

Creating Stories Out of Interviews

The story that someone shares, tells you as much about that person as the event being described. A sequence of events is just that. A story offers a vantage point on a sequence of events that draws you into the heart and mind of a human being and their experience. A story, as a sequence of actions, could take a few minutes to relate. It is the human idiosyncrasies, as well as the tellers vantage point, that makes the tale gripping. As you enter this unit and begin interviewing family members about their lives know that you are collecting information and observations on two distinct but important levels. Both the tale and the teller are essential to a fine story.

In collecting, at first general reminiscences, and finally more specific, detailed memories, you need to work like a careful seesaw. Asking specific and focused questions that will prod an individual's memory to open up is balanced with giving them the time and freedom to rediscover and explore their memories. For instance, let's say that you want to find out how your grandmother met your grandfather. You think there might be a good story there, so you ask. The answer comes back, "We were introduced by friends." Please don't faint from the passion, detail, and romance of this answer. It happened a while back. Instead, think to yourself 'good start,' and help your grandmother by asking more specific questions around the traditional 5W's.

Who was the friend?

Why did he/she think you might like each other?

Where was the meetings?

When did it happen?

What happened before the meeting?

What happened at the meetings?

What happened after the meeting?

Now, any one of these question could open into a dozen others. Think about your body and all the veins and arteries that run in and out of the heart. You don't know how to get to the heart, but you do know that the answer to any question could lead you to another which will bring you closer. Follow up on themes or events, not by moving on to the next theme or event, that will leave you on another pathway far from the heart, rather follow up what ever strain you open, helping your subject to focus more and more on the details and specifics of that question. For instance, let's say you ask your Grandmother:

"Who introduced you to grandpa?"

GM: "My aunt Evelyn"

Now, don't pop off to another 'W' question, follow Aunt Evelyn.

"How did Aunt Evelyn know him?"

GM: "Oh, I think they worked in the same office."

"What did they do?"

GM: "You know I don't remember."

(Don't give up. Come from another direction.)

"Why did your aunt Evelyn think you would like each other?"

GM: Oh Oh because he was always dropping things, papers, coffee, a typewriter once, and she told me she'd found someone who would make me feel graceful. You see my family always teased me about being clumsy."

Now things are getting more interesting. Keep following down a vein or artery until you're sure where it goes! During this process be an active listener. That means that you want to try and 'see' what they talking about. That way, when a picture is incomplete you'll know the next question intuitively. For instance, your grandmother is describing the living room of her parents home where your grandfather first came to meet her. You want to know how the setting effected who they were and how they behaved towards each other. Your grandmother simply said it was a 'living room.' Ask for details until you can picture them standing in it. If all the furniture is plush and stuffed and covered with thick plastic, a very different mood is created than a living room with well worn old sofas, a wooden rocker, and tables with concentric circle stains from the wet bottoms of glasses. Keep asking until there is a full picture in your mind. Try very hard to not interrupt, interpret, or add your experiences to the conversation unless it feels **very** appropriate, and if your subject seems to be roaming off the subject you had in mind, follow, don't lead. They might take you closer to the heart than the straight line you are imagining. If you are sure they have left the body, then gently guide them back with an appropriate question, but remain open to hearing the story you didn't come for! Trust me, you won't be able to remember everything, so take notes and/or use a tape recorder. Consider more than one interview session, as the first can simply warm up a subject who will be pondering their past by the second time they see you. Don't worry if the memories are jumbled, non sequential, fragmented, or incomplete. After you have done your best to draw them out it will be your job, not theirs to shape it into a story!

The second level at which you will be gathering information in intuitive. There are many ways to tell any story. You will most likely never hear **The Three**

Pigs told exactly the same way twice. People with an old New England, Calvinist, work ethic will paint a very specific picture of the first two pigs. For them these two were party hardy, thoughtless fellows who erected jiffy quick shacks with low cost materials. They will appear like degenerate slackers next to their industrious brick building brother. This teller will spare no tears as they are inhaled by the pork loving carnivore who visits. A 'new age' type might show how the brothers finally joined together in the thirds, finely constructed, non toxic, energy efficient, well insulated, home, and outwitted the more primitive non-vegetarian creature. The point is that the details you choose and how you tell a story will convey to the listeners as much about you as the events shared. If you are telling your grandmother's story, we want a sense of your grandmother. "She is a nasty, uptight, vain woman," might be one way to handle it, but that's your interpretation. Why not observe her style and choices and let them speak for themselves. "Rozelda, the eldest of 7 sisters, sat bolt upright. Her lean frame meticulously covered from neck to feet in a classic silk sheath she purchased at a Paris fashion show, 6 years earlier. Her hair was pulled severely back from a face, painted with careful strokes to cover her increasing creases, and a jaw held so tightly you'd be afraid that it might break if used too quickly. When she spoke, the words were formed in the mask of her face and pronounced with an enunciation and diction that bordered on British. She grew up in Kansas."

If you draw the human, your observations of them through their memories, they will be that much richer and resonant. In order to help yourself remember these things, take notes, but also create quick comparisons to help you remember their choices and style. For instance:

"Voice like off pitch violin"

"Moves like an elephant"

"Sweet disposition-like milk chocolate"

You might choose to interview a number of people about the same event. Is there a 'right' way to tell a story? There is only the way any person chooses to do it, and that way will reflect who they are, what they have experienced in this world, and what they care about. You might interview both your mother and aunt about an experience they shared during a family Christmas in 1951. Your aunt might well tell you a 'funny' story about how your mother tried to sneak down the stairs early to peek at her presents, but tripped on a cookie plate left out by a third sibling for Santa, fell down 3 steps with a big bang and woke the whole family up. All of this caused that year's Christmas celebration to begin at 5AM. Your mother might tell a very

“embarrassing” story about that same morning. Sharing that she wasn’t so sure any more if Santa was real or her father and she had committed herself to trying to wake up early and catch him in the act when she tripped. Not only did she want die of embarrassment because she’d wakened the whole family, but she felt sure that Santa would find her out and never bring another thing! Are one of these versions ‘right’ and the other ‘wrong’? How can you as the final storyteller respect both vantage points.

Thus, in collecting stories from friends and family members, you want to be aware of listening/hearing and watching/seeing on both levels. As you interview people, you want to note two different things. Help them recall events, details, people, and places. Just as important is noting their ambiance, use of language, physical being, passion or restraint, reticence or exuberance, joy or fear that their tone and beings convey. Simply put, you want to be aware of content and context. As you cull for the overt details of Who What When When Why dig gently and note the covert details, and the teller. In these things you will find story.

The following two exercised will help students to organize and practice their material

Getting It Off the Page

Stories emerge from an oral tradition. Once they are committed to print they are ossified. Have you ever tried to tell a story exactly as it was printed? If so you know just how stilted it sounds. In order to breath life back into a tale, you must make it your own. Following is a process by which you can do just that.

1. Choose a fairy or folk tale. This can be a story that you recall from your own childhood or one you have once or are now reading. Start with a simple story that grabs your attention and that you enjoy. (You’ll be telling it a great deal!)
2. Reread or mentally review the tale.
3. Create an ‘outline’ of the story. We are a very language based culture. I would like you to get away from language at this point in your discovery. Stories are just a series of images. Thus I would like your outline to be just that, a series of images that will help you recall the sequence of your story. Don’t worry about artistic skill. Actually the more artistically skilled you are the longer and harder this process will be. In shapes or symbols or literal forms or occasional words if you need them, create a visual prop on a large piece of paper that will help you remember the sequence of events.
4. Put away the written tale. Now, using your unique outline, tell this story to a willing listener. Find someone who will listen attentively and not offer suggestions or criticism. (This unfortunately sometimes rules out family!)
5. Find a comfortable spot, away from distractions, and close your eyes. Do a little deep breathing into your belly to calm, relax, and center yourself. If you are having any tension,

acknowledge it by tensing up that particular muscle and then letting it go. Once you feel very mellow create in your mind's eye the first scene of your story (keep your eyes closed for the entirety of this exercise). Paint as much detail as you can, drawing on your own imagination to tell you about the space, its smells, size, the textures and objects present, the temperature and air quality, the living beings present. Look for what makes the space special, different, specific to this tale. Once you have a detailed opening scene in your imagination, allow your camera's eye to move forward. Film your story in complete detail. Like a camera your imagination can allow you to do a close up on something important, or a pan so that the larger world of the tale becomes evident. You can fast forward through parts that don't seem important or are endlessly repetitive. You can slow down the camera to catch important actions or episodes or details. If you forget a section, you can always rewind! Paint your final scene with the same care and detail as you gave the opening. When you have finished find another willing listener who you can tell this expanded version to.

If you are having a hard time focusing for this exercise, then set up a tape recorder, press the record button (don't forget tape!) and with your eyes closed tell your story to the machine. As you tell try very hard to imagine every detail before you speak it. Don't listen to yourself, allow the next scene or image in the story sequence to define what you will say. When you have finished, find a willing human and retell the story with the details you have discovered.

6. There are a million ways and reasons to tell any story. All you need is one. That one is very important and will shape your telling. Take a contemplative moment now and think about one thing you really like about this story or one reason you'd want to share it with others. For instance I love the story of *Hansel and Gretel* because it affirms a child's greatest fears (abandonment) and models how you can overcome any difficulty if you build trusting relationships and use your wits. You might like *Snow White* because of the evil queen's inability to accept aging gracefully! You might like *Little Red Riding Hood* because you want to put the fear of G-d into children about talking with strangers. You might want to tell *Little Red* to dispel children's fears that a single mistake will end everything. This story could do either. How you tell it will depend upon your motivation, your reason for telling it. Figure out why you want to tell the story you've been working with.

7. With that reason in mind make another film of your tale choosing primarily details and behaviors that will feed into your reason. For instance, if I am telling *Little Red Riding Hood* to warn children away from strangers, then in my film (Which I am making with my eyes closed in a relaxing and secluded environment) I will emphasize certain scenes and images, such as the mother warning the daughter, the daughter flaunting that warning by leaving the path, and the wolf's approach because she left that path. When you have completed doing this you will have a highly revised tale that, yes, you should go and tell to a willing listener.

At This point you now have a story ready for a larger audience.

Getting To Carnegie Hall....Practice

Tell your folk or fairy tale *at least* five times to any audience willing to listen. Keep notes. Each time you tell, try something different. Focus on one new thing with each telling. For instance you might want to give attention to any of these things for a single telling.

Pacing

- Do I change my pacing to compliment the action and moods of the story?
- Does my pacing keep my audience confused, lulled to sleep, or interested?
- How can I adjust and change my pacing to both compliment the needs of the story and keep my audience on their toes by not staying in one mode for too long?

Plot

- Is my plot line clear?
- Does the plot need to be simplified?
- Do all the plot twists serve my reason for telling this tale? If not get rid of them!
- Is the age group I am telling this story to identifying with the plot?
- If not how can I adjust it to reflect their needs and issues?

Characters

- Have I drawn clear characters?
- Is it clear why each character is necessary in this tale?
- If you have superfluous characters try getting rid of them and see what happens.
- How can I add a physical or vocal nuance to help the audience identify a character?
- Can I find something I like or am drawn to in each character?

Participation

- Will participation by the audience enhance the tale or their hearing of it?
- If the story has clear repetitive sections can you create an audience participation from it?
- What are other ways to include your audience in your telling?
- Try some of these ideas.