

Our storytelling culture

Second draft proposal from Howard Kaplan

In December 2016, I was asked to provide a preliminary draft of a statement explaining us to new tellers. This second draft was developed in May 2017. The following paragraphs are a blend between what is already our implicit culture and what I would like it to be. By putting some of the latter into writing, I am hoping to push us towards making that part of our implicit culture.

We are a group of people who gather each week to tell and hear stories. We have now done this over two thousand times, so we have developed some practices and expectations about how the evening runs, in addition to our few formal rules:

- We tell stories without the aid of notes
- We give our attention to the person who has the talking stick
- We turn off our cellphones and other distracting electronic devices
- We all contribute to the cost of having the evening

Our primary interest is in narrative stories

These narrative stories typically run around ten minutes in length, though we do not have a formal time limit. These can be folk tales, historical tales, modern tales, or personal tales – we don't care, as long as they are organized and interesting.

Stories generally have a beginning, a middle, and an end, though not necessarily all told in one evening. Some of our tellers commit to learning long tales which they break up over several weeks. Because we meet weekly rather than monthly, that works in our context.

Some tellers choose to use forms other than spoken prose to present their stories: they sing narrative ballads, or they recite rhymed verse. These forms usually work well and are appreciated. Other spoken art forms, such as lectures or non-narrative songs or poems, are further from our core interests, and we have found that only a few performers can choose and present such material in a way that engages our audience's attention.

Our stories have many sources

Some tellers write their own material, some repeat or adapt ancient or traditional tales, and some present published or broadcast stories nearly verbatim. When we adapt or repeat material from published sources, we try to give proper credit to the original authors. When we tell or adapt material from cultures of which we are not ourselves members, we find a way, either within a story or while introducing it, to inform the audience of the material's original source or context.

Our stories are crafted – they don't just happen

Our most successful tellers have taken the time to learn and practice the material they present. Some of those tellers will specially learn or re-learn something for a specific Friday; others have the skill to quickly recall and present stories from a repertoire learned over many years.

We have a few tellers who can get up on stage and spontaneously spend ten minutes telling us something they haven't practiced or planned, and it works. Most people can't do this for ten

minutes, though they can do it for one or two; instead, they need to practice what they're going to present.

We use a microphone and a loudspeaker

We meet in a large room with unwanted noise sources close to the edges, and many of our listeners do not hear as well as they did when younger. For that reason, we use a microphone and loudspeaker to ensure that everyone can hear the tellers. Since there are a few tellers who are able to reach the whole audience without using this system, we do not require everyone to use it, though we do find that most tellers benefit from using it. We attempt to provide instruction on the best way to use the microphone, in part because effective microphone technique in other venues might not carry over well to ours.

We understand our audience

Many of our audience members are regulars who attend more often than not. Others are people attending only rarely. Tellers need to choose material which newcomers can understand but which will not bore the regulars through over-repetition. We encourage all tellers to keep track of what they have told and not repeat the same story too often. As a rough rule, we suggest that a teller not repeat the same story within a year of its last telling. Because tellers put their own stamp on their material, they don't need to be concerned about telling another version of a story a different teller has recently told. In fact, some of our most interesting evenings have included multiple variants of the same story.

We operate as an evening of adult storytelling. We do not refuse entry to people of any age, but we do not limit our subjects or our language when minors are present. Nonetheless, many of our tellers also do tell for young audiences, and they may choose to tell stories especially appropriate for any young listeners (though also of interest to older ones) when the opportunity arises.

We do not have any officially forbidden words or topics. However, our regular tellers understand that the audience consists largely of people over the age of fifty with a strong interest in traditional tales and narrative structure. Such an audience will not generally respond favourably to foul language or anti-social ideas unless they are used in the service of telling a worthwhile and engaging story.

Our regular language of telling is English, the only language shared by our whole audience. While whole stories in another language rarely work well, we welcome stories that are mostly in English but give the audience a taste of another language. Fairly short stories or songs can be told in another language but explained in English.

We share the telling equitably

We generally limit each teller to one story during the evening, though some tellers choose to put together a suite of two or three mini-stories (a minute or two each) instead of telling one longer one.

On most of our evenings, we simply accept stories on a first-come, first-serve basis, with volunteers raising their hands after the previous teller finishes. We don't have any advance sign-

up list. We usually find the numbers of tellers and opportunities roughly balance out, but sometimes people with stories to tell won't have the opportunity that week. For tellers from out of town, we can make adjustments to our usual practice and guarantee them an opportunity to tell, if they contact us in advance or let the host know at the beginning of the evening.

Except for any out-of-town tellers, we expect our participants to strike a fair balance between taking the stage and listening while other tellers present their work. We consider it discourteous if local tellers attend only on the nights when they have something to present and never attend only to listen. As a rough rule, if each of our regular tellers presents one ten-minute story for each two evenings in attendance, adjusting that figure for stories of other lengths, then we'll strike about the right balance between telling and listening.

Not everyone who is ready to tell a story is an eager hand-raiser. If people who have told stories recently wait longer than usual before raising their hands, it provides an opportunity to spread the telling more fairly among the available tellers.

We sometimes don't host a fully open stage

A few times each year, we will vary our usual practice about welcoming stories from any teller, on any subject. As part of the annual Toronto Storytelling Festival, we present a showcase of some of our regular tellers, selected in advance. Sometimes we will have special guests from out of town and give them more than one opportunity to tell a story during the evening.

Sometimes we want to devote an evening to a special theme, and the host will give priority to tellers prepared to work within that theme.

We welcome new tellers

We almost always host an open stage. Although we have many familiar, regular tellers, we have no official members who have priority on that stage. We encourage anyone who wants to tell stories to attend our Fridays and participate. People do not need to feel fully fluent in English before they tell – we recognize that telling stories is an important way to practice English, and we want to welcome people in that situation.

However, we do suggest that newcomers to storytelling gatherings like ours wait until they have heard a few stories before volunteering to tell one, perhaps later in the evening. Tellers who have attended similar open storytelling events, such as the ones held monthly in Ottawa or Waterloo, will already be familiar with our approach.