

Strategy 5: See the Bigger Picture

Donna Washington: When I work with politicians, I talk about the result of what happens when you create these really scary stories because then you get into power, and then what are you supposed to do? You politic and then you govern. And those two things are different. Politics is: I want to win my seat. Governing is: I need to actually do the job I got hired for.

The problem becomes, a lot of politicians use negative campaigning to get elected. So you go in front of your constituents and you announce that the person and the party that you're running against is Satan. They're evil and wicked and they want you to die. They want to take your stuff and you just go on and about how terrible they are. And this is something that people have been bathed in for a long enough time. That becomes part of their foundational understanding of things. Right? They believe that this other group of people who they don't really know anything about, really, they become imaginary, scary people. They've come for, they're coming for them. And so they really become afraid of their fellow Americans. Not that we have a different point of view. They're trying to kill us. Right?

Then you get elected. And now you have to work with this other party to accomplish things. The governing part. But if you have convinced your constituents that they're the devil, how do you work with them? What do you do? I'm going to offer up part of my soul and we're going to, like, get this road fixed. You know what I mean? The rhetoric out of this makes it hard to then go forward.

How do you get anything done if you cannot work with the other people in government? You're supposed to work across lines. That's how you get things done. But if you make it impossible, you cannot govern. So when I work with politicians and I start quoting some of the really sort of hyperbolic things that I've heard, and they laugh because they know that what they're doing is trying to get into office. What they don't understand is the damage that they leave behind with the stories they tell doesn't disappear when the election is over. You have to tell better stories.

Lyn Ford: I'm not going to bring up topics that include judgment and bias of any kind. I could, but what's the point of doing that when you're trying to communicate with someone else? We cut off communication by being so judgmental, both about ourselves and about what we anticipate from others. We cut off that opportunity to share love, which we should all be trying to share. I may not like everything that you say, but that doesn't mean I can't love the fact that you and I are here together and we can talk. So mindset, attitude about the whole thing, a willingness to relax and to share yourself with someone else. Those are the things that can make a difference in the world.

Sue O'Halloran: To be the bridge rather than the answer is how dialogue happens. And it's not always easy. We all get emotional about certain events and certain issues. But when I can put myself in that place of being the bridge, I change, not just them. And that's why they feel like they have some power themselves. Now we've got a relationship going.

Adam Booth: I'm always thinking about what is the power that I wield as an artist, as a person who gets in front of a group of people and says things and sends messages. And how do I refine that power so that as many people as possible can sit together in community and experience the same story. How is it that I can break some of the barriers that might exist because of the way that I look to them or that they look to me, or because of the setting where we are, or because of the experiences we brought into the space in that day? Universal elements, archetypal elements are the way that we make that happen.

When you listen to a folktale, when you see a storyteller tell a folk tale, there are universal elements that you say, "Oh, I recognize myself in that. I live within that. I have had that experience." Or if it's not exactly something you have lived, I can understand it because it's like something that I know. Because what has happened to folk tales over time is that they have blossomed in universal qualities.

And so I try to put a lot of universal elements into my work. I root my storytelling in universal elements so that whenever I'm asked to go to anywhere in the world – you know, often we're called as storytellers to tell stories to people that we've never met until right there. And sometimes we don't even get to meet them until we start talking. As I'm telling a story to a group of people, I'm actively listening all the way through, because whether an audience realizes it or not, they talk to each other all the time throughout a story. As they relate to things in the story, they'll say, "Oh, I had an uncle just like that."

And because I listen all the way through, I hear what people are saying, and I can in real time change the story. Sometimes it's nonverbal. People will show you if they're interested in the story or not. They'll show you if they have brought into this space trauma from earlier in their lives or earlier in that day – something just made them so mad and they just don't want to listen to this story and someone drug them in there. Right? Well, you can shape and talk. It is a conversation. We're having conversation here. It's just that usually the story-ers, the audience, they aren't saying out loud to me their side of the conversation. I am trained to read it as it's happening and listen very closely.

Sue O'Halloran: If we start to think of listening as actually a break from all the clutter in our brain, like to slow down enough to take in another human being, it can actually be fun. It could actually be kind of relaxing; you're not trying to win your case. But it is like a practice, and I have to work on it all the time myself, even though I teach listening in my workshops. All the time I have to say, "It's not about you, slow down. Who is this person?" To spend enough time with the person to find out who they are uniquely. And what brought you to think that way? What experiences in your life made you see it this or that way? And not so you can jump on it and tell them where they're wrong, but to really, actually find out where that, how it happened in them is so interesting.

Think of yourself on an anthropological expedition. How is it possible that this uncle who's so loving and so good to my cousins and what, could think that? Well, why not find out what causes

you to think that? Where did you hear that? How do you know that? And I think it can be, you could have an interesting, more interesting time.

Lyn Ford: I was on a walk in a park, and for some reason instead of just enjoying the walk, my mind started to attempt to identify every bird that I heard. I don't know why I was so obsessed with that, but I was writing in a little notebook because I always carry some kind of paper to write ideas on story, poetry, whatever. I'm writing down what I think the bird is. An older gentleman walked past me. This was when my hair was still black and about 30 pounds lighter, at least, and he just sat down on the bench beside me and said hello. I said hello. He asked what I was doing, and I said, "I'm trying to figure out the names of all the birds that I hear."

The gentleman said, "Why do you need to know all their names? All you need to do is just enjoy their songs." I thought, "That is so true. That is so smart." I closed up my little notebook, and I put the notebook and pencil back in my pocket. We just sat there and listened to the birds and then began to talk. It was one of the most pleasant afternoons I'd ever had, but it began with just appreciating the sounds around me and the fact that I did not have to know everything. I just needed to listen, just take it in, just absorb it. Listen to the day and let that impact the way that you feel.

One simple way is to wake up in the morning, and before you start to do anything else, listen to the day. What sounds do you hear? It could be the sound of traffic, but it could also include bird songs. You might hear the breeze, the rustling of the leaves on trees, the voices of children on their way to school, and listening in that way relaxes us, and starts us off with the opportunity to listen even more. We're ready for it.

Another thing that we can add to that is to be open to the sounds around us, the sounds of other people's voices. We may not particularly like what the person is saying, but if we can just listen to their voice, we may pick up on emotions, we may pick up an understanding of where they're trying to come from.

If we just breathe slowly, instead of tensing up, and open our ears, our eyes, our hearts, that kind of listening can make all the difference in what's communicated. We don't exhale all the troubles that we take in during the day, all the things that might be in the air that aren't healthy for us. In a day, we will inhale all of that stuff and only exhale a third of it. So the more you can relax your body, inhaling and then having a deep exhale as part of that breath, the more effective your breathing is, the healthier you'll be.

It also helps you to relax and be open to other people's stories. When we tense up, part of our body has said: "I don't want to do this. I don't want to hear this. I might not want to be here." Then you're not open to much of anything, but you're also closing off your own opportunity for good health, because your lungs are kind of crushed by your body slouching. That makes your heart beat harder. It makes it more difficult to just get that air into your body.

And so, all of it has to do with the breath. My great-grandma would say, "When you breathe in, it's a blessing. When you breathe out, it's a prayer, so be careful what you ask for." And she wasn't talking about just the breath. She was talking about the words people say.