



How Can a Storytelling Practice Help?

We are, no matter where we come from, or how we engage with the dominant culture, constantly surrounded by stories. As infants, before we even know what words are, we are told stories. These stories help us dispel fear before we go to sleep, learn morals and other societal values, and even establish a connection with our caretakers.

From the time we're at our smallest and most vulnerable, stories are the glue that binds us to others like us. Researchers have found that infants are incredible sponges for information, reading the slightest changes in inflection, facial expression and body language. The same is true for the way we experience stories. Even as adults, we can hear a gripping story and become completely lost, projecting ourselves into the story and feeling all the emotions as if they were our own. Today, "reality" television picks up some of the slack from that phenomenon, allowing us to have love affairs, heal a problem, or go on an amazing adventure, all within an hour-long timeslot.

Children often need stories in order to figure out the complex emotional world of adults. Remember hiding out in a tree or other out-of-the-way place, making up stories with your friends? Remember how doing that made it seem like you were in charge of your world, even if that wasn't technically true?

As we grow and develop, though, we leave our stories behind. Kids are always in a hurry to be a fourth grader, or a seventh grader, or a se-

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nior in high school. They want whatever's cool, hip, dangerous or seemingly grown up. Often, this doesn't include creating and sharing stories, especially if it involves spending any more time with their parents.

But just as we leave our homes, at eighteen, if we decide to get a job, or after college, we need our stories most of all. We need something familiar, which will help us make this brand new transition in our lives, and we need something that's uniquely ours, so we can keep developing our sense of self. It is the sense of self that will carry us towards our goals, whether they're personal or professional in nature.

Our stories, then, perform three major functions for us:

- Our stories are the connective tissue that reminds us to be human.
- Our stories provide our memory, foundation and "moral compass."
- Our stories protect us from the lowest aspects of our own nature.

It is at this time of our lives, when everything is changing, that we have to make some quick decisions about the kind of people we'll allow ourselves to become. What will become most important: love, money, family or spirituality? If we want a weekend out with friends, is it all right to pay the rent late? And what if the person we love doesn't love us back?

Stories are one important tool we have to deal with major transitions. But keeping a diary or blog may not work for everyone. Many of my students have said the act of keeping a diary feels like shouting into the void, or as if no one is really listening. Personally, every time I try to keep one, I feel like the most boring person on earth.

So where's a person to start?

A Brief History of Storytelling

Human beings started to keep records of their existence from the beginning of history as we currently understand it. We can only guess that they needed a way to explain the world around them, and to leave behind a record of their experience. No one knows for sure why they did this, especially when issues of survival were so pressing.

The stories of early civilizations often centered around the search for food, including the killing of animals, and the gathering and storing of other foodstuffs. Other important topics were the family structure, es-

pecially as it related to the distribution of power and responsibility, and the building of communities. Establishing security became a primary concern, and any immediate threats to their survival, such as inclement weather or predators, were immediately dispatched with sacrifices, ritual or song.

Likewise, tribes lauded a successful hunt by praising their gods and/or goddesses with elaborate ceremonies designed to curry favor. Other stories sent tribal members into the afterlife, by reaffirming the culture's burial methods and remembering the deceased's life as it had been on earth.

Other legacies of early storytelling can be found in some of the Old Stone Age (30,000 BCE - 10,000 BCE) caves, particularly those in Lascaux and Chauvet, France. Inhabitants of the caves used soil, crushed rocks and plants to make natural pigments, and used sticks and other implements to apply them directly onto the walls of the caves.

In one cave, a racing herd of animals can be seen (these are thought to be horses or red deer), along with geometric designs that some believe stand in for the phases of the sun and/or moon. A series of large dots, a semicircle of smaller dots, a V-shaped bat like symbol—no one knows for sure what these meant to the original cave-dwellers.

What is most touching about the cave paintings of Lascaux and Chauvet are the red silhouettes of human hands. These appear to have been made by blowing or spraying pigment over the artist's hand, and are present in almost all of the ancient caves. When I look at the pictures of these hands, it's easy to connect with the fact that there was a person on the other end of this experience, and that he or she was trying to be seen, across millennia, just as you or I do today.

The Five Reasons We Need Stories

In studying how stories have been told over the years, I have found that there are five main reasons we need stories in our lives:

- An Explanation of the World Around Us
- A Way to Honor the Supernatural
- A Way to Entertain Ourselves
- A Way to Gain Immortality, by Connecting with Our Ancestors
- A Way to Express the Beauty of Human Existence

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Each of these reasons corresponds with a deeper need within us—to be seen and heard, to understand the mysterious, to play, connect and express ourselves. And many of these needs often go unmet in our daily lives, whether we’re trying to lose weight or not.

Our experience with stories began when we were very emotionally pliable. Our brains were developing, and we were at our most receptive, simply so we could survive. But that way of experiencing stories doesn’t seem to change all that much as we age. Even today, stories are able to get deeper into our consciousness than other methods of communication. Just as beautiful music sometimes penetrates the way we see, engendering powerful emotional responses while bypassing any emotional guard we may have constructed, stories can trigger very old responses that may have been stored in the mind, or even in the tissues of the body, from the time we were children.

We do not cease to need stories when we pass a certain age, or when society decides we’re adults. Even if we’re working at a job, engaging in a creative project, or raising a family, we need our stories to help us make important decisions.

After all, what is “Cinderella” but a manual for finding and dating the right man?

What is “Snow White” but a cautionary tale about jealousy?

What is the story of King Solomon but an illustration of true parental love?

And what is “The Emperor’s New Clothes” but a lesson in telling the truth?

Identifying your own stories, and developing a practice that allows you to tell them on a regular basis, can help you learn more about yourself and your true feelings in a safe way (this can especially apply if your true feelings are undesirable in nature, since we tend to want to disown these). Additionally, incorporating a storytelling practice in your life can help you discover reasons you may be holding onto excess weight, and reveal unique, internal strategies to help you realize your weight loss goals. Lastly, this practice can help build confidence, and help dispel false messages that may have already been internalized by living within a narrow cultural definition of beauty.

The Six Ways We Use Stories

Along with the five ways we need stories, there are also six ways we tend to use stories in our daily lives:

- Healing from Abuse or Neglect
- Connecting with Relatives and Family Members
- To Leave Something Behind
- To Express Ourselves and the World We Live In
- To Become More Visible
- To Ensure That Our Way of Life Continues

Establishing that we need stories in our lives, to help us recognize and achieve our goals, as well as dispel any obstacles that may reside inside us, is one thing. But in order to create a storytelling practice that can help us achieve real results, we will need to look into how we're already using stories in our day-to-day lives.

All of us do it. We come home from work, shuck off our coat and put down our purse or briefcase. Then we talk to our mates, friends, children or roommates about the events of our days: the triumphs and the painful parts, the irritations and moments of excitement and joy. In essence, we are telling the story of our day, embellishing it with different voices, if we had a fight with the guy at the post office, or funny asides, to illustrate what might have been going through our minds at a particular moment. Unconsciously, we use these stories all the time.

We may be trying to convert someone to our way of seeing things, if we've had an argument, or to garner support, if we've had a bad day. We may be trying to prove a point, if we feel righteous about a wrong that has been committed, or even draw ourselves closer to someone, if we can share a similar tale that's happened to us.

The bottom line is that stories are part of our lives on a moment-to-moment basis. All you have to do is recognize that you have them, and that you're already using them. Once that happens, you can learn to channel this power towards whatever you want to achieve. For example, if you're always fighting with people, from the guy at the post office to the people in your family, you may wish to look at how you're "storytelling" about anger. If you're always complaining

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about having to take on more work than you're comfortable doing, you might look into your "storytelling" on fear or duty.

This is more complicated than simply thinking about it, or even writing about it in a journal. Creating and nurturing a storytelling practice demands nothing less than your devotion to reach inside yourself, sometimes to your deepest, softest places, in order to pull out the darkest, richest material. This can help make your writing deeper, if you're already engaged with this discipline. But it can also help you adopt coping strategies for common or uncommon problems, and develop confidence to take action wherever it's required. Your storytelling practice can be as unique and varied as you are, adapting to the myriad changes of your days, reflecting and revealing by turns.

Why Meditation?

Eastern spirituality was introduced to the West in the late 1950s, through Beat writers and poets like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and furthered in the 1960s, with the influx of teachers like Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh, originally trained in Asia. Westerners are still sorting out the effects of these ancient practices on a world more attuned to the Big Gulp than the Heart Sutra.

Meditation, an integral part of practice for Buddhists, Hindus, and other Eastern religions, is a practice which helps to train the mind away from its busyness, as well as its tendency to run away with us sometimes. If you've ever sat in meditation for any length of time, you may have begun to notice that your mind tends to dart way from you, retelling a story that has already happened, becoming lost in fantasy, or moving forward, into a story you have yet to live. Your mind may also take you in a mundane direction, telling the story of what you'll have for dinner, or how you'll cope with a work challenge later this week. It seems that no matter where we live on the planet, our human minds need to think. Maybe Descartes was right when he said, "I think, therefore I am."

Because meditation works with the mind, and most writing comes from this same source, they seem to share the same, if not a very similar, process. I believe that humans simply cannot exist without our stories, and that stories are as much part of our physiology as our digestive or respiratory systems.

However, storytelling is not just a mental activity. Though it seems to originate in the mind, and our minds seem to want to embellish our stories with very little provocation, our stories sometimes lodge themselves into the tissues of the body, only to become stuck there, until they are dislodged by trauma, exercise or bodywork like massage, shiatsu or rolfing. Scientists such as Candace Pert, who has been studying the relationship between the mind and body for close to three decades, have found that we are hard-wired for bliss, literally, by the molecules comprising our bodies.

So meditation is a very important part of any storytelling practice. With meditation, we can get beyond our mental and emotional “walls,” which have been erected to keep us from moving toward the slimy, scary stuff in our own natures. You may have had this experience—I know I’ve had it many times. You pick up a book and start reading. The prose is perfect. Every word feels as if it’s been there forever, carved in stone, and couldn’t be replaced with any other words, ever. It’s amazing, and you’re in awe of this author’s talent, so much so that you never notice that you’re not drawn into the story at all. It’s as if the author is ignoring you completely, and whatever you might get out of the book. He or she exists in an untouchable little shell. And you don’t matter at all.

I call this Airless Prose, and all writers, professional or not, can fall into this trap. We all love to be thought of as clever and talented, and many of us can fall in love with the talent we’ve been given, or have developed on our own. What makes this possible is an over-concentration on the mental aspects of storytelling, to the detriment of its physical effects.

You do not have to have a tough and masculine prose style like Ernest Hemingway to begin telling stories with your body as well as your mind. You merely have to understand and accept that there is an unbreakable connection between these two aspects of your self, and strive to find ways to help them communicate more effectively.

How Meditation Works

Over the past two decades, the Dalai Lama has met with some of the best scientific minds in the West to discuss the ways in which his native Buddhist practice overlaps with the pursuits of science. Over