

What's your story?
The St Ethelburga's
guide to narrative and
story-based approaches
to community building



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“Listening is a gift we can give to people. Listening is also a hospitality. It is the offering to someone of space in which to feel welcome, safe, free to be him/herself, to be listened to and to be heard.”

Fr Michael Lapsley, Anglican priest and activist, South Africa

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A long time ago...

...in a wet and windswept island, life was hard. Immigrants had come from the mainland, driving people off their land. It seemed the fighting would never stop. One day the island's ruler met a traveller who told him about a new way of seeing the world which didn't involve violence. He was intrigued and this new faith spread amongst his subjects. His daughter was so entranced that when he ordered her to marry a pagan prince she refused. If you will not obey me, her father said, I will send you into the marshlands to live without men.

Æthelburh left the city and joined a group of women living in the marshes. She was a natural leader and the group grew and founded a centre. People heard about it and came seeking help. One day, bad news came - a terrible plague had broken out and death was drawing near. That night Æthelburh gathered her sisters. As they sat praying a strange light appeared, brighter than the sun at noon.

Æthelburh felt a peace deeper than she had ever known. We will stay here, she said, and help anyone who comes. She and her sisters saved many lives until, one by one, they caught the disease themselves.

Centuries passed. In another wet and windswept island to the west, men were fighting against invaders from the first island. Settlers controlled all the wealth and ruled with soldiers. Life was hard for the rest. People resisted, sometimes with arguments, sometimes with killing. Frustrated that things weren't changing, they decided to take their guns and bombs to the other island.

There, in the splendid capital, huge towers had been built for amassing incredible wealth. Æthelburh was forgotten. Well, almost. Nestling amongst the towers a tiny, unused building still carried her name. One day, the men from the western island arrived and parked a lorry outside.

Nobody noticed until the lorry exploded, shaking the towers to their foundations, shattering a million panes of glass. The tiny building lay in ruins.



"They say you can survive anything if you can tell a story about it."

Sue Monk Kidd, author



The fighting eventually stopped. New towers were built, grander than ever. But what of the ruins? A wise man remembered the story of Æthelburh and her vision of light. Ignoring his advisers, he set about creating a new building where what had happened there, and in wars all over the world, could be carefully considered. A peaceful place, where people divided by conflict, culture and religion could meet and listen to each other's stories...

The story of this guide

Many times at St Ethelburga's we have witnessed the profound impact that a well-communicated personal story can have on others. We noticed that stories have the power to build bridges between people where discussion and dialogue sometimes fail. So we set out to explore how stories are being used in community building and peace work. We heard stories of conflict and struggle, stories of migration and home, stories of collective memory and inner journeys of faith. We made connections in N. Ireland, Israel and S. Africa where stories transform lives. We brought storytellers, academics and community workers together in conferences. We experimented with our own ideas in workshops. We invited traditional storytellers to perform here and created a programme of stories from different faiths which went on tour.

Stories have changed the way we think about the world and its divisions. We hope this guide will inspire you with the power of stories.



This resource

This resource is one of the results of our exploration into the world of story. So much has been written and developed around story and narrative, this is by no means a comprehensive overview of the field. Nor is it a work of in-depth academic research. Rather is an eclectic scrapbook of practical methodologies, tested in the real world, that we have come across in our work. We hope it can serve as a source of ideas and inspiration. The resource aims to:

- illustrate the value and range of narrative and story-based tools
- encourage those working in community cohesion, interfaith or peace work to become familiar with the potential of these methods
- offer pointers towards best practice.

The central section of the guide is a series of fourteen different approaches to working with narrative or story, organized into three sections:

- A. COMMUNITY BUILDING**
- B. CONFLICT AND HEALING**
- C. ARTS-BASED APPROACHES**

There is much overlap between the sections. Many of the methods could appear in more than one section; their location is only an indication of emphasis. Each approach is accompanied by case studies, points to consider and web resources.

The web resource

What's Your Story? is available as a booklet and a web resource. The website is located at www.stethelburgas.org/narrative-resource. If you wish to leave a comment, particularly if you are working in this field and can contribute something more to the guide, we would love to hear from you.



Why is story so powerful?

The nature of stories

Stories are essential to the human experience. Stories have always existed – to entertain, teach, pass on wisdom, record history, represent beliefs, explore new ideas, share experiences, build community, and express creativity.

The story is the basic unit of learning and as such is very important from our earliest years, listening to stories from our parents and carers. The word, story, is derived from the Greek word meaning knowing, knowledge and wisdom. Human beings seem to have a natural tendency to think, speak, be receptive to, and process our experiences in story. The appeal of storytelling is the appeal of the imagination. When we listen to story it gives us the opportunity to create our own images, our own personal blend of imagined sights, sounds, feelings, and much more.

How we respond to story

Dialogue and discussion often stay at the level of the mind, but story can take us into the dimension of the heart. Stories appeal to both logic and emotion. We also learn much faster if information is delivered in story form, and remember stories much more readily than facts, statistics, or conceptual statements.

Hearing the stories of others breaks down the fears that underlie prejudice, and opens us up to the perspectives of others. Through story we see more easily the unique challenges of every individual, and how their beliefs and attitudes make sense within the context of their own experience. We may still disagree with a particular perspective but begin to see how that view makes sense within the story of that person's life. As a result, we tend not to argue with story as we might with opinion.

Stories change the 'contract' with the listener. Less is demanded of us: There is less need to comment, respond or engage; we are allowed simply to listen. As a result we often let our defences down, become



less critical and more open. Similarly, many traditional storytellers see their audiences melt into a slightly dreamy state as they enter the world of imagination and surrender to the world of the story journey. This effect is mirrored in our brain chemistry, which produces a predominance of alpha waves, associated with daydreaming and release from stress.

Why we tell stories

We express our life experience by telling stories. We instinctively transform what happens to us into traditional story structure. Stories help us digest what happens to us and make sense of it. Story connects us to the meaning underlying our experience, or helps us to construct that meaning. It often reveals what we share in common, and what it means to be human. Telling our stories can be an important part of healing from difficult experiences. We make experiences manageable by sharing them with others, and we come to terms with loss and pain through repeatedly telling the story.

Types of story

Personal narrative: Often we use story to organise and extract meaning from the things that happen to us. We 're-package' our experiences as stories with a beginning, middle and end so we can better make sense of them and share them with others.

Conflicting narratives: Of particular interest to community building is the way in which people in conflict can hold different stories about events and their meanings. Working with these opposing narratives is essential to conflict transformation.

Collective stories: These are the stories we share with our families, communities and nations. Collective stories are based on shared histories or belief systems. They illustrate and underpin our values and how we see the world.

Traditional stories: Traditional stories include folk tales, fairy tales, myths and legends.

Archetypal stories: Some forms of traditional story, religious story and myth have a deep symbolic resonance and capture something essential about the human experience. They represent themes that recur in cultures across the world. The psychologist Carl Jung saw archetypal stories as having a profound effect on our unconscious minds. According to Jung, archetypes exist within the collective consciousness of a particular culture or of the human race as a whole.



Religious stories: Faith-based stories cannot be described in the same language as traditional stories, as it is not possible (or advisable) to label them as fiction. Within their traditions they are understood to express profound truth. Some are said to be divinely inspired. Some religious stories are historical accounts of actual events, some are created for teaching purposes, while others offer symbolic metaphors about the nature of reality. Many have an archetypal dimension. Religious stories that are not strictly historical are sometimes referred to as myths. There can be a lot of debate about which story falls into which category.

Narrative as organising principle: The term 'narrative' is increasingly used to express individual or collective beliefs, expectations or thought processes. Narrative in this sense refers to the mental organising structures we use to understand, digest and store information. Our narratives can reflect traditional story structures or may simply refer to a set of established thought processes around a particular theme.

Meta-narrative: This is an overarching story which explains or gives meaning to an aspect of our reality.



A word of caution: The need for sensitivity

Inviting people to share their personal stories can uncover difficult or traumatic memories, and if done carelessly, can cause harm.

Some of the tools described in this guide are relatively safe to use and easy to replicate. Others should be used very carefully by practiced facilitators with considerable attention to creating a safe space. Some methods, particularly those relating to conflict and healing, should only be used by practitioners who have completed specific training courses. They require not just skill and background knowledge but also a commitment to preparatory work and thoughtful aftercare. The ethical issues that arise from this kind of work should be taken seriously.

If in doubt, it is better not to take any risks. If you are interested in a particular method but lack experience, then consider attending a training course. Alternately, you can use our links to contact those who can deliver it safely.

A. COMMUNITY BUILDING

Human libraries

The first human library (originally called 'Living Libraries') originated at a music festival in Denmark in 2000, and this simple and fun idea has been travelling around the world ever since. Instead of books, readers can come to a living library and borrow a person for a chat. Borrowers can listen to live stories and experiences, ask questions, swap notes, share a walk or a cup of tea, and get to know each other, returning their 'books' within a set time period. The human books on offer vary depending on the theme of the event and its purpose, but often will include a healthy cross-section of people with different roles or experiences (e.g. police officer, vegan, person with mental health difficulties, activist, Muslim, gay man, ex-gang member, city trader). A catalogue can tag the 'books' with attributes. Some of these might relate to stereotypical views (e.g. a Muslim tagged as 'terrorist' or a gay man tagged as 'HIV+'). Human libraries are a great way to get people talking to those they wouldn't normally have the opportunity to get to know. They can be a memorable way of transforming prejudice and stereotyping.

The librarian explains the purpose of the event to users, issues library cards, facilitates the loans and keeps the books in check. The librarian may also help the reader to identify which books might have the most impact on them by tentatively exploring their prejudices. This is done gently by starting a dialogue with the reader and asking some pertinent questions.

"We work on the principle that extreme violence and aggression happen between people who don't know each other. So the Living Library can bring together people who are otherwise unlikely to meet. We want to show that not every Muslim wants to blow you up, not every policeman is a bully."
Human Libraries founder, Ronni Abergel.



Case Study

DCLG Human Library Event

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) ran a human library event in the atrium of their London office. The event was a contribution to National Interfaith Week and was designed to raise awareness of different faith communities within their civil servant employee base. Seventeen human books were recruited through interfaith networks. These included people from several different faith communities, among them a Baha'i, a Zoroastrian, and Salvation Army couple. The event was very popular and seventy book loans were made in one day. Feedback suggested readers found the day interesting and informative. The books also enjoyed themselves, and networked with each other, some of them deciding to hold human library events in their own communities.

Points to consider:

- Some thought may need to be given to ground rules for engagement in order that the 'books' feel safe in the process.
- Some more controversial books may be left on the shelf. Borrowers may need some encouragement to connect with them.

Web resources

www.humanlibrary.org



"This is a great way of breaking down barriers and creating opportunities for people to get to know their neighbours. This is a very flexible tool that works in a variety of settings and is very simple to set up."

Martin Ethelridge, DCLG



Narrative in diverse communities

Narrative methods offer us powerful opportunities to understand and empathise with people who are different from us. We sometimes connect with the 'true life' stories of others more readily than with their ideas, concepts or belief structures, which can be more challenging for us. Hence sharing stories can be an effective way of building new relationships and going beyond stereotypes and prejudice.



Case Study Humanity Café

Developed by St Ethelburga's, Humanity Café is a simple framework that supports a group of people to share some of their stories. Humanity Café invites the different diaspora groups or faith communities within an area to create an event together. The first step is to guide the community groups to work together to create a comfortable environment. People are invited to contribute food from their culture as well as one or two brief music or other arts performances. The participants are encouraged to make the meeting space as intimate and welcoming as possible by lending rugs, cushions, brightly coloured cloth, candles or lanterns, and any other accessories to hand such as gazebos, tents or small water features.

A theme is chosen, often one that reflects an appropriate aspect of community building (e.g. friendship, hospitality, journeys). It is a good idea to invite professional storytellers to provide some inspiration and to get the event off to a good start. The heart of the event, however, is the opportunity for participants to share their own stories with others. Story triggers (see page 49) encourage participants to locate memories they can share with others. The emphasis is on simple non-threatening themes that everyone can relate to, and the aim is to open small windows of connection between people who might not otherwise get to know each other.

Humanity Café visited an interfaith youth group in South London to explore the theme of friendship. The usual meeting space was transformed into a welcoming and cosy environment, and food was provided. An African storyteller told a story from her own life about an unexpected friendship. Later she shared an

amusing traditional story about a crocodile and a monkey who became friends. A warm-up exercise invited the young people to use beads, coins, and shells to make 'friendship maps' which illustrated the key relationships in their lives. The young people worked in pairs choosing story triggers from a basket of options and sharing on themes such as 'an enemy who became a friend', 'the friend I most admire', 'a friendship which went wrong', and 'a friendship with someone very different from me'. One or two young people volunteered to share a story with the group as a whole, and some very memorable tales ensued. The evening was easy to facilitate, it enabled an intimate theme to be explored in a safe way, and also offered time for group members to get to know each other at a deeper level. (This model has much in common with community ceilidhs, see page 42)

Case Study The Three Faiths Forum

The Three Faiths Forum is a UK-based organisation that seeks to promote dialogue between Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith groups. Much of their work is directed toward young people. They recruit young adult volunteers from different religious backgrounds to visit schools and youth clubs. The volunteers are trained to use various dialogue tools to stimulate discussion around faith, identity and citizenship. Inspired by narrative work at the Interfaith Youth Core and also St Ethelburga's, the Forum recently switched the focus of its approach from delivering presentations about faith traditions to telling personal stories.

Volunteers are supported to identify the most interesting aspects of their own journey. They refine and rehearse a five minute story about themselves. Their story may touch on aspects of their childhood and family background, challenges or struggles

they have faced, key people who have influenced them, or reflections on what led them to engage with interfaith work. Basic storytelling skills are used to help hone down the story and maximize its impact.

The aim is to present a personal and engaging tale that will bring the faith tradition to life. The volunteer's personal story may then become a springboard into deeper dialogue with the students.



Case Study

Walking tours



Walking tours are a fun way to learn about a local area and for community members to understand their roots and the history. For example, East End Walks specialises in historical tours of a fascinating area of London where successive waves of immigrants have all contributed elements of their own culture.

The Jewish East End Tour brings to life the people and places of the East End. The story begins around 1880 when Jews arrived in large numbers from Eastern Europe. Walkers hear the story of Hannah Billig and why she refused a once in a lifetime invitation. They learn about Angel Alley and the Jewish anarchist tradition, and they hear about the riot in Princelet Street.

Walking tours are often seen as an education tool or an entertainment for tourists. But they can also help with community cohesion, providing a fun way for neighbours to understand each others' backgrounds better.

Points to consider

- Community storytelling is best kept quite light and simple. Facilitators need to be careful that story triggers do not touch on memories that are too painful to be shared in this kind of context.
- For some styles of event, it is better to allow participants to tell their personal stories in their own way. For others, you may find teaching some basic storytelling skills can help with communication, keep the listeners more engaged and make the experience more satisfying for everyone. (See page 49 for suggestions).

Web resources

www.threefaithsforum.org.uk
www.eastendwalks.com

“Stories create community. When we hear a story together, foreignness disappears and we respond as one to the universal pattern of story.”

Sarah Perceval, faith-based storyteller



Autobiographical storytelling

Autobiographical Storytelling is a term we have adopted to refer to a range of approaches that lie somewhere between traditional story performance, and community true-life story sharing. In autobiographical storytelling, the aim is for participants to reflect on memories and life experiences, sometimes in considerable depth, and locate a personal story they wish to share with others. The story is refined and rehearsed using traditional storytelling skills, then performed to an audience. The purpose of this form of storytelling can vary depending on the context. It opens windows into the lives of others, revealing fascinating experiences that can be memorable and affecting. It can be offered as pure entertainment, and can also be used to communicate the stories of a diverse community. It can build bridges and strengthen group cohesion through the empathy that is created.



Case Study

Biographical storytelling with Roi Gal-Or

We were a small group of a dozen people from very diverse backgrounds – different nationalities, faiths, cultures, and personalities. We came together for ten days in a picturesque village in Crete to sift through our life stories, locating and rehearsing tales to share with others. Roi was quick to point out that the process of sifting through memories is not therapy and is not suitable for working through deep unresolved issues. His approach was about mining our experiences for the ‘gift:’ the essential moment of learning, beauty or wisdom that we could share. However, the process does help to digest experiences and allow our relationship with certain stories from the past to loosen

their hold on us. My own experience of this was that I became less identified with the stories I chose to tell. The act of performing them for others seemed akin to giving the stories back to the universe. They became no longer mine in the same way, but instead just one tiny fragment, one tiny contribution to the stories of humanity.

Listening to the life stories of others was truly fascinating. It left me with a profound sense of the uniqueness of every individual. On a more practical



level, the storytelling skills were a very useful thing to learn. They helped us to communicate powerfully. We were able to share our most intimate tales in a way that really held the attention of others, which in turn made each of us feel more deeply heard. For me, the course was a memorable experience. It was in some ways a training in what it means to be human.

“My work is inspired by the mystery of what it means to be truly human, and by what happens when you really listen.”

Roi Gal-Or

Case Study Spark London

Spark London is a ‘true life’ storytelling club that meets once a month in a fringe theatre in London. The host, Joanna Yates, aims to create a space where unusual and often amusing personal tales can be told to an audience.

Each month she chooses a quirky theme (such as mistaken identify, virtual reality, unrequited love), locates seven ordinary people who might have an interesting story to tell, and coaches them to tell the story in the best way they can. She offers some simple guidelines for storytellers: stick to what actually happened; start in the middle of the action; have clear opening and closing lines; notice what might be inessential to the plot and is best left out; and finally, identify the drama – what did you need to overcome? What did you learn?

The club appeals to people’s basic desire to connect. It generates a strong feeling of community between audience and tellers.

“I love the fact that Spark gives a voice to people who wouldn’t normally get on stage. I went to a similar event in Los Angeles last year and the realness of it got me. It was such an invigorating, empowering experience, I had to bring it back here.”

Joanna Yates

Points to consider

- It is important to be clear about the purpose of this kind of storytelling and tailor it to the needs of the particular context.
- Facilitators need to be creative in designing exercises to elicit biographical material in an interesting way. They also need to be able to coach storytelling skills and encourage participants to perform.
- Being asked to tell a story can be quite intimidating. These techniques can help the uninitiated to realise that everyone has interesting stories within them. A few simple tools can help people locate tales to share and deliver them with impact.

Resources

www.schoolofstorytelling.com

www.sparklondon.com

www.narativ.com

www.twomentalking.com

The Power of Personal Storytelling, Jack Macguire. Penguin Putnam, 1998.

Oral history

Oral history is spoken history. First person accounts are recorded through interviews using audio or video. Material is stored in archives and shared with others through exhibitions, written media, CDs, videos and websites.

In essence, oral history is a means of preserving the memories and experiences of ordinary people. It enables us to learn more than just the bare facts of an event: it also tells us about ways of life, attitudes and feelings, thus enriching our understanding of the past. Oral history now makes a significant contribution to the recording of history in general and provides insights that complement more traditional methods.

Reminiscence work with older people is a popular form of oral history. This method is often used in schools as a way of bringing history alive, for example in inter-generational work, where young people interview old people (or vice versa).

Case Study

Refugee Action's Vietnamese oral history project

Refugee Action recorded more than a hundred interviews with people of different ages and backgrounds who came from Vietnam and settled in the UK between 1979 and the early 1990's. Labelled 'boat people' because of the perilous journeys they endured on the South China Sea, their plight became known across the world. The project aimed to bridge the gap between three generations of the Vietnamese community, while also making their stories available to the wider public.

The collection features extracts from the first-hand testimonies of some 110 refugees and their children who were interviewed between 2000-2003. The tapes and transcripts are held in the archives of the British Library. A more accessible multimedia resource called 'Every tree has its roots' offers audio extracts in English, Vietnamese and Chinese, as well as photographs, diagrams, maps and video clips.

The resource contains vivid recollections of life in Vietnam, flight from the country, life in refugee camps in South East Asia, and the challenges of adapting to life in the UK. It also has a comprehensive section on how to set up and run an oral history project in a refugee community. This includes project documentation and other useful resources.

Points to consider

- As the material will be shared widely, it is important that there is a legal and ethical framework to protect participants. Interviewers should get informed consent from those they research. It should be very clear to everyone how the material will be used.
- Interviewees will open up more if they trust the historian interviewing them. In addition to establishing the ethical framework, historians may need to build rapport with participants.
- Interviewers should use open-ended questions and avoid leading ones.
- Although personal testimonies can have great value, from a historian's perspective they can be difficult to verify for accuracy.

Web resources

Vietnamese project
www.refugee-action.org.uk

Oral History Society
www.oralhistory.org.uk

British Library
www.bl.uk

Museum of London
www.museumoflondon.org.uk

Afghan oral history
www.culture24.org.uk

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling uses new media technology to give ordinary people opportunities to tell 'true life' stories in a direct and powerful way. Digital stories usually involve either video footage or alternatively, photographic stills, combined with a narrated story and music. Typically, one story is between two and ten minutes long. Packages such as iPhoto and iMovie make it easier for people without a technology background to create short pieces. When posted on the internet (for example, on YouTube, websites or social networking sites) the stories are immediately accessible to a wide audience. In community building, the main asset of digital storytelling is that it gives a voice to groups of people who otherwise might not be heard within the wider community. Blogs are another form of web-based storytelling, and have been used for community building and for the healing of conflict. For example, one project encouraged American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to use blogs as a means to digest their experience and overcome feelings of isolation.

"Digital storytelling transforms lives and communities. That's a strong statement to make but that is my experience."

Prue Thimbleby, artist

Case Study

Somali Bantu Refugees speak

The Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) is an international NGO dedicated to supporting people to share meaningful stories from their lives using digital media. The centre works in communities, businesses, education and health care to develop digital story initiatives tailored to local needs. CDS' work is based on the principle that sharing and bearing witness to stories can lead to learning, action and positive change.

A recent project assisted young Somali community members from Baltimore to create digital stories that document the history of the Somali Bantu. Produced in English and Maay Maay, the stories describe the challenges of forced migration, refugee camp life, and eventual resettlement in the U.S. The stories were screened in other Somali communities across the country. The project was successful in building awareness about the Bantu perspective on the conflict in Somalia, and in advocating for refugee and immigrant rights.





Case Study

Digital Storytelling on a Swansea housing estate

Artist Prue Thimbleby ran a digital storytelling programme on two deprived housing estates in Swansea. She started by inviting one local resident on a four-day training course to learn about digital storytelling. Later she set up a series of meetings with residents on the estate in a metal port-a-cabin.

Prue guided participants through the process of creating personal two minute digital narratives. She kept the format very simple. Each digital story included a voice over illustrated by still photographs fading in and out. Participants collected their photographs and wrote a script to record. Part of Prue's role as a facilitator was to help people tell their stories in the most effective way. When working with the very young or those with low literacy levels, she helped them decide what they

wanted to say, then interviewed them. The recorded interview was then edited to create a two-minute soundtrack.

Many participants were inspired to make changes in their lives as a direct result of honing their stories and sharing them with others. Examples include an unemployed man in his twenties who told a story about growing up playing rugby and having an eating disorder - and soon after found a job. An older lady living in a difficult part of the estate told about her daughter's dog. She later bought herself a dog who has become a real companion.

One man created a digital story about a piece of wasteland that was covered in rubbish. Subsequently he got together with a group of local people and campaigned to improve the site, eventually securing funding and making very successful improvements. A mother who told about how her son was arrested felt listened to and accepted, and was able to participate more in community life.

“What shone through for me were the changes in peoples' lives that came with every story that was made. It was as though what started as a storytelling exercise actually deepened into a personal development process that inspired real insight and growth. Digital stories can strengthen community and create positive changes on many levels.”

Prue Thimbleby

Points to consider

- Keep the material short and simple. Having too much video footage or recorded audio and needing to edit substantially can be a real impediment to completion.
- Much work may need to be done with each teller to identify and refine the essence of the story before the technology is introduced. This process of reflection and digestion keeps the material short. It is also a very important and potentially transformative part of the experience (see also Biographical storytelling p15).
- Digital storytelling is more complex than other forms of oral storytelling because of the equipment and skills involved. Technology can be intimidating for some people. Facilitators should be prepared to support participants to identify the key elements of the story, teach them the necessary skills, and accompany the teller through the whole process to completion.
- It is important to be clear about the platform you will use to share the stories. Make sure whatever method you choose is accessible for your intended audience. Some projects are web-based. Others may be located in a physical space such as the foyer of a community centre, art gallery or local cinema.

Web resources

www.storycenter.org
www.swanseastorytelling.com
www.digstocymru.ning.com
www.youtube.com
www.prue.thimbleby.net

Storytelling in the workplace

Storytelling techniques can be usefully applied in work environments to strengthen teams, improve internal communication, identify and build support for organisational values and goals, and to work through conflicts. Telling stories can also be a persuasive way to speak to funders and clients. The unique value of working with stories in organisational settings is that it can change the way we think about our work, shifting the focus away from abstract ideas towards personal narratives that bring our experiences to life.



Case Study

Organisational development at St Ethelburga's

Business Coach Joanna Yates works with a number of corporate clients and NGOs using storytelling techniques. Recently she joined the St Ethelburga's team to support us in a two-day residential for team building and strategic planning.

First Joanna invited us to explore our own personal stories about our work. She asked us how we saw the work of the centre, what metaphors and stories we used to understand what St Ethelburga's offers. Next she asked us to tell the story of our own commitment - what it meant for us to be employed here and how that connected with our own spirituality, values and aims in life. For each member of staff and volunteer, working at the centre had deep personal meaning and called forth a very strong quality of commitment. Each staff member's story was different, and a rich picture emerged of a range of diverse but equally meaningful narratives that underlay their engagement in this work.

We then explored the story of the centre itself. St Ethelburga's has a unique founding story starting in the twelfth century when the church was first built and leading up to the IRA bomb in 1993, the incident that led to the rebirth of the building as a centre for reconciliation and peace. As a team we are well used to telling this story to visitors and often tell it in the same way. This process led into an exploration of stories about the centre's current purpose. We were asked to identify several stories (of projects, events, people we have worked with) that speak to the heart of what the centre is about.

The team was able to clarify three or four stories relating to different aspects of our work, each with a basis in real life, that defined what St Ethelburga's has to offer. We also used stories to explore our organisational values. For example, St Ethelburga's value of hospitality came alive when we shared stories that told of the welcome extended to particular visitors and the results of that welcome.

As a result of this exploration storytelling has become a useful tool within the St Ethelburga's team. Thinking in stories has made it easier to communicate to centre users, funders, and new staff or volunteers.

Points to consider

- When using stories in business contexts it's important to be aware that your audience will probably be goal-focused and will want to see results. Decide what specific purpose you want to use stories for, whether it's to communicate strategy, to help the company sell or to improve people's presentation skills. Find out what the group needs from the session and focus your approach accordingly.
- Less is more, especially in a busy workplace where people have many demands on their attention. Try to keep individual story sharing down to 3-4 minutes.

Resources

Society for Storytelling special interest group for storytelling in business
www.sfs.org.uk

www.narativ.com

Joanna Yates
Joanna.yates@gmail.com

The Story Factor, Annette Simmons.
Basic Books. 2001.

Playback theatre in business

Playback Theatre can be used in corporate settings to help teams develop better communication skills and diversity awareness. Typically a member of staff will describe a workplace incident, usually one that caused some disagreement. Actors then 'replay' the event. The facilitator leads the group in a discussion about the replay. This can create a springboard for addressing issues within the workplace and learning from them. (See Playback Theatre on page 44).

B. CONFLICT AND HEALING

Sharing stories of conflict and loss

For communities that have been in conflict, personal story sharing can play a significant part in the recovery process. Story practitioners in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Israel-Palestine have developed techniques that enable individuals to come together with the sole purpose of sharing their experiences and having their stories heard. This process offers healing for the individuals themselves, while it also offers the community the opportunity to understand the experiences of the 'other side' to feel empathy for common suffering, to overcome prejudice and hatred, and to build relationships across divides. According to the Institute for Healing of Memories in South Africa, the emphasis is on the emotional and spiritual, rather than intellectual, understanding and interpretation of the past. Through an exploration of their personal histories, participants find emotional release and as a group gain insight into and empathy for the experiences of others. These processes prepare the ground for forgiveness and reconciliation between people of diverse backgrounds, races, cultures and religions.

Case Study

Towards Understanding and Healing, Northern Ireland

Based in Londonderry, Towards Understanding and Healing (TUH) works across Northern Ireland and the border counties. TUH offers a safe space for people to tell their personal stories and to listen to the stories of others. Participants come together in weekend residential to share their experiences of the Northern Irish conflict in a safe space. For many people it is a rare chance to hear voices they might never otherwise hear.

TUH has developed comprehensive training resources on their method (see resources section on p26.) Preparation and aftercare are vital to ensure that all participants feel secure before, during and after encounters. Participants are briefed very carefully on what to expect beforehand. It is important to clearly explain what the process involves, who may be attending and what kinds of stories may be shared.

During the first evening participants get to know each other in non-threatening ways. TUH trained facilitators work with the group to set ground rules for the weekend ahead. Over the following days participants meet in small groups

where they may share their experience in some depth. The starting point and what they choose to say is entirely up to them – they might speak about bereavement or about active involvement in the violence. Depending on the numbers present, each participant may take up to an hour each. While one person speaks the others listen without interrupting. At the end of the session, the sharer can decide whether or not to allow questions or comments from the rest of the group. These emotionally laden sessions are interspersed with opportunities to reflect and socialise.

“I was touched at a deep level hearing other people’s stories and relating my own experiences, some of which remain surprisingly raw.” A TUH participant

Case Study

The Parents Circle – Families Forum in Israel and Palestine

The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF) consists of hundreds of Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost an immediate family member in the conflict. They use the sharing of their stories of pain and loss as a way to educate for peace and reconciliation, and to prevent loss being a motivator for further enmity. They have found that story sharing is a powerful way to unite people on both sides of the conflict. The PCFF offers a range of programmes including dialogue, youth work, arts activities, education and workshops.

One project involved Israelis and Palestinians meeting in pairs to share personal stories and family narratives. Later the participants visited significant sites on each side of the conflict. The simple act of visiting these sites together helped deepen their exploration of community and collective narratives. For many it was a healing experience.

“Id and I are both orphans of the 1948 war. Both of us never met our fathers. I was moved to find out that I, an orphan from a Kibbutz in Israel, feel exactly the same as an orphan from Beit Omar does.”

An Israeli participant



Does storytelling in divided societies actually work?

Critics of storytelling would like to see more rigorous evaluation in this field. They point out possible hazards of storytelling such as re-traumatisation, the reinforcing of stereotypes and mistrust, and the potential for individuals and communities to get stuck in stories that become reinforced through the telling.

Practitioners have a wealth of anecdotal evidence that these methods can be healing and transformative. However, there is a significant move towards more systematic research to assess the social impact of story-sharing in areas of conflict. See www.irishpeacecentres.org.

Points to consider

- This kind of story sharing requires skilled facilitators who have undergone specific training and who have in-depth knowledge of the particular issues participants are dealing with.
- The creation of safe space is essential. If the space does not feel safe the process can be counter-productive.
- Preparing participants and providing sensitive aftercare are also very important.

Web resources

www.theparentscircle.com

www.healingthroughremembering.info

www.healingofmemories.co.za

www.bgu.ac.il

Towards Understanding and Healing resources
www.thejunction-ni.org/towardsunderstandingandhealing.htm

DVD: Storytelling and Positive Encounter Dialogue Methodology

Book: Stories in conflict,
Ed. Liam O'Hagan, 2008.

Telling your life story: Creating dialogue among Jews and Germans, Israelis and Palestinians. Dan Bar-On. Central European University Press. 2006.

www.beyondintractability.org

www.abrahamsvision.org

Storytelling and bereavement

Some practitioners working in the field of bereavement use both personal and traditional story. Those recovering from loss often have a strong need to tell their experiences to others, both the difficult memories and the happier ones. This can help people come to terms with grief. In the process, their stories may become part of a wider narrative for the community. Traditional stories can be used to convey different attitudes and responses to dying in a non-threatening way, and to demonstrate a path through grief.

Case Study Working with beads

This is a method used by the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, based in Warrington. The technique is used in their residential storytelling weekends for people who have been affected by politically motivated violence. Some bereavement counsellors use a similar method with individuals. The process involves creating a piece of beadwork in which the different beads represent significant people and events in a person's life story.

In the first stage participants are led through a remembering exercise where they reflect on the different stages of their life and recall memories of the people and events that were most important to them. Later they choose from a wide selection of beads of different shapes, sizes and colours, taking one bead to represent each significant person or event. Using their chosen beads they create a colourful string, knotted at either end. The strings of beads can be a powerful representation of a life story, imbued with memories, both bitter and sweet. Through the symbolism of the beads, those who have lost someone get to experience that person as part of a greater story. In the early stages of bereavement, thoughts and memories associated with the lost loved one can overwhelm all other memories. The beads can have the effect of bringing the relationship with that one person into the context of the participant's life journey as a whole, thus reconnecting them with the living.





The bead strings can then be used in story sharing sessions, if needed, as a way to begin sharing painful stories. A clinician is always present at the Foundation for Peace residentials to offer support if the exercise brings up very difficult memories. This is part of providing a safe space for sharing. Sharing should take place in small groups of 4-5 people. Those who have used this technique will testify to the power of the life review process, and the depth of significance that the beads can sometimes come to hold.

Points to consider

- This exercise needs skilled facilitation and safe space. It is important not to underestimate the intensity of feeling that can surface. Giving sufficient time and sensitivity to this process is essential.
- In general, using an object to mediate the telling of a story can be a very helpful tool. For example, on their storytelling residentials, the Foundation for Peace asks participants to bring a meaningful object

with them from home. This is then used as a way to invite participants to share something about themselves in the early sessions when they are getting to know each other. The visual, tactile and symbolic qualities of objects can be a helpful aid for both the storyteller and the listener.

Web resources

www.foundation4peace.org

www.healingstory.org

Article on storytelling and care of the dying and bereaved

www.wcmt.org.uk/reports/152_1.pdf



Restorative justice

Restorative justice refers both to a set of principles and to a growing social movement. In general, a restorative justice initiative is one that seeks to arrive at a dialogue-based, non-judicial resolution to a conflict. A central tenet of the restorative justice approach is that everyone's voice should be heard including the victim, the offender, and members of the wider community. The idea is that through the simple act of publicly witnessing personal stories, powerful transformation can occur - at both an individual and national level.

Restorative justice programmes for individuals who have been victims of crime tend to place a strong emphasis on storytelling and dialogue. This approach recognises that the public acknowledgement of the wrong that has been done can be as important to healing as a prison sentence for the offender. On a bigger scale, truth and reconciliation commissions such as those in South African and Guatemala are essentially public platforms for people on both sides of a conflict to share the stories of what they have been through.

Victims are given an active role and offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions by, for example, apologising, returning stolen goods or doing community service. Restorative justice focuses on crimes that are committed against individuals or communities rather than against the state. It takes the focus away from the judicial process, exploring instead how the victim, perpetrator and community can work in partnership to restore relationships and mend harm. Restorative justice has the potential to yield high rates of satisfaction for those who have suffered, true accountability for the offender, and reduced recidivism.

Case Study Restorative justice in schools

Restorative justice has been used with great success within the school system, particularly in the US where this method is more developed. For example, the Central Michigan Restorative Justice Initiative (CMRJI) conducted a conference to help resolve a conflict between students in a local high school. Ryan, a member of the football team, had been stirred to violence by the taunts



and name calling of other team members. One member of the team was hospitalized as a result.

Instead of suspending Ryan, the school authorities invited workers from the CMRJ to hold a conference at which all the young people involved were present, along with their parents and teachers. The facilitators worked through a structured process that enabled everyone's stories to be heard. First the participants were guided toward a common understanding of what happened. Next they explored who was affected and in what way. Finally they were encouraged to discuss what needed to be done to heal the harm.

The conference demonstrated very clearly that the people involved only saw 'their side of the story.' Once they were able to truly hear the perspective of their perceived opponent, a powerful opportunity for reconciliation emerged.

The victim of the violence felt heard and understood. The background story about the pressure Ryan was under generated a renewed sense of empathy. Ryan was able to take responsibility for what he did and agreements were made about how he could take restitution. The conference allowed relationships to be fully repaired to the extent that the football team could still play together without friction.



Case Study

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a court-like body assembled in South Africa in 1995 after the abolition of apartheid. Its mandate was to hold public hearings to bear witness to gross violations of human rights that had occurred under the regime. Perpetrators of crimes could give testimony and request amnesty from prosecution by making full disclosure. Stories were heard from all sides - from the apartheid state,

liberation forces and the ANC. The TRC aimed both to expose the truth of what had happened and to facilitate healing, reparation and rehabilitation. The stories recounted not just the extent and nature of the crimes, but also the perspectives of the victims and the motivations of the perpetrators.

Thousands of victims told harrowing stories. Perpetrators admitted to appalling crimes. The TRC was televised which meant it had an enormous impact internationally. Archbishop Desmond Tutu chaired the TRC. His influence brought a deeply inspiring commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation to the process, which undoubtedly supported its healing effects.

The South African TRC, although flawed in some respects, was a crucial step in the country's transition to democracy, and provided a model for others within the international community to follow.

Points to consider

- While the aim of restorative justice is healing, the retelling of painful stories can re-traumatise. This work requires careful professional facilitation.

Truth recovery

Truth recovery can be a vitally important process for communities healing from violent conflict. There are many ways to collect and preserve the stories of war. Stories shared in public hearings may be archived in written form. For example, the Documentation Centre of Cambodia has recorded the myriad crimes and atrocities of the Khmer Rouge era. An Crann / The Tree is an archive of stories from the troubles in Northern Ireland.



Web resources

www.christinemcmahon.co.uk/rj.html

www.restorativejustice.org.uk

www.restorativejustice.org

www.centralmichiganrestorativejustice.com

www.justice.gov.za/trc/

www.dccam.org

Storytelling as a therapeutic tool

Talking therapies have always involved storytelling of one type or another. In its most basic form, psychotherapy invites the client to tell and retell their own stories in order to come to terms with them. Some therapists also use traditional stories as a way to create a safe container for exploring difficult issues. Such stories can be explored and discussed as a way of working with the client's issues indirectly, which can be particularly useful with children and young people. This is a specialist area where professional training is essential.

Case Study Working with traumatised asylum seekers

Shai Schwartz, a story therapist and group facilitator, and Sheila Melzak, a child psychotherapist, have developed a method for using traditional stories in groups with young asylum seekers. Their approach grew out of work carried out at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, and now continues at a new organisation, the Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile, specialising in work with young survivors of organised violence, captivity, forced recruitment, trafficking and violation.

The young people involved in the original workshops came to the UK from a number of troubled regions across the world including Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo, Somalia, Rwanda and other African, Asian and

East European countries. Shai and Sheila's approach aimed to enable the participants to work through vulnerabilities related to their experiences of violence and loss, and to reconnect with and develop resiliencies.

Shai and Sheila would typically open the group with a contained discussion on an aspect of the participants' shared experience. The focus would be on the young people's experiences of belonging to family and community in their home countries. In this way they were invited to reflect on the roots of their personal resiliencies. Then the participants would be invited to share a traditional story from their culture. One story would be chosen to explore in more detail. Participants volunteered to play different characters. The facilitators then interviewed the characters and encouraged them to interact with each other.

Telling tales from their countries of origin gave the young people a sense of cultural empowerment. It connected them with their own culture and traditions in a way that was heard and honoured by the group. Working in more depth with the chosen story gave the participants an opportunity to look at difficult issues in an indirect and less threatening way. The character interviews enabled each person to project something of their own life situation into their character's responses. Using traditional stories in this way also encouraged empathy to develop between group members whose backgrounds might be very different.

In one workshop a teenage boy from Uganda shared a traditional tale that many of his peers also recognised. It described the deep friendship between two boys who grew up in the same village. One became a businessman, the other a doctor. When the businessman contracted AIDS, his doctor friend tried desperately to save his life, but failed. At the funeral, the doctor saw a snake in the bushes. He declared he would like to be bitten by the snake and die, so he could join his friend. But when the snake came towards him, he ran away and all the other mourners laughed at him.

The facilitators worked with this story very sensitively, exploring the different characters and asking the boy to repeat the sung refrain in the story in his mother tongue and getting the group to repeat those phrases and act out parts of the tale. This enabled the teller to connect to his own language and tradition and have the rest of the group share in that with him. The enactment, singing and ritual was a cathartic end to a threatening theme. The story later enabled a discussion about the very human feeling of wanting to die in order to join lost loved ones. The teller was able to acknowledge his own suicidal feelings, which many in the group shared. Together they could also witness, in the act of running away from the snake, the very affirming impulse of choosing life over death.



“We found time and again that young people would remember a tale that might have been told when they were very young. Yet miraculously the tale they chose tended to hold, in symbolic form, their own narrative. It was as if their subconscious had gone back to find what was most relevant for them.”

Shai Schwartz

Web resources

www.baobabsurvivors.org

www.storytellingtherapy.com

www.nswas.com/people/shai.htm

www.Humanities-Journal.com



Beyond limiting stories

As we go through life, we turn our memories and experiences into the ‘stories’ that end up in our own personal history books. In other words, we add our own interpretation to events, thus creating a narrative to underpin our sense of identity. This is a natural process that happens over time. The more significance an event has for us, the more time we spend reflecting on it and trying to make sense of it. In many cases this is what allows us to process our experiences and move on. Sometimes, however, we can become over-identified with a particular narrative and this can be counter-productive.

For example, if our story created from past experiences is that we are a failure, achieving success in the future is going to become harder. If our story is about being a victim, we may fail to notice the ways in which we oppress or victimise others. In any form of conflict, personal or international, our narrative includes not just our memory of what happened, but also our subjective beliefs: beliefs about the cause of the conflict, about who is right and who is wrong, and so on. These narratives can become very fixed and one-sided. They may fail to take into account the reality of the ‘other’ and can block the possibility of reconciliation.

When we loosen the grip our stories have over us we make space for a different kind of healing. This does not necessarily mean we change our understanding or forget what happened. But we may gain some distance from our narrative and recognise that we are bigger than our own stories.

In conflict situations, this might mean recognising that our narrative is only one side of the equation. By taking into account the stories of others, we can go beyond simple black and white explanations to see a bigger picture. This could enable us to allow in marginalised information, such as the negative effects of our own behaviour, or the vulnerability of our ‘opponent’. In witnessing the more complex narrative that emerges we may lose some of our rigidity and self-righteousness.

In personal cases, we might choose to let go of the effect a particular set of memories has had on us, giving us a more flexible idea of who we are. We may also recognise that the future has a potential that is not always dependent on the past.

Case Study

Byron Katie’s ‘The Work’

Byron Katie is an author and speaker who has devised a method for exploring the thought patterns, fixed beliefs, or ‘stories’ that lie behind our personal suffering. She works with individuals by applying a set of questions that inquire into the thoughts beneath the presenting problem. She invites people to consider whether their thoughts are objectively true, and to imagine what their experience would be like without them.





Beliefs such as ‘my husband betrayed me’ or ‘I should be better at my work’ are investigated using a set of four questions: Is it true? Can I absolutely know that it is true? How do I feel when I think this thought? Who would I be without this thought? The questions are very simple but, worked with in the right way, have the potential to lead participants beyond their own story to a more spacious understanding of their reality.

Byron Katie’s work rests on the proposition that (in the words of the Greek philosopher Epictetus) “We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens.”

Case Study St Ethelburga’s Dialogue Series

Stories can be a powerful way of opening people’s minds to a different way of seeing something. When we get stuck in our own version of events, we can become blinkered and unable to hear the perspectives of others. Ideas and concepts often cannot get through our own internal barriers. But because they operate on the imaginative and symbolic levels of the mind rather than the purely rational, stories can sometimes sneak through our defences and bring about change.

St Ethelburga’s has invited many guest speakers from all over the world who have survived conflict and taken steps towards reconciliation. They offer inspiring personal stories and insights that go beyond the collective narratives of the opposing sides.

Stories of sincere friendship between people from conflicted communities are often the most powerful. Examples of these inspiring friendships are not hard to find. Eliyahu McClean (a Jewish citizen of Israel) and the late Sheikh Aziz Bukhari (a Muslim living in East Jerusalem) shared a deep spiritual friendship that went beyond any of the prevailing Israel v Palestine narratives. They dedicated their lives to working and travelling together as a living example of what was possible.

Letting go of our stories

The process of honing down and crafting our stories for performance can have the effect of allowing us to let go of them.

See biographical stories on page 15.

Imam Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye from Nigeria also formed a similar bond for the sake of working for peace. Their friendship seems more challenging, though no less inspiring. Like a difficult marriage, it appears to require a deep commitment to honest communication for them to stay in relationship. The Parents Circle – Families Forum (see page 25) bring bereaved Israelis and Palestinians together and enable friendships to be formed on the basis of their shared experiences of loss and grief. Hearing their stories and witnessing the strength of their bonds is a very affecting and memorable experience. This creation of a new meta-narrative, one that includes the possibility of friendship across the boundaries defined by conflict, is an important aspect of reconciliation. When we can move from ‘my story’ to ‘our story’ then we are taking a step on the journey towards peace.

Points to consider

- In general, it is not a good idea to push anyone to change their relationship with their own story. Each one of us needs to find our own way through the changes in how we carry and relate to our own stories and how it affects our sense of identity.
- Techniques such as Byron Katie’s require professional training.



Web resources

www.thework.com

www.theparentscircle.com

www.jerusalempeacemakers.org

www.ftfilms.org.uk/imam.html



Collective story and the environment

Some people see the current environmental crisis as the result of a global narrative that has outlived its usefulness and begun to do damage. The story of secular consumerism has gradually spread across the globe wiping out all other stories on the way. This narrative sees human beings as in control of an inert physical planet that they can 'use' in whatever way suits them. It sees meaning in ownership of things, and sees people as separate from each other and from their environment. Some contemporary thinkers point to the emergence of a new global narrative. This narrative speaks to the need for a new set of values and a way for humanity to operate as a whole, taking all peoples and the natural world into consideration with every decision. In this new story, human beings do not 'own' the world, but rather are stewards of our planet, responsible collectively for the well-being of all. Some environmentalists are using storytelling techniques to propagate this new meta-narrative.

Case Study Ecopsychology

Ecopsychologist and storyteller, Sandra White works in a range of community and corporate settings raising awareness of environmental issues and examining psychological responses to change. In her workshops, she uses modern and traditional stories which explore the relationships between humanity and the larger natural world. She combines telling, amplifying and enacting these stories, and then listens to what emerges within the group during the enactment. Drawing and also making physical gestures are also used to discover more about the story and enable greater identification with a range of characters and elements. This can allow more of the underlying meaning and potential of the story to be felt and expressed. The heightened emotion feeds a sense of connection with the bigger natural systems of which we are all part which can then fuel an expanded sense of self and more developed form of empathy to help participants overcome resistance and make more sustainable choices in their lives.

“This way of working is about allowing ourselves to be used by the bigger system to tell its own story rather than us conducting the action and placing the focus on our own personal psychology. This way we can experience ourselves as part of the earth instead of always separate from it and just perched on top of it.”

Ecopsychologist Sandra White

Case Study The Global Oneness Project

The Global Oneness Project is a non-profit media organisation that collects digital stories, films and interviews with people and organisations who question the current paradigm and look towards a new meta-narrative of interconnectedness. What unites the stories is the vision of a future based on human beings taking collective responsibility for their world and developing a sense of empathy that goes beyond individual or national boundaries to reflect a global interdependent whole. The aim of the project is to highlight new narratives that offer hope for a sustainable future. All the films are freely available at the Global Oneness Project website.



“We hope that by showing the diverse ways oneness is expressed - in the fields of sustainability, conflict resolution, spirituality, art, economics, indigenous culture, and social justice - others will be inspired to create solutions to personal and community challenges from their own lived understanding of oneness.”

Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, founder and director of the Global Oneness Project

Web resources

www.transitionculture.org/2010/03/08/the-story-of-transition-tales

Sandra White
sandraw@greenspirit.org.uk

www.globalonenessproject.org



C. ARTS BASED APPROACHES

Traditional storytelling in interfaith relationship building

Many of the faiths' holy books and scriptures include stories. The Mahabharata is a collection of riveting tales about the Hindu gods and goddesses that are still very much alive within Hindu culture after thousands of years. The Talmud (or Old Testament) is composed primarily of the stories of the Jewish people. Jesus taught with parables. In Buddhism teaching stories are used to convey ideas that may appear paradoxical. Muslim people all over the world continually repeat stories from the Prophet Muhammed's life as a way of keeping alive the example he set. When approached reflectively, religious stories have the capacity to bypass our rational minds and invite a more intuitive wisdom to emerge within us. Stories are a valuable tool to draw on when building relationships between different faith communities. They offer an enjoyable and non-threatening way to learn about different cultures and belief systems.

Case Study

National Interfaith Week: Sea of Stories

As a contribution to the first UK National Interfaith Week, St Ethelburga's, funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, created a multi-faith storytelling performance. Storytellers from the Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Baha'i traditions came together to perform stories about prayer and friendship. The performances took place in a Buddhist centre, a synagogue, a cathedral, a mosque and a Hindu temple.

The storytellers spent time beforehand developing creative concepts. Together they agreed on the theme, Sea of Stories, and they chose tales from their faith traditions that would evoke this theme. At the end of each evening's performance the tellers told one story all together. This was a teaching story found in many faiths. The story itself, and the simple act of telling it together, gave a strong message of unity across differences.

Several factors combined to make the programme a success. The stories were very entertaining as well as rich and informative. The tellers themselves effortlessly reflected the very distinctive flavour of each religion. Finally, the performances offered a rare opportunity for audiences to experience a different place of worship in a welcoming and non-threatening way.

The storytellers themselves developed strong bonds with each other. This lent a certain chemistry to the performances and also modelled friendship across differences. The friendships they formed had the potential to create lasting links into each other's communities. Several storytellers later developed joint projects of their own. For example the Jewish and Muslim teller gave a series of performances together in schools.

"Stories create community. When we hear a story together, foreignness disappears and we respond as one to the universal pattern of story." Sea of Stories, MC Sarah Perceval

Points to consider

- Many traditional stories exist in slightly different forms in several cultures. These stories can be particularly useful in building relationships since they show what people have in common.
- It is useful to be aware that different cultures and faiths have different styles of storytelling. For example, Hinduism has a dramatic theatre-based style of telling, where long stories can take days to perform. This may be contrasted with the fireside traditions of Celtic cultures.
- Stories from scripture need to be treated with respect and sensitivity, bearing in mind how different listeners may respond. Some may take a story to be historical, others may hear it as revealing a deeper spiritual truth.
- Stories, combined with some simple and carefully chosen ritual elements such as silence or drumming, can be used to create a sense of shared sacred space. In some traditional cultures (Native American, African) the relationship between stories and sacred space is still very much alive and is something to learn from.



Web resources

Society for Storytelling
www.sfs.org.uk

Society for Storytelling Special interest group in faith and religion
www.sfs.org.uk/special_interest_groups/faith_and_religion/

National storytelling network, interfaith discussion group
www.interfaithstory.org

State of the Heart Storytelling
www.sarahperceval.com

Community ceilidhs: using the arts to bring neighbours together

A tradition rooted in Celtic culture, the ceilidh was a community event that brought people together for an evening of entertainment to which everyone contributed. Ceilidhs might take place in a home, or village hall or pub. While nowadays the word 'ceilidh' suggests an evening of music and dance, traditionally they also included storytelling, poetry and music. The basic idea is that everyone present has the opportunity to offer something into the mix. In the times before TV and film, ceilidhs were a free form of entertainment that also helped a community to bond. The practice has been revived in some locations and has something useful to offer contemporary efforts towards community cohesion.

Case Study

The Village Storytelling Centre community ceilidh series

During the 1990s professional storyteller Rachel Smiley ran a series of community ceilidhs in association with the Village Storytelling Centre in Glasgow. The events were held monthly in the side transept of the local church. From the start they were well attended, often attracting up to 50 people per night. Initially it was parishioners from the church who came, mostly older people who remembered attending ceilidhs in their youth. Gradually, though, word spread throughout the wider community and a more diverse range of people began to attend.

Rachel took care to decorate the space to make it welcoming and cosy. She lit candles and set out the chairs in a circle. She always invited one or two professional storytellers to



start the evening off. This was important for several reasons: it set a positive tone to the evening and helped warm up the atmosphere. It also gave people a good example to follow. Less experienced tellers tended to pick up good performance habits from watching the professionals. Rachel also made a point of inviting musicians who could provide a welcome interlude between performances, giving people a chance to relax and absorb what they had heard.

There came a time in the mid 90s when many asylum seekers moved into the neighbourhood. Rachel proactively sought to include them in the ceilidh events. At first there was some resistance from those in the existing community who saw the asylum seekers as outsiders. But over time, as traditional stories were shared on both sides, people's barriers and preconceptions began to wear away. Many asylum seekers told Rachel that the first time they felt at home in Scotland was at the Village Centre's ceilidhs. A broader sense of community began to emerge, one that included both the existing and incoming groups.

“The ceilidh model has the power to build community because it's not asking people to have a discussion, it's not asking people to think about anything. It's a sharing of stories everyone is entertained by. We didn't set out to do anything other than to have a fun event. But it had very powerful outcomes.” Storyteller Rachel Smiley



Points to consider

- Language may be an issue, and you may consider providing translators for those who need extra support.
- Think about how you will create safe space and encourage participants to be genuinely appreciative and non-judgmental towards the contributions of others.
- People can get restless after listening to two or three stories. It is useful to include music and tea breaks to add variety and give people a rest from concentrated listening.
- If you have the time it can be helpful to provide coaching sessions outside the actual ceilidhs to help people prepare their tales for performance.

Web resources

www.thevillageonline.org.uk

Theatre and personal narrative

Personal stories can be transformed into a different kind of community experience with the use of theatre. A number of theatre-based approaches such as Playback and Forum Theatre, make space for the dynamic exploration of ordinary people's stories within a community context. Typically these methods use actors to explore individuals' experiences in different ways.

Playback Theatre

Playback is a methodology that was developed in the US by Jonathan Fox, a student of improvisational theatre, oral storytelling, and psychodrama. This highly interactive form of theatre invites audience members to tell stories from their own lives to a troupe of playback actors. The actors then re-enact the story on the spot and 'play it back' to the teller and the wider audience.

The stories can express very simple moments or memories in the teller's life, or can describe events of more significance. The 'conductor' mediates between the audience and the actors and helps to extract enough information for the actors to work with. The teller usually gets to decide which actors play which characters.

Playback has been taken into schools, prisons, centres for the elderly, work environments, conferences and festivals, as well as community settings. It can have a light-hearted, humorous quality, and function as a unique form of community entertainment in which everyone can participate. Or it can be used in a more therapeutic way to work with people whose stories are more sensitive, such as refugees or prison inmates. Its purpose is to offer a ritual space where stories of all kinds (ordinary, extraordinary, painful or funny) can be told and immediately shared as theatre.

"Playback develops relationships between people. It deepens the capacity people have to be touched by others who are very different. Playback also crafts a view or mirror of the community as a whole. Through this it can act as a catalyst in developing healthy communities." Playback practitioner Mary Good

Case Study Playback Theatre Manchester works with refugees

Playback Theatre Manchester was invited to offer a series of performances for young refugees and asylum seekers as a way of introducing them to a specialist counselling service in Liverpool for young unaccompanied child refugees. They were particularly interested in engaging the boys who were under-represented in the service. Playback was chosen as a way of getting the children used to the idea of telling their stories to outsiders. The project was particularly challenging as there were six different languages in use. The actors worked in close collaboration with translators to ensure everyone shared the full experience.

The young people came from diverse faiths and cultures - Christian, Muslim, Far Eastern, Middle Eastern, and African. But they all had a shared experience of exile. Stories ranged from comedic accounts of getting lost in a supermarket to heartrending tales of families left behind. After one young person told a moving story, another participant from a different country said, "I know that is your story, but it happened to me too," and he embraced the teller.

"Listening to the stories of the young people was so moving. Many of these young people have been through experiences of terror and loss that are beyond anything we could imagine. It was a challenge and a privilege to be trusted with these stories, and to be part of the process of healing." Playback actor



Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is one tool within a wider methodology known as Theatre of the Oppressed, which also includes image theatre, 'invisible theatre' and the use of masks and ritual.

Forum Theatre was developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal in the 1960s. His aim was to use theatre to help people empower themselves politically and to find alternative and transformative responses to oppression.

A Forum Theatre event typically begins with the actors playing out a scene involving some kind of oppression or conflict. The audience then intervenes in order to suggest different endings. Through this process the participants can try out more powerful ways of responding and explore the available choices, some of which they may not have been aware of previously. The experience can be very empowering and help to widen the range of possible responses individuals have to challenging situations.

Case Study

Cardboard Citizens and Combatants for Peace

Cardboard Citizens and Combatants for Peace together hosted a workshop using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to explore the Israel Palestine conflict. The use of Forum Theatre in particular gave participants an opportunity to examine the dynamics of how conflicts escalate in specific circumstances and how this may be averted. Combatants for Peace is a group of Israelis and Palestinians who have been involved in the fighting and have now put down their weapons and work for peace. Cardboard Citizens is one of the leading proponents of Theatre of the Oppressed in the UK and works mainly to empower homeless people.

In the first Forum Theatre exercise of the day the participants themselves were both audience and actors. Some participants were selected to be the 'protagonists.' They were asked to remember situations in which they had felt oppressed. They then cast other participants as players in that scenario. The 'actors' created a frozen image of the scene. The frozen images then came to life and began acting out the oppression. The protagonist's job was to try to 'break' the oppression with different tactics. The protagonists rotated around the different tableaux in the room and worked with the scenes other people had set up, again trying to break the oppression. This led into a discussion about what was productive.

The workshop ended with a more traditional Forum Theatre exercise, where actors performed a play that centred around events at an Israeli checkpoint. The audience was invited to stop the action and suggest different choices. The play brought into sharp relief the day to day issues of the Israel Palestine conflict, demonstrated some of the dynamics that lead to the rapid escalation of violence, and also offered opportunities to explore more empowering choices on both sides.

Points to consider

- Theatrical techniques are great for helping participants to explore different endings to their stories, thus overcoming limiting patterns. Theatre is also excellent for working with young people.
- Theatre based approaches require special training. Because of their dynamic and highly engaging nature, exercises that involve role play can be quite explosive. It is a good idea to collaborate with trained actors and directors.

Web resources

www.playbacknet.org

www.playbacktheatre.co.uk

www.playbacktheatremanchester.co.uk/projects.htm

www.refugeestories.org/news/

www.theatreoftheoppressed.org

www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk

<http://cfpeace.org/>

www.twomentalking.com



POINTERS ON PROCESS

Hosting your first story-sharing

It is important to be very clear about the purpose of the story sharing and the level of depth you are aiming for.

If the purpose is to build community or facilitate relationships across differences then it is useful to pick a theme that will speak to all the people involved. The theme could relate to their environment or local issues (such as stories about neighbours, favourite places, local events, local history or a sense of place). If you are working with a culturally diverse group, something that highlights people's different backgrounds could be useful (such as journeys, migration, or lifestyles). You might also want to focus on building relationships; in this case you could invite stories of friendship, community or sharing.

It is a good idea to do this in consultation. Run the theme past a number of people to ensure it is engaging for everyone. Think carefully about whether it could elicit stories that are difficult or traumatic.

If your purpose is to create safe space for participants to heal from difficult memories, or to hear other perspectives within a conflict, you will need to be very clear about the risks involved. You will need to engage trained facilitators, and make sure everyone understands what the process entails and whom they may encounter (e.g. people from opposing sides of the conflict). Before they attend people should have some idea about the stories they may hear. Bear in mind the strong impact others' stories may have for those on opposite sides of a conflict. You will also need to prepare yourself – to know you will be comfortable with the stories you hear, that you

can contain strong emotions that may arise in the group, and that you have effective support and supervision. During the event you will need to be diligent in maintaining safe space.

Safe space

Safe space is essential to story sharing. You can create this by:

- Preparing participants effectively in advance.
- Setting ground rules and discussing hopes, fears and expectations.
- Teaching and modelling listening skills.
- Managing responses from listeners carefully. Decide beforehand if you will allow comments and questions.
- Creating a welcoming atmosphere – through the physical environment, food and refreshments, and looking after participants thoughtfully.
- Ensuring there is enough time. It is easy to underestimate the time needed to share stories in a satisfying way. It is important not to put time pressure on participants. You do not want to open big memories up if you are not also offering the space for them to be fully heard and digested. Do not over-pack sessions!
- Where necessary, planning in aftercare so participants are also supported up after the event.

Listening

An important aspect of safe space for storytelling is ensuring that participants will listen to each other with respect. Real listening involves:

- Giving attention
- Not interrupting
- Suspending judgment
- Containing our own thought processes and questions
- Being patient with people for whom English is a second language
- Being sensitive to cultural barriers and differences.

Icebreakers

It can help to warm up with some simple exercises to lead a group gently into the art of sharing stories from our lives.

The story of your name

This is a warm-up exercise we often use at St Ethelburga's with adults. We invite participants to share the story of their name – the meaning of the name and how they came to be called it. This is a non-threatening exercise that can inspire a rich sharing, highlighting the different cultural influences in our lives and bringing to light snippets of information about our families and our values. Sometimes we also include middle names or nicknames. One variation on this exercise is a game where everyone writes several nicknames on pieces of paper that get jumbled up and redistributed. Each person then has to locate the real owner of the name.

Mediated stories

It can be enormously helpful to have an object or image as the starting point for sharing something from our own lives. Simply inviting participants to bring an object with them that has personal meaning and then using that object as the basis for sharing their associations

can be quite effective. The object provides a focal point. It is rich with memories and images that support the teller in telling their tale. Visual images (such as colourful postcards) can also be a great starting point. Images can open a doorway to our imagination and our unconscious. Using visual triggers can enable participants to share at a surprisingly deep level.

Story triggers

Story triggers are a means to elicit personal stories from our memory banks. Participants can choose a trigger at random (e.g. from a lucky dip-style basket) with the option to put it back and choose another if that particular trigger doesn't yield anything of interest. For example, triggers on the theme of love could include phrases such as: your first love; a love that was unrequited; love for a child; a place you love; when you found love unexpectedly; love that went wrong; etc.

Basic storytelling skills

For some events it may be helpful to offer guidance on how to tell a good story by teaching some traditional storytelling techniques. This can enhance communication skills, making the stories more engaging and thus more easily received by the audience. On a deeper level, presenting our personal stories as if they were traditional tales can affect how we relate to our experiences. It can help us digest experiences and to let go of our identification with them. Using traditional storytelling techniques is only appropriate with stories that do not contain traumatic content or strong unprocessed emotions. It works best in an atmosphere where participants are willing to be playful and share their experiences in a way that is entertaining for others.

Here are five simple techniques that will improve your tale:

1. Starting and ending well

The first line of your story has a lot of impact. It can convince your audience to either sit up and listen, or drift off and fall asleep. It is worth taking time to think up an attention-grabbing first line. Simple, direct sentences are best, delivered slowly and clearly, with impact and plenty of audience eye contact. Pauses can allow the audience space to engage their imagination and to wonder about what is coming next. How you speak is as important as the words you choose. Some examples:

"I'm going to tell you about my first day at secondary school," can translate into *"Mr Johnson...was the personification of all evil"*.

"My first car was a Ford Cortina," can be delivered as *"My first love... (dramatic pause) was midnight blue...with a 1.6 engine."*

"I came to London in 1976" becomes *"I stood on the deck, waving goodbye to all the people I loved most, (pause) and knew I might not see them again for a long time."*

Closing a story well is equally important. It is not always obvious to listeners that a story is about to end. Building up to your last line can make sure everyone hears the final conclusion. Traditional storytellers use particular speech patterns to indicate endings, such as slowing down, adding pauses, and making eye contact with the audience. Some examples:

"And that...is how...the elephant got his trunk!"

"So, what did I learn from this experience? (Pause, wait, eye contact) I learned that it is never...ever...a good idea...to mess with Mr Johnson".

"And that is why...I will always remember...the road to Pondicherry".

2. The Story 'Bones'

It is important to decide what to leave out and what to keep in. Especially when it comes to personal stories, there can be real life details or added complexities that are distractions rather than necessary components. However, the storyteller, who lived through the experience, may instinctively want to include everything. Give participants time to think through the essential elements of their story. Encourage them to consider what will be most relevant to their listeners. The 'story bones' are the key plot elements of any story. Thinking these through can help the teller to order their thoughts and deliver the story more effectively. It can also serve as a memory aid. Each 'bone' can be represented with a word or phrase (or even a cartoon drawing) which can then help the teller to get the order of events right and to remember what they want to say.

For example, story bones could be expressed as follows:

- Meet new classmates and teacher
- Make friends with Charlie
- Incident with blackboard cleaner
- Mr Johnston's fury
- What I learned from this experience

3. Connecting with your audience

The more you can connect with your audience, the stronger the impact of your story will be. Make eye contact with listeners. If talking to a small group, look at everyone and make sure they all feel included. You can also pose questions or invite audience interaction (e.g. How do you think Mr Johnson reacted? Have you ever had a teacher who terrified you?) Some questions can simply invite the audience to think. The teller can move on before any answers are given. Others can be used to invite suggestions and maximise participation. Gestures and mime can also add life to a tale.

4. The hero's journey

The 'hero's journey' is a phrase used by Joseph Campbell and others to describe a basic pattern that crops up in traditional stories from around the world. The phases of the journey can be expressed as follows:

- The call to adventure
- The threshold (the beginning of transformation)
- Challenges and temptations
- The abyss (death, rebirth, change, crisis or revelation)
- Transformation
- Return

It can sometimes be useful to present our personal experiences in this formula. It can help us digest experiences by seeing them as part of a cycle or age-old process. For the listener, it adds structure and also a sense of familiarity. You can see these phases represented in the bones of the story about Mr Johnson above.

5. Some final tips from Spark London

The London-based true life storytelling club Spark London (featured on page 16) offers some very simple but effective guidelines for those sharing their own stories:

- stick to what actually happened
- start in the middle of the action
- rehearse your opening and closing lines
- notice what might be inessential to the plot and is best left out
- identify the drama - what did you need to overcome? What did you learn?

Resources

The Story Factor, Annette Simmons, Perseus Books, 2001

Stories in conflict. E. Liam O'Hagan. Towards Understanding and Healing, 2008.

The Power of Personal Storytelling, Jack Macguire. Penguin Putnam, 1998.

St Ethelburga's guide to creating safe space www.stethelburgas.org/facilitation-and-dialogue-skills/resources

Training courses

St Ethelburga's offers courses in:

Narrative methods for building bridges
Basic storytelling skills
Storytelling for effective communication

For more information on storytelling and narrative at St Ethelburga's see www.stethelburgas.org

What's your story?

If you have been working with narrative or storytelling, particularly in the field of community building, we would love to hear from you. Email your story to: tent@stethelburgas.org

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