

## Strategy 2: Seek Multiple Perspectives

**Dovie Thomason:** It's kind of my theory — theory to the point of it being a belief — that we're living in a time between stories. That a narrative has exhausted itself and has betrayed itself. My grandmother was born in 1896. She was not a citizen of the United States until '24. So she grew up in a totally different narrative. If we're in a time between stories, I'm really interested in what the next stories are, what we're moving to. I think we're in a transitional stage.

**Donna Washington:** There is a body of mainstream stories. And in that mainstream, there is a story about their stories. This is who we are. Manifest destiny. We discovered America. We built everything. And that's the story that goes: this is our place and we're proud of what we did.

Then there are the stories of the minority cultures around the mainstream culture. And those stories are stories about how many of these groups were exploited to create this thing.

The mainstream has to go, “Okay, our bad. We did this.” And then it has to own up. “Yeah. Okay. So we were responsible for the Civil War. Okay. Okay. Yeah. We were responsible for like taking all the Native Americans off their land. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. We did this. We're going to put our hand up.” But that's not an easy story to tell because of our foundational stories, and at the foundation of your mainstream life is: we did it ourselves. We built this manifest destiny. Nobody helped. This pull your own self up by your bootstraps. If that's your story, then it becomes uncomfortable to tell the stories of the minority cultures around you.

Those stories don't make you feel good about manifest destiny. And they don't make you feel good about we built everything, and they don't make you feel good about we did this ourselves, and they don't make you feel good about we got here and took everything from everybody's already here, and then we made all the other people build our stuff. And then they took their music, and took this, and burned down Black Wall Street.

Nobody wants to tell those stories in the mainstream. Well, that's not true. There are people trying to tell those stories, but there is a push to not tell those stories, because they fight with the foundation of what America wants to believe it is. So you have to tell those stories. But it's supposed to fall to the people who had to live it to tell it because if we don't tell it, we have learned that the mainstream will just not tell it. So we have to keep telling those stories. We don't have any choice. And we'll have to keep going until the mainstream of America is telling all of our stories.

**Dovie Thomason:** Years ago, I was invited to a festival in Oklahoma that no longer exists. And it was a wonderful, brilliant festival. The conceit, the idea behind the festival was they would pick a folktale. they would invite a bunch of tellers and they would have this one story that we'd be sent in advance. And it's like the folktale we are telling is this, and please do a spin on it. And then we're going to tell them one after the other. Same story, one after the other from a different point of view. And I think the story they told was a story I think it's called, I know it was a book

called “East of the Sun, West of the Moon” something like that. Not my tradition. It's a Norwegian story, I think.

So, one person came and they were telling the story about, is a bear, a woman who's cursed, she's married, she gets married to a boy who's cursed to be a bear all day and a man at night. And it's one of those stories that if she's good for so many years or days or whatever, the curse is lifted and she gets to be with the prince forever. And so, everybody had their different take on it. And one was sort of a story of bears, and another was a feminist, and another version, she's a feminist and she just, nobody's going to marry her off anyway.

And when they came to me, I said, "A Norwegian story to me, I don't think of Norway as Norwegian. I think of the indigenous people, the Sami who lived there and one of their clans is the bear. So could it not be a metaphor that the man she was marrying was of that clan?" And besides, in the story they speak of him being able to put a bubble of air around her as she rode on his back, and he would take her into the sea in this bubble of air protecting her. It's like, who would want a prince if you could have that? And it was a totally different take. Everybody else was modifying, but we were all modifying it from where we were.

And I think that that's true not of just a children's book or a story or a piece of folklore, but it's true of history. The history I learned in Texas in schools was very different than the history I learned from my grandmother who was Apache and taken to a mission school and was scared to death of Texas Rangers because they were Indian hunters. I grew up with two histories, so I think it gave me, it leans me that, in that direction to always be like, always on the other.

And one of my favorite stories in the world is Henrik Ibsen, the playwright. His dying words were “on the other hand.” And I was like, how wonderful is that? You live your whole life, you write all these plays, you become celebrated, great man of words and thoughts. And then at the last minute you say, “Yeah, but...” – and I like that.

**Adam Booth:** One of the great fortunes that I've had as a storyteller is to be mentored by a storyteller named Dovie Thomason. And our relationship came about because well, one of the many reasons, one important reason is that we are both from communities that very often have stories told about us by people who are not from within that community.

And this is a very dangerous practice. I think, when someone in a position of power or in a position of great audience tells stories about other people that they are not, that they don't understand or they aren't part of that community.

Often what happens in an instance like that is that there's this idea of, oh, well, this person must be authoritative. So we believe what they say. And as that type of story gets spread around, the people actually from that community lose their voice. They lose their story. They lose their power to share it.

And that has happened a whole lot recently, where few people with a lot of power and privilege are sharing stories that are misinformed, or they're using the art of storytelling inappropriately for the wrong type of power. And what that does is it silences huge swaths of people who want to be heard, who want people to just sit down and listen to what they have to say because it's not just the words that they share, it is that connection that is formed when one person tells a story and another one experiences it. Because when all those people who are, who have had, their stories taken from them, another thing that's taken from them is connection with another human being. And that's what people want so much right now. Connection.

And when people aren't listening and when people don't, when they're not enabled, to tell stories, that's broken. And a lot more breaks when that's broken.

**Donna Washington:** I was a kid in the 1970s and the 1980s and I remember being in class, I was an army kid. And when I was back in America in the late eighties or late seventies, early eighties, you know, this first time we talked about enslavement. In school. And I remember being the only black kid in my honors class sitting there and everybody, like all the other kids around me. And I'm in Oklahoma, by the way; Lawton, Oklahoma. And they're like this moment of frozenness. Are we allowed to talk about this with her in the room? Like somehow, I should be ashamed of having my ancestors who were enslaved.

And it was years later and I was really cognizant of it. Like no one would look at me or some, like somehow this was about me. And I was really cognizant like later in my life. That I wasn't the one who should have been concerned about that. I didn't do anything. My ancestors didn't do anything. You know, the... if anyone should have been uncomfortable, they should have been uncomfortable about their own families, the historical choices, not mine.

And I realized that the problem is the way we told that story. And then, you know, they talked about my ancestors as being slaves, as opposed to being enslaved. Slave is something you are; enslaved is something somebody did to you. It's just a different perspective of thinking about it. And I, I began to understand that if I wanted to tell stories, I wanted to make sure that I did it from the point of view of the people who are telling the stories. If you want to understand the people, don't listen to the stories people tell about them.

**Dovie Thomason:** To me, storying is real interactive. I don't come with something finished, You are providing a service, that you have a craft, you have a skill, that there is a social need for you.

I'm always very aware of the society I suddenly find myself in if I'm here to serve it. And I serve it just the way the cooks are serving it. They are cooking; I'm storying.

We're all providing a function that reminds us, and for me always, and always, and always, the most important thing is it reminds me how much we are related to each other, how much we need each other, how much our interactions affect each other.

I'm not there to change anybody's mind, but I'm there to let them know that there are other thinkings. I think differently, and that I'm listening, and I know other people think differently. And to present that in a conversational way, rather than a dogmatic or proselytizing kind of way.

I think that anger, I think that guilt, I think that shame are all motivators and that they should have a shelf life of about five seconds. Because their pain, guilt, shame, anger — they're telling you there's something that needs action. It needs remediation, it needs care, it needs improvement. And then that's when we step in.

So if I have people, and I do, I tell a story where people will suddenly be offended and hurt to hear from me something they had not previously known. And it might be very close to something that matters a great deal to them. And it troubles them that anyone was harmed by it. Given... especially when I'm telling traditional stories or histories of my own indigenous background or others. And in that instant, it's the attention getter.

But you don't beat that, that's abusive. And to try to change other people, I think to try to change other people's thoughts and feelings and opinions, it violates their own autonomy and freedom. And if I think they disrespected me, how could the answer be to disrespect them?

**Sue O'Halloran:** You know, the truth is, we read each other more than we think. And somebody can tell if you're criticizing them, if you got a plan for them, if you know you're right and they're wrong. And so it's not just how you say something, what you say, but you got to be clear in yourself that you might not have all the answers.