Praise for *The Storyteller's Way*

'This book is about that rare thing: the magic of storytelling, one of the sustaining fountains of the world.'

Ben Okri, OBE, novelist, poet and Booker Prize winner

'Sue and Ashley have distilled the essence of their unparalleled knowledge of the craft of storytelling into this magic potion of a book. The Storyteller's Way is much more than a storytelling primer: the stories, techniques and practices in this wise and generous book will help you find and express your own unique and authentic voice. If you are familiar with the authors' work, you will devour each chapter, as I did, with a delighted smile. If it's new to you then I'm willing to bet that you will soon be knocking on the door of the International School of Storytelling, begging to be let in.'

Geoff Mead, PhD, author of
Coming Home to Story: Storytelling Beyond Happily Ever After (Vala, 2011) and *Telling the Story: The Heart and Soul of Successful Leadership* (Jossey-Bass 2014)

'This book will be a key text for people interested in storytelling for years and years to come. It is a truly lovely book, in which the authors share their deep experience with storytelling in many different contexts, their wisdom and remarkable creativity. Buy this book, cherish it, and you will travel the storytellers' path with greater ease and more fun.'

Alida Gersie, PhD, author of many books and editor of
Storytelling for a Greener World: Environment, Community and Story-based Learning

'Ashley and Sue have been performing and teaching as storytellers for many years. This book is the fruit of long experience. It's full of ideas, exercises and stories that have been developed and refined by long usage. For anyone wanting to explore the practice of storytelling (either as a practitioner or as a beginner) it's a helpful and inspiring handbook.'

Hugh Lupton, storyteller, author

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The Storyteller's Way

Sourcebook for Inspired Storytelling

by

Ashley Ramsden and Sue Hollingsworth

Foreword by David Campbell

Dedication

This book is dedicated with gratitude and love to all the students who have trained at the International School of Storytelling between 1994 and 2012: without you this book would not have been possible.

S.H. & A.R.

To an ancient oak in the heart of Wales inside which this whole journey began.

A.R.

To my father, Melville James Castle (1927–2008) who was my first storyteller. I can still see his shoulders shaking in glee as he told some daft story.

S.H.

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Preface

Once, a student of Zen came to visit her master. He was old and frail. She knew he did not have long to live. She sat before him in silence for a long time, a brazier close by warming them both. Then he reached beneath his robes and took out a beautifully bound book.

'I give this to you,' he said. 'In it is all the wisdom I have learnt in my long years of meditation and study. Treasure it with your life.'

The student reverently received the book and bowed before her teacher. Then without opening it, she quickly threw it onto the brazier where the flames consumed it. She became the new master.

Nasrud'din wanted to learn a musical instrument. Finally he found the one of his dreams. He took it home and played it to his wife but – eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee – on and on he played the same note for hours. His wife was going crazy.

'What are you doing Nasrud'din? Everyone else who plays that instrument plays scales, cadenzas, mazurkas!'

'I know,' said Nasrud'din, 'they're all looking for this one note.'

Foreword

Over the last thirty years, storytelling in the UK has been growing in sprightly leaps and bounds. International festivals, a vibrant Scottish Storytelling Centre, the Crick-Crack Club at major London venues, the Society for Storytelling and countless workshops countrywide have been at the hub of a remarkable revival. The International School of Storytelling has been the hidden jewel amidst this hive of activity and I was fortunate to be a student there in 1996. It might well be re-christened the 'School of Life' as, on my travels as a storyteller, I heard the often-repeated mantra: 'That experience changed my life.' The beauty of the teaching and the teachers is that they speak, as our Scottish Travellers say, 'Eye to eye, mind to mind and heart to heart.' They give people, in the profoundest sense, the freedom of their own voice. For this golden meeting I am ever grateful.

It might be a riddle to some why interest in storytelling is growing so rapidly; but in our time when close-knit communities have all but disappeared, families live far apart from each other, and technology, along with ubiquitous screens, has replaced much of our real human inter-relationship, storytelling can return to us a deep sense of belonging and recreate the nourishing warmth of community. In the ceilidhs I have so often hosted in my house, I have repeatedly seen surprise turn to sheer delight as guests become part of the ageless wonder of story, music and song. They rediscover companionship and community in their brave and intimate sharing, putting, so to speak, a bit of peat on the fire. Something lost is recovered, an innate hunger satisfied, people become joyfully themselves. It is this that our age cries out for. My conviction over the years has only grown deeper that, if we are to survive as a

healthy society, it will be through rediscovering this sense of community. All the humanity, magic and technology we require can be found in the wisdom of the stories. It was Albert Einstein who said, 'Deeper meaning resides in the fairytales told me in my childhood than in any truth that is taught in life ... to imagine is everything.' Anyone who has taken part in a well-crafted evening of stories would agree with him.

I am fortunate in having had both Ashley and Sue as guides. Rich in their complementary talents, both generous and attentive teachers, this book is a testimony to the alchemy of their work. From it you will learn that you are already a storyteller and that you can burnish your metal to gold. On the journey you will discover your confident self, your own voice and an insight into your unique beauty and the beauty of others in their infinite variety. It is a voyage of body, heart, mind and spirit. Implicit in this book is the conviction that we storytellers are bearers of gifts; that the holy pact the stories make with you, the storyteller, is the knowledge that you are bearing gifts and treasures down the carrying stream of time. It is a high calling to be an entrusted guardian, but as the book resolutely assures the reader, your feet and voice must tread firmly to reach the heights. Our mentors make clear that above all you must love the story you tell whatever its nature.

There's a favourite riddle amongst storytellers that runs as follows:

What is it that will never break, will never wear out,
You can give them away and still have them,
Each time you give them away they will get better,
And if you don't give them away they are of no use?

(The answer is under your tongue)

David Campbell

Author of *Tales to Tell I and II* (St Andrews Press), *Out of the Mouth of the Morning* and *A Traveller in Two Worlds* (Luath Press)

Introduction

You've probably picked up this book because you're curious about storytelling. Perhaps you want to learn how to tell a story, or maybe you want to be able to tell stories better. These days, as storytelling becomes ever more popular, there's no telling why you might want to tell stories: you might be a teacher or a parent who wants to inspire children with the gift of imagination or pass on learning in a vivid way; you might be a librarian trying to encourage children to read; you might be a teacher of English to foreign students helping people get under the skin of another language; or a therapist looking to stories to help unlock deeper healing. You might be a business person trying to inspire your colleagues or workers; or someone who longs to be able to entertain others as a performer; or maybe you have no reason other than a perennial fascination with stories, and would enjoy being able to tell them well yourself.

Whoever you are, you're holding in your hand a treasure trove of stories, exercises and insights from over 18 years of experience of teaching the craft of storytelling at the International School of Storytelling based in East Sussex in the UK. Every one of the thousands of students we have taught, from over 20 countries, has contributed to this book with their questions, experiences and challenges. All of them have something in common: they love stories. So if that's you too, and you would like to be able to tell them well, whether to adults or children, in the boardroom or on walks, for entertainment or to make sense of your life, read on ...

Storytelling is serious fun. We laughed (and struggled) a lot writing this book, as you would do with telling any good story. Now, there are plenty of good stories in this book and you could just enjoy reading them; but to be a storyteller you

have to be able to actually *tell* them. This book is about telling them well, and by that we mean not just with craft but also with heart, as a gift to your listeners.

What will you need?

In our experience, storytelling is a social art, something that can only happen when more than one person is present, so in order to practice and get the most from this book, you'll need at least one other person or some companions to practise with. All the exercises can be done with one or two other people (or a cast of thousands if you prefer). The only other things you'll need are a quiet space, a notebook, pen and some means of keeping the time.

Each chapter covers an important aspect of the craft of storytelling. You can dip in at any point you like. However, we have arranged the chapters in a sequence that will help you deepen your experience and make links with other related themes. Some of what we've written may seem blindingly obvious, but other parts will give you pause for thought. Within each chapter the exercises can be taken separately and we recommend that you follow the order given. Read the guidelines a number of times until you've all agreed on what you're doing. Feel free to repeat the exercises as many times as you like: we return to them regularly and often gain new insights.

Each exercise is structured in the following way: do, discuss, discover – the 3 Ds!

When *doing* the exercises, try not to glance ahead at the questions and discoveries, as that may affect your initial experience. In *discussing*, use our questions as a guideline but allow space for others to come up: ours are not exhaustive, they're just designed to start you off. However, to go into something deeply requires focus, so it's good to stay on track and keep to the theme of the chapter. With *discoveries*, take the time to make your own notes. It's important to reflect on your own progress and record the insights you have gained. Besides, you may discover something uniquely your own that we may not have covered.

Before you start we should mention that, for us, storytelling is also a path of inner development. Expect to be surprised by

discovering things about yourself as you progress through the book. The exercises can be very revealing, and as you build up trust in your partner or group you'll be able to take risks, go deeper and discover more. Woven into each chapter are opportunities to reflect on where you personally need to develop in order to tell stories with honesty and integrity – and we say more about all of this in the last chapter. As the Abenaki storyteller Joseph Bruchac put it, 'The stories are much older and wiser than I am.' To this end we've included a cracking good tale at the close of each chapter, that often says things far better than we could, and which you can also use to put into practice everything you are learning along the way.

Right, that's it and remember, just like the Zen student in the story at the beginning of the book, you can always totally ignore all this advice and plunge straight in. As we say at the School of Storytelling, 'There are no rules, it's just helpful to know what you are doing!'

CHAPTER

1

First Steps

A good beginning makes a good end. English proverb

'The first time I ever told a story in public,' Sue remembers, 'I suddenly found myself in front of two hundred pairs of eyes. Part way through the tale I remember thinking, "How did I get here? What am I doing? Is this what telling a story is supposed to be like?" I was so grateful to have got to the end without forgetting anything that I scuttled off the moment the last word was out of my mouth!'

So why would you tell stories? For some people it's part of their job: as teachers, parents, librarians, healers or in business; but many people want to tell stories simply because they love them and feel compelled to tell them. Whatever the reason, as soon as you say, 'Once upon a time ... ' you step into a long tradition of storytellers. Indeed, some storytellers acknowledge this before they begin, by saying, 'Although you can't see them, behind me is the person who first told me this story, and standing behind her[1], the person she heard it from' – and so on. Whether you've told many stories before and want to work on your skills, or whether you're hoping to tell your first story soon, we're going to start with a process which will help you make a story your own. What do we mean by that? Well, first of all, we *don't* mean learning a story by heart, word for word: that's recitation not storytelling. Storytelling is a social art that begins with a conversation between you and the story. Just like any good conversation, you need to be interested in who you're talking to, and you don't always know what you're going to say next or how your listener will respond! So right from

1 To avoid the awkwardness of both genders we will alternate from chapter to chapter.

the outset there needs to be a meeting between yourself and the story you tell.

Take this short story, for example:

> *Once there was a city surrounded by a high wall with only one gateway. One day a fierce and terrible giant came and placed himself right outside. No one could go in or out. Whenever anyone tried to get close, he reared up, brandishing a huge club. At last the king himself decided to face the giant. He stepped towards him but the giant jumped to his feet and let out a thunderous roar. For a moment the king faltered but then he took another step. The giant roared again but the king kept going. And then he noticed a strange thing – the closer he came, the smaller the giant seemed to become. In fact, by the time he reached him, the giant was no bigger than his little finger. Bending down, the king picked him up and put him on the palm of his hand. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'My name,' said the giant, 'is fear'.*

Let's start by getting interested in this story. For example, where was the city and what is the king like? For Sue when she tells this tale, 'My city is always on top of a hill and the king doesn't really want to go and face the giant, it's just expected of him.' Working in this way, the story changes. There is a meeting between us and the story. There are other questions of course. Why did no one see the giant coming? Was the giant frightened of the people? What did the giant really want? These are the kinds of question whose answers you might not actually weave into your telling but they form an essential background. On a deeper level still, the story has questions for our own lives, for example, 'How do I deal with fear?' and 'How often am I frightened to get close to people?' You need to have examined these questions first so that the story can be told in an authentic voice.

The grace to be a beginner is always the best prayer for an artist. The beginner's humility and openness lead to exploration.

Julia Cameron

From this you can see how important it is to find a story that really grabs you, otherwise there will be an essential ingredient missing – the chemistry, that strange attraction, the magic. And without that, all of the techniques that follow are just techniques. They will have no heart.

So let's get going. Below is an African folktale for you to work with. Once you've done all the exercises in the chapter with this story, you'll be able to apply the process to any story you choose.

Once there was a hunter called Ogaloussa who had six sons. His wife was pregnant again and she was sure it would be another fine boy. One day Ogaloussa took his weapons and went into the forest to hunt. His wife and children went to tend their fields and graze the cattle. In the evening they waited for him to return but he didn't. They ate their meal and went to sleep. Another day passed and still Ogaloussa did not return. His family talked about it and wondered what had happened. A week passed and then a month and eventually his family no longer talked about his disappearance.

One day the wife gave birth to her child, another son. His name was Puli. Puli grew bigger. He began to sit up and crawl, and when he said his first words, these were: 'Where is my father?' The other sons looked at each other.

'Yes,' one of them said. 'Where is father? He should have returned a long time ago.'

'Something must have happened. We must go and look for him,' said another.

'He went into the forest. Let's follow the trail.'

So the sons took their weapons and set off into the forest. They followed the trail until at last, in a clearing, they found their father's weapons and a pile of bones. They knew then that he had been killed in the hunt.

The first son stepped forward. 'It's lucky that I have the power to put a dead person's bones together,' he said, and he gathered the bones and put them together, each in its right place.

The second son spoke. 'I have power too. I can cover the bones with flesh.'

'I can put the blood back into a body,' said the third son.

'I can give the power of breath,' said the fourth; and the hunter's chest began to rise and fall.

'I can give the gift of movement,' said the fifth.

And the sixth son said, 'I can give the power of speech.'

At that moment, Ogaloussa opened his eyes and said, 'Where have I been?'

His sons told him everything. They picked up his weapons and together they went back to the village.

His wife was delighted to see him. She prepared a bath for him and his favourite food. For four days he stayed in the house, and on the fifth day he came out and shaved his head, for that was what people did when they came back from the land of the dead. Then he killed a cow and invited all the villagers to a celebration. Whilst the women were preparing the food he took the cow's tail and braided it. He decorated it with beads and feathers and cowry shells and other beautiful things. It was the finest cow-tail switch the village had ever seen. At the feast he announced that he would give it to the son who had done the most to bring him home. Immediately an argument started.

'I should have it because I put the bones together,' said the first son.

'Well, it wouldn't have been much good without the flesh,' said the second one.

'No, no,' said the third, 'I gave blood, that's the most important.'

'How could you live without breath?' said the fourth, 'I should have it.'

'But where would a hunter be without movement?' said the fifth.

'Speech is definitely the greatest power. Give the cow-tail switch to me!' the sixth son said.

They argued and argued until Ogaloussa told them to be quiet.

'I know which son I will give it to,' he said. He bent down, placed little Puli on his lap and gave the switch to him. 'For he remembered me, and our people say that a man is not truly dead until he is forgotten.'

When the villagers heard these words they all cheered, even the sons, and that day there was singing and dancing and feasting that was long remembered.

If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.

Barry Lopez,
in *Crow and Weasel*

This story is very much about bones and flesh and remembering. We can start our process by imagining a story as having a body with bones and flesh. The bones give you the basic shape and structure of the story whilst the flesh provides the colouring, mood and texture. Let's explore this further with some exercises.

1. Bones

Exercise 1 – Bare Bones

The bare bones are the facts: what happens and in what order. They're like newspaper headlines, short and to the point. So in this story, try to summarise the facts in eight to twelve short phrases or headlines. For example, the first three might be:

- hunter with six sons
- wife pregnant
- goes hunting

Complete the rest of the headlines and write them in your notebook before going any further. If you are working together with someone, you might like to look at their bare bones and compare what you both think is essential.

Now you have the bare bones of the story, the facts and their sequence in time.

Exercise 2 – Mapping

Rather than the links in time, this exercise focuses on how things are related in space. Take a single sheet of plain paper and a pen, or use your notebook if you don't mind a smaller picture. You don't need any colours or artistic ability for this! Imagine you are a bird flying over the landscape of the story. Look down and draw a quick map of the scene of the story, the geography, using simple outlines – a very childlike picture. The picture only includes the landscape, no people. For example, you may want to place the village in the middle of the picture or perhaps you see it to the right. Where would the forest be in relation to the village? Whereabouts in the forest was the hunter found? If several of you do this exercise, you'll

Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation, which is not nurturing to the whole woman.

Maya Angelou

probably all have different pictures: our imaginations all work in different ways.

Take a couple of minutes now to draw your picture before moving on.

The beginning is always today.
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

If you are working with other people, now have a look at how they see the scene before going on to the third exercise. At the end of this chapter we've included our maps as examples of how we saw it.

Exercise 3 – Moving into the Story

You explored how the landscape of the story looked on paper in two dimensions in the last exercise. Now you will lift it into three dimensions. Stand up, take your drawing in one hand and imagine that you are standing on the edge of the paper with the world you have created spread out in front of you. Without looking in detail yet, silently see the pictures you have drawn in the space around you. You might like to point at them so that you can accurately place them in space. There is the forest, here is the village etc. Once you can 'see' the world of your story spread out in front of you, put the paper down and, if you are working with a partner, take them on a guided tour of your world. It's helpful to speak at this time, so that you can describe what you see and your partner can ask questions to clarify the scene. For those of you who are not primarily visual types, this could be challenging but we will be working with the other senses later on.

A story is a way to say something that can't be said in any other way.
Flannery O'Connor

Take some time now to jot down any thoughts or discoveries you have made for yourself about the work we have done so far with the bones of the story.

You now have the bones of the story both in time and space and you are ready to see if you can remember it. If you are worried about whether you can remember a story, you might be pleasantly surprised with the results of the next exercise.

Not so long ago, in the North of England, in the mill and mining towns, houses were built right up against one another, gardens only separated by a low wall or fence. A familiar sight would be two neighbours talking over the fence, exchanging the latest news, stories about what was going on in the community. Nowadays if you work in an office, you might see people standing around the photocopier or the water cooler doing exactly the same

thing. It's an opportunity to share those casual, informal stories that keep us all in touch. So prepare to chat!

Exercise 4 – Casual Telling

First, put away all your papers, your notebook, copies of the story, bare bones, maps etc and then draw your chair close to a partner or two other people who have also been working on this tale. As a group you are going to tell the story, passing it from one to another, taking no more than six minutes in total. Tell as much as you can remember of the story (without glancing at the text) in a casual, informal way, just as you would to a good friend and then pass it on to the next storyteller. For instance, with the story we're working on, you might start 'You know that hunter Ogaloussa? The one with the six sons? Well, apparently he went off into the forest one day and just disappeared ... ' And so on. Allow your listeners to make encouraging noises such as 'Really!' and 'And then what happened?' And most important of all, allow yourself to forget things, to make mistakes, to go back and add things in, 'Oh, and I forgot to tell you ... ' In short, have some fun. Keep passing the story around, telling a bit each until you have finished. If as a group, you are all working on different stories, than take it in turns to casually tell the story to each other, being careful not to take longer than about five minutes.

Stop here until you have completed your casual telling. If anything that interests you about the story comes up in this telling, take a moment to write it down before moving on.

Once you've told the story as a group or all of you have told your individual stories, move on to the discussion questions that follow.

Discussion

Have a chat with your partner or group about the experience. Use the following questions as a framework but also include anything else that may have come up between you.

- As the storyteller how much did you remember?
- Did you feel your listeners were interested in what you had to say?
- Were there any surprises in the telling?

Before eating, open your mouth.

African proverb

Discoveries

You've done four different exercises, working on getting the structure of the story, the bones, under your belts. Already a great deal has happened that will influence the future shape of your story. You may have noticed when your listeners were most engaged and when they were getting that glazed look – some bits already work better than others! This will be a good indication of where you need to do some work. On a personal level, there will be parts of the story you are drawn to more than others, parts where your relationship is stronger than others.

Make notes now about anything important that you need to remember before moving on. Now that you've worked on the bones, let's turn our attention to the flesh of the story.

2. Flesh

You have the bones, the shape and structure of the story. Now it's time to look at the flesh: the details, the emotional colours and the things you didn't even know you knew about the story.

Exercise 5 – the Mood Map

Stories give life to past experience. Stories make the events in memory memorable to others and to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why people like to tell stories.

Roger C. Shank

For this you need to find a quiet place. You will be working on your own but you will need a partner to discuss things with after you have completed your mood map. Take with you a large piece of white paper, lots of different colours, pastels, crayons or even paints if you wish. You do not need any great artistic ability but you do need to be willing to stay with the process for at least twenty minutes.

With a mood map, the colours you choose will be an expression of the feelings or emotional journey you *or* the characters experience during the story (to begin with there is always this mixture of responses to the story). A mood map is abstract, it doesn't have any recognisable objects or figures, the colours move and flow in and out of one another. Try to cover as much of the paper as possible with colour – be expansive and generous and don't be afraid to get messy!

So now, put away any notes or copies of the story, get comfortable and spread the colours out around you. Give yourself at least twenty minutes for the exercise and work in silence, since this concentrates the energy and focus.

Discussion

Get together with a partner and show them your mood map. Talk them through it, naming the emotions and where you felt them in the story, for example, 'This orange patch is the sadness his wife felt when he didn't come back.' Allow your partner to ask questions about your picture and to reflect back any comments they may have. Take some time to jot down any discoveries or insights you have gained.

Discoveries

Some people are more comfortable with the bones, while some revel in the flesh! Just notice where you are most at home. Your strength may lie in the action line of the story where the bones are most important, or if you felt a great relief to be able to expand in this way, your strength may lie here in the feeling realm. Before moving on, make notes if you want to.

Exercise 6 – Visualisation

For this exercise you can work with a partner or with several others. It will take about fifteen minutes. If you decide to work in a small group, one person will need to guide the visualisation and not take part. With a partner you will be able to swap roles. Again, you will need a quiet place where you can get really relaxed and comfortable, even lie down.

You're about to embark on an exercise that will enliven your senses and give you a physical experience of walking in the world of the story (there's more about this in the chapter on the senses). Do this exercise first with the story of 'The Cow-Tail Switch', using the questions prepared for you below. (We'll give you some help in a moment with preparing the exercise for any other story.) All the following instructions are for the person guiding the visualisation.

So let's begin. Make sure your partner is settled down and then say in a quiet, slow voice, 'Get comfortable now. Close your eyes ... take some good deep breaths ... and relax.' Pause for a few moments and then begin to ask the following questions, allowing about fifteen to thirty seconds between each one.

- You are inside the hunter's hut, what does it smell like?

- Where are his weapons? Pick up his spear, what does it feel like in your hand?
- You are standing in the doorway of the hut, looking out towards the forest, what do you see?
- Now you are in the forest, going along the trail, what bird and animal noises can you hear?
- You are taking the cows out to graze; run your hand along the back of one, what does it feel like?
- The cows are being milked into large gourds; pick one up and drink, what does it taste like?
- The new baby is born, you can hear his cries.
- You are going along the forest trail, what can you smell?
- You step into the clearing where the bones and weapons are, what do you see?
- You pick up the bones, what do they feel like?
- The feast is being prepared, what can you smell cooking?
- You see the hunter's face as he bends down to Puli, what does he look like?
- You take a big platter of food and begin to eat, what does it taste of?
- What sound does the cow-tail switch make as it goes through the air?

When you have finished asking the questions, pause for a while and then help the person leave the story world and come back to this one by saying, 'We're going to leave the world of the story now. Take a deep breath ... wiggle your fingers and toes ... and then, when you're ready, slowly open your eyes.'

If you are doing this in a group, this is the end of the exercise. Allow people to make some notes and then go straight to the discussion questions. If you are doing this in pairs, allow your partner to spend some time quietly making any notes about what they have discovered, then reverse roles and repeat the exercise. Once you have both finished, move to the questions.

Discussion

Get together with your partner or the group and use the visualisation questions as a basis for conversation. For example, the first questions included:

- What does the hunter's hut smell like?
- Where are his weapons?

What questions were missing for you?

Take some notes at this point, especially about what was missing for you. Each of us has one or two senses that are strongest and these are the ones that help us get into our stories most readily. It's good to find out what works for you.

The Universe began as a story.

Ben Okri

Discoveries

You may be astonished that others had different experiences. Everyone's inner world is unique. This means that two people can tell the same story in completely different ways because they see things differently in their imagination. The important thing is that the questions evoke sensations of touch, taste, smell, sight and sound in our bodies, so that the world of the story becomes more real to us. Another world is uncovered that is as real as this one.

When you do a visualisation like this on another story, it's essential to prepare your partner's questions in advance. They need to be open questions (those beginning with how, what, where, why, when and who) that evoke a rich sensory experience. Eventually, you'll be able to do this kind of visualisation work on your own with the minimum of preparation. And if you found it difficult, it does get easier with practice.

Exercise 7 – You Don't Know What You Know!

This exercise needs a partner and is best done with a story that you have both already heard (like 'The Cow-Tail Switch'). It will take about thirty minutes for you both to complete. It's very useful for unlocking your feelings about characters and their situation.

One of you is going to make a first attempt at telling the story as fully as possible. The listener's task is to ask questions whenever there is something they want to know more about. For example, if the storyteller is saying, 'The hunter went off into the forest', the listener might ask a basic question such as,

The highest form of ignorance is when you reject something you don't know anything about.

Wayne Dyer

'What kind of trees were there?' But they might also ask, 'What kind of a hunter was he?' or 'Did he enjoy his work?' This type of question unlocks deeper levels of the story. There are only two rules here: the listener needs to be *genuinely* interested (so try not to ask questions just for the sake of it) and the storyteller always has to answer. The only response that's unacceptable is, 'I don't know.'

Once you've been the storyteller, jot down any discoveries you have made and then change roles. Don't read any further until you have both completed the exercise.

When you've both finished, move on to the discussion.

Discussion

Have a conversation with your partner based around the following questions:

- What did you find out about the story that you didn't know before?
- What was it like to find yourself creating the story spontaneously?

Discoveries

Listeners assume the storyteller knows everything about the story. Storytellers are in the privileged position of creating the world of the story and as creator beings they are like gods. This is quite a responsibility. More about this later.

Write down any thoughts or insights you may have about this part of the process before moving on.

Across the world, in the last couple of decades, fitness clubs have flourished. Everyone seems to be after the perfect body. Storytellers have the same desire. Our story needs the perfect proportions of form and fantasy, action and description, bones and flesh in all the right places! So let's see how you can do that.

Exercise 8 – Perfect Proportions

You will need a partner and about five to ten minutes each, depending on whether you want to tell the whole story or just part of it. One person will tell the story, as much as they remember. The listener's task is to help the storyteller achieve the perfect balance of flesh and bones. As you've discovered,

the bones relate to the action line of the story, the places where the plot moves on, whilst the flesh corresponds to the detail, decorations and embroidery where the action stops and you can live more fully in the world of the story. The listener is going to be like a conductor, giving the storyteller signals for when the story needs to move on and where it needs to slow down and have more description. When you're the listener you'll use two signals. If you've had enough description and want to move the story on, give a few brisk taps on your legs. The storyteller then needs to get into action and concentrate on the bones as quickly as possible. When you feel that the story is moving too fast and you'd like more description, lift both hands and using all your fingers, make a beckoning gesture to the storyteller to show 'give me more!' The storyteller should then concentrate on the flesh and give more detail.

Sit down opposite each other and either tell the whole story or just part of it, for up to ten minutes.

Afterwards, take some time to record when your listener wanted more and when they needed less.

Discussion

Have a conversation with your partner around these questions:

As the storyteller,

- Did the listener's needs match your own?
- How easy was it for you to follow your listener's instructions?
- What did it feel like not to be in control?

Discoveries

Sometimes it's hard for listeners to ask for what they want. People are not usually in this position. But still they want a satisfying experience, and as storytellers it's our job to provide it. When you tell a story you can't expect to get these obvious visual clues, but an attentive storyteller will notice them in other more subtle ways. However, this exercise can help develop a sensitivity to what the listeners want and ultimately to what the story wants too (for more on this, see Chapter 12 on silence). If the storyteller brings too much description or flesh, the listener drifts off and loses attention. Conversely, when the story moves on too relentlessly or is too spare, the listener may get breathless

Don't be afraid if things seem difficult in the beginning. That's only the initial impression. The important thing is not to retreat; you have to master yourself.

Olga Korbut

We are all storytellers. We all live in a network of stories. There isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling.

Jimmy Neil Smith

and give up or hunger for those delicious details. There's a principle of opposites at work here, a vital part of the craft that we will be exploring more fully in Chapter 5. If you'd like to play with this and stretch yourself to the extreme, just for fun try to do the exercise again, keeping the storyteller in one mode or other far beyond what would be a healthy balance. You may be driven bananas but hopefully you will experience how one extreme cannot exist without the other.

You've travelled a long way in this chapter. At the beginning your story was just words on a page. Then you began to get interested in it. You boned it, you mapped it, you had a good gossip about it. You fleshed it out with moods and visualisation. You asked it questions and began to find its perfect proportions. It's now a living entity with a life of its own. These exercises are an essential foundation for any story. You can sense if a storyteller hasn't done this groundwork. You used the imagination of a body because you have given birth to something here, but you could also use the analogy of moving into a house for this process. For example, when you're looking for a story, it's like looking for a house to live in. Some are too big, some too small; some don't have enough light or a fireplace, but one will be just right. You get the feeling, 'I could live here – I could tell that.' Then you start looking at how many bedrooms there are, the state of the garden, the size of the kitchen. You get a feel for the architecture, the bones of the place. Often you might draw a rough map of each floor. Before you know it, you're gossiping to your friends about it! You want to live in this house, you want to tell this story. Now you go back for a closer look. You see details you missed before. You sense the mood of each room, the quality of the light, the colours of the walls. You begin to dream of how the house might look when you live in it. Of course, some houses are old, they are listed buildings where certain things can't be changed and you may feel this about parts of your story too. When you've asked enough questions and you're satisfied with the answers, you buy it, you are going to tell this story. Now begins the work of knocking down walls, painting and decorating, planting out the garden. You begin to make the place your own. You ask friends for their comments so that they can help you find the perfect proportions. What's missing? A house warming! You tell your story to others. What was once a house has become a home. You're ready to start living in it.

Summary

1. Bones: to learn a story quickly, write down the headlines or very brief bones (relationship in time), then draw a bird's-eye-view map (relationship in two-dimensional space) and then point to where all the places are in space around you and walk through the story (relationship in three-dimensional space). Finally you gossip, tell the story very casually, going back if you've missed anything out.

2. Flesh: to add detail or flesh you can do a mood map and ask questions of the story.

3. The most important thing is to develop a sense of proportion for when the story needs to move on (become more boney) or needs more detail (adding flesh). Too little flesh and there are no pictures to engage the imagination, too much flesh and the listeners are drowning in detail and can get bored or overwhelmed.