

The Impact of Storytelling

‘Human beings have been communicating with each other through storytelling and narrative since living in caves and sitting around campfires. We might say storytelling is virtually hard-wired into our DNA, we use stories to define ourselves, to make meaning and sense of the world, to teach values and pieces of wisdom, to engage others in change. We learn things at deep levels through hearing stories; they move us before we know why we are being moved; they affect us before we have time to put up defences.’ McKinsey ¹

‘So, the key role of stories is to connect people and to have a people find meaning in their lives and in their work. Great change stories that carry meaning can then spark action.’ McKinsey ¹

‘While our ancestors sat around the camp fire listening to the tribal storyteller, we now sit in cinemas, theatres or in front of TVs, computers and mobile phones to share the stories of our lives. In fact, the universal nature of storytelling may explain our shared, evolved human psyche.’ Melcrum ¹¹



Adam Weinroth, CMO, May 22, 2014 ²

Listening to Information in the form of stories means it is processed in multiple areas of the brain....

Paul says ‘Researchers have long known that the “classical” language regions, like Broca’s area and Wernicke’s area, are involved in how the brain interprets written words. What scientists have come to realize in the last few years is that narratives activate many other parts of our brains as well, suggesting why the experience of reading can feel so alive. Words like “lavender,” “cinnamon” and “soap,” for example, elicit a response not only from the language-processing areas of our brains, but also those devoted to dealing with smells.’ AM Paul 2012 ³

‘While facts and figures engage a small area of the brain, stories engage multiple brain regions that work together to build colourful, rich three-dimensional images and emotional responses.’ DH Saphiere 2015 ⁴

Listening to Stories enables Empathy....

‘When we tell stories to others that have helped us shape our thinking and way of life, we can have the same effect on them too. The brains of the person telling a story and listening to it, can synchronize, says Uri Hasson from Princeton:

“... the volunteers understood her story, and their brains synchronized. When she had activity in her insula, an emotional brain region, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs. By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts and emotions into the listeners’ brains.”

Anything you’ve experienced, you can get others to experience the same. Or at least, get their brain areas active, too: Evolution has wired our brains for storytelling. Now, whenever we hear a story, we want to relate it to one of our existing experiences. That’s why metaphors work so well with us. Whilst we are busy searching for a similar experience in our brains, we activate a part called insula, which helps us relate to that same experience of pain, joy, disgust or else.’ L Widrich 2012 ⁵

Listening to Stories enables Engagement with others

Harvard Business Review published an article by Dr Paul Zak in October 2014 who is a professor who studies the neuroscience of connection between people. He is especially interested in the production of oxytocin which is a chemical in the brain which he describes as enhancing ‘the sense of empathy, our ability to experience others’ emotions’. They found that ‘character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis’⁶. In another piece of research ⁷he also found ‘a virtuous cycle in which we first engage with others emotionally that leads to helping behaviours, that make us happier. Many philosophical and religious traditions advocate caring for strangers, and our research reveals why these traditions continue to influence us today—they resonate with our evolved brain systems that make social interactions rewarding.’ P Zak ^{6 and 7}

Listening to Stories Reassures us of our place in the world.....

‘Cognitive science has long recognized narrative as a basic organizing principle of memory. Gazzaniga suspects that narrative coherence helps us to navigate the world – to know where we’re coming from and where we’re headed. It tells us where to place our trust and why. One reason we may love fiction, he says, is that it enables us to find our bearings in possible future realities, or to make better sense of our own past experiences. What stories give us, in the end, is *reassurance*. And as childish as it may seem, that sense of security – that coherent sense of self – is essential to our survival.’ J Gots ⁸

Sharing our Stories Relieves Stress....

‘Every time you tell your story and someone else who cares bears witness to it, you turn off the body’s stress responses, flipping off toxic stress hormones like cortisol and epinephrine and flipping on relaxation responses that release healing hormones like oxytocin, dopamine, nitric oxide, and endorphins. Not only does this turn on the body’s innate self-repair mechanisms and function as preventative medicine—or treatment if you’re sick. It also relaxes your nervous system and helps heal your mind of depression, anxiety, fear, anger, and feelings of disconnection.’ L Rankin 2012

Sharing our stories increases our connection with others...

‘As Brené Brown teaches in her TEDx talk The Power Of Vulnerability ¹⁰, the gateway to intimacy is via being vulnerable about your imperfections. If you try to sugar coat your story, you miss out on the

sense of connection with another human being that you can only attain when you're letting someone see your warts and your big ugly tail. Every time you expose those imperfections—and someone loves you in spite of—even because of—those imperfections, you gain trust (or as Brené calls it, you “put marbles in the jar”). Over time, the intimacy you feel with other people depends on how many marbles are in your jar. ‘ L Rankin 2012 ⁹

Sharing our Stories increases our Resilience...

Clinical Psychologist, Dr S Hamby talks about storytelling in an article for Psychology Today. She says ‘I have been surprised at the power of emotional, autobiographical storytelling. Emotional, autobiographical storytelling means writing about events and people that have mattered to you in your own life—not just describing the facts of your lives. Research shows that even brief autobiographical storytelling exercises can have substantial impacts on psychological and physical *health* even months after the storytelling.

... One thing we have learned since starting Touch Network is the importance of sharing your story. It is not just the telling or writing it down, but knowing that what you write will be read by others and the hope that by sharing in a public way, someone else might be inspired or helped by your story.

1) Realizing that sharing your story can help others

Stories can be very healing and many people benefit from getting the opportunity to pass on their *wisdom* to others. This can be especially powerful for people who do not always feel that they have the chance to help others. Resilience is strengthened by recognizing that we are all experts in our own lives and we all have something to share with others. Another piece of this is starting to understand that words can have power—positive power—on others. As mentioned above, this is an under-appreciated benefit of narrative and storytelling.

2) Finding your voice

Another well-known benefit of storytelling is finding your own voice. What does it mean to “find your voice”? It means learning how to express yourself and learning how to think about what has happened in your life in a way that makes sense. Developing and organizing your story often means imposing a traditional story structure on the events of your life. Sure, in some sense it may be true that many of the events of our lives are random and unconnected. From a psychological point of view, however, it does not help to think about them that way. It helps to think about your life as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It helps to think about how the various events—even the bad ones—have been part of a journey toward the person you want to become. Writing it down or telling it to someone else can help you impose that organization on it, help you identify key events, and even help you just rehearse and remember the details in a way that helps you become the author of your own life.

3) Re-affirming your values

Sometimes you learn things about yourself from the act of writing or storytelling. It can be a way to clarify what is important.

4) Finding peace, finding hope

'What's the difference between someone who has achieved resilience and someone who has not? One important difference is a sense of well-being. People who have found their voice, shared their story, and reaffirmed their values often find a sense of peace and a hopefulness that they did not have before. ' S. Hamby 2013 ¹²

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