

Storyteller & Toastmasters: *Learning From Each Other!*

By Craig Harrison, ExpressionsOfExcellence.com

Storytellers and Toastmasters. Similarities abound. Each communicates with audiences, entertains, informs and inspires their listeners, and receives applause in return. Storytelling is arguably the oldest profession and its traditions carry on around the world. For their part, Toastmasters have been meeting since 1924 when founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley launched this educational non-profit that now has over 10,000 clubs in 90 countries.

There are already Toastmasters clubs dedicated to storytelling in Southern and Northern California, and Toastmasters conferences and conventions often feature storytellers. *The Toastmaster* magazine features periodic articles about storytelling. There are even storytellers who are active Toastmasters, using club meetings to polish their craft and develop new material.

As one who is active in both communities, I've come to believe each group has valuable lessons to teach the other.

Five things Storytellers can learn from Toastmasters

1. Speaking "In The Moment"

Toastmasters regularly participate in Table Topics, where they're asked to speak "off the cuff" for 1-2 minutes on a random topic, without any warning or preparation time. As a result, they become adept at thinking, listening and speaking on their feet and reacting to whatever comes their way.

This skill can help storytellers with their pre-, post- and between-story interactions with audiences.

2. The Value of the Introduction

Toastmasters pride themselves on mastering the art of the introduction. They delight in introducing each other in ways that draw in audiences, predispose them to listen, build credibility in the presenter and foreshadow the presentation to come. *Audiences are naturally curious about tellers too. Your introduction can help audiences get to know, appreciate and admire you, and deepen their connection to you and your stories.*

3. Developing One's Internal Time Clock

Toastmasters time all aspects of their meetings, with special attention to speeches. Whether they are giving

a 5-7 minute speech, a 2-3 minute evaluation or speaking "off the cuff" for 1-2 minutes, the net result is that they, over time, develop an excellent ability to measure presentation time. Thus they become more adept at the ability to perform for a finite amount of time, no more and no less. Each week Toastmasters practice speaking within time limits. Their contests are won (or lost) in part through adherence to prescribed time limits. *Storytellers too can develop a feel for how to tell a two-minute tale, a seven-minute story or something in between.*

4. Live Audiences

Toastmasters provide their members with a ready-made audience. Tellers can benefit from an audience of poised listeners who laugh, sigh and cry in response to what they hear. How wonderful for tellers! Oh, did I mention Toastmasters' proclivity for clapping? Tellers can only practice so much in isolation. As *Tellers we can use audiences to refine our material, fine-tune our timing and gauge audience comprehension, appreciation and reaction.*

5. Immediate Feedback

Toastmasters evaluate all presentations. They are skilled at acknowledging strengths and recommending areas for improvement. Their blend of motivation and specific recommendations provide tellers with immediate feedback on what was perceived to be effective, where improvement can occur. *Tellers can gather many data points about their stories through the written and verbal evaluations Toastmasters provide each meeting.*



As Teller...



...And Toastmaster!

Five things Toastmasters can learn from Storytellers:

1. Vocal Variety

Stories often feature characters, each with its own voice. Tellers' develop the ability to distinguish different characters for their audiences through their vocal inflections, variety, pitch, volume, accent and nuances.

2. Stage Presence

Many Toastmasters find themselves tethered to a lectern, planted in front of a microphone or behind a table. They rarely make full use of a stage or podium they find themselves on. Storytellers will often use the entire stage, coming upstage, downstage, to the left or right, to say nothing of kneeling, teetering and more.

3. The Power of the Pause

Storytellers understand the pause as a valuable mechanism for building drama, adding suspense, and imbuing key words and sentences with added meaning. Pauses signify to audiences that something profound, important or special has been — or is about to be — said.

4. Imagery

Storytellers paint marvelous verbal images of scenes and settings. They use adjectives to convey color and detail in their stories. So should Toastmasters. Too often Toastmasters give us just the facts, and little else. Storytellers excel at the details: the sights, smells and sounds of scenes, the nuances and subtleties of situations, and the specifics of settings. Each adds to the power of a piece.

5. Setting the Stage

Every story is different. Thus, each time a storyteller takes the stage or begins a story, he or she has a blank canvas to paint. Like Toastmasters, they 'paint' through body language, gesture, facial expressions and vocal variety. But they don't rely on the clichéd "Mr./Madame Toastmasters, fellow Toastmasters and most welcomed guests..." opening line. Toastmasters who rely on this rote opening are relying on a crutch that doesn't work beyond Toastmasters meetings. Worse yet, it undercuts any impact a powerful opening line or paragraph possesses. Toastmasters should begin each presentation by setting the stage appropriately — though posture, voice, gestures, and employing other elements like surprise, shock, mystery or suspense.

Untold Stories — Misnomers On Both Sides

Just as many presume storytelling is just for kids, so too do many people regard Toastmasters as simply the are afraid to speak. In point of fact, storytelling is for everyone, and Toastmasters holds value for beginners and advanced orators alike. Storytellers in particular can benefit greatly from Toastmasters participation, and Toastmasters can glean much from participating in storytelling.

This Story is To Be Continued...

So what are you waiting for? This story doesn't end here. It's your move. Visit these monthly or multiple-meetings-per-month clubs that specialize in storytelling:

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Danville: Tales and Tellers

1st Saturday mornings
(925) 228-0120; tevist@sbcglobal.net
www.toastmastersd57.com/findclubdocs/tales_tellers1a.pdf

Oakland: Dramatically Speaking Toastmasters

2nd Saturday mornings
(925) 757-2787 DST1580@comcast.net

Oakland: LaughLovers — The Cantu Comedy Lab

3rd Sunday nights
(925) 577-7948 shags@noi.net
www.laughlovers.com

Sacramento: Aesop's Fblers

1st Thursday nights (916) 362-9013
www.freewebs.com/aesops_fblers_toastmasters/

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Culver City: Yarnspinnners

2nd and 4th Wednesday nights
(310) 479-6318 stepsay@aol.com
<http://yarnspinnners.freetoasthost.com>

SpeechCrafters

2nd and 4th Tuesdays evenings
Pasadena (626) 614-0411
www.toastmasterstalespinnners.com

Orange: Orange Upon a Time

2nd, 4th, and 5th Thursday evenings
(714) 921-3776 or (714) 771-5311
koscki1@sbcglobal.net
www.orgsites.com/ca/club192/index.html

Panorama City/Tarzana: Storytelling and Performing Arts Club

2nd Monday evenings
rudeutsch@gmail.com (818) 541-0950

Craig "Hackin' 'Boo" Harrison is a Distinguished Toastmaster and past District Governor in Toastmasters. He first joined in 1992. Craig is also a vice chair of the Storytelling Association of Alta California (www.storysaac.org), past president of Dramatically Speaking Toastmasters (1580-57) and told tales in China in 2006. E-mail him your experiences with storytelling Toastmasters clubs at stories@craigspeaks.com. Browse www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com for more storytelling and Toastmasters resources.