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The Many Faces of Megan Wells



A former theatre-arts major entralls audiences with stories of modern heroes and ancient myths.

**By Susan DeGrane
Photos by Lloyd DeGrane**

Inside the Uncommon Ground Coffee House on Chicago’s North Side, Megan Peterson Wells ’81 stands on a barstool, hands and arms splayed back and upwards, head and chin jutting violently downward, eyes narrowed to slits. Her voice is high-pitched, wizened.

She’s well beyond pretending to be Jupiter’s eagle from a mythical Greek tale about Eros, the god of love. For the moment she is this bird creature. Her nose appears sharp as a beak, and the sleeves of her diaphanous white tunic have spread like plumage. For the audience, the wooden floor of the coffeehouse looms below like a deep canyon and the perilous “under river” of a mythical world.

Moments later, Wells jumps off the stool, and the transformation is startling. She’s now Psyche, a young maiden, facing death at the River Styx, risking all, completing several life-threatening tasks in order to prove her love for Eros. Then she’s Aphrodite, a demanding, vainglorious queen of beauty and potential mother-in-law, then Eros himself, beaten at his own game and smitten with Psyche.

For an entire hour, the lithe and energetic Wells disappears completely, calling up male, female and even animal characters with voice changes and body language that suggest the work of a medium. Her large sapphire eyes change constantly, like sky and water—liquid blue one moment, stormy gray the next, sometimes black and menacing with pupils wildly dilated. “I have often described this as a possession state,” she says later. “But as I see it, we’re all multiple personalities. I experience this as a calling.”

To say the characters speak through Wells is an understatement. They flow in and out, filling the room with the help of a small microphone, owning it, devouring the attention of a tightly packed audience.

Wells' performance at Uncommon Ground culminates an evening of storytelling that has included tales from less-seasoned storytellers. Afterwards, several performers approach her to offer compliments and seek advice. It's understandable that the novices would salute her performance with hoots and hollers, but she's managed to reach others as well. "I had my doubts about coming here, but her performance was incredible," says Steven DeFalco, 24, a law student from Darien, Ill. "She was very vivid, and there was just so much emotion. She really got your attention, and the story kept getting better and better."

Wells has been enchanting audiences with her storytelling talents since 1987. That year, while attending a storytelling festival, she approached an open microphone and recounted a true story of a friend who died of AIDS. "He had had a powerful dream about a wave that took him, and a voice of wisdom told him to lean into the wave," she recalls. "In the dream, his face goes peaceful and he starts to cry." Later, when her friend was dying in San Francisco, she wrote out his dream and mailed it to him, and it seemed to comfort him. He died a week later.

Wells' story provoked more experienced storytellers to encourage her. From there she was on her way toward mastering an art that is as old as history. While storytelling has been an integral part of human society for thousands of years, its importance faded with the advent of print and, later, radio and television. Efforts in the last 30 years to preserve oral traditions led to a revival of the art of storytelling that really exploded in the early 1980s. By the end of that decade, there were 114 large festivals solely dedicated to storytelling in the United States. This boom has been accompanied by rapid growth in the number of professional storytellers, many of whom are now trained in master's programs at universities across the country.

As a professional storyteller, Wells performs for schools, libraries, community organizations—even large corporations. In 1999, she was honored at the Illinois Storytelling Festival as "Outstanding Illinois Teller." That same year, she released *Fire in Boomtown*, a collaboration with folk singer Amy Lowe which earned both the EdPress Distinguished Achievement Award and *Parents Magazine* Parents' Choice award. Combining storytelling, singing, and music, the CD tells the story of the 1871 Chicago fire that left 300 people dead and another 100,000 homeless.

Fire in Boomtown is typical of the kind of story Wells likes to write and perform—one in which the hero faces an epic struggle that brings him or her closer to enlightenment. The hero in *Fire in Boomtown* is an exhausted fire captain who surveys the devastation to Chicago, the town he has been assigned to protect. Wells recognized him as an archetypal hero—a man who attempted and failed to enforce a boundary against a mighty enemy, wind and fire. The struggle, not the failure, proves his valor, she says, and the town, which has a spirit of its own and is destined to boom, rises from the ashes even stronger.

Listeners' reactions to the heroic captain's struggle in *Fire in Boomtown* have been especially emotional since the terrorist attacks last September in New York and Washington, D.C., says Wells, who believes her purpose as a storyteller is not just to entertain audiences, but transform them. Wells has faith that stories have the power to mend wounded souls and reconnect people with the purpose of their existence. "The right story can heal," she insists.

Where the World Makes Sense

Wells discovered the healing power of art and performing when she was only 9, growing up in Des Plaines, Ill. Playing a character in a children's theatre production of *The Miracle Worker*—a play about young Helen Keller's struggle to come to terms with her deafness and blindness—Wells said she immediately felt the stage was a place “in which the world made sense. Plays came to a resolution. Heroes suffered for a reason. There was always peace in theater work for me.”

She continued to act in high school but it wasn't until attending Illinois Wesleyan as a theatre-arts major that Wells discovered she also had a talent for writing. Wells made that discovery in a class taught by former English professor Dorothy Berkson, who “taught me how to write,” Wells says. “First she flunked me, then she allowed me to rewrite until I earned an A. There was no coddling...[but] I would not be a writer without her.”

Wells' skill and confidence as a writer grew to the point where, in her senior year, she collaborated with former history professor John Heyl on the writing of an original play, *Father of the Revolution*. Based on the life of Karl Marx, the historical drama—also codirected by Wells—was performed at the university's Lab Theatre. Wells describes this experience of bringing history to life as “formative.”

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, Wells continued her studies at Illinois State University, earning a master's degree in theatre arts in 1985. Just one year later, she made her mark on the Chicago theatre scene by winning a coveted Jefferson Award for her work as codirector of the Absolute Theatre production of C.P. Taylor's play, *Good*.

While her theatre career was growing, Wells spent time studying with a shaman, who she says introduced her to the mystical art of healing. She had always felt a spiritual purpose in her work as a performer and when she discovered her talent for storytelling, that purpose seemed even clearer. Long ago, storytellers were regarded as healers, Wells says. “When you were ill, you didn't need a pill. You needed a story because the right story gave you a sense of place in your emotional struggle.”

For inspiration in writing narratives that she will later perform as a storyteller, Wells often turns to ancient myths, like the story of Psyche and Eros. “I turn to these myths,” she says, “because they are the source of our codes.” Wells defines these codes as “the unconscious rules of behavior that shape our response to life's deep mysteries: birth, death, love, war, honor, wisdom, generosity.” Channelling stories and voices from our past can open up a new understanding of the world, she says, “making choice, and change, possible.”

Once Wells originates an idea and conducts research, the creative process begins. “I sit down at my computer and write for a while, and eventually one of those voices will show up,” she says. “I write and edit, write some more, edit.”

After writing comes memorization and recitation—essential skills for a storyteller. Having practiced memorization since she first started acting as a child, Wells says she has no difficulty

reciting stories she's heard only once with accuracy and in great detail. "Your mind is just a muscle," she says. "You just have to work it."

After memorizing the story, she invites friends to listen. "In the first 20 times telling the story, there's the process of moving from creation to sharing," she says. "There's the journey from recitation to storytelling." The amount of time taken for this process varies. In some cases, stories evolve over several years and several retellings.

King Midas and Cookie Dough

Perhaps the most unexpected listing on Megan Wells' list of credentials is "business consultant." Her list of recent clients is a corporate "who's who"—Ace Hardware, AT&T, Kraft/Nabisco, Nalco, MasterCard, Motorola, and Northwest Airlines all have used her services.

Wells' application of her storytelling talents to the corporate world came at the request of Kay Allison. A brand-management consultant serving Fortune 500 companies, Allison discovered Wells during a performance at an art salon, and was impressed by not just her storytelling, but by what transpired afterward. "Megan asked each person to tell her what image stayed with them and what it meant to them," says Allison, who highly values interactive experiences that stimulate creativity.

Allison—who has a black belt in karate, as well as a reputation for coaxing corporate executives to break boards—saw Wells as a perfect fit in her efforts to enhance corporate brainstorming sessions. "Rather than saying, 'Now, let's think really hard about this,' I have them experience new things," Allison explains. "Megan is one of those firecrackers I bring in.

Wells' first corporate gig worked to restore harmony to a food company coping with a merger of competing brands and competing staffs. "Here you have an organization suddenly composed of individuals who never before would have dreamed of cooperating or sharing information with one another," Wells says. To counter this feeling of distrust, "We opened the session with an emotional myth of generosity," she recalls. "That set the tone for the rest of the day and gave them a metaphor to refer to from that moment on.

Wells later had the group imagine a primary encounter with one of their products: the childhood experience of eating raw cookie dough from a bowl or beater. "I put them back in touch with their historical roots and the deep sacredness of family tradition, which their brand was rooted in. Once I put them back in touch with these things, it seemed to revivify their connection to the source of their passion.

For a global-brands communication company, Wells told the tale of King Midas and advised staff to be vigilant of what they would choose to love and hold precious. For a pet-food manufacturer, she told a story of how the canine species made the leap from wolf to dog. Allison admires Wells' ability to jump so smoothly into the corporate mindset while maintaining the essential strengths of her storytelling art. "She's able to translate between the two worlds," says Allison.

Wells says she is almost always “amazed” at the results of combining business and storytelling. “The world of business is hungry to revive the imagination and is coming to value it again. I am happy that my life is coinciding with this reawakening of business.

Bedtimes stories

Awakening people to the joys and healing power of imagination remains Wells’ primary effort as a storyteller. Whatever bigger projects she may pursue in the future, she says she will continue to perform in more intimate settings such as schools and libraries. “Though my life commitment is primarily to bring storytelling back to adults, I will always remain close to the children,” she adds. “They feed my soul and nurture the work in incomparable ways.”

Now her own children—Claire, age 6, and Hannah, born last October—are benefiting from Wells’ talent as a storyteller. When she and husband Gary tuck them into bed at night, Wells often reads them stories, or imagines stories on the spot that address various events that came up during the day. She says she finds a deep satisfaction in sharing this gift with her daughters. “I keep thinking that someday I’ll find a way to teach this stuff to other parents,” she remarks.

To spend more time with her children, Wells has cut back a bit on her appearances lately, but she remains focused on several new projects. Among them is an ongoing collaboration with the vocal group *Chicago a cappella*. Wells is writing, and will direct, a story opera about Helen of Troy, featuring original music by *Chicago a cappella*’s artistic director Jonathan Miller. Previously, Wells and Miller created *The Nordic Wolf*, a weave of Scandinavian music and the firebird myth, and Wells also collaborated with the vocal group on *Go Down Moses*, which she describes as “a weave of spirituals with an oral history of slavery.”

This slate of collaborative ventures doesn’t mean that Wells’ passion for one-woman performances is flagging. “I don’t ‘prefer’ one format or another, but it seems that certain stories *do*. So if a story requires one voice, I’m the voice—if the story requires more dimension, then collaboration it is.”

In fact, despite her long-held love of the stage, Wells admits, “I tend to shy away from big theatrics, actually. The power of storytelling is its mysterious ability to create hypnotic images in the mind of the listener. If the audience spends a lot of time being aware that they are looking at something outside of themselves, then the images in their heads diminish. It’s like mind cinema; my goal is to create the images somewhere in the invisible space between their imaginations and mine.”

“My life’s work is an attempt to live a ‘realized’ life, and to help others do the same,” she concludes. “I tell these stories to awaken people’s minds and hearts to the wonder of being alive.”