

What Makes a Good Story

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Everyone has gathered for an evening of barbecue and beer, friendship and camaraderie, relaxation and fellowship. As darkness falls on the party everyone gravitates to the fire pit where, for the next half-hour, the conversation is dominated by exchanges over the best way to stack the wood, add the tinder, and pour on the ignition fluid (or not). Soon the fire burns bright and high, and as it settles down to comfortable level the lawn chairs begin to gather in a loose circle. Conversations become quieter, more introspective; people relax; and soon, the stories begin. Remember? Do you remember the best story of the evening, the one that made you laugh, or cringe, or grow

quiet and introspective? Why? What was it about that story that caught your attention and refused to let go?

Such is the stuff of a good story. In other essays we've talked about the elements of good storytelling. For example, all good stories have a beginning, middle and end which we refer to as the opening gambit or hook, the wild ride, and closing moment or call to action. Good stories also must have a hero, which can be a person, a place, a thing, an idea, or a concept. Good stories also *want* to be told and retold because they offer a universally valuable message.

But there are other less obvious elements to good storytelling that I'd like to discuss here. For example, the storyteller plays a major role in a good story through the proper use of body language. Body language indicates the degree to which the storyteller is involved in the story. For example, a good storyteller will lean in toward the audience when they are trying to make an important point that's particularly relevant to the message they're trying to convey. They use vocal control to provide emphasis, growing from a near whisper to pull the audience in to a thundering outburst to strike them with power.

Another thing that good storytellers do is exercise the power of idiosyncrasy. Flawed characters are the best characters in a story because they let audience relax. After all, if the hero isn't perfect there's no reason why they have to be, either. Besides, idiosyncrasies make the character (or the subject of the story) more interesting, which causes the audience to pay better attention to the story itself.

A mistake that many storytellers make is dumbing down the story to make it more understandable to a wider audience. The problem with this is that (1) it annoys the audience because it means that the story isn't presented the way you would normally tell a story, and (2) you actually alienate the entire audience because it is so watered down that it applies to no one. Be genuine: It's OK for the audience to be challenged a bit by your story!

One of my favorite writers is Annie Dillard. In her wonderful book *The Writing Life* she makes the following observation about writing:

One of the few things I know about writing is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for another place is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.

After Michelangelo died, someone found in his studio a piece of paper on which he had written a note to his apprentice, in the handwriting of his old age: "Draw, Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and do not waste time."

Ms. Dillard is right. If you have something to say, and it's meaty, pithy, and just plain good, write it down. Now. Don't wait for a better time because there won't be one. As the author of more than 60 books, take my advice on this: She's right.

Another characteristic of a good story is that it evokes an emotional response. Make 'em laugh. Make 'em cry. Emotion means they're not just hearing the story; they're feeling it as well, and that means it will have lasting impact.

Finally, remember that the human body is equipped with five senses – sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. Use them! Use them all! Here's an exercise for you. Think about the most recent story you heard that had an impact on you. Now think about the senses that it evoked in you. See what I mean?

Thanks for reading.