

## A Story about Telling a Story (about Telling a Story) with Beth Benedix

---

{music}

**Eleanor Price, producer:** November, 1942, Joe Koenig and his father, Theodore, are living in a Jewish ghetto in Czestochowa, Poland. March 20th, 1943, Jewish Intelligentsia are taken on trucks to the Czestochowa cemetery. There are several mass exterminations of this sort over the next months. June 25th, 1943, Nazis force Joe and his father onto a wagon with their neighbors. Theodore is killed during the ride, but Joe escapes.

**Christiane Wisehart, producer:** It's 1943 and Joe Koenig is 14. World War II is in full swing and the Nazi party is emptying Jewish ghettos, like the one Joe lives in with his dad. He and his father are mourning Joe's mother and sisters who are missing and presumed dead. One day, the Gestapo, the Nazi Party's police, force Joe, his father and their neighbors onto a wagon. They realize they're being taken to the cemetery to be executed. By chance, the back of the wagon swings open and Joe, his dad, and several others leap out to make a run for it. None of them get far. Soldiers open fire, and Joe drops to the ground and plays dead. When the wagon finally drives off, Joe stands up to find that his father, and neighbors have all been killed. He makes a run for it. And for the next day and night, hides in the corn fields while the Gestapo search for him. And this? This is just the beginning of Joe Koenig's Holocaust survival story.

Today on the show, we're exploring the ethics of narrative, and specifically the ethics of this narrative, with Religious Studies scholar, Beth Benedix. In her book, *Ghost Writer*, she probes what it means to tackle the task of sharing memories that aren't her own. It's a story about telling a story.

I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is *Examining Ethics*, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

{end music}

**Christiane:** So which one of those versions of a year in Joe Koenig's life is more compelling to you? I'm guessing that it's the second one, the story. And that's because humans are captivated by stories. Stories draw people in. They take raw facts and infuse them with meaning and significance. But is it acceptable to take the facts of someone's life and turn them into an entertaining story? Are we in fact obligated to make stories of human suffering interesting? And what does that actually mean in practice? Those are just some of the questions we're thinking about today in this episode as we talk to Beth Benedix. It turns out, writing a story about someone else is trickier, ethically speaking, than you might think. It's about more than just

making sure you tell the truth. Here's Beth reading from a passage in *Ghost Writer*.

**Beth Benedix:** There are things I worry about when I think about how to tell Joe's story, despite Joe's unerring graciousness. That I've co-opted Joe's story by placing my own story alongside of it. That I've allowed my conversations with Joe, which were supposed to be about collecting the details of his story, to veer at times in the territory that has more to do with me than him. That I've exploited Joe by sharing some of the more intimate details of these conversations.

**Christiane:** Beth met Joe in 2009. A friend asked her if she'd be interested in talking to a Holocaust survivor with an amazing testimony. The survivor's family wanted to capture that account for posterity, and after trying and failing to make it work with two other scholars, were searching around for someone else. With her background in Holocaust literature, they suspected Beth might be a perfect fit. When she decided to work with Joe and his family, Beth knew she was taking on a big task. What she didn't realize was just how fraught that task would turn out to be. The book she ended up writing, *Ghost Writer*, is far from the straightforward retelling of Joe's story.

**Beth Benedix:** I do try to give the family exactly what they're asking for which is that narrative, the linear story, that exists in the book, unedited, unreflected upon, as a discreet piece. The rest of the book is the pulling apart of those choices that went into making that discreet piece, and all of that is just very kind of transparent and explicit. I want readers to hear the questions that I was asking myself as I was writing the book, because I think those questions are really important from a perspective of how do we do Holocaust memory? What are the obligations that go into that kind of storytelling, particularly Holocaust memory, but also just in general when we're trying to nail down memory, how do we do it?

**Christiane:** Beth's job nailing down Joe's memory was more than recording and transcribing his testimony of what happened. Her job was to turn his account into a story. Because most of us have been surrounded by stories from a very early age, story is a word we don't often stop to think about very much. I asked Beth to explain what she means when she talks about telling a story.

**Beth Benedix:** When I think about story, I think of something that has an arc, a trajectory. Not necessarily a moral lesson, but something that brings people in. It's always with the conscious awareness that you're speaking to another person. And for me, this was all a very new process, trying to think about telling a story.

**Christiane:** I'm a pretty bad storyteller, so it's all still kind of a mystery to me, how people are able to take a series of events and make a compelling, engaging narrative out of that.

**Beth Benedix:** I'm a terrible storyteller, which is... I mean, maybe why it took nine years to write this book. But yeah, somehow this process has trained me to think more in terms of life as story. When I met Joe and I was able to be part of this whole experience, I started to see things more in terms of the patterns in the way we live. There's patterns in the questions that we ask, there's patterns in the decisions that we make. That's storytelling as well, right? So when you're... I

think the stories that I'm most drawn to, the literature that I'm most drawn to, has that sort of that underlying set of patterns.

**Christiane:** This mapping of patterns is in fact part of what makes stories so compelling. In a 2014 essay in *The Atlantic*, on the comforts of narrative, Cody Delistraty writes "stories can be a way for humans to feel that we have control over the world. They allow people to see patterns where there is chaos, meaning where there is randomness. Humans are inclined to see narratives where there are none because it can afford meaning to our lives. A form of existential problem solving."

There's a rhythm to stories that make them more compelling to the senses than unfiltered information. Anyone who has taken a high school history class should know some of the facts about the Holocaust, like key dates, names, and events, but hearing a story about someone who experienced the Holocaust is going to have a different effect than the straight facts. Beth argues that the way those facts are turned into stories, isn't always clear.

What does, what does it mean to give these accounts or these stories justice? What's the kind of best version of a Holocaust story?

**Beth Benedix:** So I think I want to preface this by saying we are obligated to tell these stories. We're also obligated to tell all stories of suffering. In my head there's no primacy to Holocaust stories. It happens to be the place that I have spent the most time. I think people have to acknowledge that they have an obligation to confront these stories, but they need to be able to do it in a way that feels authentic to them. So I feel like I don't ever want to tell people how they should access this horrible world. I only want to tell them that they need to, that they can't have blinders on. They need to know that this happened. They need to know what we're capable of doing to one another. I think that the way that they should be told is through contour and nuance, and not allowing the subjects of these stories to become less or more than who they are.

It's really about people being who they are and hearing a story that unfolds because the people made the choices that they made because they are who they are. And this was something that I felt like I was being really mean in various places in the book, because I kind of carry with me, prejudices about Holocaust narratives because I've read so many of them.

And I think that's something that, I've got this sort of knee jerk reaction to, but it has to do with kitsch, is the only word that I can... It sounds terrible. It sounds really mean to say it that way, but that's the only word that I can think of. And what I mean by that is the flattening out of the human experience. Anything that keeps us from being able to relate to a human being, because it's been packaged in a way that's cognizant that it's going to become a commercial item. That to me is not... that's not okay. That's what I try to resist in my own telling of this story. And yet, right, this is part of the conundrum, how else do you make these stories accessible to large numbers of people?

**Christiane:** Beth knew that if she wanted to reach more people with Joe's story, she'd have to approach writing it with care.

**Beth Benedix:** Very early on, I was given drafts of manuscripts from women who had taken on that task prior to me. So I had the details of his story of survival, but it felt to me very early on in

reading those drafts, that he... that this man was like larger than life. And I wanted to find a way to make his story really compelling. I didn't want this to be relegated to obscurity. Like unfortunately, so many Holocaust memoirs are. There's this phenomenon, right? That it sort of folds back in on itself. And these details that are extraordinarily important to families and to the people themselves who are telling these stories, they don't get packaged in a way that is accessible to an outside audience. And so that's really what my main concern was. How do I take this story? How do I take the facts? How do I take these details that mean so much to him and his family and package them in a way that would make other people really care.

**Christiane:** Even Beth found it hard to navigate around her own preconceptions of what a Holocaust story should sound like.

**Beth Benedix:** I really needed to resist my own listening strategies because of the way Holocaust narratives are sometimes packaged for a commercial audience. There's a seductive quality to some of these stories, right? And so I think I've been, a product in some ways of the commercialization of the Holocaust. And so when I'm listening to his story, sometimes there's certain pieces that are just more, exciting, which sounds horrible to say it that way. And that was part of what I wanted to bring into the book too, is ethics of that, how kind of appalling it is that there's a way to listen to a story that's selective in this case. So he would tell me details. And in the first telling of them, sometimes they wouldn't register with me that they were details that needed to come out.

The way that the story unfolded the story behind the story was really through my listening to our recordings. I recorded the conversations and was listening to them over and over and over again. And then sometimes I would hear things that I didn't hear the first seven times, that I listen. And over a period of a long period of time, the details started to make sense to me. And I think what I was trying to do there in telling his story was make it as cinematic as possible, and I wanted people to feel what he was feeling. I wanted them to be able to see it and smell it, and hear it, and all of those things.

**Christiane:** Despite her passion for preserving Holocaust memory, Beth worried it wasn't her place to tell a story she hadn't experienced, but Joe gave her permission to do just that, to craft the details of his experiences, into a story that people wanted to read.

**Beth Benedix:** The first time that I met Joe, he said to me, "listen, you're the tailor, okay, I'm going to give you all these little pieces and you're going to stitch this suit together." And then the whole structure of the book sort of falls into... Here's this suit. Here's my attempt to stitch together those pieces that he gave me into this sort of coherent hole, which is the shortest part of the book, which to me, is something else I feel a little guilty about. In the book I make the very sort of literary choice to make the statement "I'm a terrible seamstress and this is never going to work." Every time I try to sew anything, I pull the buttons too tight, the thread breaks. So in my head, I think one of those... One of the first choices that I made was that I needed this organizational structure that was metaphorical. So I think that was one of the first choices that I made.

**Christiane:** And I think part of, to me, part of making story compelling is making certain choices about what to leave out, right? Because you can't possibly include everything. And so how then... How can you possibly tell the story in, in 30 pages or how do you make those decisions about what is actually important for the suit part of the story.

**Beth Benedix:** I've always approached my students and their writing in the way that I want them to feel the stakes of anything that they write ever. I want them to feel that any piece they put out into the world is something that is scratching it, meaning can't be insignificant. And it sort of is striking me that that's what Joe was saying to me. And the charge that he was giving me was to approach the project with that sense of heightened importance, it's all important. It doesn't mean that every detail belongs in the narrative. It's the positioning before the thing.

**Christiane:** The stakes are pretty high with this project. You've got Beth's own conviction that we're morally obligated to tell Holocaust stories in the first place. You've got Joe telling her it's all important. But just because someone's life story is important, just because there's a heightened sense of ethical stakes, that doesn't make it automatically something an audience is going to want to engage with. So to illustrate this let's briefly turn to something that Beth experienced while she was writing Joe's story. On Holocaust remembrance day in 2009, she went to see a lecture by Myer Bronicki, who survived the Holocaust by hiding in the woods in Belarus for two years. His account was amazing, but as Beth sat in the audience, she noticed that the people around her were, well, bored.

**Beth Benedix:** It should have been something that was electric and it was no fault of... it was the structure. There are rules, there are parameters. This is the way that the Holocaust testimony is given. This is the way that it's done. And that was something that I really, really, really wanted to push back against. It was heartbreaking to watch people struggling with their own sense of... when have I spent enough time listening to this story and it almost felt like, it has felt to me like this in various contexts, like penance, right? So you listen to these stories as a form of penance, and then you've done it. And then you, you get up and you go to lunch, right? And that has always been very upsetting to me. It's not that we need to carry the sense of burden with us, I don't mean it that way, but I feel as humans, we just kind of have to constantly... I'm an existentialist, right. It never... The story always ends in death, right? There's many ways to tell that story. And there can also be humor in that story. In my view, that's the main thing.

When I think of Joe, the word that kept constantly coming into my head was swagger. Not that he was arrogant or that he was trying to discount other people's experiences, it was swagger. This guy has swagger. He walks into a room. He's a tiny, tiny man, but he walks in and he has this sort of way of defining his own space. He will not let the world define, the space for him. So I felt for him like, how do I... And what kind of story captures swagger?

And that was sort of the charge that I felt for myself really palpably, I felt like I needed to sort of step into that space of not letting the world define for me what a Holocaust narrative needed to feel like, needed to look like. I wanted it to be captivating. I wanted it to be compelling. I wanted it to sound like it sounded when Joe was there talking to me and giving me the sort of sense of, on the one hand, the stakes of every thing. On the other hand, he was so just matter of fact about everything, he's like, "eh, you know, it happened here. I am, I've got my life. I've got love, I've got a family, it happened, let's move on." And so the way that I wanted to tell the story, I really... I just wanted to make that come to life somehow.

**Christiane:** As I read Joe's story in *Ghost Writer*, I was captivated. I couldn't put it down, but I kept wrestling with the fact that I found the story exciting, exhilarating even. That felt a little off to

me. Maybe I'm making like a false kind of pull between entertainment and ethics, right? Or how to morally tell a story and how to entertain somebody, I guess. Are those at odds with each other?

**Beth Benedix:** I don't think they have to be. I think that there are ways when they are at odds. I think that there is definitely a commercialization of suffering, that is entirely from an exploitive of sort of like there's no attempt to create an authentic relationship between the people watching and the subject that they're watching. I think that it is possible to have entertaining, to have entertainment that has as its primary mood, empathy. In my head, that's what was lacking in that testimonial where that poor man stood all by himself on the stage, and there was no interaction, there was no exchange. There is no empathy there. There is separation, there's sympathy, there's pity, there's compassion. There's all of those things. But empathy, I think really requires two humans meeting each other, the seams, right? That's empathy. And I think that those stories have to be entertaining because they have to try to help other people recognize their own capacity for empathy, and to see the places and their experience where empathy's possible.

When you see, a standard sort of Holocaust survival survivor testimony, it gets flattened out in that, it's generally a person who is called to give testimony to stand apart sometimes on a stage and, and speak. And there's very little dialogue in that. And that to me, is where the stories get lost and they get flattened out. And the seams that are in the telling of that story, right? So the person who's standing on that stage, giving you that testimony has told the story over and over and over and over again, so much so that the seams get written over. And I think it's a... for everybody involved, it becomes a way in which we can all become numb to the pain of stories.

**Christiane:** For Beth, part of what makes the empathy possible is the fact that she's showing her work and she's exposing the seams where her story and Joe's story get stitched together. By opening the dialogue between herself and Joe, she creates a dialogue between the narrative and the audience. In doing that, she's opening up possibilities for a deeper kind of engagement. And Joe and Beth were having a dialogue in the real sense of the word. Beth shared her pain over losing her dad at a young age, and it became a point of connection between her and Joe. But even though she talked about her father with Joe, she still couldn't convince her herself, that it was morally okay to put details of her life into a book about the Holocaust. Your interface with Joe is the story, right?

**Beth Benedix:** Yeah, I think so. And I struggled against that because that's right, I mean, all that, that entails is that narcissism, is that self-absorption, is that appropriation, is that exploitation? What does it mean that my story is at the interface with his? I really, really struggled with that. I think what it really is is that Joe, the humanness of that encounter, it really just, it made it for him, for us to have the humanness of that encounter, I think was very important for him that, he was the one who said, 'we both lost our fathers too soon. We're the same.'

And when he said that it was, I can't describe the generosity of what... To hear him say that to me, it was sort of like the floodgates just opened. And all of a sudden it was okay to bring this part of my life into the mix that I carry with me every day. And when he said, "that's, it that's the most important relationship any of us will ever have, is a relationship with our father." I was... I don't know. He gave me the validation to be able to make the seams, he's the one who gave me validation that the seams mattered. And I think if we hadn't had that conversation that was so

pivotal, I think I wouldn't have been able to go the route that I had gone. I think it would've been completely exploitative.

**Christiane:** Well, and that, I mean, he stitched your stories together, right? He took the needle and stitched the seam on that part, right?

**Beth Benedix:** He did.

**Christiane:** Does one need that kind of permission with the person that they're interfacing with?

**Beth Benedix:** Oh, that's interesting. I don't know. I think in the relationship that I had with Joe, it was necessary that I had his permission because of the position he came to hold in my heart and my life. I needed his permission for that. But I think that it's absolutely possible that there are any number of other stories. And I, I'm always talking with my students about this. If you can, if you see the way that you can relate, you can see that that kind of encounter. I think it's always really important to be explicit and transparent about it. And maybe that's part of the, if there is a prescription, maybe that's part of my prescription, is that it needs to be acknowledged.

**Christiane:** And in this case at least, showing the seams makes for a better, more authentic story. By revealing her own mistakes. In trying to tell Joe's story, we see Beth as a real person and not some anonymous academic, writing from an ivory tower.

**Beth Benedix:** I was dangerously close to trying to place this sort of lens of symbolism, literary symbolism on things that Joe kept teasing me about as he should have. There was a guard in one of the camps that he was in, whose name was Eden. And to me, this was like, right, I'm a literature person. I was like, "oh my gosh, this is so symbolic. What does it mean that the guard is named Eden? And it's like this fall from paradise." And we had, I said that to Joe at one point, and he looked at me like, "you are nuts. You were, he's a guy. And he made my life hell and that's really all you need to know." And so I think that part of the framework there too, and the pulling of threads is to make it very clear that we had those kinds of conversations that were entirely about us trying together to nail down what was important and what wasn't important.

**Christiane:** It's the push and pull between Joe and Beth, where the story really comes together. And it's where we, as the audience get a chance to examine the writing process, through the framework of ethics. Making sense of tragedies like the Holocaust, working our way through the problem of evil is something we ought to do together. It's something we shouldn't face alone. I want to end today's show with Beth reading another passage from Ghost Writer. She's talking about seams, the interface between her and Joe. It's a good spot to end on because on next month's show, we're going to stick with Beth and Joe and the story they created together. We'll be talking about the ethics of not only writing someone else's story, but the ethics of listening to and encountering another person in the space of the narrative. Here's Beth.

**Beth Benedix:** We must learn collectively the objective truth of what happened during the Holocaust, but I'm starting to wonder if there really is such a thing as collective memory. Joe's memories are not collective. They're his and his alone. When Joe goes into that space of specified memory, when he looks at his pictures and remembers faces and names and spaces and events and midnight blue bicycles, I can't see the things he's seeing. What I can see is the effect these non-communicable specifics have on him. What I can do is imagine what he's

seeing and try to enter into his world. What I can do is make a connection between his mental images, the effects of those images and the ones that are swirling around in my own brain as a result of my own experiences. Maybe this is all an elaborate rationalization of that dreaded self absorption I keep worrying about. Maybe, but something in me feels like this connection making is the thing that I can do to protect Joe from becoming the guy on stage on Holocaust remembrance day, that people despite themselves stop listening to.

**{music}**

**Christiane:** If you want to know more about Beth Benedix's work, check out our show notes page at [examiningethics.org](http://examiningethics.org).

Let us know what you think of today's show. Record a voice memo on your phone and email it to us at [examiningethics@gmail.com](mailto:examiningethics@gmail.com). Be sure to include your first name and where you're from. Or, if you're shy about recording your voice, send us an email with your thoughts and we'll share it with our listeners.

Remember to subscribe to get new episodes of the show wherever you get your podcasts. But regardless of where you subscribe, please be sure to rate us on Apple podcasts--it helps us get new listeners, it's still the best way to get our show out there.

For updates about the podcast, interesting links and more follow us on Twitter: [@examiningethics](https://twitter.com/examiningethics). We're also on Instagram: [@examiningethicspodcast](https://www.instagram.com/examiningethicspodcast) and Facebook.

**Credits:** Examining Ethics is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Eleanor Price and Christiane Wisheart produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions and can be found online at [www.sessions.blue](http://www.sessions.blue). Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support.

**The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.**