

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

The article below is the property of the author. Permission for private use is granted. Distribution, either electronically or on paper is prohibited without her expressed written permission. For permission please contact: mike@mikelockett.com

What is Storytelling?

c. 2016 Mike Lockett

Storytelling is the oldest method of communication. One only has to imagine how in the earliest of times primitive man used sounds, gestures and words to convey ideas and stories. Cavemen around a campfire likely told stories to tell about their hunt and to teach their young. Some of the earliest stories were probably based on actual events that happened to themselves or their ancestors. Other stories may have been developed to explain mysteries in nature. Stories that were passed from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation were embellished and changed each time they were told. It is easy to picture how individuals combined their oral skills with gestures and expressions to convey their messages and stories to others – that we term listeners. Storytellers may have told tales about encounters with animals or with other people – both true and imaginary. Though the first stories were most likely oral, some early people drew pictures on cave walls to tell their stories. Others created sculptures, or wove and painted images into baskets and pottery to express their thoughts and stories about themselves, about nature and about the known and the unknown.

Anne Pellowski in The World of Storytelling (1977) suggested several theories on the origins of storytelling.

- 1) That it grew out of the playful, self-entertainment needs of humans;
- 2) That it satisfied the need to explain the surrounding physical world;
- 3) That it came about because of an intrinsic religious need in humans to honor or propitiate the supernatural force(s) believed to be present in the world;
- 4) That it evolved from the human need to communicate experience to other humans;
- 5) That it fulfilled an aesthetic need for beauty, regularity, and form through expressive language and music,
- 6) That it stemmed from the desire to record the actions or qualities of one's ancestors, in the hope that this would give them a kind of immortality.

Some stories became myths and legends that may still be told today. Some stories have worked their way into the many religious beliefs in our world. Yet many stories have been lost due to not being retold. I believe that stories are alive and remain alive as long as someone takes the time to tell and preserve them. We would be lost without stories. Stories are a conduit for learning according to Daniel Levis, a modern marketer from Canada. He calls stories “the sacred baton, passed from one generation to the next without which human development would stand still.” (Why Facts Tell and Stories Sell, 2006)

I recall a true story that provides a good analogy to give readers food for thought as they ponder the question “What is storytelling?”

Jerome Su (Cheng C. Su) is an instructor at National Taiwan Normal University's Graduate Institute of Translation and Interpretations. He is an esteemed language scholar, and he has become my friend. Jerome is a firm advocate of listening to and telling stories to facilitate learning languages. Jerome took my wife and me to the National Palace Museum in Taipei City, Taiwan. The beauty and history contained behind glass cases cannot adequately be described in words. I was told it would take more than twenty years of visiting the museum daily in order to see all the history that the revolving exhibits preserves. So many stories...

I recall staring at a huge iron urn that I presumed was used for cooking. A great deal of work had gone into something that would only be used for preparing food. The ornate carvings and decorations seemed too good

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

for a simple tool from the kitchen, regardless of how large it was. Then, Jerome Su began to tell me its story. “This urn and others like it,” he said “served as a status symbol for lords or emperors in times past.” I learned the urn was like a trophy. Wars were actually fought for the purpose of seeing who could be the last one to own these several hundred pound iron pots. An analogy for stories and storytelling came to my mind.

The ore for the giant pot came from the earth. It had to be dug out, put with other pieces of ore and manipulated before it could be used. Chances are that many different areas had to be dug up and explored before the raw material for the urns could be found. Stories come from pieces of information and bits of events that are buried in our minds. Sometimes hundreds of books, ideas and writings must be explored to find the raw material for one good story. The raw material for a story must be dug out, sorted and crafted before the concept of the story can begin.

The ore for the urns had to be heated (smelted) to separate it from the rest of the un-necessary materials (slag) and made pure and before it was ready to be used. The smelting process for stories comes through telling and re-telling the stories. Each telling refines the story and makes it more pure. The good parts are kept to be used. Details that are not needed are discarded. John Walsh, a storytelling friend and author of [The Art of Storytelling](#) (2003) says it takes at least five tellings before a new story is ready to be crafted into a memorable tale.

The iron for the large urns was heated and melted and forged. The urns took shape. If an urn had large imperfections, it probably would have been melted down and cast again. Small imperfections were cleaned up one by one through the hard work of the craftsman. Eventually, the urns were polished and ready for use. Perhaps they did serve a purpose in the kitchen. Most certainly, they were looked up to and enjoyed by everyone who saw them. People took ownership of the urns, even though they may not have created them. Stories are forged during live performances. Large mistakes and problems are cleaned up. At times storytellers melt the stories down to their original materials and start crafting the stories from the beginning. The stories are polished, and the stories are told. Listeners take the stories to heart. Though they did not create the stories, they take possession of the storyteller’s works and make them their own.

I can’t help but compare the artisans who made the many artifacts we saw in that museum to storytellers. The artisans are no longer present for a “live” explanation or story of how their carefully crafted items came to be or to tell the tales of their use; however the story of those items and the ancient Chinese culture can be felt in the hearts and minds of every visitor at the National Palace Museum. I equate this to storytellers and stories. The initial telling of new stories takes live interactions with audiences to craft the tales. But, the polished stories can be recorded on audio and video recordings for future listeners to enjoy. The stories can also be written down to be delivered to audiences again in the future. All this said, I believe that storytelling is the creation of the stories in front of live audiences or with audiences in mind.

Definition of Storytelling

I have been asked in interviews and again in discussions how I define storytelling. Simplistically, it is the process of taking ideas from your head and putting them into the head of someone else through verbal communication. It can be also compared to taking an idea from your head and putting it into listener’s hearts for the purpose of moving, informing or persuading someone through words and actions. It seemed like fate that the question of, “*What is storytelling?*” came at the same time I was beginning to write a book, *The Basics of Storytelling* (2007) that I decided to research and see how others define storytelling.

The first place that anyone seems to go to today, even for a definition, is the computer. From a humorous perspective, the first site that appeared in my search was a site for storytellers by Tim Sheppard. Tim had an entire section devoted to frequently asked questions. Read what he had to say. *How Do You Define*

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

Storytelling? You don't! There is no consensus, and it is extraordinarily hard to come up with any good definition, long or short...

Most storytellers are very resistant to setting a definition in case they get limited or excluded by it. (Sheppard, 2007) Kendall Haven humorously stated in his book Super Simple Storytelling (2000) that six of seven dictionaries do not have a definition for storytelling.

Not one to give up easily, I scrolled through numerous websites and large numbers of books and articles written by sages from the world of storytelling. It was in one of the simplest sites that I found a starting place for composing a response to the question, "What is storytelling?" The site was called Wikipedia. It is a free, ever-changing multilingual encyclopedia written collaboratively by contributors from all over the world. The site called storytelling "the ancient art of conveying events in words, images and sounds." This made sense to me. Then I looked to see what storytellers had to say about their own art.

Ellin Green, co-author of Storytelling Art & Technique, (1996) is credited for defining storytelling as the "art of recreating literature, taking printed words in book and giving them life". This definition would likely appeal to most librarians since they depend on published sources to provide them with the material for their stories. Green's definition is used in most library storytelling courses and workshops.

Children's author Aaron Shepherd stated that folklorists do not accept Green's definition, since they base their stories on tales from oral stories. He suggested that Ann Pellowski, author of the World of Storytelling (1977), had the right idea when she defined storytelling as "the art or craft of narration of stories in verse and or prose, as performed or led by one person before a live audience; the stories narrated may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other accompaniment and may be learned from oral, printed, or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes may be that of entertainment."

Minneapolis Storyteller, Kevin Strauss, shortened the above definition and called storytelling "the art of live narrative performance, dynamically shaped by audience response." His use of the words "live performance" brought to mind the words of Ruth Sawyer, a master storyteller from the early 1900's and author of The Way of the Storyteller (1942). She wrote that like the folk arts of music and dancing, "Storytelling lives only while the story is being told. True, a child or adult can sometimes go to a book and read the story again for himself... but it is not the same thing."

Much like Sawyer's definition, the National Storytelling Association (Now better known as the National Storytelling Network) came up with a "working" definition of storytelling which states that, "Storytelling is the art of using language, vocalization, and/or physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images of a story to a specific live audience." (NSA, 1977)

Lewis Carroll, author of Alice in Wonderland, calls stories "love gifts." Ethel Barrett, storyteller and author of Storytelling – It's Easy (1960) said, "The ability to tell a story well is a gift of expression, the gift of interpretation - the ability to take an event from the memory or from the printed page and make it come to life." This talk of storytelling being a gift gave me the final thoughts I needed to complete my own definition. I define storytelling as "the gift of taking a story or memory, shaping it through live performances and putting it into listener's heads and hearts through words, gestures, and sounds."

The gift is enjoyed as much by the storyteller as by the listener *"All who have told stories in even the most casual way must have experienced mysterious satisfying moments when, by some happy chance, they have quite unexpectedly seemed to touch the very heart of childhood – when the children have listened breathlessly to the*

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

end of the story, and the storyteller has emerged from his ecstasy with the feeling that he has given something that will be a permanent possession to the listeners.” (Storytelling in Home and School, 1918) People have

been giving and receiving these love gifts since the earliest recorded history. Regardless how you define storytelling, may you one day enjoy sharing the gift of storytelling with others.

History of Storytelling

Storytelling has been around for thousands of years. Yet most storytellers do not know much of the history of how storytelling began. While talking to her audiences, mostly librarians and library storytellers, Ruth Sawyer said, “I know of no other group of artists, be they painters, architects, or composers, who have not gone into their own pasts, keen to gather all that had a bearing on their art.” She wrote, “I have found too few storytellers in this country (America) who have looked beyond the hand that compiled or wrote their favorite collection of stories for them.” (The Way of the Storyteller, 1945)

We are only learning in recent years how far back storytelling goes. A discovery by a group of children in the Pyrenees Mountains in 1940 called attention to drawings of extinct animals in the Lascaux Caves. Over 2000 figures, (mostly animals) were painted by some primitive people. While many animals in the paintings cannot be identified, over 900 animals that appear in the drawings can be recognized, including deer, cattle, bison, birds, bears and even one rhinoceros. In addition, the drawing of one human appears on the cave walls. Scientists and folklorists who reviewed these paintings say that one particular composition has all the elements of a narrative (a story) in it. The drawings were more than just portraits. The animals were interacting with each other. It is believed that the cave was used for the performance of hunting and magical rituals. The artist was a storyteller. In a similar way, Australian aborigines painted symbols from their own stories on cave walls. Cajete, Gregory, Donna Eder and Regina Holyan (2010, *Life Lessons through Storytelling: Children's Exploration of Ethics*) suggests that stories were told using a combination of oral narrative, music, rock art and dance, proving that storytelling have been around for a very long time!

Another form of historic evidence of early storytelling comes from ancient Mesopotamia. The stories were about the epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king who was reported to live in about 3000 B.C.E. Stories of Gilgamesh were passed down by word of mouth and likely went through many versions until the story was printed on clay and fired in about 700 B.C.E. Stories of Gilgamesh were also reported to be carved onto stone pillars where all could read them. I have to also believe that people also told the tales, thus keeping storytelling alive in ancient Mesopotamia. It may be interesting to those who are familiar with the Old Testament stories in the Bible that the stories of Gilgamesh included a creation story in a garden much like the one described in the Book of Genesis and even a flood story – both predating the time when the Old Testament was written down.

One of the oldest surviving records of storytelling was written on the Westcar Papyrus of the Egyptians. Through ancient Egyptian records, we know that three sons of Khufu (Cheops), the great Pyramid builder, entertained their father with stories. It is generally believed that this took place sometime between 2000-1300 B.C.E. The writings show that one son told a tale of magic, another of the deeds of Khufu's forefathers and another told a contemporary tale. This is proof that storytelling existed at that time. It supports the belief that storytelling was used for entertainment as well as for communication and religious purposes.

We know that storytelling was prevalent in African history as well. Though the Greeks claim the stories of Aesop as their own, it is believed that Aesop originally came from Egypt, Ethiopia or some other area in North Africa or one of the islands near Africa in the Mediterranean Sea. Aesop was a slave who was best known for telling stories and fables that had been handed down through generations and for creating fables of his own that have lived until modern times. While Aesop was reported to have lived about 550 B.C.E., his stories were not written down until 300-250 B.C.E.

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

Storytelling helped adults pass on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through the generations before they were finally printed in written form. A good example of the passing of stories through the generations can be shown by Homer's epics. Originally told by Homer about 1200 B.C.E. – the stories were passed on and on until about 700

B.C.E. when the ancient Greeks first developed their written language. This serves as proof that stories live on through re-telling. Modern storytellers still tell Homer's stories of the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The same pattern can be seen in China and in India where ancient stories appeared in written form years after they were originally created. "Storytelling was one of the many Arts of the Yu, the entertainers at the feudal courts, during the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 B.C.E.)." ([The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling, 1996](#)) This was documented in sources linking storytelling in China back before the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). I found it interesting to learn that storytellers often performed in the marketplace or bazaar. One source stated that the Pingtan performers depended on their mouths to eat, meaning that they were paid for their stories. In telling Buddhist epics in China and in southeastern Asia, their storytelling included pinghua – storytelling or narration without music; and tanci – narration with music. Stories were often told in narrative passages with breaks of music, humor, and poetry. In the olden days a story could take as long as three months to tell – with an hour session each day.

Shadowplays (storytelling with the use of paper puppets) in India have long been based on stories from Hindu epics about the god Rama. The favorite stories were included in the Ramayana which was first written in Sanskrit about 1500 B.C.E. The epic story was based on a series of about 25,000 couplets credited to the Indian Poet Valmiki about 1500 B.C.E. that were turned into story form by performers. Storytellers told the Ramayana all throughout southeastern Asia. More relevant to modern storytellers are the tales of the Panchatantra, a collection of five books filled with stories that were written and told by Vishnu Sarma as around 300 B.C.E. The stories of the Panchatantra are animal fables told in narrative and in poetry. These stories were reported to have been written as a means of educating the three sons of a Brahmin on how to deal with people in life. Each story has a moral and a theme dealing with topics such as love and hatred, compassion and wit, selfless courage and base cowardice, generosity and meanness and more.

Storytelling even held an important role in the Americas. Like every part of the world, America had its creation stories, flood stories, tales of heroic deeds and all kinds of sacrifices. Records of most of the stories in the Americas were considered pagan by Jesuit priests who came to what was often called "the New World." In their efforts to convert the natives of Central America and South America to Christianity, priests burned all perishable documents and broke up the stones that recorded other stories. Despite this, North American storytelling was preserved through oral stories told at pow-wows and over campfires. The storyteller still holds an important place in the culture of Native Americans.

The above information proves that storytelling existed in the oldest of times. But, there are connections that serve to connect historical storytelling to contemporary times. How did the stories of yesterday move forward through time to become the stories of today? For indigenous groups, the connection is easy to see. As stated above in some cultures, stories have been passed down from generation to generation through individuals who are designated as the "storyteller."

Handcrafted scrolls in the middle-east, handcrafted books in ancient Greece and Rome and handwritten Bibles and books – like those created in monasteries preserved many of the world's stories. The advent of the printing press and movable type helped to preserve stories, both religious and secular ones. The oral tradition of telling stories were perpetuated by traveling troubadours, by travelers bringing the news from afar, by actors and storytellers of all types wherever audiences gathered. Folktales, fairytales, myths, legends, tall tales, fables and all other forms of stories have been preserved so today's listeners can still hear the stories of old. Today's listeners can still be entertained through the Tales of 1001 Arabian Nights, the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table and more.

Individuals like French born Frances Alcott made a great impact on storytelling. In 1899, Alcott made storytelling a regular part of the education program for school children. Further influence for storytelling came

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

from Marie Shedlock. She was born in France, a child of English parents, and got much of her education in Germany. Shedlock brought a new appreciation for storytelling in American libraries during two long tours in the early 1900's. She became the first well known modern storyteller and paved the way to keeping storytelling

alive in the modern world. A historical look at storytelling should also credit an unusual type of entertainment in America that flourished from 1879 throughout the mid 1900's. What started as a summer school program for Sunday School teachers became vaudevillian style camps that featured religious instruction, music, opera, drama, popular lectures and even storytelling. The events took place under large tents and brought in listeners of all ages and from all walks of life. The idea of telling stories under tents has developed into its own effective mechanism for preserving and encouraging storytelling in the modern world and helping it to flourish worldwide. The National Storytelling Festival is one of the Top 100 Events in North America. The event and the organizations that stemmed from it, The National Storytelling Network and the International Storytelling Center, are helping storytelling grow and live on in history.

The Gift of Stories - The Caliph of Bagdad

As Retold by Dr. Mike Lockett, The Normal Storyteller

I have adapted a story from 763 C.E. that was retold in Religious Education through Storytelling (Cather, 1925) to summarize why storytelling has been important throughout history and why it should remain important in the future. I call the tale, "The Gift of Stories – The Caliph of Baghdad" as it had no name in its original form. I have told this story to teachers and parents, and now I tell it to everyone who wishes to learn to tell stories by reading this book.

Many Centuries ago, a banquet was held in the palace of the Caliph of Bagdad to celebrate the birth of a new son. As was the custom, leaders and men of high station came from all across the land to present gifts and enjoy the feast provided by the Caliph. Each brought a costly gift, except for one very wise sage named Mehelled Abi. Abi came to the feast empty-handed.

Each guest paraded in elegance before the Caliph to present his gift. Fine clothes, jewels and gold were given in abundance. As each gift was received with a smile from the Caliph, the givers turned and gave a frown as they watched the sage standing at the end of the line with no gift to give.

"He has no gift to give," they began to whisper among each other. "He has no gift to give the new prince."

At last the sage came before the Caliph, and the room grew silent as all wished to hear what words he shared with their ruler. "Fine raiment, jewels and gold the prince has received, and may he be blessed by many more gifts as he grows to manhood. But, I bring the most precious gift of all. I bring the gift of "Stories." Laughter broke out in the room until the Caliph held up his hand to silence everyone and let the sage continue.

"From the time that your son is able to understand my words," said the sage, "I will come to the palace every day and tell him stories. The tales I tell him, both true and fanciful, will make him wise and righteous as he grows in wisdom through my words. When the day comes, my Caliph, when you can rule no longer, your son will sit above your people as their chief. He will be just and merciful, and all of Arabia will rejoice in his leadership."

Mehelled Abi kept his word. From the time the young prince could speak and understand words, the child, who was named Haroun-al-Rashid, was tutored daily by the wise old man and told stories from all around the world - tales both true and fanciful. He learned of wise men and fools; of science and nature. He learned about all religions of the world and more. When the time came for him to rule as Caliph, he extended the borders of his

NES STORYTELLING STARTER KIT

empire from the Byzantine Empire in the West to China in the East. He ruled with wisdom like few other men possessed.

Haroun (called Aaron by westerners) is still known as “Aaron the Upright,” “Aaron the Just” and “Aaron the Rightly Guided.” Bagdad grew in power. Art and music flourished, as did the art of storytelling. Some say that the Book 1001 Arabian Nights was stimulated by the rule of this Caliph - all because of the gift of stories.

One of the best gifts history has given to us is to teach us that storytelling is important. Children are blessed when we take time to tell them stories, starting as soon as they are born, and certainly no later than when they are old enough to understand the spoken word. Stories can indeed make our world a better place in which to live. *May the world become a better place because of the gift of the stories that you tell to young and old alike!*