

HARVESTING YOUR STORIES

A Workshop with Joel ben Izzy
Oaktree, Rancho la Puerta

WHAT MAKES A STORY WORK?

PERMISSION - Like so much else in life, much of storytelling is about the set-up. Find the time and create the space to share the story. No point cramming it into a space it won't fit - to make a long story short is usually to ruin it. You may want to ask permission before telling it.

COMMITMENT - Tell about something you care about. Then, follow your feelings.

60 SECONDS - Give yourself time to be inside the story before you tell it. 60 seconds of calm should be a start - a minute if you're feeling expansive. Whatever your story (or slice of description) let yourself be into that story with all of your senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Linger on the last one, touch, for it's not just what you touch with your hands, but the feeling you get inside the story. Of the first kind of senses there are five; of the second kind there are too many to name.

DETAILS - When you tell it, offer those that make the story rich for you.

SHOW, DON'T TELL - One of the toughest lessons in writing and storytelling. When you tell instead of showing, it is like letting the air out of a balloon. Instead of saying "It was really scary!" show us the grave, now turned to mud by the rain just ended, and there, in the moonlight the decaying fingers of the hand just starting to move.... you get the idea.

TAKE YOUR TIME - To make a long story short is to kill it. Each story has a natural life span, and when you find yourself summarizing to squeeze in a bunch of information, you may be cutting it short. By the same token, when you take an inherently small story and stretch it out for an hour, you may be keeping it alive too long. Listen to the story - and your audience - for guidance.

FIND THE CONTRAST - When descriptions fail it is often because black and white have turned to gray.

FIND THE CONFLICT - Much as we may wish to avoid these in life, we love them in stories and movies. There's always a problem, and as the problem grows, so grows the story.

SOMEBODY WANTS AND/OR FEARS SOMETHING - This usually has something to do with the problem. If we can relate to what our main character wants, we're involved in the story.

A STORY IS A GIFT - Not a performance to be judged, but a treasure to be passed on.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE - Remember, you're building a bridge from them to the story. Make connections to what they have in common - perhaps the place, perhaps the weather, perhaps the time of day. And, remember, they're just people.

KNOW YOUR ENDING LINE - And when you get there, stop.

A Basic Story template:

Once upon a time...
...every day, every day
...and then, one day....
...because of that.... (repeat as necessary)
...until finally...
...and ever since then...

(From *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater*. By Kenn Adams)

Some Favorite Story Strings:

Think back to a place you used to love to go.

☞ ☞

Think of a teacher you remember

☞ ☞

Recall an animal you have known.

☞ ☞

Looking back over your life, can you recall a time when
you found yourself astounded by a single color?

☞ ☞

Close your eyes until your inner ear hears a piece of music that's meaningful to you.
As you listen to it, let it bring back all the memories that went with it.

☞ ☞

Sift through your memory or possessions until you come upon an photograph that is filled
with meaning. Try to recall everything you can about it - where it came
from, and why it came to mean so much to you.

☞ ☞

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

— *Mary Oliver*

For more info on Joel's storytelling, books, and coaching, please go to www.storypage.com.
There you will find videos, Joel's blog, and other story materials.
Questions? Story needs? Reach out to: Joel@storypage.com.