

Storytelling is my super power what's yours? By Richard O'Neill

The author Ursula Leguin wrote 'there had been cultures without the wheel but none without storytelling.' And being brought up in a traditional nomadic family with a strong indigenous storytelling tradition I can identify with that.

Many of the older people I grew up with had little formal education, but were able to teach us about a number of quite complex issues including history, nature, community and our place within it. Whatever the subject they always made it entertaining and as such the information and the stories they were wrapped up, in stayed with us. Storytime was also an opportunity for all ages to get together and share their stories past and present, it truly was an intergenerational experience.

So what can this ancient art of communication do for us in the 21st century?

Quite a lot it seems; although we are a sophisticated technological connected society we are also an increasingly diverse one; whether that be in the workplace where it's not uncommon to find three or even four generations working together, or in our communities where there is a growing number of people feeling isolated and suffering from loneliness through exclusion including that fuelled by ageism.

There is an increasing need to have positive interactions with the people around us, and storytelling is an excellent medium for doing that because it's so inclusive. It builds bridges between communities and individuals, it focuses on similarities rather than differences and anyone can do it regardless of age or background. Story allows us to connect to other people's joy, pain, and varied life experiences, which in turn helps to foster understanding.

Although stories are unscientific there is plenty of evidence to show the positive effects they have on our brains particularly in releasing the chemical dopamine, a hormone related to happiness. Storytelling allows you to communicate authentically as listeners can see and hear that you mean what you say, as the old people used to tell me 'story allows you to speak heart to heart.'



There's been a growing interest from professionals and community volunteers to learn storytelling skills, one such opportunity was created recently by the Reading Agency's 'Reading Friends' project at Bolton central library. Delegates from a variety of ages and backgrounds learned about the theory and practice of nomadic storytelling including how to use their voices, their bodies and their experiences to tell some of their old stories and also how to create new ones.

Richard storytelling with Oldham Dementia Group

Creating new empowering stories is a huge part of the nomadic style of storytelling as it shows us positive ways forward, this has many benefits for our communities. Stories can be therapeutic too as people feel really listened to, I know from family experience and now with my work in dementia just how useful it can be at those times when people find it too

difficult to reminisce, so instead of going over the past we create new stories together in the present. Sharing stories like this can be truly transformative for the teller and the listener.

As a manager or team leader storytelling allows you to communicate much more effectively than email, notes or powerpoint ever can as it speaks to head and heart and is much more memorable as a result. That's why people swap stories at work and down the pub and not powerpoint presentations!

There is so much to gain from using storytelling personally and professionally, it improves your confidence and the confidence of others it also makes you a better listener and it's by nature very inclusive.



Richard at Hay Festival

We mustn't forget that storytelling is also about having fun and being playful with words when this happens people of all ages connect and reconnect, there are few things more lovely than watching the generations laugh together. As one of my previous delegates, and now one of my colleagues, said after learning storytelling skills 'when I realised you could have fun my whole mindset changed for the better.'

I'll leave you with a comment from one of the attendees at our storytelling in the community event on what it had taught them to do; "have fun" "bring the people into the story - make connections" "Go with the flow" "Vocal dynamics"

So go on do all of those things and share a story with someone today!

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Richard O'Neill is a multi-award winning master storyteller and workshop leader, he delivers sessions in a wide range of settings across Europe. He has a particular interest in using storytelling to promote inclusion and social change.

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