

Are you sitting comfortably?

Then **Penny Walker** has a story for you

A parable of citizen action

A fearless and environmentally-minded young woman was travelling by tube. The man sitting opposite her threw his gum wrapper on the floor. She looked pointedly at the man, then at the wrapper, then back at the man, raising one eyebrow. The man got the message.

He took out the rest of his gum, unwrapped each piece and put it in his capacious mouth. All the wrappers were thrown on the floor. She got the message, and got off at the next stop.

I have learnt a lot about engaging people since then!

The power of stories

I have also learnt a lot about the power of stories – to help get your message across; to enable a group of people to build a shared understanding of a situation and the options for moving forward; and for uncovering what may be going on beneath the surface, when you’re trying to create change but things have got stuck – by listening for the stories people don’t know they’re telling.

A rabbi was talking with God about Heaven and Hell.

“Come,” said God. “Walk with me, and I will show you Hell.”

And together they walked into a room of cold, rough stone. In the centre of the room, atop a low fire, sat a huge pot of quietly simmering stew. The stew smelled delicious, and made the rabbi’s mouth water. A group of people sat in a circle around the pot, and each of them held a curiously long-handled spoon. The spoons were long enough to reach the pot; but the handles were so ungainly that every time someone dipped the bowl of their spoon into the pot and tried to manoeuvre the bowl to their mouth, the stew would spill. The rabbi could hear the grumblings of their bellies. They were cold, hungry, and miserable.

Getting a message across

As they say, all stories are true, and some of them actually happened.

You can get your message across very effectively with a well-chosen story. There are dozens of storytelling websites, as well as books, that you can find stories in. Or you can come up with your own, from life or imagination.

There is also a lot of theory about what makes for a compelling story. There are archetypal characters like the victim or damsel in distress, the hero, the villain, and the trickster (think of Brer Rabbit, Anansi or Del Boy Trotter).

There are also some classic plot types, like these identified by playwright Denis Johnston.

Plot types

- 1 Cinderella (unrecognised virtue)
- 2 Achilles (hero with a fatal flaw)
- 3 Faust (a debt must be paid)
- 4 Tristan and Isolde (love triangle)
- 5 Circe (the spider and the fly)
- 6 Romeo and Juliet (forbidden love)
- 7 Orpheus (a precious thing is lost)
- 8 Indiana Jones (indomitable hero)

Cinderella, Faust and Orpheus all have the potential to get across ecological messages:

“And now,” God said, “I will show you Heaven.”

Together they walked into another room, almost identical to the first. A second pot of stew simmered in the centre; another ring of people sat around it; each person was outfitted with one of the frustratingly long spoons. But this time, the people sat with the spoons across their laps or laid on the stone beside them. They talked, quietly and cheerfully with one another. They were warm, well-fed, and happy.

“Lord, I don’t understand,” said the rabbi. “How was the first room Hell; and this, Heaven?”

God smiled. “It’s simple,” he said. “You see, they have learned to feed each other.”

Source: www.storylovers.com



Cinderella

- Cinderella – foolish humans not recognising the virtue of nature in providing us with vital services;
- Faust – we’re now paying the price of industrialisation; and
- Orpheus – when we no longer have clean water, fertile land or a stable climate, how will we get it back?

The puzzle story or joke, like the heaven and hell story (see left), is more punch-line than plot, but can still remind us of what we already know about ourselves!

Building shared understanding

“Any event retold from life that would appear to carry a meaning, however small, is a story.” Ben Okri

Telling our own stories helps us to make sense of our experiences, and hearing other people’s stories builds a shared understanding of what’s happened.

When an organisation is facing change,

whether imposed or planned, then telling the story of how we got here, and how we'll go forward, can unleash empathy, insight and energy.

The stories don't have to be profound, or fit a particular plot type. They can be highly realistic (and probably messy and not very neat) or they can have been tidied up a bit to meet our expectations about having a point, and a beginning, middle and end. They might be based on familiar stories (films, nursery rhymes or fairy tales), but given a twist to make them relevant.

Try this exercise:

Invite everyone in turn to tell a story about how their organisation relates to the environment. Instead of then discussing and analysing these stories, have another round of stories on the same theme. By responding with another story (which may echo or contradict the stories which have been told), people move to a deeper level of understanding about what's happened, and about how they make sense of it.

A further round could be stories about how the organisation has or will change, for the better.

(Based on Reason and Hawkins, 1988)

The important thing is to give people an opportunity to tell their stories and hear from other people.

I also use a variation of this exercise as a way of helping a small group get to know each other at the start of a training course. The invitation is to "tell me the story of how you came to be on this course". The things that people choose to focus on say a lot, personal and professional motivations are shared, and people begin to see others' beliefs and assumptions about sustainable development.

And it's a great way of engaging people, because most people love to talk about themselves, and those who don't love to hear others' stories.

Listening for the stories people don't know they're telling

When you're in the middle of trying to change things, sometimes it can feel as if you're stuck in treacle. This might be because people are trapped in a set of assumptions about 'what's going on'.

Our unconscious framing of a situation can help make sense of a chaotic and messy world – but it can also limit our thinking

about what to do to transform and move forward.

Professor Steve Downing, Director of the Sustainability Lab at the Henley School of Management, says that there are four basic story types. We may be unconsciously using them to make sense of our situation, and through doing so, limit our thinking about what can and should happen next.

Downing's four story types

- 1 Quest (romance) – the organisation or individual is a hero, challenging the status quo. Think of Innocent or Greenpeace
- 2 Downfall (tragedy) – the initial success falls to humiliation. Gazza, Woolworths
- 3 Scam (irony) – the hero's actions are a trick to immorally or amorally fool others. Enron, carbon offsetting
- 4 Contest (melodrama) – the struggle between good and evil. Chewing gum wrappers, GM versus organic

Downing 1997, examples added

You may vehemently disagree with the examples I've chosen. For example, you may think that carbon offsetting shouldn't be in the 'scam' story category. And that's the point of Downing's insight: we simplify reality, often unconsciously, to make a satisfying story. Further, the person telling the story makes a value judgement about which of the characters is playing which role. We see this all the time on the news, but it happens in our everyday conversations too.

Even when people don't think that they are 'telling a story' – when they are simply describing the situation and why things aren't improving – their unconscious 'story' frames may be affecting what they're seeing and what they're missing.

Having understood the story types, and thought about which type appears to fit the situation, people can be asked to think about the situation as if it was another kind of story, with the characters playing different roles.

In this way, uncovering underlying story patterns can help people think in new ways about their organisation, its relationship to the environment and society, and about how it can change.

Novels

When I was writing this, two very different books were suggested to me, which tell stories about our current environmental crisis: 'Ishmael' by Daniel Quinn, a fable

where a man learns about the planet and humanity from a telepathic gorilla; 'The Carbon Diaries' by Saci Lloyd, teen fiction set in 2015, when carbon rationing is a reality and teenagers are still teenagers.

Both these fictions tell us something about our reality. Both, judging by the reviews on Amazon, are successfully engaging people. ■

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www.nasrudin.org Peter Hawkin's book
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References
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Reason, Peter and Hawkins, Peter 1988, 'Storytelling as Inquiry' in Peter Reason (ed), Human Inquiry in Action: New Developments in New Paradigm Research, London: Sage

