

The Soul on Stage

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Imagine you are a cave man or woman, long before movies, Holt Renfrew, TED Talks, Twitter and even television.

Huddled around the fire you listen as members of your tribe describe and act out what happened to them during day. This is your only way to get information about the adventures of others beyond your cave. You listen with wrapped attention.

Drinking in the amazing stories. Your respect and admiration grows for the storyteller, their courage and cleverness for how they have survived another day in the wild, and stayed alive in a Canadian winter, without gortex!

The power of sharing our stories still exists today. And we need it more than ever, in a world where we often don't know our neighbours in the next apartment or house.

I believe here is something very simple we can each do to make life long friends, grow our businesses and save the world.

That one simple thing is to tell our stories and listen to the stories of others.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“What lies beyond us and what lies before us are tiny matters when compared with what lies within us.”

Ten years ago I left the business of acting full time and created a process that provides a safe and fun opportunity for people who are curious about getting on stage to tell and act out part of their life journey. I have watched people tell and act out stories of finding love, losing love, losing parents, losing weight and then re-finding the weight they lost.

This experience has changed my life and the lives of the people who have performed their stories.

The course I created course called SOUL-O Theatre. Spelled: S-O-U-L-O.

Participants go on a journey, from the very beginning, where they have no idea what their piece is going to be about to the tenth session, which is a performance of a polished 10 minutes piece that they've written and then perform in front of invited friends and family.

Here's a just a few of the hundreds of stories I have been mid-wife to:

For example, a woman in her early 70's who has struggled with her weight all her life. As a little girl in Montreal her parents, who were survivors of the second world war, used to wake her up in the middle of the night when they were back from having dinner out on the town and feed her huge fatty smoked meat sandwiches and tuck her back into bed and would then tell her

she had gained too much weight. She got up and told her story of every diet book she'd bought and tried to follow. She started her piece by entered the room dancing to that classic polka song; "I don't want her, you can have her, she's too fat for me." She found the courage to laugh at the struggle she's had with weight, she got clear on where it all came from and has told me that since her performance she has lost the weight sensibly and knows in her bones, it is gone for good.

Another women, I swear, men do take the class, these are just samples of women's pieces. This woman chose to tell the story of her grandmother's child hood growing up in Scotland. But she chose to do it as her grandmother, relating the story in the first person. She set up a kitchen table and spoke to the audience as if we were sitting with her in her kitchen in the 1940's in Scotland. She said: "Oh hello there! Come on in. Welcome. So nice to see ya. You look lovely! How about spot of tea? With wee bit of alcohol, ya know, for medicinal purposes." And she goes on to talk about growing up poor and how they would sleep four to a single bed, head-toe, head-toe. And one day they father came into their room, carrying an axe. And he starts to smash the door off it's hinges, for firewood, so he could keep the stove going and heat the apartment for a few more days. She says how even though they were poor they didn't know they were poor. And when she gets to the end of her grandmothers story, she says, "Well, it's been great chatting with you, you're a lovely bunch, but now I have to pop down to the corner store, to get a week bit of alcohol...for medicinal purposes."

In baring witness to hundreds of people's stories I have come to see so many of our human experiences are the same. The uniqueness comes in the details of what happens to us and how we deal with it.

I would love to help you share your story. The good, the not-so good, the hilarious and the tragic. The truth shall set you free. Especially if you're one telling it. It may be one of the most exhilarating things you have ever done. And rather fun to feel like a 'star' for a night, when you perform in front of family, fellow members of the congregation and friends.

And there are no new excuses you can throw at me not to do it. Try it, I dare ya. I have heard them all. For example, "I can't do it. Who would want to hear MY story? It's too boring, tragic, unbelievable, mundane, outrageous, ordinary, take your pick!

And then there's:

"I can't act, speak in public, be funny, reveal the truth."

"I'm too shy, too young, too big, too old, too thin, too blond, too vegetarian, etc."

And let me tell you, it's the one's who have had these thoughts and gotten up there and told their story any way's, that have brought the house down with laughter and tears and then got them jumping to the feet with a standing ovation.

The work we do together in the course is therapeutic but it is not therapy. It is often hilarious when we point out our own human foibles and can bring us

to tears when someone opens their heart to us about what they have been through and how they survived.

For example, a woman re-created a very real slice of life, where she was waiting in a crowded hospital hallway with her terminally ill father lying on a gurney, waiting to be seen by a doctor. When the young gorgeous Doctor, began to walk towards her, all she could think was: “why didn’t I do my hair this morning and how could I have left the house wearing my Mickey Mouse sweatshirt!?”

These are moments we remember because they are surreal and yet so true to life. They force us to be present.

And we only remember what we are present for.

All the other stuff, we miss.

One of my participants tells the story of growing up, what she called, ‘dead dirt poor’. She entered the stage to the song:

“Trailers for sale or rent. Rooms to let, fifty cents, no phone, no pool, no pets, I ain’t got no cigarettes.”

And she shared the story of living in a shack on the edge of the Don River here in Toronto in the 1940’s. She had seven siblings, all under eleven years old.

When her mother passed away from Tuberculosis and malnourishment, several of her brothers and sisters were taken from their home and placed with foster families. On many occasions she and her younger sister would

walk miles up Yonge Street to visit their little sister, now living with another family.

One day, when they made the long walk, because they didn't have the three and half cents to ride the Yonge Street, Street Car.

She saw who she thought was her little sister playing in the road. But when she scooped the child up, she realized it was not their sister, but another little girl in a yellow sweater. They looked around and discovered, the family had moved away without telling them, taking their baby sister with them.

Amazingly, forty years later, as a result of placing an ad in the Toronto Star, they found her again.

When she finished telling this story on stage, she said;

“I'd like to introduce my baby sister, who we found after forty years. She's here”.

And up on stage came her sister, a woman who looked just like her. Many of us cried.

I believe and have seen that everyone has a powerful story to tell.

Everyone.

And in my humble opinion this kind of work, where we take the time to share and witness each others stories, can change the world.

Why? Because it is the opposite of what must be done in order to do damage to another human being. In order to hurt other people we must de-humanize them, to think of them as 'less than' ourselves, to strip them of their full humanity and this means to take their personal stories away from them.

It's much easier for me to do you harm if I have labeled you 'enemy' and someone who must be destroyed as a threat to me and my tribe. But let me tell you, it's much harder to do harm to someone when he or she has shared with you their most personal trials and triumphs, has opened up their heart for you to have look inside. What happens in this case is we fall in love with you. We have to, because we have seen a part of ourselves.

When my first students, those ten years ago performed their solo pieces and the audience, made up of the performers adult children, parents and friends, laughed and cried and rose to their feet to give these brave people a standing ovation, my mother gave me a card and on the front was written:

“When your story is told and it will be told in song and fable and interpretive dance and puppet show, people will weep and, through their sobs, say,
“Today we have witnessed love. How can our lives not be bettered by this?”

I couldn't agree more.

And this brings us to another story I heard when two women took my course at Ryerson.

They have a wonderful company called, “Downsizing Diva's”.

They specialize in helping seniors downsize from their homes into smaller apartments or seniors residences.

One of the women, Karen, did a wonderful piece. In it she tells the story of working with a woman in her 90's and helping her go through all of her belongings from the past 70 years and decide what to keep and what to get rid of.

Karen goes down into this woman's basement and while looking through some shelving units she comes across a brown paper bag, with the top neatly folded down.

She carefully unrolls the paper bag, opens it up and peaks inside. Guess what she finds? 21 wishbones. Washed, cleaned and completely intact. She takes the treasure up to her client, the older woman and with excitement she says; "Look what I found! Wishbones! Why don't you make a wish!?"

The older woman looks at her and slowly turns her head away and says: 'I'm too old for wishes.'

'No you're not', says Karen, 'we're never too old to wish'.

Like many of you I have had moments that knocked me sideways, turned my world upside down and brought me face to face with the truth that anything can happen and we never know how much time we have with the ones we love. Telling the stories of these times to myself and to others has be a

saving grace for me. A way to release some of the shock and grief that I experienced. And I will be sharing such a story this summer in the Toronto Theatre Fringe Festival. It's called, 'snug harbor'.

Doing this gives us perspective and a way to dig deep into our stories and find the truth. I think Mr. Salmon Rushdie says it so well when he says:

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

I also believe everyone in this room is a teacher, and through sharing your personal story, you teach us.

You touch us. You love us. You change us.

Each sermon has three parts:

The What.

The so what.

And the now what.

This is the “now what”.

I invite you to share a little more of your personal story and to learn more about other people's life journeys.

It will educate you, humble you, move you and cause you to fall in love, just a little with every person you listen to.

It's one of the most powerful experiences we will ever have.

Everyone has a story. What's yours?