

The delight and dilemma of storytelling

By Linda Gorham, Storyteller

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Storytelling has been very good to and for me. Over the past 14 years, it has virtually become my lifestyle and it has made me rich - no, not in monetary terms (*duh!*), but in other, more important ways. For one, storytelling has opened up a world of friendships and camaraderie that I could have never imagined. In addition it has taken me places I probably otherwise would have never been: to towns in Illinois smaller than my own subdivision, to rugged outdoor camps along the Mississippi River, to college campus in Iowa, Kentucky, and South Dakota (*extra points for going to S. Dakota in March!*). And finally, *this one was unexpected*, storytelling has made me devoted to and dependent upon, of all things . . . my computer.

I turn on my computer first thing in the morning, before brushing my teeth and dressing. Then all day long, when not performing, my computer and I prepare contracts, write thank you letters, design workshops and keynotes, develop new stories, plan marketing strategies, respond to email (*tons!*), set booking dates, design flyers, brochures, write bios, pay bills and more.

As if I needed more to do, this year, in addition to all of the hats I wear as a small business owner – *yes, storytelling is a business* – my computer and I have taken on the 24/7 job as co-chair (along with Judith Heineman) of the 2003 NSN conference. So you see, my computer and I have a close and loving relationship. (*I really should give him a name!*)

A typical morning when I am not performing starts out with the ringing of the phone. I have two teenage sons, but no one gets more calls than I do. My favorite caller is focused. My reputation has preceded me and this caller is looking for an available date. We talk for a few minutes, secure a date, discuss a price, and I get all the info I need to prepare a contract. A five-minute phone call and we're set.

But sometimes the caller is not done. "By the way, we would like stories about dinosaurs, pirates, mythology, Civil War, famous women in history, twisted fairytales, Halloween without ghosts and witches, Egyptians, and/or dragons."

"Say what?!" Oh man! Now I have to wake up and actually *think*. My smile fades and my mind goes into overdrive as the questions start flying through. Do I have these themes in my repertoire? Do I want to add these themes to my current list of stories? Can I deliver these themes in the days between the phone call and the show? Do I want to work on finding the material? Will I curse the venue over and over again as I find myself pouring through books searching for the appropriate themes and then sweating bullets as I try to design exciting stories to fulfill the request and be up to my standards of audience participation, learning and fun? Oh the anxiety of it all!

Smile back in my voice, I ask a couple of pertinent questions, “Really???? Are you flexible on that . . . ????”

When I started telling stories, I took on just about anything. “You want dinosaur stories? Sure, I can find some. No problem.” Then I’d hang up the phone and in the words of Steve Eurkel from the TV show, Family Ties, I would say, “Did I do thaaaaaaat?” Next, after kicking myself several times, and shaking my remorseful head pathetically, I would race out to the library in search of ideas. By the way, there are virtually no good stories about dinosaurs, but now I have a few. Similarly I now have Civil War stories, twisted fairy tales, and even mythological love stories.

I worked up the mythological love stories for a middle school audience. The kids loved them, but one of the teachers thought they were a bit too “erotic.” The gods were very erotic, and not all that faithful and family oriented, you know! But I caved in and I tabled the stories for a few years. Then I realized I had two choices: keep them in the “never tell these stories again” pile or revamp them. This year I brought them back -- new, improved, and downright naughty and sexy. Forget middle school – they have a new life – adults only!

I’ll be the first to admit I cursed and fussed as I took on some of these venue inspired topics, but these challenges have forced me to really look at the creative process. Especially in the beginning, I needed to stretch myself and take on themes I might have never considered. They also taught me a lot about patience as I waded through tons of resources finding the “perfect” story that would please the venue and fit my personality and style.

Actually, the early variety of requests help me now as I struggle to define and refine my style, my proverbial “storytelling voice.” I’m still not completely sure what mine is, but I do know that while some of the early and unusual requests have faded into the “never” pile, others have become favorites and have helped me develop my voice. So far, I would characterize my telling as mostly folktales that are updated, funny, interactive, full of surprises, and loaded with *attitude*. Lately I would add that my adult material is even a bit risqué. Hey, life is short! I may tell a well-known folktale, but chances are you will have never heard it the way I “Linda-cize” it. I’m borrowing that term, *with permission by the way*, from my friend and fellow storyteller, Mama Edie Armstrong, who coined the phrase, “Edie-cizing.”

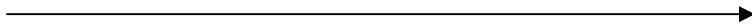
Such are some of the delights and the challenges of being a storyteller. There are the things we can control like finding a voice and understanding the challenges of running a business. Then there are the things that are sometimes out of our control:

I told at a neighborhood block party around a huge bonfire where a group of kids began roasting marshmallows. Competing with the excitement of watching a marshmallow burn up is akin to having a puppy or a child upstage you – there’s nothing you can say to get attention. Well, I figured, at least they had promised

me a sound system. I guess I should have explained that a bullhorn is not a microphone system. Have you ever tried holding down a “speak” button for 45 minutes?

Then there was the outdoor show where I was to start in the storytelling tent at 1:00 PM. About ten minutes before I was to start, I learned that a helicopter would land – yes, you guessed it – also at 1:00 PM and right in front of my tent. “You don’t mind do you?” the coordinator said with a smile. With a stiffer smile, I replied, “I’ll start later.” I added helicopters to my list of puppies, babies, marshmallows and bullhorns.

Not to be forgotten was when I performed at the end of the school day in a school cafeteria with a large long picture window behind me. Ten minutes into my performance, the weather abruptly changed from beautiful and sunny to ferociously stormy, and then into a torrential downpour with almost tornado-like winds. I’m sure the students and teachers didn’t hear a word I said. School dismissal was delayed due to the storm. My list got longer – no picture windows behind me.



Okay, it’s been fourteen years and I’m a little wiser. When the phone rings, I am less hesitant about driving to remote locations, I know more about what types of stories I want to pursue, and I am quick to say “Perhaps you can find someone else,” six words that have saved me a lot of angst.

But there are always new horizons, new challenges, and new reasons for angst. My list of issues continues to grow:

- Will there be a dunk booth nearby?
- How big is that bonfire going to be?
- Will firemen be tearing down any buildings nearby?
- Can we suggest the children sit with their parents?
- Can you feed the kids their sugary sweets after my show?
- Can we get some lighting for that nighttime show in the woods?

And in case you are wondering, I don’t even ask about sound. I bring my own system – best investment I ever made!

Linda Gorham (Lgorham2@aol.com) lives in Chicago and has been telling stories throughout the country for the past 14 years. Before her storytelling life, she spent ten years as a “three-piece-suit-wearing-briefcase-carrying manager in the human resources field. She is co-author of Quality Angles & The “Tantalus” Complex, a book describing unique perspectives on professional balance and performance. Linda was the co-chair of the National Storytelling Conference that was held in Arlington Heights, Illinois in July 2003.