

Strategy 4: Be Vulnerable

Adam Booth: One piece of advice that I got when I was a younger storyteller came from Kathryn Windham. And she said, like without even thinking, having to think about it, she said: “Don't be afraid to make a mistake. You're not performing up here. You are telling a story. And if you make a mistake, just tell them that you made a mistake. They will trust you even more.” And I think one of the things she was saying is, teaching me, that's how you build an even stronger connection with people.

This is something that I hardly see anywhere in life. People acknowledging that they've made mistakes, and then trying to go back and say, “Here's what, here's what wasn't right.”

You know, I have sometimes said words that I thought I should not have said that. Sometimes I've had to say, “I am sorry. I didn't, I didn't, I shouldn't have said those words.” Or, “it was insensitive that the story came out that way today.” Or sometimes, you know, something just happens in a place. Storytelling is so live and so real and in the moment, and there's so many variables that sometimes things happen. And I – because of that, those lessons – try to practice this concept of asking for forgiveness if that happens in the moment, or even later, if I am taught from someone, you know, here's something that happened that you might not realize what you said, so that I can be a stronger bearer of tradition, have a stronger artistic walk, build greater community.

Sue O'Halloran: It can seem contradictory, but actually being vulnerable and letting people know you make mistakes is actually how they can come to trust you. Because you're telling the whole story, right? Now, that doesn't mean that you don't do your work ahead of time and get some understanding what might be offensive to people, especially if you're telling any kind of culture or story outside of your own experience. I never tell a story on stage unless I've run it by a number of diverse folks, because I can totally miss the point. And, I'd be honest about, I'm just learning this, or I didn't know this.

I talk a lot about race and prejudice in my stories. I always make a point to talk about some way I was prejudiced. That makes everybody in the audience go, okay, I don't have to be perfect here. And yet it's not just like, so I'll keep on being ignorant. It's like, here's what I learned and here's what I would do differently.

So I don't say, “I'm here, you should come here, this is the right place to be, this is the right way to be.” You structure a story, so you take a journey with your audience that they're with you. You be vulnerable. You say, I have my doubts too. I'm hesitant about this, or I was angry, and that wasn't very productive. And as they start to identify with you, that you're, I guess, inspiring with respect. You're not telling them how they should be. You're not wagging a finger at them. You can teach all kinds of things if you take the journey with people, and they discover, as you discover, you be vulnerable, you use yourself as the person who's learning and growing. And I think that tempers people a little bit, because if you think about anytime you've been upset, if

somebody keeps interrupting you, or they tell their story, you're still angry. But if you just get to have the Vesuvius and kind of let it rip, emotions are energy in motion. So through a story, through us going through emotions, we can kind of channel people. They feel heard. And when people feel heard, they actually calm down. And that's when you can be open to other perspectives.

There's a phrase that says, "The world doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care." And again, when we tell stories and make ourselves vulnerable, people are able to feel our hearts. Again, you can't tell people, "I really care about this." But if you show it and then they think, "Wow, she really cares about that." That's their opinion. They value that. Now they are actively involved in the story. They're creating the little summary statements and what it all means as you go. Then that connection is built where people, there's a trust that's built.

We often think that people first tune into, you ever hear that, the radio station WIFM, what's in it for me? But actually, when you get up to talk, what they're first thinking is, "Why do I trust this person? Who are they to tell me anything?" And so in your story, if you can establish that human connection to begin with, then they say, "Oh, I will listen to this person" because, ABC, but one of the things should be "cause she's like me." There's something we have in common. People are always looking for, how does this relate to me? Yes. So you have to show that. You have to let yourself. So one of the big questions in all my so-called social justice stories, which I guess isn't a great word anymore – always was a clunky word, especially now – but I always say to myself, "How am I like the thing I want to change?" To me, that's how a bridge is built. How am I like the thing I want to change? Then the audience doesn't have to be defensive. They don't have to feel like they're getting scolded, they're wrong. We're in this together.