

Healing Out Loud

The Life-Giving Power of Story

by Jamie Bonczyk

Stories are a way to preserve history. They are a way to teach morals and social dictates. Being able to connect to another person by sharing your story creates a bond, in which both parties are invested in the connection, in the story and in the outcome. Personal stories can build a bridge, allowing the storyteller to rally support for a cause, while simultaneously connecting people with information. Meaningful experiences create vivid memories, and retelling past events can help an individual express how their life has been affected by crucible—or even ordinary—moments.

Personal stories reveal how complex systems affect the lives of everyone involved. Audiences can relate to the wide range of experiences presented by diverse storytellers. We feel the mix of tragedy, endurance, exuberance, and accomplishment.

I was introduced to the healing power of storytelling by Allison Broeren, co-founder of Strike Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I signed up for Storytelling 101. I wrote down the story of how my daughter was born in the front seat of a leased Ford Focus. What I walked away with was a tool for life. I learned that to become a storyteller, I first had to understand my own story.

The following are three moments in time that were filled with hurts and healing, told using the “string of pearls” method of storytelling. Each pearl is a memorable moment in my life that is connected to my journey toward understanding the life-giving power of story. This journey has allowed me to heal out loud.

“Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.”

—Brené Brown

During the summer of 1990, instead of going to Girl Scout camp to ride horses and sing a parody of “Love Shack” with my troupe during the talent show, I headed off to a military hospital in Colorado to have an orthopedic procedure called an osteotomy. This procedure required multiple incisions to divide, shift, and reshape the right side of my pelvis. The resulting full body cast was meant to slow me down so I could heal, and while it worked on my physical form, my mind was not restrained. Maybe I was inspired by my father’s career as a Green Beret or maybe it was pure tenacity, but either way, I ended up conspiring with my 14-year-old babysitter to sneak out and covertly cross town in a wheelchair



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with my little sister wedged between my legs using the metal bar that connected my knees as a makeshift safety harness, all so we could watch the forbidden Days of Our Lives together. The only thing that would have made this better is if we had been wearing trench coats, sunglasses and fake mustaches.

We did this for six weeks until the cast came off. That is when I started living my very own soap opera. The moment the cast came off, my family and doctor realized that the surgeon had put my leg on sideways. This gave me a 1 ¾" leg length discrepancy. That fall, I started fifth grade at a brand new school. When some of the kids were mean to me, my teacher encouraged me to stand up for myself by addressing the class in a formal presentation. I did not really think giving a formal presentation would have helped Carrie when she got buried alive, but because my teacher was an adult and I was 10, I assumed she knew what she was doing, so I went with it. That is how I ended up standing in front of the class talking about my 13 inch scar like it was a show and tell item.

I had dressed in an outfit I loved, one that made me feel confident: a blue leotard under a neon green windbreaker with matching neon green pants. I opened the presentation with, "My name is Jamie and I have hip dysplasia." I am sure I expected them to reply, "Hi Jamie," as in meetings I had seen in an after-school special. Instead, they just stared at me as I explained that the two-hour surgery turned into 11 hours. I almost bled to death, and so I had "stranger blood" in me. Ryan White had died just months

before, so this had some kids squirming and wondering if I had contracted HIV from my blood transfusion. To add to the discomfort in the room, I pulled down my pants to show the scar where they had taken the bone and the scar from where they put the bone in.

I saw their grimaces. I told them my mom had found me a new doctor at the Shriners Hospital in Minneapolis and I was scheduled for more surgery. I pulled up my pants and wished someone would abduct me like Marlena on Days.

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

—Maya Angelou

I was sitting in a seminar on trauma and I heard these words: "Being a workaholic is a socially acceptable way to not deal with trauma you have experienced." My whole body felt hot, my pulse elevated, and I started to sweat. I felt like I had been called out.

In one of those "aha" moments of life, I could clearly see that I was about to embark on a "spiritual awakening," which makes it sound pleasant—like something Oprah might say. The reality is more similar to gardening for the first time. I got some things in the wrong places and they did not flourish, because I did not understand what the roots needed. I had been tending the top soil of my life for a few years. It was time to go deeper. The very evening of the training I went home and found a therapist. I began processing the complex medical trauma I had experienced through a process

called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing.

After a year, I felt called to go on a yoga retreat to Guatemala. I was ready to let go of old stories and make space for the next chapter. On the fourth day, we participated in a Mayan fire ceremony, calling to ancestral lineage. We called our mothers, our grandmothers, and our grandmothers mothers. Then it went quiet and the Shaman let us know that the lake had called to the fire and that all the women needed to step toward the fire and all the men needed to step back.

We did as instructed. All of the women linked arms and stood facing away from the fire so that we could warm the backs of our hearts. We were told not to be afraid. We were told to "be loud" and know that the most important tool that women will need for our courageous mission to bring love to the world is laughter.

As we closed our ceremony, the Shaman patted us down like he was a TSA agent looking for any negative energy that we were still holding on to. Instead of a metal detector, he used a branch. He tapped us from head to toe. Front to back. I noticed that he tapped the back of some people like an obligatory hug, the kind where you put your arms around the person and tap them a little on the back. However, when he got to me he walked behind and WHAP, WHAP, WHAPed the back of my heart. Maybe there was some courage back there that needed to be jolted into action. Little did I know he was preparing me for what was ahead, a time when I would need to both love fiercely and use my voice like never before.

“Tell the story of the mountain you climbed. Your words could become a page in someone else’s survival guide.”

—Morgan Harper Nichols

I asked my sister to have lunch together. Her answer both surprised and intrigued me. She responded, “I want to go to Baltimore.”

I blurted out, “I am sure they have lunch there.” It seemed like a good time to take a trip. I was taking on a new job and thus was in a place of transition. She sent me a link to an Airbnb on a property previously owned by Elisha Tyson, an abolitionist from our family tree that we were both interested in learning more about, and the trip was set in motion.

Spending time at the Maryland Center for History and Culture was part fact-finding and part self-discovery. I left there feeling that not only did I enjoy having what author Layla Saad might call a “good ancestor,” I wanted to be one. I asked myself many questions about what this would mean for me. When life started answering, I wished I had never asked.

I had landed what I thought was a dream job, executive director of a nonprofit child development center with a long-standing lease at a public school. On the very first day in my new job, I was informed that the school board had just made a decision to renovate the building. I would need to relocate 115 children, 30 staff and seven classes worth of belongings

for the summer and then bring everyone back—without losing anyone or anything. Upon returning successfully, I was so proud of the staff and the environment that I wanted to show them off. I began running what I called policy and practice tours. I would bring together groups of 8-10 policymakers, higher education faculty, and early childhood advocates. While touring the center, attendees would discuss workforce shortages, low child care assistance program reimbursement rates, and the long waiting lists that lead to inequitable access for families in the community.

After the fourth tour, I was called into a meeting letting me know that after 38 years as a lessee, the school district was not going to renew our lease. I asked if we could hold a community event together to raise awareness of the significance of both our child care program and our advocacy platform. I was told no. I explained that we would likely dissolve without a successful capital campaign. I called every person who had come to the tours and asked for help. Just as we were starting to pull together a plan, COVID-19 hit. Inevitably, the moment came that I had to look my staff in the eyes and tell them that although they were amazing, our organization would be sunseting. This felt abrupt, like the shortest day of winter, without the transition of twilight.

The timing of my sister’s next proposal felt like she had book-ended my career move with life changing opportunities. This time the question seemed simple enough: do you want to participate in dry January?

Did I want to give up alcohol for a month at a point in my life that I really wanted to be numb? I agreed to what I thought would be 31 days. But, I never started drinking again, because what I found in that month was that I still had more work to do to become the ancestor I envisioned. In order to lay a foundation for my family’s future, I was going to need all cylinders firing!

“Sometimes the most healing thing to do is remind ourselves over and over and over, other people feel this too.”

—Andrea Gibson

Our stories help us understand each other as well as ourselves. Clinical psychologist Carl Greer said that when we write our stories, we stop feeling confused about the events in our lives, and begin to access the wisdom that might not have been available while we were experiencing them. When we explore our own stories and learn how to express them, we can be clear on who we are and how we show up in relationships with others.

Thank you to my daughter who inspired so much healing in my life.

To hear the story of how her birth occurred in a leased car, check out:

<https://youtu.be/nYoC-zmShsQ>
Bonczyk, J. (2020, March 21).
JBonczyk March 14 2013.
YouTube.

