

Chapter 7

Painting the Spoken Picture



© Alexy Losevich/Shutterstock.com



Listen to ...

1. “Not to be Believed”

Guest Storyteller: Brendan Bourque-Sheil,
March 20, 2014

Listen to this teller. He offers every emotion, picture, sensation, and tone imaginable. You will be listening to a star.

2. “Eloquence and Professionalism”

Guest Storyteller: Elizabeth Ellis, May 29, 2014

Listen to this famous teller and author and you will learn know why Elizabeth is considered one of the top storytellers in the nation. The stories she tells will forever be etched in your mind.

Understand



Symbol

Tools of speech

Variety of expression

Human senses

Story prop

Imagery

***“I want all my senses engaged.
Let me absorb the world’s variety and uniqueness.”***

—Maya Angelou

Symbolically Speaking

Language, nonverbal communication, and the construction of meaning are symbolic activities. In a story, words are used as symbols because they represent or stand for other things. Because symbols are arbitrary, they have no natural connection to what they represent until the communicator makes those symbols come to life through a variety of expressions.

You already know that symbolism can be an important feature in personal narratives. A storyteller may tell a tale about a vacant house on top of a hill to stand for his unattainable dream. Another might speak about a set of quilts seen at a bazaar to represent his intricate life. I remember one eloquent storyteller telling us about the most beautiful autumn day in Vermont she had ever seen. She spoke of a leaf clinging to a branch, when other leaves have fallen. Most of her story was spent describing this beautiful image. Then, almost in passing, she transitioned seamlessly to her father's battle with cancer and teased us by not offering closure to that part of the story. It became quite clear that her comprehensive description of the one remaining leaf was a symbol of hope for her father's survival. I was captivated by her use of symbolism. I felt fortunate to be a member of that audience.

Great storytellers use fascinating story symbols. Considered one of the greatest American novels, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often seen as a virtual clearinghouse of important story symbols. For instance, the brilliant relationships developed between characters clearly points to the mockingbird as a symbol of innocence and curiosity. Edgar Allen Poe's, "The Raven" is a symbol of the inevitable death of Virginia, Poe's beloved wife. As she suffers from consumption and awaits certain death, the Raven doggedly continues to tap on the chamber door, beckoning the protagonist to ask, "When will I see Lenore?" the Raven prognosticates, "Nevermore." Poe continues to asks his question vicariously (using the name, Lenore), and envisions her death more clearly each time the Raven utters, "Nevermore."

Symbols can intensify a story, encouraging an audience to search for meaning. Such intensity is also very common in children's stories, like those symbols used to convey the sadness of social disgrace we learn from Karen, the central character in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes." Do you ever think about the symbols that repeat in different children's stories? Several stories take place in a castle. We find princesses locked in dungeons. And why is it so important to kiss so many princes? There are wicked witches, wicked stepsisters, wicked queens, and wicked parents. Deliciously inviting symbols, such as apples laced with poison, gingerbread houses enticing young children, and hens that lay golden eggs, all serve as an icon of danger and each is essential for understanding the intricate relationships between the characters, the plot, and the problem that the characters must solve.

Symbols used in a story force the storyteller to deliver language in meaningful, colorful, and descriptive ways. To warn your audience that you are about to tell "a sad story," does not make it so until you tell your story in a convincingly sad tone, assisted by the symbols used to highlight that sadness. Symbols allow us to name experiences and emotions, which is the primary way we give meaning to our lives. Because human beings are symbol "users," their uses of symbols are not confined to the here and now. Rather, symbols let us journey into the past (e.g., "I remember when I arrived at the restaurant"), future (e.g., "I will be there for your little league game . . . you can count on it"), and any dimension of time so that the designation of time differences infuse with the present.

Whether your story is about that argument you had with your father, your first bike, or "Pinocchio," a fundamental understanding of storytelling as a symbolic process can help you etch beautiful spoken images and successfully take an audience on a journey, and then return them safely to the present.

Economy of Words

Having a good sense of meaning of words is indispensable to a storyteller. A good sense of meaning of words implies that the teller

has a good sense of meaning behind the symbols of a story. However, not commonly explored as a way to make words work well is the use of word economy. In short (not to make too fine a point), more words do not strengthen a story. In fact, an excess of words, especially fillers, or “segregates,” such as, “you know, uh, like, and um” can severely cloud the meaning of a story, not to mention be a major distraction to the audience. On the other hand, some use of vocal fillers can restore a speech pattern belonging to one or more characters in a story. Read these two examples of the same message aloud, and sense how too many fillers can negatively influence the message, whereas a few strategically placed fillers can enhance the message:

It was like, I don't remember, you know? Like the first twenty or thirty, um, uh feet, you know, told me that as if it was like time to, you know, get ready for my like landing. To be like shot like from a cannon, you know, was like, I don't know, like unbelievable, you know?

Don't you dare tell me that the above illustration looks good to you. If it does, then I am especially glad you are taking this course. That illustration has a ridiculous amount of vocal fillers, and we all know there could have been more. This passage will illustrate a few carefully placed, *uh*, fillers:

I don't remember. The first twenty or thirty minutes warned me that it was time to prepare to land. You know, to be shot from a cannon was like, um . . . I don't know. It was just unbelievable.

Sometimes the best way to economize your word use is to use cryptic statements to replace sentences that are more tedious. This technique is not appropriate in written communication, because the rules are different. But when your story is designed to be spoken, your gestures, postures, eyes, face, and voice can more than compensate for the occasional use of cryptic thoughts. In fact, skillful delivery can make those cryptic thoughts quite powerful. Practice this segment. Read it aloud a few times. Do not add any words to it. What do you need to do with your face, voice, eyes, gestures, and postures to make it work?

Night. A cold night. Bitter, in fact. About 7:00. That call startled me. Startled me? Scared the hell out of me. I didn't expect it, you see. Well, not from her. No way hear from her, unless you expect to hear from a ghost. That's right, a ghost. So buckle up! This story is a ride, and I'll be taking you into dangerous traffic. No lights. No signs. No turning back.

With fewer words and a reduction of vocal fillers, consider how the use of the grammar in a story can help you to regulate the telling. In turn, your audience will become more attentive and attuned to what you want to achieve as a teller. Consider the following narrative segment by Rodney Orr, an electrician, telling his story about being bitten by a shark in a 2002 *Esquire* article entitled “What it Feels Like.” Read it aloud and please follow these instructions: When you reach a comma, slowly say the letter, “A” silently to yourself. When you reach a period, slowly say, “AB.” When you reach grammatical marks in this passage other than periods and commas, say “ABC.” Try it.

“I swam back to my board. I was bleeding like hell, blood pouring out of my nose, out of my face. To escape a shark was nothing but luck. Nothing! Nothing could have saved me but luck! They took me away in the helicopter. I was taken to the hospital. Everyone looked at me as if I was hamburger. I still have some pretty bad scars on my face, but they fit in with my wrinkles.”

Using vocal expression like the way a writer uses grammar is a principle we will revisit very shortly. But for now, could you feel the change in your rate of speech when reading the passage the way I asked? I bet you had plenty of energy and could read a complete sentence without running out of breath. I would also bet that the way you regulated the words and sentences helped to produce a change in the tension in the story. You can play with this technique and come up with a variety of configurations for regulating the rate (how quickly your words are spoken), pace (duration of story segments), and pauses (short, stretched, elongated) in a story, and ultimately help convey the tone of the story.

Storytellers who practice word economy tend to tell stories more effectively than tellers who use words excessively. Fewer vocal segregates, occasional cryptic thoughts, and rediscovering grammar as a way to regulate your spoken story can help make your story symbols more meaningful to your audience.

Tools of Speech

The magic of painting a spoken picture cannot be accomplished until the storyteller uses his speech tools successfully. These tools of speech include the tongue, teeth, lips, mouth, larynx, and diaphragm. These anatomical features work together to produce variations in sound. These variations are a direct result of how we use these tools to articulate and pronounce the words we need to convey. Articulation is the ability to pronounce the letters of a word correctly. Pronunciation is the ability to pronounce the entire word correctly. It is important in storytelling (and anytime you speak, unless you are intoxicated) to communicate letters and words clearly. However, there are times when experimenting with your speech tools can produce some creative results and convey a variety of images. These images can crystallize in the teller's mind and ultimately communicate them to listeners through a variety of expression.

Variety of Expression

Earlier in this book, I asserted that a good storyteller takes an audience on a journey and returns them safely to the present. This assertion suggests that oral performance is time-based. Listeners cannot go where they want when listening to a story. If the storyteller stops, the listeners must wait. If the teller speeds up, the listeners must catch up. An audience cannot take an orally presented story, shove it in a drawer, and read it again later. What helps the storyteller guide his listeners to where he wants to take them, while keeping them in the here and now, is an artful display of meaningful expression. A display of expression is crafted by the unique

instruments of oral language, which include the use of voice, gestures (including face and posture), and eye contact.

Whether a variety of expression is used to tell an audience about a favorite camping trip, engage them in a favorite myth, or help them to uncover and rediscover the magical characters from a favorite children's story, each of these instruments allows the storyteller to convey meanings that, in written language, might need to be expressed primarily in words. So let's discuss these instruments and begin with the one the audience hears: the human voice.

Vocal Expression

When used correctly, the human voice should help an audience to listen carefully to *how* something *is* said, not *what* is said. This is called paralanguage. How would you know if someone is sarcastic when saying, "Oh, sure, I love liver and onions," "Of course I will love you forever," and "I can't wait to speak to you tonight"? What did you hear in your mind when depicting the sarcastic elements in the statements? Did you imagine a familiar tone, or "timbre"? Did voice inflections come to mind? Would the volume conveyed in the statements (loudly or softly) have any influence?

As you contemplate your responses to these admittedly simple questions, consider how difficult it would be for your listeners to make dozens of similar evaluations about a plethora of emotions in the story you tell, even a very short story, without your thoughtful and appropriate display of vocal variety. In the case of depicting sarcasm, you probably knew to listen for an inconsistency between the words and the tone. In that case, you would know to address the tone with your voice so that the "sarcastic" message is heard.

Storytelling requires that the teller use vocal variety to communicate many tones (mood of a story, the impression a teller wants to leave on the audience), images (the physical and aesthetic persona of the character and background), and emotions (responses felt and/or conveyed by story characters). The voice alone cannot communicate

fully and completely all of the tones, images, and emotions in any story. It (the voice) needs help from other varieties of expression. But voice is essential. Let's explore more about vocal importance in storytelling by looking at tempo, rate, pitch, and volume.

If you are telling a story that includes a frustrated, demanding mother who is in the midst of reprimanding her daughter, a clear and even exaggerated, "I Said, No!" makes the point. But what if a character in your story is a little sloshed? Do not be using clear speech for this person. Slur your words, vary the tempo, vary the rate, think about your pitch, play with the volume, and do not sound articulate when painting the profile of your character in a drunken stupor.

Your vocal expression can also orchestrate the tempo, or "pace," by regulating the inherent rhythm of a story. Is the plot moving steadily, forging ahead with little or no detours? On the other hand, are there rifts and shifts that dart in and out of the story with a nervous frenzy? Thanks to our larynx and diaphragm, volume and projection also surface as useful for the storyteller. Volume refers to the loudness and softness of your voice, while projection refers to the depth and richness in your voice.

Try speaking directly from your throat, without taking a deep breath. Now as loudly as you can, say, "Welcome, all, and thank you for being here today." Was it a strain on your voice? That may be useful (for a very short time) if you are telling a story about the time you were screaming frantically at the pinch-hitter who came in at the bottom of the ninth inning, needing to score the runner on third to get your team into the World Series. Low volume can be useful when communicating the shy, reticent student who is terrified about giving his speech in front of the class for the first time. Low volume can compel your audience to lean forward as much as possible, as if to say, "Come on, you can do it."

Now, breathe deeply and try to use your gut rather than your throat, and repeat the earlier "Welcome . . ." line from above. Was there any difference? Was there less strain in your voice? You projected.

Projection is a product of good breathing. When you took that deep breath, you filled your diaphragm, a muscle that rests below your abdomen. Like a balloon, when you breathe correctly, your diaphragm is filled with plenty of air, allowing you to communicate with greater clarity and vocal richness. To be able to project will allow for those seated in the back of a room to hear your message. After all, when you tell us about the first time you told someone, “I love you,” do you want it conveyed with loud throaty roughness, or with the sensual depth that comes from great projection?

Do you have a nervous character in your story? Try a higher pitched or fractured voice. Pitch is the highness or lowness of your voice. How about Charlie, the twelve-year-old seventh-grader smitten with Carla, the little girl who sits next to him in Social Studies? Charlie wants to sound more mature than he is, so give him the lower pitched voice. Add a comical topspin by fracturing his voice, thereby disclosing his true age.

Another use of vocal expression with a potentially entertaining effect is the intentional use of sound substitutions. Although never recommended in good written communication, a teller might want to use “budder” instead of butter (does the character have a cold?), “brute” instead of brewed (does the character tend to use malapropos?), “library,” not library (does the character have a tendency to speak unclearly?), and so on. Using substitutions can help you shape a number of different characters with an infinite combination of personalities, ages, education levels, and more.

Another kind of verbal substitution is the euphemism. I remember the time I interviewed a woman on the radio about the murder of her daughter. As you would imagine, it was an incomprehensible story. I was nervous. I wanted to say the right thing. I asked her to share the story of her daughter’s untimely death with listeners and she said, “You mean when she was murdered?” It turned out this remarkable person who was about to convey the most difficult story any parent could possibly fathom preferred to use the word “murder” because she needed to hear it. And say it. For me, “untimely death” was a euphemism for murder. However,

euphemisms can make stories somewhat hazy. Consider these examples of euphemisms:

Ethnic cleansing instead of genocide
Letting someone go instead of firing him
Correctional facility instead of jail
On the streets instead of homeless
Terminated pregnancy instead of abortion

As shown by these illustrations, euphemisms are polite expressions used in place of one that may be found offensive. These innocuous statements are quite appropriate in many situations, but using them in a story—particularly a personal story, may not meet a storyteller's needs. It did not in the case of the courageous mother to whom I earlier referred. The best advice is for storytellers to balance the need for certain descriptors with what listeners will hear comfortably when deciding on the best word to portray a potentially offensive behavior or circumstance.

Exploring Your Voice

There are several fun ways to practice the power of voice. Here is a variation of what researchers refer to as “content-free speech.” Write several emotions, each on a separate index card. Without showing the emotion to your classmates, look at the index card given to you by your instructor, and think of a time when you felt that emotion. Then, by reciting the “ABCs,” communicate the emotion clearly enough so that your classmates can guess what it is. Remember, you may only recite the “ABCs.” Here are some good emotions to use:

Surprise
Fear
Anger
Happiness
Confusion
Anguish

Frustration Jealousy

With the help of your classmates, discuss the exercise. What did you do with your voice to convey your emotion? What experience did you reconstruct in your mind to help you communicate the emotion? Which emotions were more difficult to identify? Other than your voice, what did you do to help convey the emotion? Were any of your expressions unplanned?

Using a suitable inflection, communicate each of these words. The sentence in parentheses suggests a specific meaning for the word, but do not read the sentence aloud. Just read the word. Concentrate.

So (*We've caught you, you rascal!*)

So (*What's it to you?*)

Stop (*I mean it!*)

Stop (*. . . in the name of the law!*)

Geez (*I lost a button!*)

Geez (*Are you kidding me?*)

Wow (*He/She is hot!*)

Wow (*I didn't think anyone could be that stupid!*)

Yes (*I'm sure!*)

Yes (*I think so*)

What did you think about before communicating the key word? Speaking of key words, how would you use your voice to emphasize the words in a sentence so that your audience can correctly interpret the meaning of that sentence? Read the following sentence and emphasize the word in caps:

YOU can't water those plants too much.

You CAN'T water those plants too much.

You can't WATER those plants too much.

You can't water THOSE plants too much.

You can't water those plants TOO much.

How did vocal emphasis change the meanings? The English language is difficult. One reason for that difficulty is that the same

sentence with the same word can mean something entirely different when that word is emphasized. What you may have also noticed is that in most cases, the voice, as I suggested earlier, is not enough to give the listener an accurate interpretation. For example, in the fourth sentence in this exercise, it would have been very helpful if you gestured by pointing to the plants to which you referred.

Using your voice, or no voice, if you will, to pause at important moments in your story can effectively convey silence, movement, and stillness. Notice what happens when pauses are used in the following sentences. Read them aloud, and pause for two seconds when you see the bold “P.”

My wife doesn't understand me. **P**. I'm not sure. **P**. Maybe she doesn't love me anymore.

No doubt I'm very **P** quiet. And I'm very pale. But yes. I am very **P** quiet.

I own this great Golden Retriever, Tim. He's like **P** Lassie. Remember **P** Lassie?

It was Jill. She **P** was the one. She was **P** the **P** one.

What did the pauses communicate about the speakers in those sentences? What was on their minds? What were they trying to convey to listeners? Under what circumstances can silence be effective?

Pauses are often viewed as a way a storyteller can create rhythm. Rhythm is a process by which listeners are led to listen to beats. Sentence variation is another rhythmic device because it can lead the attention of listeners to a designated set of words. Read these sentences aloud and feel the rhythm in each message.

She was right. Well, maybe she was, I think, but who really knows...Huh?

He saw. He left. He never went back.

Sylvia was one of those incredible, amazing, remarkable women who could drive any man wild. Except for me.

The human voice is indeed powerful. However, voice cannot stand alone. It needs help. So let us examine the other varieties of expression and build your expressive repertoire.

Expressive Movements

Kinesics (muscular movement) is the dimension of nonverbal communication that consists of gestures, such as hand movements and body shifts. Having said that, allow me to return to grammar for a moment. Earlier in this section, I touched on how looking at grammar in a cryptically conveyed story can help you regulate the telling more effectively. Just as punctuation marks can help you to regulate written messages, gestures can help you to regulate spoken ones. Say you want to convey one of your story characters asking a question. What do you do with your hands? That's an obvious one. But they get harder. How would you express passion? Rage? Anger? Surprise? Think of it this way. Since gestures work like grammar, what type of gesture would you use to communicate a comma, period, or exclamation mark?

Let's practice a bit. Get up. Get your hands out of your pocket. Read these sentences, sans grammar. Remembering that grammar regulates a message, decide what you want to communicate in the following statements. Adding what you have learned about voice, convey your messages with appropriate gestures.

Are you talking to me
I don't know why she swallowed the fly
Get away from me right now
I'm not to blame for your mistake
There is no way that could have happened
Take my word for it
There were several reasons we broke up such as a lack of affection
attention and respect
That summer was the best ever it was serene and romantic

I picked her up at her house and was shocked to find her father answering the door

I never saw my father cry until that day that very moment

See how useful your gestures can be? It is impossible to imagine a good storyteller who has not mastered the use of gestures. To punctuate the point (yes, a pun is intended), no person in a straitjacket should pursue storytelling as a vocation.

Postural position can be a useful way to communicate the status or position of a story character, as well as help clarify his personality and emotions he needs to convey. Princes, paupers, rich, poor, strong, weak, meek, confident, passive, afraid, reluctant, and many more roles and adjectives illustrate the status or position held by a character, and they can be best conveyed through the clever use of postures. Experiment with postures that could be used to communicate the following descriptions:

He is a tower of strength.

He's a worm.

He stood proud and confident.

I heard some trepidation in his voice.

I was in awe of her.

I was embarrassed by the idea of asking her to dance.

Zeus was larger than the universe.

I looked up but couldn't see the stars.

I looked into the cave and saw utter darkness. It was a tiny crawl space.

I looked at my mother with newfound respect.

Postures and gestures can merge into open or closed positions, and can convey the degree of exposure to the world in which the storyteller is surrounded. Closed gestures and postures tend to protect the upper torso area. The shoulders, arms, and legs rotate "in." In the case of open gestures and postures, shoulders are back, palms face forward, and the legs are rotated "out." At a storytelling workshop, I remember a teller sharing the story of being in the hospital with a life-threatening disease. Once cured, this amazing teller wrapped his arms around his body as he described the blend

of excitement and fear he felt when he did something as simple as taking a walk:

“I was so happy and so very afraid. I was dizzy with excitement and had to balance myself as I looked down and watched my feet take steps. I was in awe of everything around me. But really I was in awe because I couldn’t believe I was alive. I was always tapping and poking some part of my body to check if I was here.”

My impression was that the teller used closed postures and gestures to convey the emotional blending of wonder and disbelief he felt about being alive. When it was time for discussion, my impression was somewhat confirmed when I asked him “What prompted your choice of postures and gestures?” He answered, “I didn’t know I was doing all that.” After thinking a bit, he suggested that his partially conscious use of closed gestures and postures, culminating in the “hugging position” more fully described the strange internal contradiction between happiness and fear he felt at the time. After some more discussion, he disclosed, “I was terrified of the world and wanted to be within myself by myself. Then, I didn’t. I couldn’t decide.”

The closed position isn’t only helpful when telling a story of internal conflict; it can be an important addition to carving an image of a character, real or fictitious, who feels some reluctance, trepidation, uncertainty, or embarrassment about a situation he is about to confront. Remember when you were fourteen, wanting to ask Melanie to go to a movie? Were you not just a tad shy? What about fear of being rejected? Do you remember the positions of your posture and gestures at the time? Of course you don’t. However, I can be fairly confident in guessing that there were no open postures or gestures at that moment for you, my friend.

Now since Paul Bunyan rode a big blue ox and had fists as big as choppin’ blocks, I think we can safely say that he’s an open posture and gesture kind of guy. If you are telling a tale about him, your gestures and postures had better show it. But you don’t have to be Paul Bunyan to use an open position. Have you ever beaten the

odds? Have you ever proved yourself victorious? How did you feel when you received an “A” on that exam for which you studied so hard? After saving for years to buy that vintage automobile, your discipline finally paid off. You finally quit smoking, and no one thought you could do it. You never thought you would ever again gain back your confidence after that terrible breakup. You feel proud, confident, strong, and independent, each conveyed by your open position asserting, “I have conquered it.”

I have found that the use of both open and closed positions can be especially useful to the teller who wants to remain in a single space, or the teller who moves his feet very little to none at all. This type of storyteller is one whom I call a “purist,” because he relies more heavily on himself in the storytelling process, as opposed to the “theatrical” teller who might move laterally and back and forth, and use a costume or elaborate prop in his telling. These types are a matter of taste, and both types are fine. However, and for what it is worth, most tellers are purists, and collectively endorse storytelling as a non-theatrical art. I am a purist, and I teach that style to my students. I ask students to either stand or to sit on a stool (for greater comfort and flexibility of movement) when telling their stories. I encourage the stool, because when their legs start a shakin’ and their knees are a quakin’ the “story stool” rules.

When seated, open and closed gestures and postures are excellent ways to compensate for not moving your feet. Moreover, open and closed positions can help a storyteller communicate distance. For example, a gentle lean forward closes the distance between the teller and listeners and can communicate interest (“Tell me more”), desire (“I need you so don’t walk away”), and secrecy (“I want to let you in on a little secret”). Intimacy is a distance as well as feeling (“It’s just you and me”), along with privacy (“Nothing is to go beyond this room, understand?”), all the while not moving your feet. Gently leaning back conveys feelings of disbelief (“I can’t believe what you just said”), surprise (“Whoa, you are not what I expected”), and awe (“Oh, my, that is an incredible sight”). Scrunch down to “He’s a worm,” straighten up to “He’s a tower of strength,” open your palms to “The blazing sun,” shrug those shoulders to

“They can say what they want,” and stiffen your arm to tell me it is
“Enough already!”

In Your Face

Great facial expression carries so much weight in storytelling that many tellers refer to storytelling as “Theater of the face.” Think about it. Who can forget the mask in the film *Scream*? That face made an indelible impression on us, and the type of person behind that mask has caused many of our nightmares. The notorious mask in the movie is precisely the reason facial expression is so important to a teller.

For a storyteller, the face conveys the type of person in the story, along with the social role he plays. A social role is termed “persona,” an Italian word that derives from the Latin, “mask” or “character.” More specifically, in the study of communication, persona is a term given to describe versions, or multiple roles (personae) we play every day. In any given story, a teller must use his face to show the shifting of a character’s persona. This shifting is seen whenever a character moves dramatically from one emotion to its opposite. For example, happy to sad, comedy to tragedy, despair to elation are common continua of emotions found in a plethora of stories.

The novel *American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis, also made into a movie, is the story of a successful Wall Street executive by day and very active sociopath by night. The novel points to the character’s personae as the cause of his murderous tendencies. This story is an interesting illustration of how roles are morphed (inconspicuously blended, dissolved), and not a recommendation that we become psychopaths in order to use our face to convey various versions of a character. I would suspect that normal folk do facial morphing as much as the insidious characters found in scary stories.

To morph one’s facial expression into the other is largely dependent on the teller’s complete understanding of the version he wishes to show his audience. Try this. Look at the following set of sentences. Each set of two or three sentences will force a morphing of one

facial expression into the other. These expressions are to be made without a break between them, in order to parallel the emotional circumstances they convey. So make a face, or two, or three. If you can do this in front of a classmate and keep a straight face ☺, so much the better for later discussion:

Sitting in a bar, waiting in anticipation:

Wow, I can't wait to meet him . . .

Oh, Hi, I didn't really recognize you.

Sitting in the waiting room to be interviewed for your first big job prospect:

I want this job so badly. But I am so mad at this guy. He told me to be here at 3:00 sharp, and now it's close to 4:00, and . . .

Hello, Mr. Dexter. No, I wasn't waiting too long. No problem.

Knocking at your grandmother's front door:

I can't believe I have to come here every Sunday afternoon . . .

Hi, Grandma. I'm so excited to see you again.

You are about to leave your house to go to your own wedding. You are to be married outdoors.

You open the door:

It's raining? Oh, My God, it's raining?

Thank goodness the sun looks as if it might sneak through. Oh, please, please, please . . .

The sun is out, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes . . .

Go away cloud. A cluster of clouds? Where did they come from? More clouds. Oh, no!

How did your facial expression shift along with the changes in your feelings? What kind of feelings prompted certain physical features on your face to change? Try this exercise in front of a mirror at

home the next time you rehearse a story. In addition, storytellers contend that stretching your facial muscles so that expressions can be exaggerated a bit (think amplification) is important so that the audience can clearly see, and feel, the persona behind it. Since eyes are found in the face, it makes sense to continue our facial expressions by adding eyes to this discussion.

Hey, “Look me in the eyes and say that,” is a line as common as brushing your teeth in the morning. And it should be. In most cultures, eye contact is an important element of nonverbal communication. In dialogue, too much eye contact can be intimidating for some, and too little is too distant for most. Just the right amount of eye contact can get others involved in your message. In public speaking, a speaker should look at his audience rather than focus on that single friendly face, or on an imaginary dot on the back wall. Just as eye contact is important to a public speaker or anyone involved in a dialogue, making eye contact with listeners is crucial for a storyteller. Among other things, eye contact is a way for a teller to establish rapport with his audience, as well as equalize the status of the relationship between himself and his listeners.

In their book, *The Power of Story: Teaching through Storytelling*, Pamela Cooper and Rivas Collins contend, “Unlike theater, in which actors usually don’t acknowledge the presence of the audience, storytellers speak directly to their listeners.” These authors view eye contact as the most viable way to establish this presence with the audience. In turn, this presence helps to create a private, rather than public relationship with the listeners. This privacy between teller and listeners is what professional storyteller and educator Lynne Rubright refers to as the moment when storytelling becomes a “poetically intimate art form that exists eye to eye and heart to heart.”

Borrowing from Cooper and Collins, I found that exploring eye contact in terms of “circle of awareness” is quite useful when making decisions about ways to connect an audience to story characters. In the first circle, the storyteller is self-contained and communicates the inner feelings of the character (real or fictitious).

In this case, eye contact may not be made with the audience at all, or if it is, it is very limited. Still, the audience is present, as if they are eavesdropping on the teller talking to himself. For example, the audience is not present when Hamlet contemplates suicide with “To be or not to be. That is the question.” That is a soliloquy, much as we do when we are alone, talking to ourselves. No one is invited to listen. When telling a story, the physical audience is invited. However, like Hamlet, we use creative eye contact to communicate to our listeners that they are not supposed to be there. We might look at the ceiling, or somewhere else away from the audience. If communicating despair or desperation, we might stare at the ground.

In the second circle, the storyteller may need to keep eye contact with an imaginary character while having a dialogue with him. When Peter Pan says to Tink, “You drank my poison, didn’t you?” Peter speaks to the light, a definite focal point so that the audience knows where Tinkerbell is located. You expect your sister, Jill, to be home soon. You hear your front door open. No one speaks and the lights are out. You can’t see a thing. It’s probably your sister, so you turn toward the door and ask, “Jill, is that you?” Will your audience know where the door is located? What will you do with your eyes when you follow the person walking across the room?

The third and fourth circles of awareness consider the very real audience. The third circle will create the intimate relationship with your audience that you may require. It is most useful when speaking directly to a very real person, such as in a personal narrative. If you are speaking to your father, you may look directly at someone in your audience. To increase the involvement of your listeners, you might even look at someone different each time you speak to your father. You would make the same eye contact when addressing other characters in your narrative. Although it will not create the intense intimacy as the third circle, the fourth circle of awareness can involve the entire audience. However, you may not want that level of intimacy with them because of the sensitive subject matter in your story. In this case, it might be best to look at clusters of listeners, perhaps five or six for about five or six seconds.

Although most tellers commit to a consistent form of eye contact when sharing a story, a blend of eye contact can be useful when guiding an audience through a maze of both real and fictitious characters, as well as a way to convey different points of view (first, third person) within a given story.

Most storytellers will never need to worry about this complex configuration of matching eye contact with points of view to real or fictitious characters. However, it is also important to appreciate how this challenging blend of eye contact, point of view, and character type can work almost effortlessly in some of our favorite classic stories. In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, there can be found instances of direct first person, followed by third person narration mixed with first person stream of consciousness, and finally the famous extended, reflective first person soliloquy that ends the story. I have watched professional storytellers, actors, and readers perform parts of this novel. In every case, the successful performer used the circles of awareness, consistent with how he wanted to involve the audience.

Clearly, our face and eyes convey a wide range of feelings and emotions. The feelings and emotions of any character cannot be completely communicated through facial expressions and eye contact alone. In fact, to convey a full slate of feelings and emotions requires that the teller draw from a full variety of expression. When artfully used by the storyteller, this variety of expression can create memorable images for any audience.

Imagine That!

Storyteller Jay O'Callahan points to the storyteller's ability to visualize and create images to be at the very heart of storytelling. This is an important point, because a good storyteller is only equipped to transfer images to his audience by first creating those images in his own mind. Haley Joel Osment did this a little too effectively in the film *Sixth Sense*, when he declared, "I see dead people." I do not think we want to be that convincing. Nevertheless, as storytellers, we do want to benefit from the power of imagery.

Images are those pictures we paint for our listeners with a variety of expression, and imagery is the formation of those images in our minds. Let us try some imagery by internalizing a series of character traits, and then use a variety of expression to create images of those traits. Think about the three witches in *Macbeth*. You have read *Macbeth*, right? At the outset of this masterpiece, three witches await the Thane of Glamis and say:

Witch #1: “When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightening, or in rain?”

Witch #2: “When the hurly-burly’s done. When the battle’s lost and won.”

Witch #3: “That will be ere the set of sun.”

Witch #1: “Where the place?”

Witch #2: “Upon the heath, there to meet with Macbeth”

Get one of your classmates to speak these lines. With your eyes shut, have your peer recite these lines without any vocal changes. You should be asking yourself, “Which witch is which?” Next, have your classmate use vocal variety to distinguish between the witches. Unless your contemporary hasn’t the foggiest idea of how a witch sounds, the delineation should now be clear. Now open your eyes and have your classmate add gestures, postures, and colorful facial expressions for each witch. The witches should then appear (sort of) in front of your eyes in their entire spooky splendor. When you see these witches emerge in front of you, it is because the classmate teller successfully created the image of each of the ugly old hags. Even the setting can help a teller internalize the mood of the scene. Let’s crank this exercise up a notch. Scan this partial list of categorical characteristics of the witches.

Voices

Crackly

Rough

High pitched

Medium pitched

Low pitched
Hoarse
Nasal
Scary
Wicked

Postures

Hunched over
Rounded shoulders
Stooped down
Close together

Gestures

Hands circling cauldron with large spoon in hand
Laughing
Glaring eyes
Moving long fingers with sharp nails

Descriptors/Adjectives

Confident
Tall hats
Ugly
Old
Green
Stringy hair
Long nose
Warts
Black eyes
Tall hats

Context

Forest
Dark
Owls

Crickets
Fire
Cave

I have a hunch you know what follows. Three of you at a time will become these three witches. Don't worry. No one is watching. Shut the door to your classroom and do it. First, internalize the descriptors/adjectives (imagery) you see above. Next, decide what vocal characteristics, posture and gestures, facial expression, and eye contact each of you will use to convey your designated "witchy" image. After each frightening trio has done their thing, discuss it as a class. Go to the next trio, discuss, and repeat until every trio had their fun. Discuss the variations in expression used by the witches in each trio. Which ones were especially effective? How did the choices in expression help the trio interact with each other?

Now let me add an ingredient to the image-building recipe with a hearty dose of our sensations. You know what they are: touch (tactile), sight (visual), smell (olfactory), aural (hear), and taste (gustatory). For extra flavor, we will throw in a dollop of movement (kinesthetic). You will now be able to use your palette of expression to paint images with a heightened level of clarity, thanks to the addition of your five senses plus one. Recite these lines. Use a comprehensive set of expression to paint the spoken pictures in these sentences. Exaggerate your gestures, postures, face, eyes, and voice to feel the picture you are painting so clearly:

Tactile

"He brushed against me because he wanted my attention."

"Oh, that kiss was, well . . . it just worked."

"Pushing my way through the crowd on Times Square was scary."

Visual

"Now that's a gorgeous woman."

"That guy's a model? Are you kidding me?"

"The desert at night is made of colors not possible to describe."

Olfactory

“The stench of garbage was all over the house.”

“Wait. I think something is burning. Is that dinner? Is that your roast burning?”

“Cinnamon rolls. I love cinnamon rolls . . . fresh, warm cinnamon rolls.”

Aural

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

“Lower your voice. I said lower it. You’ll wake the baby.”

“Did you hear that? Listen. It’s faint but clear. Listen!”

Gustatory

“Yuck. How long has the coffee been on?”

“I ate raw oysters for the first time and they were, well, hard to swallow.”

“A mild jalapeno? Are you kidding me? Water. Ice water. Lots of ice. Water. Beer. Hurry!”

Kinesthetic

“My arm is so stiff it feels like I have arthritis.”

“I’m moving this way because I’m sunburned. Can’t you see?”

“I can’t see the top of the building.”

How did you do? It isn’t easy, is it? Adding sensory discoveries to our images requires a great deal of concentration. So concentrate. Break up into pairs. Imagine there is an apple tree in front of you. One at a time and without a sound, fluidly show your partner the following three actions in this order: (1) How difficult or easy it is to pull the apple off the tree. (2) The size of the apple. (3) What does the apple taste like? Watch your partner carefully. Talk about the experience.

Was there tension in his shoulders to show how difficult it was to pull the apple from the tree? When he grabbed the apple, did his

palm remain open? After all, it wasn't the incredible shrinking apple. Unless it's a tree that grows magical fruit (possible in a fantasy or fairy tale), an apple does not change its size or shape. So why move your palm while you hold the apple in it? When your partner bit into the apple, could you tell if it was sweet or sour? Sensory discovery using gestures, postures, face, and eyes is a broad stroke toward achieving storytelling excellence.

Using your skills in expression, imagery, and sensory discovery, practice communicating these two passages, one taken from a narrative delivered by one of my students, and one from the 1890 popularized version of "Jack and the Beanstalk" by Joseph Jacobs. I realize you do not own the narrative, so expressing it the way its teller would convey it isn't to be expected. The story is not familiar to you. However, if you hadn't been exposed to Jack most of your life, would he be familiar to you? Try to feel these two different messages and give them a shot.

"Eventually my mother left my dad. The apartment we moved to seemed smaller than the walk-in closet in my old room. I couldn't move without running into my mother and two younger brothers. What made things worse was that my mother smoked. She tried to quit but the tension and pressure didn't let her. I choked every night. One night I told her she was being selfish. She yelled at me. She slapped me. She threw a magazine at me. She never did any of that before. My brothers cried all night. We had no money. She didn't have a job, but was out looking for one every day. I worked at a boutique three days a week, then ran home to make dinner. I usually burned everything in sight. If I didn't burn it, it was too salty or had no taste or whatever."

"As Jack slept, the beans grew in the soil, and the gigantic beanstalk grew in their place by morning. When Jack saw the huge beanstalk, he immediately decided to climb, climb, and climb, until he arrived in a land far above the clouds. This land happened to be the home of a giant. The house was bigger than the land from where Jack came. He broke into the giant's house, for the giant had many

*treasures. Jack tried to hide, thanks to the help of the giant's wife.
But the giant knew Jack was near and said:*

*“Fi-fi-fo-fum
I smell the blood of an Englishman
Be he live or be he dead
I'll grind his bones to make my bread.”*

With imagery and a treasure chest of expression, the storyteller uses both broad and finer strokes to paint spoken pictures of real and imaginary life, so that the wonder of a story can unfold like a well-worn magic carpet, and carry its travelers to places they have never been, and into worlds that enrich their lives.

Show and Tell

Do you remember “Show and Tell”? Just as it was fun and meaningful to talk about an object of personal importance and show it to your classmates at the same time, it can be fun and meaningful to use props when telling a story. Common storytelling props include puppets, costumes, musical instruments, toys, picture books, personal heirlooms, and other personal items. Admittedly, I do not use props very often. Still there are times when using a prop is not only appropriate, but if used effectively, can mesmerize an audience. I have observed my storytelling friend use puppets when telling “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak, with enormous success to his very young audiences. His timing is impeccable and his skills extraordinary.

One occasion when I do use a prop is when I tell the story of the “Gingerbread Man” to a young audience. I use a toy called a limber-Jack (a refined wooden man, simple in design, who sits on a wooden plank that rests on your knees and when a teller taps the plank, the wooden man dances around). When I arrive at the chorus, “Run, run, run, just as fast as you can, but you won't catch me 'cause I'm the Gingerbread Man,” I manipulate the little wooden man so he dances to the rhythm of the tapping of the plank. The little dance

prompts my young listeners to repeat those lines, and gives me a chance to interact with them during the story.

I need to qualify something here. I do not mesmerize an audience. I'm not that good with props, but I'm working on it. I have a hard enough time telling a good story all by my lonesome. In addition, for those of you who care, you can purchase a limber-Jill to go with your limber-Jack, and practice your conversations with dates or your partner ☺. But good luck in trying to use both the limber guy and gal in the same story. That would be a real knee-slapper! Sorry. I had to say it.

Having said that, let me make it clear that a prop should never be difficult to handle. In addition, a prop should not require you to move around very much. Cumbersome props that encourage too much movement or theatrics can quickly detach you from your audience and shift your program from storytelling to a bad one-person theater production. Instead, the teller should effortlessly manipulate a prop so that it becomes a seamless addition to the story itself. If you choose to use a prop, be sure to include it when rehearsing your story. You may think you know exactly how it will fit in, but if you are the least bit uncomfortable, it will detract the audience from listening to your story.

If you think that props are best suited for a younger audience, you would be correct. For many children's storytellers, props can highlight a cultural ritual, teach a song, compare and contrast social mores between communities, and fuel an interactive energy between themselves and their young listeners. However, a prop can also be useful when telling a personal narrative to an adult audience. Think about the beautiful story about Grandpa's watch, Mother's first doll, that empty frame in which your firstborn's picture will be placed, the hat donned by Uncle Sid when he reached Ellis Island, family awards, special heirlooms, private trinkets, and more. Briefly showing these kinds of items from which your story evolved can give it a deeply captivating and sentimental flavor, bringing your listeners even closer to you. Regardless of the prop, it should be

used only to enhance your story, or as the title of this chapter proclaims, another way to paint your spoken picture.

Final Remarks...

As you continue to assemble a range of human expression, you will find that your ability to confront a myriad of story images and paint them with your voice, eyes, face, gestures, and postures is well within your reach. In turn, those images will transform into an appealing sensory experience for all to enjoy.



*“I eat my peas with honey,
I’ve done it all my life . . .
It makes them taste so funny . . .
But it keeps them on my knife.”*

—Children’s Rhyme