



Patterns of Living

◆ TELLING ◆ OUR ◆ STORIES ◆

If you think that storytelling is just a bedtime activity for young children, think again. Since the beginning of time, storytelling has fascinated people of all ages and backgrounds. All cultures throughout history have thrived on stories. In fact, history itself is largely a collection of interwoven stories. One of the world's oldest art forms, storytelling was going strong long before there were books, much less TV and movies. Anywhere on earth, an appreciative crowd will quickly gather for a well-turned story.

A story can be anything from an anecdote about your trip to the grocery store to a grand epic of kings and nations. A story may teach, inspire, or provoke the healing sound of wholesome laughter. Even with today's flashy high-tech media marvels, the old-fashioned art of spinning a tale has never left us and is at the heart of so much of what entertains and informs us.

The adventure of a good story touches us emotionally and engages us intuitively, thus unleashing a positive force that can break down barriers and open up new understandings and possibilities. It's easy to see why so much moral and religious teaching comes to us in the form of stories and parables. Spiritual leaders and great thinkers down through the ages have placed their nuggets of wisdom in carefully crafted tales.

We have an inborn need to tell our stories—it is part of what defines us as humans. We yearn for those who will listen, care, and understand. This need to connect with others is universal, and it drives far more of our modern civilization than most of us realize. Stories spark our imaginations like no other form of communication—they make us laugh and cry; they inspire and teach; and they hold sacred truths that nourish our souls.

YOUR STORIES ARE IMPORTANT

Indeed, our stories form “patterns for living,” and the quilt of life remains incomplete without the gift of your personal stories. Life has blessed you with a wealth of both pleasant and difficult experiences. As a result, stories have been placed in your heart that want to be told. It’s up to you to look over these stories and decide how they form *your* pattern for life. How do these stories define you? How do they reveal your character, show what you love, and demonstrate what you believe in most strongly? Think about the tales you heard as a child, family stories, or stories you’ve come up with yourself. Let your intuition guide you in knowing which stories you want to tell and how you want to express them.

DEFINITION OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling is difficult to define precisely. It is many things to many different people. *In the classic sense, we can say that storytelling is the art of orally sharing an experience with a live audience, usually accompanied with distinct facial gestures, sounds, and physical movements.*

The concept of presenting a story face-to-face with the audience is very important. Certain elements of storytelling are very common in our culture—in books, in movies, in television, and on radio—but they don’t achieve the same type of power as true storytelling because they lack one vital component: interaction between the teller and the audience. This is a central and unique aspect of storytelling. Modern media have, in many ways, robbed us of this important dynamic, turning us into passive receivers of information.

This is not the case in storytelling. Here, the audience is expected to respond to the teller’s words and actions and, in a sense, become part of the performance. The teller uses the audience’s responses, which can be verbal or non-verbal, to make on-the-spot adjustments as the story unfolds. He or she can alter the story’s tone, wording, or pace to better meet the needs of the audience.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT STORY?

Skilled storytellers can transport their audiences out of their day-to-day lives and into a magical realm where anything is possible. How do they do this? Tellers use a number of different techniques to make their stories a memorable experience. Often stories start with a phrase that lets the listener know he or she is being taken into a different world of new possibilities. Traditionally, many stories begin with the phrase “once upon a time...” or any number of variations. Likewise, they often end with a phrase that is a transition back into our own normal world, such as “and they all lived happily ever after.” Phrases like these are ingrained in our consciousness; they automatically set up certain expectations in our minds and they are an important aid to the imagination.

I don't think human beings can exist without stories. They take a life that is open-ended and seemingly meaningless and give it meaning.

Harold Scheub

Most great stories have vivid characters, a well-developed plot, and a precise setting. Yet, even with these definite elements, a great story is usually universal, meaning that we can all relate to it because it somehow describes the human condition. Listeners like to identify with the hero, even if it is only to laugh at his foolishness. Usually they laugh because they have been in similar situations. Stories needn’t be literally true, but it is good if they can be emotionally true—if they say something that we can recognize as valid from our experiences. It’s O.K. if a story is embellished, or is an amalgamation of several events, just as long as it retains that basic thread of truth.

Usually, the more sensory details that the teller provides, the better. If the teller can conjure up

vivid word pictures and pleasing sounds and rhythms, the story has a good chance of being a success.

Likewise, if the teller is able to create suspense and build to a climax, then the listener will be that much more entertained.

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR SUCCESSFUL STORYTELLING

A great storyteller learns his or her skills. They come with practice and repetition, like playing a musical instrument. Here are a few guidelines.

- ★ Keep the audience's needs uppermost in your mind. The attention spans of today's audiences are much shorter than they were when storytelling began. Beginners should therefore keep their stories fairly short until they learn some of the skills that allow them to keep a long tale lively and interesting.
- ★ Good storytellers try to stimulate their audience's senses. You can do this by using different voices when there is dialogue and by working on the pacing of the story by speeding it up in places and slowing it down in others.
- ★ Gestures are also very important. It's good to use your whole body, including your eyes and face.
- ★ Repetition of certain elements or phrases helps to create a rhythm that the audience will pick up on.
- ★ Learn the story by heart, but don't try to memorize it word for word. Absorb the story, devour it and make it a part of you; then it will come out naturally and not forced. You'll be telling it in your own words, which will probably make it come out a little bit differently each time, but that's O.K.

The story you tell should be one that you like and that suits your personality. Your audience will know if you are uncomfortable with the material. It's a good idea to get used to your story for a while before you tell it in public. Make sure it is something you really believe in and that touches

you in some way. These feelings will make it much easier to approach your story with confidence. Even if your seeming confidence is just a front, don't apologize to the audience. Just relax and do the best you can. If you get stuck, just keep going. Nobody knows how it is "supposed" to go; it's your story.

We use stories to pass on accumulated wisdom, beliefs, and values. Stories are the building blocks of knowledge, the foundation of memory and learning. Stories connect us with our humanness and link past, present, and future by teaching us to anticipate the possible consequences of our actions.

Chuck Larkin

Telling your story to other people will help all of these things come together. Their feedback will be your best critique. They will let you know what they like and don't like. Take their hints and let them guide you! Try to involve your listeners as much as possible; some sort of participation helps establish a rapport quickly.

IDEA-STARTERS FOR TELLING YOUR STORIES

The seeds for a good story are everywhere in everyday life. Chances are, if something has happened to you, something similar has happened to members of your audience, so they will be able to relate. Think about good stories that you have heard in the past and borrow elements from them. Take real life situations and fictionalize them with embellishments.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when trying to come up with your own story:

- ★ Who were some of the interesting characters in your family?

- ★ What are some of the most important life lessons you have learned?
- ★ Have you been in situations that really frightened you?
- ★ What were some funny circumstances you have found yourself in?
- ★ Is there an interesting story behind how you or someone else in your family got his or her name?
- ★ Has anything happened lately in the news that's caught your eye?
- ★ Are you particularly interested in any periods of history? How could you set a story in that time?
- ★ What are some of the great moral dilemmas of your life? How did you solve them?
- ★ What were some of the happiest times of your life?
- ★ Is there an interesting story to how you met your spouse or any of your good friends?
- ★ Does the town you currently live in or any that you have lived in have interesting legends or history? Could you use this in a story?
- ★ Did you ever have an exceptional pet that did funny or interesting things?

GO OUT AND BE A STORYTELLER

Stories are part of everybody's life. Anyone can tell them and everyone's stories are important. Generally, you don't need any props. All you really need is a story and an audience. If you want, you can write your stories down, record them on audio or videotape, or even try to express them with paint or photographs.

To find the story you want to tell, look inside yourself. What are your values? What do you love? Who is closest to you? Turn these things into your stories. If they are deeply meaningful to you, chances are others will want to hear about them. The more you tell them, the better and more interesting they will become. Many stories are age-old and have been handed down from generation to generation, but they have to start somewhere. That's part of the magic of storytelling—it is at once as old as time and as new as today's headlines. So what are you waiting for; let's hear your story!



References and Further Reading:

- Davis, Donald O. *Telling Your Own Stories: For Family and Classroom Storytelling, Public Speaking, and Personal Journaling*. Little Rock: August House Publishing, 1993
- "Handbook for Storytellers" <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/storyhandbook.htm>
- McWilliams, Barry. "Eldrbarry's Story Telling Page." <http://www.seanet.com/~eldrbarry/>
- Nadel, Miriam H. "Miriam's Storytelling Page" <http://www.cinenet.net/users/mhnadel/story/storytop.html>
- Scheub, Harold. *Story*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.
- Scheub, Harold. *The African Storyteller*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1998
- Sheppard, Tim. "The Storytelling FAQ." <http://www.liliput.co.uk/faq.html>
- Thompson, Stith (ed.) and Petrov, Vladimir (ed.). *One Hundred Favorite Folktales*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

3/2001, FAM-SAM.150

Prepared by **Sam Quick**, Ph.D., Human Development and Family Relations Specialist and **Peter Hesseldenz**, M.A., Family Studies Staff Associate, Department of Family Studies, College of Human Environmental Sciences.

Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, M. Scott Smith, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Lexington, and Kentucky State University, Frankfort. Copyright © 2001 for materials developed by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice. Publications are also available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ca.uky.edu>.

◆ LISTEN TO THE STORIES IN YOUR HEART THAT WANT TO BE TOLD ◆