Keynote Address – How to Tell a Story in 15 Acts

What I am about to say works for any story – radio, podcast, TV, novel, sitting around a campfire, whatever. A story is a story. Learn to tell it well.

Act 1: SENSE OF PLACE
I wrote a book recently (describe the book). To get at the meat I needed (greater meaning) to describe the PLACES.

Lithium Jesus P. 122 (story on entrance to Polish rave)

Now we are ready to hear the story.

Act 2: LISTEN
I was recently hiking in Oregon and came across a small red stone. It was on top of a log. It was on purpose. I was intrigued. I asked a ranger. And she introduced me to Gordon Hempton. The man who put it there. We met and he hiked back to the stone. There we sat on a log in silence. And after about 15 minutes I noticed something. No artificial sound. None. Then pointed out this was one of the few spots left in the US that doesn’t have airplanes overhead. I then record the silence with him (yes, RECORDED it) and turned it into an audio story later that I did for NPR.

David Isay, the founder of Story Corps put it best, “Listening is an act of love.”

https://www.ttbook.org/interview/nature-preserve-quiet-nature

Act 3: CONNECT
Missy Cummings was an F-16 pilot for the US Navy. She became THEE expert on drone piloting. I interviewed her for NPR. She hated me and did not want to do this interview. And, remembering she was from near my home town in Rust belt, Ohio, I struck up a conversation
about football (our high schools were rivals). I then shared my poverty. She opened up. THEN we talked about PTSD (higher with drone pilots than regular soldiers) and had a powerful interview.

Act 4: BE VUNERABLE
A new black barbershop opened in my neighborhood. I wanted to interview this famous Jamaican artist, who is also a barber, in the barbershop. I did and well, a young man covered head to toe in tattoos walks in and confronts me while I am recording the interview. I mean he let me have it. Called me a racist. For a long time. I let the situation evolve to a point that I was worried it was going to get physical. I left like running out. I felt guilty. I felt uncomfortable. I got some great tape. If a character in your novel doesn’t make you feel this way, MAKE them make you.


Act 5: USE STORY
Everyone likes a good story. To quote public radio’s This American Life’s Ira Glass, "If you want somebody to tell you a story, one of the most easiest and effective ways is if you're telling them a story." Don’t be afraid to share. Fiction or non-fiction.

Act 6: WRITE DRUNK, EDIT SOBER
I am not telling you all to get drunk. But I am saying this. When your guard is down. When you are ecstatic. When you are full of ideas that they are bustling out of you. That is the time to let it flow. Get the ideas down – however stupid they may seem. Be in the zone. Then, later, calm in a coffee shop, edit away. Write crazy. Edit calm. Rinse. Repeat.
Act 7: EMPATHY
My book is about my mental illness. I only survived that process by empathizing with myself during it. To go back to my past and empathize with my past self was the hardest thing I ever did.

Lithium Jesus – tell faith healing story from the Philippines.

When I wrote that that was the first I even told anyone - my wife, a friend, MYSELF that story. But I was able to find the vulnerable teenager in that story. And learned to love him. Whatever you write, fiction or non-fiction, you must empathize with your characters. Even if they are you.

http://snapjudgment.org/faith-healer-snap-723

Act 8: ASK A QUESTION
Come with a question to you work. Make it clear. Make it central. Make it honest. And then try to answer it. I recently interviewed the native writer Terese Marie Mailhot about her memoir “Heart Berries.” I asked her what questions she brought to her book. She grabbed it and read this.

Heart Berries (Terese Marie Mailhot) p. 82. (If her father was a monster did that make her half monster/half Indian? That was her guiding question to this memoir.)

A question brings discipline to your work. It brings focus. Question the question. Argue with it. Doubt it. Hate it. But don’t change it.

https://www.ttbook.org/interview/when-its-real-stakes-are-higher
(warning: this interview is about the author being sexually assaulted as a child by her father)
Act 9: BE AFRAID

Sometimes I am afraid to write. And sometimes I am afraid of what I write. You should be afraid of the story you are telling. Very afraid. You should be afraid that what you write will mean people will not like you. And if you are not afraid that people won’t like you then you are not telling the truth in your writing.

https://themoth.org/storytellers/darryl-dmc-mcdaniels

Act 10: BELIEVE SOMETHING

To me, irony and cynicism are the death of creativity. To me, irony and cynicism are the death of creativity. To me, irony and cynicism are the death of creativity. Work that is cynical and ironic is lazy and boring. And dangerous. Let me tell you about someone I met recently.

Christian Picciolini became a skinhead at age 14 and went one to become the leader of the most violent hate groups in the world. He left white supremacy recently and helps other leave hate. I wanted to know why young men in American become skinhead and Nazis. He said they are cynical. And the cynicism is the hardest thing for the them to unlearn.

Maya Angelou, “There is nothing so pitiful as a young cynic because he has gone from knowing nothing to believing nothing.” Your work must know something. Your work must believe something.

https://www.ttbook.org/interview/can-you-change-mind-white-supremacist

Act 11: EMBRACE CONTRIDICTIONS

I was on my book tour and giving a lecture in Dallas. As I got started a young teen in the front row stood up and took off her sweater. This got our attention. Then I noticed the scars. Deep ones over her wrists
and neck. Then she looked at me and yelled, “Do you resent them?” I knew her parents and loved ones had been lying to her. They kept telling her it was going to get better because they loved. Because they wanted to assure themselves. But it doesn’t help her. I knew that. And I knew she needed to know that. She also needed to know that it does get better too.

So, I looked at her and told her this: every morning I take my meds and I resent them. I hate psychiatry. I am exhausted by my mental illness. Every evening I take the same meds and I thank them for giving me a career and a family that I care about.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

https://www.thisamericanlife.org/31/when-you-talk-about-music/act-one-0

Act 12: TRY NOT TO VOMIT
I know it is hard to be a teenager. I get it. And that can be deep. I know, I was saving souls for Jesus in Haiti and China and the Philippines when I was your age. But reveling in your angst is not art. It is therapy. Now if writing it all down helps you heal then by all means do it. Keep a journal. But to take an essay or poem, say about your drinking problem or bulimia, beyond the therapeutic takes analysis and discipline that is VERY hard to pull off.

Act 13: AWE AND WONDER
Everyone shut your eyes. I am going to say a word and I want you to clear your head and only think of that word. Ok?

TABLE
Take just 30 seconds. Find someone. Now describe your tables to each other. Anyone have the same table? Round. Square. Maybe the table is fictional. Maybe it evokes a painful memory. Maybe you can smell grandma’s cookies. The poet Jericho Brown, author of New Testament,
says words on paper make us co-creators in the universe. Have awe and wonder, he says, at the power of your creation. Your work should evoke awe and wonder.

https://www.ttbook.org/interview/do-chimpanzees-have-spiritual-experiences

Act 14: KNOW YOUR POWER
Art has power. Writing has power. Why do think the future will hold evil AI, clone wars, and dystopia? Because basically every god damn science fiction novel since science fiction was invented has told us that. Now today, that is the reality. The fiction of those writers are today’s reality. Couldn’t they have dreamed that we colonize Mars and it ends up a utopia? Why not?

But we can create, with art, a better future. Look no further than the utopian vision of Afrofuturism – an African American culture that combines history and art with technology that views the future as a utopia rather than a dystopia. Black Panther is a prime example. Think before the robot on your page wipes out humanity.

https://www.ttbook.org/interview/envisioning-better-today-through-tomorrows-afrofuturism


Act 15: THE FINAL ACT. THE STAKES ARE HIGH.
I ended up back in Wisconsin at the end of my book tour, in Milwaukee. I was tired and was looking forward to seeing my wife and kids. I did my book talk and opened it up to a Q&A. An old man wrote something on a piece of paper, sealed it in an envelope, got up, handed it to me, and left. I did the Q&A and on the way out remembered his envelope in my pocket. Inside was a suicide note. Hand written and beautifully composed I might add. Beautiful. Paper
clipped to the note was a small scrap of paper with a YES and a NO on it. He had Xed off the “no”.

You do not write poetry or essays or novels or make multimedia or TV or a painting in a vacuum. Your work is consumed by others. You have a responsibility in that. And a privilege. This is a social contract of trust. And the stakes are high.

https://storycorps.org/animation/the-human-voice/