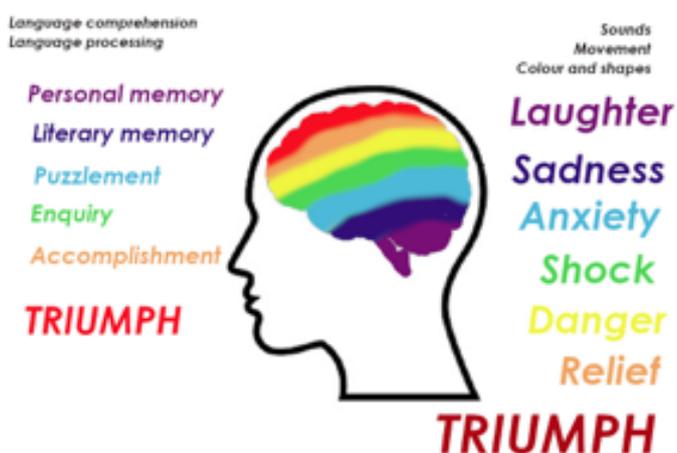

What is a story?

John Hamilton, an environmental storyteller who supported On Our Wave Length <http://tracscotland.org/storytellers/john-hamilton/> shares his tips on how to tell a story.

A story needs a beginning middle and an end (though not necessarily in that order). Basically SOMETHING HAS TO HAPPEN! It is a journey, of some sort; through space, or time, or ideas. The characters start somewhere and they end up somewhere else. Often the somewhere else is the same place they started but it is changed (or the characters have changed) as a result of events in the story. If nothing happens all you have is a description.



Scientific studies have shown that our brains respond differently to hearing a story and being presented with a catalogue of facts. We really didn't need studies to know this. We all know this. Stories make far more impact and are easier to remember than reams of data because, in the first place we pay more attention and, most importantly, the understanding of story structure is hard wired into the human psyche. We

engage with stories both intellectually and emotionally.

Children, from about the age of five, have an innate understanding of how stories work. If you tell a child a story which deliberately deviates from the understood structure they will, on retelling the story, "correct" it. Of course, traditional stories passed down through centuries conform closely to the natural principle.

So what is a story?

A story has a setting. The story is placed in time: past, present or future. It maybe a fixed historical past - this happened in the 19th century - or it may be a mythical past, the “Dream Time” or a “Time of Legends” perhaps. The present may be familiar “look out the window” now or a “this is happening” now. The future can be fantastical or it can be a potential reality to be hoped for or to be feared.

A story has characters. It has a main character. This is fundamental! A listener follows the story because they are concerned about what happens to a character they have identified with, they keep listening because they want to know what happens to them. A main character can be someone the listeners are completely rooting for or someone they are keen to see get their comeuppance.

- The main character can be ‘Me’ the storyteller. Personal stories can be very powerful. The main character can be a real person from history, or a representational figure who, though fictional, illustrates the experience of many. They can be hero or failure, loner or leader, wise man or fool.
- The character does not have to be an individual. This could be the story of a community; of how the community existed, what forces were brought to bear on them how they reacted, what the outcome was. It could be story of a place: what happens to this town, this beach, this island.
- It does not have to be human; what happened to this school of dolphins, this flock of birds, this population of fish?
- Whoever or whatever they are there has to be something about them that the listener recognises and something has to happen to them.

There are secondary characters – characters who materially affect the plot. In traditional stories these often take one of two forms (often with both in the same story). There is the antagonist who the main character has to battle with (in some way) and overcome (or not). There is the helper (sometimes magical) who comes to the aid of the main person. Often goals cannot be achieved without them.

There are also supplementary characters who do not actually change the story, but whose experience may illustrate or clarify issues for the other characters and for the listener.

So...

Whatever body of information you have I urge you to seek and find the story it contains.

WHAT HAPPENS? WHAT IS THE CHANGE? It may be what has changed from the past to the present. It may be what is changing now. It could be what will change in the future.

WHAT DOES THE STORY SAY? What are the bare bones of it? Try and capture this in a few words. Once you have recognised this, much else will fall into place.

Remember endings do not have to be conclusive. They can be speculative! Where WILL this story end? "If we take this course, it could be this", "if we take that course it could be that".

Identify the main character, whether human or otherwise. This will give the viewpoint from which the story is told. Decide the setting in which the story is set. Is it a real or an allegorical place. Is it past, present or future? Who or what has a direct bearing on the events?

Once you have the bones and the structure, decide what images, descriptions and metaphors illustrate your story.

Then decide how you are going to dance the story!

John Hamilton 2019
