

THE RADICAL ACT OF COMMUNITY STORYTELLING

Empowering Voices in Uncensored Events



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“If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.” —Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Voices Uncensored

COOPERATING *INSTEAD OF* COMPETING. Telling *instead of lecturing*. Listening *instead of eavesdropping*. Compassion *not judgment*. Acceptance *not censorship*. Celebrating identities *not shaming*. Risking exposure, *not hiding*. Paying attention *instead of zoning out*.

That is what makes community storytelling unique and transformational. But what makes it radical?

For one thing, the pure democracy of it all. The essential structure provides all storytellers an equal opportunity to take to the stage and tell about real things that happened to them, things they saw and did, things that they want to share with a roomful of strangers. It’s a place where everyday folks, with different life experiences, joys and sorrows, have a voice. Providing a venue and audience for this sort of activity could be seen as downright subversive. Nothing is canned, predictable or especially polite. It can be raw, mean or sugary sweet depending on who is brave enough to commit to a rehearsal, have their name and bio go out over social media, and show up for the event.

The structure inspires honesty and confessional tales. Intimacy emerges from the bare bones of a stage, a mic, a teller and listeners. One night at an Odyssey Storytelling show a woman, whose mother sat in the audience, confessed to sneaking out of her second story bedroom window, undetected, when she was a teenager. Twenty years later, Mom laughed at the story along with everyone else.

Stories about shame, triumph, and prejudice; love, revenge, and greed; all presented on a neutral stage, inviting deep respect and listening. I've never seen nor heard anyone being confrontational, although sometimes people are shocked or confused. If you weren't expecting to hear about the sex life of a transman, it might take a moment or two to adjust your expectations and relax into serious appreciation.

Exposure = understanding = acceptance = true connection

Radically changing minds and hearts is just one of the many advantages of community storytelling. Shaking people out of their insular lives and dropping them into another reality is radical. Community Storytelling is a place where diversity is celebrated and lessons are learned in the best possible way—from people who are different from us. By listening fiercely and intensely, we allow ourselves to be amused or scared or made joyful; we open up to new possibilities. As the Tucson Meet Yourself 40th Anniversary Commemorative Magazine so aptly put it, “The messiness of cultures bumping into each other is the messiness of democracy—the elusive aspiration of equality, justice, and respect.”

Infusing storytellers with self-confidence and the knowledge that their stories matter is radical. Exposing tellers to nonjudgmental witnesses who validate their experience by offering kindness in exchange for honesty/trust subverts the paradigm of separateness and competition. For two hours, the length of a show, a community is created. And there is spillover—friendships are forged, connections happen, overlapping social networks will amaze and make us say, “But, of course.”

I have to admit, I am a radical *storylistener*. I'm the one who hangs on every word of disclosure and drama, the one who holds the hand of the terrified and encourages the merely shy to share

their sloppy or slick, enthusiastic or hesitant, but always sincere voices with a room full of strangers.

My first taste of a storytelling event occurred in San Francisco. You know how they talk about love at first sight? That's kind of how I felt. I was enthralled by the concept of people sharing private, personal parts of their lives in a public venue. I'm not shy about telling the truth of my life as I see it but I'm also not one to broadcast my autobiography. I thought the people onstage were brave beyond words and I felt privileged to be part of the audience. I wanted to hear more stories.

My parents were artists. One lesson I learned from them was: If it doesn't exist, create it. To construct something from nothing is a radical creative act. The theme of the first Odyssey Storytelling show was aptly titled "In the Beginning." It felt like I was creating heaven and earth. I was running on chutzpah and innocence, never thinking about where it could go or how I was going to get there. I trusted myself to turn a great idea into a reality.

Odyssey is truly a grassroots organization. Founded in the community, for the community, it has succeeded by the volunteer cooperative efforts of hundreds of people donating their time and energy. Each month six people come forward to be coached in the craft of storytelling. The following week they step on stage to reveal some of the most important parts of their lives to friends and strangers who give them their undivided attention.

It works because there is a core group of people that believe in it enough to sustain it and keep it running smoothly. The group has evolved over time, and the energy remains to propel Odyssey to the next show. No one is in it for the money, a very radical concept.

I did not have a clear roadmap to follow, but I'm offering you one—replete with lists, references and a guided step-by-step process to start and maintain a storytelling event. If, at some point in my story, you think to yourself, "Wow, that seems like a lot of work,"

skip ahead to Part Two in which you will see the benefits of storytelling for the community, the tellers and listeners, and for the organizers, and hopefully you will become re-energized.

My dearest desire is that you will be inspired to create your own community storytelling.

Review

- ▶ Community Storytelling is democratic – anyone can tell their story
- ▶ The structure inspires honesty and confessional tales
- ▶ Exposure = understanding = acceptance = true connection
- ▶ Storytellers gain skills and self-confidence with the knowledge that their stories matter
- ▶ Audience members become active story-listeners