

Strategy 3: Make Space

Donna Washington: As a society, we are fed images all the time, right? Like most of our stuff – telephone, the computer, television – so much of what we think of as entertainment is somebody showing us something. Storytelling links into something a little more primal that's just part of us. So we start listening to a story and like the world explodes around you, and you're seeing things that even you didn't know you could see. And you're going to places even you didn't know you could go. And you've never been there, but you clearly have been there. And this person you have never seen before is suddenly your aunt or your cousin or your uncle. And you, you as a person have never experienced that before and you suddenly go, "That was magical."

Sue O'Halloran: Our brains are very dualistic. And so, if we present ourselves or our point of view or whatever in a very righteous, good, bad, dualistic way, the brain will flip to the other side if they disagree. But when we have kind of the complexity of layers of human beings and all that's going on in the situation, that dualistic part of our brain can't click in because it doesn't fit. It's more complex than all that. And suddenly people are able to see the other points of view, be able to say, "Yeah, that's kind of like me too," especially if the teller is admitting their doubts, their uncertainties, their mistakes. You just don't flip into a defensive part of your brain. And that's where magic can happen. That's where we can be brought together. That's where we can find other points of view.

Donna Washington: Our stories, our foundational ones, tell us who we are. What's cool about storytelling is you can find the places where you can link into other people's stories. And it's also easier to accept someone if you feel like your stories are the same or similar, or if you can find places where you can hook into each other.

So that's why they're important in terms of how we talk to each other, because the truth is, all of our foundational stories boil down to really simple things. We want to be safe. We want the people we love to be safe. We want everyone to have enough to eat. All the people we love, we want them to have enough. We want them to have good lives. If you can find those connections in your stories, you can get through some of the foundational, "This is a scary person. This is a scary idea." But stories can do that.

If you do it right, you should disappear and the story should be there. So, the space you leave for the audience – if your story's got universal hooks in it so that you're pulling out the images – the audience will fill the space, and you just have to be willing to not be there. So that's also something I think can be really tricky for people because it's not about the storyteller. It needs to be about the story.

Adam Booth: I come to my practice of storytelling in a way that I believe is a little different than a number of other people who I am often telling stories with. In this field, we see very frequently a number of people who come to storytelling through acting or through the ministry or through library studies and sometimes performing musicians. My training academically was in music, but

not as a performing musician. I was taught to be a composer and to write music for film and for the stage.

And so that carries over into the way that I approach storytelling, because I'm thinking of the way that a group of people experience a story with a lot of different senses and a lot of different storytellers all at once. So I have a very filmic approach, I think, a very cinematic approach to the way that I tell stories.

So I'm thinking about all those things as I'm putting together a story. If it's original or if it's a folktale, I think about what are the different ways I could have an audience – a group of story-ers – look at and experience this story so that it can reach them the way that they need to experience it in this moment. And that really guides my practice. So you get levels of depth to the storytelling. And really, I find that it's pretty effective because many times I hear people say, “I could just totally live in the world of the story that you were sharing.”

It turns out that a lot of different people see and hear and experience a lot of different things in my stories. And I like that. I want it to be like an artwork on the wall or an artwork that's performed on a stage that, or people say, “Oh, I got this. I, I take this from it. I have part of my own life that I see in that.” And for every single person, that's different. And that's something that I celebrate in storytelling as the person who's providing the artwork to then say, now you take it and figure out, you know, what it means to you, how it touches you.

Dovie Thomason: I remember once a woman was really infatuated or taken with a story I tell; it's a monster story, and she really liked it. But her take on it was everything was resolved and the monster was at rest.

And I thought, how very interesting that that is what her takeaway. Because to me, it is a story of vigilance, because monsters never are gone. And what that meant, and that it meant her life experience, my life experience, as well as all kinds of background things that would come to bear – my being indigenous, her not, me telling a story from my own tradition, her hearing from her tradition. And the stories have to be big enough for that.

I think profoundly that my job is not to make things simple. If I presume the answer, then I'm getting a real rigid structure that then I take from Tennessee to Minnesota, to DC, to Dublin. And I'm forcing everybody into that space instead of being open to what's coming in, and that the storyteller's job isn't to come up with the answer, it's not to me. It is, I believe, it is to, when we story, we're helping people be comfortable with not knowing the answer.

And ambiguity and ambivalence, and even contradiction, that we can hold that. You know, humanity can hold that, and from that, interact, and then decide what the next “we” is going to be.

Sue O'Halloran: The dialogue starts even before you get up on stage, because you have to think about that audience. What do they care about? What's going to resonate with them? Not to sound

too business-y, but it is like a marketing mindset. Not what you want to say, but what can they hear? And then yes, you can say what you want to say. But you have to think about that audience first. So, whether you're going to a school performance, whether it's at a festival, you have to know something about your audience and what they might care about. And you have to think, what are the universals? You can talk about all kinds of things that open up perspectives, but there's got to be commonalities. For many of us, that's our families. So I often talk about my kids, and then all of a sudden I'm talking about Guatemala, or I'm talking about my mother and when she was sick and she passed away, and people have all lost loved ones, they can relate to that.

Donna Washington: Our foundational stories are really important. And if you break them, then you don't even know what's real. This is one of the reasons why, if you go at someone's personal stories, if you go straight out in facts, whatever, they will quadruple and, you know, quintuple down because they need those stories to be true. They need them to be able to function in the world. They need them to make decisions.

But when you can get stories in there that make them think about their foundation, not question it later, but just think about it, then you can move people off of where they stand and onto the next place. Move them closer to you.

Dovie Thomason: There is a huge beauty and gift in stories that we can all find something in them. That's our humanity. Humans came up with language, because we need it. That's how we connect, and that we use stories because stories are our way of embodying something big from inside our head, or that we need in order for you and I to carry on, or for all of it to just flow.

Yes, there's that harmony, yes, there's a universality, yes, we are all homo sapiens, cool, but we're not the same. It's like the birds are all some sort of avian thing, but they're not the same. You cannot hold in one hand a blue jay and in the other a goldfinch and say they are the same. They're eating different things. They're flying different ways. Their mating habits are different, their child-bearing is different, their calls, their songs. And yet they're all birds.

Can't we see the diversity among and the same? Are we not big enough to hold two thoughts that seem to not fit? Yes, we're all the same and no, we're not. And can't we, isn't that a beauty of us? Isn't that a strength of us? And that's the difference. I know that if I believed everybody in a room agreed with everything I said, then there'd be no reason to be up there. And if I needed them to agree with everything I said, then I don't belong up there because I don't know it's presumptuous and perhaps a bit overbearing, even I would say arrogant.