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## Telling a Story is Not a Crime

Danielle Ameden, Communication '07

“Who should decide what story can be told? And in what language can those stories be told?” These were among the probing questions Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie asked the Roger Williams University community on April 6, 2005, during his Reason & Respect lecture entitled “At What Cost Safety?”

Americans generally take for granted their freedom to read and write stories. The First Amendment says we’re allowed to stomp our feet in protest, verbally bash our political leaders, express ourselves through musical lyrics and poetry, and publish on every controversial topic under the sun. It takes mention of a *fatwa*—a death condemnation—for us to turn our heads and contemplate what our rights really mean.

Rushdie’s appearance on our campus put our freedom of speech into perspective. In 1989, Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, sentenced Rushdie to death because he had written a novel called *The Satanic Verses*. We naïve Americans have difficulty making sense of the religious edict that called for Rushdie’s death. In our country, criminals are pegged by their ruthless acts of violence. Rushdie wrote a book. How could he be in the same league as those we call villains—rapists, murderers, and terrorists? By rejecting his voice, Khomeini and his cohorts had lumped the author in with these heinous criminals, but Rushdie didn’t belong there. Telling a story is not a crime.

Yet Rushdie cautioned the audience, as he had been doing recently on campuses across the United States, that the Patriot Act poses significant risk to our First Amendment rights and that if we are not careful, reading and writing stories the government considers politically or ideologically dangerous could become criminalized. According to Rushdie, writers and politicians throughout the world are in a struggle over what is real and true. He stated that “both offer visions of how things are, but... writers admit that the thing they’re trying to sell you is made up.” Ironically, though, writers tend to tell the truth more often than politicians.

Since Rushdie believes that telling a story is “essential to our nature,” it is not surprising that his main idea concerned censorship. “We are storytelling animals,” Rushdie said. “When we die, this is what is left of us. This is why stories matter.” He reflected on the importance of family stories—those fascinating tales of “wicked uncles” and “mentally-defective cousins”—being passed down the generations. These stories come to represent our family and what we remember of it, and through re-telling, we become the story. The greatest myth, Rushdie said, “is that we live ordinary lives.”

Salman Rushdie had a story to tell: we are the story, and it’s our responsibility to keep it going. Not even a government has the right to put up the stop sign. The audience departed that night with a newfound appreciation for our right to freedom of speech, and respect for the man who had found a way to tell his story—because the story is ours to tell.