



You've got STORIES!

Prospecting Your Past to Uncover Your *Own* Stories

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If you've been in professional speaking for more than a year or two you've no doubt heard countless versions of the Lighthouse Story, the Starfish Story and other rehashed stories. At conferences and meetings they're repeated ad nauseam. The equivalent of "hack humor" in comedy, these stories are the cockroaches of the speaking industry...they cannot be eradicated and will outlive us all. Every new speaker it seems trots them out as if they're freshly minted.

And NSA and CAPS members recount their own horror stories regarding speakers (not all of them newbies) telling OPS: Other People's Stories. What's worse: another speaker telling your story badly from the platform, or telling it better than you? Either way, it's an ethics violation, as well as a signal to others a speaker's not-ready-for-prime-time.

Many speakers lower their head and murmur that they don't have great stories since they haven't beaten cancer, founded a Fortune-50 company or won a Nobel Prize. And yet you don't have to have survived a bullet to the head, turned around a failing airline or even won a Cavett award to have stories to tell. Truth be told, you've got stories, you just need to uncover them!

The Best Stories: Unique Yet Universal

What makes a speaker's story compelling? For starters, it's their story. Not a story gleaned from Reader's Digest, the *Chicken Soup for the Soul*[®] series, or another speaker's repertoire. Authenticity reigns. Audiences sense when a story is fictitious or appropriated from other sources. It's fine that your story is personal and originated with you, yet for the audience to embrace it the story should have universal appeal. Is there a universal theme found within your story? One that audience members can relate to? If not, then the story isn't serving your audience. For example: we can all relate to stories with these familiar themes:

- ✓ The coming of age
- ✓ Acquiring of wisdom
- ✓ The hero's journey
- ✓ Finding prince charming
- ✓ Haste making waste
- ✓ Practice making perfect

In fact, the list of universal truths is a lengthy one. For any story you're considering using, identify for yourself the universal appeal it offers its listeners.

History, Her Story, Our Story

Everyone has stories. Your family has them: about how you were conceived, born or bred. About how your ancestors arrived at this country. Your religion has them, as do your religious leaders! Your organization has them: about the founders, the incorporating of the business and its development. Your nation has them: about its founders, wars, famines, transformations and growth. Cultures have them. They may take the form of myths and legends. And you yourself have stories: of growing up, of life's milestones and your travels. It's time to uncover your own stories.

Uncovering Your Story Gems

People constantly ask me: "How do I find my own stories?" It's hard to do in isolation yet easy to do with the help of others. Engage a friend, colleague or family member and spend some time together. Have them ask you the following questions and capture what emerges (through notes or recording). Many of the questions pertain to the first time you did something. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it is guaranteed to generate stories.

- ✓ Your first day at school
- ✓ First pimple
- ✓ Your first girlfriend / boyfriend
- ✓ First breakup
- ✓ Your first trip overseas
- ✓ First time you saw your partner
- ✓ Your first million (made or lost!)
- ✓ Your first arrest
- ✓ First overnight at camp
- First pet
- ✓ First kiss
- ✓ First beer / tobacco chew / mixed drink
- ✓ Your first job
- ✓ Meeting your (first) wife / husband
- ✓ Your first audit
- ✓ First child or grandchild

Other places to find stories:

- ✓ What was your family like?
- ✓ Where did you grow up and what made it distinctive?
- ✓ Describe your favorites from childhood? Smell? food? Hangout? Favorite Relative?
- ✓ Ever do anything extraordinary?
- ✓ Ever witness an extraordinary event?
- ✓ Ever have a brush with fame? (An encounter with a famous person)

By using this process I've generated stories about the Great Dane on the corner that inhibited my paper route, the time in Las Vegas I made Sinbad the comedian laugh, a mishap at a Chinese banquet hall in Hong Kong (my Chinese wedding banquet), how I sold lemonade to the National Guard during the riots in Berkeley in the 60's and more. Each story has a moral, learning point or universal truth embedded within it that others appreciate. My story resonates with listeners, as will yours when it taps a universal theme or truth. Listeners will either inhabit your story with you, or it will remind them of their own story. Either way, you've connected! Congratulations.

Types of Stories

As a professional speaker your use of stories should be strategic. More than to entertain yourself and your audience, your story should tie in to your main theme or to learning point you're discussing. You may be telling your signature story, or using a story to illustrate a point you've just made, or are about to make. You may use a story to transition from one part of a presentation to another, as a change of pace or to focus the audience's attention onto a third party instead of talking directly to them about themselves. Stories validate and reinforce your message and offer an outlet for thoughtful reflection.

Story On!

Now that I've convinced you that you indeed do have stories in your past you can safely use to benefit your audiences, and helped you uncover them, it's your job to hone them. How?

- ✓ Write them out.
- ✓ Tell them informally to your friends to see what interests them, what they want to hear more about, and what the stories mean to them.
- ✓ Share them at your Toastmasters club, and in your other presentations.
- ✓ Find a Story Swap (a regular gathering of storytellers where stories are freely exchanged) and ask for feedback before sharing yours. (Check local libraries or storytelling guilds for more information on local swaps.)
- ✓ Record your stories. Now, pour yourself a glass of wine and listen to your own stories. How can you improve?
- ✓ Ask for feedback from your audiences and students, through written evaluations, to learn which stories stuck, which stuck in their craw, and which are their favorites? Why?
- ✓ Practice, practice, practice.
- ✓ Listen to storytelling on National Public Radio: Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion, Ira Glass's This American Life, and the oral histories of StoryCorps.
- ✓ Enjoy stories online at www.themoth.org.

And then you too will live happily every after!

Craig Harrison tells stories under the name Hackin' 'Boo. He got his start melding stories with silliness when he went door-to-door in his hometown of Berkeley telling as an eleven year old selling Recycled Jokes. Visit his storytelling site www.HackinBoo.com or enjoy story resources at www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.