

PROFESSIONALLY SPEAKING



SPRING 2010

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YOU'VE GOT STORIES!

Prospecting Your Past to Uncover Your Own Stories

By Craig Harrison

Once you've been a professional speaker for long enough, you inevitably hear countless versions of the Lighthouse Story, the Starfish Story, and other rehashed epic tales, repeated ad nauseam at conferences and meetings. The equivalent of "hack humor" in comedy, these stories are the cockroaches of the speaking industry—they cannot be exterminated and will outlive us all. Every new speaker seems to feel obligated to trot them out as if they're freshly minted.

NSA members are fond of recounting 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 do? Either way, it's a serious ethics violation, as well as a signal that the speaker is "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. But you don't need to survive a bullet in the head, turn around a failing airline, or even win a Cavett award to have stories to tell. You've got plenty of stories! You only need to uncover them.

THE BEST STORIES: UNIQUE YET UNIVERSAL

What makes a speaker's story compelling? For starters, it's truly theirs, not 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. Even when your story is personal and origi-

nated with you, for the audience to embrace it, the story must have universal appeal, a universal theme. If not, then the story isn't serving your audience.

Here are some familiar themes we can all relate to, a short set of universal truths from an almost infinite list:

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

HISTORY, HER STORY, OUR STORY

Everyone has stories. Your family has them—about how you were conceived, born, and bred; how your ancestors arrived at this country; about work and love and successes and failures. Your religion has them, as do your religious leaders (who'd better have them if the flock is to stay awake during their sermons!). 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.

These stories might take the form of myths and legends. Memory changes over time; people are known to elaborate, add details, filtering in their personal perspectives. So what? If it's yours and if it makes an authentic point that will be meaningful to your audience, then it's a good one!

UNCOVERING YOUR STORY GEMS

So how do you find your own stories? It's hard to do by yourself, yet easy to do with the help of others. Make a date to hang out with a friend, colleague, or family member. Have them ask you the following questions and capture what emerges (through notes or recording). Don't be limited by this list, but it is a great start, guaranteed to generate stories.

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

I've generated stories using this process 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 60s, and more. Each story has a moral, learning point, or universal truth embedded within it that others appreciate. 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

When you are a professional speaker, your use of stories should be strategic. Not simply to entertain yourself and your audience,

your story should tie in to your main theme or to the 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 about them. 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 them. How can you improve them, making them more universally relevant?
- 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.

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 as an eleven-year-old selling Recycled Jokes. Visit his storytelling site www.HackinBoo.com or enjoy story resources at www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.

