

*I Am a **Living**
Witness...*

Storytelling as a radical method of healing

Presented by Donney Rose
Futures Without Violence Webinar
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*Storytelling offers the **space** to reflect upon and move through past traumas, the **ability** to relish in the beauty of moments long passed, and **ignites the desire** to unite with our communities and with ourselves—all forms of healing.*

**The Smithsonian Center for Folklife
and Cultural Heritage**

*It is **empowering** and healing
for survivors to share their
words and their stories.*

- Connections for Abused Women and their Children (CWAC)

Adult Learning Theory of **Storytelling**

Research on narrative learning in adult classroom settings states that narrative is a fundamental human way of making meaning. Learning through stories told, stories heard and stories recognized, allows us **make sense of our experiences** on a deeper, more cognitive level.

Storytelling appeals to listeners on a holistic level and is multifaceted in its approach and benefits to both the storyteller and the story recipient.

There is distinct human connection made when we are able to share our stories in a manner that feels safe, intimate and valued. The **restoration of safety and value** is vital in the healing process for victims of abuse.

Writing Exercise (7 min)

Participants should take 7 minutes to write in response to the following prompt:

“ I was afraid of what would happen if anyone would find out...”

The ‘what’ can be relative to any experience the participant would consider traumatic if it became known to the public. In the written response, the story of what happened, where it happened, who was there/involved and why it would create a conflict should all be considered.

Using an Anecdotal Approach vs an Allegorical Approach is Based on Communal Familiarity

An anecdote is **a short story about a real person or event**, usually serving to make the listeners laugh or ponder over a topic. Generally, the anecdote will relate to the subject matter that the group of people is discussing.

An allegory is **a simple story that represents a larger point about society or human nature, whose different characters may represent real-life figures**. Sometimes, situations in the story may echo stories from history or modern-day life, without ever explicitly stating this connection.

Allegorical approaches to storytelling are beneficial to communities that are newly formed. Whether it is school communities, workplace communities etc. an allegorical method can allow participants to convey their positions on certain topics by providing familiar examples of cautionary tales, **while not disclosing a great deal of their personal narrative.**

Communal trust is built over time and everyone who enters a space does not come in primed to give first-person accounts of experiences they've had, **particularly if their experiences relate to trauma.** Allegory provides a sense of distance for newly formed communities to 'test the temperature' of the people around them.

Anecdotal approaches to storytelling are of greater benefit to communities seeking to **deepen trust within a group** after the group members have spent time learning about each other on a surface level. A willingness to be vulnerable and honest must be at the forefront when sharing either personal narratives or stories of people we know of, or align with ideologically. **The more time people in a community spend with one another, the less likely individuals will have deep concerns of being judged,** and are therefore more likely to be open about real-world scenarios they have been impacted by.

Because of the humorous nature of anecdotal storytelling, community members who have gained some degree of familiarity with each other are less likely to feel embarrassed about sharing stories of blunder, and more comfortable with exchanging 'cautionary tales' to help each other avoid the same mistakes. Communities that have **built trust** may implore a more serious form of anecdotal storytelling when unpacking traumas within a group.

A Sample Story of Abuse (6:30)

TW: Graphic images, story of domestic violence



Would Hayley's story be considered **allegorical or anecdotal**?

What jumped out to you about her narrative/story sharing?

What kind of **community trust** would have to be established for someone to share a similar story with a group?

Identifying the Narrative Arc in **Stories of Survival**

Narrative arc is a term that describes a story's **full progression**. It visually evokes the idea that every story has a relatively calm beginning, **a middle where tension, character conflict, and narrative momentum builds to a peak**, and an end where the conflict is resolved.

For survivors of domestic abuse or sexual assault the idea of a narrative arc can **begin as early as childhood or young adulthood, persist for a number of years, be comprised of multiple villains and end with a great deal of trauma-informed therapy or counseling** needed for the survivor to fully be able to comprehend what happened to them.

A Story of Assault (5:56)
TW: Explicit details of sexual assault



The narrative arc in Darchelle's story of sexual assault consisted of memories of being a proud daughter of a military man, joining the armed services later in life and being the victim of assault by **more than one military personnel**. Darchelle's resolution was not as simple as being able to retain her standing in the military despite being a decorated soldier.

So, what could be considered the benefit of her coming forth with her story of assault?

Writing Exercise (3 min)

Prompt: *I knew I had to say something, whether anyone believed me or not...*

Write about a time you had to speak out about an injustice or violation. The story of violation can be whatever level of extremity you feel comfortable with writing about.

Practicing the Art of Group Storytelling Through **Story Circles**

“THE RULES OF THE STORY CIRCLE ARE THE RULES OF CIVIL PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY. **YOU AGREE TO LISTEN. YOU AGREE TO RESPECT.**”

— JOHN O’NEAL, FOUNDER OF JUNEBUG PRODUCTIONS

Story circles allow participants to practice authentic listening, being present in the moment and **honoring the experiences of everyone involved**. Facilitators of story circles that are trauma-informed have an important obligation to adhere to the following guidelines of story circles to ensure that participants feel **safe and open in their sharing**.



Story Circle Process and Guidelines

There are 4 parts to a story circle.

Part 1 – Introductions and explaining the guidelines

Part 2 - Listening & telling

Part 3 – Crosstalk

Part 4 – Transformative action

Be aware of how much time you have for the whole process: Make sure you know to include time and instructions for how you will break up into small groups if you have more than 8 people, and what time your circle is to re-join the larger group (if there is one), or what time the whole session needs to end. The facilitator should re-cap these time factors to the circle.

1. **Always sit in a circle;** make the circle a "good" circle", not oval or jagged. Being in a circle is important. In a circle everyone is an equal, and you can see everybody –so it's easier to listen.
2. **Always introduce everybody.** The facilitator of the circle should introduce themselves to the group, and then moving clockwise from that person, each person states their name and gives a VERY BRIEF introduction of themselves (where from, what organization they are with).
3. **Be transparent about the purpose and theme for the circle.** If there is to be a theme given for the stories, the facilitator explains the theme and answers any questions about that theme or about the process itself. This matters so that the participants can support the reason for the gathering. Don't get to worried about the theme though, because the only person who really needs to concern themselves with the theme is the person telling the first story.
4. **Only one person speaks at a time.** As the circle proceeds, there will be no "cross circle" talk, questions or commenting on the story just told. After the circle is complete and everyone that might have passed has had a chance to tell a story, then there will be a "cross circle questioning, commenting and dialogue" time.
5. **The first story is the "seed" that grows what stories get told.** The facilitator may have prompted some one to tell the first story, or the facilitator may call for the first story and anyone in the circle may begin with a story, it depends on the facilitator, the purpose of the circle or how well the people know each other.
6. **The most important part of story telling is the listening.** Listening is more important than talking. Don't spend time thinking of what your story will be; just actively listen to the stories. Trust that the circle will bring you a story. If several stories come to you as you are listening, go for the one that is the "deepest", that you feel comfortable telling.

7. **Have a timekeeper and share time equally.** Decide on the number of minutes for each story; **we suggest three minutes.** Choose the method of time keeping; will there be one timekeeper or will you pass the watch around the circle. Decide on what the signal will be when the time is up; the storyteller doesn't have to stop abruptly, just finish up the story.
8. **The story circle will proceed clock-wise from the first storyteller.**
9. **You can pass, you don't have to speak.** If it's your turn to share a story and you don't have a story to tell it's ok – just say “pass”. Anyone who passes will have another chance to share at the end of the circle.
10. **The stories you tell should be STORIES,** not political theories, general histories, or your opinion on the theme, or your opportunity to lecture. A story can be your story or the story of a family member, friend or acquaintance.
11. **Be Present.** Turn off cell phones, don't text or tweet while participating. Do not take notes while in the circle. Do not hold books or papers in your lap. Concentrate on listening.
12. **Silence is OK,** in fact it is good. As the stories pass around the circle it is OK for there to be silence after one story is complete and before the next person begins; this gives that person, and the circle, time to reflect on the story they just heard, and it gives the next person time to land on his/her story, or decide to pass without pressure.
13. **Respect.** You don't have to like the story someone has to tell, but you have to respect their right to tell it.
14. If your circle has time for more than one circle of stories, then at the end of the circle, do it again - again ending with an opportunity for those who have passed if they now have a story. They may, or they may pass again.
15. **Cross Talk** - After everyone who is going to tell has spoken, open the circle for the "cross circle questioning, commenting and dialogue. You need to have decided how long you have for that phase of the circle and keep to that time.
16. **Snapshots** - You May do a “Snap shot” to capture what you hear in the stories people share. Take a moment to collect the sensations, thoughts, images, and feelings you have as the result of listening. This can happen after a round of stories be told, before or after crosstalk.
17. **Transformative action** –Finally, always end the circle with an opportunity for people to do something with what has been shared. The action can be small and simple, like sharing a thought or feeling; creative and artistic – like writing a poem

THANKS FOR PARTICIPATING!

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