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The Ancient Art of Storytelling

Introduction by Rinaldo S. Brutoco, World Business Academy President

The following article, "The Ancient Art of Storytelling," is an unusual one for *Perspectives*, even by our cutting-edge standards. Written by Academy Fellow, Jim Channon, it deals with the "myth and magic" potential for corporate communication. Jim's call for a new level of engaged communication is a strong antidote to the conventional practice of seeing the workplace as a place to "hide" ourselves rather than to experience our fullest creative resources as human beings in daily collaboration engaged in our joint enterprises.

Jim is one of America's senior corporate strategic consultants with ongoing major assignments for Reuters, Ford Motor Company, Sprint and others. His work not only assists individuals within the corporation to clearly *envision* their strategies, he is able to assist them to "listen" for their collective wisdom as well. Most importantly, he evokes their inner knowing and calls forth to their Soul. This article is the light-hearted commentary of a master on the present scene who shares his knowledge for how great communication, and more than that, great team building, occurs.

On the practical level, any presenter of corporate information would be well advised to consider a series of "tips" Jim provides for "shifting" the way material is delivered. The more that our business readers immerse themselves in Jim's suggestions (even if they can't do it with the same accomplished dramatic style that he utilizes), the more effective their connection will be with their "audience," whoever it is, and regardless of its size.

The Ancient Art of Storytelling

Theater For the Mind and Life For the Soul

By Academy Fellow Jim Channon

(fonts selected by author)

The sound of the fluorescent lights buzzed intensely. I worked myself to the bottom of my mountain of e-mail and papers. Pushing my chair back, I settled in for a review of my week. I gazed out the window at a meadow largely overshadowed by a parking lot full of cars and began to recall the moments of value. After some time ... three thoughts returned. They were important to the company business, but what interested me was that they were all wrapped in stories.

Nothing is kinder to the mind than a richly imaged story with a journey we can relate to. The brain has so many more anchors, tags, and hooks to draw the ideas back out of a file that is already overloaded with data and corporate abstractions. We can remember stories best and, therefore, the ideas attached to them have a real thread of connective tissue.

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"The Academy is not just another association of business people to exchange information and foster collegiality. It is about investing ourselves in a task of historic proportions." **Willis Harman**

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The most professional presentations are thought to be the bulleted abstractions on a Power Point style display. They are often the least memorable, and they nearly always end up without any compelling energy to move the audience to action. They don't serve the brain or the spirit.

Stories weave and mend the fabric of our lives. They guide the greater ethics of our best work together. Colorful folklore has always had an awesome power to shape tribal attitudes and key behavior. Stories can be told about things that have happened or as invitations of things that need to happen. The permission we have to become as alive as the characters that tell the stories is as important as the story itself. Storytelling is beyond content.

The Six Storytelling Secrets

In this paper are six storytelling tools. They have been gleaned from the masters of this now fading art form. People who have taken the time to use these tools have, for the most part, completely changed their feelings about speaking before others.

Imagine the gathering around the fire. When the storyteller begins, the magic of this great theater of the mind brings forward a world that you can assemble in your own way. You walk into the experience with the storyteller, but the lessons are yours to take away. The feelings come in and out with the word pictures.

You can live in the future state the story brings alive. A leader using stories can take you to the desired solution and give you a good feeling to carry the work energy forward later on. Stories are the ultimate tools to lead people to a new place.

Here are the stepping stones for your adventure into story telling:

- FINDING YOUR SPACEfinding the setting
- CHOOSING A FACEchoosing a character
- CAPTURING THE SPACE.....working the energy field
- WORKING THE PACEstyle, speed and tone
- RIDING THE BASEbeing one with music
- EXIT WITH GRACEbowing out with applause

Learn these techniques and attach a real situation to the methods suggested and discover the real difference storytelling can make in your world. See this in your mind.

...the storyteller approached us as if he were the owner of a special surprise. The eyes twinkled and the walk was full of suspense. Once centering himself in our midst, he began his enchanting descriptions of a situation we could all relate to. He became the central character and took the emerging journey for us all. His voice was paced to keep us on the line like so many happy fish. And, he would pause for long periods while waiting to let us in on the next important secret. He used music to fill our senses with the richness of soul seldom found in the corporate world. He made his final point when the music gave him the opening. He exited with a bowing gesture that told us that the story was at an end. We applauded and the energy rose.

We also know that often the character that needs to be called upon in the corporate setting is a very sober and grounded being. The content may involve a decision that could change the life of the company. Just be aware that the story form will still work better than the bullet form. Just move it to *scenarios* that can provide descriptions of options in a story-like way.

FINDING YOUR SPACE

There usually is one place in a setting, whether it is a room or a grassy knoll, where the storyteller can best make an eyeball connection with everyone in attendance. I usually imagine a bubble encompassing the group and then find myself in the bubble with them, but at one edge.

In a dark room the spot just under a good light may be the best choice. If you have a large prop, then that could locate you slightly differently. Once the ideal speaking location is discovered, then choose the best path to enter. Making an entrance is a storyteller's first chance to capture an audience. So, combine the best entry with the best point of delivery as your initial study.

The other setting that needs attention is the location of the story itself. You notice in most of the fantasy adventure pocketbooks that the authors usually create a map of the magic kingdom in question. A map of any territory about to be discovered is a lovely gift to the brain. It allows a framework upon which many smaller details can be attached. Notice here, we are serving the memory. But, even if you are presenting financial data, there is usually a model large enough to hold the remaining details. This is a way to set context for your audience.

"Once not very long ago, in a colorful cubicle not far from here, there sat a very wise corporate strategist. She was looking at a ten-year approach to a new market halfway round the world that was peopled with mostly nomads."

See how quickly the story form creates a time/space image for the group.

The ten-year timeline might be the prop needed then to organize the story in time/space. This is the approach needed to bring the audience into your world. Got it?

CHOOSING A FACE

One reason to choose a character to tell a story is that the character may have way more permission to be outrageous than you do. I love to speak in broken Italian (immigrant's voice in English) because I can be soooo big. I can tease, I can pontificate, I can bombast, and I can move my arms and hands in ways that saturate the room with energy.

The moment I enter the world of a character the audience will suspend their rational minds and take the journey into an imaginary space with me. That doesn't mean that I do this just to avoid critical analysis of the ideas. It's just that the analysis is best done after the ideas have been presented as a whole.

If accents don't come easily to you, try a funny hat. Or pretend you are the messenger returning with a secret from a distant land. In any case, see if you can achieve a bit of mystery as the carrier of the story.

A very interesting thing usually happens to those on the hunt for a character. They become more acutely aware of who they are themselves! The primal, raw, bone-deep you is the precious reward for your quest into character-land. Think back to times when you have gotten a laugh by imitating someone or some animal or just some strange voice. Don't rush this. It is a lifetime of fun. Soon magic hats and other accessories will come popping out of the woodwork.

CAPTURING THE SPACE

Imagine that all of your audience is sitting with you in a very large bathtub. You make a sweeping motion with your right arm, and the hot water begins a long, slow invasion of the group going around the back of the tub. There is an energy field in the room, and you have the invitation to move it around.

When everyone else is seated and still, you are also the conductor and choreographer with the power to set the mood, pace and tone of the event. If your chosen character believes and works this theater as if it is real ... the audience will go with it and the trance will set in for all. Consider these angles:

Don't rush! A slow and searching intro will put the audience into the same child-like space they fondly remember as a child. If you move like a Tai Chi practitioner, you can continue this water sweeping game for as long as you like.

Now stand in a charged posture with potential reeking from your being. You are slightly crouched down and could go off at any moment. If you carry yourself as if you could spring out and catch them ... they will think that too.

The way you launch into character in a go-for-broke kind of way assures you the initial connection. Strike a pose! Speak now in a whisper and look over your shoulder as if someone might overhear the magic report.

Whip out the opening and defining phrase. Launch into the role and imagine the story is happening to you. Be at the effect of the drama. Be a character the audience can empathize with. You are a thief with the Hope diamond. Heh, heh!

WORKING THE PACE

BLAH ... BLAH ... BLAH ... BLAH. We learned most of our speaking patterns from tired and slightly bored teachers. The pace is an even and often monotone drone. It is shocking how little has been made of how that speech pattern can be dramatically changed.

Each word you speak can be made "precious" with careful enunciation and glaring intent. The connections between words can be seductively drooled out, stringing the audience's translator into hyperspace. Short bursting patterns of speech can make a haunting difference. Especially, and here is the secret, with the ever-powerful *pause* at the ready.

To create suspense, there is nothing like well-placed silence. Just as the most precious pictures have the biggest frames, the most precious ideas are bordered in silence. Even a breath between each word can seduce the toughest group.

Even if you find the rest of this storywork too extreme for your personality, use this pacing technology. It's a shocking discovery to find that you can offer your words in a savory voice just dripping with intent. Think for a moment how far some singers take the expression of words. Wailing, crooning, and breathing softly are only some examples. Now tone that way down, but believe you are still delivering special content.

E-mail will never have the capacity to move the energy around like a storytelling voice. If you imagine you are walking purposefully while uttering each sentence, the audience will pick up the energy. The leader

purposes a group both with direction and effort. The momentum at which we attend our work comes from the visceral and embodied energy of our leaders.

RIDING THE BASE

Okay, we are about to take a leap. I want to suggest that if the circumstances permit, you consider telling your best stories to music. Hollywood has already trained everyone to get emotional about certain musical themes. If I were to play a few bars of "Jaws," the audience would have a complete mental and emotional take on the scene about to be created.

"Out of Africa" would be dramatically different and call forth sentiment. Many new instrumentalists are available on CD. The moods are infinite. The music is not intrusive and can be selected to support whatever tone you want to establish. So, what's the secret?

The secret is talking like a singer would talk. The voice quality is irrelevant. Keeping the mood and suspense is the trick. Riding the base is key. The momentum we feel from music is largely created by the

drum and base rhythms of the instruments. Just practice a little at home. The kids will love you. Then when you feel the magic ... the moment your words and the music gel ... you're home!

This may seem pretty outrageous to you at this point, but stay with me. There are just some times in the corporate scene when really deep sentiment or great moment is required. Let your characters help you out. There is no substitute for emotion, energy and information combined. At the minimum, consider the music to be played in and around your meetings. You can suggest heartfelt connections just by playing that kind of music at the right moments.

The corporate world is the only community most people have these days, whether we like it or not ... so, make it gray if you must, but there are no excuses for not including color. It's available and will not detract from your messages or meetings. Think about it. If you don't feel up to the deed, then select a storyteller from your team and a music-meister for those meetings where you want to really purpose your team.

EXIT WITH GRACE

Perhaps the only line that needs to be remembered during a story is the closing line. The moral ... if you will. To signal the audience that you are closing, begin to move slowly backwards in the direction you entered. While softening your closing to a whisper, begin to bow slightly. Letting them know when to clap is a courtesy to them and the entire group. This isn't the time to evaluate the presenter so much as a time to get a rousing chunk of energy from the group. Everyone needs the inspiration to be bold and have some fun at work. Pump it.

Your job as a leader may be more of a function of your ability to transmit energy than information. So, once you have organized your precious information on your laptop, don't make the mistake of thinking the best thing you can do is attach that to a projector. Translate it into a story that people can root in. Bring in the characters, add the music and let 'em have it. They are worth it.