

How to Listen for Key Stories (and what they really mean!)

The Buzz about Story

There has been hearty discussion concerning the value of good storytelling in the last ten years. Topics have ranged from:

- * The healing power of storytelling for individuals and communities,
- * The need for leaders to tell powerful stories in order to catalyze and motivate group members,
- * The stories that seem to dictate the limits of our collective growth, through to,
- * The need to unify our species' stories in order to transform conflict.

Given the interest and the widespread, growing application of story, it seems prudent to begin developing 'an ear' for the stories we hear.

The Listening Process

It is said that each time a story is told three apples fall from heaven, one for the teller, one for the listener and one for the one who 'really hears'. In order to understand stories, we must learn to 'really hear' them.

The following are good basic tenets for listening:

Tenets

1. Trust the individual or group that is telling.
2. Listen to everyone.
3. Listen with your heart. Listen for the emotional, heartfelt quality of stories and note without judgement.
4. Resist criticism or evaluation.
5. Listen to the story within the story. Not everything that is said is wise but there is wisdom in every story. Listen for both content and quality. What is straining to be heard?
6. Listen to the story between the stories. Wisdom and insight are revealed in the silence between the stories rather than in the words themselves. Is there a theme connecting the stories? Is a pattern emerging?
7. Listen to the stories behind the stories. Even when a story contains a belief that you find challenging or justifies a behaviour you dislike, you are called to listen for the story behind this story. Choosing to perceive people's stories as their best efforts, to date, of achieving noble goals will help them to open up and you to really hear.
8. Everyone's wisdom is required for the best result; the connections and divergences point the way to a group's emergent story. The connection or convergences can be reinforced, magnified, and built upon. The divergences or conflicts can be analyzed and utilized for new ideas; these are the points of greatest potential growth, learning, and adaptation.

In order to 'really hear', we must listen for various types of stories and come to know what they signify. The following are general story types and questions that assist us in gleaning the encoded learning.

What sort of stories are we listening for?

Stories, whether they come in the form of myth, folktales, 'true accounts', personal or professional tales, or epics, all follow certain universal patterns. These include (but are not limited to):

** Creation stories

How did this all begin? What was the intention? What was the birth process like?

** Major developmental leaps and milestone stories

When was a challenge like this current one faced previously? How did it end up? What factors contributed to the outcome?

** The stories of past development initiatives

What initiatives have been undertaken to date? How have they worked, or not worked, for you?

** Diversity stories (how others tell the same stories)

What other versions of your story are being told? Which, if any, do you particularly agree or disagree with? Why? What do you imagine is the story behind these other varying perspectives?

** The environmental story (external conditions)

What are the forces currently supporting your objectives? Challenging them?

** The emerging story (preferred futures)

You are now 5 years in the future. What does the story look like now? How did it come to be?

Look for a range of tone in the stories shared (ex. successes, failures, regrets - mad, sad, glad). Excessive reliance on one type of story or one prevailing tone is a source of important information and suggests a discrepancy that can be turned into an asset given proper care. It also suggests an overall cultural shape, especially with respect to trust, risk-taking, and communication.

The Hero's/Heroine's Journey - The Ultimate Template

Joseph Campbell's seminal work with myth underpins much of today's theory. In part, Campbell illuminated our understanding of the archetypal hero's journey. The ordinary person, with some unique gift, is called to meet a daunting challenge. He or she embarks on an outward or inward journey wherein obstacles must be overcome and transcended. The heroine, upon completion of this, receives a special gift, power, or knowledge that has the ability to assist others. He must then return to whence he came, bringing back the treasure in a manner that allows as many as possible to benefit.

This is a storyteller's map of the journey. It is one way of interpreting and informing our listening of an individual and group story. Joseph Campbell and others have mapped out the universal elements within stories from many cultures. Together these create a powerful template for viewing individual and group stories.

Everyone and all organizations experience this epic adventure, to a greater or lesser extent. We embark on both an inward and an outward voyage where we are challenged to wrestle with life's twists and turns. Whether we struggle with lofty organizational goals, loss of market share, changing business conditions, recurring personnel problems, lack of innovation or initiative, or general staff malaise, we are all engaged, at some level, in this process. The essential elements are lived. We know the major players (good guy, bad guy, love interest, mysterious figures, gods/authorities) and we know, or can come to recognize, the pattern of events (singular or recurring challenges, trials of skill and faith, death and birth, miraculous events, triumph). We do battle with this pattern over and over again. Summarized, it might look like this:

-> The call - separation (having to leave or being left - physically or psychologically), any crisis or challenge

-> The ascent - initiation, transformation (facing the challenges)

-> The descent - transformation, revelation, integration

-> The return - the learning and service to community (skill, belief, initiative, etc...)

In the Call (or separation), we become aware that something must change and transform. Various Heroes are called to take the journey. In classic mythology, the hero reluctantly leaves the homeland.

The ascent and descent phases (the journey) are a time of initiation and transformation. The Hero and companions leave on a journey where they fight many battles and discover many things about themselves and strange new worlds. Along the journey, a series of obstacles are encountered, each more menacing, until the final encounter is reached. In the journeys of some people, a great enemy or an abyss must be overcome. There is also an encounter with the current state of the person or group, in both its positive and negative aspects. This is oftentimes presented as a quest; going on a journey of renewal or transformation. Some quests lead to higher returns, while others are a wasteful adventure. Different people in a group will have quite different interpretations of the same quest.

During the Return, the Hero and companions provide the "boon" or magic elixir. The elixir is able to transform or save the community.

As a culture, our central focus is on the upward, outward journey or ascent. It is here that we set and achieve goals. The malaise experienced by many successful people today results from a lack of a sense of meaning and fulfillment in their material attainments. The process of meaning and value can only be realized through the descent. It is here that we determine the true purpose of the quest, our overall lives, and the value of meeting challenges. Just as there are external monsters to face and conquer, so too are there internal ones. In doing this, we collect the gifts available to us and bring them back to our own lives and that of our communities. The downward or inward journey, which is sometimes referred to as the shamanistic way, is often overlooked and undervalued. Both the ascent and the descent are part of the complete adventure and when they are not aligned, they wreak havoc on our lived experience.

When you become familiar with the basic tenets of good listening, the types of stories people tell, and the universal storytelling template for challenge and transformation, you can begin to 'really hear' what the storytellers are conveying to you.