



# IT MATTERS

## Beowulf and the Dragon: Why we need storytelling

*"The story - from Rapunzel to War and Peace - is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories" - Ursula K. Le Guin (1979, p. 30)*



D. QUINCY WHITNEY

In "The Beautiful Mystery," a murder mystery that takes place in a monastery, celebrated writer Louise Penny closes her book with a tale:

"One of the elders told him that when he was a boy his grandfather came to him one day and said that two wolves were fighting inside him. One was gray, the other black. The gray one wanted his grandfather to be courageous, and patient and kind. The other, the black one, wanted his grandfather to be fearful and cruel. This upset the boy and he thought about it for a few days and then returned to his grandfather. He asked: 'Grandfather, which of the wolves will win?' The grandfather told the boy: 'The one I feed.'"

It matters what we teach - and old tales, polished and refined in thousands of years

of storytelling have much to offer us today. "Beowulf," perhaps the oldest surviving long poem in English literature, interweaves themes of loyalty, reputation, generosity, hospitality, envy and revenge in the characters of an epic tale of a warrior fighting a dragon.

Odds Bodkins, called the "consummate storyteller" by the New York Times, has spent his career telling stories - in Off-Broadway shows at the Lincoln Center and at the White House, but also in schools and organizations like IBM and Target that commission original performances.

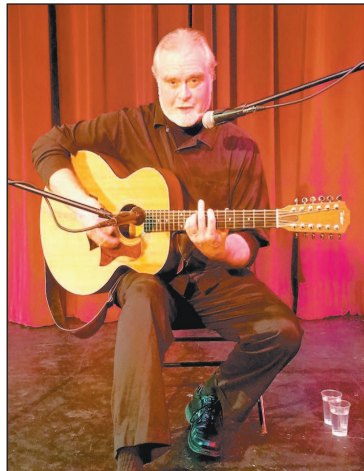


Photo by E. WHITNEY

MATTERS | PAGE 4 Odds Bodkin plays the guitar at the Groton School in January.

**Integrating scientific evidence, evolutionary theory, linguistics, artificial intelligence, game theory, anthropology, economics, neurophysiology, philosophy, and psychology, Boyd summarizes his findings: "In retrospect, the 20th Century can be seen as a giant experiment by the human race to find out what could be accomplished if organizations treated people as things and communicated to them in abstractions, numbers and analysis, rather than through people-friendly communications such as stories. Employees became 'human resources' to be mined ... customers became 'demand,' or 'consumers,' or 'eyeballs,' to be manipulated, rather than living, feeling human beings to be delighted."**