

## Strategy 1: Listen First

**Lyn Ford:** Listening, I think, is the foundation for all of storytelling. Some people think it's speaking. But when we're born, we have been listening for at least nine months. And so that's the foundation – listening and then speaking, learning to speak. Storytelling, of course, helps to build community. Story listening is underlying all of that.

**Dovie Thomason:** I don't go anywhere without meeting teachers because I listen and I spend far, far, far more time in my life listening than I do speaking. And in my experience, my favorite tellers are brilliant listeners.

**Adam Booth:** When a story is told, there is also a practice of the art of listening. And that is something that does not happen a whole lot right now. And so when good storytelling is practiced and when it's practiced often, it builds the skill of listening. And when stories are shared that, even if this is not the aim of the story, if they have rich imagery, if they have universal elements, it enlivens the part of the brain that also works with empathy. And that empathy is integral to listening. Because when we listen, we have, we build that metaphysical spiritual connection and we start to understand someone else's position in life.

**Dovie Thomason:** As I was coming here, it was just as beautiful a day as you get. The sky was so blue, and the hills were just rolling, and the foliage is just turning, and the birds were a wing. And it was just about... I looked around me and all I saw was such extraordinary beauty. And I thought, what is my part in this? And how did humans — not just me. How did humans get so lucky to be a part of a place this beautiful? And what do we owe it? And I think part of it is we owe those moments of deep reverence for it and attention to it. And attention is not just sitting and staring. Attention to me means action. You pay attention to something. We learn our best things by paying attention and that attention is mindful and attention is loving and attention is respectful and attention is action.

**Sue O'Halloran:** To me, there's no split between storytelling and activism. The act of storytelling is creating community. That's activism to me. The act of storytelling is a kind of ethical persuasion, a kind of ethical education. That's activism to me. Again, stories create emotions and it's emotions that are the foundation to action. It's not just a soft skill. Sometimes people say, oh, that storytelling is a soft skill. It's a foundational skill. It's a sophisticated skill that gives people new world views. We create little models of the world for people when we tell stories, and that's bringing them to a different place. And to me, that is a kind of activism.

When we can get people to care about people they didn't even know about before they walked into the concert hall or the festival tent or whatever, and now they feel connected. And suddenly they are involved and invigorated. And I could ask the question: “Would you stand up for somebody else if they were being harmed?” How do you do that? How do you do that and be safe? You have to say, especially with kids, right? What adult would you go to for help? That to

me, they're practicing activism. They're practicing taking a stand in their head through a safe vehicle of story, and “what if,” and imagination.

But it's true for adults as well. I've had people come up to me and say, “Well, how could we help with this? What should we do?” That's a terrific thing. That's why I love when you can ever do storytelling with a workshop and you can kind of pair them together and then you can really get into some action steps. But first people have to care enough to want to get involved. And that's what storytelling can do.

**Donna Washington:** Everybody has foundational stories. These are the stories that we've picked up through our lives and we believe those stories, right? So every human being is a compilation of the stories that they accept and the stories they reject. They're not more than that, they're not less than that, in terms of how they move through the world. And we make choices based on the stories we accept. And I call those stories the foundational stories, and they make up your reality.

Like what's real is part of your stories. Facts do not have any impact on those stories. You can always reject those facts because stories are real to people.

Now, the thing that's kind of interesting about our foundational stories is they are hooked into our limbic system. And the reason they're hooked into our limbic system is because before we were talking to each other back in the day, our limbic system filtered everything to help us understand what was safe and what was not safe. That's your fight or flight or freeze. Right? So, you know, two homo sapiens are out there and they're like eating berries. So a thing rustles in the bushes and one of them gets up. He's gone. The other one's like, why are you running? And then he gets eaten.

So what it means is that our limbic system is really, really hair triggered for danger or for something that's unfamiliar. The stories that we have tell us what's safe or what's dangerous. And our brains are really, like really, focused on that. When you hear a story that conflicts with your foundational stories, sometimes your brain just filters it out. And so you don't necessarily hear what someone's saying. That's why it's possible for you to have a conversation with someone and you walk away and you have a completely different idea of what happened than the other person. Because our foundational stories, well, they set off our limbic systems.

If you and I are having a discussion and we have political differences and you say something to me that is very against what I already believe strongly, my brain says “danger.” And either I'm going to like not listen to you at all, or I'm going to just stare at you and go, they'll stop talking in a minute. Or I might decide to argue with you, because we think that there's danger. Your brain, your limbic system doesn't know the difference between someone talking to you and threatening your stories and somebody trying to stab you. It sees all of that danger the same way.

So what stories can do that facts cannot do, and arguing cannot do, and lecturing cannot do, is since our brains are patterned on stories, the stories we believe are foundational stories, you can tell someone a story and find places within their foundational stories where you can connect that

isn't dangerous or scary. And if framed in story form, it's something that's easier for people to accept.

**Sue O'Halloran:** I don't shy away from saying some of the hard stuff, but it's as if with stories, we have the Trojan horse. We can sneak into places – I'm not going to say enemy lines – but places maybe we wouldn't think of going, because we are cloaked in that story. I have gone into groups that people would say, “Oh, they're going to be resistant to your message.” But by time we're laughing and crying together, I can't tell you how many times people come up and say, “I didn't know that; I didn't know that.”

Because we're getting information from such different sources now. But I didn't stand there and say, “you should know this” and “you're getting propaganda.” It's through that story, and again, the common experiences. You're in the moment; it's like we have the time machine by using sensory language of smells and tastes and sights and sounds. The brain doesn't know what's real and what's not real. It's like when you see a great commercial of apple pie and your mouth starts watering. We can't tell the difference.

So when you create the right picture, people are there with you. And maybe they've never been in a synagogue, maybe they've never been in a mosque, maybe they've never been in this or that country, but you can take them there. And when they take them there, just like when you travel, your perspectives change. And then if we really work our craft, we also have that gift of bringing people to new places. And then through experience, not through preaching and scolding and whatever, or arguing, they have new perspectives.