
Storytelling Concerts

A storytelling conference of course needs storytelling, and the planners of the 39th Allerton Conference made sure it had plenty. At the conclusion of the days' programming on both Sunday and Monday nights, a storytelling concert was held in the library of Allerton House. Conference participants gathered together in the genteel space, encompassed on three sides by vast floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and on the fourth side by floor-to-ceiling windows.

On Sunday night, Janice Harrington and Dan Keding held the audience with energy and humor. Harrington told traditional folktales, sometimes engaging the audience in boisterous participation. Her awe-inducing delivery of "Tiger's Minister of State," (an African folktale in which Tiger asked each prospective minister if his breath was sweet or sour) had listeners longing for their mouthwash. Keding's Civil War ghost tale about a letter delivered after the death of the writer added a poignant chill to the evening, especially with his a cappella rendition of "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye" echoing off the library walls.

For the Monday night concert, Harrington and Keding were joined by the impressive Susan Klein, who told personal tales of growing up on Martha's Vineyard. Keding told stories of his upbringing by his Croatian grandmother on the South Side of Chicago, interspersed with snatches of traditional and original song as he accompanied himself on guitar and banjo. When Harrington wasn't rocking the walls with a mirthful retelling of the African tale "Talk" relocated to the American South, she was wistfully evoking the sorrow of Mother Wind and her lost children. Klein's closing piece was a 30-minute tour de force, an especially moving tribute to a teacher who affected her life forever with his flamboyant flair and love of language. She imitated her erstwhile teacher uttering Keats' phrase "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," in the round, resonant tones of a master of dramatic delivery. The printed page can only hint at the live experience that made the conclusion of each day seem like a new beginning