



Why stories matter

People have told stories for millions of years and written them for thousands, using them to make sense of the world. At their best they can spark ideas, bring people together and drive real personal change...

The anecdote your family regales around the dinner table. The fairytale you tell your children before bed. The self image you hold in your head. The political speech wheeled out before an election. The front page of the newspaper. The latest must-watch television series. A new advertising campaign. What do they all have in common? Storytelling. The medium may change, but the power of stories remains universal.

Stories aren't a new phenomenon. Anthropologists say that storytelling is central to human existence and has been a part of society since cave times. People use stories to make sense of the world and to share that understanding with others, in the process connecting to a larger self and universal truths. From early creation stories and religious parables through to modern fables, stories are a means of understanding. 'Creating stories about sea creatures, mythical gods or animals real and imagined, is a lighter way of expressing our own pains, worries and moral dilemmas,' says Barbara Bloomfield from Lapidus, a writing for wellbeing organisation. Stories help you to navigate some of those worries in a form that feels more palatable.

Shared experience

In part this is because of the sense of order stories provide. With their beginning, middle, end and (mostly) resolution, there's a certain sense of comfort that arises from their predictable nature. You can experience difficult situations or emotions within their safety net, confident in the knowledge that all will be sorted by the end. At the same time, stories provide a space in which to explore the interconnectedness of things. And through that experience, you learn. As the late Stanley Kunitz wrote in *The Layers*: 'I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was.'

George Murphy is a writer, storyteller and chairman of Shaggy Dog Storytellers, a group promoting oral storytelling in

West Yorkshire. He used to tell an ancient Italian story, called *The Land Where No One Ever Dies*, to older primary school pupils. 'Of course, death always wins in the end,' he says. 'But the story provided an opportunity for children to confront their own fears and share their experiences of the demise of much-loved pets and the even more painful loss of family members. An ancient tale enabled them to address an issue that is too often hidden away.'

Making connections

As well as the personal benefits, stories offer opportunities for groups and society to come together. It is no coincidence that the stories in the Old Testament led to the ancient Hebrews acting as a unified society devoted to God and his commandments. Similarly, the stories of King Arthur and St George have become rooted in a collective identity of Britain.

Glens Newton is a member of Cambridge Storytellers: 'By sharing our stories we forge friendships, families and communities. We learn about the lives and the culture of others and a communion is formed.' Key to the society's work and events is the oral tradition, and the interaction between the speaker and the listener. It's in the process of telling that connection takes place. Sharing tales allows people to pool ideas and thoughts, and build dialogue. Societies, and groups within them, are built on shared narratives.

According to research by Dan Johnson, published in the *Basic & Applied Psychology* journal, reading fiction increases empathy to others and outsiders. He and his team studied the MRI scans of individuals and found that the parts of the brain related to connection, relationships and empathy were activated when they were exposed to stories. Neuroscientist Gregory Bern, based at Emory University in the US, discovered that reading a novel triggers not only a figurative response but also a physiological one. The parts of the brain and body that are



activated in the storyteller are also stimulated in the listener. A real connection is formed.

Similarly, studies have shown that when listening to or reading a story, the same parts of the brain are activated as if the event is taking place in real life. Cortisol is produced when something warrants your attention, for example, distress. Dopamine is released when you are rewarded by emotionally charged events. And oxytocin, the chemical that promotes pro-social behaviour, allows you to feel empathy with a character or hero. Stories create genuine emotions and behavioural responses. Regular readers of fiction are more socially attuned and able to pick up emotions of those with whom they interact. Researchers under Emanuele Castano of The New School in New York have found evidence that literary fiction improves a reader's capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling. Stories can make you nicer and, in turn, improve the society in which you live.

Changing the narrative

But stories are not fixed. They evolve and change as you do. They can help you to define who you are and reflect on possible new versions of yourself, making decisions about the kind of person you aspire to be. At Narrative Workshops in Brighton participants are helped to discover their stories, and to change them.

According to Barbara and Imogen, who runs the organisation: 'Telling stories can shape our personal narrative – for better or for worse.' Through the process of telling their stories and being offered the opportunity to shift them, there has been a marked improvement in the emotional and even physical resilience of participants over time. One participant, John, 45, says: 'I have a long-term health condition [Crohn's disease] and I often feel overwhelmed by my symptoms and worries about my health and my future. At Narrative Workshops I have written stories that remind me that illness has been only one part of my life.'

Health and wellbeing

Recently, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board's mental health delivery unit in South Wales appointed a clinical nurse specialist in storytelling. Jess Wilson has been using traditional oral storytelling in her practice as a mental health nurse for the past nine years and completed an MSc researching why it is useful for nurses to use it in forensic hospitals.

'I have seen stories transform people, I have seen stories inspire change,' she says. 'I believe that stories can help, educate and inform.' Plans include a digital storytelling group for eight patients in secondary mental health care and a community mental health storytelling cafe. They've already seen benefits in pilots and projects.

Prue Thimbleby, arts co-ordinator for the Health Board, has seen first hand how telling their stories brings resolution and personal development. 'One lady slept through the night for the first time in 22 years after telling hers,' she recalls.

Stories have been wielding their power for thousands of years and their impact remains potent. As a means of bringing people together, a way to discover new ideas or to make sense of the world, a source of inspiration or an opportunity for exploration, they are hard to beat.

Philip Pullman, author of fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, once said: 'After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.' Stories matter to everyone – personally and socially, physically and mentally, in good times and in tough. Once upon a time that was true, and it will remain so, right until the end.

Words: Francesca Baker

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