars.

In another *ASK* interview, Michael Coats says, "When I look down, I'm no

longer a Texan or an American; I'm part of the human race." In time we may all see through the eyes of Michael Coats and realize we can find ways to live and work in greater harmony.

**COHEN:** Do stories need to be told face to face?

**O'CALLAHAN:** I think that's best. Radio, DVD, and print are wonderful, but when I read Eileen Collins' *ASK* interview, I was so moved I wanted to meet her, I wanted to hear her voice. Storytelling is a fundamental way of communicating. Ideally a story is told directly to another person or a group of people.

**COHEN:** When story listeners and storytellers are together, I think they affect each other.

**O'CALLAHAN:** Listeners mysteriously have the power to draw out details, images, and memories. Listeners can inspire the storyteller. Becoming a good listener takes a lifetime. Listening is a creative process. It takes attention—that's crucial—and it takes a generosity of spirit. My children listened me into being a storyteller. Listening is key.

NASA's work is thrilling. They're exploring the universe. We haven't taken in the wonder of it, but one day we'll wake up astonished. ●