

# The Gifts of Story

Sue James

[sue@bjseminars.com.au](mailto:sue@bjseminars.com.au)

*This article describes four gifts of storytelling – Real Listening, Relationship, ‘AHA’ and Healing – and includes for each a brief story that illustrates and illuminates. The article then outlines five gifts a good storyteller brings to his or her listeners – Heart Space, Voice, Music, Listening and Humour. Sharing of stories in a way that incorporates these nine gifts brings with it the most precious gift of all – transformation of both storyteller and listener.*

A human being is nothing but a story with skin around it.  
American comedian Fred Allen

Perhaps there was no language or storytelling when humans first stood upright and discovered the wonders of an opposing thumb to help them hunt, build and do what was needed for survival. But soon primitive language and images on cave walls became a form of storytelling, celebrating successful hunts, teaching skills to others and making meaning from the world in which they lived.

Since very early times, storytelling through both language and imagery has been an integral part of human existence: practical stories to teach children and share the learning that has shaped society; myths and legends that helped people explain the otherwise inexplicable. Throughout history, people have ‘storied and re-storied’ their lives and become meaning-makers – describing experience, sharing dreams and expressing the whole gamut of human emotions.

From homo sapiens to Hollywood, stories have helped us learn, shape our lives and construct meaning about the world and our place in it – the gifts of story have always been a part of our human journey.

## Four Gifts of Storytelling

### 1) The Gift of ‘Real Listening’

Perhaps more than any other form of human communication, storytelling brings the gift of listening – real listening – with heart and soul as well as with ears or mind. In this process there is alchemy at work that can change the ‘plain metal’ of human interaction into the gold of transformation. ‘Real listening’ opens our hearts and thereby opens us to be transformed in some way.

#### *Alan’s Story*

Alan Alda, of M\*A\*S\*H fame, says in his autobiography<sup>1</sup>:

*At first, onstage and in life, I didn’t really know what relating was. And listening was more a kind of waiting than anything else. I talk and then you talk. And then I listen for when I get to talk again. But relating, I came to understand, happens not just while I’m talking; it also happens while you’re talking and in between.*

*During rehearsals for The Apple Tree, Mike Nichols got frustrated as Barbara Harris and I played a scene, and he yelled out something from the darkened house I would never forget: ‘You kids think relating is the icing on the cake. It isn’t. It’s the cake.’*

*I began to understand what I do ... is not as important as what happens between me and the other person. And listening is what lets it happen. It’s almost always the other person who causes you to say what you say next. ... You have to listen so simply; so innocently, that the other person brings about a change in you that makes you say it and informs the way you say it.*

*The difference between listening and pretending to listen, I discovered, is enormous. ... Eventually, I found a radical way of thinking about listening. Real listening is a willingness to let the other person change you. When I’m willing to let them change me, something happens between us that’s more interesting than a pair of duelling monologues.*

## **2) The Gift of Relationship**

Alan Alda’s story is also an illustration of another gift – the power that stories have to engage us more deeply and meaningfully with others. They help to expand and deepen the ‘in between’.

### *Bill’s Story*

*I was teaching at a pretty rough school at the time. A 15 year-old kid in one of my classes, ‘Joe’, was one of the roughest. He spent more time outside the principal’s office than he did in class. He’d often turn up in the mornings spoiling for a fight and usually found one. He interrupted every lesson I had, was aggressive to other kids and wouldn’t do his work.*

*One day, about half way through the year, we had an excursion that arrived back late. The last school bus had gone, so a few of us had to ferry kids home. On my last run, I had two kids in my car – one lived close to the school, but the other was Joe who lived some distance away.*

*Somehow, on the way, we got talking. When I think about it now, I realise we’d never before said more than a few words to each other – mostly Joe giving cheek, and me doing the discipline thing.*

*This time it was different. I can’t remember how it happened, but about half way to Joe’s place I found myself listening to a story about his dad – ‘the old man’ as he called him.*

*Joe talked in disjointed bursts and half sentences, with lots of expletives thrown in. For once, I didn’t interrupt – didn’t tell him he shouldn’t swear. I just listened. As he talked, I gathered Joe’s dad would often come home from work drunk. Joe, his mum and his brothers and sisters would sometimes be able to stay clear of dad’s fists, but sometimes not. And there were times when the kids would sleep in the old tree house, just to get out of the old man’s way. They couldn’t get back into the house in the morning, as their dad would have locked the door. So they’d simply head for school.*

*Finally, I dropped Joe off near his house. On my way home I had plenty of time to think. I realised I’d not understood the first thing about this kid. I’d assumed things that I shouldn’t have, and I’d done ‘the tough teacher thing’ without even thinking about it. Gave myself a pretty hard talking to during that drive home!*

*What happened after that? I wish I could say Joe’s behaviour changed overnight – but that’s not the way it was. He was still a pain in class and he still spent most of his time outside the principal’s office. And I don’t think we ever again had such an honest conversation.*

*But his rudeness and aggressiveness in my classes did take a downturn. And I did less of the ‘tough teacher talk’ and cut him some slack – though he’d still push my buttons sometimes!*

*So our relationship changed. By the end of the year we were getting along pretty well I think, and he was less of a pain. Maybe he was just growing up. But I think it was also because I'd listened to his story – really listened for a change.*

### 3) The Gift of 'AHA'

Stories give us the gift of 'AHA' when they resonate profoundly for us and help us understand our own or others' experiences at a deeper level. An 'AHA' experience is *the feeling that accompanies sudden insight*.<sup>2</sup>

Sharing stories is a powerful way to trigger these moments of creative insight. Stories reach more deeply into our subconscious and involve us, as listeners, more intensely in the experience being shared by the storyteller:

*Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.* (Chinese proverb)

The story below, from Marge Schiller, is an example of the gift of 'AHA'. Marge is well known to the AI community and her '9/11 story' is also familiar to many people. She has told and re-told it many times in different places for different audiences.

With each telling, her story brings the gift of 'AHA' for both her listeners and for Marge herself. For many, this is related to a resonance with their own work with children and young people. For others, it is an invitation to reflect on events that have influenced the direction of their own lives. And for Marge, re-telling her story also gives the gift of 'AHA' as she continues to make meaning from her experience.

#### *Marge's Story*

*On 9/11 I was in mid town Manhattan working with a hotel chain. At that point in my career I was spending most of my time using Appreciative Inquiry with corporations and large government agencies.*

*I had just asked the group the question: 'Is then the same as now?' ... does the past predict the future or is the world fundamentally different than it was? The group of seventy senior hotel executives had just begun the conversation when the executive vice president walked into the room and said 'The World Trade Centers have been hit!'*

*The crisis committee was called together to see how the ten New York City hotels could respond to what everyone imagined as a need for housing for medical personnel. No one knew what was happening – the networks were not on TV. Phone service was disrupted. Some thought it was the beginning of World War Three. Many of the Appreciative Inquiry session participants and the corporate staff had friends or family who worked in the World Trade Centers.*

*I volunteered to look after Rachel, aged three, so her mother Lynette could do the work that needed to be done. Lynette had picked Rachel up from day care. The little girl had seen the smoke and heard the sirens. She was worried. I held her hand and we walked around the office. The reactions to this child were remarkable ... staff members who were sitting as if frozen un-froze, those who were crying stopped when they heard Rachel's voice. She had a healing presence.*

*That is when I realised that children and youth are the Image and Voice of Hope. When things are at their worst, hope comes when we remember the children. September 11 has many different meanings and there are multiple sources of evidence showing 'then is not the same as now' but I know that right*

*now the world is an unstable place and that it will be the children to whom we leave the job of making it a better place.*

#### **4) The Gift of Healing**

Marge's story also illustrates a fourth 'gift' of storytelling – the fact that stories can help us heal in times of trouble.

This includes one of life's paradoxes, where it is within our darkest moments or most shattering experiences that we find the seeds from which new, and perhaps otherwise unrecognized, possibilities and hope emerge. We sometimes need to experience fear, anxiety, pain or grief, in order to find new direction, new hope or a fresh appreciation what is right in our world.

Sharing stories can play a profoundly important role in the healing, reflection and creative 'work' that is needed for people to recover and grow after devastating events have disrupted their lives.

Death of a loved one is one of the most profound of dark times, filled with loss, grief and pain. Yet this can also be a time when those who remain share a deep sense of connection and love. The story below is my own – about a time when stories helped to bring healing, as well as moments of laughter and joy, in the midst of grief.

##### *Sue's Story*

*My partner, Glenn, died in June 1999. Tragically, he took his own life and, for a number of reasons, his body was not found for four days. I won't share the details of my trip to the coroner's court and the ensuing process I went through to identify his body – but it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do.*

*When Glenn's family and I met with the funeral director, we chose the simplest of coffins, because Glenn loved making things with his hands out of wood. It seemed appropriate to pick one that was as simple but beautiful as everything Glenn had made.*

*Glenn was also a perfectionist about anything he did. We used to tease him that anything he made would remain standing after everything else around it had fallen. After we'd picked his coffin, his brother-in-law quipped: 'But if Glenn had made it, there'd be two inch bolts every six inches all around it!' And in the midst of this incredibly painful time, we found ourselves laughing!*

*Glenn had also left instructions that he wanted to be cremated and have his ashes scattered in the Thompson's River country in Victoria, Australia – a place we used to love going camping. When the funeral director asked about the cremation, Glenn's brother-in-law suddenly laughed and said: 'Well, he wanted to be cremated – and if we have to go up to Thompson's River, we'll have to camp. What do you reckon, we could have a HUGE campfire ...' And again, we found ourselves laughing together – even making up stories such as building a raft to send Glenn's spirit down the river like the Vikings used to do.*

*This may have been 'black humour', but it was certainly not light-hearted or disrespectful! There are no words adequate to describe our pain and grief at that time. But for just a few moments we were able to turn our faces from darkness back into the sunshine. Laughing together and sharing 'silly' stories was helping us hold on to our courage with both hands and start to heal.*

*Over the following months, there were many moments like this. We shared both our tears and our laughter, as we shared stories about the funny times, the great times and the joy of being with Glenn,*

*as well as our pain and grief at losing him. For us, these were truly conversations that heal.*

*Some time later we made the trip to Thompson's River to scatter Glenn's ashes in the way he wanted. Around our campfire that night we again shared lots of stories – remembering all the things Glenn had meant to us. Woven through all of them were both pain and joy. For me, the fact that we can experience pain and joy, tears and laughter, at one and the same time is one of those wonderful paradoxes of our life's journey.*

### **Five Gifts of the Storyteller**

There are those who make their living as storytellers. Through oral recitations, novels, poetry and movies, they hone their craft – their gifts – as storytellers. Some of them reach such heights they make the rest of us laugh, weep or gasp in awe at the power of the stories played out before us.

Yet it's a myth that only professional storytellers can harness the transformative power of stories. Every one of us can be a storyteller to engage, move and inspire others.

So what gifts do we need to bring for our listeners when we are the storytellers? What can we do to help others 'really listen' and be willing to let us change them? How do we best enhance the relationship between ourselves, as storytellers and our listeners? How can we encourage that 'AHA' feeling for them? And how, through the stories we share, can we best help others to heal?

#### 1) Heart Space

Always tell a story 'from the heart'. Bring your own 'heart space' to bear on the stories you tell and invite others to share this space with you. Bring the best of yourself – your passion, your values, your spirit – along with you as you share your story, and you'll find your listeners will do the same.

#### 2) Voice

Find your own voice and give it full reign. Let it express your excitement, laughter, pain, anger, compassion – whatever drives you to tell your story and is contained within it. Be 'real' and your listeners will be moved and inspired.

#### 3) Music

Every story has its own music – its own rhythm and melody. This is contained in the pacing of your story, the rise and fall of your voice, and in your pauses. If you 'stay real', finding your voice and speaking from the heart, you'll find the music of your story will play naturally. You don't need to force it, frown over it or feel compelled to craft it. Just relax and let it play.

#### 4) Listening

Storytelling is actually a two-way process! As you tell your story, 'listen to your listeners' – stay aware of and responsive to their reactions as you go. You'll find that the way you tell your story – the 'music' of it – will change, however subtly, to stay fresh and engaging for your listeners every time you tell it.

## 5) Humour

Another gift you can give your listeners is to share your sense of humour in the stories you tell. This does not necessarily mean ‘telling jokes’! A joke woven into the story fabric may be appropriate at times, but the best use of humour in storytelling is much more subtle. It’s about feeling a gentle amusement at the folly and foibles of human nature (including your own) and inviting your listeners to share this amusement with you. It is born of empathy, kindness, compassion and delight. It is never cruel or sarcastic – and never at the expense of others. This kind of humour, as well as the laughter it engenders, is energizing and inspiring for both storyteller and listener.

Bring these gifts to your listeners and your story will stay with them for a long time after it is told.

## The Magic of Storytelling

The sharing of stories – particularly those encompassing the nine gifts outlined here – can be incredibly powerful. Stories can move us, change us and inspire us to action.

Watch any group of people listening to music. If it resonates with them, soon they will be stirred to movement – there will be nodding heads, tapping feet or clapping hands in time with the rhythm. They will be inspired to get up and dance or to raise their voices in song.

Good storytelling is music for the soul.

Tell me the facts and I may nod my head and say ‘That’s very interesting’. But tell me a story that resonates with me and I will be stirred to movement. I will walk with you, work with you or raise my voice with yours. I’ll be inspired to change, grow or shape my life differently because listening to your story helps me re-story my own.

This is the magic, the alchemy – and the most precious gift – of storytelling.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Alan Alda, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed and Other Things I’ve Learned*, New York: Random House, 2005, pp. 160-161

<sup>2</sup> *A Dictionary of Psychology*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001

### *FAVOURITE QUOTES ABOUT STORY FROM THIS ISSUE’S CONTRIBUTORS*

‘Their story, yours and mine – it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.’

William Carlos Williams

‘Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.’

Salman Rushdie