

Learning A Story

15 Steps to Learning a Story:
From Bud to Blossom

From Laura Simms

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The following suggestions and explanations provide a way to understand the living reciprocity and dynamics of storytelling that not only inform and entertain but engage the mind in a way that creates relaxation and deep emotion and flexibility without stress.

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Read Out Loud - A text is like a hieroglyph. It is not the text that holds the meaning alone. The words heard hold the clues for what is taking place so that we can discern what is occurring and where it is happening from start to finish. Reading out loud invigorates the visualization of the unfolding events and lets the feelings that underlie the words and interactions, be felt as we read and listen to our own exploration. Our entire process is a way of “reading” the actual story and of weaning ourselves from a content-driven recitation that relates mainly to content only. We are working toward a living, shared story event that has meaning and associations on many levels at one time.

Outline – Carefully listening to what is happening gives us a sense of the journey of the story in a very direct way. Making a written outline then maps out the events. It removes us from attachment to the literary narrative as a text into a story. This is a way of piercing the yet mysterious actuality of the meanings of the tale that manifest in the process/performance with listeners. This is also a way of quickly embedding the main events in our mind. Then, we are not rampantly forgetting or reconstructing the story based on our own projected experience, but each time we tell the tale we are reliving the journey just as we might recount our day’s activities to a friend.

Beginning – Before the journey of the story unfolds, there are simple events that define where the story takes place at the start, and what exists before the “story” moves forward. There are structures to text and structures to a living storytelling that need to be acknowledged in order to deepen the experience of the listener and protect the storyteller from becoming too enmeshed in either one character or their version of the meaning of the story. Make a list of the place, characters, time of day and character(s) that are presented at the beginning of the story text.

Ongoing - Going back and reading through the text, it is possible to see that there are things that existed in the story (although not yet introduced) at the start. Places, persons, objects, or history is mentioned later that the storyteller would be well informed to recognize before telling. Making a list of these details begins to bring the story into actuality. There is no way to tell or write a story without a narrative line. We do have a starting point, gaining access to what is existing in the landscape and events of the story as we begin gives us the rich way to understand the motivation for the story and its historical background. For example, we may discover one-third into a tale that a princess has been hidden in a basement or a tower for years. The listener did not know this. However, the storyteller would know that the princess is hidden at the beginning. This knowledge touches them at the start. Waiting in hiding all along beneath the intention of their words, in the landscape of the story, is a buried or hidden character who will be

liberated or sought. It gives more validity to the teller as the one who knows the story. What generates trust in the storyteller is this intangible knowing of the wholeness of the story. The teller has already lived the full tale, even though the telling itself is fresh at the start. These aspects of direct speaking to each audience in each situation, and a sense of the fullness of the tale, instigates trust and provokes the kind of surrender to imagining that distinguishes the living event from a more moderated, memorization presentation.

Turning Point – It is exquisite to discern what small event changes the entire ongoing situation and sets the story in motion. This moment is where the listening audience suddenly becomes engaged both in wanting to know what will happen next, and also letting go of their attachment to listening with mental acuity only into a more direct becoming of the imagined and felt story arising uniquely in each person moment by moment. Again, it helps the storyteller to understand the structure of the living event.

Ending – Because the storyteller has read and spoken the entire journey of the story, it can be helpful to mark what elements constitute the end of the story. How is that end different from the beginning. These are the bookends of the ceremony of revelation. It is the goal the story is reaching. For instance in a tale there might be a King or Merchant with three daughters (no wife or queen mentioned). At the end of the story there is a marriage between the youngest daughter with a prince or King or hero. Somehow the story takes us from a situation with no ruling feminine principle, to a shared reign of masculine and feminine inwardly united in the kingdom, the community, the body of the listeners and the teller. How does the story get there? It is our delicious dilemma. What is needed to make this happen?

Journey – This is the demanding work of the storyteller to find out what has to happen from the point of view of the story – not from the point of view of the teller or a single character. We have a map with an entry point and a destination. The teller can now look at the outline again. Read it out loud. What has to happen to get from start to finish? A good exercise is reading one sentence and then saying out loud. “Because that happened, then this happens” and reciting the next incident, small or large, significant or not.

Begin to climb into the world of the stories. Teachings that have patience, trial and error, and sudden, seemingly random events and appearances. Whether or not they make sense to our thinking mind, we begin to listen in to what the logic of the story itself reveals.

Maps - This is an invaluable activity of making the story real for the teller. It is done in two parts; whichever part you choose can be the first. It is only important to do it as carefully and diligently as possible. Do it over several times. It is an exploration. Make a map on paper of the whole landscape with doodles, words, little drawings and stick figures. See if there is a shape, a structure. What is the world in which the story takes place? Real or mythic, under the earth, in water, caves, castles, sky or in a tree. When you have a sense of the whole landscape, then walk through it like a tourist and create it imaginatively like a pop up in your own room. Use your hands to make magic architecture. Define where things are, again not from within the story as a character, but

as an eagle or a tourist guide - the role of the storyteller. This is about place and events, not about your opinion or about the intentions of people in the story.

Many stories, especially mythic tales or traditional stories, have only simple descriptions of places. Many of these worlds are assumed now because of cultural understanding. Use research, learn about places, weather, landscape and wildlife.

Seek out repeated journeys, events that are mirrored, sequences and cycles: day and night; seasons, earth and sky; rain and drought. Look for color schemes and numbers of characters in each place. Enjoy the rummaging through the story for clues about how the story has meaning and intention.

Characters – Make a list of characters and then give each one a separate page. What do we actually know about the characters from the story? Avoid what we assume or would like to add to the character's psychology from our own interpretations. Staying with the information provided often reveals in time much more depth and nuance. List who was there in the start. Who is there at the end? Who disappears or dies? Who appears and then is never mentioned again? How many female, male, good, evil, animal, supernatural characters? Explore with no wish for result, just for the revelation potential.

There is a gentle way of approaching the story, like one would approach a new relationship: simply waiting for revelation, allowing for things to reveal themselves. Often we come up with a decision about how something has meaning too quickly and are then blinded from later bigger, deeper realizations. This cannot only enhance the telling, but can transform our own lives with more compassion and wisdom. The stories can offer us a bigger view.

Cultural Information – This is a task that is to be taken seriously and with a grain of salt. See what you can discover about the culture of origin of this version of the story; its belief in community, social ideas, spiritual ideas, and meanings assigned to objects and symbols. What do places look like? Search for photos of natural world and houses that might be part of the story. Are there any clues about who translated and rewrote the story? Are they writing from a colonial point of view? Are they writing for political reasons or trying to make a literary piece out of folklore? All of this helps to discern what we can garner, imagine, discover.

C.G. Jung said that if we truly could understand one single story we might have clues about all stories. This is a journey for the storyteller as a human being as well as the listeners in their audiences. Ultimately the story is not the text, but the living event that is only truly manifested in the reciprocity of listening. Deeper, more hidden meanings often arise in the telling. This research can also help explain and work out dilemmas about ethical issues.

The storyteller can never forget that before deciding to make a change, it is necessary to fully recognize that the story is not about an actual place, but only is alive and present in

the mind of the listener and the space conjured between listeners, teller and where and when the story is released.

Objects and Symbols – Make lists. Explore and research. Educate yourself without making definite decisions. Risk trying out ideas and seeing how they work. Making definite decisions may begin to manipulate the story and the listeners. Look at numbers, colors, metals and weather as well.

Emotional Map - When you feel that you have a confident sense of what is actually taking place in the story, review your map. Flash your map and traverse the landscape. Stop in places: What is here? What happened in the story here? What did it sound like? What is the general feeling of this place in different times? Then chart out a map of emotions. Please remember that this is not accurate, but assumption and for our sense of the inner weather report of the unfolding story and how it might affect our listeners. Can you discern between what you assume was being felt and what is the general atmosphere.

Personal Associations - Very often the reason we choose to tell a story is not evident to us at the start. But as we work on the story, uncovering hidden streams of meaning and the intentions of the journey, we often find that somehow we chose a tale that is very much about our own inner journey and ourselves. It is easy to quickly make a statement about what it is about for us... but it is very interesting to let the unconscious decisions that somehow chose us into this story speak. Choose an image in the story, or a place. Then create an imagined secret door. Place the door. Decorate the door. Then open it and find a tunnel and travel to a place in your childhood. Write about the place before you make any statements about what you liked or disliked about the place. Then tell yourself who was in the place with you, if anyone, and what happened there. One incident. Write it down without editing or explaining. Read it out loud. Write about the relationship between that incident and the story. What have you discovered? Do not tell anyone that event for at least a week. Let it marinate within you. It will speak with you in associations, dreams, and sudden insight.

Negative Aspect of Story as Medicine – Now that we have bravely weaned ourselves from our assumptions and begun to find the “key” to the story we can go deeper. Make a list of one or two of the terrible or most frightening, dark, dangerous, or cruel events in the story. Then see how the arising of that event moved what was stuck forward in the story. What is the medicine it provides in the story? What is the gift it offers to a listener and what social benefit is possible through recognizing how this incident awakened, broke through or transformed something?

TRY! Now it is time to put away the research and to begin to try to TELL THE STORY to someone else. The best beginning is to be a beginner. Don’t decide on voices or gestures. Just tell the story as simply and generously as you can to others and see what takes place. You have walked through this story and divided it several times. There is no reason that you don't really remember it. Tell it a bit offhandedly and simplistically. See what your listeners reveal to you about how the story affects them. What questions do they pose? What did you forget? What did you change? All of these are clues. You are

now on your way. You can actually begin at the top of the list and do it all again, with more excitement and even more discovery.

Each time you tell the story see your audience. Begin fresh, as if you have never told it before. In truth, since the story arises between the listeners and the teller, you have never told this particular story ever before. Travel well.



♥ 2008 L. Simms

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Compiled by Laura Simms
Overview of Storytelling

The following books are not in preferred order. They are a sampling of books that bring together a way of seeing traditional and personal storytelling in the contemporary world. I have chosen a variety of books that have influenced me. There are far more that are worthwhile.

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On the art of storytelling as social action. This will
Be held four times in the spring 2019
Documents on request

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