



My Storytelling Story

By Lyn Turknett



I have long realized that I perk up when I hear a story. I've sat through a lot of sermons, and daydreamed through many, but I perk up when a story begins. As a presenter I too want to get four thousand points on a single PowerPoint slide, but I can't help realizing that the audience is at rapt attention only when I'm telling a story.

I didn't think much about how wired we are to truly "think in stories" until around 2001, when I read [Stephen Dennings The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations](#). He began the book with a story of the power of a single story, and I can still remember my excitement when began the book. Here's how Denning describes that initial story:

"The origin of my interest in organizational storytelling was simple: nothing else worked. As a manager in the World Bank in 1996, I had been trying to communicate the idea of knowledge management and to get people to understand and to implement it. At that time in that organization, knowledge management was a strange and generally incomprehensible idea. I used the traditional methods of communicating with no success. I gave people reasons why the idea was important but they didn't listen. I showed them charts and they just looked dazed. In my desperation, I was willing to try anything and eventually I stumbled on the power of a story, such as the following:

"In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the website for the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria.

"This was June 1995, not June 2001. This was not the capital of Zambia but a tiny place six hundred kilometers away. This was not a rich country: this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank isn't in the picture. The World Bank doesn't have its know-how accessible to all the millions of people who made decisions about poverty. But just imagine if it had. Think what an organization it could become."

Our son Josh, a neurologist, believes that stories are key to transferring information and key to learning. He is now hosting a TLG podcast entitled "Value Tales" featuring the stories of Leadership Character Award nominees. The leadership stories so far are from [Alex Gregory, Ann Cramer, and Robiaun Charles](#), and their lessons are so much more powerful in that form.

The name “Value Tales” comes from family history, and from a series of children’s books written decades ago, when our two sons were small. I remember them as interesting and wonderful for character and values development. And they were all stories. Josh remembers:

“When I was growing up, it was a series of children’s books called Value Tales, which serves as the inspiration for the name for this series, and we had the books in our home. They were also in the library in our elementary school. Each book was about a different value and they told the story of a historical figure and the value that they exemplified - The Value of Courage: The Story of Jackie Robinson and The Value of Respect: The Story of Abraham Lincoln.

“One of the most remarkable things thinking about it in retrospect was just how popular they were. Like, so I guess when I was a first grader, everybody would rush to check out that first. You wouldn’t think that a book about values would be that popular, but I think it’s a testament to the power of stories. Stories - and the importance of values and character - are deeply wired into all of us. But if you’d had someone stand up in a room full of first graders to lecture them about values, I doubt you’d have had much engagement!”

I’ve tried to collect and use stories in speaking, and one of my favorites is from our other son, Rob. I’ve used it to demonstrate the power of listening and the power of empathy. Before this happened I had decided to try to “up” my empathy and be a better listener. And I got the perfect chance. Here’s the story - excerpted from **Decent People, Decent Company**:

“One day our son Rob, who was about 11, came in from school obviously upset. He slammed his book bag on the kitchen table. I said, “Rob, what’s wrong?”

“Somebody stole the bats, and now we have to do exercises in P.E. instead of softball.”

So I responded, “Oh, that’s too bad. And that’s your favorite part of the day.”

“Yeah, and the coach won’t even let the rest of us pay to buy new ones. He says whoever took them has to bring them back.”

I was sorely tempted at this point to launch into a mini-lecture about why the coach would have said this. But I remembered my pledge and just said, “Oh, Rob, I’m so sorry.” I even went further. “If he changes his mind, I’ll contribute toward the new bats.”

And then Rob said, “That’s OK. I can understand. If we just paid for new ones, it wouldn’t teach them a lesson.” And then he took his books upstairs and went out to play.

I’m still amazed by that reaction. I know that if I had reacted with a lecture instead of with empathy, Rob would have argued and stayed angry, and I would never have heard that mature response. We both grew in that interchange. Empathy is a powerful teacher.

And so are stories.

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