Paul Elie’s Passion for Stories

Hear the story of the man behind the American Pilgrimage Project.

BY JAMES BREIG

If a visitor didn’t spot a writer’s lair behind a curtain in an apartment... if the president of a major Catholic university didn’t listen to the radio... if an upstate New York boy didn’t grow up to become a book editor, maybe thousands of stories of love, faith, sorrow, and loss would never have been told. But those ifs did happen, and the result is the American Pilgrimage Project (APP), overseen by writer Paul Elie.

The phrase “once upon a time” would make a great motto for Elie. As head of the APP, based at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, he has made it his mission to preserve as many stories of ordinary people as he can. Through the project, they have the opportunity to tell their personal stories, which are recorded and preserved for all time. The title of his effort reflects Elie’s appreciation of stories as part of each person’s unique pilgrimage. In one of his books, he laid down his understanding of a pilgrimage as “a journey undertaken in the light of a story. A great event has happened; the pilgrim hears the reports and goes in search of the evidence, aspiring to be an eyewitness. The pilgrim seeks... to be changed by the experience.”

Expanding on that notion, Elie tells St. Anthony Messenger that his wish is “to follow the path others have taken. We’re not trailblazers. We follow a path that’s already been trodden by others to a place where something significant has happened. You’ve heard about something happening. You go there in a group, and your wish is to see the place with your own eyes. You’re not trying to replicate somebody else’s experience; you’re after your own experiences. You hope you will be changed by the encounter.”


Ironically, given his fascination with stories, Elie did not grow up in a home filled with raconteurs. On the contrary, he says, “Ours wasn’t a storytelling family.” That’s counterintuitive because the Elie household had plenty of seeds that could have blossomed into memorable tales.

Once upon a Childhood
Recalling his youth in Latham, New York, a suburb of Albany, Elie says, “My father was a Catholic seminarian. My mother met him through her brother, who traveled to and from the seminary with my father.” The Elies also had relatives in France, and his granduncle was the bishop of Burlington, Vermont, who occasionally celebrated Mass in Latham. “That was very special,” Elie recalls. “From him, we knew we were part of a larger Catholic story that includes our parents’ generation, the gen-
While those topics could have triggered all sorts of tales for dinner-table chatter, Elie says that he “came to sense the power of narrative more as a writer than a teller of stories.” In high school, he desired to become a writer, but wasn’t sure what kind: a novelist? a reporter? a poet? “It took a few years to figure out that I have an attraction for narrative and know how to do it,” he says. “By the time I started writing seriously, I had read thousands of novels and stories.”

Much of that reading occurred during his college years at Fordham University; even more took place during his time as an editor at the Manhattan publishing firm of Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG). While poring over manuscripts, Elie detected how “certain decisions taken by the writer made the story more compelling. I learned certain tricks on the job and applied them to my story about the four Catholic writers.” Merton, Day, O’Connor, and Percy—the latter two FSG clients—“had their own personal stories,” Elie continues, “and I had the instinctive sense that they were part of a larger story.

“But what does that mean? How is it that people are parts of one another’s stories? I then came up with a sense of what a pilgrimage is. That word figures into the work of those four writers in significant ways.”

Meditating on that observation, Elie came up with his notion of relating the individual life stories of the quartet “as part of a single pilgrimage. They’re pilgrims on the same journey, but not taking part in the same story, a story that through their work now includes us. That gave me a very strong sense of what story is and the religious dimension of story that I hadn’t had when I set out to write the book.”

**Behind the Curtain**

In 2012, the linkage he saw between pilgrimages and stories took a new turn with the birth of the American Pilgrimage Project. Through it, Elie seeks out “stories of how we communicate our interior lives, stories that have social dimensions when we tell others about it, stories that belong to a narrative time before our birth and extend out beyond our deaths, stories that join us to people of other cultures.”

Two people played major roles in bringing his dream to reality. First, he met with Dave Isay, a winner of a MacArthur “genius award” and creator of StoryCorps, an effort to collect oral histories, all of which are stored at the Library of Congress and some of which are regularly aired on National Public Radio. Over a decade, StoryCorps has gathered tens of thousands of stories from ordinary people. “It has been a really effective model for how to elicit people’s best stories,” Elie says. “Two people who know each other go together to wherever the stories are gathered and talk to each other in a conversation that takes about 45 minutes.”

“Paul is an extraordinary man,” Isay says. “I really admire him. I met him through my wife,” whose book Elie had edited. On a visit to Elie’s small apartment, Isay detected something telling. “I remember seeing a little curtained-off part that he worked in,” Isay says. “It was almost monastic. He would work all...
day at FSG and stay up all night writing.” Isay sensed in Elie a “dedication and spirit and gentleness that’s almost otherworldly. He’s such a moral, smart, thoughtful, hardworking person.” As a result, Isay remarks, the decision to connect Elie to his StoryCorps work was “a no-brainer.”

A second figure whose action solidified the American Pilgrimage Project is John DeGioia, president of Georgetown University, where Elie was overseeing a lecture series. When Elie, Isay, and DeGioia got together, the latter two invited Elie to merge his work with StoryCorps and establish a base at the university. That led Elie and his younger sister to take part in a StoryCorps session to learn how it works. The result was profound, he says. “We had a conversation that we had never really had of what we believe and what we think of each other’s beliefs.” His eyes welled up as he listened to her. That’s a response that often happens at the sessions, which “lead people to greater candor,” he says, because they “try to really touch bottom and tell stories of who they are.”

Isay defines his StoryCorps technique as “a conversation between two people where the microphone gives you the license to talk about things you might not normally talk about. It gives people a chance to have a meaningful conversation. There’s a sense of safety and comfort in the way we hold these interviews.” When the dialogue is done, he continues, the participants “can sign a release or not for it to go to the Library of Congress. If you don’t sign, we erase the fact that you have been in the booth.”

Isay had guessed, when the project started, that the compliance rate would be “maybe 70 percent.” But his estimate was off. He says that “99.9 percent of the people sign the release. Clearly, people feel a need to leave a record to speak their truth. It’s very intimate. It’s an act of generosity and love.”

Stories of Light and Darkness
While Elie’s American Pilgrimage Project, led by a Catholic and located on a Catholic campus, is open to people of all faiths or none at all, Isay, who is Jewish, senses a religious side even in his own StoryCorps. “There’s a real strain of Catholicism running through it,” he observes. “I feel like there’s an incredible spiritual alignment. I spend a lot of time going to schools to lecture about StoryCorps. At one point, I said [to colleagues] I was going only to Catholic colleges because they were the only ones where the students were actually thinking about this seriously. There are a lot of points of connection between the work of StoryCorps and the work of StoryCorps.”
we’re doing and Catholicism.” He adds that “a lot of people have compared [the process] to a confessional booth” and notes, “There’s something almost sacred [about it] to some people.”

Certainly, there’s something alluring about it. Having overseen many American Pilgrimage Project events in several locations, Elie says that “sometimes, people show up so eager and so prepared that they end up telling their stories to the people who are there just to greet them before the microphone goes on. People know what a significant occasion it is.”

After their conversations, Elie has seen people exit with a “sense of discovery. Everybody goes in knowing just what they’re going to say, but conversations go to unexpected places. Most people come out surprised. ‘I wound up telling people a story I never told before’—that’s what I hear. Some of them also are really glad that the project has an archival aspect. People take great satisfaction in knowing that the story they told is going to be part of the permanent public record of this country.”

What Really Matters

As he presses on with his career of fostering both conversations and the written word, Elie admits he is “disconcerted” at how much time people, including his son, spend “staring at their phone.” But he has not despaired. “When I was in college,” he points out, “the concern was that we would become preoccupied by video, and the words in the textbooks wouldn’t mean anything to people. Something very different happened. In an unexpected way, young people are very focused on the texts they read digitally.” He says that the hundreds of words his son reads each day are “a real surprise.”

Elie also tempers his worry about the decline in reading and personal conversation by refusing to go by statistics alone. “The whole wisdom of the Catholic tradition is to avoid measuring things by numbers and size,” he says, citing the parable of the mustard seed and quoting Jesus’ words, “Wherever two or three are gathered . . .” (Mt 18:20).

Elie asks, “Does it really matter if a million and a half people go to see Pope Francis in Philadelphia? It’s the same Mass as when [a priest offered it] at Fordham for half a dozen of us sitting Indian-style on the floor. To go by the numbers is to really miss the point of Christianity. I was one of two students in the Aquinas class I took at Fordham, but it reached me. It was very consequential for my life; it really mattered.”

People who take part in the American Pilgrimage Project might utter that same final sentence.

James Brig is a frequent contributor to this publication. His most recent article was an interview with Sir Gilbert Levine in the July 2015 issue. He is also the author of Searching for Sgt. Bailey: Saluting an Ordinary Soldier of World War II.